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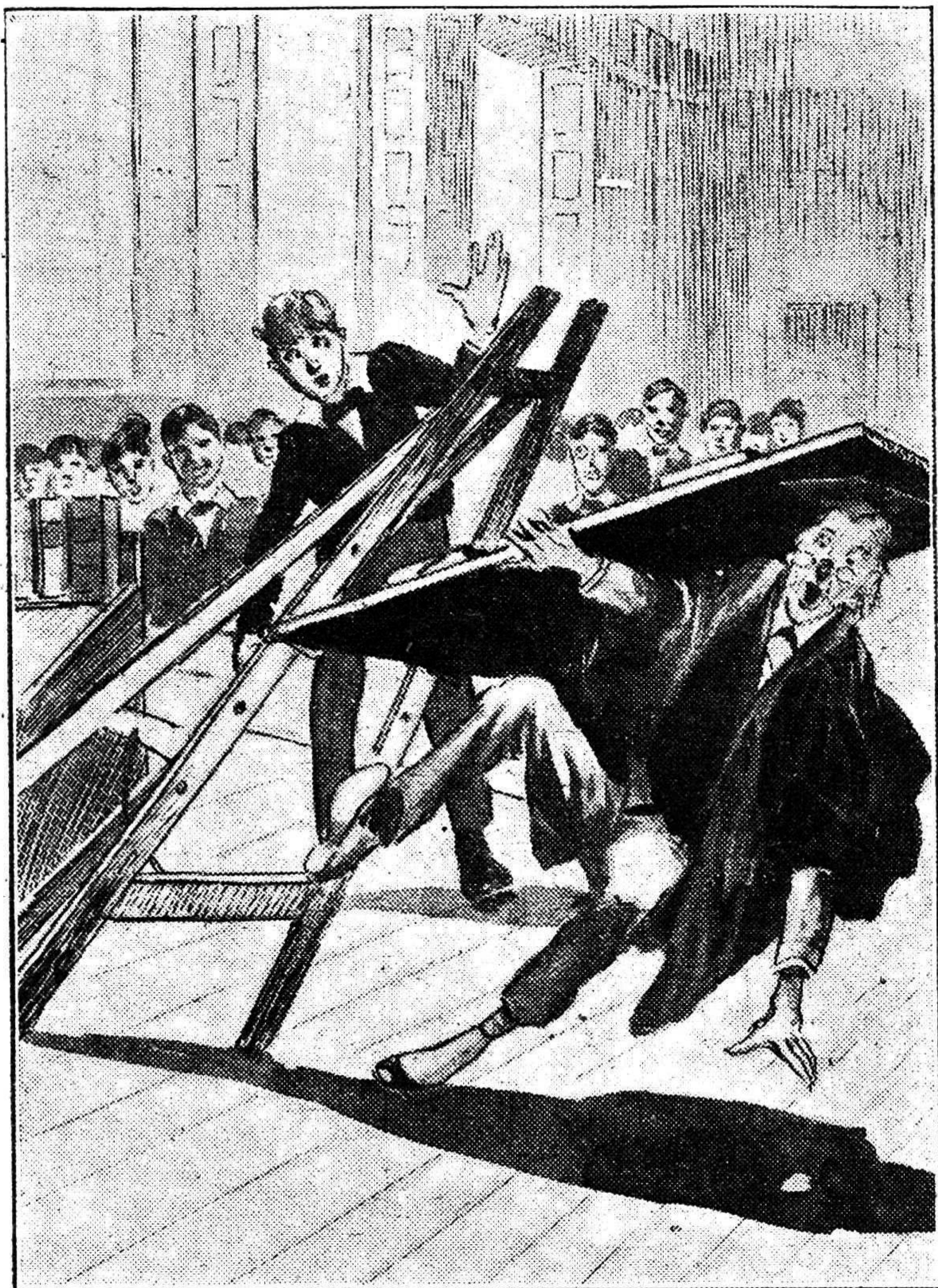
THE NELSON LEE 2

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Alf was dropped to the floor with a crash. Juniors came along with knotted handkerchiefs, and the thing developed into a particularly unpleasant kind of rag.

ALWAYS IN THE WRONG! OR, THE SNOBS OF ST. FRANK'S.
This Week's Rousing Long Complete Story.



Alf dodged in the nick of time, just as Mr. Snuggs made a vain attempt to save the collapse. The blackboard fell on Mr. Snuggs with a crash.



ALWAYS IN THE WRONG!

or,

The Snobs of St. Frank's



This is the second story of the Great New series relating to the adventures and experiences of Alf Huggins, the Cockney new boy at St. Frank's. Alf, for the first time in his life, mixes with boys of a different social standing to which he is accustomed. He is the son of a humble bricklayer who has suddenly come in for a large fortune. With the boys of St. Frank's his accent and manners cause him to be looked down upon and badly treated by the snobs of the school. Mr. Snuggs, the new master of the Remove, being a thorough snob himself, does his best to make Alf feel uncomfortable, and altogether, as you will read in the story below, Alf has a very bad time of it.

THE EDITOR.

CHAPTER I.

SNOBS—SNOBS, EVERY ONE!

"SERVES him right!"

And practically every fellow in the Remove Form at St. Frank's agreed with the taunt. The juniors had no pity—no sense of justice whatever. They only looked at the one point.

"He's a low bounder—serves him right!"

Ralph Leslie Fullwood made that remark, and there were very few juniors who thought of disagreeing with him. Alf Huggins, the boy from Hoxton—the son of a bricklayer—had come to St. Frank's.

That, in itself, was a crime.

The juniors didn't ask themselves why Huggins should be penalised for this terrible offence—they didn't take into consideration the fact that the new boy might have had no say in the matter.

He was here—and that was enough.

A bricklayer's son—a low-down, common brat, who had the manners and the speech of a street urchin. How dare he come to St. Frank's?

That, in a way, was the spirit that had gripped hold of nine-tenths of the fellows in the Remove. Alf Huggins' personal character was nothing—it did not enter into considera-

tion, even. He was not of the same class—and, because of that, he was barred.

It was mid-day now—dinner was over, and afternoon lessons would shortly be commencing. And outside there was a drizzle falling—a drizzle which had succeeded a sharp April shower.

And most of the fellows were congregated in the junior common room. Their one subject of conversation was Alf Huggins. This was only his first day at the old school.

He had been at St. Frank's just one morning.

And yet he was condemned!

"I'm sick of the whole crowd of you!" said Edward Oswald Handforth fiercely. "I can understand Fullwood and Merrell and that lot—but I'm blowed if I can understand some of you others. You ought to be boiled!"

"Look here——" began Armstrong.

"It's no good you saying that Huggins is low-class, and all that sort of rot!" interrupted Handforth curtly. "Of course he's low-class. Strictly speaking, he oughtn't to have come to St. Frank's."

"Then you're as much against him as we are," sneered Hubbard.

"Dry up!" roared Handforth. "I say that he oughtn't to have come to St. Frank's."

But perhaps the poor chap couldn't help himself. If his pater made the arrangements, what could he do? He's here, and I think we ought to give him a bit of a chance!"

"Hear, hear!" said Reggie Pitt.

"What's the good?" growled Owen major. "Supposing we do give him a chance? The first thing he does is to punch Fullwood!"

"The filthy cad!" snarled Fullwood hotly.

"As a matter of fact, that's the very thing that's made me realise he's the right stuff!" exclaimed Handforth. "He punched your nose, Fullwood—and if you had had your deserts, he'd have slaughtered you!"

"Why, you—you——"

"For two pins, I'll do it!" snorted Handforth, glaring. "Just say one word, my lad, and you'll get it in the neck."

lowed him. The three chums of Study D were inseparable. Where one went the other two went. And before long the trio were in their own study.

They had had a bit of a tiff earlier—not that this was anything unusual. But it was completely forgotten now. Handforth strode up to the easy-chair, and flopped himself into it. He sat glaring across the little room.

It was the mention of Mr. Snuggs that had enraged him more than ever.

"Look here, Handy, there's no need to get wild——"

"I am wild!" snapped Handforth curtly.

"But, my dear chap, Huggins can look after himself," said McClure. "He proved that——"

"I'm not thinking about Huggins," inter-

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ADVENTURE

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"Yes, and Snuggs'll come and——"

"Snuggs!" jeered Handforth. "Who cares a snap about Snuggs? He's no better than you are! He's a crawling reptile, willing to lick the boots of any fellow whose pater's got a title! Snuggs wouldn't touch me. I could do any blessed thing, and he wouldn't drop on me. Huh! A fat lot I care about that worm!"

And Handforth, feeling rather disgusted with the whole conversation, strode out of the common room long before he had completed all the remarks he had mapped out in his mind.

And Church and McClure automatically fol-

lowed Handforth. "Snuggs! What do you think of him? Did you ever know such a rotten beast? Give me old Crowell any day!"

"Rather!" agreed Church. "There's no doubt that Mr. Snuggs is a blessed toady. All he can do is to find favour with the snobs. He's down on the rest."

"Do you call me a snob?" snorted Handforth.

"Of course not!"

"Well, Snuggs isn't down on me," said Handy. "The chap simply slobbers over the snobs, and those chaps with titled parents! That's all he does! You fellows can look out

for yourselves. You'll get it in the neck! You're just as good as I am, but Snuggs looks upon me as gold, and you as rubbish!"

"Look here——"

"Oh, don't get huffy!" growled Handforth. "I'm not insulting you! That's just what Snuggs thinks. I wish to goodness my pater hadn't got a title! By George! I don't want to be favoured by that—that wriggling tadpole! He's nothing but an insect!"

Church and McClure felt that it was better to remain quiet. They didn't want to get into any argument. Even if they agreed, Handy would find fault in his present mood.

"Snuggs!" said Edward Oswald sourly. "They made a giddy mistake with his name! It ought to have been Sluggs!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Church and McClure laughed dutifully—but they made a mistake.

"You cackling asses!" snorted Handforth. "There's nothing funny in that! The man is a slug! It's a wonder he doesn't leave a slimy trail behind him! I've looked for it several times!"

Handforth was certainly bitter. But he was not without a certain amount of justification. For Mr. Snuggs the new master of the Remove, was a thin, weedy individual, who had got himself thoroughly hated by all the decent fellows in the course of one short morning.

As captain of the Remove, I was disgusted. Mr. Snuggs had practically ignored me—and for that I was glad. I was something like Handforth—I did not want the man's fawning attentions.

Mr. Snuggs was a toady. A junior only required a titled parent, and he was in Mr. Snuggs' good books. It didn't matter whether he was a rotter or not. That was of no importance.

Of course, it was not absolutely possible to judge the new master in such a short time. But Mr. Snuggs had certainly revealed his character in no uncertain manner. It was very unlikely that we had gained a wrong impression. The man was insufferable.

Yet, at the same time, there was no doubt about his ability. When it came to qualifications, Mr. Snuggs was a remarkably able man. This made it all the more surprising that he should be so little-minded. He had been engaged because he was well fitted for the work of the Remove. The Head had no idea of Mr. Snuggs' slimy little ways. And, in all probability, the Head never would know.

"Look what happened a quarter of an hour ago!" went on Handforth gruffly. "That cad of a Fullwood insulted Huggins—insulted him in a rotten way. And Huggins went for him, and biffed him over."

"It was a pretty good swipe, you know," said Church.

"One of the best I've seen for weeks," declared Handforth approvingly. "I'm blessed if I could have done it better myself. And just then Snuggs has to come in—and he

fawns on Fullwood, and sends the new kid to his study for a flogging!"

"Well, I suppose Snuggs had to do something——"

"Rot!" snapped Handforth. "Couldn't the beast have made a few inquiries? Couldn't he have found out why Huggins sloshed into Fully? No! He simply took it for granted that the new chap was a hooligan."

"Oh, let's talk about something else!" said McClure.

"Yes, I think we'd better," snapped Handforth. "I'm getting wild! Of course, strictly speaking, Huggins is a bit of an outsider. I mean, the way he talks. But he can fight—and I like him for that. If the chaps'll only give him a fair chance, he'll make good!"

And Handforth and Co. changed the subject.

As Handforth had said, Alf Huggins was certainly a bit of an outsider. He was not of the same class. But the chums of Study D were not prejudiced on account of that. They decided that they would be pleasant to Huggins, but they wouldn't cultivate him.

This, of course, was the fair, impartial view.

All the decent fellows agreed to take the same course. But the snobs—and these formed by far the greater majority—instinctively decided that Huggins was to be squashed—crushed—kicked out, if possible. They didn't see any reason why he should be given a chance.

And while all this discussion was going on, Huggins himself was out in the Triangle.

The drizzle didn't affect him. He didn't even know that a drizzle was falling. He paced up and down in the vicinity of the old elms. Then, not knowing where his steps led him, he passed through the great archway into the cloisters. All was quiet and peaceful here.

Alf was alone—except for his thoughts.

He was sulky—he was in a sullen, sore mood. His hands smarted, for Mr. Snuggs had just delivered a sound caning. But the bodily hurt was nothing in comparison to the wound within him.

"Snobs—rotten, measly snobs!" muttered Alf fiercely. "That's what they are—every blinkin' one! The filthiest crowd as ever I see! Crikey! Ain't it a pity that such chaps are born!"

He continued his pacing, more fiercely than ever.

"It ain't just! It ain't right!" went on Huggins. "Wot 'ave I done? Nothing! Absolutely nothing! And yet them beasts treat me like I was infected with the plague!"

"What ho! What ho!"

Alf turned, and frowned. Just appearing from under the archway was Archie Glen-thorne, the dandy of the Ancient House. Archie, as a matter of fact, was looking for Alf, and at last he had found him.

"So here we all are, what!" said Archie pleasantly. "I must remark, laddie, that

your tastes are somewhat frightful. I mean to say, the old wetness, and so forth. Waltzing up and down with the bally clouds weeping on you!"

"Oh, go away!" said Alf gruffly.

"Absolutely!" said Archie, startled. "I mean, absolutely not!"

He could see at once that Alf was in a very touchy mood. The situation, apparently, required delicate handling. And Archie flattered himself that he was just the fellow to do anything of that nature.

Extraordinary as it may seem, these two juniors were friendly.

Archie had chummed up with Huggins more than any other fellow in the Remove. At first he had felt under a bit of an obligation—for Glenthorne had met Huggins in London, and the latter had done Archie a big service. And Archie considered that it was up to him to make some sort of return.

But that feeling was already fading away.

Archie was becoming genuinely interested in the new boy. And, in a fit of extreme soft-heartedness, Archie had invited Huggins to share his study—that wonderfully luxurious apartment which had hitherto been quite exclusive to the genial ass.

Only a short while ago, in fact, Archie had had high words with Phipps, his valet. For Phipps had been shocked at the news, and Archie told him off in no uncertain terms. Having invited Huggins, it was impossible to back out. The arrangement had to stand.

Archie's heart was extremely soft, and although he was the biggest swell in the Ancient House—although his family had blue blood, and his father was practically a millionaire—he was less snobbish than Tubbs, the page-boy. It simply meant, in a nutshell, that Archie was a gentleman.

"I say! I say!" he exclaimed smoothly. "All this rushing about stuff! I mean, it's dashed silly! Kindly come indoors, laddie, and allow me to condole! I've heard all about that frightful affair with Snuggs. Lessons will begin in ten minutes, so we haven't got much time."

"I don't want to come in!" muttered Alf. "I'll stop 'ere!"

"But, my dear old potato——"

"I'll stop 'ere!" repeated Huggins fiercely. "I don't want no pity from you! I ain't made o' glass—I sha'n't crack!"

"It strikes me, laddie, that you are frightfully cracked already!" retorted Archie. "I mean to say, nobody but a born jackass would proceed to walk up and down in the rain! It's such a dashed silly thing to do!"

"I didn't know it was raining!" snapped Alf. "Oh, it's decent of you to come out here to a bloke. But I dare say you're just the same as them others. You're all enobs—the 'ole blamed crowd!"

Archie smiled.

"Of course, if I was one of those queer sort of chappies, I should get on my dignity!" he said smoothly. "I should walk away with my nose in the air, after telling

you to go to the bally old dickens! But absolutely not! I realise, old scout, that you are somewhat upset. So what about it? What price the little chat, and the quiet pow-wow?"

Archie hooked his arm through Alf's, and proceeded to lead him gently out of the cloisters.

"Yes, but look 'ere——" began Alf weakly. "Absolutely!" said Archie. "This way, old tulip—not another word till we get inside!"

CHAPTER II.

PUTTING HIMSELF IN THEIR PLACE.



ALF HUGGINS was still sulky when Archie's study was reached.

Glenthorne himself was rather tactful, and he had said nothing on the way indoors. He knew there was only a small amount of time, and so he wanted to have his little quiet talk with the new boy as soon as possible. The bell would soon ring for afternoon lessons.

Archie sank down on the lounge, and Alf took his seat in one of the easy chairs. There was a kind of uncomfortable feeling in the air.

"Now, old lad, the fact is——" began Archie.

"Oh, don't talk to me!" muttered Alf.

"But, I mean to say——"

"I don't want to 'ear your bloomin' voice!" said Alf sulkily. "It grates on me! And that silly rot of yours—it ain't 'uman! For goodness' sake close your blinkin' trap!"

Archie swallowed hard.

It was apparently going to be somewhat difficult. Alf did not give him much encouragement. Many fellows, indeed, would have finished the affair then and there. But Archie was a very patient youth—and he was wonderfully human. He was one of those fortunate people who could keep his temper under very difficult circumstances.

And he realised that Alf Huggins had had a severe time—his temper had been tried to the utmost limit. It was hardly surprising that he was sulky and sullen. The chap was all right—but he wanted to be brought round a bit.

"Of course, I'm sorry," said Archie softly. "Dashed sorry, don't you know. If my talk annoys you, old lad, all I can do is to express a few well assorted chunks of sorrow. But it pains me to think that the old vocal chords act in the manner of a grater."

Alf sat there, glowering.

"That there Snuggs!" he exclaimed fiercely. "He's a 'ound, if you like!"

"Absolutely," said Archie. "As you say, laddie—Mr. Snuggs is undoubtedly a 'ound. I should say, a hound. Dashed awk., you know! I'm bally well getting into the same way! But to proceed. You've

had a pretty rotten time—and I'm jolly well disgusted with the lads of the village."

"Snobs!" muttered Alf—"orrid, sneer-in' snobs!"

"Absolutely twice," said Archie firmly. "Well, dash it all! I mean to say, the words hardly do justice to the occasion, old fruit. These fearful blighters seem to think that they're better than everybody else. But, of course, that's sheer piff. In other words, rot."

"I'm glad you know it!" said Alf.

"I do know it—absolutely!" said Archie. "But you must allow me to remark, dear old tulip, that I'm fearfully disappointed. I mean, the old brain has received abundant quantities of shock. Why? I mean, why should I be treated like the rest of the gang? Good gad! It's not fair!"

"What do you mean?" growled Alf.

"Why, you distinctly called me a snob—you absolutely shoved me in the same old catalogue with all the other bounders!" said Archie. "That was distinctly putrid. So frightful, in fact, that I'm pained. I might even say, without exaggeration, that I'm dashed well wounded!"

"Oh, don't be so blinkin' silly!"

"Of course, you're not in a position to appreciate the thing," went on Archie. "Here I am, using up the old tissues like one o'clock, trying to make the whole position clear. I repeat, I am wounded. I dash about the school—I whizz hither and thither—I go this way and that way! In fact, I absolutely make the muscular department sore—looking for you. And when I find you, what happens? What, laddie, happens?"

"Oh, don't——"

"I will tell you what happens!" said Archie firmly. "I offer vast varieties of consolation. And in return I receive a bally good handful of sneers. Now, that's what a chappie might call somewhat on the steep side. And I must conclude by saying that I thought you were made of different material. I had a firm idea in the old bean that you were slightly better."

Alf looked up, and he was rather shame-faced.

"I didn't mean no 'arm!" he growled, in a low voice.

"Absolutely not!" said Archie, brightening up. "Good gracious! In fact, good gracious twice! 'Arm? I mean to say, harm? My dear old lad of the village, I absolutely like you! In a sort of way, we're bally well next door to twin brothers. What?"

Alf broke into a kind of reluctant smile.

"Lummy!" he said. "You ain't 'arf a one!"

"A one?" said Archie. "Well, I mean, hardly——"

"I'm blowed if you couldn't talk the 'ind leg off a donkey!" said Alf. "Once you start, there ain't no stoppin' of yer. Fair take the biscuit, you do! I ain't never met a bloke like you afore."

Archie beamed.

"The fact is, it so happens that there aren't many blokes about of the same old type," he admitted. "I might remark, in passing, that Phipps would die on the spot if he heard the young master referred to as a bloke. But we'll let that slide—we'll allow it to pass away into the offing. I'm dashed glad to see that the sun is smiling forth."

"Oh, blow the sun!" growled Alf. "This 'ere weather——"

"Gadzooks! You mistake me, old bird!" interrupted Archie. "When I say the sun, I mean the bally brightness of your countenance. The sun bursts forth—the clouds disperse. The amassed wrinkles on the dome are becoming somewhat smoothed out. What about it? Better?"

"There ain't nothin' wrong with me," said Alf.

"Great goodness!" ejaculated Archie. "Nothing wrong? Oh, absolutely not! But, I mean to say, the sulks——"

"I wasn't sulky."

"Well, you were somewhat depressed," amended Archie. "Let's have it like that, dear one. And I'm doing all I can to bring things round and to cause the old tissues to recover their vitality. It's a frightfully frightful job, but once I get going, I dashed well go. I mean to say, when the good red blood of the Glenthornes starts buzzing, it buzzes like—like—— Well, there you are! It absolutely buzzes!"

Alf lost the last of his sulks, and his face broke into that sunny smile which had characterised him on his arrival.

"Crikey!" he said. "I'm blowed if you ain't the limit!"

"Good—absolutely good!"

"And you've made me feel 'eaps better!" went on Alf. "I say, I wasn't arf an idjit to get riled like that. I don't know wot you thinks of me. I s'pose you reckon I'm a bloomin' fool!"

Archie grinned.

"At last we have succeeded—and only just in time!" he observed. "In about two shakes the dashed bell will be ringing for lessons. How absolutely putrid! And I wanted to have a little chat with you."

Alf bent forward, his face earnest.

"'Ere, I say!" he exclaimed. "I ain't 'arf sorry."

"But, dear old boy——"

"I oughter to be kicked!" went on Alf. "I oughter be chucked out o' this 'ere study. When I come to think o' the way you came out to me, tryin' to 'elp me—and then I goes and hinsults you."

"No hinsult, dear old tulip!" said Archie firmly.

"It was a hinsult!"

"Well, if you say so, we'll let it pass," agreed Archie. "Dash it all, there's no need to have a bally row about a hinsult, what? Only a trifle, anyhow. It's all over now, Alf—and we're pals. What about it?"

"You're a brick!" said Alf fervently. "My goodness! You ain't arf a brick!"

Archie looked rather distressed.

"I mean to say, you called me half a brick early this morning," he observed. "Well, that's rather decent of you, but it strikes me as being somewhat near the edge. Of course, I may possibly be at a loss——"

"Wot I mean is, you're a stunner," said Alf. "You're absolutely a top-notch every time. An' I was sulky, too. I'm sorry, Glenthorne—I didn't mean no 'arm!"

"Of course you didn't," agreed Archie. "My dear lad, I shouldn't suspect you of meaning 'arm—I should say, harm. And, gadzooks, don't call me Glenthorne! Archie, don't you know. Just Archie!"

"Thanks!" said Alf.

"And now to proceed with the little chat," said Archie. "I want to have this out quietly, darling. I want to explain just what I think about the whole dashed sub——"

"Arf a mo'!" put in Alf. "Afore we go on, I want to tell you 'ow rotten I feel, 'cos I snapped at you just now. I made a beast o' meself, and it's a wonder to me you still want to be pals. You're a real sport, Archie. Why, there ain't another chap in the 'ole school arf as good as you!"

Archie shook his head.

"Naturally, that's a piece of priceless rot!" he said. "There are plenty of chappies who can whack me to bits, you know. Nipper, for example—and Reggie Pitt, and——"

"Nipper ain't such a bad sort," admitted Alf. "He never sneers, and 'is pals don't sneer. An' Nipper did his best for me when I was tryin' to find a study. 'E's a good sort!"

"Absolutely!"

"But them others!" said Alf darkly. "Them others! My 'at! They're nothing but snobs an' sneerin' cads. Never 'ave I seed such a collection of rotters. An' I thought all the blokes here was decent."

Archie looked distressed.

"You see, the posish is somewhat delicate," he said. "These chappies don't take the trouble to think. They're dashing about all over the shop, and they jolly well haven't got time to reason things out. That's just the frightful trouble. They're too bally hasty."

"An' I s'pose I'm 'asty, too," admitted Alf. "Look 'ere, Archie! I've bin thinkin'. An', wot's more, I've made hup me mind."

"Good! A fruity scheme, in fact."

"When I ain't riled, I feel a'most sorry for these 'ere blokes," went on Huggins. "They don't know no better, pore coves! They ain't never bin brought hup to no-think else, 'ave they?"

"Absolutely not!" said Archie stoutly.

"Wot I mean is, they think they're nobbs, an' sech like," went on Alf. "An'

I've bin a-tryin' to put meself in their place. Mebbe I should be the same as them."

"I hardly think so, laddie."

"I ain't sayin' as I would—but I might," said Huggins. "Ah, it strikes me that it ain't no sort o' good ridin' the 'igh 'orse."

"The 'igh 'orse," repeated Archie vaguely.

"That's it, mate!" said Alf. "You know, gettin' on me dignity, an' thinkin' that I'm as good as them. If these chaps makes mistakes, I s'pose I'm liable to make mistakes as well. So I've made up me mind."

"Good!"

"I've decided wot I shall do!" declared Alf firmly. "In future, instead o' gettin' angry—instead of 'oldin' meself aloof, I'll try an' be pleasant. I'll keep me temper, an' do everythink I can to please the chaps."

"To please them?"

"Yus, that's it!"

Archie adjusted his monocle.

"Frankly, old dear, I can't quite follow——"

"Wot I mean is, I'll allus remember that I'm low-born, an' they're 'igh born!" exclaimed Alf. "Y'see, if I do that, there won't be no sort o' friction. D'you git the 'ang?"

"Absolutely," said Archie, with conviction. "And I may say that the whole scheme is not only fruity, but positively ripe. Proceed, old turnip! Go ahead with it, and you'll bally well make the chappies realise that they've been in the wrong all the time."

Alf nodded.

"That's what I was a-thinkin'," he said. "Y'see, I'm in a queer kind o' position. I ain't like you young gents."

"Absolutely not!" agreed Archie firmly. "I mean to say, not exactly."

"All you chaps 'ave bin brought up well," proceeded Alf. "I ain't! Kicks an' cuffs, an' all that sort of thing. No proper eddication. Why, I can't even speak like you fellers."

"Don't mention it, old darling," said Archie hastily.

"My talk is pretty rotten, ain't it?" asked Alf.

"Well, I mean, as it were—perhaps so," said Archie, fiddling with his watch-chain. "Not absolutely rotten, Alf, old dear. What I mean is, it seems to me that the jolly old stuff requires a goodly quantity of sand-papery. Smoothing, and what not."

"I get you!" said Alf. "Tell you what! You'll 'ave to give me some lessons in talkin'!"

"That, of course, will be absolutely priceless!" said Archie feebly. "I mean to say, what a perfectly ripping pastime. But we don't need to talk about it—— What-ho! The good old knell of doom, so to speak."

The bell was clanging for afternoon lessons.

CHAPTER III.
NOT APPRECIATED!



"CRIKEY! Ain't it queer wot a little 'eart-to-'eart talk will do" said Alf, as he went over towards the door. "When you brought me in 'ere I was feeling somethink awful. But now I'm miles better. You ain't arf made a difference, Archie."

Archie beamed.

"It's rather ripping to know that a chappie can be of some use in the old world," he observed. "Good! So now we'll trickle forth, and dash into the Form room. Gad-zooks! A few shudders had just passed down the old spine! Snuggs, don't you know. We've jolly well got to stand Snuggs again."

"Oh, blow 'im!" said Alf.

"Quite right—quite right!" agreed Archie. "As you say—blow 'im! In fact, I wish some breeze would come along, and blow 'im into the next dashed continent! Absolutely!"

They were just passing out of the door when Alf paused.

"I say, wot about tea?" he asked. "I 'eard some of the blokes saying that you 'as tea in your own studies."

"Exactly, laddie."

"But wot about the grub?"

"Well, naturally, we have a certain amount of grub!" confessed Archie. "I mean to say, the meal would hardly be complete without grub—what? Tea, don't you know, is what a chappie might call a somewhat important meal. Toast—crumpets—and all that kind of rot!"

"And sardines, I dessay?"

"It all depends," said Archie. "Some of the dear lads consume sardines that are most frightfully squiffy. In fact, you would be fearfully shocked if you could see the tea-tables in a few of the bally studies—particularly when times are somewhat lean."

"But don't the school provide the grub?"

"Absolutely not—at least, not for tea," said Archie. "Of course, you can go in the bally old hall if you like. And then you will proceed to drink mugs of fearful watery stuff, and vast slabs of the staff of life—slabs which appear to be fashioned after the style of doorsteps! But that's absolutely putrid! We have grub in plenty—we buy what we want for the studies."

"Oh, I see now!" said Alf, nodding. "So that's the idea. Well, we'd best be getting along."

They went into the Form room for lessons. And the Remove gazed at Archie with disapproval and scorn. It was a shock to them to see him on such friendly terms with the fearful outsider. He ought to have known better. It was a disgrace to the Remove.

"Oh, what else can you expect?" sneered Griffith. "Archie's an idiot—one of the



Having made up his mind, Alf purchased a couple of particularly large bloaters, convinced that these would please Archie.

biggest asses that ever happened! He's bound to do something like this, poor chap—he can't help it!"

"But Huggins can!" said Hubbard. "The rotter!"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, he ought to be kicked!" said Hubbard. "What right has he to shove his rotten friendship on a chap like Archie? That's what it amounts to! He's pushing himself forward—sponging up to Archie, and Archie hasn't got enough sense to stop him."

"Yes, that's about it," said Owen major. "The filthy cad! But what else can you expect of a gutter brat?"

And so Alf's gradually ripening friendship with Archie Glenthorne was only earning him more scorn and further abuse. Archie was looked upon as a fool who couldn't help himself.

And Huggins was condemned as a cad and a sponger. The Remove had no sense of justice; the boys were hasty, and jumped to the first conclusion that came into their heads.

And once again, during the afternoon, Mr. Snuggs provided the Remove with amusement. At every opportunity he singled out Alf Huggins for sarcasm. But Mr. Snuggs was rather disappointed.

Alf behaved himself so well that the Form master had really no excuse. Not only that, but Mr. Snuggs was rather shocked to

find that Alf's work was a great deal better than many of the other Removites. He was by no means a dunce; he worked hard and willingly, and gave full attention to his lessons. And when it came to general knowledge, he was well up in the majority of subjects.

And Mr. Snuggs had assumed that Alf would be ignorant. He had intended holding up the lad as a moral of everything that was crass and stupid. But after he had tried Archie on several subjects—and had found that Archie was astonishingly proficient—he gave it up.

And lessons, at last, came to an end.

But the Remove's opinion of Mr. Snuggs was unaltered. He was a worm, a crawling thing who fawned upon the snobs.

Alf was immensely pleased to get free, and as soon as he emerged from the Form room, he touched me on the arm. He took particular care to avoid Archie for some reason.

"I say, matey—just a word!" said Alf.

"Hallo! Anything I can do?" I asked cheerfully.

"Just a word, if you don't mind," said the new boy. "I ain't quite got the hang of things yet, and I'd like a bit of advice. You ain't got no objections, I suppose?"

"Not in the least," I replied. "Say on!"

"Well, about tea!" said Alf, drawing me aside in the passage. "Lummy! See that? Might think I was a leper!"

Alf spoke in rather a wrathful way, for several juniors had elaborately passed to the other side of the passage in order to get by. It was a direct insult, but Alf took it in good part, in accordance with his new plan.

"Mind you don't touch me!" he said sarcastically. "You might get small-pox, or somethink! I'm contaminated, ain't I? Crikey! Wot a set!"

"Never mind them!" I said, frowning. "All the fellows who do that sort of thing are cads, Huggins. You can easily afford to ignore them. What's that you were saying about tea?"

"Well, I understands that you blokes buys the stuff yerselves? I s'pose you share the exes?"

"That's it," I said. "That's the usual way."

"An' wot sort of grub do you heat?"

"Oh, all sorts of grub," I said, smiling. "Sardines, boiled eggs, or kippers, or something savoury like that. Bread and butter, of course—and cakes and pastries and pork-pies, if the funds will allow."

"Good!" said Alf. "Thanks, mate! That's all I wanted to know. Sorry to trouble you."

"No trouble at all," I replied. "And don't forget that you'll always be welcome in Study C."

"Thanks again," said Alf gratefully.

He went off, and passed outside into the Triangle. He was on his way to Mrs. Hake's tuck-shop. For Alf had decided to obtain the supplies for tea in Archie's study.

He was acting in all innocence; it was his good nature that was directing this little scheme. He didn't know that Archie's tea was always provided by Phipps, and that Archie was rather fastidious.

Alf thought that it would be a sign of good faith if he got tea ready for Archie as a kind of surprise. And he might not get another opportunity for some little time.

Archie had informed him that he was going upstairs with Phipps immediately after lessons. Some new clothing had arrived, and Archie was particularly keen upon examining the things, and trying them on. As a consequence, tea would not be ready until six o'clock.

It seemed remarkable to Alf that Archie should take about an hour and a half to try on new clothes. But Alf didn't know Archie yet. When the elegant junior got fairly going in the clothing line there was no stopping him. Tea became a very unimportant matter.

So Alf went outside, and made his way across towards Mrs. Hake's tuck shop in the corner of the Triangle. But long before he got there he saw that the place was packed. Mrs. Hake already had a large number of customers.

And Alf paused.

He instinctively shrunk from pushing his way in amongst the juniors. It would merely give them another opportunity to jeer at him. It did strike him that it might be a good idea to treat them all to whatever delicacies they desired to order.

But, on second thought, he decided that he had better not. He would have liked it, for Alf had a generous nature. But he feared that he would be misunderstood. The fellows would believe that he was simply trying to buy their goodwill.

And then he noticed a cart was standing just outside in the road. A man was going to it from the direction of the domestic quarters. There was a basket on the man's arm, and he wore a striped apron. Then Alf observed that a string of bloaters hung down from the basket.

"That's the idea!" he decided. "I'll get some o' them things. Better than waitin' about for the grub-shop to clear!"

Having made up his mind, he quickly went out to the cart, and purchased a couple of particularly large bloaters. Alf was very partial to bloaters, and he was quite convinced that Archie would like them, too. Huggins remembered that I had mentioned bloaters in my menu. So he assumed that this article of diet was in correct order.

He came back across the Triangle with his small paper parcel, and felt quite pleased. He had plenty of time; he wouldn't need to start frying them until about half-past five, so they would be nicely done to a turn by the time Archie appeared.

He was passing the big bicycle-shed, and paused to look inside. Being new to the school, he was naturally interested. Besides, his own bicycle would be arriving by

train in a day or two. Perhaps the other fellows would have something to say about that, too!

The shed was empty, except for Armstrong. And Armstrong was wrestling with the tyre of his back wheel.

"Want a 'and?" asked Alf pleasantly.

Armstrong turned, and scowled.

"No, I don't!" he snapped. "Who told you to interfere?"

"Don't bite my 'ead off!" replied Alf. "Lumme! I was only offerin' a little 'elp."

"Thanks all the same, but when I want your help I'll ask for it!" said Armstrong shortly. "Take my advice, and don't butt in!"

"I reckon I'm partickler good at mendin' them things——"

"Clear out, you outsider!" interrupted Griffith, coming up at that moment. "Who the dickens told you to shove your nose in here?"

Alf made no reply as Griffith pushed past. It seemed that his attempts at being pleasant were not meeting with much success.

"You're wanted indoors at once, Armstrong," said Griffith. "Better buck up!"

Armstrong scowled.

"I'm not coming indoors now!" he stormed. "I've got to get to Bannington in just over half an hour. I made an appointment with one of the Grammar School chaps, and I can't keep him waiting."

"But this'll only keep you ten minutes, and you can get to Bannington in twenty——"

"And what about this rotten puncture?" snapped Armstrong savagely. "Every time I'm in a particular hurry, my beastly back tyre's flat! Look at it! Just when I want to be quick, too!"

"Hard lines!" said Griffith.

"Oh, it's easy enough to say that!" grunted Armstrong. "It'll take me twenty minutes to get this repaired, and then I shall have to pedal like thunder. Don't bother!"

"Oh, all right," said Griffith, shrugging his shoulders. "But Snuggs wants you particularly. He was looking over your exercise-books, and he told me to fetch you at once. Better not keep him waiting!"

Armstrong flung down a tyre-remover.

"Blow Snuggs!" he snapped irritably. "It's always the same! Everything comes at once! This'll mean that I shall miss my appointment, and I was going to collect ten bob from that Grammar School chap! Look here, if you'll mend this puncture while I'm with old Snuggs, I can just manage it!"

Griffith looked indignant.

"Rats!" he said. "I'm not going to mend the thing! Do your own dirty work! Likely!"

And Griffith went off, leaving his study-chum looking after him with exasperation and anger. Armstrong muttered something under his breath, and went indoors.

There was no question about the annoying

nature of the situation. And Alf, who was still standing there, felt rather sorry for Armstrong. He had been in a similar position himself many a time. This was just when a helping hand would come in useful.

"I'll mend that there puncture!" he murmured.

It was a decision that he came to on the spur of the moment. Not because he wanted to find favour in Armstrong's eyes; he had every reason to detest Armstrong. But here was a chance to do something useful, and he could easily spare ten minutes. And it would be a nice surprise for Armstrong when he came out again.

So Alf grinned to himself, whipped off his jacket, and in a few seconds he had the bicycle tipped upside down. He was an expert, evidently, for the tyre came off with great ease under his skilful fingers. It didn't take him long to locate the puncture in the inner tube.

Alf whistled cheerfully while he was at work, and he was glad that he was not interrupted. In fact, nobody came near him until he had practically finished. He had got the tyre back, and was just beginning to pump it up.

Then Owen major and Hubbard and Skelton entered.

"Hallo!" said Hubbard, staring. "What are you doing, you beastly new kid?"

"Crikey!" said Alf. "Ain't you never seen a tyre pumped up?"

"I don't want any nerve!" snapped Hubbard. "Who told you to touch that bike?"

"Nobody!"

"Then you've got a rotten cheek——"

"'Old 'ard!" interrupted Alf quietly. "Is this your jigger?"

"Well, no——"

"Then mind your own bloomin' business, and I'll mind mine!" said Huggins. "If I start touching your bike, it'll be another thing. Can't you let a bloke alone?"

Hubbard looked rather surprised.

"You'd better not talk to me like that!" he said, turning red. "That's Armstrong's jigger, and he'll slaughter you when he comes—— Hallo! Here he is! I say, Armstrong! This rotten gutter brat is interfering with your bike!"

Armstrong came hurrying in. And Reggie Pitt and Grey and one or two others strolled up to see what the noise was about. Armstrong glared at Alf ferociously.

"What the dickens are you doing?" he shouted.

"Keep your 'air on!" said Alf. "I'm pumpin' up the tyre—can't you see?"

"Who the thunder told you to touch my bike?"

"'Ere, don't carry on!" said the new boy quietly. "I was standin' by ten minutes ago when you was called away, an' I 'eard you sayin' as you 'ad a himportant appointment somewhere."

"Nosey beast!" said Hubbard. "He was spying!"

"Well, what about it?" demanded Arm-

strong. "Did I ask you to interfere with my business?"

"You didn't arst me nothin'!" replied Alf. "But you said as 'ow you was in a 'urry, an' as I 'adn't got nothing to do, I got busy. I've repaired the puncture, an' the bike's all ready."

Armstrong cooled down a bit.

"Oh!" he said. "You've repaired the puncture?"

"Yes, matey!"

"Don't call me that, you blithering ass!" snapped Armstrong. "Thanks for mending the puncture—I shall be able to buzz off straight away, and keep that appointment after all. I didn't know."

"That's all right," said Alf, smiling.

"You ass!" said Owen major. "Do you think this common beast repaired the puncture because he wanted to do you a good turn? If we hadn't popped in when we did, he'd have buzzed off!"

"Eh?" said Armstrong. "My hat! So that was it!"

He turned to Alf with a glare.

"So you wanted to pinch my bike, did you?" he snorted. "I can understand now! I might have known all along! I couldn't expect much else from a low-bred cad of your sort!"

Alf said nothing, but he flushed deeply.

"I think you're the low-bred cad, Armstrong," said Reggie Pitt.

"What the dickens do you mean?"

"What I say!" retorted Pitt hotly. "You miserable rotter! Out of sheer good nature the chap mends your puncture, and then all you can do is to jeer at him! That's a fine encouragement for him to make himself pleasant, isn't it?"

"Who wants him to be pleasant!" demanded Armstrong sourly. "The fellow's an outsider, and I'll tell him so to his face! And if he dares to lay fingers on my bike again, I'll knock him down! I shall have to give it a clean up before I can touch it!"

And with that parting taunt, uttered with bitter sarcasm, Armstrong strode out, wheeling his machine.

And Alf Higgins stood there, clenching his fists—and keeping to his resolve with the greatest difficulty. He fought with himself for a second or two. Then his rising temper died down. His freckled face broke into a strained kind of smile.

"Queer, ain't it?" he said, looking round. "It don't matter wot I do. Some'ow or other, I allus seem to be in the wrong!"

CHAPTER IV.

BLOATERS FOR TEA!



REGINALD PITT looked round at the knot of Removites after Alf Higgins had passed into the Ancient House.

"I'm not one of Higgins' friends—and I don't profess

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to stick up for him!" he said. "But you fellows ought to be kicked round the Triangle—and Armstrong deserves to be ducked in the fountain!"

"Oh? And why?" demanded Hubbard.

"I won't tell you why—you ought to know!" snapped Pitt. "But I don't suppose you will—you haven't got brains enough for a flea!"

"Why, you silly rotter——"

"Oh, don't talk to me!" said Pitt tartly.

"Just because this chap has come to the school you're all turning into a set of cads! It's rather a good thing he came—we're able to find out what you're made of!"

Pitt walked away, boiling.

And in the meantime Alf Huggins had passed into the Ancient House, and had made his way along the corridors to Archie Glenthorne's study. It was empty, of course—for Archie was still upstairs admiring silken shirts, fancy waistcoats, and other choice varieties of clothing for spring wear.

"Ain't it rummy?" said Alf, addressing himself to the lounge. "As soon as ever I do anythink to 'elp a bloke, I go an' shove my blinkin' foot in it! It's funny 'ow these things 'appen!"

Alf shrugged his shoulders, and unrolled the parcel of bloaters. Then he looked round for a stove. He couldn't very well fry the bloaters unless he had a fire of some kind.

He was rather dismayed.

The only stove was the fire grate—and the day was so mild that the fire had not been lit—although it was laid in readiness—in case the weather turned chilly.

Then there was the question of a frying pan.

Alf could easily light the fire, but what could he use to cook the bloaters in? He gazed round, and then went to the cupboard. His face broke into a smile as he saw a large biscuit tin.

The lid would do splendidly—he had used one for such a purpose before, and knew all about it.

"Now we're gettin' on!" he murmured. "We'll soon 'ave a nice niff spreadin' through the room!"

He grinned with anticipation, wondering what Archie would say when he found tea all in readiness. He was quite sure that he would give Archie a big surprise.

He certainly would!

Alf prepared everything. He lit the fire, and before long it was going on merrily. There was plenty of coal in the handsome box, and Huggins piled it on so that there would be a good blaze for frying purposes.

He had already forgotten that little incident in the bicycle shed. After all, it wasn't worth worrying about that. He was angry with Armstrong for being so ungracious.

But what did it matter?

There was no sense in making a fuss over a trifle. And he gave himself wholeheartedly to the task before him. And

before very long he placed the big square tin lid on the fire, and the bloaters commenced to fry.

After about ten minutes the study gradually began to fill with a hazy blue smoke—quite an appetising smoke, too, according to Alf's opinion. He sniffed at it, and grinned.

"I'll 'ave to pop out soon," he told himself. "That there shop ought to be clear by now. I've got to get bread an' butter an' cakes. Must do it proper!"

Alf whistled cheerily. By now the study was quite filled. The hazy blue smoke, indeed, was wafting out in a general flood, through the top of the window, where it was slightly open.

And then, just at that moment, the door opened.

Phipps appeared. And Phipps stood there, his mouth open, his eyes staring, and with an expression of utter horror upon his face.

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Phipps faintly.

It took a very great deal to awaken Phipps out of his customary sedateness. Archie had never really succeeded in doing it. Time after time Archie had attempted to give Phipps a big surprise or a shock.

And Phipps had always stood the test.

But Alf Huggins, without any intention of doing so, had succeeded in the most complete manner. Phipps stood there. His composure vanished. He was lifted entirely out of himself.

Phipps took a tremendous pride in Archie's study. He rather gloried in the fact that that apartment was always orderly, sedate and redolent of peace and quietness and charming luxury.

Yet here—amidst all this splendour—was this son of a bricklayer, engaged in the task of frying bloaters! And the bloaters, moreover, were sending forth clouds and clouds of vile and ghastly smoke into the atmosphere.

"Good heavens!" said Phipps, again.

Alf looked round.

"What-o, old sport!" he said cheerily. "Ow goes it?"

Phipps made one tremendous effort to pull himself together. He succeeded. It was a valiant piece of work. And Phipps stood there, his face immobile once more. The fumes wreathed round him.

"Master Huggins!" he said stiffly.

"What's the matter?" asked Alf. "You speak as though I was standin' in the dock, about to be sentenced to death! Cheer up! No need to look so downhearted!"

Phipps swallowed hard.

"What—what is the meaning of this, Master Huggins?" he asked. "Is it possible that you are frying bloaters?"

Alf grinned.

"I don't think much o' your nose!" he remarked. "Wot did you think they was—honions? Can't you tell they're bloaters?"

For tea, you know! Me an' Archie are goin' to 'ave a spread!"

Phipps nearly fainted.

"You—you are fryin' bloaters for Master Archie?" he asked weakly.

"That's the idea—but don't you let on!" said Alf. "Archie don't know nothink about it yet. Just a little surprise for 'is nibs—see? I reckon he'll be pleased, don't you?"

Phipps did not trust himself to give any opinion.

"I am very much afraid that you have done wrong, Master Huggins," he said. "It is a pity that you did not consult Master Archie before coming to this decision."

"Why, don't 'e like bloaters?" asked Alf, with concern.

"I am not aware of Master Archie's tastes concerning bloaters," said Phipps stiffly. "Tea will be served very shortly, Master Huggins."

"Oh, that's good!" said Alf. "I was just wonderin' 'ow we should get on. It won't take me long to pop out an' get some bread, an' a half-pound o' butter——"

"That will be quite unnecessary, sir," said Phipps coldly.

"But we must 'ave bread——"

"I shall attend to such matters, Master Huggins," interrupted Phipps. "It is my general custom to bring in a tray, and I shall return after Master Archibald has come down. I am exceedingly sorry that you considered it necessary to—er—indulge in this surprise."

And Phipps walked out.

He was absolutely filled with alarm—but he had kept his feelings in check in a very magnificent way. But Phipps hardly knew which way he was walking or what lay in front of him.

He was staggered out of his usual serenity. And he was just wondering what he should do—how he should act—when Archie Glenthorne came strolling round the bend of the passage.

"A dashed ripping collection, Phipps, old carrot!" he observed. "I mean to say, the fancy waistcoats are positively topping. As for the silk shirts, I'm dashed if I've ever seen such priceless beauties. The young master will be resplendent."

"Yes, sir," said Phipps. "But there is a little matter I should like to mention——"

"Pardon me one moment, Phipps—just one moment!" interrupted Archie, producing a handkerchief, and applying it to his elegant nose. "There appears to be a most poisonous odour wafting about in the atmosphere. Have you noticed it? It strikes me as being distinctly ghastly."

"It is quite atrocious, sir," agreed Phipps grimly.

"I gather that some of the lads of the village are indulging in one of their fearful orgies," went on Archie. "I mean to say, how absolutely putrid! Between you and me, Phipps, I'm dashed if I know how these chappies exist! I mean, bloaters and all that kind of stuff!"

"I was about to tell you, sir——"

"Sorrow, Phipps—but I really must trickle onwards," interrupted Archie. "Pray don't think me dashed rude, but Huggins is waiting for me. The poor chappie is absolutely waiting, don't you know?"

"Master Huggins has taken a liberty, sir," said Phipps. "He is preparing a meal of his own accord."

"What-ho!" said Archie. "That's rather dashed good, as it were. I mean to say, it shows that the dear boy is absolutely on the job! I trust, Phipps, that the food stuffs are of the right blend?"

"You have already scented the odour, sir," said Phipps significantly.

Archie started, and then turned pale.

"But—but you don't mean——"

"Exactly, sir."

Archie gave one look of horror at Phipps, and then staggered along the passage to his own door. He threw open the door, and stood there, just inside the study.

Archie swayed dizzily to and fro.

Through a blue kind of haze he could see Alf. Alf was bending over the fireplace, holding up a bloater on the end of a piece of stick. The bloater was smoking, and large blobs of liquid fat were oozing down, and dropping from the smoking fish.

Archie felt ill, and he shuddered.

"Great gadzooks, and what not!" he said faintly. "In other words, help! I mean to say——"

"Hallo, Archie!" interrupted Alf, looking round. "Good! I didn't figger on your bein' 'ere for another ten minutes. But it's just as well, 'cos the bloaters is cooked to a turn."

"The—the bloaters?" said Archie, clutching at his heart.

"Yes—all prime an' oily!" said Huggins.

Archie clapped his handkerchief to his mouth and made a terrific effort to smile. Above all, he could not possibly let Alf see that he was horrified. It wouldn't do at all.

The position was too foul for words, but Archie had to cope with it.

Here was this chap—this Hoxton bouncer—actually turning the study into a fried-fish shop. Archie vaguely gazed round, expecting to see a pan of chip potatoes. He had heard that fish and chips were greatly favoured in Hoxton.

The thing was so terrible that Archie simply couldn't control himself. All he could do was to stand there, gaping. But Archie's natural breeding made it impossible for him to offend the new boy. At whatever cost—if he was poisoned—he would

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have to stick it out. And, what was more, he would have to look cheerful.

Huggins had done it as a surprise—to please Archie. So Archie was pleased. At least, he told himself that he looked pleased. He didn't. He looked dazed.

"Ain't you well?" asked Alf, staring at him.

"Well?" repeated Archie, bracing himself up. "Oh, rather! In fact, dear old boy, I'm positively bursting with vanloads of energy. I mean to say, I'm absolutely in the jolly old pink!"

"Hungry?"

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "That is to say, I—I mean—what? To be absolutely exact, I don't think I'm quite so dashed hungry as I thought. Just a little light something, laddie, don't you know."

"Bloaters?" said Alf eagerly.

Archie gulped.

"Well, as a matter of fact, no!" he faltered. "Not absolutely! Bloaters, of course, are frightfully ripping things when a chappie is sort of starving. But I think I would prefer just a little scone, you know. Absolutely! Jolly decent of you, Alf, but——"

"Oh, I say!" interrupted Alf, in dismay. "Ain't you goin' to 'ave none?"

"Well, to be absolutely candid——"

"I fried 'em specially for you," added Alf invitingly.

"Really?" panted Archie, hope dying out of his breast. "Really? I mean to say, really? No—no! It seems that I've got to think of something somewhat lucid! To be quite frank, Alf——"

"Oh, but look here——"

"I repeat, to be quite alf, Frank—I mean, of course, to be quite clear and concise, absolutely not!" gasped Archie, now breathing with extreme difficulty. "Pray don't worry, old lad! Pray don't allow the wind to arise! Do I absolutely understand that you have fried these ghastly things—these priceless things, I should say—especially for my benefit?"

"O' course I 'ave!"

"Then, in that case, that's rather rich!" said Archie brightly. "What ho! Bloaters! The old appetite has returned. Most remarkable thing, Alf; bloaters—my favourite fruit! I should say, my favourite dish! Extraordinary that you should hit on it!"

Alf was quite delighted, and he proceeded to dish up the bloaters with much enjoyment. Nobody ever knew what an effort it had cost Archie to brighten up so rapidly. Inwardly, he was filled with horror; but outwardly he smiled with all his usual serenity.

He felt like a fellow sitting in a dentist's chair, waiting for the gentleman with the forceps to operate. Sitting in the chair was bad enough, but there was worse to come.

Archie had to go through with it now; he absolutely had to partake of bloaters.



Archie swayed dizzily to and fro. Through a kind of haze he could see Alf. Alf was bending over the fireplace, holding a bloater on the end of a stick.

And the very idea of it filled him right up to the top of the throat. But it would never do to let Alf see that he had made a mistake. It would be a fearful shock for the poor chap.

And Archie went through with it.

He pretended to like one of the bloaters—to the amazement of Phipps, he consumed three parts of it. And he chatted amiably all the time. By the time the meal was over, Archie felt that he had passed through a particularly ghastly kind of nightmare.

And Alf Huggins—although he said nothing—instinctively knew that he had done wrong. Archie was too polite to say so—his abundant good nature would not allow him to state his disapproval. But Alf was not blind. He could see that his study chum was suffering.

And later on, Alf went out into the Triangle, and paced up and down in the

gloom with his hands thrust deep into his trouser-pockets.

"Wrong ag'in!" he muttered. "I allus try to do the right thing—an' I allus goes wrong! Lumme, ain't I thankful the day's nearly over!"

But the day wasn't over—quite.

CHAPTER V.

THE END OF A PERFECT DAY.



RALPH LESLIE FULLWOOD nodded.

"Yes, to-night," he said. "It's no good waiting until later on; it's got to be done on the bounder's first night in the dormitory. We'll make him jolly well squirm!"

"But some of the other chaps might object," said Bell doubtfully.

"Let 'em object!" growled Fullwood. "We shall have the majority on our side, so you needn't worry. This bally cad hasn't got half a dozen friends in the whole Remove. And you can take it from me, that before a week's gone by he'll be kicked out of the school!"

"Oh, it's easy to talk like that!" said Gulliver. "But it won't be so easy to get him kicked out. He's a rotten outsider, but—"

"Well, we don't want to talk about that," interrupted Fullwood. "It'll be bed-time soon, and there isn't any time to waste. I've got a pretty good idea—we'll shove something in the cad's bed."

"Tacks?" suggested Bell.

"No fear!" replied Fullwood. "Tacks ain't much good. Besides, they wouldn't hurt him at all—and he'd see the things as soon as he turned the sheet back. My idea is to stick a lot of burrs on the bed-clothes."

"A lot of what?" asked Gulliver, staring.

"Burrs!"

"Oh, you mean those prickly things," grinned Bell. "Those bally things that stick like glue when you're walkin' through the woods?"

"Yes, that's the idea," said Fullwood. "They're horrible, you know—they hurt like thunder. And as soon as this chap gets in bed, they'll stick to his pyjamas and make him in a terrific mess."

"I'm not sure that it's severe enough," said Gulliver. "Why not chuck water all over his blankets, or put bricks in his pillow? It seems to me that we ought to do something better—"

"Don't you worry, I've got some other ideas, too!" interrupted Fullwood. "This idea about the burrs is just to start with. Only we've got to do that now, because it'll be bed-time soon."

"But what about these burrs?" asked

Gulliver. "We can't get any now. You've got to collect them out of the fields—"

"Don't be an idiot!" broke in Fullwood. "I know where I can lay my hands on bags of the things! There's a little box-room at the end of the upper corridor; and there's a whole pile of burrs in the corner—some of the chaps used 'em for a jape last term."

And Fullwood and Co., a minute or two later, sallied out and passed upstairs on their errand. They soon obtained a large number of the prickly little burrs; then they cautiously entered the Remove dormitory.

Morrow was there—Morrow, of the Sixth.

"Oh, hallo!" said Fullwood calmly. "I just wanted to have a look at Huggins' bed."

"It's just the same as any other bed," replied Morrow. "That's the one—near the middle. But what do you want with it? If you're going to start any of your foolery—"

"Keep your hair on!" interrupted Fullwood. "I'm satisfied now. I wanted to make certain the cad wasn't put next to me, that's all. It's a dead certainty I'm not going to sleep next to a Hoxton street urchin!"

And Fullwood and Co. walked out again, leaving Morrow grinning. Even the Fifth and Sixth were rather opposed to Alf Huggins. In their dignified way, they considered that his presence at St. Frank's was rather a come-down for the old school.

The cads of Study A waited until Morrow had gone—watching from a dim corner at the end of the corridor. Then, when the coast was clear, they came out and crept back into the dormitory.

"Sharp's the word!" murmured Fullwood.

They had to work in the dark, for it was impossible to turn on the switch. But it was moonlight outside, and the juniors had no difficulty in selecting the bed which had been prepared for Alf Huggins.

"Pull the clothes back!" said Fullwood sharply.

They were pulled back, and hundreds of the burrs were stuck all over the sheets—particularly on the upper sheet, where they clung in clusters. And the cads grinned as they pictured what would happen.

It would be a most unpleasant ordeal, to say the best of it. To slip into bed and to find oneself smothered with little prickly things would be an exceedingly trying experience.

But when the bed was replaced in its former state there was nothing to show that this trick had been performed. And Fullwood and Co. were only just in time, for the bed-time bell was due to clang within ten minutes.

They slipped downstairs and went into their study to indulge in a final cigarette. Fullwood and Co. rather fancied themselves

(Continued on page 15.)

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No. 19.

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April 14, 1923

THE LEAGUE

OF THE IRON HAND



A Thrilling Detective Story of a powerful criminal
confederation organised by "Number One."

**BEGIN TO-DAY THIS OPENING INSTALMENT OF
NELSON LEE'S GREATEST DETECTIVE EXPLOITS.**

CHAPTER 1.

THE RULING COUNCIL.

"**W**ELL, Herman, here we are, back in London again! And how have things been going while Fairfax and I have been away? Business been good—eh?"

"Oh, pretty much as usual!" said the man who had been addressed as Herman. "We've had one or two good hauls, but nothing out of the common."

"No trouble with the police?"

"No. But we had a rather narrow escape this afternoon—not of getting into trouble with the police, but of having Nelson Lee put on our track."

The scene was a sumptuously furnished room in a palatial house in Curzon Street, Mayfair. The costly works of art which adorned the walls of the apartment, the superb old china in the inlaid cabinets, the priceless folios and rare editions which lined the book shelves—all these betokened unlimited wealth and faultless taste.

Paul Herman, the millionaire-owner of this magnificent house and all the artistic treasures it contained, was a strikingly handsome man, still on the right side of forty, who had settled in London about three years before our story opens.

In appearance he was tall and slim, with a clean-shaved face and jet-black hair and

eyes. In manner he was courtly, suave, and affable. He was supposed to have amassed his vast wealth by successful mining operations in South America. It is true that nobody knew where the mines were situated, but that was a mere detail.

He was a millionaire; he was a liberal patron of the fine arts; he entertained on a lavish scale; and these facts, added to the magnetic charm of his personality, had made Paul Herman, at the time of which we write, a leading and popular figure in London society.

If only society had known the truth!

At the moment when we make Paul Herman's acquaintance he was reclining in an easy-chair, with a cigarette between his lips and a rather bored expression on his handsome face.

The two men with him were also well-known in the highest social circles. They were Sir Edgar Fawcett and Mr. Willoughby Fairfax, and they had only to-day returned to England after a two months' absence abroad.

The younger of the pair, Sir Edgar Fawcett, was rather loudly dressed, and bore on his face unmistakable traces of vice and dissipation. Fairfax, on the other hand, presented the appearance of a somewhat portly and rather stolid country gentleman, who might not be very clever, but whose integrity and respectability were above suspicion.

As both these men, together with Paul Herman, will figure largely in our story, it is necessary to tell the reader something of their history and antecedents.

Sir Edgar, then, was the only son of the late Sir Humphrey Fawcett, of Moscar Grange, in Surrey. On the death of his father he had succeeded to the baronetcy and estate; but in less than two years he had dissipated his inheritance, and had only saved himself from the Bankruptcy Court by selling Moscar Grange and the surrounding estate to a retired British admiral named Sir George Langford.

Sir Edgar had then taken up his residence in a modest flat in London. Here he had lived for two or three years, sponging on his friends, and occasionally making a few pounds by betting and card-playing. Then, to the amazement of all who knew him, he had moved into a large and expensively furnished flat, had invested in a motor-car, and had rented some shooting in Scotland.

One or two of his friends, more curious than the rest, had questioned him as to the source of his newly-acquired wealth. To these Sir Edgar had replied, in an offhand way, that a "distant relative" had died, and left him all his money.

In some respects, the history of Mr. Wiloughby Fairfax oddly resembled that of Sir Edgar Fawcett. He had started his business career as a member of the London Stock Exchange, and for four or five years had been fairly successful. Then his luck had completely deserted him, and for the next two years he had continually hovered on the threshold of bankruptcy.

And then—just when his friends were expecting to hear that he had been "hammered" as a defaulter—he had retired from business, had bought a country house and estate, known as Rycroft Hall, and had purchased a handsome and up-to-date steam-yacht.

Where had the money come from? Fairfax laughingly said, when questioned on the subject, that his sudden rise of fortune was due to "a lucky speculation in American railway stock." But it was a curious fact that the name of the railway was as big a mystery as Sir Edgar's "distant relative," or Herman's "South American mines."

The truth of the matter was, that Paul Herman's mines, Sir Edgar's distant relative, and Fairfax's railway stock were as fabulous as the unicorn. Far different was the source from which these three men had derived, and were still deriving, their princely incomes. For they and another man—a retired Army officer, named Major Rockstro—formed the ruling council of the greatest and most powerful criminal organisation of modern times.

This infamous secret society of criminals—for such it was—was known as the League of the Iron Hand. It owed its origin and organisation to the criminal genius of Paul Herman, who had chosen the name as a symbol of the ruthless discipline he meant

to enforce. From small beginnings, under his skilful guidance, it had rapidly developed both in numbers and in the scope of its operations. At the time of which we write it had nearly a thousand members, many of whom were men who moved in the highest circles of society.

The headquarters of the league were situated at a house in Walworth Road, but there were "district lodges" at various clubs and cafes up and down the metropolis, where the members met to discuss their plans, make their reports, and receive their orders.

Each district lodge was presided over by an official, who was known by a distinguishing number. The members of each lodge were under the direct orders of the presiding officer of that lodge; and these officers, in their turn, were under the orders of the ruling council, at the head of which, invested with supreme authority, was Paul Herman.

All the servants at Herman's house were members of the league. With the exception of these servants, and the members of the ruling council, none of the members of the league had the remotest suspicion that their iron-handed chief was the handsome millionaire of Curzon Street. To the vast majority of the members of the league their president was a mysterious individual, who seldom appeared in the same disguise at two successive meetings, and who was only known to them as "Number One."

Plunder was the one and only object of the League of the Iron Hand. Burglary was, perhaps, the principal means adopted for attaining this object; but other means were not neglected. At the house in Walworth Road, for instance, there was an extensive plant for the manufacture of counterfeit coin and spurious banknotes. Arson, blackmail, and forgery also contributed their quota to the coffers of the league.

All the resources of modern civilisation were pressed into the service of this up-to-date league of criminals. The fleetest motor-cars carried "cracksmen" to and from the scene of their labours; and many a parcel of stolen jewels had been conveyed out of the country by Fairfax's yacht, and secretly disposed of on the Continent.

As a matter of fact, on the very day our story opens, Fairfax and Sir Edgar had returned from a two months' cruise in the yacht, in the course of which they had disposed of over twenty thousand pounds' worth of stolen gems, and had "planted" almost the same amount of spurious notes.

They had landed at Southampton about noon, and had reached London by train shortly after five o'clock. From Waterloo a taxi had conveyed them to Paul Herman's house in Curzon Street, where the conversation set out above had ensued.

At mention of the "narrow escape," and the name of Nelson Lee, a look of alarm came into the faces of both visitors.

"Why—what—what has happened, then?" almost gasped Willoughby Fairfax.

"Oh," was Herman's nonchalant reply, "one of our ordinary members—that fellow Martin, of Kennington Road—wrote to Lee this afternoon, stating that he was a member of a secret society, and was prepared to sell Lee some startling information if he would come to his house to-morrow afternoon. The matter was reported to me, through our secret service branch, within an hour of the letter being posted. I inveigled Martin here, by means which I

The other isn't quite so big, but it's well worth attempting. You've heard of Donald Stuart, of course?"

Sir Edgar nodded.

"That crack-brained fellow who has squandered a nice little fortune in experiments in airships?" he said.

"That's the man," said Herman. "Has it ever occurred to you what an immense power would be placed in our hands if we had a practicable airship at our command?"

"Hasn't it?" said Sir Edgar, with a laugh. "I've often amused myself by



Sir Edgar uttered a shout of alarm and took to his heels. At the same instant a cry of "Stop thief!" rang out from Herman's window, followed by the crack of a revolver.

needn't trouble to describe, and—" He paused to light another cigarette.

"There is now a vacancy for an ordinary member in D Division," he drawled, blowing out a cloud of filmy smoke.

His two companions shuddered. Hardened as they were, familiar as they were with Herman's ruthless methods of maintaining discipline, his cold-blooded callousness sent an icy shiver down their spines.

"Have you anything big on at present?" asked Sir Edgar, hastening to change the conversation.

"Yes," said Herman; "I've two schemes in contemplation, one of which may prove to be the biggest thing we've ever tackled.

imagining all the gorgeous things we could do if we only had the right sort of airship—something practically noiseless, you know, with the speed of a Zepp, although not a tenth part of a Zepp's length, and needing only two or three men to control her. However, it's no use talking of it. Such a craft won't be invented in our time."

"That's just where you're mistaken," said Herman. "If my information is correct—and I've no reason to doubt its correctness—such an airship has already been invented."

"By Donald Stuart?"

"Yes."

Fawcett shook his head.

"I shall believe it when I see it!" he said.

Herman shrugged his shoulders.

"Listen to me," he said, "and when you've heard me out you may not be quite so sceptical.

"I have long known," he went on "that Stuart was crazy on the subject of airships, and has well-nigh beggared himself by costly experiments. A day or two after you left England, a paragraph appeared in the 'Daily Mail,' stating that Stuart had at last overcome a difficulty which had baffled him for years, and that his noiseless airship—a small but marvellously fast and easily controlled affair—would shortly make its initial public appearance.

"As soon as I read this paragraph, I sent for Rockstro, and instructed him to go down to Wimbledon—where Stuart's place is—and find out all he possibly could about this wonderful new airship.

"Rockstro at once proceeded to carry out my orders, and the information which he has obtained up to the present is this. The airship is practically finished, and all the workmen were dismissed last week. All that now remains to be done is to fix up some rather delicate electric fittings, which Stuart will see to himself.

"A few days ago the airship made a short trial trip, and behaved perfectly. Next day Stuart wrote to the War Office, describing the result of this trial spin, stating that he wished to give the Government the first chance of purchasing the invention. Up to the present, so far as I know, he has received no answer to his letter.

"Now," proceeded Herman after a pause, "I intend that that airship shall become the property of the League! By hook or crook, we must get possession of it before the Government snaps it up!"

"Your idea is to steal it, I suppose?" asked Fairfax.

Herman nodded, and lit onther cigarette.

"But none of us knows anything about airships," objected Fairfax. "You can't steal a motor-car if you don't know how to drive it; and it seems to me that you can't steal an airship if you don't know how to navigate it!"

"There'll be no difficulty about that," said Herman. "Rockstro will attend to the navigation and— Ah! here's Rockstro himself!"

"Major Rockstro!" announced the butler, throwing open the door.

The major—a thin, wiry-looking man, rather under the average height, with a sallow face and a heavy black moustache—nodded to Herman, and shook hands with Fairfax and Sir Edgar.

"We were just talking about you," said Herman. "I've been telling these two about Stuart's airship. However, you can talk about that to them later on. I rather want to discuss that other affair first."

"What other affair?" asked Fawcett.

"The Hummersea jewels!"

"I don't follow you."

"Don't you?" laughed Herman. "Well then, I'll explain. Sir George Langford is giving a ball at Moscar Grange to-morrow night in honour of Miss Langford's birthday, and I have been invited."

"As Paul Herman, or as Squire Mandeville?" asked Fawcett.

"Both!" said Herman. "But Paul Herman has declined the invitation, and Squire Mandeville has accepted it, and is to stay the night at the Grange."

It should here be explained that Paul Herman lived a double—or, rather, a treble—life. As already stated, he was only known to the vast majority of the members of the league as "Number One." To the general public in London he was only known as Paul Herman. These, however, did not exhaust the list of his aliases.

In addition to owning the house in Curzon Street, he was the owner of a fine old country house in Surrey, known as Hartop Manor. Part of his time was spent at Curzon Street, as Paul Herman; and part of his time was spent at Hartop Manor, where he was known as "Squire Mandeville."

Only the servants at Curzon Street and the members of the ruling council knew that "Paul Herman" was "Squire Mandeville"; but not even the members of the ruling council knew that Paul Herman had another alias, and lived another life, of which, in due course, the reader will be informed.

"Well?" said Sir Edgar Fawcett, "Where does the big scheme come in?"

"That young idiot, the Marquis of Hummersea, has also been invited to the ball, and is also staying the night at the Grange," answered Herman. "As you know, the marquis has a passion for adorning himself with expensive jewellery, and possesses amongst other things, a superb set of diamond studs and sleeve-links, which are valued at five thousand pounds. He's certain to wear these at the ball to-morrow night, and he's equally certain to keep his jewel-case in his bedroom.

"Now, you used to live at the Grange before you sold it to Admiral Langford, and you have told me many times that the house is honeycombed with secret passages, running in the thickness of the walls, and communicating with the various rooms by sliding panels. Did you ever tell Admiral Langford about them?"

"Never! So far as I know, he's quite unaware of their existence."

"Is it possible to get from any room in the house to the other rooms, by means of those secret passages?"

"With few exceptions," replied Sir Edgar.

"Would it be possible to get from my room to the marquis's, and rescue his jewel-case?"

"It would be possible for me to do so, because I know exactly where the sliding panels are, and how to open them."

"Very well, then! Are you game to help me to get hold of that jewel-case?"

"Yes; if I can do so without much risk."

"There's no risk at all. This is my plan. You will disguise yourself to-morrow night, run over to Moscar in your car, leave the car in one of the lanes outside the village, and hide yourself in the grounds of the Grange."

"Before I go to the Grange, I will conceal a light rope-ladder at the bottom of one of my bags. The ball will be over about two o'clock in the morning, and at half-past four I will open my bedroom window, and signal to you by three short flashes of my electric torch."

"On perceiving my signal you will come underneath my window, and I will lower the rope-ladder. You will then swarm up to my room, make your way to the marquis's room by way of the secret passage, secure the jewel-case, and get away with it."

Sir Edgar expressed his approval of this daring plan, and after he and Herman had settled the details, the three men rose to take their departure.

CHAPTER II.

NELSON LEE AND DERRICK O'BRIEN JOIN HANDS.

THE reader will have gathered that one of the ordinary members of the League of the Iron Hand—a man named Martin, who lived in Kennington Road—had written to Nelson Lee on Monday afternoon, stating that he belonged to a secret society of criminals, and was willing to sell the famous detective "some startling information" if he would call at Martin's house the following afternoon.

This letter was delivered at Nelson Lee's rooms in Gray's Inn Road on Monday evening. The detective, however, was away from home at the time, and did not return—and consequently did not receive the letter—until one o'clock on Tuesday afternoon.

Now, Nelson Lee had long suspected that an organised gang of criminals, directed by a man of extraordinary skill and daring, was at work in the metropolis, though he had never been able to lay his hand on any tangible evidence in support of his suspicion. He had broached this theory to several of his brother-officers, and also to the officials at Scotland Yard; but the latter had openly derided the idea, and most of the former had pooh-poohed it.

There was one man, however, who cordially agreed with Nelson Lee's theory, and had, as a matter of fact, formed the same theory himself before ever Nelson Lee had mentioned the matter to him. That man was Derrick O'Brien, a warm-hearted and impulsive young Irishman, who, like Nelson Lee, followed the profession of a private detective.

So Lee's first action, when he returned to Gray's Inn Road on Tuesday afternoon and

opened Martin's letter, was to send for a taxi and drive to O'Brien's rooms in Lambeth Palace Road.

"Faith, it's mighty pleased with yourself you're looking!" was the Irishman's greeting. "Is it a fortune you've just come into?"

"I've come into something better than a fortune," replied Lee. "At last I've got a chance of learning something about that mysterious criminal organisation. One of its members has written to me, stating that he is prepared to turn traitor if I make it worth his while. Read this!"

He thrust the letter into O'Brien's hand, the latter read it and uttered a shout of triumph.

"The letter arrived last night," said Nelson Lee, before O'Brien could offer any comment. "Unfortunately, I was away from home at the time, and only returned about half an hour ago. If I'd been at home when the letter arrived I should have gone to see the fellow last night, in spite of the fact that he fixes this afternoon for the interview."

"Then you haven't seen him yet?" asked O'Brien.

"No," said Nelson Lee. "I'm going to see him now. Remembering our compact, I thought I'd call and ask you if you'd like to come with me."

O'Brien's reply was to snatch up his hat, and a moment later the two detectives were on their way to Kennington Road.

On reaching the address given in the letter, Nelson Lee rang the front-door bell. There was no response. He rang again, and yet again, but still there was no response.

"Let's try the back door," suggested O'Brien.

They went round to the back and knocked at the kitchen door. But the echo of their knocking was the only answer they received.

"He has repented of his letter," said O'Brien. "He has run away, and will probably never return."

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I'm afraid it's worse than that," he said gravely. "You remember what he said in his letter—that his life would not be worth an hour's purchase if his fellow-members knew that he had written to me."

O'Brien started, and a look of horror crossed his face.

"You think they've discovered his treachery, and made away with him?" he said, in a low, awed voice.

"I fear so," said Nelson Lee. "Anyhow, we'll take the liberty of breaking in and seeing if we can discover anything useful in the shape of letters or other papers."

He forced back the catch of the kitchen window, and crept into the silent house. O'Brien followed him.

On the kitchen table lay a sealed envelope. The detective picked it up. It was addressed in typewritten characters to "Nelson Lee, Esq."

Lee tore the envelope open and drew out a sheet of paper, on which was typed:

"Number One presents his compliments to Mr. Nelson Lee, and regrets to inform him that Mr. Martin died somewhat suddenly about six o'clock on Monday evening. Mr. Lee has Number One's permission to search Mr. Martin's house from roof to basement, if he thinks fit; but Number One assures Mr. Lee, on his word of honour, that he will only be wasting his valuable time. All Mr. Martin's papers have been destroyed or taken away."

"It is as I feared, you see," groaned Nelson Lee, tossing this typewritten message to O'Brien. "The villains discovered that Martin had written to me, and they have murdered him, ransacked his house, and taken away everything of an incriminating nature."

"But I'll be even with them yet!" he exclaimed, with flashing eyes. "This insolent message is a challenge. I accept the challenge. From this moment I will devote the whole of my time to avenging Martin's death and bringing Number One and his dastardly confederates to justice."

"And I'll help you!" said O'Brien between his clenched teeth.

"You mean that?"

"I do. It shall be war to the death between us and this infamous gang of thieves and murderers."

And the two detectives gripped hands on the compact.

CHAPTER III.

THE STOLEN JEWEL-CASE.

TO the ball given at Moscar Grange by Admiral Sir George Langford in honour of his daughter's birthday, over a hundred guests had been invited, many of whom had also been invited to spend the night at the Grange. Amongst the latter were "Squire Mandeville," Donald Stuart, the brilliant young inventor of the famous airship, and a wealthy, but foppish young nobleman known as the Marquis of Hummersea, who had a mania for adorning himself with rare and costly jewellery.

There is no need to describe the ball, which began at nine and ended about half-past two in the morning. It is enough to say that everything passed off with the greatest éclat, and all the guests, with one exception, were enthusiastic in their description of it as the most enjoyable function they had ever attended.

The exception was Paul Herman. As already stated, he was madly in love with the admiral's pretty daughter, and, during the course of the evening, he had taken advantage of an interval in the dancing to propose to her. To his bitter mortification she had refused him—gently and kindly, but in terms that left no loophole for future hope. And when—remembering what Major Rockstro had told him the night before—he had blurted out the name of Donald Stuart, and had challenged her to deny that Donald

was the favoured suitor, her blushes had told him all he wished to know.

"This, then, was why Paul Herman was pacing his bedroom at Moscar Grange with a look of savage fury on his face. Scoundrel though he was, there was nothing insincere in his love for Vera Langford. He loved her with a passionate fervour which bordered on infatuation.

For nearly two hours Herman strode up and down the room, cursing Donald Stuart and plotting schemes for trampling him underfoot. So fierce was his anger, so absorbed was he in his thoughts of vengeance, that it was not until the clock on the mantelpiece chimed a quarter-past four that he suddenly remembered the plot which he had concocted with Sir Edgar Fawcett for stealing the Marquis of Hummersea's jewels.

Without a sound he opened the window and lowered one end of the rope-ladder to the ground. On the other end were two steel grappling-hooks. Having fixed these firmly on the window-sill, he picked up the electric lamp and pressed the button once, twice, thrice.

In the meantime Sir Edgar Fawcett had carried out the programme agreed on the night before. Having disguised himself as an out-at-elbows working-man, he had motored over to Moscar, had left his car in a lonely lane on the outskirts of the village, and had concealed himself in the grounds of the Grange, in full view of the house.

On seeing Paul Herman's signal, he glided from his hiding-place, swarmed up the ladder, and climbed into the bedroom.

"So far, so good," he said in a low voice. "Now, where is the marquis sleeping?"

Paul Herman told him, then he laid his hand on Sir Edgar's shoulder.

"I proposed to Miss Langford to-night," he said. "She rejected me. Can you guess why?"

Sir Edgar nodded.

"Donald Stuart," he said. "What are you going to do?"

"Crush him!" said Paul Herman between his clenched teeth. "Ruin him! Brand him as a felon, and shatter for ever any hope he may have of marrying Miss Langford. And you're going to help me!"

"Me? How?" exclaimed Sir Edgar in surprise.

Herman whispered something in his ear. Sir Edgar started and chuckled. Again Herman whispered. Sir Edgar grinned and rubbed his hands.

"Magnificent!" he said. "You're a genius! Can I do it? As easy as winking! Will I? Rather! Where is Stuart sleeping?"

"In the next room but one to the marquis. Both rooms are on this side of the house, and on the same landing as this."

"I know," said Sir Edgar. "And now I'd better be getting to work."

He drew a pair of rubber-soled goloshes

from his pocket and slipped them over his boots. Then, having borrowed Paul Herman's electric pocket-lamp, he crossed the room and pressed his thumb on a certain spot on the wall. With an almost inaudible click the panel flew open and revealed one of the secret passages.

Stepping through the opening, he switched on the electric lamp and made his way to the panel which gave admittance to Donald Stuart's room. After listening intently for a moment or two, to make sure that the young inventor was asleep, he pressed the secret spring and stepped into the room.

Donald's clothes were lying in a folded heap on a chair beside the bed. On the top of the heap was his handkerchief, marked with his initials.

"That'll do as well as anything," muttered Sir Edgar under his breath. "They'll think it fell out of his pyjama-pocket."

He secured the handkerchief and left the room as silently as he had entered it, closing the panel behind him, of course. Two minutes later he stood in the marquis's bedroom.

On the dressing-table was a jewel-case, which contained an assortment of rings and pins of almost incalculable value. Having secured this case, Sir Edgar dropped Donald's handkerchief on the floor, unlocked the bedroom door, thrust the key into his pocket, glided back into the secret passage, and silently closed the panel.

Once more he made his way into Donald's room. Opening the jewel-case, he took out one of the least valuable of the rings and dropped it on the floor. Then, stepping back into the secret passage, he closed the panel and returned to Paul Herman.

"All's ready for the last act now," he whispered. "I've got the jewel-case and the studs and links, and I've left one of the rings in Stuart's room and Stuart's handkerchief in the marquis's room, as you suggested. How long do you calculate it'll take you to rouse the admiral and get him here?"

"Three minutes from the time I close the window," said Paul Herman.

"Then I'll wait two minutes before I shy the gravel," said Sir Edgar.

With these words he swarmed down the ladder and took his stand, with the jewel-case in his hand, beneath the window of Donald Stuart's bedroom. After his departure, Paul Herman hauled up the ladder, stowed it away in his bag, and removed all traces of Sir Edgar's visit. Then, having closed the window, he unlocked his bedroom door and hurried to the door of Admiral Sir George Langford's room.

"Sir George, please get up at once!" he cried, hammering on the outside of the door.

Sir George sprang out of bed, hastily donned his dressing-gown, and opened the door.

"What's the matter?" he gasped. "Nothing wrong, I hope!"

"I'm afraid there is," replied Herman

in an agitated voice. "For some reason or other I couldn't sleep to-night, so, a few minutes ago, I got out of bed and drew aside my window-curtains. To my great surprise I perceived a rough-looking man standing under one of the bedroom windows, and as I watched, I saw a man lean out of the window and drop a small box into the hands of the man outside. It looked to me like a jewel-case."

"A jewel-case!" exclaimed the admiral, turning pale.

"That's what it looked like," said Paul Herman. "But the man is still there. Come to my room and you can see him for yourself."

In the meantime, after waiting a couple of minutes, Sir Edgar had flung a handful of gravel at the outside of Donald's bedroom window.

Awakened by the rattle, the young Scotsman sprang out of bed and opened the window.

"What is it?" he called out, peering down at the half-seen figure below.

Sir Edgar waited a few seconds before he replied; then, seeing Paul Herman and the admiral take their stand at Herman's window, which Herman had softly opened, he held up the jewel-case.

"You've put the markis's studs an' links in 'ere?" he said, in a low but distinct voice. "Right-ho! So long! I'll see yer to-morrer at the usual place."

Donald stared at him in stupefied amazement.

"The fellow must be mad, or drunk," he muttered to himself.

The thought had scarcely crossed his mind ere Sir Edgar uttered a shout of alarm and took to his heels. At the same instant a cry of "Stop thief!" rang out from Herman's window, followed by the crack of a revolver; and in the twinkling of an eye—or so it seemed to the bewildered Donald—the Grange was alive with shouting men and screaming women.

Donald hurriedly switched on the electric light, with the intention of donning his dressing-gown and going to see what had happened. Then his eyes fell on the ring in the middle of the floor.

"Hallo! What's that doing there?" he gasped. "It wasn't there when I came to bed. Somebody must have been in my room while I was asleep. Yet the bedroom door is still locked, and the key is still in the keyhole. What on earth does it all mean?"

Completely mystified, he picked up the ring; and even as he did so, he was startled by a thunderous knock at the bedroom door. Ere he had time to open it, the door was burst open from the outside, and, to Donald's utter amazement, the admiral dashed into the room, purple with rage and indignation, and closely followed by "Squire Mandeville," the Marquis of Hummersea, and half a dozen other excited guests!

(To be continued.)

This Grand New Series of Detective Stories Begins To-day!



HUNTED DOWN

or
the Adventures of GORDON FOX,
DETECTIVE

No. 1—The Case of the Padlocked Room.

CHAPTER I.

THE HOUSE IN CHELSEA—THE EXPLOSION.

EXTRY 'dition! More strikes in Russia! Desprit fight with Cosacks at Warsaw! 'Ave a paper, sir?"

Gordon Fox shook his head, dropped a copper into the ragged little urchin's hand, and strode on his way across the King's Road. It was eight o'clock of a wet and gusty February night, and none would have recognised the famous detective in his long stormcoat with muffled-up collar, tweed cap pulled over his brow, and a briar-root pipe between his teeth.

He was on one of his long, nocturnal tramps, pondering over a case that had baffled him for several days, and nothing was farther from his thoughts than the Russian crisis as he turned up Church Street, that quiet thoroughfare in which, if anywhere in Old Chelsea, one might hope to see ghosts of the past.

But it was something more substantial than a ghost that attracted Gordon Fox's attention before he had gone more than two hundred yards. He heard the rapid crunch of footsteps from a low-walled garden on his left, and then, a gate flying open, a man burst out upon the pavement into the light that shone from a near-by lamp-post.

He was middle-aged, with closely cropped side whiskers, and his face was the hue of ashes. He was bare-headed and excited, and, from his dark clothing and white shirt-front, he was either a waiter or a butler.

"Have you seen a constable, sir?" he exclaimed breathlessly.

"I don't think there is one about," replied Gordon Fox, whose curiosity was instantly aroused. "Perhaps I will do as well. I am a detective, and my name is Fox."

"Not Mr. Gordon Fox?"

"Yes; that's right."

The man hesitated briefly.

"I'll take you at your word," he said.

"Come inside, will you? My master—"

"What of him—murdered or robbed?"

"I don't know; that's just it. But come along, sir, and judge for yourself. My name is Harry Staines, and I am servant to Mr. William Melbury."

The two hastened through the garden, between trees and shrubbery, and entered a small detached house that stood some distance back from the street.

Having closed the front door, the servant stepped into the dining-room at one side and poured a drink from a decanter, swallowing it at a gulp.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, as he rejoined the detective. "My nerves were a bit shaken, and no wonder! That way, if you please!"

He led his companion to the rear of the hall, and opened a door on the right. Gordon Fox paused, looking into an empty room, where a shaded lamp was burning. It was furnished with a writing-desk, a case of books, a few choice engravings, and several easy-chairs. There was a curtained window at the far end and one at the side, and at the opposite side was a narrow door, to which was attached a heavy padlock. The servant crept to this, and put an ear to it.

"Listen, sir!" he whispered. "Listen!"

"I hear nothing," said the detective.

"Nor do I now. But I did before; I'll swear to it!"

"I am waiting for an explanation," said Gordon Fox. "Why have you brought me here?"

The man pulled out a handkerchief and mopped the perspiration from his brow.

"I will tell you all, Mr. Fox," he replied, "and it may turn out that I've been making a fool of myself. For twelve years I have lived here quite alone with Mr. Melbury, except for a charwoman, who comes every morning. My master is an elderly gentleman, of independent means, and, to the best of my knowledge, he has no friends. He leads a regular life, going out for a couple of hours after dinner, and the most of each day he spends in what he calls his study, a room on the first floor. I have never seen the inside of it, and the only

access to it is by that padlocked door. To go on, sir:

"At half past six o'clock this evening Mr. Melbury got a letter with a foreign stamp on it—I didn't notice what it was—and a little later a telegram came for him. He went out shortly afterwards, returned at a quarter past seven, and shut himself in this room. At a quarter to eight o'clock I rapped on the door to tell him that dinner was served, and as there was no answer, I stepped in.

To my surprise, there was no sign of him, and you may imagine it gave me a shock. He couldn't have left the house again, or I should have seen him; and it was impossible for him to have gone up to his study, because the door is locked on this side. While I was puzzling over the mystery I heard a queer, scuffling noise, and when I listened at the padlocked room I heard the sounds again, up in the study. Then I ran out to fetch the police, and met you in the street. That's the story, and I'd like to know what you make of it."

"You are certain that you saw your master come in?" asked Gordon Fox.

"Certain of it? Why, I passed him in the hall!"

"And you say he could not have left the house?"

"Impossible, sir. Not without my seeing him. The kitchen is across the hall from this room, and I was between there and the dining-room all the time. Yet he is not here and he can't be up in the study. What has become of him?"

"You must give me time to answer that question," said the detective, who was rather inclined to believe that there was no mystery at all. "Any rats or mice in the house?"

"None, sir."

"Have you any idea what Mr. Melbury did in that secret room?"

"I imagine he was writing a book, sir."

Gordon Fox shrugged his shoulders, and, stepping to the padlocked door, he listened for a moment. Then he made a brief and thorough survey of the room, beginning with a glance at the windows. Under the desk he picked up a heavy gold ring, bearing a crest, which he slipped into his pocket.

Observing that the low fire in the grate was covered with ashes of burnt paper, he turned his attention to the wastepaper-basket. It had been entirely emptied, and sticking to wickerwork was a torn fragment of a telegram, which read as follows:

"... Must see you . . . very important.—DUBESKY."

"Is your master an Englishman?" inquired Gordon Fox, as he put the scrap of paper with the ring.

"So far as I know, he is," replied Harry.

"What does he smoke—cigarettes?"

"Yes, sir; Russian ones."

"I thought so," said Gordon Fox. "I can satisfy you on two points, my good fellow,"

he added. "For one thing, there is nobody in the study upstairs; you imagined the noise. And, for another, Mr. Melbury left this room by the end window."

"By the window?" gasped the servant. "I can't believe that! Why on earth would he—"

He paused abruptly. Both had caught a faint sound, and the next instant, as they bent their ears to the locked door, they heard stealthily, groping footsteps somewhere overhead.

"My word, I was wrong!" exclaimed Gordon Fox.

The words had hardly left his lips, when there was a terrific explosion, the house shook, and the two men were dashed violently to the floor.

CHAPTER II.

THE WRECKED LABORATORY—THE HAT IN THE GARDEN—MONSIEUR DUBESKY.

WHEN the echoes of the crash had died away, and the detective and his companion had risen to their feet, unhurt, they saw that the padlocked door had been burst open by the concussion. Gordon Fox snatched at a candle from the writing-desk, lighted it, and dashed up the narrow staircase, with the servant at his heels.

At the top they were met by a cloud of acrid, yellow smoke, but it soon drifted away, and showed them a scene of destruction—a small room that had evidently been used as a laboratory. The end wall towards the back garden had been blown entirely out, and the shattered roof hung over it. On the floor, amid the splintered wreckage of furniture, glass vessels, and shelves, lay the body of a man who was mangled beyond recognition.

"Is this Mr. Melbury?" asked Gordon Fox.

"No, sir; it can't be," declared Staines, who was shaking with terror. "His hair is too dark. But—but his overcoat looks like my master's!"

"See here!" And the detective picked up a false beard and moustache of a tawny-grey colour. "What of these?"

"Mr. Melbury had just such a beard and moustache," was the reply, "but they were not false."

"That settles it," said Gordon Fox. "I am certain that the dead man is not Mr. Melbury. A crime has been committed, if I am not mistaken. Could a stranger have entered the house this evening without your knowledge?"

"No, sir; it would have been impossible. My master came in alone."

The detective asked no more questions. He had discovered several pieces of stout rope on the floor, and a gleam in his eyes told that he already had a clue to the mystery. He descended the stairs and hurried through the house to the front door, followed by the frightened servant.

"Can my master be guilty?" Staines inquired hoarsely. "Do you believe he murdered that man?"

"Does it look like it?"

"I'm afraid it does, sir. Are you going for the police?"

"They will come soon enough," was the reply.

No more than a minute or two had elapsed since the explosion, and as the two walked down the garden, the detective still carrying the candle, and flashing it right and left, they heard a noisy clamour and the sound of running feet.

Gordon Fox suddenly paused and stooped down, examining a deep footprint in the grass at the edge of the path. Then he reached into a clump of shrubbery and pulled out a grey felt hat.

"That is Mr. Melbury's, sir," exclaimed Staines. "It is the one my master always wears. What does all this mystery mean, Mr. Fox? Can you tell me?"

The question remained unanswered, for just then a constable hastened into the garden, breathless and panting.

"What's wrong here?" he gasped. "What was that explosion? Is this the place?"

"This is the place, Wilkins?" replied the detective, as he recognised the man.

"Why, if it ain't Fox!"

"That's right. A word with you, and then I'll be off."

He drew the constable aside, told him briefly what had happened, and added a few instructions.

"You are on duty in the neighbourhood?" he went on.

"Yes, sir."

"Did you see anything of a closed cab loitering about here?"

"I did, sir, as it happens. I saw a taxi—I took it for that—standing close under the trees not ten yards from this gate."

"At what time?"

"It was about a quarter to eight as nearly as I can judge," replied the constable.

"Thanks, Wilkins! That will do."

They parted, the constable hastening to the house in company with Staines. An excited crowd had gathered in the street, and Gordon Fox pushed through them to the King's road, where he hailed a taxi, and was driven to his apartments in King Street, Westminster.

He stopped here only long enough to examine the ring he had found, and to compare the crest with a similar one in a book of European heraldry. A smile of triumph hovered about his lips as he closed the volume.

"Good work!" he told himself. "I have a grip of the case, and I imagine the end is not far off."

Returning to the cab—he had kept it waiting—he drove to Scotland Yard and had a brief interview with his friend, Inspector Harkness.

"Yes, I can put you on the track," said

the inspector. "It is the same man, no doubt. You know, we keep a quiet eye on those fellows. You will find Paul Dubesky at No. 7, Greek Court, Soho."

A moment later a taxicab was spinning up Whitehall as fast as the driver dared go, and that was not fast enough for Gordon Fox.

He jumped out of the taxi at the mouth of Greek Court, paid the cabby a handsome fare, and was soon knocking at the door of the squalid house to which he had been directed. The rap was answered by a foreign-looking woman, who regarded the visitor distrustfully.

"No, Monsieur Dubesky is no longer here," she said, in reply to an inquiry in French.

"You are a friend of his, is it not?"

"An acquaintance, madame."

"I am sorry, but he is gone. He goes out at six o'clock, and soon come back. He have his supper, he wait in his room, and at nine o'clock he come down with a bag in his hand and pay me what he owe. Then he depart, I know not where."

"Will you permit me to see his room, madame?" and the detective tendered a five-shilling piece.

The woman hesitated, then accepted the coin and led the way to a dingy apartment on the second-floor back. It contained only a bed, a chair, and a table; and Paul Dubesky had evidently taken all his belongings with him.

But he had written a brief letter before he left, for a pad of blotting-paper on the table bore fresh ink-marks. Gordon Fox held it up to a cracked mirror, and there was an eager gleam in his eyes as he read the following impression:

"Arrange to . . . to . . . in Legation . . . great peril of . . . ché Gabrielle . . . off Wappi . . ."

"Is monsieur satisfied?" the woman asked suspiciously.

"Quite, madame," replied Gordon Fox. "Here are five more shillings. If you do not object, I will take this with me as a souvenir of my friend Dubesky." And he thrust the blotting-paper into his pocket.

It was now twenty minutes past nine, and by that narrow margin Gordon Fox had missed his man. But he had succeeded far better than he had expected, and he was in high spirits as he left Greek Court and walked westward to the nearest post-office, when he sent two wires to his friend and frequent assistant, Jerry Larking—one to the latter's club, and the other to his chambers in Sackville Street. That done, the detective strolled slowly and thoughtfully on to his lodgings in King Street.

"There is plenty of time," he reflected. "They won't attempt to carry out their daring plan before midnight, at the earliest, and it is possible that they may wait for a day or so. But I will take no chances on that."

CHAPTER III.

THE VIGIL AT WAPPING—THE CLOSED CARRIAGE— A BOLD RESCUE.

WHILE the West End was sparkling with light and merriment, there was darkness and squalor and solitude down at Wapping in the east, the haunt of sailors and land-sharks, and rogues of all descriptions.

Here two men were crouched between a boarding and a blank wall, sheltered from the keen wind; and here they had been waiting for a long time since the City churches struck the midnight hour, listen-

ing, since we know that the yacht Gabrielle lies out yonder, with steam up?"

"Yes, that looks all right," assented Larking. "I hope we'll not be disappointed. I suppose there will be a scrap. I don't mind waiting if there is a chance of getting in a few right-handers, and teaching scoundrels that they can't—"

"They are coming now!" interrupted Gordon Fox. "Hark! Remember your instructions, my dear fellow, and do be careful. I want this to pass off quietly, without any bluster or violence."

A throbbing noise was audible in the distance, ringing on the silence. It drew



On the floor, amid the splintered wreckage of furniture, lay the body of a man, who was mangled beyond recognition.

ing to the hoot of steamers and the occasional steps of a policeman or a prowling vagabond.

In front of them was a dark and narrow street, and close to the left it terminated near the river, a passage leading from it to the Swan landing-stairs.

"This is getting a bit tiresome," said Jerry Larking, when Big Ben had been faintly heard to strike the hour of one. "I don't believe they are going to ship your man to-night."

"But I do," replied Gordon Fox, whose features were disguised. "Can you doubt

nearer and nearer, two yellow lights winked up the street, and soon a closed cab appeared.

"Here goes!" bade the detective, and with that the two darted to the middle of the narrow thoroughfare and barred the way to the vehicle.

"Stop!" Gordon Fox commanded. "Stop at once!"

The chauffeur answered with an oath, and lashed with his fist at Larking, who dodged the blow and then pointed a pistol at the frightened and helpless man on the seat.

As quickly and without a tremor of fear,

though he knew that he was taking his life in his hands, Gordon Fox sprang to the side of the cab and threw the door open, at the same instant levelling a revolver. Within he saw the vague shapes of three men, and caught the gleam of a weapon.

"None of that!" he said sternly. "Fire a single shot, and you will repent it! I am not alone. Help is near, if it should be needed."

There was a moment of silence, and Gordon Fox knew that two desperate enemies were thirsting for his life. Then a man was thrust out of the cab and into his arms—a man muffled in a fur coat, whose eyes were half-shut, and whose tottery limbs could hardly support him.

"You have chosen wisely," said the detective. "The incident is closed, unless you choose to reveal the identity of the man who was blown up in Chelsea a few hours ago. You had better turn back," he added, "for you can have no business on board the yacht Gabrielle to-night."

With that he shut the cab door. Larking lowered his weapon, and the cab rumbled swiftly up the street.

"Where am I?" the rescued man mumbled incoherently. "Who are you?"

"We are friends," Gordon Fox told him, "and we have saved you from a Russian prison. Come, Mr. Melbury! You shall hear an explanation later, when the effect of the drug has passed off."

All had been done quickly and quietly, and nobody was in sight. Larking and the detective hurried down a side street, leading their half-conscious companion, and a walk of five minutes brought them to a cab that had been held in waiting.

CHAPTER IV.

IN KING STREET—PRINCE BULGARINE'S STORY.

IT was between two and three o'clock that same night, and the scene was Gordon Fox's sitting-room in King Street, Westminster. The detective was huddled indolently in a basket-chair by the fire, with a pipe in his mouth; and opposite to him, with his back to the mantel, stood Prince Loris Bulgarine, alias Mr. William Melbury. He was deftly rolling a cigarette, and on one of his fingers was the gold ring bearing his family crest.

"You are a wonderful man, Mr. Fox," he said; "and your swift and infallible powers of deduction amaze me. With the exception of one or two missing links, you have fitted together exactly what happened. It is true that I am Prince Bulgarine. From my youth upward I have been an advocate of social reform in Russia, and fifteen years ago, after taking part in the Nihilistic movements of that period, I was compelled to seek an asylum in England, where, until recently, I was successful in hiding my identity. The history of these

past years is brief—work in my laboratory, visits to my friend Paul Dubesky, and secret correspondence with another friend in St. Petersburg, Troskoi by name.

"To Troskoi this tragic affair is indirectly due. During the late disturbances in Petrograd he was arrested and sent to the Fortress, but he managed to smuggle a letter to me, in which he stated that the Russian Government were aware of my address, that they knew I had invented a new and powerful explosive to be used in the manufacture of bombs, and that they meant to trap me through their embassy in London, and ship me back to Russia on a yacht. The letter came this evening, and shortly afterwards I received a telegram purporting to come from Paul Dubesky, and asking me to call upon him at a quarter past seven. But I was satisfied that Dubesky had not sent the telegram. I suspected a trick, and I prepared for it. I left the house, took a cab for a short distance, and then came back and climbed into my library by the window. There I hid, and not ten minutes later a man boldly walked into my room. He was most cleverly disguised as myself, but I at once recognised him as Dalgeff, a spy of the Russian Embassy in London. He must have had a key to my front door, and his object was to search for papers during my absence. As for myself, I should doubtless have been seized in Greek Court had I gone to Dubesky's lodgings.

"To continue, I stunned Dalgeff by a blow with a life-preserver, dragged him up the stairs to my laboratory, bound and gagged him, and destroyed what explosive I had by immersing it in a pail of water. Then I returned to the lower rooms, and while emptying my papers from my desk—I burnt them in the fire—the ring must have fallen from a drawer unobserved. I fled by the window, meaning to seek a fresh hiding-place, but on the way down the garden I was overpowered and drugged by men who were concealed in the shrubbery. They took me to the Russian Embassy in a taxicab, and the rest you know. Dalgeff's terrible end, I may add, was purely accidental. He must have released himself and stepped on a small quantity of the explosive that I had left lying on the floor. As for Dubesky, I do not doubt that he also received information from Russia, which would account for his hasty flight after writing me a letter or warning. That is all, Mr. Fox. How can I thank you? When I think of what my fate would have been but for you—"

He offered his hand, but it was refused. In silence, with a bow, he left the room and passed out into the dark night. So he vanished—perhaps to hide his identity for years to come in some far land, perhaps to fall again into the toils and end his days in the dungeons of Schlüsselburg, or in the terrible Fortress of Peter and Paul.

THE END.

(Continued from page 14.)

as smokers. And they had an idea that life would be comparatively easy now that Mr. Snuggs was in control of the Remove.

The bell clanged, and among the first fellows to arrive in the dormitory were Handforth and Co. and Alf and Pitt. Huggins had said good-night to Archie outside, for the elegant junior had a bedroom entirely to himself. Alf was very sorry for this.

He had been counting on Archie's presence in the dormitory, and it came as a big set-back to learn that he would not have the presence of his one friend. However, it was no good grumbling.

Alf commenced undressing quietly. Morrow had pointed out his bed, and he laid his clothing on it while he undressed. And Handforth suddenly stared at him.

"What do you think you're doing, Huggins?" he asked warmly.

"Why, I'm undressing, ain't I?"

"I can see that, ass!" snapped Handforth. "But why are you shoving your blessed things on my bed?"

"Tain't your bed!"

"I tell you it is my bed!" said Handforth warmly. "Look here, my lad, if you're going to pinch my bed, there'll be ructions! I've always slept next to Church and McClure——"

"'Old 'ard!" said Alf. "Lumme! I don't want to 'ave the bed! I'm not pertickler. One bed's just as good as another, as fur as I can see. Take yer choice, matey!"

"Oh, well, if you don't mind, that's all right," said Handforth.

"That there prefect chap told me which bed I was to 'ave," went on Alf. "You know—'im who was 'ere when we come up."

"You mean Morrow," said Handforth. "Well, Morrow made a bloomer. He meant the bed next to this—that one. I slept here last night—and I'm going to sleep here again."

"Right-ho, old mate!" said Alf. "Just as you like."

He shifted his clothing and got on with his undressing.

And Fullwood and Co., who were a bit late, arrived in time to see Huggins preparing to slip between the sheets. The nuts occupied the beds at the extreme end; and in that long room it was impossible to notice that Alf had made a change.

"Good!" murmured Gulliver. "He'll be gettin' in soon, and then we shall see the fun."

"I'll bet he'll yelp!" grinned Fullwood.

A minute later they stared in amazement.

For Alf Huggins calmly turned back the bed-clothes, and slipped between the sheets, and snuggled down in perfect comfort. This, of course, was quite natural, for his bed was not interfered with in any way. But there was something in store for Handforth!

"Well, I'm jiggered!" muttered Bell. "The—the chap hasn't said a word!" Fullwood frowned.

"There must be some mistake—or else he's stickin' it out of sheer bravado," he said. "That's about the truth of it! The cad! An' I thought that——"

"A jolly good idea, wasn't it?" sneered Gulliver. "It would be a pity if I couldn't think of something better than that. I told you at first that the scheme was rotten!"

"Oh, don't make a song over nothing!" grunted Fullwood.

In the meantime, Handforth was just getting ready. The leader of Study G generally entered his bed in a peculiar way. He didn't get in in the same manner as any other fellow. He swished back the bed-clothes and gave one jump. It was his nightly custom.

And he did just the same now.

The result was astonishing. Handforth landed between the sheets, slid down, and then sat up like a startled jack-in-the-box.

"Yow! Wow! Yoohoo!" he howled madly.

"Great Scott! What the dickens!"

"I'm stung!" hooted Handforth, leaping up.

"Stung?" gasped Church. "You—you ass! What's the matter with you? Don't yell like that!"

"Yaroo!" shrieked Handforth, falling out of bed with a bump, and lying on the floor. "Something bit me! Wow! There it is again! Oh, my hat! Yow!"

The juniors crowded round, astonished.

"He's smothered with burrs!" yelled Church.

"Birds!" gasped Handforth, aghast.

"No—burrs!" said Church. "What the dickens made you get those things all over you?"

"I suppose it's some new game!" remarked Pitt, with a grin. "No wonder he yelled! He must have sat on about a hundred!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth leapt to his feet, red with wrath.

"Who—who did it?" he roared.

"I did, of course!" said Fullwood. "I put them in that bed——"

"You did!" breathed Handforth, clenching his fists. "By George! You—you funny freak! You lop-sided lunatic!"

"Hold on!" said Fullwood hastily. "Don't get excited!"

"Wouldn't you get excited if you'd been bitten by about a thousand burrs?" bawled Handforth. "I'm bleeding all over! Those rotten things are just like hedgehogs! Lemme go, you asses! I'm going to smash him! Lemme get at 'im!"

But the juniors held him tight.

"I thought it was Huggins's bed!" exclaimed Fullwood. "Morrow told me, and I didn't make any bloomer. I thought it 'ud be rather a good joke on that Hoxton brat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Church suddenly. "What the——" Handforth paused, and stared. "What's up with you, you cackling maniac?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Church. "Huggins was going to get into that bed, and you made him change! Ha, ha—— Yow—wow!"

Church's hilarity ceased with startling abruptness, for Handforth suddenly gave him a shove which caused him to sit on the floor with a crash. And Church sat on about a dozen loose burrs at the same time.

"Oh!" said Handforth darkly. "So—so that chap got into my bed, and I got into his! I'll jolly well skin him!"

"Go easy, Handy!" grinned Pitt. "It wasn't Huggin's fault. He's about the most innocent chap of the whole lot!"

"Of course he is," I put in. "Huggins wasn't to know anything about that trick."

"Not likely!" put in Alf, with a grin. "Seems I missed something pretty steep. Lumme! You ain't 'arf in a mess, mate!"

All the fellows were looking at Huggins angrily. For some reason they seemed to imagine that he was completely to blame, although, of course, Alf had known nothing whatever about the matter.

I was astonished at the blind prejudice of the juniors. Instead of looking at the thing in a reasonable light, they immediately became intensely indignant against Alf. He ought to have received that jape—and yet he had slipped out of it.

Nobody took any account of the fact that Handforth himself was the chief cause of the blunder. And the wrath of the juniors soon took concrete shape.

"Let's bump him!" suggested Fullwood.

"Let's make him pay!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Grab the cad!"

"Not likely!" snorted Handforth. "I'm the chap who suffered, but I'm blessed if I'll see you touch him! I didn't know he was——"

But Handforth might as well have talked to the wall. Over a dozen fellows had already seized Alf, only too glad of a little excuse to attack him. This, in fact, was just what they had been looking for.

"Hi! 'Old 'ard!" gasped Alf, as he was yanked out of bed. "What the dickens—— 'Ere! Leggo! Why, you bloomin'——"

"Bump him!"

Crash!

Alf was suddenly carried to the centre of the dormitory, and then dropped to the floor with a terrific crash. Juniors came along with knotted handkerchiefs, and the

thing developed into a particularly unpleasant kind of rag. Once an affair of this sort started it was difficult to stop.

Alf fought madly—desperately.

But it was no good. There were a score against him, and he was pushed this way, thrown down, punched and battered, until he was so dazed that he could hardly stand.

Reggie Pitt and Handforth and I did all we could to break up the gang of excited juniors. But we could not rescue Alf from his ill-natured tormentors.

Then there came a scuffle from the door.

"Cave!" shouted somebody in a hissing voice.

As though by magic, the juniors separated, each fellow diving for his bed with one bound. And Alf was left standing there, swaying dizzily. He half sank to the floor, his nose bleeding, his lip cut, and his breath coming and going in great gasps.

The dormitory door burst open and Mr. Snuggs danced in.

"Oh, indeed!" he exclaimed in his thin voice. "What is this? What, may I ask, is this?—How dare you make this terrible commotion—— Good gracious me! Can I believe it!"

He stared at Alf with obvious satisfaction.

"Huggins!" he exclaimed. "Upon my soul! And so this is the kind of hooliganism you adopt in the very first night of your arrival at the school! Utterly disgraceful!"

"I never done anythink!" burst out Alf desperately. "'Tain't fair! I ain't done——"

"This is beyond all endurance!" interrupted Mr. Snuggs sourly. "This boy has the audacity to argue with me! Huggins, it is quite unnecessary for me to make any inquiries. I can see that you have been behaving like a common ruffian."

"Oh, go on!" said Alf sullenly. "Pile it on; I'm used to it! It don't matter wot 'appens, I'm allus in the wrong! It's me wot copped out!"

"Your language is utterly vile!" sneered Mr. Snuggs. "Under the circumstances, I shall not administer a severe punishment. I must conclude that you know no better. Having lived among roughs and vagabonds in Hoxton, you, naturally, bring their ways to St. Frank's! You will write me five hundred lines for insubordination and creating a disgraceful commotion!"

And Mr. Snuggs, highly satisfied with himself, walked out of the dormitory. The instant he had gone everybody sat up.

"Well, that's about the meanest, rotten thing I've seen for years!" said Pitt angrily. "Snuggs is a beast! He didn't make a single inquiry; he jumped on Huggins like a ton of bricks! And he must have known that Huggins wasn't to blame——"

"Oh, don't bother!" said Alf wearily. "'Tain't no good, mate! I s'pose I'm a blinkin' Jonah! I'm allus wrong—allus copin' out when I don't mean no 'arm. I'm

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fair sick! Fair sick!" he added deliberately. And he walked unsteadily to his bed, and dropped between the sheets.

CHAPTER VI.

TROUBLE IN THE FORM-ROOM.



MORNING found Alf busy at work in Archie's study—writing lines.

Archie had been intensely indignant when he learned of the Hoxton's boy's ordeal in the dormitory. But Archie's indignation made no difference. Alf had to do the lines for Mr. Snuggs. And Alf accepted the position philosophically, and started on the work. The sooner he started, the sooner it would be over.

And he didn't want to spend any part of the afternoon on the job. For it was a half-holiday, and Alf was particularly keen on football. The season was on its last lap, and King Cricket would soon be ousting the position of the great winter game.

There was an important match on this afternoon, and Alf was as keen as mustard upon seeing it. The juniors of Barcliffe School were coming over to play the Remove.

Alf worked feverishly. He wanted to get those lines done by dinner-time. He reckoned that he would just be able to complete them if he put in every minute of his time.

He had got up feeling practically himself. He was bruised and sore, but a little pain did not worry him. And he was growing accustomed to the bitter prejudice which existed in the Remove.

And he had come to the conclusion that it was practically useless, trying to please the fellows. Being pleasant, in fact, only brought him more sneers and gibes.

It was far safer to keep aloof, to remain to himself. And this was what Alf was doing. He made no complaint about the rag in the dormitory. Even Archie only heard of it as a kind of joke.

But Alf hated Mr. Snuggs in a very whole-hearted manner. He knew that the Remove master had got a particularly vindictive "down" on him. Mr. Snuggs was on the look-out for the flimsiest chance to drop on the boy at any moment.

And Alf was very wary.

During lessons that morning he behaved himself with perfect decorum. He was trying to avoid the Form master's attentions. For Alf was still thinking about that football match. He had wanted to see it, and he had an instinctive feeling that Snuggs had determined that he shouldn't see it.

It seemed that Fate was against the brick-layer's son.

The morning was half over, and Alf was congratulating himself that he would get through all right, when Mr. Snuggs went round the class examining the fellows' books.

Alf watched his progress with dismay. He

was quite certain that Mr. Snuggs would find fault with his own work—not because it was wrong, but Mr. Snuggs took a particular pleasure in that kind of thing. And, sure enough, the master uttered a contemptuous little cackle, in his thin voice, when he picked up Alf's book.

"Remarkable!" said Mr. Snuggs.

He gazed round, and made quite certain that he had obtained the full attention of the Remove.

"Remarkable!" he repeated. "And this, I presume, is a fair sample of your handwriting, Huggins?"

"Tain't bad, is it, sir?"

"Tain't?" said Mr. Snuggs, frowning. "Where did you learn that expression, Huggins? As far as my recollection takes me, there is no such word in the English language!"

Alf remained silent.

"Your speech is becoming worse and worse, instead of better," said the Form-master severely. "I am afraid that it will have a very serious effect upon the other boys. You must improve, Huggins. If you do not, I shall be compelled to give you extra work. I am afraid you are dull."

"That ain't my fault, sir," said Huggins.

"No—no!" agreed Mr. Snuggs. "Of course not! It is merely a result of your unfortunate upbringing. This handwriting is shocking. And you can be quite sure that I shall read your essay on history with the greatest amount of interest."

"'Istory was allus my strong point, sir," said Huggins. "I loves 'istory! I don't reckon as you'll find many bloomers, sir."

"It is doubtful if I shall be able to read the essay at all!" said Mr. Snuggs sourly. "Some of this handwriting is little short of disastrous. Huggins, you will stand out before the class."

"What for, sir?"

"Never mind what for; I will tell you presently," said Mr. Snuggs. "Your companions will have a good look at you, as an example of what they should be!"

There was a snigger, and Alf bit his lip. But he obeyed the order, and stood out before the class. Mr. Snuggs continued his round of examination, taking as long as he possibly could. It was done deliberately, so that the new boy should be compelled to stand there in idleness.

Alf even suspected him of doing this so that he could complain later that he had been lazy. If so, it would be a mean, filthy trick, even for Mr. Snuggs.

At last the master had finished, and he came to his desk. He handed Alf a piece of chalk.

"Now, Huggins, you will go to the black-board, and you will write there these words: 'This is an example of my abominable handwriting,'" said Mr. Snuggs pleasantly. "I trust your spelling will be accurate!"

"I'll do my best, sir," said Alf quietly.

The Remove looked on with interest, and Mr. Snuggs tittered to himself. He con-

sidered that this would be a very good exposure for the Hoxton boy. But, somehow, the joke was robbed of its point.

For Alf wrote the words in really perfect caligraphy—round, full copperplate writing. And the spelling was quite accurate. Reggie Pitt grinned with keen delight, and Mr. Snuggs frowned.

"Amazing!" he said. "Dear me! Quite amazing. I am astounded, Huggins, that you should be able to write so excellently. I must admit that I am very gratefully surprised."

"Thank you, sir," said Alf. "Anythink more?"

"Yes, Huggins, there is something more!" said Mr. Snuggs. "Go to the board and write the word 'Nothink.'"

The Form giggled again, and Mr. Snuggs rubbed his thin hands with keen anticipation. Alf, flushing slightly, turned once again to the blackboard.

But it so happened that at this very moment Marriott produced a pea-shooter. Mr. Snuggs was not looking, and a second later a pea hissed across the room and struck Alf on the back of the neck.

"Ooooh!" he gasped, in surprise.

He staggered, and his foot touched the bottom of the blackboard support. What happened afterwards was exceedingly humorous—from the point of view of the Remove. The whole easel rocked, the blackboard tottered forward, and then came over.

Alf dodged in the nick of time—just as Mr. Snuggs made a vain attempt to save the collapse. The blackboard fell on Mr. Snuggs with a crash.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Remove howled.

Mr. Snuggs and the blackboard lay on the floor in an inextricable heap, together with the easel.

"Crikey!" gasped Alf, in dismay.

Mr. Snuggs emerged, mouthing with rage.

"You—you wretched young hooligan!" he screamed.

"But—but—"

"Not one word!" shouted Mr. Snuggs, leaping to his feet and turning upon Alf like a fury. "You did that deliberately!"

"I never!" said Alf indignantly.

"Do not dare to argue—"

"Somethink stung me!" exclaimed Alf. "Blowed if I know wot it was—but it struck me right in the back of the neck! I'm awfully sorry, but I didn't mean to—"

"I will take no notice of your detestable hypocrisy!" shouted Mr. Snuggs. "You have committed a deliberate assault, and you may think yourself extremely lucky that I do not take you at once to the Headmaster! Good gracious me! You rascally young hooligan!"

"I didn't mean no 'urt—"

"Silence!" yelled Mr. Snuggs. "One more word, sir, and I shall take you to the Headmaster immediately!"

He danced to his desk, opened it with a flourish, and whipped out a cane. The Remove brightened up.

The fact that Alf did not deserve a caning made no difference to the majority of the fellows. It had been a pure accident—caused solely by that pea from Marriott's shooter. Alf was perfectly guiltless. Mr. Snuggs, however, did not look upon the affair in that light.

"Now, young man!" exclaimed Mr. Snuggs. "Hold out your hand! Your hands, by the way, are disgracefully filthy! I am not surprised—considering that you have been accustomed to Hoxton!"

Alf held out his hand sullenly.

"Half a minute, sir!" I exclaimed quietly, standing up. "It wasn't Huggins' fault. Somebody hit him with a pea from a pea-shooter, and he couldn't possibly help—"

"I do not desire any excuses to be made for this young reprobate!" interrupted Mr. Snuggs sourly. "Sit down, Nipper!"

I sat down, fuming.

Swish! Swish!

Mr. Snuggs caned Alf severely. But the Hoxton boy did not utter a sound. He merely compressed his lips, and then walked back to his place. It was nothing to him to receive punishment that he didn't deserve.

And then lessons went on again.

Mr. Snuggs regained his dignity after a short time—but he was still very bitter against Alf Huggins. He considered that Alf was to blame for everything that went wrong. And during the last lesson of the morning, the unfortunate new boy again found himself on the carpet.

And he had just been congratulating himself that he was safe for the afternoon. That was what made it all the more galling.

Algebra was the last lesson, and the fellows were hard at it, and silence reigned—for algebra requires concentration. Mr. Snuggs was at his desk, examining the exercise-books which had been collected together after the previous lesson.

This had been grammar. And as Mr. Snuggs was examining the books he suddenly uttered an exclamation, and stood up.

"Huggins!" he exclaimed sharply.

"Sir?"

"Stand up, boy!" commanded Mr. Snuggs.

Huggins stood up, with an inward groan.

"How is it that you did no work during the lesson in English grammar?" demanded Mr. Snuggs, with vindictive relish. "How could you possibly have had the audacity to laze your time away for such a long period?"

"I didn't do nothink of the kind, sir," said Alf. "I did my lesson, same as everybody else."

"How dare you!" demanded Mr. Snuggs. "Good gracious! Your impertinence is

even worse than I imagined! You are lying to me, Huggins!"

Alf flushed.

"'Tain't my 'abit to tell lies, sir," he said quietly.

"Oh, indeed! Indeed!" said Mr. Snuggs tartly. "Do you assure me, Huggins, that you wrote your exercises in this book?"

"Yes, sir—two whole pages!"

"Then what is the meaning of this?" shouted Mr. Snuggs shrilly. "What is the meaning of this? Perhaps you will condescend to explain? Possibly you will be good enough to tell me what these blank pages mean?"

Mr. Snuggs hurried to the front of the class, and turned over the blank leaves of Alf's new exercise-book. Not a single page contained any writing. The first two—which Alf had filled—were as blank as the rest.

"Lumme!" gasped Alf. "Somebody must 'ave torn 'em out!"

Mr. Snuggs gave a short laugh.

"And do you suppose that I tore them out?" he asked sarcastically. "Do you suppose that I shall accept such a preposterous excuse? You will remain in the class-room during the whole of this afternoon and do your grammar lesson again—but double the usual length."

Alf breathed hard.

"Oh, sir!" he exclaimed, sick with disappointment. "But—but that ain't fair! Not as I expect fairness!" he added bitterly. "I did the lesson—straight I did!"

"One more word, Huggins, and I shall cane you again!" snapped Mr. Snuggs. "Sit down!"

Alf sat down, rather limply.

"Hard lines, old son!" murmured Pitt, from the rear.

"Oh, don't be sorry for me!" said Alf. "Wot's the use?"

And then he stared at the page of his exercise-book in front of him. He had been doing algebra—but the characters which had filled the top portion of the page were fading away. The first line, indeed, was no longer visible. And the truth dawned upon the startled junior.

"'Ere!" he gasped. "I say, sir!"

"What is it—what is it?" asked Mr. Snuggs irritably.

"There's somethink wrong with my ink, sir!" exclaimed Alf excitedly. "Come an' look at this 'ere book, sir! No wonder that there grammar ain't in the book! All the writin's fadin' away!"

A loud snigger from the corner of the room occupied by Fullwood and Co. caused me to glance in that direction. The nuts of Study A were grinning widely. I immediately guessed who the authors of this mean trick were.

Mr. Snuggs went to Alf's place, and examined the algebra-book, and then the inkpot. He was no fool—and he must have known that Alf had been tricked. And I



"I'm stung!" hooted Handforth. "Yaroo! Something bit me! Wow! There it is again! Oh, my hat! Yow!"

expected him to cancel the punishment for the afternoon. But not a bit of it!

"Ah!" said Mr. Snuggs. "So this is your little game, is it, Huggins?"

"My little game, sir?"

"No doubt you thought it would be distinctly humorous to substitute some kind of chemical liquid for the customary ink!" sneered Mr. Snuggs. "Possibly you believed that your crass blunders would be concealed by doing your work in ink which faded soon afterwards!"

"But I never knowed anythink about the ink, sir!" said Alf indignantly.

"I do not believe one word you say!" snapped Mr. Snuggs. "I can only regard this as a direct piece of impertinence. You must do your algebra lesson this afternoon—in addition to the grammar! Enough! Boys, get on with your work!"

Alf Huggins sat in his place, and his eyes blazed. His fists were clenched, and for a moment it seemed that he was about to break forth into some passionate outburst.

Then he sat back limply, and his anger faded.

Prejudice—that's what it was—blind, unreasoning prejudice! Throughout morning lessons he had done his best—he had tried his utmost to please everybody. And yet he had been singled out for severe punishment.

Once again he was in the wrong!

CHAPTER VII.

THE BOY FROM BARCLIFFE!



"THERE they go—off to play football! An' I've got to stick 'ere—a prisoner!"

Alf Huggins muttered the words with bitterness and lack of spirit. Indeed, much of his spirit had been broken to-day. The sunny smile had left his face, and the fire had gone out of his eyes.

It was afternoon now—and Alf was in the Remove Form room, gazing wistfully out of the window into the sunlit Triangle. The April afternoon had turned out very fine, with a cool breeze, and just the right nip in the air for a healthy game of football. And Alf, who had hoped against hope that he would see the game, was locked in the Form room.

Yes, locked. His word was not enough for Mr. Snuggs. The Form master had pounced upon him directly after dinner, and had led him straight to the Form room and had locked him in. Escape was quite out of the question, for Alf could not get out of the windows without being seen by everybody in the Triangle.

But he stood there on Mr. Snuggs' chair—for the window was very high, and could not be reached in the ordinary way.

The footballers were just going out. Archie had attempted to join Alf, but had met with no success. So Archie, disconsolate, had gone back to his study to indulge in forty of the best.

And while Archie dozed off, Alf was standing on the chair, looking out of the window—miserable and heavy-hearted. Then he gave an abrupt start, and his face flushed with great excitement.

A boy had just come out of the Ancient House, and was walking across the Triangle. He wore a strange college cap—and was, indeed, one of the Barcliffe crowd who had come over for the game. And before Alf could even move from his position, the Barcliffe boy saw him. He stopped short in his tracks and stared.

The window was open, and the pair were only a few yards apart. They gazed at one another with mutual recognition.

"Well, I'm hanged!" said the Barcliffe boy. "Why, Alf—"

"Quick, Snell!" exclaimed Alf. "'Ere! Just a word!"

The Barcliffe boy came right beneath the window.

"I didn't know you were at St. Frank's!" he exclaimed wonderingly.

"And I didn't know you was at Barcliffe!" exclaimed Alf. "Not a word! If any of the fellers ask if you know me, say you don't want to talk about me."

"But what in the world—"

"Honest Injun, Snell—it's serious!" said Alf urgently. "Don't let on—don't let 'em

know we've met afore! I'll see you arter the match! Meet me behind them shrubs on the other side!"

Snell stared rather blankly.

"After the match!" he exclaimed. "What the thunder—"

"Please!" pleaded Alf earnestly.

"All right!" said Snell. "I'll see you later!"

He turned away without another word, and walked off. And Alf Huggins drew a deep breath, and there was now a look of alarm in his eyes. He saw Snell stopped by Fullwood and Marriott and one or two others on the other side of the Triangle, and he anxiously wondered what they were talking about.

He needn't have worried.

"What did you go and talk to that cad for?" asked Fullwood.

"Which cad?" said the Barcliffe fellow.

"Huggins, of course!"

"Huggins?" exclaimed Snell vaguely.

"That infernal Hoxton boy indoors!" said Marriott. "We saw you speaking to him. -Do you know the beast?"

"Do you think I know the chaps at this school?" asked Snell, with a laugh. "I've never been here before—I'm new to Barcliffe this term. Only come over to see the match."

He strolled away, having given the nuts no satisfaction. And they vaguely wondered what the pair knew of one another. There was a mystery here that Fullwood would have loved to probe.

Alf didn't know how he got through the afternoon.

But he worked hard—he threw himself right into his task—and the time flew. When one is working hard, passage of time is swift. And at last Mr. Snuggs came in and released Alf from his bondage.

He didn't go to Archie—he didn't even trouble to fetch his cap. He went straight outside, and made for the shrubbery near the monastery ruins. There was nobody there. Alf had the place to himself.

He was glad—for he wanted to think a bit before Snell came. He was deep in thought when the Barcliffe junior suddenly came into sight through the trees. He came forward, and gripped Alf's hand.

"Now, my son, what does it mean?" he asked briskly.

"Can't talk 'ere!" said Alf. "Some o' these blokes might 'ear. They've got bloomin' sharp 'earin', too!"

Snell stared.

"But what the dickens—"

He didn't get any further, for Alf pulled him away, and a few minutes later they were making off round Little Side towards the meadows near the old barn—which had been used the previous term as a stronghold for the rebels, and had been nicknamed Fort Resolute.

There was no fear of listening ears here. For the two juniors kept to the open, where they could see all about them. They came

to a halt out of sight of the school, and in a little hollow.

"Now!" said Snell. "Perhaps you're ready? What's all this giddy mystery? And what's the idea of talking like a cockney street urchin?"

"The question is, what did you come here for?" asked Alf. "You might mess up my whole plan. These blokes——"

"Blokes!"

"I mean these fellows are not quite so dull as you might think," went on Huggins. "In a nutshell, Snell, I've come to St. Frank's on a kind of experiment. And it's a pretty tough business, you can take it from me. It takes some doing, sticking to a part like I'm undertaking."

What could this mean?

Alf Huggins—the bricklayer's son—talking to this Barcliffe boy in a refined tone, and in highly educated accents? The change in him was absolutely astounding.

"You've come here on an experiment?" asked Snell blankly. "But look here, Brent——"

"My name ain't Brent—it's 'Uggins!'"

"'Uggins!" repeated the other blankly.

"My hat! Those fellows mentioned that name before the match!"

"O' course they did!" said Alf. "I ain't know'd by no other name 'ere."

"What the—— How the——"

"Sorry!" said Alf, relapsing into his refined tone. "I've got so used to talking in that way that I do it naturally now. I've trained myself to it. I even think in that kind of stuff. If I have to say something to myself, I use language of that sort."

"You must be mad!"

"I'm not mad—I'm here on a pretty tight business!" said Alf firmly. "At St. Frank's I'm Alf Huggins, the son of a bricklayer, and I come from Hoxton."

"Great Scotland Yard!" said Brent, aghast.

"Sounds queer, don't it—I mean, doesn't it?" said Alf. "But it's not queer, really, and you'll understand after I've explained. It's like this 'ere—— Hang! I mean, it's like this!"

"I'm blessed if I can make you out," said Snell. "Huggins—bricklayer's son—Hoxton! But you're Alfred Brent—your pater's Sir John Brent, the Chairman of the Board of Governors of St. Frank's College."

Alf nodded calmly.

"Yus—yes!" he added hastily. "Of course I am!"

"Then you must be absolutely up the pole!" declared Snell, with conviction. "A chap who's got a pater like yours ought to be proud of him! Fancy! The Chairman of the Governors, and you come to this school telling everybody that your father is a giddy bricklayer! You've made a mistake! You ought to have gone to Colney Hatch!"

Alf smiled again.

"That's what it seems like to you! But look here—last term you and I were together

at Houndsley, weren't we? As it happens, my pater's a Governor of that school, too——"

"Your pater seems to be a pretty influential man!" said Snell.

"He is!" agreed Alf. He's not only one of the biggest contractors in London—with extensive yards at Hoxton, by the way—but he's got interests in scores of other directions. And my pater's a sport. He knows all about my being here, and he thinks it's a great scheme!"

"Time your pater went to Colney Hatch, too!" said Snell. "It must run in the family!"

"Look here—don't be silly!" said Alf. "Crikey! Oh, my hat! I keep saying these things without thinking! Once a chap gets into these ways of talking, he can't git out of 'em! If I make a slip, don't take no notice!"

"You've made about ten already!"

"It doesn't matter—listen!" said Alf. "I thought you were going to stop at Houndsley——"

"I thought so, too, but my people sent me to Barcliffe, instead."

"Just my luck!" said Alf, with a grunt. "Houndsley was a school full of snobs. At least, it was while I was there. But Houndsley is a second-rate sort of place, and I had an idea that St. Frank's would be worse."

"Worse?"

"Exactly," said Alf. "The higher you get, the more snobbish they are. That's how I've allus found it. I mean, that's the way I've always found it. So I came here to put the thing to the test."

"It's as clear as mud!" said Snell blankly.

"Of course it is—but can't you wait?" demanded Alf. "Just before I left Houndsley half-a-dozen of us got arguing. They knew I was coming to St. Frank's—but they were the only fellows that did. I was saying that I should find St. Frank's a hotbed of snobs. They thought differently. Well, the argument went on——"

"Arguments generally do," said the Barcliffe boy.

"Don't interrupt, you bloomin' fathead!" exclaimed Alf. "It's like this 'ere. The argument got a bit heated. These chaps said that I couldn't test the St. Frank's fellows because I was the son of the Chairman of Governors. And one thing led to another, and two of the fellows reckoned that if I was a bricklayer's son I should soon find out about the snobs. In other words, if I came to St. Frank's as the son of a bricklayer, and talking common, I should get the bird pretty quick."

"My only hat!" said Snell, breathlessly.

"So there you are!" said Alf. "You know me—when I start a thing, I go on with it. There's no money on the wager, as you can imagine. It's just a kind of test. Well, I went away from Houndsley and told the pater all about it. Of course, he poo-pooed the idea. Called me a silly young bounder

at first. Then he rather liked it. He got arguing, too. Said the chaps at St. Frank's were thoroughly decent, without any snobbery."

"Well?"

"That's about all," said Alf. "In the end the pater agreed. During the holidays I got dressed up in reach-me-downs, and moved about among the common crowd, getting the right talk. And I decided to adopt the name of Huggins—and to adopt a new mother and father, too."

"You did it thoroughly!"

"It wasn't much good doing it at all unless I did it thoroughly," replied Alf grimly. "Old Huggins, you see, is a foreman bricklayer—works for my pater. I fixed it up with him, and by a piece of pure luck I ran into a gang of St. Frank's chaps at the Zoo. So I took them home—to old Huggins' place at Hoxton. I thought it would be a good preliminary. I've spoofed the whole crowd—they all take me for a bricklayer's son."

"You artful dodger," said Snell admiringly.

"So there you've got it," went on Alf. "Naturally, it was fixed up easily. My pater arranged it with the Head, and the Head agreed—but only for this one term, of course. After we've proved the thing one way or another, the truth will come out. Then the bloomin' snobs will get a bit of a surprise. Straight! Not arf!"

Snell stared.

"I'm blessed if you don't do it like a navvy!" he said. "And what about these chaps? Are they worse than you thought, or better?"

Alf took a deep breath.

"There's no doubt about who'll win the wager," he replied with conviction. "Snobs! My dear chap, I've never met such a gang in all my life! Three parts of the fellows in the Remove are choked with snobbery up to their necks! They're down on me like a ton of bricks! They're up to every trick they can think of!"

"They're a set of cads, then?"

"Some of them are—but most of them are merely snobs," said Alf. "They're led by others. And then, of course, there are just one or two gilt-edged rippers. Archie Glenthorne, for example—and Nipper, Reggie Pitt and Grey and Tregellis-West. Oh, they're not all duds! And out of the whole lot, Archie is just about the best!"

"He's not a snob?"

"Archie is true blue—right to the backbone!" said Alf with enthusiasm. "He thinks I'm a bricklayer's son—he hasn't got the faintest idea of the truth—and some-

times I feel positively ashamed of myself for keeping up the deception. What a brick! He's got blue blood, too—one of the oldest families in the county. And he's palled up with me of his own accord. There's no doubt about it—Archie Glenthorne is gold right through!"

"Then you're not getting on so bad?"

"I'm getting on rotten!" said Alf. "But I'll stick it! There's a master here—Snuggs! A creeping, crawling reptile! One of the worst specimens of zoology I've ever met! And I've got to be sneered at about fifty times a day by him—caned, and all sorts of other things. But I'll stick it out if I bust! You can take it from me that I'm going through!"

"You're a rummy sort of chap, Brent

"Not a bit of it," said Alf. "I'm just a bit different from the others—that's all. And I mean to prove that I'm right about these snobs. Will you promise to keep it mum?"

"Of course I'll promise."

"Honour bright?"

"Honour bright," said Snell solemnly.

"Good enough—I know I can take your word," said Alf, with relief. "Now we'll have a chat about old times!"

CHAPTER VIII.

MAKING HIMSELF USEFUL!



MERRELL, of the Remove, strolled out of the Ancient House in the gathering dusk. He hung about in the Triangle. And it seemed that he was waiting for somebody.

Presently, Marriott came and joined him.

"Has he come out yet?" asked Marriott.

"No—I'm waiting for him," said the other.

"Clear off, you ass!"

Marriott cleared off, and a few minutes later came back again.

"Look here, perhaps he isn't coming out——" he began.

"Will you clear off?" snapped Merrell.

"I tell you he is coming out. I heard him tell Glenthorne that he was going to the village about seven. It struck seven two minutes ago. Fade away, fathead!"

Marriott faded away, and he was only just in time, for Alf Huggins—as I shall continue to call him—came out of the Ancient House only a moment or two afterwards. He came out briskly, and set off towards the gates.

Alf, as a matter of fact, was feeling in much better spirits than usual. That talk with Snell, of Barcliffe, had bucked him up wonderfully. He felt that he had unburdened himself. At St. Frank's he had had nobody—for he had resolved to keep the secret of his identity locked within his own breast.

Of course, I didn't know it until long afterwards—but I'm setting it all down

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now because it is necessary to do so. At the time I hadn't the faintest notion that Alf was anything but what he professed to be.

He had come back to the school, flushed, and in a happy mood. And he had automatically dropped back into his assumed character. Immediately upon leaving Snell he had become Alf Huggins of Hoxton. Alfred Brent, son of Sir John Brent, had been left behind.

"I say, Huggins!" exclaimed Merrell, coming up.

"Ullo!" said Alf, turning.

"Going down to the village?"

"Yus, mate. Anythink I can do?"

Merrell nodded.

"The fact is, I'm a bit sorry," he said.

"I haven't treated you quite right, and I think Snuggs is a beast. Everybody seems to be down on you here."

"No, it ain't possible!" said Alf sarcastically.

"Why, you cheeky—I—I mean, I'd like you to fetch something from the village, if you will," said Merrell hastily. "The fact is, you can do me a good turn if you like. You see, if you care to make yourself sociable, some of us won't mind recognising you."

"Ow can you be so kind?" asked Alf. "Lummy! It's a queer thing you can stand so near. You'd better back away a bit! Don't forget I'm contaminated! Bein' a bricklayer's son, I'm pizon!"

"Oh, stow that rot," growled Merrell. "There's a little parcel at Binks' shop—sweets, as a matter of fact. I left it there by mistake. Would you mind calling for it, and bringing it home? It's paid for!"

"Oh, that's all right," said Alf good-naturedly. "Anythink to oblige!"

He nodded and passed on—but would have been suspicious if he had observed the gloating expression on Merrell's face as soon as he had turned his back.

Alf was on the look-out for all sorts of tricks, but he certainly did not suspect anything here. He simply took it for granted that Merrell was making use of him.

And, after all, why shouldn't he be agreeable?

He went down to the village—to the post-office, as a matter of fact—and on the way back he called in at the confectioners, and asked for Merrell's parcel. It was there, on the counter, and Mr. Binks handed it over. It was quite small, and Alf put it in his pocket.

When he got to the gate, he found Marriott hanging about. Marriott looked at him casually, and then nodded.

"Nice evening!" he remarked.

"Not so dusty," said Alf.

He vaguely wondered why Marriott was deigning to address him. He was one of the fellows who had been particularly bitter. For the first time, Alf began to get a little suspicious. Was there some kind of trick on the go?

"Got that parcel?" asked Marriott.

Alf became more suspicious.

"Wot d'you know about any parcel?" he asked sharply.

"Oh, I—I heard Merrell asking you to bring one from the village," said Marriott. "He's waiting for it, I believe. Chocolate, I think it is— No, something in the cough drop line."

"Corf drop?" said Alf. "Strikes me, you're a pair o' corf drops."

He commenced fumbling in his pocket, but Marriott looked alarmed.

"The parcel's not for me—you'd better take it in to Merrell. You'll find him in the study."

Alf nodded, and walked away—and did not observe that Marriott waved an arm on the instant. Alf walked towards the Ancient House fingering the parcel in his pocket. He was puzzled. He couldn't possibly see what these two fellows were up to.

He might have understood if he had seen Merrell's actions.

Merrell was at the window of his study, watching. He saw Marriott wave his hand. And Merrell whizzed out into the passage, dashed along, and burst into Mr. Snuggs's study.

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Mr. Snuggs. "What in the world—"

"Quick, sir!" panted Merrell.

"My dear lad," said Mr. Snuggs, "this is remarkable! Why do you burst in upon me like this? It is most distressing."

"But I want you to come out at once, sir," said Merrell urgently. "Huggins went to the village a little while ago, and I heard that he bought some cigarettes. If so, he'll have them on him."

Mr. Snuggs jumped up with alacrity.

"Upon my soul!" he said, frowning. "Cigarettes! How shocking! How truly appalling! Of course, I can quite understand it! That young hoodigan would naturally smoke."

Mr. Snuggs was gloating with anticipation. If he could catch Huggins red-handed with cigarettes, it would please him enormously. He did not stop to inquire how Merrell could have obtained his information. That did not interest Mr. Snuggs in the least.

He danced outside hurriedly. Mr. Snuggs generally danced when he was excited. He went along in a series of skips and hops, with his gown flowing in the wind. And he arrived in the lobby just as Alf walked in. No time had been lost by the cads.

"Ah, Huggins!" said Mr. Snuggs pleasantly. "So you have been for a little stroll, eh? Just a little jaunt to the village, maybe?"

"Yes, sir," said Alf.

"No doubt you have had quite an excellent time?" beamed Mr. Snuggs.

Alf looked at him curiously. Then he looked at Merrell. He knew for certain now that something was on. There was some

game here—some nasty business to involve him in trouble.

"I don't know about an excellent time, sir," he said. "I went down to the post-orf to git some stamps."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Snuggs. "How interesting—how exceedingly interesting! So you went down to the post-orf to get some stamps?"

"Yes, sir."

"A perfectly innocent expedition!" proceeded Mr. Snuggs, delighted to find that an audience was collecting. "Quite so—quite so! Surely there can be no harm in going to a post-office. But are you sure, Huggins, that you did not go somewhere else?"

"Not for meself, I didn't, sir."

"What evasion is this?" asked Mr. Snuggs sharply. "I am convinced, Huggins that you made a purchase of cigarettes in the village. I have discovered that you are addicted to the filthy habit of smoking."

Alf took a deep breath.

"Well, that's a lie, any'ow!" he said stoutly.

"What! What!" shouted Mr. Snuggs. "Do you dare to call me a liar?"

"I didn't say that, sir—leastways, I didn't mean it!" growled Alf, flushing. "I meant as 'ow them as told you. If somebody says I've bin smokin', they're liars. I don't smoke—never 'ave smoked! 'Tain't right for a boy to smoke."

"In that case, Huggins, you have no cigarettes on you at the moment?"

"No, I ain't!"

"You are quite sure?"

"I oughter know, I s'pose?" said Alf defiantly. "Look here, sir. I don't reckon it's right to take notice o' wot these 'ere blokes say. They're allus tryin' to make mischief—"

"Silence!" commanded Mr. Snuggs. "Turn out your pockets!"

Alf started.

"Turn out me pockets?" he repeated.

"Yes—at once!"

"I don't mind a-doin' of it—but you won't find nothink that I'm ashamed of!" exclaimed Alf. "My pockets—"

"Obey me!" commanded Mr. Snuggs.

Alf took the little parcel out, and offered it to Merrell.

"Well, that's yours, anyway," he said. "Better take it—"

"Mine!" said Merrell, staring. "What do you mean?"

"One moment—one moment!" broke in Mr. Snuggs. "What is this parcel? Let me see it!"

He bent forward, and snatched the parcel out of Alf's hands. Fairly gloating with triumph, Mr. Snuggs tore the wrapper off—and revealed a packet of cigarettes!

CHAPTER IX ALWAYS IN THE WRONG.



MR. SNUGGS chirruped with joy.

"Ah, indeed!" he exclaimed. "And so, Huggins, I have caught you red-handed in a deliberate falsehood! This is very serious—very serious indeed!"

"Oh, so that's the game, is it?" exclaimed Alf. "I knowed there was somethink queer about it. Look 'ere, sir—"

"Do not utter a word, you wretched boy!" interrupted Mr. Snuggs. "You have no defence—no excuse. I have caught you with cigarettes in your pocket. I shall take you at once to my study, and cane you—"

"'Old 'ard!" interrupted Alf. "About this 'ere parcel. I bought it from one o' the shops for Merrell. He asked me to fetch it."

Mr. Snuggs turned to Merrell.

"Is this true?" he asked.

"Of course not, sir," said Merrell promptly.

Alf turned on him fiercely.

"Are you sayin' that you didn't ask me to fetch that parcel?" he demanded.

"I'm not in the habit of asking bricklayers to do me favours," sneered Merrell. "I never heard anything about the parcel—I don't know anything about it. You rotter! Trying to put the blame on me!"

"Cad!"

"Common, low bounder!"

"That's just what he would do!"

All sorts of comments came from the crowd.

"I must ask you, boys, not to interrupt," said Mr. Snuggs. "Naturally, I can appreciate your feelings. This lad is so utterly different from yourselves that you instinctively resent his presence."

"He's not our class, sir."

"He's only a rotten navvy!"

"Hardly a navvy!" corrected Mr. Snuggs. "Dear me, no! I have always understood that a bricklayer is just slightly above the status of a navvy. A shade higher in the social scale, boys."

"Don't you think you'd best take me indoors an' lick me?" asked Alf. "It's comin', so we might as well git it over."

"Be silent, you wretched boy!" said Mr. Snuggs sourly.

"'Tain't no use bein' anythink else," said Alf. "But as true as I'm standin' 'ere, I didn't know that there parcel 'ad fags in it."

"Fags?" repeated Mr. Snuggs innocently.

"Fags!" said Alf grimly.

"This language is quite incomprehensible to me," said Mr. Snuggs. "I have always understood that fags were youthful school-boys—"

"Mebbe they is!" growled Alf. "An' if

you ain't 'eard that fags is cigarettes, you're a queer kind o' bloke!"

"You impertinent young reprobate!"

"Oh, go on—it don't matter to me!" said Alf resignedly. "I brought that there parcel up for somebody else. It was a trick on me. Look 'ere, you chaps! I ask you to listen. Do you think I'd—"

"Get away! We're not listening to your lies!"

"No fear!"

"Rather not!"

Handforth pushed forward.

"Well, I believe him, anyway!" he roared. "If any chap here says that Alf Huggins bought those cigarettes, I'll punch his nose."

"Mr. Snuggs said so!" exclaimed Merrell. Handforth clenched his fist.

"By George!" he breathed. "By George!"

Just for one moment Mr. Snuggs was in frightful danger of having his nose punched on the spot. Handforth was ready for it, and he would have done it. Of the consequences he had no thought whatever. Handforth never had.

But, luckily for him, Church and McClure were just behind. They dragged him back, and then a mysterious kind of struggle commenced on the steps. Pitt and Grey joined in—which was highly necessary.

In the end, Handforth emerged, breathless, hot and triumphant. Injured juniors lay strewn around him. Church and McClure were wrecks. Even Pitt was showing signs of having a black eye.

"Where is he?" said Handforth faintly.

But he looked in vain—Mr. Snuggs had gone. Perhaps Mr. Snuggs had had a vague presentiment of peril. At all events, he had rushed Alf to his study.

And Handforth was robbed of his prey.

"You—you rotters!" he hooted. "I've been fighting the whole crowd of you for nothing!"

"Thank goodness for that!" gasped Pitt. "Great Scott! You must be dotty! If you had punched Snuggs on the nose, it would have meant the sack."

"Who cares about the sack?" snorted Handforth. "It would have been worth it—for the pleasure of seeing Snuggs turn a double somersault backwards. But it's coming. By George, he's going to get it one day!"

"Where—where am I?" asked Church, sitting up dazedly.

Handforth turned on him.

"The next time you'll be taken to hospital," he snapped. "I've treated you lightly now. I was going to punch Snuggs into the middle of next week. The miserable, crawling, earwig! Dropping on Huggins like that for nothing. When I do punch him, I'll knock him so far that they'll have to get up a search-party to find him."

And Handforth stalked indoors, leaving the wounded to attend to their hurts. And, in the meantime, Alf was going through the mill in Mr. Snuggs's study. Mr. Snuggs



Mr. Snuggs snatched the parcel out of Alf's hands. Fairly gloating with triumph, Mr. Snuggs tore the wrapper off, and revealed a packet of cigarettes!

had asked no questions—he had made no attempts to get at the actual truth.

The Form-master had seized upon Alf just as a wolf will seize on a bone. And the boy from Hoxton received a drastic caning—a caning that made him sore all over.

But he didn't lose his temper.

He had found that it was quite useless to do that. Once again he was in the wrong—once again he had received punishment that he hadn't deserved. And this time it was because the snobs had been plotting against him.

It was a miserable, contemptible affair.

And when Alf told Archie all about it, the latter was on the point of dashing straight off to the Headmaster. He declared that it wouldn't be sneaking. Archie considered that the thing ought to come out.

"Oh, what's the use?" asked Alf, with a sigh. "It's no good, matey; they're all the same—they're all tarred with the same brush! Just because I'm a bricklayer's son, they're all down on me!"

And he went outside and made his way to the Common-room.

He knew that he was going into the thick of things, but that was just what he

wanted. He was curious to see how the Remove would take this fresh development.

And, although he was in pain, he was enjoying himself. He was proving that his contention had been correct. And he wondered what Mr. Snuggs would say later on—when he discovered that he had victimised the son of Sir John Brent—the son of the chairman of the board of governors.

"I'm storing it up," Alf told himself grimly. "Rather! So I'll hold myself in check for the present. Later on Mr. Snuggs will get it where the bottle got the cork—in the neck!"

And that thought cheered Alf up to such an extent that when he entered the Common-room his usual sunny smile was apparent. He forgot the pain altogether. Everybody was down on him, but what did that matter?

The Common-room was in a ferment.

A Form meeting was in progress. At least, the fellows called it a Form meeting. But all the important juniors were missing. It was only the rank and file of the Remove that gathered.

And Armstrong was presiding.

"Here he is!" said Armstrong sneeringly. "Coming in as though he owned the blessed school!"

"Cad!"

"Beast!"

"Common ruffian!"

"Good!" said Alf, nodding. "That's the stuff! Go it, you bloomin' snobs! I'm rather enjoyin' it now! D'you think I care a snap of the fingers for the 'ole blinkin' crowd? Why, you ain't worth shovin' in a dust-cart! I've seen better things than you in a ripe cheese!"

The Remove was shocked.

"Are we going to stand this?" howled Griffith. "He's called us maggots!"

"Maggots!" said Alf. "You ain't maggots—you're grubs!"

There was a tremendous roar.

"Good man!" yelled Handforth, from the rear. "Why, I didn't think you had enough pluck to talk to 'em like that! As a matter of fact, I was going to call them maggots. And don't they look like it? Fat, ugly things that crawl about with slime all over them!"

"Are you siding with this common beast?" roared Armstrong.

Handforth looked round.

"Which common beast?" he asked. "I can see about twenty!"

He suddenly caught sight of Archie.

"Oh, no," he added; "there's one here who isn't! This chap's all right—he's not common. As for the rest of you, I think you must have been brought up in a convict settlement. You're all criminals! You've all got the instincts of born hooligans!"

Handforth walked out, feeling that he had done well. Besides, the atmosphere rather disgusted him. Then Archie came in, and Archie stood listening angrily as the meeting came to a decision.

"We decide to send this chap to coventry!" declared Armstrong. "He's a common cad, and we won't have anything to do with him!"

"Hear, hear!"

"He's barred by the Remove!"

"Barred, am I?" shouted Alf defiantly. "You've barred me because I'm from 'Oxton! Well, I'm going to bar you because I 'ates the sight of yer! I'd rather mix with pigs in a bloomin' sty!"

"Hear, hear!" exclaimed Archie approvingly. "Bally good! In other words, well spoken! That, dear old laddie, is positively the stuff to give 'em! I mean to say, pigs are rather decent, anyway!"

"You—you silly fool!" shouted Armstrong. "Can't you have a bit of sense? Are you going to side with this beast?"

"Dear old chappies—I mean to say, frightful bounders," said Archie, "I have sided with him all along. And now I shall proceed to trickle out. But allow me to remark that I regard you as a bally set of mouldy insects! Absolutely! And that—to put it precisely—is that!"

He grasped Alf Huggins by the arm.

"Dearest one, we will adjourn," he said sweetly. "What-ho!"

And Archie and Alf Huggins passed out of the Common-room together.

The boy from Hoxton was getting on; but his adventures at St. Frank's were only just commencing. They promised to be full of interest in the very near future!

THE END.

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Editorial . . .

Announcement.

My Dear Readers,

I wonder how many of you suspected that Alf Huggins was only playing the part of a cockney lad, and that instead of being the humble son of a bricklayer, he is in reality someone of considerable importance. It will be an eye-opener for Mr. Snuggs when the truth is made known. Huggins, or, rather, Alfred Brent—to give him his correct name—means to bide his time and prepare a pleasant little shock for the new master of the Remove. Now that you are in the secret, my chums, you will be able to appreciate the sensational developments that are to follow before very long. Young Brent has certainly displayed remarkable ability as an actor, for I doubt if any of the Juniors—not even Nipper—penetrated his disguise in his impersonation of a cockney. From Brent's point of view, the persecutions and insults which he has borne so bravely were as nothing compared to the huge joke of the situation, over which he must have chuckled to himself many times. But, of course, his object was not merely to fool the snobs of St. Frank's. He has a much

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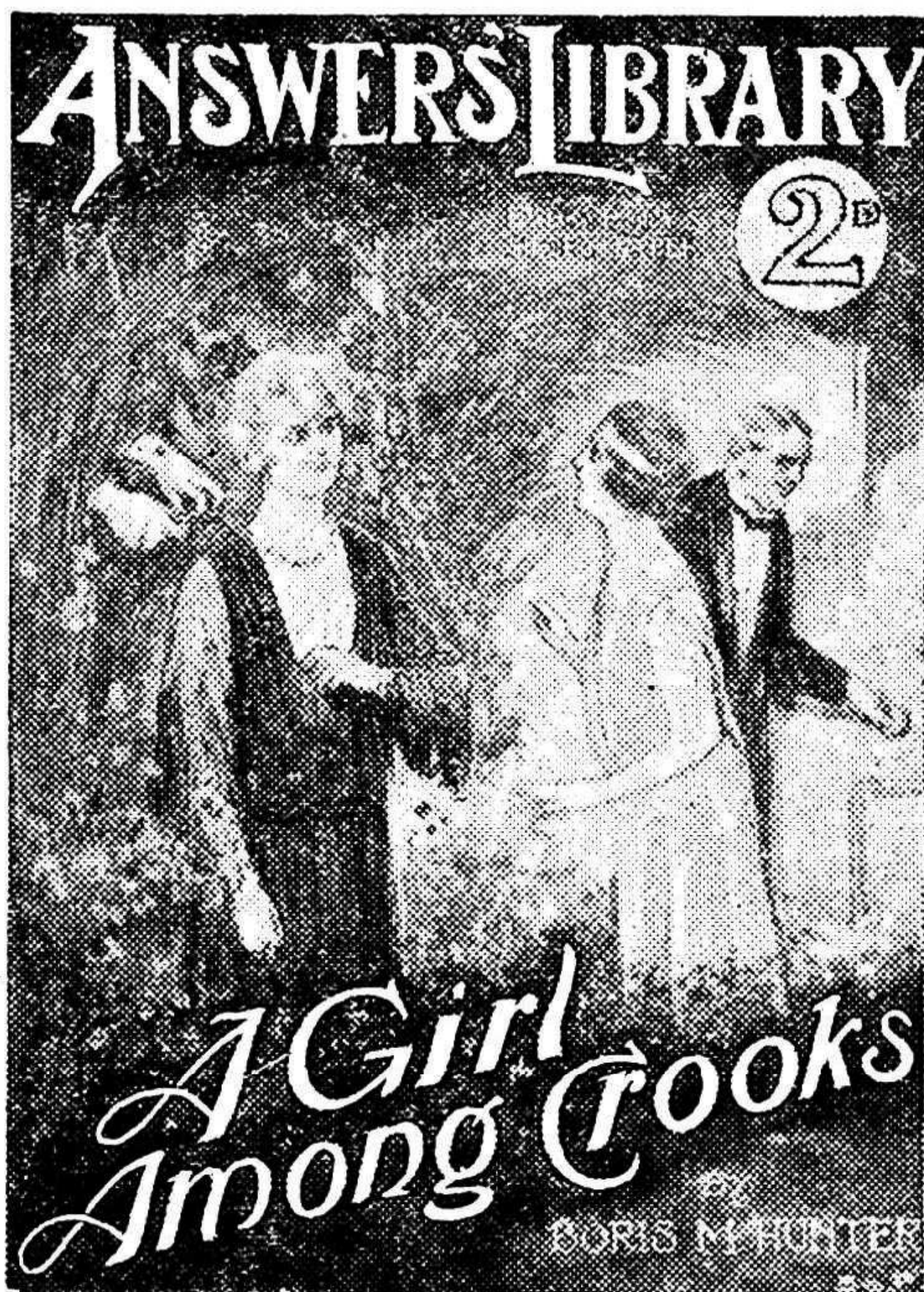
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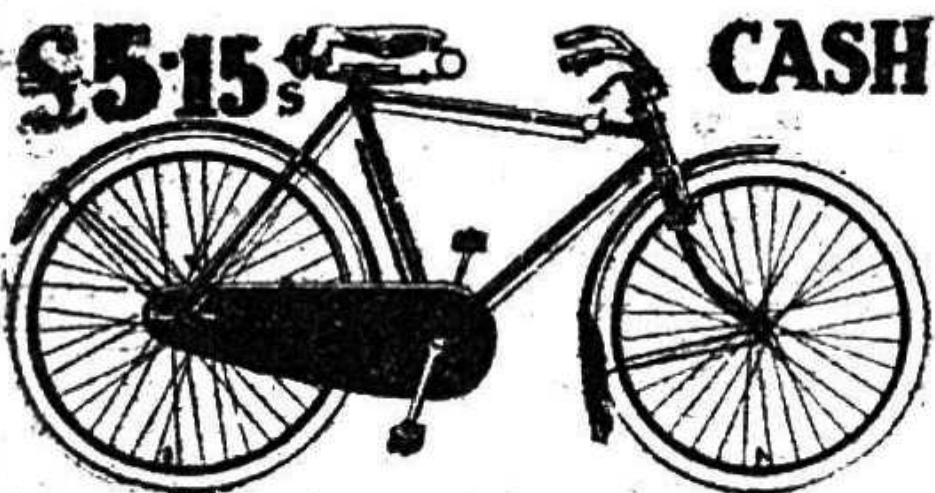
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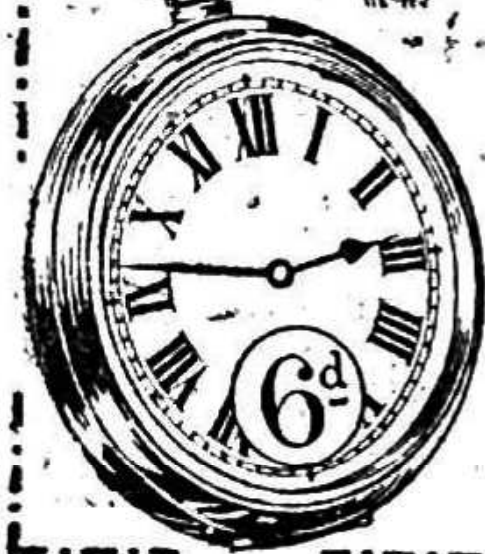
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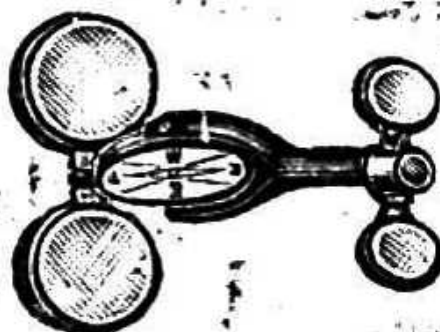
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