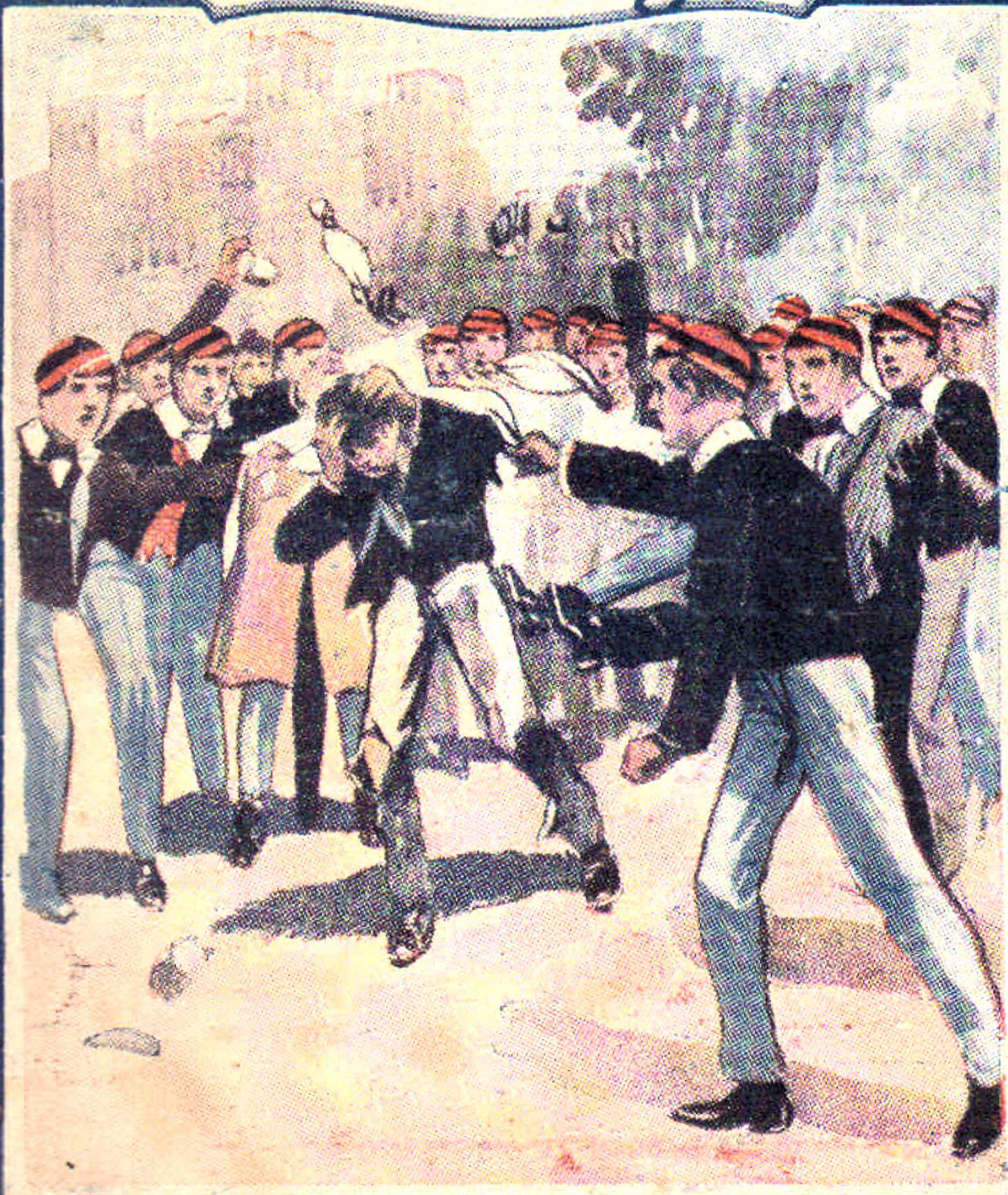


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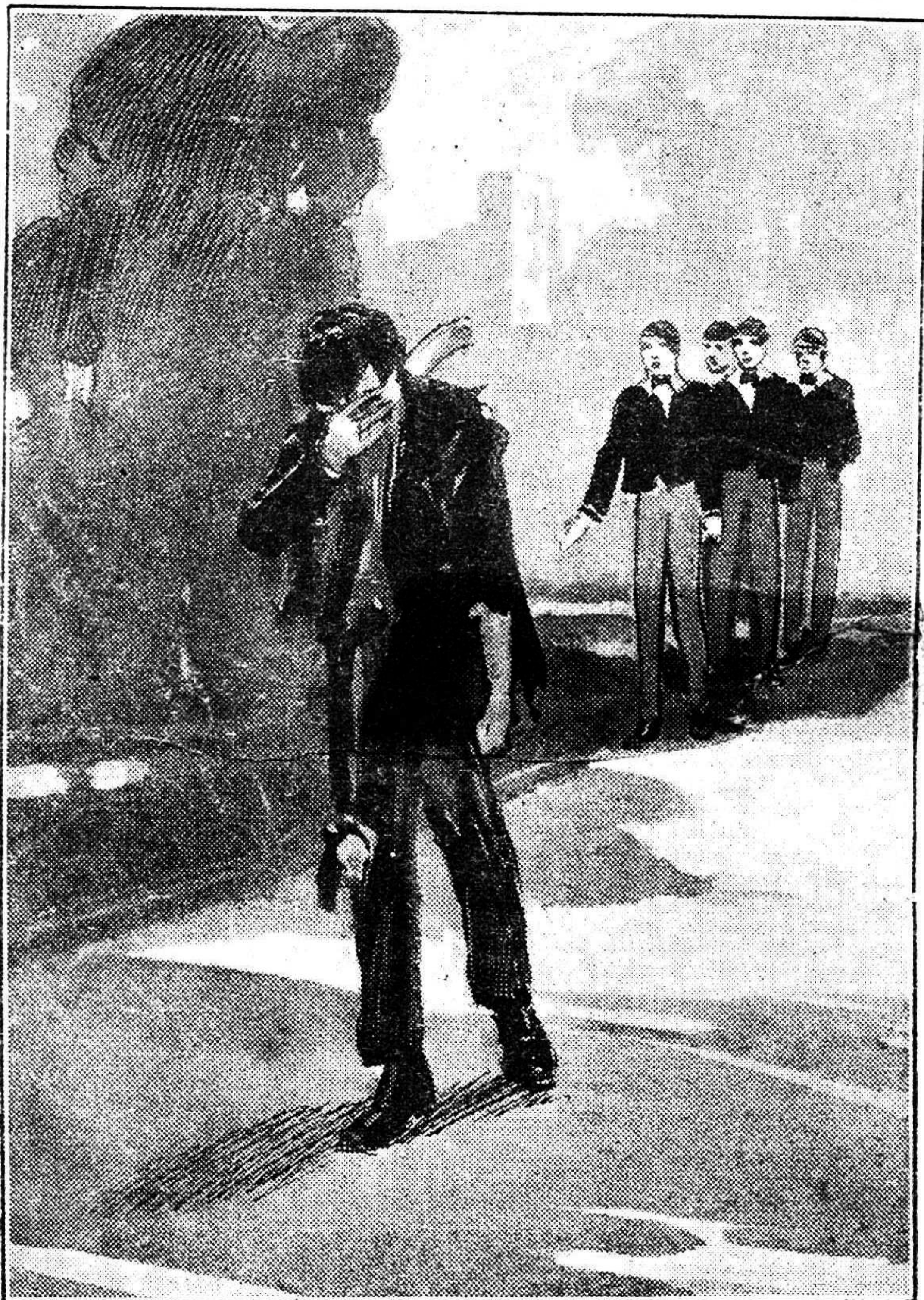
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The Stirring Incident in the Picture on this cover occurs in This Week's
Absorbing Story of ST. FRANK'S:—

DOWN AND OUT; or, **HOUNDED FROM THE SCHOOL!**



And with a last look at us, Alf turned and walked down the lane towards the village. I wanted to go with him—I wanted to have something more to say—but I felt it would be better not to.

DOWN and OUT!



Because he is supposed to be the son of a bricklayer, Alf Huggins has been severely persecuted by the snobs of St. Frank's, including Mr. Snuggs, the new Remove master. On account of his unfairness towards Huggins, Mr. Snuggs is under notice to leave the school. But before he departs, Mr. Snuggs is determined to avenge himself against the unfortunate Huggins. An opportunity comes sooner than the master expected. Snuggs meets with an accident, and

accuses Alf of maliciously assaulting him. The circumstances are all against Huggins, and he is expelled from St. Frank's. The following story deals with the final scenes at St. Frank's prior to Huggins being hounded out of the school by his infuriated schoolfellows.

THE EDITOR.

CHAPTER I.

FULLWOOD'S LITTLE SCHEME!

"**S**ACKED," said Fullwood gloatingly—"kicked out on his neck!"

"Yes, an' serve him right!"

"Rather!" agreed Bell.

The cads of the Ancient House at St. Frank's were sitting in Study A, in the Remove passage. And the whole school was humming and buzzing with the dramatic events which had just been taking place.

There had been excitement at the old school.

It was now getting on for bed-time, and before long the bell would clang out, and another day would be over. But this was a day which would live long within the memory of the Remove.

Alf Huggins had been expelled!

The boy from Hoxton—the bricklayer's son—had at last fallen a victim to his enemies, and he was in the punishment-room, awaiting the final "kick out" in the early morning.

For Dr. Stafford had announced that Huggins would not be seen by the boys again. It was too late for him to leave the school to-night, but when all the fellows

came down in the morning, Huggins would have gone.

And this was a thought which made Fullwood and Co. gloat.

It was largely owing to Fullwood's vindictive rascality that Alf was now in the throes of misery and disgrace. It was Fullwood who had plotted and planned. It was Fullwood who had aided the scheme.

For, actually, Mr. Snuggs was the culprit.

But even Gulliver and Bell did not know this. They had no idea of the actual truth. They believed, indeed, that Huggins had actually committed the crime for which he had been sentenced. And Fullwood had no intention of enlightening them.

"Yes, the cad's going!" said Fullwood. "I don't believe in lettin' him clear out on the quiet, though. It's a filthy trick on us to send him off in the early morning."

"Of course it is," agreed Bell.

"We wanted to kick him out ourselves!" said Gulliver. "My hat! Just think how great it would be to hound the beast out of the Triangle."

"Rather!"

Fullwood nodded.

"Well, that's my idea, as a matter of fact," he said. "I don't see why we

should be swindled out of that pleasure. The chap's a beast—practically a murderer—and he deserves to be hounded out. I've only got to whisper it to the other chaps, and they'll join in like birds."

It was rather extraordinary that Fullwood should talk in this way. For he knew—he was aware of the actual truth concerning Huggins. He knew that the lad was innocent. Yet it was Fullwood who originated this scheme to kick the unfortunate junior when he was down.

It was an indication of Fullwood's capacity for hatred.

Furthermore, the leader of the cads had repeated his lying story so frequently that

Unconscious, Mr. Snuggs had been carried indoors.

The doctor had come, and the school had waited in a ferment.

All sorts of wild rumours had got about. Some said that Mr. Snuggs was dead. Others declared that he would peg out before the night had gone. And then came the truth.

Mr. Snuggs was very much alive—and, indeed, would be able to resume his duties within a day or two. The blow had been a glancing one, and the master had not received the full force.

But this made no difference to the assault.

The murderous intent had been the same. The master had been attacked with a heavy

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ADVENTURE

Out on Friday! Order a Copy TO-DAY.

he had almost begun to believe that it was true. He had nearly succeeded in convincing himself that Alf Huggins had committed the crime.

Yet there had been no crime.

The whole school believed that the boy from Hoxton had committed a brutal and murderous attack upon Mr. Snuggs, the master of the Remove. The Head believed it, too—for the evidence was conclusive.

Earlier in the evening, Mr. Snuggs had been struck down, and Huggins had found him lying in the woodshed—with a horrible, ugly wound on his forehead. And when Huggins had rushed for help, blood had been seen on his hand. And then the uproar commenced.

crowbar. And it was only by pure chance that he had escaped fatal injury.

And Alf Huggins' guilt was clear.

Not only had he been found with blood on his hand, not only had he admitted that he was in the woodshed with Mr. Snuggs, but Fullwood had given positive evidence against him.

And then the thunderbolt had come.

Mr. Snuggs, recovering consciousness, had definitely stated that he had been murderously attacked by Huggins, of the Remove!

There was no question—not the slightest doubt. Huggins had followed him to the woodshed, and had attempted to kill him.

But, as Mr. Snuggs had pleaded with the Head to show the boy mercy, Alf was to be

merely expelled, and the whole affair was to be hushed up as much as possible. In the morning, Alf would go.

Even Nelson Lee himself had no cause to suspect the truth.

And investigation was not necessary, since Mr. Snuggs was definite in his statement. Nelson Lee knew how Alf had been goaded and driven of late—he knew that Mr. Snuggs had been Alf's chief persecutor. And it seemed only too obvious that the lad had turned at last, and in a fit of passion, he had assailed his tormentor.

It was quite simple—quite a trivial matter. And yet how different was the truth!

Just before the alarm, Mr. Snuggs and Fullwood had gone to the woodshed for the purpose of plotting in quietude. In the darkness, Fullwood had tripped against something, and had fallen against the wooden wall. The whole structure shook, and an iron crowbar, lodged up on the rafters, came out of place.

It fell—striking Mr. Snuggs, and hurling him to the floor.

And that was all—the affair was merely an accident. And Fullwood and the rascally Remove master had seized upon this unexpected opportunity to put the blame on the boy they hated.

It was an astounding act of vindictiveness. Injured though he was, Mr. Snuggs had put the idea into Fullwood's head. He had caused Fullwood to send Alf to him—and then Mr. Snuggs had screamed for help with his last breath before lapsing into a brief spell of unconsciousness—mainly brought about by fright.

With such terrible evidence against him, there was no chance for Alf.

He was condemned to leave St. Frank's.

And, no matter what some of the fellows thought, Alf would never be able to hold up his head again in the old school. He was disgraced for ever. He had committed an assault upon Mr. Snuggs which could never be wiped out. And he was condemned by all.

At least, nearly all.

The one fellow in the whole school who ought to have felt a trace of pity was Fullwood. For Fullwood knew that Alf was guiltless. And yet Fullwood was even now plotting and planning to kick the unfortunate junior when he was down. Ralph Leslie's hatred was appalling.

"Yes, the other chaps will help if we only give them the tip," said Fullwood.

"I don't know about that!" exclaimed Bell. "It's all very well to suggest these things, Fully, but—"

"But what?"

"Well, some of the chaps seem to be rather sorry for Huggins," said Bell. "Now that he's sacked, they reckon we'd better leave him alone."

"Oh, they're only the silly soft idiots!" sneered Fullwood. "Fellows like Merrell and Marriott and the others will join in. Only too willing. Just wait and see."

"But what's the wheeze?"

"What have they got to join?"

Fullwood grinned.

"Huggins is going in the morning, isn't he?" he asked.

"Yes, early."

"Before the school gets down?"

"That's what the Head said, anyway."

"Well, two can play at that game," said Fullwood grimly. "If Huggins can get up early—so can we."

"You—you mean—"

"I mean that we can get up at about six—a whole crowd of us!" said Fullwood tensely. "Do you understand? Huggins can't leave before seven, because there's no train until half-past."

"By gad!"

Gulliver and Bell looked at their leader in admiration.

"Now, perhaps you fellows can give me a bit of credit," went on Fullwood. "All we've got to do is to steal down—without wakin' the rest—an' then we can make an ambush."

"An' collar Huggins as he leaves?"

"Exactly!"

"And what then?"

"My dear ass!" said Fullwood. "Haven't you got any imagination at all? We'll make the beast run the gauntlet. We'll give him the frog's march down the lane. In fact, we'll hound him out of the place completely, and make him wish he'd never been born!"

"Oh, good!"

"Gorgeous idea!"

"And, what's more, we'll do it!" said Fullwood. "I'll go round now, and talk to Merrell and some of the others. I'll get it all fixed. You chaps had better say nothing—leave it to me."

And Fullwood, with a nod, went off on his rascally errand.

CHAPTER II.

STAUNCH TO THE END!

ARCHIE GLENTHORNE sighed. "The fact is, Phipps, I don't bally well feel like sleep at all!" he said sadly. "The tissues are fearfully depressed and weakened, but I'm dashed certain that sleep won't come to the young master."

Phipps looked concerned.

"You are worrying, sir?"

"Well, dash it all!" said Archie. "Worrying? My dear old haddock, I'm positively wilting away! This thing is too much, Phipps. I have a ghastly fear that in the morning I shall not be here."

Phipps looked rather startled.

"You are thinking of leaving the school, sir?" he asked.

"Well, not absolutely—not the entire body and soul, and all that," said Archie. "You'll probably come in the old bedroom, and you'll find my earthly remains lying between the sheets. But I shall be gone, Phipps—abso-

tutely! Why, dash it, there's nothing else to live for!"

Phipps was relieved.

"You gave me quite a start, sir," he said. "There is no necessity whatever for you to have such fears——"

"Fears!" interrupted Archie. "My dear old chap, it would be welcome! I don't want to exist! Can't you understand that Alf has absolutely caught about five hundred packets at once? Can't you realise that the dear old lad is in the throes, and all that sort of rot?"

Phipps sighed.

He was having rather a difficult time with Archie Glenthorne. It was getting late. In fact, it was bedtime. And Archie and his valet were now alone in the elegant junior's private little bedroom. Archie was in bed already—sitting up, and hugging his knees. His gaily-striped pyjamas gave the whole room an air of colour.

But Archie himself was sad.

His usually cheerful face was pale and drawn. He felt Alf's trouble to a terrible degree. For these two had been the firmest of firm friends. Throughout the whole of Alf's troubles, Archie had stuck to him. Archie had been as staunch as any friend could be.

And now—Alf was going.

At first, Archie hadn't been able to realise it. It had seemed too awful. Even now, he hardly knew what to do. Nobody could console him. Even Phipps, who was tactful, and knew Archie's every mood, found it quite impossible to comfort his young master. And Phipps had never failed before. It worried the man.

"You see, I shall be dashed well alone!" said Archie musingly. "I mean to say, life on a desert island would be rather priceless in comparison to this. Think of it, Phipps! Do your utmost to get the old brain department into working order. Get busy with the broom."

"A broom, sir?"

"I mean to say, sweep out the cobwebs, and think!" went on Archie. "In fact, think fearfully. What about it? How can I live, Phipps? How can I continue to go through the good old daily grind without Alf lazzing about, and dashing hither and thither? My dear old turnip, I feel so frightfully frightful that I'm dashed well all of a dither!"

"You will soon be better, sir——"

"Absolutely not," said Archie sadly. "Dash it all, I ought to know! I go hot, and then I seem to pass under a dashed shower-bath! Iciness sets in in chunks! And then I get hot again! I shouldn't be surprised, Phipps, if I'm sickening for one of those poisonous kind of fevers!"

"I hardly think so, sir," said Phipps gravely.

"Brain fever, and what not?"

"Quite impossible, sir."

"Gadzooks! I mean to say, dash it!" protested Archie. "That sounds rather foul!

It implies that I haven't got any bally brain! I say brain fever! And you say impossible! Rather near the edge, Phipps! The young master feels hurt!"

"I must apologise, sir," said Phipps. "I did not mean to imply any such suggestion——"

"In that case, old peach, we will allow the matter to slide into oblivion," said Archie gracefully. "Of course, I'm quite ready to admit that when it comes to brains, I'm somewhat on the short side. Not absolutely lacking entirely, but the brain department is limited."

"Not at all, sir."

"I fear that it must be so, Phipps," said Archie, shaking his head. "I mean to say, I can't dashed well think! I can't get any ideas! I keep pondering over this, and pondering over that, and I come back to the same old spot without progressing. It makes me feel sad, Phipps."

"I should advise you to get to sleep, sir," said Phipps. "It is quite useless to worry yourself over Master Huggins. And, indeed, the boy is certainly not worth the concern you have been showing."

"Not worth it!"

"I am afraid not, sir," said the valet. "Huggins is quite a young hooligan! His attack on Mr. Snuggs——"

"Stop!" commanded Archie firmly. "Phipps, I'm disgusted! In fact, I'm bally well shocked! Do you mean to actually tell me, you fearful worm, that you believe in Huggins' guilt?"

"It has been proved, sir——"

"That, I mean to say, is nothing!"

"Mr. Snuggs himself testified——"

"Mr. Snuggs is a blight—a kind of dashed poison gas!" said Archie. "As soon as he wafts in, the atmosphere becomes rather putrid! I mean to say, the chap is nothing more or less than an individual of frightful loathing! And when it comes to lying, he can beat a bally Greek!"

"I'm afraid you're somewhat prejudiced against Mr. Snuggs, sir," said Phipps.

"However, it is not my place to argue. I must let you have your own way, sir. I would like you to get to sleep as soon as possible. I am hoping, Master Archie, that you will feel better to-morrow."

Archie moaned.

"Better!" he breathed. "If I still live, Phipps, I shall be a shadow! There is one thing that you must do. You must get busy on the telephone at once, and give an order."

"An order, sir?"

"Exactly—dash about, and buy a bath-chair!"

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Phipps, startled.

"Oh, look here! I mean, look here!" protested Archie. "Don't be so deucedly dense! You don't suppose that I shall be able to walk, do you? I shall be weak, and a bath-chair will be absolutely ncess. Trickle along, and see about these things!"

"Very good, sir," said Phipps, without any intention of obeying. "In the morning you will have one worry off your mind, at least. For Master Huggins will be gone—"

"Gone!" shouted Archie.

He thrust the bedclothes aside, and leapt out in one energetic bound.

"You do not appear to be very weak, sir," remarked Phipps.

"Absolutely not!" said Archie. "I mean to say, you gave me a spasm! A kind of rapid development of the good old Kruschen feeling. I simply had to whizz out like one o'clock. But, laddie, you can't mean to tell me that Alf will be gone when I stagger down in the morning?"

"Yes, sir—he's leaving early."

"Then, of course, the young master will have to arise at an early hour, also," declared Archie, crawling back into bed. "That, I mean to say, is absolutely ness. You've got to come along at about four o'clock, Phipps, and yank me out. In other words, if you are waking, call me early, mother darling! That kind of stuff, Phipps!"

"Just as you wish, sir," said the valet.

"I mean, it's a question of life and death!" said Archie. "I haven't seen the dear lad for hours and hours and hours! I tried to get at him, but the Head wouldn't allow me to buzz anywhere near. And so the only thing is to catch him early."

"I will awaken you in good time, sir."

Archie lay back, with a sigh.

"Well, I mean to say, I'm feeling somewhat braced," he observed. "Only somewhat, Phipps. In a frightfully small degree, but distinctly braced. The very thought of seeing the dear lad in the morning has caused the young master to buck up in several large slices. In fact, I have a priceless idea that I shall be able to indulge in forty of the best!"

"That is splendid, sir," said Phipps gravely.

And he passed out of the bedroom, leaving Archie to indulge.

CHAPTER III.

HIS LAST HOUR AT ST. FRANK'S!

ALF HUGGINS was dressing.

It was early—the whole of St. Frank's lay still and silent, bathed in the sunshine of the late April morning. It was almost like summer. The sky was clear blue, the sun shone dazzlingly, and everything was green and fresh and perfectly delightful.

Never had the old school looked so glorious.

From the punishment-room window, Alf could see out across the Triangle, over the playing fields, and right beyond across the open country. He stood there, gazing out wistfully.

He almost wished it had been a cold, wet, miserable morning. Then the parting would

not have been so hard. But Fate had conspired against him at every turn.

He had to leave to-day—he was going to be bundled out before the school awoke, in case his very presence should contaminate the other boys. It was a bitter, terrible thought.

And he stood there, lost for a few moments.

He could hear the birds singing gaily in the tops of the old chestnut trees—gay and fresh with their new spring coating of brilliant green. He could see Belton Wood in the distance, and just to the left a few peeping roofs of the village.

And there, just near by, sparkled a stretch of water in the sunlight. It was a bend of the River Stowe.

Near at hand, the playing fields were looking at their best—green, inviting, and entrancing in every way. Alf could see the College House, and the old chapel—the fine, stately old buildings of this magnificent school.

And he was leaving it.

He was being hounded out in disgrace—and he had done absolutely nothing to deserve such terrible treatment. That was what made the thing so hard to bear.

It was hardly surprising that as Alf stood there, his eyes became suspiciously moist. There was a lump in his throat that he tried, again and again, to force down.

And then he shook himself.

He held his head back proudly, and his eyes flashed with defiance. He was innocent! They could persecute him as they liked—he was helpless, and had to submit.

But he was innocent!

He was no longer a pupil of this old pile. It was no use trying to fight against Fate. Everything had conspired against him, and it was absolutely useless to battle any longer. He had done his best.

"Oh, what's the good?" he muttered. "I might just as well give it all up now. They've got me this time—they've got me proper! As for that Snuggs—by glory!"

He paused, clenching his fists, unable to find any words that could adequately express his feelings for his chief persecutor. He didn't actually hate Mr. Snuggs. It was something different to that.

He regarded Mr. Snuggs as absolutely wicked, and Alf's sole desire was to see the man exposed for the rogue he actually was. Alf merely wanted justice. But it seemed that he would never get it.

His eyes burned fiercely as he thought of it all. The injustice was unbearable—intolerable! And, at the same time, there was that feeling of helplessness gripping him harder and harder.

It was like some deadly disease which numbed him. He could do nothing—nothing!

And he turned away from the window, miserable, and boiling with inward fury. Why should he be sorry? Why should he worry because he was leaving St. Frank's? Ever since his arrival he had been treated

with nothing but scorn and contempt. The fellows had shown him the cold shoulder.

There were a few, certainly, who were different.

Alf lost some of his anger as he thought of them. Handforth, for example. Good old impulsive, outspoken Handforth! He was one of the best, if you like!

And Reggie Pitt, and Tregellis-West, and Tommy Watson. All that set was made of the right sort of stuff.

It was the others who had been persecuting the bricklayer's son—Fullwood and Co., and Merrell, and Griffith, and Armstrong, and Hubbard—all those snobbish rotters. They weren't worth thinking of!

And there was Archie.

Last, but most important of all—Archie! Alf's eyes softened now.

"Good old Archie!" he murmured. "What a stunner! But—but I'm beginning to wonder," he added uneasily. "I ain't seen nothing of him—he ain't given a single sign!"

Alf paused, secretly alarmed.

"Oh, it ain't possible that Archie has turned agin me!" he muttered. "He ain't that kind—I don't believe it! And yet he ain't said a thing. He ain't come nigh me once. Well, he'll have a chance this morning. If he's what I think he is—if he's true blue—I'll see him."

Alf brightened up somewhat.

He was convinced that Archie would get up early—so that he would be able to say good-bye to his chum. There was a clean pleasure in that thought. And Alf went on with his dressing, and a few minutes later he was ready. Only just in time, too.

For the door opened, and two prefects entered. They were Fenton and Morrow.

"Ready?" asked Fenton.

"Yes," said Alf quietly.

"We don't like the job, Huggins, but we've got to see you off the school premises," growled Morrow. "Take my advice, and say as little as possible. Talk won't do any good now."

"Oh, don't be afraid," said Alf. "I'm not snivelling. I never done it, but it's no good sayin' that. I s'pose I can say good-bye to Glenthorne, can't I?"

Fenton shook his head.

"No!" he replied.

"Oh, don't be——"

"NO!" repeated Fenton uncomfortably. "I'm awfully sorry, Huggins. But the Head gave strict orders that you were to be escorted straight off the school premises. You must not come into contact with any of the other boys. Hard lines! I'm sorry."

"Well, it's a bit rough!" muttered Alf. "But I ain't grumblin'."

"Your box will be sent on in due course," said Fenton. "That's all."

He spoke coldly, for he shared the general opinion—he believed that this boy had committed a blackguardly assault upon Mr. Snuggs. Therefore, he was not deserving

of any pity. Having taken this for granted, Fenton's attitude was correct.

They went downstairs. Alf got into his overcoat and cap, and then they passed out into the Triangle.

Everything was quiet and still—and lovely. It was just one of those perfect spring mornings when one realises that life is worth living—when it is a joy and a delight to be in the country.

But in Alf's heart there was nothing but bitterness.

Joy! What joy was there for him? There was nothing but blackness in front of him. He hardly noticed the glories of the morning. And, walking between Fenton and Morrow, he passed over the Triangle towards the big main gates.

He was being kicked out!

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE HANDS OF THE MOB!

"WAKE up—wake up, you ass!" muttered Fullwood urgently.

He was bending over Gulliver's bed. The rising bell had not clanged out—it was not due to clang out until another hour had elapsed. But Fullwood had awakened.

Before going to sleep, he had known that he would be up in time. For his vindictive hatred was so great that he absolutely had to be on the spot, in readiness to give the final jeer when Alf Huggins took his departure. And all the other cads and snobs would be with him.

"I say!" muttered Gulliver. "What's the idea? It's not time——"

"Just half-past-six!" murmured Fullwood.

Gulliver sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"Oh, yes! I remember!" he said. "Pretty rippin' mornin', by the look of it. I say hadn't we better chuck it? It's a bally fag, gettin' out of bed now."

"Don't be a fool!" snapped Fullwood. "Come on!"

He pulled the bedclothes back, and Gulliver reluctantly tumbled out. But a few minutes later, when he was getting dressed, his enthusiasm of the night before returned.

And it was the same with Bell and Marriott and Merrell and Hubbard, and all the other snobs.

One by one they got up. They dressed in silence, talking to one another in the merest whispers.

For they had no desire to awaken any of the other fellows. The snobs were in the majority, but, at the same time, they didn't want to cause any upset. That might bring a master on the scene, and then the whole game would be ruined.

So they took every precaution.

And when they were ready, they crept out

of the dormitory one after the other, and went downstairs as softly as mice. They did not want to be stopped by anybody.

"We can't do anythin' within the school grounds," breathed Fullwood. "We'd be dropped on at once. But we can make our ambush outside—in the lane. It'll be just as good!"

"Better!" said Marriott.

"Rather!"

And the cads went on their way. They succeeded in getting outside, and then slipped across the Triangle to the school wall—which they scaled. The gates were not yet unlocked.

Fullwood and his gang were delighted when they found that no alarm had been caused. They gathered out in the lane, and stood there in a big crowd—thankful that they were now able to talk freely.

"How long shall we have to wait here?" asked Bell.

"Oh, not long—about ten minutes, I should think," said Fullwood. "It's nearly a quarter to seven, an' he's bound to be kicked out before the hour strikes."

"Well, we'll be ready for him."

"You bet!"

"An' we'll show him that he's not wanted at St. Frank's, too!"

"Hear, hear!"

The crowd of snobs moved off down the lane until they were some little distance from the extremity of the school. Here they reckoned they would be safe. Any commotion they made would not be very noticeable.

And they entered the meadows on either side—hidden by the thick hedges, lying in ambush.

Gazing up and down the road, one would have believed that the lane was deserted. But there they were—these contemptible juniors—waiting for their victim.

He emerged even sooner than they had expected.

Fullwood, peeping out from cover, and keeping a sharp watch on the school gates, heard a clang, and then looked closely. Alf Huggins came out. Fullwood caught a



Archie deliberately reached forward, seized Merrell's nose, and twisted it violently.

glimpse of Fenton and Morrow, of the Sixth. And, for a moment, Fullwood was dismayed.

"Oh, by gad!" he muttered.

He half believed that the prefects were coming down the lane with Alf. But this was not the case. They went back, after having a word or two, and the gate clanged again. Alf stood there, alone. He didn't move away at once.

The gate was closed upon him—locked.

He had been turned out, and he gazed dully at Fenton and Morrow as they returned into the Ancient House. The Triangle was deserted once more. Not a living soul was to be seen.

Alf stood there in a kind of dream. Dimly, he heard the twittering of the birds, and the humming of the insect life which was already getting briskly to work on the day's labours. And in a dim kind of way, from behind the school buildings, came the sound of milk cans.

St. Frank's was awakening to the day's labours, too.

And Alf Huggins felt a kind of dead weight within him. He wanted to burst out crying—but he wasn't that kind. And he couldn't have cried even had he attempted to do so. This was a hard, dry-eyed kind of misery.

He almost felt that it would have been

better if he had left in the middle of the day—when all the fellows were about. There was something terrible about this early morning affair. He had been thrust out as though he were a leper—put outside the school grounds, with the gate locked upon him.

And Archie?

Not a sign—not the faintest trace of him.

Alf's last hope had gone. He had had an idea that Archie would come—that the noble junior would bid him farewell, in his time of awful trouble. But Archie was not out.

With dragging footsteps, Alf turned away, and commenced walking down the lane. He had come to St. Frank's with the conviction that he would find many snobs. He had found them—he had proved himself to be right. But at what a cost! He had fought hard—but they had beaten him.

But, at least, they could not see him now, in his moment of supreme humiliation. That was a comforting thought.

He knew there was a train to catch—but he didn't think of it now. What did it matter? One train was as good as another. He had the whole day before him. He went down the lane in an absent-minded, dull sort of way.

Then, suddenly, he halted.

From both sides of the road forms appeared. Alf caught his breath in, and instinctively clenched his fists. Then he had been wrong! These rotters were to see him off, after all! They had planned to jeer at him as he left the school.

And there was no escape.

Fullwood led the crowd, and they swarmed up like so many hornets—vindictive, venomous things, ready to sting. Alf nearly lost control of himself as he found that Fullwood was there.

Fullwood it was who had betrayed him—who had given false evidence against him! Alf remembered that scene—he remembered how Fullwood had sent him into the woodshed—deliberately, so that he would be caught in the coils. And Alf absolutely "saw red."

"You—you cowardly cur!" he shouted, his blood rising to fever heat at the very sight of the fellow. "So you've come to jeer, have you? You dirty blackguard! You scoundrel!"

Fullwood started back, surprised at this fierce outburst.

"Grab him!" he snarled. "The vulgar cad—"

"By glory, I'll shut that mouth of yours!" shouted Alf thickly.

Crash!

With all his strength, he hurled himself forward, and his fist thudded into Fullwood's face like a sledgehammer. The leader of Study A nearly turned a complete backward somersault.

He went down with a crash in the dust, utterly dazed and in the throes of agony.

And Alf stood over him—hot, flushed, and filled with righteous indignation and wrath.

"Now then—jeer!" he said defiantly. "Call me a murderer now! If this chap doesn't deserve knocking out—"

"Hold him!"

"He's dangerous!"

The cads rushed upon Alf, and they grabbed him. He was held tightly, although he fought madly for his freedom.

And Fullwood staggered to his feet, his face an unpleasant sight. His nose was bleeding, and his eyes were glittering with evil hatred. He was in pain, too, and still somewhat dazed.

"Shove him on the ground, and grind his face in the dust!" he snarled. "By gad! I'll do it myself!"

Alf was quite helpless in the hands of so many. His struggles were of no avail. Hands seized his arms and legs, and he was forced down upon the road, and his face was pushed into the dust. He was nearly blinded and choked, and his skin was grazed cruelly.

Then, half suffocated, he was hauled to his feet, and the snobs practically lost control of themselves. They commenced battering him about—punching wildly—kicking, and tearing his clothing. It was a disgraceful exhibition. The juniors had become a mob.

Truly, Alf Huggins was suffering!

CHAPTER V.

NOT PLAYING THE GAME!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH sat up and looked at me dazedly.

"Hallo! What's wrong?" he asked, yawning. "I say, Nipper, it's not time to get up yet—"

"Fullwood and his gang have got up—they've gone outside to rag Huggins as he leaves!" I said grimly. "It's up to us to protect him. We can't let the chap be kicked when he's down!"

Handforth leapt out of bed with a roar.

"Why didn't you stop 'em going?" he demanded furiously.

"Because we can't fight them here—better do it outside!" I replied. "Besides, I didn't wake up until they were on the point of leaving the dormitory. They've been gone about two minutes!"

"Oh, good!" said Handforth. "We'll stop their rotten game."

In a few minutes every other fellow in the Remove dormitory was getting up, including Fatty Little. He was determined to be in this affair, for he was just as indignant as the rest.

"Of course, we've got to protect the chap," said Reggie Pitt. "We can't let him suffer at the hands of those beastly cads!"

"Rather not!"

"He's guilty all right—no question about

that!" said De Valerie. "But that doesn't make any difference. He's a dangerous hooligan, but we can't see him kicked!"

"No fear!" said Jack Grey. "He's been sacked from the school—he's got the order of the boot. That's enough punishment, goodness knows!"

"It's not playing the game," I said grimly. "There's something horribly contemptible and mean about kicking a fellow when he's down. It's a wretched business. We'll stop it."

"Begad, rather!" said Sir Montic Tregellis-West. "Dear old boys, I'm feelin' a bit sorry for Huggins. I am, really. It's such a frightful pity that he should turn out to be a rotter."

Handforth paused in his dressing.

"I'm not sure of it even now!" he said, glaring.

"Oh, don't be an ass——"

"I tell you I'm not sure of it!" roared Handy. "Fullwood's a cad, and Snuggs is a rotter! They may have diddled the Head—but they can't diddle me! I've got an idea there's something fishy about the whole affair."

"Oh, rot!"

"Draw it mild, Handy!"

"Something fishy!" repeated Handforth deliberately. "By what I saw of Huggins, he's one of the best. He's true blue. And I'm not satisfied about this Snuggs affair. In fact, I've decided to make investigations!"

"Ha, ha, hā!"

"Oh, you can cackle!" said Handforth sourly. "You can laugh! But I know what I'm doing! You'll be a bit surprised when I prove that Huggins is innocent—when he comes back without a stain on him!"

"That all depends," said Pitt. "It's quite likely he'll have two or three stains on him, particularly if he goes across a muddy road——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you funny ass!" sneered Handforth. "Without a stain on his character, I mean. Wait! That's all! Wait! I'm not telling you to do anything else. Wait!"

And Handforth went on dressing, glaring at the other fellows with his jaw thrust out in an aggressive way.

As a general rule, Handforth was miles wide of the mark in his surmises. But now and again he met with an accident—he would hit the nail on the head. And he was astonishingly near the mark just now.

It was generally admitted that Handforth was something of an ass. But Handforth was absolutely human. He was open, frank, and straightforward in everything. There was not the slightest trace of deceit about Edward Oswald. And he had a happy knack of summing up a fellow, and knowing his true worth.

And just now it was his instinct that served him—not anything else. He felt, within him, that Alf Huggins was not capable of committing the crime for which

he had been punished. And, then and there, Handforth positively made up his mind that Alf was innocent.

He believed it—there was no question about the thing at all. Once Handforth made up his mind, there was no shifting it. He was as immovable as the rock of Gibraltar.

And he was furious at the thought of Fullwood and Co. ambushing the unfortunate junior. It was caddish—it was blackguardly. And it was Handforth who led the crowd of juniors out of the dormitory. I had tried to be first, but he beat me.

We hurried downstairs, and rushed across the Triangle.

The gates were still locked, but this was a mere detail. We had nearly reached the wall, when we heard a hail from the rear. And we came to a halt, and looked round.

"Where are you youngsters off to?" demanded Fenton, striding up grimly.

"Has—has Huggins gone?" I asked quickly.

"Yes; nearly ten minutes ago."

"Oh, my hat!" said Pitt. "They've got him, then!"

"I shouldn't advise you kids to interfere!" said Fenton. "Let the boy alone! He's had his punishment, and——"

"You—you blithering idiot!" roared Handforth.

"What!" gasped the school captain.

"You babbling lunatic!"

"You'd better stop that, my lad, or I'll get wild!" said Fenton curtly. "I'm not going to have Huggins persecuted——"

"Don't you understand, we're going to rescue him!" hooted Handforth. "Fullwood and those cads have gone out to rag the poor chap, and we're off to his rescue. You don't think we'd descend to such dirtiness, I suppose?"

Fenton looked startled.

"Oh!" he said. "You're going to rescue him? Good! You'd better get going!"

He spoke briskly, and we waited no longer. We ran full tilt at the school wall, and swarmed over.

And as soon as we dropped into the road we knew that we were only just in time—indeed, too late.

Two hundred yards down the lane a kind of melee was going on. Fullwood and all his gang were persecuting Alf Huggins in the most outrageous manner.

Handforth gave one bellow, and dashed to the attack, followed by all the rest of us.

CHAPTER VI.

RESCUING ALF!

"RUN, you cad—run!" snarled Fullwood.

All Alf's persecutors had lined up in a double row, and they were standing there with knotted handkerchiefs and clenched fists. Having mauled him about

until he could hardly breathe, they were now making him run the gauntlet.

At the best of times this was a terrifying ordeal.

But just now Alf was not fit for such a thing. He could hardly see, for his eyes were full of dust and grit. He was bruised, dazed, and his clothing was half torn from his back.

"Oh, you cads—you blackguards!" he muttered thickly.

"Run, confound you!" snapped Fullwood.

He gave Alf a heave, and the unfortunate junior was sent spinning forward. And the very moment he started to move, the tormentors commenced on him.

Whack! Slash! Whack!

The knotted handkerchiefs and the fists thudded upon him from all sides as he staggered down the double line. He was turned this way and that. In vain he put up his hands to defend his face. The blows came from all sides. And at last, quite blinded by the fury of the attack, he stumbled, and fell in the dust.

"Get up, you hooligan!"

"Kick him!"

And the cads were quite capable of doing it. But they were startled at this moment by a sudden roar from the rear. And before they could know where they were a swarm of juniors appeared from nowhere, with Handforth in the lead.

Crash!

For the second time that morning Full-

wood went down. Gulliver thudded into the dust, too, to be instantly followed by Bell. Handforth's fists were everywhere. He entered into the fight with all his strength and energy, and thoroughly enjoyed himself. In a way, he was rather glad that this affair had happened, because it gave him a chance to let go at these rotters as they deserved.

Handforth was a terror for a scrap.

And the rest of us were fighting just as hard.

Fullwood and Co. and all their fellow cads were put to rout. They were cooled down, too. Our arrival on the scene had been unexpected. They hadn't had the faintest idea that we should become aware of their game, and intervene. And now they had been caught red-handed.

After the first exchange of blows, most of them fled, but paused after they had reached a safe distance.

"Yah! Cads!" yelled Marriott. "You're no better than that beast of a bricklayer!"

"Go back to Hoxton with him!"

"Go and help him to sweep the roads!"

"Go and empty the dustbins!"

Handforth glared at the cads ferociously.

"You—you miserable worms!" he roared.

"You mouldy set of insects! If anybody ought to be chucked out of the school, it's you! This poor chap is kicked out for assaulting Snuggs, and you go and do the same thing!"

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"I'm blessed if Handy isn't right!" said Church breathlessly.

"Of course I'm right!" snorted Handforth. "I'm always right! If we hadn't come on the scene, now, those beasts would have half murdered Huggins. Come on! Let's go for 'em baldheaded!"

"Is this what you call playing the game, Fullwood?" I asked curtly. "Haven't you got more decency than to attack a fellow when he's down and out?"

"Go and eat coke!" snarled Fullwood thickly.

"Decency!" said Handforth, with heavy sarcasm. "Decency! These rotters don't know the meaning of the word! A brick-layer is a gentleman in comparison to these cads! I'll cut the lot! I'll never speak to one of 'em again! I wouldn't be found in the same room!"

Handforth was so disgusted that even his anger cozed away. And, while he continued to make bitter remarks, Reggie Pitt and I helped Alf to his feet. The poor chap needed help, too. I boiled with fury as I looked at him. He had been treated in the most blackguardly manner.

He stood there, hardly able to keep straight. His clothing was torn and dusty. There were jagged rents in his jacket, and his overcoat was hardly wearable. And his hands and his face were grazed and battered and torn. He was bleeding from half a dozen minor injuries. And his face was streaked with dust and grime, his hair being literally choked with dirt from the road. It was some moments before he could speak.

"Huggins," I said quietly, "I'm sorry! I hope you won't think that we agreed to any horrible plan of this kind. We've got nothing but disgust for these contemptible curs!"

"They deserve to be kicked out a lot more than you did," declared Pitt.

Alf stood back, and looked at us dully.

"It's all right; you don't need to bother!" he muttered hoarsely. "Thanks for 'elping me. I don't know what those blokes might have done if you 'adn't come up. But you don't need to trouble now!"

"We'd like to tell you——"

"It's a queer thing you can speak to me," said Alf bitterly. "Oh, I know you don't agree with this sort of thing, but you all think me guilty. You all think I tried to kill Mr. Snuggs."

The juniors were silent.

"Don't you?" asked Alf fiercely.

"Well, the evidence, you know——" began Watson uncomfortably.

"All right; that's enough!" interrupted Alf. "The evidence! You believe it, don't you? Lies! Lies! Lies! Nothing else but lies!"

It was a passionate outburst, and his voice rose higher and higher.

Handforth came rushing up.

"Good man!" he roared. "I'm with you! I don't believe it! I've said all along that the thing was a put-up job. Look here, Huggins, will you take it?"

He impulsively thrust out his hand.

"You—you—you believe in me?" asked Alf, in wonder.

"Yes, I do!" replied Handforth.

"And so do I!" I said quietly. "I'll confess I was doubtful at first, but this has settled me. Huggins, old man, you've had a rotten time, but you'll get your reward later."

But the rest of the fellows hung back, silent.

"Well, I'll be going!" said Alf quietly. "Thanks for helping me. But you'd best not come too near, you other fellows. You think—I tried to kill Mr. Snuggs, an' I ain't fit to touch you! You reckon I'm guilty, an' I don't want nothing more to do with you!"

"Look here——" began De Valerie.

"What you've done, you've only done out of pity," went on Alf. "You didn't think it was right that I should be kicked when I was down. But you 'ate me, all the same. You think I'm a blackguard and hooligan. But I've finished with you—finished! You won't see me no more!"

His voice was full of bitterness and misery.

And with a last look at us, he turned, and walked down the lane towards the village. I wanted to go with him—I wanted to have something more to say, but I felt it would be better not to. I couldn't do any good, and the poor chap probably wanted to be alone.

I restrained Handforth from going, too.

"Don't, old man!" I said quietly. "Can't you understand that Huggins has been through a terrible time? He's grateful because we believe in him, but he'd rather be alone. Give him a chance! Let him be in peace!"

Handforth nodded.

"Right you are!" he said. "I suppose you're right. As a matter of fact, I didn't really mean to go. Poor chap! I can't help feeling sorry for him! What a rotten time he had here!"

He looked down the road rather sadly.

Alf Huggins was just disappearing round the bend. He didn't turn—he didn't even glance back.

Handforth turned to the others.

"Well, he's gone!" he said. "Is that the last we're to see of him?"

"It looks like it!" said Jack Grey.

"Things are not always what they look!" replied Handforth. "But I'll bet we'll see Huggins again! I'm certain of it! I can feel it in my bones!"

"By Jove!" I said. "I hope your bones are right!"

CHAPTER VII.

ARCHIE'S SORROW!

"**W**HAT-HO! What-ho! Morning, and all that!"

Archie Glenthorne sat up in bed, stretched himself, and gazed out of the window at the sunlit landscape. He had been awakened by the clanging of the rising bell—a most unusual circumstance. He generally slept on until Phipps came with a cup of tea.

"Yards of sunshine, gentle breezes, and the good old birds twitterin' in the tree-tops!" murmured Archie poetically. "I mean to say, dashed bracing! Just the kind of morning to make a chappie feel somewhat priceless!"

But, somehow, Archie felt uneasy.

There was a kind of heavy lump within him, and he couldn't understand it. Then, in a moment, he remembered—the truth came to him. Of course! What an ass he had been not to recollect earlier!

Alf!

"Absolutely!" murmured Archie, aghast. "Dear old Alf! He trickles away this morning—he whizzes out of the landscape in dire disgrace! How absolutely foul! And I was warbling about the beauties of the morning!"

He got out of bed, and made his way across the room to the window. He opened it, and looked outside. And it rather startled him to see Willy Handforth and a number of other fags indulging in a game of cricket in the Triangle. At least, the fags called it cricket. Actually, they had got Willy's jacket for a stump, a soft ball, and a wooden spade did duty as a cricket bat. But the fags were enjoying themselves.

"I mean to say!" murmured Archie. "What? Cricket, don't you know! But I understood that dear old Alf was going to whizz off quite early. There appears to be a mystery!"

Very worried, Archie turned away from the window, and was just in time to see the door open to admit Phipps. Phipps was his usual self. He carried the usual tray, upon which stood the usual cup of tea.

"Good-morning, Master Archie!" he said. "I hardly expected you to be out of bed, sir!"

"Look here, Phipps—look here!" said Archie. "What about it?"

"Your cup of tea, sir!"

"Bother the cup of tea—bother it!" said Archie curtly. "I mean, hand it over here! Absolutely! I feel in need of a bracer! And

a cup of the good old brew is always calculated to stimulate the tissues."

He took several sips of tea, and then frowned.

"And when, may I ask, is Alf leaving?" he asked.

"Master Huggins has already departed," said Phipps steadily.

Crash!

The cup of tea descended to the floor, and the china broke to smithereens. And Archie stared at Phipps blankly.

"Departed!" he gasped. "But—but—I mean to say, you are joking, Phipps! You can't mean it, old dear! I distinctly told you to call me early!"

"I am sorry, sir, but it was advisable not to do so," said Phipps quietly. "Master Huggins left the school nearly an hour ago, and caught the early train to London."

"Gadzooks!" muttered Archie. "He didn't see me—he didn't hear a word from me! How positively poisonous! Why, dash it, the dear old lad of the village will believe that I have turned against him!"

"It was advisable to let you sleep on, sir," said Phipps.

"And so—and so you disobeyed the young master's orders!" exclaimed Archie fiercely. "This, Phipps, is the end! Go down to my study, and write out a cheque!"

"A cheque, sir?"

"Your wages, laddie!" said Archie. "You may not be aware of it, but you are buzzing! In other words, I am firing you! I desire no other words—I am disgusted! You deliberately failed me!"

"I am exceedingly sorry, sir——"

"I am mortally wounded, Phipps," said Archie. "You have delivered a blow that I shall never recover from. Alf has gone, and I did not say good-bye. Depart from my sight!"

Phipps remained.

He knew that Archie did not mean this—but, at the same time, he was rather distressed. He did not like any kind of misunderstanding.

"I am afraid, sir, you believe that I deliberately failed to awaken you," said Phipps. "As a matter of fact, I received orders——"

"Orders?" repeated Archie.

"Yes, sir!"

"That I was not to be disturbed till Alf had gone?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Dash it all! Who from?"

"Mr. Snuggs, sir!"

Archie stared at Phipps blankly.

"From Mr. Snuggs?" he repeated.

"Precisely, sir."

"Absolutely not!" exclaimed Archie. "I mean to say, impossible! I regret, old tulip, that the yarn does not go down. In other words, I absolutely and positively refuse to swallow it. Why dash it all, Mr. Snuggs is lying in bed suffering from large quantities of bashing about! Not that he doesn't deserve it, by the way."

"I am attending to Mr. Snuggs, sir."

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"Attending to him!" repeated Archie.
 "What! Since last night?"

"Yes, sir. I received instructions from the Headmaster after I had bade you good-night, sir," replied Phipps. "And Mr. Snuggs expressly told me that you were not to be awakened until Huggins had departed."

Archie sat down on the corner of the bed, rather limp.

"Well, this, I mean to say, is something of a blow!" he observed. "I am staggered, Phipps. I pay your bally wages—and you jolly well wait upon this foul reptile of a Snuggs! I mean to say, it's dashed stiff! Not to say steep, and bordering upon the perpendicular!"

"I must admit, sir, that it is rather thick, as you would say," admitted Phipps. "But, as you know, in addition to serving yourself, I also act in the capacity of butler to Dr. Stafford. I could not very well refuse to obey orders—much as I dislike them."

Archie considered.

"Oh, well, of course," he said slowly. "I mean to say, of course! Oh, well! As you say, Phipps. Under the circumstances, the young master's wrath is subsiding. But, all the same, it's dashed frightful. And as for Snuggs, the fellow is a blighting blighter!"

"I agree, sir!"

"Not content with scheming to get Alf hooped out, he absolutely prevents me from bidding a fond farewell to the dear chappie. I mean to say, Snuggs is nothing more nor less than a kind of snail! In fact, he's a bally tadpole!"

Archie commenced dressing, filled with utter misery. And Phipps could not console him.

Mr. Snuggs had acted again!

Although he was lying in bed, with his head bandaged, his mean, vindictive spirit was just as strong as ever. Mr. Snuggs had known full well that Archie would make every effort to see Alf off. And Mr. Snuggs had ordered Phipps to leave Archie sleeping.

It was contemptible—unbelievably contemptible.

And Archie's sorrow was so great that he hardly knew what he was doing. Alf had gone home, and Alf probably believed that his best chum had turned against him. What else could he believe? The thing seemed so obvious—so palpably clear.

And Archie Glenthorne decided that life was a fraud!



Six or seven Third-formers lay strewn about like so many ninepins. "Want any more?" demanded Willy. "Just say the word! I am always ready to oblige a chap!"

CHAPTER VIII.

DOING HIS BEST!

"HALLO, Archie! Feeling bright this morning?"

Handforth came to a halt in the Remove passage, and barred Archie's progress.

"Kindly fade, old tornado," said Archie coldly.

"Old what?" demanded Handy, staring.

"Old tornado!" repeated Archie, with firmness. "I mean to say, you always bally well remind me of one of those frightful storms. A kind of crash—thunder—roaring noises, and what not! I'm sorry, but the tissues are not strong enough to stand the strain at the moment!"

"Why, you—you insulting rotter!" roared Handforth violently.

"Help!" murmured Archie. "It appears that the old tornado has arrived in full blast! Absolutely!" Archie rubbed his face. "And rain, too, by gad! I mean to say, it's positively pouring!"

Handforth glared.

"I didn't stop you to have a quarrel!" he grunted. "I was going to sympathise!"

"Thanks frightfully, but absolutely not!"

"I think you are a bit of a bounder not to come down this morning!" went on Handforth severely. "I thought you were a pal of Huggins'!"

"Dash it, I am!"

"Then why didn't you show up to bid him good-bye!"

Archie explained in sad tones.

"Oh, Snuggs again!" said Handforth fiercely. "The beast! This absolutely proves it! Huggins is true blue! Don't you worry, Archie. I told Huggins to his face that I believe in him. I'm positively certain that he's been mixed up in a plot. He's innocent!"

Joy came into Archie's eyes.

"Then—then you're one of us?" he asked gladly. "I mean to say, one of me? That is, we're absolutely together? You and I, as it were, exist under one banner?"

"Yes," said Handforth. "And there's Nipper as well. Nipper's a good sort—he's with us."

"Why, this is priceless!" said Archie. "I mean to say, ripping! And what of Alf? I trust he seemed happy and confident when he trickled off?"

"It's a wonder he went off at all!" growled Handforth. "Strictly speaking, he ought to have had the ambulance."

"Gadzooks!"

Archie listened with dumb horror as Handforth explained the whole circumstances.

"But—but this is too ghastly for words!" he exclaimed at last. "It's absolutely terrible! Good glory! Pardon me, old lad—pardon me! Something must be done!"

Archie stalked down the passage, and came face to face with Merrell and Marriott. They paused, and looked at Archie in astonishment.

"Out of the way, fathead," said Merrell.

"Absolutely not!" replied Archie. "I am aware that the atmosphere is putrid, but I trust I shall survive! I understand that you took part in the frightful demonstration against Huggins this morning?"

"We helped to hoof him out, if that's what you mean?" sneered Merrell.

Archie deliberately reached forward, seized Merrell's nose, and twisted it violently.

"And that," he said firmly, "is that!"

"You!" howled Merrell. "You—you——"

"Yaroo!" screamed Marriott.

Before he could dodge, Archie had seized his nose in the same way.

And the genial ass of the Remove squared his shoulders and walked off. He returned to Handforth, who had been looking on in astonishment.

"A kind of start!" said Archie. "As a matter of fact, I intend to twist the bally noses of the whole bally crowd!"

"Not a bad idea, but a punch is ten times more effective!" said Handforth.

Merrell and Marriott came rushing up.

"Grab him!" said Marriott. "We'll make him pay for that! Why, the blithering fool——"

"What?" said Handforth aggressively.

"You clear out," snorted Merrell.

"You're not——"

Biff!

Handforth was quite ready. His two fists shot out, one after the other. The noses of Merrell and Marriott were sore from the twisting—but they absolutely throbbed with pain after Handforth delivered those punches. The cads of Study G slunk off. They had no stomach for the fight.

"But what's the good?" growled Handforth. "It's all very well to punch 'em, but that doesn't bring Huggins back, does it?"

"Absolutely not!" agreed Archie mournfully.

"I can't understand the fellows!" muttered Handforth. "They're nothing but a lot of cads and rotters! They're ready to believe anything against Huggins—just because he's the son of a bricklayer!"

"Dear old scout, it's bally awful!" said Archie.

He went towards his study, mournful and sad. And when he arrived there, he sank upon the lounge, and proceeded to stare before him in a glassy kind of way. Not that this did much good.

In the Triangle, at the same time, a fight was in progress.

It was not actually a fight of the ordinary kind. Just behind the shrubbery, and in close proximity to the monastery ruins, six or seven Third-formers lay strewn about like so many nine-pins.

And Willy Handforth stood in the middle.

"Satisfied?" he asked grimly.

"You—you dangerous——"

"Want any more?" demanded Willy. "Just say the word! I'm always ready to oblige a chap!"

Willy glared round, went over towards Hobbs, and gave him a punch on the side of the head which caused Hobbs to fall back, gasping.

"That's better!" said Willy. "You didn't look quite groggy enough!"

He took another look round.

"You're just about even now," he remarked. "You can't grumble, because I've treated you all alike. But I'm always willing to be reasonable. Just say the word, and I'll give you another dose."

Chubby Heath picked himself up dazedly.

"You—you dangerous bounder!" he said faintly. "I knew you could fight, but I'm blessed if I've seen you slosh out like this before! It's—it's like a massacre!"

(Continued on page 15)

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CONTAINS TWO OF THE VERY BEST
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OUR DETECTIVE STORY SECTION

No. 22.

PRESENTED WITH "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY."

May 5, 1923

THE LEAGUE

OF THE IRON HAND



*A Thrilling Detective Story of Nelson
Lee's Greatest Exploits against a
criminal confederation organised by
the mysterious "Number One."*

FOR NEW READERS.

PAUL HERMAN, millionaire and well-known figure in West End society, is the head of the League of the Iron Hand, a dangerous criminal confederation, which

NELSON LEE, the famous Gray's Inn Road detective, has set out to crush with

DERRICK O'BRIEN, the young Irish detective, and

COLIN MACKENZIE, the leading Scots detective, hailing from Edinburgh.

Following upon a daring jewel robbery and the stealing of a marvellous new airship by the "Iron Hand," the three detectives decide to watch the movements of certain prominent members of the league. O'Brien gets on the track of Bernstein, an antique dealer and suspected member of the league. Whilst searching Bernstein's shop he is caught unawares and overpowered by the suspect.

(Now read on.)

THE CIPHER LETTER.

"HANDS up, quick, or I fire!" cried O'Brien sternly. "It's my turn now to dictate terms!"

But he spoke too soon. Bernstein was not vanquished yet. Undaunted by

O'Brien's threat, he lashed out with his fist, and sent the revolver spinning from the detective's hand. As the weapon fell to the floor, it exploded with a loud report, whilst at the same instant, after dodging a blow from Bernstein's other fist, O'Brien closed with his opponent and tried to trip him up.

In ordinary circumstances Bernstein would have had no chance in a wrestling bout with the athletic young Irishman. But O'Brien had inhaled a considerable amount of the chloroform before Bernstein had opened the safe, and this had not only dulled his faculties to a certain extent, but had also robbed his muscles of a good deal of their suppleness and strength. The result was that, after a brief but desperate struggle, the two men crashed to the ground, with Bernstein uppermost.

"Whose turn is it now to dictate terms?" hissed Bernstein, as he planted one knee on O'Brien's chest and fastened both hands on the detective's throat. "Eh? Whose turn is it now? That was a very cute dodge of yours to feign unconsciousness, but you'll soon be unconscious in reality now!"

As he uttered these words he tightened his grip on O'Brien's windpipe. Madly the detective tried to tear those sinewy hands from his throat. But his efforts were vain,

and the stupor of suffocation was beginning to creep over him, when suddenly the shop re-echoed with a thunderous knock at the door, followed by the gruff demand:

"What's all the row in there? Open this door! I'm a policeman!"

It was a constable of the D Division, who, while patrolling Lord Street, had heard the report of the revolver.

Bernstein was so startled by this unexpected interruption that his hands for an instant relaxed their grip on O'Brien's throat.

It was only for an instant, but it was enough. Galvanised into life by the sound of the constable's voice, O'Brien swiftly wrenched his captor's hands away, and let out an excited shout for help.

"Help! Murder!" he yelled. "There's a window open at the back!"

The words had scarcely crossed his lips ere Bernstein, with a savage imprecation, gripped him by the throat and choked his further utterance. But the mischief had then been done, so far as Bernstein was concerned. The shrill blast of the constable's whistle rent the air; then the hurried tramp of his feet was heard as he ran down the covered passage at the side of the shop which led to the yard at the back.

For one brief second Bernstein seemed to be paralysed with consternation and fear. Then, raising O'Brien's head from the floor, he dashed it down again with a violence that stunned him. A moment later he had leaped to his feet and had darted into the office.

As he vaulted through the open window into the yard, the constable rushed through the end of the covered passage. With one blow of his fist Bernstein sent him sprawling on his back, and by the time the constable had picked himself up, the Jew had bolted down the passage and had vanished into the darkness.

A moment or two later three other constables arrived on the scene. When their comrade had explained what had happened, so far as he knew, the four men climbed through the office window and made their way into the shop, where they found O'Brien lying on the floor in a state of partial unconsciousness.

The detective, however, soon revived, and when he had told his story, and had showed the four constables his translation of Bernstein's cipher letter to Sir Edgar, he took the jewel-case out of the safe and opened it in their presence.

And then came the crowning triumph of O'Brien's victory. Not only were all the marquis's jewels apparently intact, but in the case was the note which Sir Edgar had written to Bernstein at the time he had left the jewel-case at the shop.

Sir Edgar had apparently enclosed the note in the case, and Bernstein had left it there until it was decided how the jewels should be disposed of. Like Bernstein's

letter to Sir Edgar, it was written in the secret cipher of the league; but as O'Brien had already discovered the key to the cipher, it did not take him long to decode the note. And this is what he read to the astonished constables:

"Dear Bernstein,—I called here this afternoon, but was told you were in Birmingham. The contents of this case were formerly the property of the Marquis of Hummersea, and were secured by No. 1 and myself at Moscar Grange last night. You will see the account of the robbery in the papers, and will see that we planted the theft on a young fellow named Donald Stuart.

"No. 1 wishes you to dispose of the various articles as quickly as you can and for the biggest price you can obtain. Both he and I think you might try to dispose of the various articles in their present state, as it would greatly diminish the value of the collection if the stones were removed from their settings and recut and reset in the usual way. Please drop me a line at your earliest convenience, and let me know what you think of this idea. Yours,
E. FAWCETT."

"That's as good as a verdict of acquittal for Stuart!" said one of the constables, when O'Brien had finished reading Sir Edgar's note.

"There's not a doubt about it," said O'Brien. "That's one thing I've accomplished, at any rate—I've established Donald Stuart's innocence."

THE RESCUE OF CUNDLE.

BEFORE leaving London for Dartmoor, Nelson Lee had telegraphed to the governor of the prison, informing him that he was coming, and orders had accordingly been given for him to be admitted as soon as he arrived.

"Mr. Nelson Lee," said the civil guard on duty at the prison gate, when the detective presented his card. "Quite right, sir. The governor is expecting you. Thompson, show this gentleman to the governor's office."

An assistant warder stepped forward, and respectfully saluted.

"This way, sir," he said.

He conducted the detective to the governor's office, knocked at the door, and opened it.

"Mr. Nelson Lee," he announced.

The detective stepped into the office with an anxious look on his face; but no sooner had he crossed the threshold than the anxious look vanished as if by magic, whilst at the same time a cry of mingled amazement and delight burst from his lips.

The governor was not alone in the office; another man was seated by his side. And the other man was Mac, looking somewhat pale, but otherwise apparently in perfect health.

"You old fraud!" cried Nelson Lee, seizing Mac's hand and wringing it with a vigour that made the Scotsman wince. "And I've come all the way from London believing you were on the point of death!"

"You can't be more surprised than we are," said the governor. "As I told you in my letter, our doctor feared that Mr. Mackenzie's skull had been fractured; but he was evidently mistaken, for last night, quite suddenly, Mr. Mackenzie recovered consciousness. And now, after a good night's rest, he asserts that he never felt better in his life!"

attacked Mr. Mackenzie and stunned him, and Cundle didn't deny it."

"Didn't deny it?" said Nelson Lee, in a puzzled voice. "That's strange."

"I was as bewildered as you at first," said Mac, "when they told me Cundle had admitted that it was he who had attacked me. But now I think I can guess what happened. Croft was a member of the league. When he found that Cundle was also a member, and was willing to turn traitor, he stunned me to prevent me hearing what Cundle had to say. Then probably he persuaded Cundle to take the blame



Herman did not reply. With a snarl, he sprang towards the bed, and thrust the muzzle of his revolver into Donald's face.

"And I never did," declared Mac, with a laugh.

At Nelson Lee's invitation, the Scottish detective then described the events which had followed his arrival at Dartmoor. He related how he had obtained the governor's permission to interview Cundle, how Cundle had ultimately promised to tell him all he knew about the league, and how, before Cundle could fulfil his promise, a warder named Croft had leaped on Mac and stunned him with his truncheon.

"Of course, I knew nothing of this when I wrote you," said the governor, breaking in. "When the affair was first reported to me, Croft said that it was Cundle who had

by promising to help him to escape, or something of that kind."

"You have questioned Croft, I suppose?" said Nelson Lee, turning to the governor.

"I haven't had a chance to question him," said the governor. "He went off duty at six o'clock on Saturday night, and since then nothing has been seen or heard of him."

"Then I don't think there can be any doubt that your theory is correct," said Nelson Lee to Mac. "Croft knew that you would give the show away as soon as you recovered consciousness, so he took time by the forelock and disappeared. Have you interviewed Cundle again?"

"No," said Mac. "Remember, I only recovered consciousness last night, and this is the first day I have been out of bed since Saturday. I should have interviewed him first thing this morning; but the governor told me you were coming, so I decided to wait until you arrived, so that we might interview him together."

"Then may we interview him now?" asked Nelson Lee, turning to the governor.

"Certainly," replied the latter.

"Where is he?"

"Taking exercise in the yard set apart for those convicts who are confined in the punishment cells."

With these words the governor led the way out of the office, with Nelson Lee and Mac at his heels. After tramping through innumerable corridors, they at last reached a fog-enshrouded yard, surrounded by high walls, in which about a dozen convicts were solemnly walking round and round in single file, under the supervision of a couple of warders.

"That's Cundle!" said the governor, indicating the third man in the procession—a burly, coarse-featured fellow. "Halt!" he called out sharply.

The convicts obediently halted. Even as they did so a curious humming sound was heard, and the next instant the dark form of an airship floated down through the fog and came to rest about thirty feet above the convicts' heads.

To say that those in the prison yard were astounded by this unexpected apparition, is to put it mildly.

Even Nelson Lee, usually the most self-possessed of men, was so completely taken aback as to be deprived for the time being of the power of speech or action.

In the meantime, the two men who were on board the airship—both of whom were disguised and masked—had received almost as great a surprise as that which they had created, for as the airship floated down into the yard, and their eyes fell on the governor and his two companions, they recognised Nelson Lee and Mac.

"Good heavens, Nelson Lee and Mackenzie are here!" gasped Fairfax—for it was he and Paul Herman who had flown to Dartmoor in order to rescue Cundle. "D'you see them—on the other side of the yard, with the governor?"

But Herman had already seen them, and his hand had dived into one of the side-pockets of his jacket, from which he swiftly drew out a cardboard box, lined with cotton-wool, and containing a small explosive bomb.

"Quick, there's not a second to be lost!" he said, as he hastily drew the bomb out of the box. "I'll look after Lee and Mackenzie, while you attend to Cundle, and if they attempt to interfere with us I'll blow them to smithereens! There's Cundle, the third man on the left. Hail him, and drop the ladder overboard."

He had scarcely finished speaking and

Fairfax flung the end of the rope ladder over the airship's side.

"Cundle," he shouted, beckoning to the convict, "we're friends! The league has sent us to rescue you. Quick, swarm up this ladder!"

For one brief second, but only for a second, Cundle was too dazed by his good fortune to obey; then, as the glorious truth burst into his bewildered brain that these men had come to take him away, he let out an exultant yell and darted to the foot of the dangling ladder.

By that time Nelson Lee had regained his wits, and as Cundle grasped the ladder with both hands and began to swarm up, the detective whipped out his revolver.

But Herman was narrowly watching him, and the instant the detective's revolver flashed out of his pocket Herman sprang to the airship's side and raised his hand.

"Down on your faces!" roared Nelson Lee, who espied the bomb in Herman's hand and divined the scoundrel's intention.

Mac and the governor instantly flung themselves flat on the ground, an example which was immediately followed by the two warders and all the convicts, except Cundle. But Nelson Lee pluckily stood his ground, and almost at the same instant as the bomb left Herman's hand the detective pressed the trigger of his revolver.

It would have been a comparatively easy matter for him to have shot Paul Herman through the heart, but if he had done so, Herman's death would have been quickly followed by the death of Nelson Lee, and probably also by the death of Mac and the governor, when the bomb struck the ground and exploded.

Instead of aiming at Herman, therefore, the detective aimed at the bomb. But his bullet missed it by the merest fraction of an inch, struck one of the steel masts of the airship, and glanced off into space.

What happened next happened so swiftly that it was all over before the governor and Mac had time to realise that they were witnessing one of the most gallant acts and one of the most superb instances of presence of mind that history has ever recorded.

For as soon as Nelson Lee saw that his bullet had missed its mark he instantly dropped his revolver, for there was no time for a second shot, threw himself forward, flung out his hands, caught the bomb a bare half-inch from the ground and scooped it up in his hollowed palms. Then, as many a cricketer has done after making a similar catch, he pitched forwards on his face and rolled over and over on the ground, but never lost his hold of the little glass ball and never let it touch the ground!

His dexterity and coolness undoubtedly saved his life and probably also the lives of his two companions; but by the time he had scrambled to his feet Cundle had swarmed to the top of the ladder and was clambering aboard the airship.

OUR DETECTIVE STORY SECTION

And even as Nelson Lee snatched up the revolver again, Fairfax and Cundle threw themselves flat on the airship's deck, Herman sprang to one of the levers, pushed it forward, and the airship began to rise.

It should here be explained, in justice to the governor and Mac, that neither of them was armed, while the two warders carried only short, wooden truncheons. Everything, therefore, depended on Nelson Lee, and as soon as he had recovered his revolver he flung up his hand and fired at Paul Herman.

Quick as thought, Herman threw himself down on the deck, and the bullet struck the lever which he had just pushed forward. Glancing off the polished steel, it crashed into a neighbouring switchboard, and severed one of the wires. There was a slight report, followed by a shower of electric sparks, and the next instant, to the consternation of Herman and his companions, the airship began to descend.

"Hurrah! I've winged her! She's coming down!" yelled Nelson Lee in triumph.

Alas, his triumph was premature! Seething with excitement, yet outwardly as calm as ever, Herman swiftly crawled towards the lever on his hands and knees and pushed it as far forward as it would go. And no sooner had he done so than the airship soared upwards through the fog with the swiftness of an ascending rocket, and vanished from the detective's view.

"By Jove, I thought we were done for then!" gasped Fairfax, as he staggered to his feet. "What happened?"

"I don't quite know," said Herman, as he also rose to his feet and examined the damaged switchboard. "The bullet appears to have smashed one of these wires, but why the vessel went down I can't imagine. However, she's all right now apparently."

"Are you going to keep her at this height?" asked Fairfax, when Herman had consulted the compass and had started the airship off in an easterly direction. "It's jolly cold up here. Can't you bring her down a bit?"

"Just what I'm going to do," said Herman.

He pulled the lever back and in the twinkling of an eye the airship shot down with the swiftness of a falling star. With a gasp of alarm he hurriedly pushed the lever forward again, and again the vessel bounded upwards.

"I don't like the look of this," he said anxiously. "That cursed bullet has evidently damaged the electric apparatus which controls the suspensory screws. As you see, she goes up when I push this lever forward and comes down when I pull the lever back, but I can no longer regulate the movements with the same nicety as before."

"But I hope you'll be able to bring her down all right when we reach Rycroft Hall," said Fairfax, in a nervous voice.

Herman shrugged his shoulders and lit a cigarette.

"Time will show," he said. "In the mean-

time, I'll let well alone. She's travelling all right now, and I don't either raise or lower her till we reach the hall."

All this time Cundle was squatting on the deck, gazing round him with a bewildered stare, and wondering whether it was really true that he had been rescued in this sensational fashion or whether it was all a fantastic dream from which he would presently awake and find himself on his plank bed in the punishment cell.

His doubts, however, were speedily banished when Herman presently turned to him and explained that he was Number One, and that his companion was Willoughby Fairfax. Cundle, of course, had met both of them many times before his conviction, although he had failed to recognise them in their present disguise; and after he had given suitable expression to his gratitude for what they had done for him, he bombarded them with a never-ending volley of eager and excited questions.

How had they come by the airship? Who had built her? How long had they had her? When had they decided to rescue him? How did they know that he would be in that particular yard at that particular hour? Had they seen Warder Croft? Did they know about Mac? Where had they come from? Where were they going now?

By the time Herman had answered all these questions, and Cundle had told his story, the airship was approaching Rycroft Hall. The fog was still as dense as ever, and although it was only about two o'clock it was almost as dark as night.

In the grounds of the hall, a shed had been built for the accommodation of the airship. The walls of this shed were of wood, but the roof was merely an enormous sheet of tarpaulin, which was removed whenever the airship descended into the shed or ascended out of it.

Whilst the airship was approaching the hall four men were standing at the four outside corners of this shed, each man with an electric torch in his hand. They were four of Fairfax's servants, and all of them, of course, were members of the league.

"They ought to be here before very long," muttered one of the men to himself, as he glanced at his watch. "It's nearly two o'clock, and Number One said—Here they are!"

The hooting of an owl—or, rather, a human voice that simulated the hooting of an owl—floated down through the fog. Instantly the four men pressed the buttons of their electric torches, and held them high above their heads.

The result of this manoeuvre was that those on board the airship, which was then sailing over the grounds of the hall, suddenly perceived four twinkling points of light spring into view which told them the exact position of the shed.

"Now comes the tug of war," said Herman, as he brought the vessel to a standstill immediately over the four points of

light. "Will she settle down slowly, or will she go down with a rush, like she did the last time I tried to lower her?"

He laid his hand on the lever which controlled the suspensory screws. With his heart in his mouth, he gently pulled the lever back a little way. To his intense relief, and the relief of Fairfax and Cundle, the airship slowly settled down. Suddenly, however, an ominous whirr was heard, the screws ceased to revolve, and the airship dropped at a furious pace, and Herman had barely time to fling the lever forward in time to prevent the vessel crashing down on the floor of the shed with a violence that would have wrecked her and destroyed her occupants.

The moment he flung the lever forward, the screws whizzed round, and the airship shot up with dizzying speed. Again he cautiously pulled the lever back, and again she descended, slowly at first, and then with a rush.

A dozen times or more this performance was repeated, and then, by dint of skilful manœuvring, Herman contrived to bring the airship to a standstill about twenty feet from the floor of the shed.

"I daren't risk trying to bring her any lower," he said to his two terrified companions. "We'll descend by the rope-ladder, and then we'll see if we can drag her down by main force."

The ladder was accordingly lowered, and a moment later the three men stood on terra firma, all of them profoundly glad that they had reached their destination uninjured and alive. Ropes were then affixed to the bows and stern of the airship, and when with the help of the rest of the servants, she had been forcibly pulled down until her keel rested on the ground, Herman clambered aboard, pulled the lever back, and stopped the revolution of the suspensory screws.

"That's the last time we'll ever be able to use the airship," said Fairfax, with a regretful sigh, as he and Herman and Cundle entered the house.

"How do you make that out?" asked Herman.

"It would be madness to use her when we can't regulate her ascent and descent," said Fairfax.

"True," said Herman. "And I should never dream of doing so."

"Well, that's what I meant when I said we should never be able to use her again," said Fairfax. "She's worse than useless now; she's positively dangerous."

Herman laughed and selected a cigarette from his case.

"We'll have her at work again in less than a week," he said, as he lit the cigarette and blew out clouds of smoke. "We have lots of skilled engineers amongst our members, and they will be able to repair the damage without any difficulty."

"I'm not so sure about that," said Fairfax, shaking his head doubtfully.

After events were to prove that Fairfax was right. Herman, however, pooh-pooled his confederate's forebodings, and after reiterating his confident opinion that the airship would soon be ready for work again, he announced his intention of returning to London at once by motor-car.

A few hours later, Paul Herman was back at his mansion in Curzon Street; Fairfax was back at the Centurion Club; while Cundle, his convict garb exchanged for a cast-off suit of tweeds, was enjoying the unwonted luxury of a pipe and a quart of beer at Rycroft Hall.

ACQUITTED!

ON the morning of Monday, the twentieth, Mac and O'Brien, leaving Nelson Lee to keep watch on Fairfax in London, travelled down to Guildford in order to be present at the trial of Donald Stuart.

The court was crowded when the judge took his seat on the bench, amongst those present being the Marquis of Hummersca—the owner of the stolen jewels—Paul Herman—in his character of "Squire Mandeville"—and several of the other guests who had been at Moscar Grange on the night of the robbery.

There is no need to describe the trial, which lasted nearly half an hour. When the case was called on, the prosecuting counsel rose and explained that since the police-court proceedings certain facts had come to light which rendered it unnecessary for him to do more than ask that the prisoner should be discharged.

Having briefly indicated the nature of these facts, he put O'Brien in the witness-box; and after the Irish detective had told the story of his adventures at Bernstein's shop and had produced the two cipher letters, and after one of the four constables had confirmed his evidence, the prosecuting barrister announced that he now wished to withdraw the charge against the accused.

The judge, however, pointed out that the charge, having been placed on record, could not be withdrawn, and that the jury must return a formal verdict of "Not guilty." This the jury unhesitatingly did, and Donald Stuart stepped out of the dock a free man, "without," as the judge remarked amid cheers, "a stain on his character."

Warrants were out for the arrest of Sir Edgar Fawcett and Samuel Bernstein; but that pair of scoundrels had completely disappeared, leaving no trace behind them.

Mac was the first to congratulate Donald Stuart on his triumphant vindication of his innocence. O'Brien was the second, and the third was Squire Mandeville, alias Paul Herman, who came up to Donald and the two detectives as they left the court-house, and shook the young Scotsman by the hand.

"I trust you don't bear me any ill-will

for the apparently hostile evidence which I gave against you at the magisterial inquiry," said Herman, when he had congratulated Donald on the result of the trial.

"Not at all," said Donald frankly. "You couldn't do otherwise than you did. You only described what you actually saw, and I don't wonder that you thought me guilty."

"I'm ashamed to confess that I did think you guilty at the time," said Herman. "It was very foolish of me, but, as you say, it was hardly to be wondered at, considering the circumstances. What an unmitigated scoundrel Sir Edgar Fawcett must be, and how cleverly he and that mysterious Number One must have laid their plans, to make it appear so conclusively that the jewel-case had been stolen by you. I wonder why they selected you as their victim?"

"To get him arrested," said Mac, "and keep him out of the way whilst they stole his airship."

Herman glanced at Mac, and then at Donald, as if to say, "Who is this?"

"This is my cousin, Colin Mackenzie," said Donald.

"I am proud and delighted to make your acquaintance," said Herman, grasping Mac's hand. "You are the famous detective, are you not, who is helping Mr. Nelson Lee and Mr. O'Brien here to unmask that villainous League of the Iron Hand? I have read the newspaper accounts of your exploits, and have often wished to meet you. You must come and see me some day. I live at Hartop Manor, which isn't very far from here. Are you staying in London?"

"I've been staying with Mr. Nelson Lee up to now," said Mac, "but I'm going to spend the next few days with Donald, at his house at Wimbledon."

"You are going back to Wimbledon, then, are you?" said Herman, turning to Donald.

"Of course," said Donald. "Where else could I go?"

"Well, if I were in your place," said Herman, "I should want to go for a long holiday after the terrible strain you have undergone. Well, good-bye, Mr. Stuart. Good-bye, Mr. Mackenzie. Good-bye, Mr. O'Brien; and may the best of luck attend your efforts to unmask the League of the Iron Hand."

He shook hands cordially, and made his way to the railway-station. An hour or so later he arrived at Waterloo and drove by Taxi from there to the Centurion Club.

Nelson Lee, watching the portals from the other side of the street, saw "Squire Mandeville" alight and enter the club. Lee, of course, did not know Mandeville; had no suspicion that Mandeville was Paul Herman; while still less did he suspect that he was "Number One" of the League of the Iron Hand.

"Come up to my room in five minutes," said Herman in a low voice as he strolled past Fairfax in the smoking-room.

Fairfax waited five minutes, then made his way upstairs to Herman's private sitting-room.

"Stuart has been acquitted," announced Herman as the other entered and locked the door after him.

"How was that?" asked Fairfax, in astonishment.

Herman briefly told of O'Brien's discoveries at Bernstein's.

"The police kept the secret very well," he concluded. "Until to-day the public were ignorant of the whole affair. I knew of it, however, some days ago, and knew that Stuart was bound to be acquitted."

"And where is Bernstein now?" asked Fairfax.

"At Walworth Road."

"And Fawcett?"

"Safe on the continent."

"And Cundle?"

"Oh, he's lying low at Rycroft!"

"And what about the airship? Has she been repaired?"

Herman shook his head.

"No," he said, "she hasn't. You were quite right when you said you feared it wouldn't be an easy job. I've sent six of our most expert electrical engineers to Rycroft in the last ten days, but no one of them has been able to discover what is wrong. However, I know now of a man who will put her to rights in a couple of days—perhaps less."

"I'm jolly glad to hear that. Who is the man?"

"Donald Stuart!"

Fairfax stared at Herman in amazement.

"What on earth do you mean?" he gasped.

"I mean," said Herman coolly, "that I'm going to kidnap Stuart, take him to Rycroft Hall, and make him repair the airship!"

"Easy to talk!" said Fairfax, with a shrug. "But how are you going to manage it?"

"Quite simply," was the reply. "Stuart is going back to his Wimbledon house to-day, and Mackenzie is going with him. To-night, therefore, Stuart will be in the house with only Mackenzie and that deaf old caretaker as his companions."

"And to-night," concluded Herman, as he rose to his feet, "Cundle and I will pay a visit to Wimbledon in my car, and when we return to Rycroft Hall we shall have Donald Stuart with us!"

DONALD IS KIDNAPPED!

AT about an hour after midnight, a motor-car glided silently along the neglected drive leading up to Donald Stuart's house at Wimbledon, and pulled up just in front of the dining-room window.

In the car were two men—Paul Herman and Cundle.

Having alighted, each produced a black crape mask from his pocket and affixed it over the upper half of his face. Each drew

a pair of rubber-soled goloshes over his feet. Each slipped his hand into the outside pocket of his coat, and assured himself that his revolver was ready for instant use. Then, whilst Herman rummaged in the back of the car, and fished out a gag, a pair of handcuffs, and a coil of rope, Cundle stole up to the outside of the window, and examined the fastenings by the light of a small electric torch.

"It's a soft job, guv'nor!" he chuckled, when Herman came over to him. "We'll be inside in a brace o' shakes!"

Drawing a diamond glass-cutter from his pocket, he described a circle with it on the outside of one of the panes at the meeting of the sashes. Replacing the cutter in his pocket, he produced a lump of putty and gently pressed it on the centre of the ring which he had drawn. Grasping the lump of putty between his forefinger and thumb, he pulled it towards him, thus removing a circular piece of the pane, and then thrust his other hand through the hole.

Thirty seconds later the catch had been pressed back, the lower sash raised, and the two men were inside the dark and silent house.

"Wait here while I reconnoitre," whispered Herman.

He glided across the room, opened the door cautiously, and peered into the hall. Then he beckoned to Cundle, and handed him the gag, the handcuffs, and the rope.

"The coast is clear," he said. "They're in bed and fast asleep, I expect. Remember, everything depends on our overpowering Stuart before he has time to raise an alarm. If he doesn't wake when I open the door, you must cram that gag into his mouth, and slip the handcuffs over his wrists, before he knows what's happening. On the other hand, if the opening of the door awakes him, I'll keep him quiet with my revolver while you gag and bind him. Come along!"

He extinguished his electric lamp, and drew out his revolver. Then he led the way across the hall and up the first flight of stairs, closely followed by the ex-convict.

Reaching the door of Donald's bedroom, Herman paused and listened at the keyhole. Hearing no sound from within, he switched on his pocket-lamp, and gently turned the handle.

It turned without the slightest sound; but the instant he began to push the door open, a startled exclamation fell upon his ears, telling that his intended victim was awake after all!

As a matter of fact, Donald Stuart, although he had retired to rest hours before, had found himself unable to sleep. He had lain tossing restlessly from side to side, thinking of what he had recently endured through the machinations of the League of the Iron Hand.

"Hallo! Who's there?" he exclaimed, when the door swung open and a shaft of light flashed into the room.

Herman did not reply. With a snarl, he

sprang towards the bed, and thrust the muzzle of his revolver into Donald's face.

"Hands up, or I fire!" he hissed.

Taken utterly by surprise, Donald raised his hands. At the same instant, Cundle seized his wrists, brought them together, and snapped the steel bracelets around them. Then as Donald, regaining his presence of mind, opened his mouth to shout for help, Cundle clutched him by the throat with one hand, and thrust the gag between his teeth with the other.

After that the rest was easy, and in little more time than it takes to tell Donald's arms were pinioned to his sides with the rope, and his legs lashed together from the ankles to the knees.

"Now listen to me, Mr. Stuart," said Herman, in a low, tense voice. "By this time you have doubtless realised that you are completely in our power, and that resistance is useless. I beg you to believe, however, that we have not the slightest desire to harm you in any way whatever—that is, of course, if you act sensibly. We have a motor-car outside, in which we propose to convey you to a certain place for a purpose which I will explain when we get there. In the meantime, if I untie your legs, will you give me your word of honour that you will walk quietly down to the car, and will make no attempt to escape or to raise an alarm?"

Donald, who could not speak, of course, by reason of the gag, vigorously shook his head.

"You won't?" said Herman, raising his eyebrows. "That's very foolish of you, Mr. Stuart. You admit, I suppose, that you are entirely at our mercy, and that you have nothing to gain by being obstinate?"

Donald made no sign.

"Come now, will you accept my offer?" said Herman.

Donald shook his head again.

Herman shrugged his shoulders and turned to Cundle.

"Then we shall have to carry him down to the car, that's all!" he said. "Help me to wrap him in one of these blankets."

When Donald had been enwrapped in the blanket, Herman grasped him by the shoulders, and Cundle by the legs, and in this fashion they carried him out of the room and down the stairs.

It was not an easy task, for Donald was no featherweight, and just before they reached the bottom of the stairs Cundle, who was walking backwards, slipped.

In order to save himself from falling, the ex-convict loosed his hold on Donald's legs and made a wild grab at the bannister. The result was catastrophe. For the moment Cundle released his hold on Donald's legs, the weight of the young Scotsman's body dragged Herman forwards and downwards, and the next instant all three were rolling down the few remaining stairs with a clatter that reverberated through the house.

Another Powerful Instalment Next Week.



The Case of the Exmoor Murder!

The Adventures of GORDON FOX, DETECTIVE.

CHAPTER I.

A FEW moments before, Gordon Fox had heard a vague sound, like a stifled shriek, that seemed to come from nowhere in particular; and now, as he pedalled down the crest of a knoll, a fearful cry rang distinctly on his ears—thrice repeated.

"Murder! Murder! Murder-r-r!"

A faint tumult was swelling, and the detective was convinced that a crime had been committed, though he had supposed that he was miles from any habitation. For fifty yards he pedalled noiselessly on, and then, warned by a crashing noise, he hastily dismounted. He put his machine flat on the ground—the lamp had long since burnt out—and crouched beside it. The next instant the dark shape of a man crossed the road, from left to right, a short distance ahead, and plunged into the thickets. He tore on, was visible for an instant on the top of a hillock, and then vanished in the direction of a ragged, mountainous heap of rocks that towered far off against the murky sky.

Gordon Fox had no chance to apprehend the fugitive, if such he was. Having mounted his bicycle he sped swiftly on, and soon came to an old Devon farmhouse standing by the edge of the lonely Exmoor Road. He saw a light in front of him, shining from a window, but he did not go any farther. He stepped into the open door of the farmhouse, and found himself in a low-ceilinged, stone-paved kitchen—in the presence of a tragic and thrilling scene. A grey-bearded man was stretched by the fireplace, and by him knelt a weeping girl and a youth, whose face was distorted with rage and grief. Around them were half-a-dozen men, one a police-constable and another an inspector. All turned towards the stranger as he entered.

"I am on a cycling tour," said the detective, "and I have lost my way on the moors. Is this a case of murder?"

"That's what it is, sir," replied the constable.

"Well, perhaps I can assist you. My name is Fox—Gordon Fox."

"Not the London detective of that name?" exclaimed the inspector.

"Yes, I am."

"Then I'm proud to meet you, sir. I am Inspector Luke Tredennis, of Lynton, and it so happens that Constable Trewth and I are on the spot; but we'll be glad of your help, Mr. Fox, though there isn't any mystery about the case."

He went on to explain the situation. The murdered farmer, Isaac Polwin, had been in the habit of sitting up later than his son and daughter, who had retired between eight and nine o'clock. Roused from sleep by the sounds of a struggle, the girl, Ruth, had crept downstairs, to find her father lying on the floor in a pool of blood, and to see the murderer fleeing from the house with a gun on his shoulder, and in one hand a canvas-bag of gold, which the farmer had received that day for the sale of some sheep. The girl had fallen in a swoon, with a shriek that woke her brother Hugh, and he had given the alarm that brought the others to the scene—two farm-hands, Inspector Tredennis, and the constable, and the landlord and his son, Eben, from the neighbouring inn, the Monmouth Arms. The inspector and his companion had driven over that evening, with the intention of lying in wait for some sheep-stealers who had lately been committing depredations. The murderer had been recognised, and that part Ruth Polwin told herself, in a sobbing voice.

"It was Joel Pengelly, our shepherd," she declared. "He was always a sullen and morose man, and a couple of days ago he had a bitter quarrel with father. But he must have killed him for the gold, which he knew to be in the house, locked in the kitchen closet."

"I heard no shot," said the detective, as he stepped towards the body.

"No, he did the deed with the butt of the gun," put in Hugh Polwin. "If I get hold of him," he added, "I'll blow his brains out!"

"He is sure to be caught, I think," declared Gordon Fox. "I saw the murderer myself. He crossed the road ahead of me, and ran over the moor towards a great pile of rocks."

"That be Carn Tor," said one of the farm-hands. "Over the coast."

"It's queer that he should strike in that direction," said Inspector Tredennis.

"Not at all," replied the detective. "For he is evidently a shrewd and cunning fellow. Knowing that the country will be widely searched for him, he means to hide close by until the hue and cry has subsided and he has a chance of escape."

"Then we'll find him at Carn Tor, sir," said Constable Trewth. "It is a rocky place, full of caverns."

"And he has no doubt laid in a supply of food," said Joshua Haggard, the landlord of the Monmouth Arms.

"He has," put in Owen Polwin. "He has cleared out the larder."

"We had better start at once and make sure of him," urged the inspector, "or he may give us the slip by morning."

"Are there any other houses near by?" asked Gordon Fox.

"None, sir," was the reply. "Not within miles."

"Any chance of getting a dog that is good at tracking?"

"Not nearer than Minehead," said the inspector.

"Then we'll make the best of it. It will certainly be wise to surround this Carn Tor without delay."

Gordon Fox took matters in hand, and acted promptly. Two traps being available, one of the farm-labourers was sent off to Lynton and the other to Minehead, to give information of the murder, and to ask the local authorities to assign men to watch all the roads leading away from Exmoor. Meanwhile, firearms had been collected, and when the landlord's wife had come over from the inn, to keep the distracted girl company, the search-party set forth. They numbered six—the detective, Trewth and Tredennis, Haggard and his son, and Hugh Polwin—and all were provided with waterproof coats or capes; for a storm had been threatening all day, and it promised to burst very soon.

It was now between ten and eleven o'clock. The little party struck seaward across the wild moorland, carrying unlighted lanterns in case of necessity, and an hour of hard and difficult tramping brought them close to Carn Tor, which had been constantly in view, rising black against the sky-line. It was a tall and ragged mass of boulders, and the slope that led up to them on all sides was covered with bushes and loose stones. The circumference was not very large, however, and Gordon Fox saw that the place could be easily guarded by six persons.

"We had better not go any farther," he whispered. "If our man is here he must not discover us. The first thing is to—"

As he spoke there was a flash and a report from up among the rocks, and a bullet sang within an inch of his head. Hugh Polwin instantly fired at the spot, and a peal of mocking laughter answered him.

"We've got you, Pengelly!" cried the inspector. "You'll have to surrender, for you can't escape!"

"I won't be taken alive!" shouted the enraged and desperate murderer. "Mind you that! Come on, if you like, and I'll kill you one by one."

"Shall we rush him?" said the detective.

"It would be madness, sir," declared Haggard. "He'll do what he says. He can easily dodge from cave to cave, and keep reloading."

It was a dark night, and the little party did not have to retreat far to be invisible.

"He has the best of us," grumbled Inspector Tredennis. "What's to be done?"

"We'll have to wait till morning," replied Gordon Fox. "And we'll take good care that the man don't give us the slip in the meanwhile. He is not likely to make a dash, though he has prepared for a siege. Inspector, you and Haggard post yourselves here, on the south side. Hugh Polwin and Constable Trewth will slip round to the north of the Tor. I will mount guard on the east side, and young Haggard on the west. And we must all keep our eyes and ears open, remember that."

The detective's instructions were at once obeyed, and a few moments later, when the six were at their posts, the threatening storm broke in wild fury.

CHAPTER II.

THE VILLAGE BY CARN TOR—A STARTLING DISCOVERY—THE TRAGEDY AT THE EMPTY HOUSE.

IT was an April storm, and not for a long time had the Devonshire men known a worse one of its kind. There was no lightning or thunder, but the rain fell in sheets, and the wind rose to a fearful gale. In spite of his cycling-cape Gordon Fox was soon drenched to the skin. Quite alone, he crouched in the lee of the rock, peering over it occasionally at the dripping mass of Carn Tor, though the darkness was so intense that Joel Pengelly might have crept by him unseen.

There he sat wretchedly for three hours and more, exposed to the raging elements; and then, of a sudden, the faint report of a gunshot was borne to his ears. He rose to his feet and looked seaward, gazed in surprise at a light that appeared to be shining from a window. He summoned his companions by a whistle, and four of them promptly joined them.

"Did you hear the shot?" he asked. "Do

you see that light yonder? What does it mean?"

"There is an empty house down there—an old inn that was used in the smuggling days," replied Inspector Tredennis. "The light must be there. But where is the constable?" he added.

The missing man had been posted some ten yards from Hugh Polwin, but the latter had not seen him. He did not answer when his name was called, and a brief search was equally fruitless.

"I have it!" the inspector cried excitedly. "Trewth slipped off to the house for shelter, and Pengelly must have dodged us and gone there also, to seek a fresh hiding-place, for the water would have been streaming through the crannies of the Tor. The two have met, and one has shot the other!"

"My word, I believe you are right!" declared Gordon Fox. "Come!" he added. "Keep in single file, so as not to spoil any tracks that we may cross."

They soon arrived at the inn, and entered by the open door.

A tragedy had evidently taken place. Constable Trewth's lantern was alight on a table near the window, one pane of which had been shattered by a bullet. A three-legged chair had been broken, and there were other signs of a struggle. In the middle of the floor was a jagged opening, where the rotten planks had given way to heavy force, and near-by lay the constable's helmet and a greasy tweed cap, that was at once identified by young Polwin as the property of Joel Pengelly.

"Keep away from that hole," urged Inspector Tredennis. "It runs down through the cliff, and the smugglers used to throw the excise men into it! The sea runs in by a cleft, and it is high tide now. Don't you hear the waves roaring far below? Pengelly and poor Trewth are down there, being mangled on the rocks, and their bodies may never be recovered. Pengelly got here first, and when Trewth came and lit his lantern, the scoundrel fired at him and missed. Then the two grappled, fell, and broke through the floor. It is all as plain as daylight, Mr. Fox."

That such had happened all believed, except the detective, whose keen eyes had discovered a remarkable thing about the damp foot-prints on the dusty floor. He knew that they had been made by the same person!

Taking the lantern—another one had been lighted—Gordon Fox led the way out of house. The footsteps of the party of five ran straight away from the door, and to right and left, diverging at an angle, were the separate prints of the two missing men. Both had entered the door, and neither had afterwards left the house. Of that the detective and his companion satisfied themselves by making a circuit of the building.

"This is Trewth's trail, for I know his broad-soled boots," declared the inspector. "and the other, with the big hobnails, is Pengelly's. They met their death together."

The detective was silent. He followed the two trails, one by one, to the verge of the soft earth, where he found that they ended among the rocks within twenty yards of each other, and that both pointed heels first towards Carn Tor.

"Come, we will go back," he said.

They returned to the inn, where, after looking about for a time, Gordon Fox took a ball of stout cord from his pocket. He tied an end to the lantern, which he lowered into the black, draughty hole, peering cautiously over the brink.

"Ah, what is that?" he exclaimed, when the light was a dozen feet below.

"Look, Tredennis! Do you see something sticking to a spur of rock?"

"It is one of the constable's boots," declared the inspector.

"But the sole is missing!"

"Yes, torn off! The poor fellow must have caught his foot in falling."

Gordon Fox shrugged his shoulders, and when he drew up the lantern he was smiling.

"There has been no tragedy—no struggle!" he said quietly. "Constable Trewth was not inside this house to-night. Joel Pengelly was here, but he went out alive. There are no bodies down there."

"Impossible!" cried Inspector Tredennis. "Both men entered the house—look at their tracks—and they did not leave it. I know you are a clever detective, Mr. Fox, but when it comes to telling us that—"

"I am right," broke in Gordon Fox, "and I will convince you of it before you are much older. But now for your instructions! I am going to creep close up to Carn Tor, and within a few minutes you will leave here and pass by the Tor, as if homeward bound, talking loudly about the death of Pengelly and the constable. Carry no lights. When you have gone on for a quarter of a mile, turn back, and hide yourselves within earshot of me, so that you will be ready when I need you. Wait patiently, and you won't be disappointed."

A moment later the detective was off, leaving his companions in a state of utter stupefaction.

CHAPTER III.

WHEN THE DAY DAWNED—THE FIGHT IN THE CAVERN—GORDON FOX EXPLAINS.

THE sobbing gale and the angry clouds departed on the wings of the night, and the dawn broke slowly on a clear sky. Cramped and stiff from his long vigil, squatted under a dense clump of bushes, Gordon Fox gladly watched the

grey light flash over wild moorland, and grassy cliffs, and raging sea.

He waited a brief time, and then, before the first glimmer of the sun had shown itself, he started to climb the eastern side of Carn Tor. Noiselessly, with the stealth of a cat, he drew himself up from boulder to boulder, grasping a revolver in one hand.

Having mounted for a dozen yards, he suddenly paused on a ledge. He was listening to a sound that he recognised—the sound of deep breathing. It came from a cavernous opening in front of him, and when he had crept inside and peered round a spur of rock, he saw what he had expected to find.

Within a couple of yards of him was stretched Joel Pengelly, a huge man with a matted beard, and a little further back lay Constable Trewth. The latter's eyes were closed. He was bound and gagged, and his helmet and boots were missing.

Gordon Fox warily advanced, bent over, and picked up the murderer's gun. With that Joel Pengelly awoke, and as quickly leaping to his feet with a yell and a curse, he threw himself upon the detective and tried to wrest the weapon from him. The gun was discharged, doing no harm, as the two men fought for possession of it. They grappled and fell, rolling to and fro in a desperate embrace.

"I'll fix you!" snarled Pengelly. "I won't be taken alive!"

"Help, help!" Gordon Fox cried hoarsely.

Help came, but not until he was getting the worst of the furious struggle for life. Then Inspector Tredennis and his companions swarmed into the cavern, and when they had overpowered and bound the raving murderer, they turned their attention to Constable Trewth. They cut him loose, and took the rag from his mouth, but he showed only faint signs of life.

"He is unconscious, that's all," declared the inspector. "There's an ugly lump on his skull, and perhaps a slight injury to the

brain, but, with proper treatment he'll pull through. This beats the world!" he added. "How did you get on to it, Mr. Fox? How did you figure it out?"

"It was very simple," replied Gordon Fox; and he stated what had given rise to his theory. "Pengelly slipped away, meaning to escape," he went on, "and he caught sight of the constable in the bushes. He stunned him with a single blow—Polwin did not hear anything, owing to the wind—and that suggested to him the cunning idea which he carried out. He was a powerful man, and when he had bound and gagged Trewth, and robbed him of boots, lantern, and helmet, he shouldered him and brought him up here to the cave. Then he crept down to the empty house and arranged his plans. He tramped about the room, broke the chair, smashed the rotten planks over the hole, and threw the cap and helmet on the floor. He fired the shot to draw us to the scene, and meanwhile he had cut the uppers from the constable's boots, flung them down the hole, and tied the soles to his own boots, in a reversed position.

"Then he left the house, making the deceptive foot-prints, the way here. I felt sure that he had returned to Carn Tor from the moment I discovered the clue to the mystery. Believing that his death would be accepted as a certainty, he hoped to lie safely concealed for a day or two, and then get away from the neighbourhood. Before leaving, no doubt, he would have murdered Trewth!"

The murderer was lodged in gaol before the close of the day, and by then Constable Trewth had recovered consciousness. Gordon Fox finished his cycling tour and went back to London; but later he returned to Devonshire to give evidence at the trial of Joel Pengelly who, in due course, was hanged. The bag of gold, it may be said, had been found on him at the time of his capture.

THE END.

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(Continued from page 14)

Willy nodded.

"I meant it to be!" he replied. "There's not quite enough blood, that's the only thing. I tapped Lemon and I tapped Owen minor. But your tap doesn't seem to be running! What's the matter with your silly nose? I'll give it another punch—"

"You—you fathead," gasped Chubby, dodging away. "All this silly fuss over Huggins! He's gone now—what's the good of fighting about him? He wasn't in the Third, anyhow!"

"That's got nothing to do with me!" said Willy. "Huggins is a brick—one of the best! I know! I've seen what he can do, and you can't spoof me! He didn't biff old Sluggs."

"Sluggs?"

"Oh, well, Snuggs!" said Willy. "What does it matter about a name? When it comes to that, he is a slug! I'll bet a penny to a pound that he made a bloomer. He only thought it was Huggins who hit him. But I'm not going to argue any more—I've settled with the matter."

Willy had proved quite conclusively that he was very strongly in favour of Alf Huggins. The other Third-formers had rather gloried in the fact that Alf had gone. And Willy had expressed his own opinion. He generally did this, assisted by his fist.

He stalked off, and came upon his brother on the Ancient House steps.

"Oh! I've been looking for you!" said Handforth frowning.

"Good?" said Willy. "What's the trouble?"

Handforth looked at his minor critically.

"I can see you've been fighting!" he remarked. "Good man! I hope you whacked him hollow?"

"Whacked him?" sneered Willy. "I'm not like you—I don't take on one! I've just slaughtered half the Third! If you go behind the shrubbery, you'll find all the dead bodies!"

Handforth grinned.

"It's all very well to have a scrap now and again, but there's no need to be so blessed wholesale!" he said, becoming severe. "And I'll bet the fight was over nothing!"

"It was about Huggins!"

"Oh, it was about Huggins?"

"Didn't I say so?" asked Willy. "What a chap you are for repeating things! You see, the young idiots started saying that Huggins was a cad. Then they said that Huggins deserved what he got. So I just pointed out the truth."

"With your fist?"

Willy stared.

"What's the good of pointing it out with anything else?" he asked. "My hat! Do you think those young fatheads would take any notice if I didn't slosh 'em at the same time? I told 'em plain out that Huggins is a good 'un, and that he didn't touch Snuggs at all."

Handforth thrust out a fist.

"Put it there!" he said warmly. "Then you are with Huggins?"

"Every time!" said Willy heartily.

Several Removites who were in the Triangle nearly fainted. Such a spectacle as this was unprecedented. To see Handforth major and Handforth minor scrapping was nothing—but to see them shaking hands was unbelievable.

"That's good!" said Handforth. "I'm jolly glad— You—you beastly little bounder!"

"What?" said Willy blandly.

"Jam!" roared Handforth, glaring at his fingers.

"Oh, that's nothing!" said Willy carelessly. "I've got one of Mrs. Hake's jam tarts in my pocket, and I touched it by mistake. Don't make a fuss over nothing. Blessed if you ain't always grumbling."

Handforth stared at his hand in a horrified kind of way.

"This is what comes of being pally with a sticky fag," he snorted. "By George! It's the last time I'll shake hands with you, my lad. I've got to go in and wash now."

"Well, you needed one, anyway," said Willy. "I was just thinking that it would be a pretty good idea to put some jam on your face, too. So long!"

Under the circumstances, Willy deemed it wiser to stroll away. He did so, fishing out the jam tart at the same time. He munched at it, quite careless of the fact that several pieces of fluff adhered to it.

Handforth took a deep breath.

"One of these days, that young ass will be missing," he said darkly.

He turned, and went into the Ancient House—and passed upstairs to indulge in a totally unexpected wash. Handforth didn't mind washing, but he objected to too much of a good thing.

In the meantime, Archie still sat in his study, wondering what on earth he could do. He was terribly worried. He hadn't seen Alf, and his main idea was to dash off as soon as possible. But how could he? How could he go to London? What about lessons?

It occurred to him that he might go to the Head, and ask for permission. But this didn't strike him as being very hopeful.

Only the previous evening he had approached the Head—with a request that he could see Alf at once. But the Head had curtly refused. So it was a dead certainty that Dr. Stafford would not sanction a visit to London.

And then Archie had another idea.

"Absolutely!" he murmured, starting up. He paced up and down quickly.

"I mean to say, it's the absolute goods! Of course, the idea of going to the rotter is rather ghastly, but this is the time when a chappie must put personal things aside. Yes, by gad! I'll do it!"

He moved to the door, which opened, and admitted Phipps.

"Ah! Good!" said Archie. "In fact, distinctly good! The very laddie! Somehow

or other, Phipps, you generally manage to float in just when the young master requires large chunks of assistance. This, Phipps, is where you shine."

"I trust so, sir!"

"In other words, I require your advice," said Archie. "I am just going upstairs, Phipps, and I mean to have a few words with the blister!"

"The blister, sir?"

"Absolutely—Mr. Snuggs!"

Phipps started.

"You're going to have a word with Mr. Snuggs?" he asked.

"That, as it were, is the scheme."

"Really, sir, I strongly advise you not to attempt any such thing," said Phipps earnestly. "In my opinion, it would be most unwise—most ill-considered."

Archie looked rather aghast.

"But, I mean to say!" he protested. "That's rather a blow, Phipps!" he observed. "Dash it all! I came to you for advice, and all you can do is to reel out a dashed silly thing like that!"

"I consider, sir, that it is the reverse of silly," replied Phipps. "To begin with, Mr. Snuggs is in bed, and I doubt if you would be admitted—"

"I'd bally well walk in!"

"Of course, sir, there is that possibility," said Phipps. "But it seems to me that no good would result from an interview with Mr. Snuggs. He is not the kind of man one can argue with."

Archie sat down.

"You see, I thought about trying the good old detective stuff," he remarked. "I mean to say, I was going to shove Snuggs through a bally cross-examination. Between you and me, I think he made a bloomer."

"In what way, sir?"

"Why, it wasn't Alf who sloshed him at all!" said Archie. "Don't you grasp the idea? It was probably some fearful cove who was hanging about—a tramp, or somebody like that."

"There is that possibility, undoubtedly, sir."

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "Then, you see, there was the darkness. Mr. Snuggs hated Alf in the most frightful way. He didn't see exactly who biffed him, and so he accused dear old Alf on the spot. It was a fearful mistake. And it struck me as being a ripe and fruity scheme to go to Mr. Snuggs and ask a few questions. Don't you think so? Or what?"

Phipps shook his head.

"I am afraid I must disagree, sir," he said firmly.

"You absolutely fail to approve?"

"I do, sir."

"Well, of course, that's foul," said Archie. "I even thought that you might be able to wangle the old interview?"

"I doubt it, sir," said the valet. "Now there is this possibility. I am permitted to enter Mr. Snuggs bedroom at will. As I have told you, I have been instructed to look after the gentleman."

"Precisely, Phipps—precisely!"

"And Mr. Snuggs has shown most decided inclinations to talk," continued Phipps. "There is just a possibility that I may get into conversation with him, and do the very things you require."

"You absolutely think so?"

"I do, sir."

"Then, I mean to say, that's priceless!" said Archie. "But what about the nurse?"

"There is no nurse, sir."

"In other words, you can bally well catch Snuggs alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good—absolutely good!" said Archie. "And I sincerely trust that you will meet with success, laddie. Do your best—question Mr. Snuggs like one o'clock. You grasp the trend?"

"Yes, sir."

And as Phipps went out, Archie had renewed hope. But neither of the pair had the faintest idea of how Fate was to help them.

CHAPTER IX.

A RAY OF HOPE.

PHIPPS entered Mr. Snuggs' bedroom. He did so quietly, and with all his usual imperturbability. Phipps was a very well-trained valet, and he knew his business perfectly. That was why Archie was so pleased with him as a servant.

Phipps did not have much hope of achieving any result.

He had promised Archie that he would try to question Mr. Snuggs. But it seemed to him that the thing was impracticable—to say nothing of being preposterous.

There was no question as to Huggins's guilt.

That was the way Phipps looked at it. He did not actually dislike Huggins—he disapproved of him. From the very first, Phipps had regarded Alf as a kind of intruder in Archie's study. And he was secretly pleased that Alf had gone, although exceedingly sorry that he had gone in such disgrace.

Although he considered Huggins guilty, Phipps had a great contempt for Mr. Snuggs. The blow on his head was nothing like as bad as Mr. Snuggs had made out.

But Phipps would do his utmost.

He was loyal to Archie, and he was determined to question Mr. Snuggs if such a thing was at all possible. And he had

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come up at once with that object in view. He passed into the room.

Mr. Snuggs was apparently asleep.

The Remove master lay in bed, with his head on the pillow, and it was obvious that his slumbers were not peaceful. He seemed to be murmuring in his sleep—and every now and again he would shift his position.

"Is there anything I can do, sir?" asked Phipps politely.

No reply.

Phipps went closer to the bed.

"A little water, sir, perhaps?" he asked, bending nearer.

But Mr. Snuggs was obviously asleep.

"Yes—yes!" he mumbled, in a peculiarly toneless voice. "Quite so, Fullwood. An accident—an accident! I know! Don't stare at me like that, boy. Go at once! Go!"

Mr. Snuggs moved more uneasily than ever, and Phipps looked at him in a startled way.

"Go!" came Mr. Snuggs's voice once more. "Bring Huggins here—it is our chance! I will accuse him—he will never be able to escape the toils. Bring Huggins! It is the one opportunity we will have."

Mr. Snuggs moved again, tossing as though in a nightmare.

And then, suddenly, he turned over, and half sat up.

He opened his eyes and looked round. Phipps was over by the window, attending to one or two little details.

"Phipps—Phipps!" muttered Mr. Snuggs. "Water!"

"Pardon, sir?" said Phipps, turning.

"Water, I said! Quickly!" said Mr. Snuggs. "I—I've had a most unpleasant sleep—most unpleasant."

"I'm sorry, sir," said Phipps. "I observed nothing to cause any alarm. I trust you are feeling better."

"No—no! My head is aching abominably," said Mr. Snuggs. "This is what comes of admitting young hooligans to the school. You hear, Phipps? Young hooligans! I am glad the boy has gone."

"Yes, sir," said Phipps.

He got the water for Mr. Snuggs, and managed to get out of the bedroom five minutes later. He went straight downstairs, and entered Archie's study. The latter was sitting down, looking very sad. But he brightened up as Phipps appeared.

"Well, laddie—well?" he asked. "Any news?"

"Well, I'm not quite sure," said Phipps. "In a way the matter may be important—but it is just possible that I am mistaken. Again, one is often inclined to speak misleading words during a nightmare."

Archie stared.

"I may be frightfully dense, old dear, but I'm bothered if I can catch the trend," he observed. "I mean to say, it seems so involved. What, as it were, are we dealing with nightmares for? What is the idea?"

The wheeze? Extend the lungs, Phipps, and explain."

"By a most remarkable chance, sir, Mr. Snuggs was suffering from a nightmare when I entered his bedroom ten minutes ago," replied Phipps.

"This is extraord.!" observed Archie. "I mean to say, how in the name of all that's wonderful did you know that Mr. Snuggs was nightmaring—That is, how did you know that he was indulging in one of the good old spasms?"

"He tossed in his sleep, sir—and talked in his sleep, sir."

"What!" said Archie. "Gadzooks! What!"

"He talked in his sleep, sir," repeated Phipps. "And by what I could understand he was dreaming about the events of last night. It appears to have been an accident. Master Archie. Moreover, Mr. Snuggs was a party to a plot."

"Great Scott! A plot?"

"Yes, sir. For Mr. Snuggs planned with Fullwood to bring Huggins to the wood-shed, so that he could be accused of the affair," said Phipps steadily. "I should like to add, sir, that this is mere surmise—we can only assume it from what I heard Mr. Snuggs saying in his sleep."

Archie looked at Phipps excitedly.

"But—but it's evidence," he declared. "I mean to say, chappies have been absolutely hanged through talking in their sleep. It strikes me, Phipps, that we're absolutely on the track."

"It would appear so, sir."

And Phipps told Archie everything about it in detail.

Archie listened, growing more and more excited. And when Phipps had done, his young master was flushing.

"Phipps," he declared, "this is absolutely it! I mean to say, there's no doubt about it! I'm dashed well going to the Head!"

"Really, sir—"

"I'm going to the Head!" said Archie firmly. "Absolutely! I'm going to tell the dear old lad all about it."

"I should strongly advise you not to, sir."

"Oh, but really—"

"It would be most unwise, sir."

"Unwise?" repeated Archie. "But it's dashed important!"

"I will agree that the matter is very important, Master Archie, but it would be mistaken policy to approach the Headmaster at this juncture," said Phipps. "Indeed, it would be quite useless. Dr. Stafford would take no action. He could not possibly take action."

"But why not?"

"Because this information is not evidence, sir."

"Not evidence?"

"No, sir."

"Oh, come!" said Archie. "I mean to say, come! The blighter absolutely gave the whole show away! I mean to say, he chatted

about the plot in the course of his nightmare. The foul villain! Just imagine it. He deliberately put the blame on poor old Alf."

"So it would seem, sir," said Phipps. "But I must urge you once again to remain calm. I should suggest that we do nothing for the present. Mr. Snuggs is guilty, the truth will certainly come out in the long run. Therefore, I advise inaction."

"I disagree," said Archie firmly. "It may be right to refrain from approaching the Head—absolutely. But inaction—never! I'm jolly well going to dash about hither and thither, and I'm going to do this and that! In other words, the young master is going to be frightfully busy!"

"In what manner, sir?"

"That," replied Archie, "is my biz. Sorry, old lad, but I've got a priceless wheeze, and I mean to shove it along like one o'clock!"

CHAPTER X.

THE FAILURE!

ALf walked with flagging steps along the Hoxton streets.

It was just after midday, and London was looking quite brilliant in the spring sunshine. But Alf hardly noticed these things. Ever since he had left the vicinity of St. Frank's, his thoughts had been busy.

And now, at last, he had arrived at Hoxton.

He had managed to patch himself up a bit.

He did not look so untidy as he had done after Fullwood and the other cads had finished with him. The rents in his clothing were not so obvious. He had had a wash, and he had managed to fasten his crumpled collar, and make his tie look fairly respectable.

As for his bruises and scratches, he didn't care much about these. Alf had other things to think about—other matters to worry him.

And now he came within sight of the Huggins' cottage.

This was occupied by the Hoxton bricklayer and his wife. Alf was rather pleased that this was midday, for old Huggins would probably be at home for dinner. He sometimes came home if he was working in the neighbourhood. Alf wanted to see him.

Of course, Mr. and Mrs. Huggins were not his parents.

The St. Frank's fellows thought they were, but the St. Frank's fellows were wrong.

Startlingly enough, Alf was really the hopeful son of Sir John Brent, the millionaire contractor. Sir John also happened to be the Chairman of the Board of Governors of St. Frank's College.

And this was the boy who had been kicked out!

This was the boy who had been hounded from school! The cads and snobs had treated him so badly because they believed him to be the son of a bricklayer. They

would never have persecuted him if they had known the actual truth.

Alf had come to St. Frank's on a kind of test.

It was his secret, and nobody else in the school knew. At his previous school, he had made a wager with several of the fellows that the St. Frank's Remove was largely composed of snobs. If he went in his own character, he would be treated well. But if he went as the son of a labouring man, he would be despised and scorned.

Alf maintained that personality counted for nothing. The fellows would judge him by his social standing—not according to his own actions. And so he had gone to the old school as the son of Mr. Huggins—his father being fully conversant with the truth.

Indeed, Sir John had approved, feeling that this would be a good test.

And this was the result.

Kicked out—sacked! Persecuted and hounded from St. Frank's! Not because he had done anything wrong, not because he was a young blackguard, but because he had committed the awful crime of being the son of a bricklayer.

All of Mr. Snuggs' petty maliciousness—all his vindictiveness—had been on account of Alf's pretended breeding.

It was some consolation, perhaps, to know that his contention had been right. But to leave the school in this way was a blow—a dreadful shock. And Alf was afraid to go home.

He couldn't do it—he couldn't tell Sir John of this. At least, he wanted to think—he wanted some advice first. So he had decided to come straight to Hoxton, and tell his troubles to the kindly old foreman bricklayer.

He reached the cottage, passed round the little path to the rear, and entered by means of the back door.

It opened straight into the kitchen.

There was a hearty smell of roasting beef and cooking vegetables. And there, over by the little stove, stood Mrs. Huggins. Mr. Huggins sat at the table, ready for the midday meal.

"Why, bless my soul!" he exclaimed, starting up. "It's Master Alfred!"

"Come in, sir—come in!" said Mrs. Huggins.

Alf was already in, and he went forward.

"I expect you're surprised to see me!" he exclaimed. "Well, it's all up, dad! This is the end of it. I'm finished!"

They both looked at him curiously.

"Here, I say, lad!" growled Mr. Huggins. "Wot's the trouble? It looks to me as if you've been goin' through a pretty bad time. I hope as 'ow it's nothin' very bad, sir."

Alf laughed in a hollow kind of way.

"Nothing bad!" he echoed. "I've been expelled."

"Oh, dear!" said Mrs. Huggins. "Is that anything very dreadful?"

"Sacked!" said Alf. "Kicked out! I've got the order of the boot!"

The old couple looked at him with much worry and concern.

"I don't rightly understand, sir," said Mr. Huggins quietly. "I knowed as them young gents down there was a pretty lively lot, but—"

"It wasn't the boys!" broke in Alf. "They're bad enough, but they weren't the cause of this! It was Mr. Snuggs—that rotten Remove master who treated you so badly when you came down to the school!"

Mr. Huggins nodded grimly.

"Ay, I remember him," he said.

And, starting from the beginning, Alf explained exactly what had taken place. He took his time over it, because Mrs. Huggins insisted upon giving him dinner. He wanted it, too.

He had had nothing to eat all day—he hadn't even thought of buying food. And now he suddenly discovered that his appetite was just as healthy as ever.

By the time he had finished his explanation, Mr. and Mrs. Huggins were very grave.

"It strikes me, Master Alfred, that things is bad!" said the bricklayer, at length. "I'm sure I dunno wot your father will say. It'll be a nasty blow for 'im, lad."

Alf nodded miserably.

"That's what I'm afraid of, too!" he said. "Oh, dad! Isn't it a shame! I've done nothing, and yet I've been kicked out! And that gang of Fullwood's! The cowards—the curs!"

"Steady, sir—"

"Steady!" shouted Alf passionately. "You can't know what they're like! They took it for granted that I was guilty—they wouldn't listen! They didn't give me half a chance!"

"It don't seem right, do it?" asked Mrs. Huggins.

"I was accused unheard!" went on Alf, quieting down. "They took it as an absolute certainty that I was a murderous young ruffian! And as for Snuggs! By glory! I'll make him pay one day!"

"It's all very well to go on like this, Master Halfred, but that don't improve matters at the moment," said Mr. Huggins practically. "I were afraid o' this, lad. I told ye so at the start."

"Ay, and so ye did," agreed Mrs. Huggins.

"I knowed what would happen," went on the bricklayer. "It's a pity—ay, it's a rare pity!"

"I'm more sorry about you than anybody else," said Alf, with concern. "I mean, how rotten it looks! I'm supposed to be your son, and I've got into disgrace! It makes it so bad—"

"Bless you, lad, don't worry about that," said Huggins kindly. "These 'ere young rascals can't hurt me. Huh! I know wot you are, an' I know wot them boys are too!"

"Then—then you don't believe I'm guilty of this?" asked Alf.

"Why, Master Alfred, that ain't fair!" said Huggins. "Just as if I should think



"Frightfully sorry, old darling! I—I should say, dear lady!" came a well-known voice. "It pains me to bother you, but about Alf. The dear old lad who probably arrived—"

you could do a thing like that! No, sir! I've knowed you since you was a nipper, an' I've allus had the best respect for you, sir. You ain't the kind o' boy to hit nobody unfair!"

Alf was more relieved than he could say. The old couple had taken the thing very well. For, of course, as he was supposed to be their son, discredit would naturally fall upon them.

"Why, there's one good thing about all this, Master Alfred," went on Huggins. "I'm durned glad that there won't be no scandal. There won't be no disgrace for your father."

"Ay, that's a thankful thing!" said Mrs. Huggins.

Alf looked at them warmly.

"You're great! Oh, you're great!" he exclaimed.

"We wouldn't be much good if we treated you else, Master Alfred," said the bricklayer. "The best thing you can do is to go straight to your father, and tell him the whole truth."

If I know anything of Sir John he'll set a few of 'em stirrin'!"

"How do you mean, dad?"

Alf always referred to Mr. Huggins as "dad." He had got into this habit deliberately, for he had trained himself in the most thorough manner before starting on this adventure—this experiment which had turned out so badly.

"Why, Master Alf, I mean that your father will make a few of 'em sit up!" declared Mr. Huggins. "Lor' bless yer life, he won't let things stand as they are! You didn't do this thing, and Sir John——"

"But I don't see what we can do!" interrupted Alf. "It's all very well to talk like that, Mr. Huggins, but how can the pater prove I'm innocent when Mr. Snuggs has sworn that it was I who attacked him?"

Mr. Huggins considered.

"Well, that's certainly a point!" he admitted. "I don't say as 'ow Sir John will do somethin' right off. It'll take time, likely as not. But 'e won't be content to let things stand still."

"I'd rather not go home!" muttered Alf miserably. "Oh, it's awful! And I wanted to do everything so well, too! I'd planned all sorts of surprises for the pater! And everything's gone west!"

"You ain't the fust one what's met with disappointments, Master Alf," said Huggins. "Afore you've gone fur through life, you'll find there'll be others. That's what life is, sir. Jest when things seem right, somethin' comes along and sets you back. But if a man's got any grit in 'im, he squares his shoulders, and starts again. Same with a boy."

Alf took a deep breath.

"You're right, dad!" he declared. "I'm not going to lose heart now. I'd be a weak idiot if I did. I've got to go back home—and the sooner it's over the better. I'll time it so that I get there for tea. It'll be an awful shock for the pater."

"Don't you believe it, son," said Mr. Huggins. "He's had his shock."

"You—you think he knows already?"

"Knows?" repeated the bricklayer. "O' course 'e knows! I dessay the 'Eadmaster o' your school sent 'im a telegram. There'll be fair ructions, and don't you forget it! But, as I said afore, it's a fine thing that you didn't go to the school under your own name."

"If I had done, this wouldn't have happened," said Alf. "But what about your work, dad? I'm keeping you——"

"That's all right, Master Alfred; there ain't no call for me to go back this arternoon," said Mr. Huggins. "Things is a bit slack just now. I'll stay here. It don't make such difference."

Alf was too worried to realise that the bricklayer had decided to sacrifice the afternoon for his sake.

"There's Archie, too!" muttered Alf. "I can't understand him! And I thought he was so staunch, too!"

"You mean that there swell young gent?"

"Yes," said Alf.

"Why, ain't 'e done what 'e ought?"

"I don't know—I don't know," said Alf, intensely worried. "He didn't come and see me last night, although I can understand that. But this morning! All the other fellows in the Remove turned out—they all saw me leave. But Archie wasn't there. He didn't think it necessary to say good-bye!"

The old couple were silent.

"I suppose he believes I'm guilty, too!" said Alf, with a sigh. "That's the worst blow of all, dad. Archie! The one pal I had all the time! And he turns against me! Oh, it's awful!"

Alf sank his head down, and the old people did not bother him with questions. Then a tap came at the door—the front door. Mrs. Huggins removed her apron, and passed through the parlour. Alf heard her open the door, and then she gave an exclamation of surprise.

"Frightfully sorry, old darling—— I—I should say, dear lady!" came a well-known voice. "It pains me to bother you, but about Alf. The dear old lad who probably arrived——"

Alf leapt to his feet, his face aglow.

"Archie!" he shouted joyfully.

CHAPTER XI

BACK TO ST. FRANK'S!

ARCHIE GLENTHORNE beamed upon Mrs. Huggins with all his natural serenity.

"The fact is, I've just popped up!" he explained. "That is to say, I buzzed into Bannington like the dickens, and whizzed up by the express. Absolutely! I trust that——"

"Archie!" shouted Alf, brushing past Mrs. Huggins.

"Dear old lad!" said Archie gladly.

"And—and I was thinking all sorts of horrible things about you!" said Alf, his eyes shining. "Crikey! This is great! Come inside, mate! You've made me feel all happy agin!"

They clasped hands with great warmth.

At the very sight of Archie, Alf automatically dropped back into his assumed speech. For Archie believed that Mr. and Mrs. Huggins were Alf's father and mother. He had no suspicion of the actual truth.

"Yes, Master Glenthorne, do come in!" said Mrs. Huggins.

Archie passed into the cottage, and went straight through into the kitchen. He wasn't at all particular. And just at present he wouldn't have minded if onions—his pet aversion—were frying by the hundredweight. He had found Alf—and that was all that mattered.

"You see, old lad, it's like this," said Archie, as he sat down. "I told Phipps to call me this morning. That is to say, I told him last night. I mean, last night I said—or, to be exact——"

"You're getting mixed!" said Alf. "I suppose you mean you told Phipps that you wanted to be called early?"

"Absolutely," said Archie. "Thanks for the good old helping hand. But, you see, the foul bouncer didn't do the job!"

"He let you sleep on?"

"Absolutely twice!"

"And that's why you didn't see me off?"

"Absolutely three times!" said Archie, nodding. "I sincerely trust you will forgive me, dear old fruit. It was fearful of me. You can imagine my feelings when I found that you had whizzed away into the next county! Why, dash it all, I was like one of those frightful chappies in a padded cell! Nothing whatever would console me! I even twisted a few bally noses!"

Alf grinned.

"I bet they needed twistin'!" he said.

"Oh, rather!" agreed Archie. "But, about the getting up business. Of course, it wasn't absolutely Phipps' fault. He, don't you know, had been supplied with large-sized instructions to wait upon Mr. Snuggs in the sick-room. You gather? You follow?"

"I think so."

"Well, there you are!" said Archie. "That, I mean to say, is it. Phipps was chatting with Snuggs last night, and the fearful blot propounded this fruity scheme. He absolutely told Phipps to keep me asleep. In other words, there was to be no if-you're-wakin'-call-me-early-mother stuff!"

Alf grinned again.

"So it was Snuggs, arter all!" he said.

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "When you come to think of it—when you come to probe the whole matter to the bottom—you find that the Snuggs bird is jolly well at the base of everything! In fact, he's just like those dashed savoury things of Heinz!"

"Heinz!" repeated Alf.

"Fifty-seven varieties, don't you know!" explained Archie. "Only, of course, whereas the Heinz articles are fifty-seven varieties of goodness—Mr. Snuggs is fifty-seven varieties of badness!"

"You're just about right there, mate!" said Alf. "I'm glad you've come up—I was worrying awful."

"Wait! Wait!" said Archie. "Why, dash it all, I've only just started! I've only just commenced to reel out the news! You've got to come back! You've absolutely got to let me lead you back to the fold!"

Alf shook his head.

"You don't mean back to St. Frank's?" he asked.

"Precisely."

"It can't be done, old mate!"

"Absolute rot!" said Archie. "It's got to be done."

"I'm not wanted!" said Alf.

"Rot again!" said Archie. "As a matter of absolute fact, a particularly foul brand of rot! My dear old priceless jackass, you don't know what you're talking about! Half the chappies are beginning to have doubts. I mean to say, they're absolutely chatting about the old sub here, there, and every-

where else! You are gaining supporters with every hour. The dear lads of the village are commencing to think that they've made a bloomer!"

"A bit late, isn't it?" asked Alf quietly.

"Well, rather!" agreed Archie. "Late is hardly the word. When you come to think of it, they're a set of fearful rotters. As for Fullwood and his set—they don't count. They're only a collection of stains!"

"Lummy! You're right!"

"Absolutely," said Archie. "And you've got to come back—not openly, but in secret. I've fixed everything!"

"In secret?" repeated Alf.

"Precisely."

"But—but—"

"Phipps is working like the dickens!" said Archie, beaming. "He's planning all sorts of dashed ripping plans. And he's doing all sorts of dashed ripping doings! I mean to say, the dear old cove is positively working like four men rolled into one. He's nothing more nor less than an exploded atom!"

"What!"

"Energy by the ton!" said Archie. "You grasp the trend? And all for you, old lad. You see, we're getting up a rather ripping scheme to prove your innocence. We have even gone so far as to order a few thousand yards of hunting, and a supply of flags. I shall engage the brass band later."

Alf looked at his chum strangely.

"Well, I'm blowed if you don't take the biscuit!" he said.

"Pray don't be so bally ridic!" said Archie.

"Now, this is the explanation. Snuggs has been talking. In fact, Snuggs has been giving the whole bally game away. He declares that Fullwood and he were in the woodshed together, and he sent Fullwood to fetch you."

"That's right!" said Alf eagerly. "Fullwood did come and fetch me!"

"Absolutely!" agreed Archie. "That's why I'm so dashed confident. What Snuggs has said, positively tallies with your own yarn. I mean, they fit in. A dashed lot of dove-tailed business."

"But—but—"

"Archie has not finished!" said the elegant visitor. "Wait, dear old boy. Snuggs also let out that there had been an accident, and it appears that the foul blister bally well shoved the blame on to you on purpose. Now, what do you think of that? I mean, don't you consider that blot on humanity ought to be rubbed away—like a bally mistake on an exercise book?"

"It's—it's too much!" said Alf. "You—you don't mean that Snuggs has confessed?"

"No—not at all!"

"Then—then what—"

"You see," explained Archie. "Snuggs has been chatting in his sleep."

"In his sleep!" yelled Alf.

"Absolutely!"

"But—but that's no good!" said Alf, in dismay. "It may be all a dream—there may be no truth in it at all!"

"Priceless rot!" said Archie. "You can't

dish me! Snuggs talked in his sleep, and he gave the whole bally show away. That's why I've whizzed up to London. That's why you've got to whizz back with me. In fact, if you don't agree, I'll kidnap you!"

Alf looked at him helplessly.

"I've got a taxi waiting outside," said Archie calmly. "A taxi, and we'll shoot back to Victoria, and catch a train that will land us in Bannington in the evening. What about it?"

"Oh! You're a brick, Archie!" said Alf. "I—I can't believe that it's really going to happen! If there's any possible chance of the truth coming out—I'll come with you like a shot! Crikey! It's too much all at once!"

"Not at all—not at all!" said Archie. "It's not often I have a brain wave—but this time it was a kind of storm. I mean to say, the old brain cells positively surged with wheezes. I didn't know the dashed stuff was in me! And here we are—just about to set off."

Alf considered for a moment.

Archie said that he had everything planned—and Alf Huggins was quite certain that the elegant junior had not exaggerated.

It was a chance.

He didn't want to go home yet—he didn't want to meet Sir John. Wouldn't it be ten times better to return to St. Frank's, establish his innocence, and then face his father proudly?

"Lummy!" said Alf suddenly. "I'll go!"

Archie patted him on the back.

"Good lad—good lad!" he said. "Brave words!"

"An' I'll fight this out to the finish!" declared Alf fiercely. "I'll make Snuggs crawl before I've done! I'll make him admit all his guilt, and then the fellows will be sorry for themselves, too!"

"Absolutely!"

Alf was fired by the possibilities.

What had happened could be put right. He had been hounded out of St. Frank's because he had posed as a bricklayer's son. Even in his direst extremity, he had not revealed the truth—he had made no capital out of the fact that he was the son of Sir John Brent.

And now he would return—still as a bricklayer's son.

But this time he would establish his innocence. Ever since leaving St. Frank's in the morning he had realised that he was doing wrong. The very fact of going was enough to convince most people that he was guilty.

Less than half-an-hour later—after Archie had partaken of a meal at the cottage—the two friends started off in the taxicab to Victoria.

"We're going back, and we're going to

make things jolly well hum!" said Archie, in a pleased voice. "I mean to say, we're dashed well going to paint the whole place blue!"

"Rather!" said Alf. "Oh, you ain't 'arf a good 'un!"

"Rats—rats in large swarms!" said Archie. They went to the train, and during the journey down to Bannington, Archie told Alf all his plans—plans that made the Hoxton boy glow with anticipation.

And by the time they arrived in Bannington, everything was clear to him.

There was no train to take them on to Bellton—at least, no train until an hour had elapsed. So they set off walking. And, instead of keeping to the main road, they took one of the side lanes and at length came out by a footpath, on the banks of the River Stowe.

It was getting dusk by now.

Everything was quiet—hardly a soul could be seen up and down the river. And certainly none of the St. Frank's juniors had the faintest idea that Alf Huggins had come back.

Archie came to a halt just against some bushes nearly opposite Willard's Island. He pushed his way through them, and gazed below at the water.

"Good!" he murmured. "Phipps, old lad, has done it!"

There, lying in the water, was a small boat, securely tied to an overhanging willow.

The two juniors got into the boat, and then it slipped out across the water, and in a few minutes it touched Willard's Island. This little piece of land was quite deserted. In the middle of the summer picnic parties would sometimes go there—but only in the middle of the day.

Now, in the deep dusk of the evening, the island was uninhabited.

As everybody knew, there was a kind of building on it—an old stone place constructed in the style of a miniature castle. It was locally called Willard's Folly—for the building had never been completed.

Archie and Alf passed inside, and went down some stone steps to the small cellars. They could smell an oil lamp burning, and a few moments later they entered one of the cellars, which had evidently been prepared. There was a camp stool there, a supply of food, a good lamp, and one or two books and papers.

Archie beamed.

"Now, I might as well observe that Phipps is a dashed useful sort of cove!" he said. "He had the boat ready—and he's got this place ready. Alf, old darling, all you've got to do is to stay here."

"How long?" asked Alf.

"Oh, hours—rather!" replied Archie. "But you'll know all about it later. I've got to buzz like the dickens. So long, old tulip! See you later! Don't worry, because everything's going to be all serene."

A moment later, Archie had gone.

ANSWERS
EVERY MONDAY...PRICE 2:

CHAPTER XII.

THE CHANGING VIEW!

ARCHIE strolled languidly across the Triangle, after having been let in by old Cuttle, the porter. Naturally, Archie was late—the gates had been locked some time earlier.

And Archie was feeling happier than he had felt for weeks and weeks. As far as he could see, everything was going beautifully.

He heard a faint little rumble in the distance, and remembered that the air was very sultry. Overhead, too, there was a curious murk in the sky, and there was every indication of a thunderstorm.

Archie vaguely decided it was rather early in the year for that sort of thing. But, after all, there was no telling what the English climate would be up to next.

Archie got into the Ancient House, and met Reggie Pitt and Grey just inside.

"Hallo!" said Pitt. "So you've come back?"

"Absolutely!"

"They were just going to send search parties out for you!" said Grey. "What do you mean by it, Archie? You've missed afternoon lessons——"

"He's missed morning lessons as well!" said Pitt. "I'm afraid, O youth, that large and awful things are going to happen! Why this business? Where have you been, naughty one?"

Archie smiled.

"Sorry, old darlings, but I'm afraid I can't get busy on the old explaining stunt," he said. "Just a little private matter. You see? Sorrow! I don't want to offend you, but there you are!"

Handforth came up.

"Oh!" he said, planting himself in front of Archie.

"Exactly," said Archie. "Dash it all! Hardly any need to bore holes through me, old lad! The glare that kills, what?"

"I'm jolly well going to tell you off!" roared Handforth.

"Absolutely," said Archie, staggering. "Kindly refrain from exploding near me, old thunder! I should say, old tornado! I wasn't aware that you had any authority to——"

"That's my authority!" said Handforth, pushing his fist under Archie's nose.

"Great gadzooks!" murmured Archie. "Kindly remove the offending digit! I mean to say, I saw something like that when the chappie was putting coal down the hole! Somewhat grimy, if you understand——"

"Look here—I'm not putting up with your insults!" snorted Handforth. "Where have you been?"

"Out, dear old chap!"

"I know you've been out!" stormed Handforth. "Don't be a potty ass! But where did you disappear to all day?——"

pose you know that you're going to get into trouble?"

"Well, I had a slight idea to that effect!" said Archie.

"Well, that's one thing!" growled Handforth. "There's another. You've missed a lot! Snuggs is nearly well enough to come down, and he'll probably be in the Form room to-morrow. Blow it! I was hoping we should have another easy day! There's no luck for us!"

Before Handforth could continue the argument, De Valerie came up.

"Why, hallo, Archie——" he began.

"Kindly refrain from addressing me, you fearful rotter!" said Archie stiffly.

"Oh! What have I done?"

"You are one of the lads who believes that dear old Alf swiped into Mr. Snuggs!" said Archie severely. "He didn't. You know he didn't! At least, you ought to know!"

"Well, I'm beginning to have doubts!" said De Valerie. "In fact, I'm sorry that I didn't believe in Huggins before. There seems to be something fishy about the whole business!"

"Then—then you are coming round, too?" asked Archie.

"Yes."

"Good lad!" said Archie. "Bright boy! Allow me to offer my congrats! Why, dash it all, we're gathering supporters all the bally time!"

And Archie found this to be literally true. All sorts of fellows were expressing doubts—and Handforth did not lose any opportunity to drive home the points that he had originally stated.

"Just think!" he declared. "Think! Who are the people who brought this accusation against Huggins? Snuggs was one, and Fullwood the other! They're both rotters—and both liars!"

"I say—go easy——"

"I'll repeat it!" declared Handforth. "Haven't we proved it dozens of times? And these two—these rotters—were the only ones who saw Huggins go to the woodshed. And the chap has been kicked out on their word! I don't believe it! It was a put-up job!"

"Hear, hear!"

"I'm blessed if Handy isn't right!"

"I'm not saying who knocked Snuggs about—but it wasn't Huggins!" maintained Handforth. "But you needn't worry—I'm going to find out! My investigations are already in full swing!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, yes, you can cackle!" sneered Handforth. "Do you think I care? All famous detectives are sneered at when they start on their cases! But they triumph in the end, don't they?"

"Yes, in fiction!" grinned Reggie Pitt. "But this happens to be real life—and you won't triumph in the end. It's far more likely that you'll come a fearful cropper!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth looked round witheringly.

"I'm disgusted!" he said coldly. "I'm absolutely disgusted! You're nothing better than a set of mouldy sprats!"

He walked away, with his nose in the air. But he was grimly determined that he would see the thing through.

Archie was feeling delighted. He was glad of this commotion. Alf wasn't despised so much as he had believed. Everything would soon be all right. Just a few hours—and then—triumph!

Archie had a rather painful interview with Fenton, but he emerged smiling as serenely as ever. Fenton had told him that he would have to see Nelson Lee later on—to give some sort of explanation for his absence. Archie was quite agreeable—particularly as it was not necessary to see Nelson Lee until the morrow.

He went into his study, and found Phipps there.

"Everything all right, sir?" asked Phipps softly.

"Absolutely great!" said Archie. "The dear old lad has come down, and now he's waiting."

"That is very good news, sir."

"Rather!" said Archie. "What about it? Anything fresh, old scream?"

"No, sir—nothing fresh," said Phipps. "But I have not the slightest doubt that there will be some good news before long. I do not altogether approve of your plans—but I have done my best."

"You don't approve?"

"I'm afraid not, sir."

"But don't you think it's a ripping idea to have Alf on the spot?"

"In a way, yes, sir—but you are proposing to have him very near indeed," said Phipps. "However, I will carry out your instructions. Possibly you are right, Master Archie. I sincerely trust so."

"I'm bally certain I'm right!" said Archie firmly.

And he lay down on the lounge, and sprawled himself out in comfort, and thought over the priceless scheme. He was still thinking when the bell clanged out, and announced that it was bedtime. Archie went upstairs with a light tread. He had an idea that a few remarkable things were going to happen before long!

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE OLD TOWER!

"HALF-PAST ten!" murmured Alf Huggins. "How much longer, I wonder?"

He was pacing up and down just outside the little building on Willard's Island. He had grown tired of remaining down the cellar. And as it was very dark, he considered that it was perfectly safe for him to take a stroll.

And he was puzzled.

Archie had told him his plans up to a certain point, but no further. He didn't exactly know what was going to happen next. And that was the puzzling part of it.

Alf was filled with a warm kind of glow. It was grand to have a pal like this! It was fine to have a friend who would take all this trouble. And Alf was glad to be near St. Frank's again. Somehow, he felt that something good was coming out of it.

It wasn't possible that Fate would be against him all the time.

He heard a slight splash, and peered out keenly across the water. For a moment or two he thought that the sound had been caused by a fish, or a water rat. Then he detected something moving on the surface of the river.

It was a small boat.

"Hallo!" murmured Alf. "There's something doing."

He crouched behind a bush, and stood watching. The boat came right to the island, and pushed its nose against the bank. It was Archie, of course, decided Alf. And he was just about to move forward when he paused.

It was the figure of a man.

This was rather startling. Who could the fellow be? Probably he had no connection whatever with Archie at all. Alf decided to remain in hiding, and to watch closely. But just then he chuckled.

He had caught sight of the man's outline against the dimness beyond.

"Phipps!" breathed Alf. "Then it's all right!"

He moved out at once, and came near.

"That you, Phipps?" he whispered.

Phipps turned and came towards him.

"I was expecting you to be down in the cellar, Master Huggins," he said.

"Oh, I got a bit fed up with it," said Alf. "It was stuffy down there, and I put the lamp out and came up."

"In that case, sir, we may as well make a move at once," said Phipps.

"Yes, but where are we going to?"

"The school, Master Huggins!"

"The school!" said Alf, with a start. "But—but they won't let me stop there, Phipps!"

"I think they will, Master Huggins—for the simple reason that they will not know of your presence," replied Phipps calmly. "You need not worry. Master Archie has thought of everything."

"It strikes me that Master Archie's a bit of a wonder!"

"To be quite confidential, I'm exceedingly surprised myself," said Phipps. "I did not know that Master Archie had such energy in his composition. He certainly awakened in no uncertain manner to-day."

"Crikey! I should say he did!" grinned Alf.

He couldn't understand it at all, but he followed Phipps into the boat, and very soon afterwards they were rowing quietly

up stream. At a point further up the bank, they got out, and the boat was concealed in some bushes.

"This way, sir," said Phipps.

They went across the meadows, round by the old barn—known as Fort Resolute by the boys—and then over the playing fields. They found themselves in the Triangle, where everything was quiet and still.

The air was still sultry and heavy, with a promise of thunder. But, so far, there had been no rain. Phipps knew, however, that the barometer had been dropping rapidly during the last few hours.

a small door, and after that Alf followed him up a back stairway. They traversed two or three corridors.

Then they went up some more stairs—narrow, circular stairs—finally arriving at an old oaken door, studded with knobs that somehow reminded Alf of a church. Phipps inserted a big key, and turned it in the lock.

Alf wanted to question him, but refrained. They passed inside, and the door was closed.

Phipps produced an electric torch, and flashed it on. Alf, to his surprise, saw that some stone steps led upwards. And the



Then he detected something moving on the surface of the river. It was a small boat. "Hallo!" murmured Alf. "There's something doing."

"Well, what now?" asked Alf in a whisper.

Phipps came to a halt.

"I should like to warn you, Master Huggins," he said. "Please do not speak. We must be very careful indeed. Any chance meeting, and all Master Archie's plans would go wrong. Please follow me, and say nothing."

"Right you are!" said Alf. "Go ahead!"

They went round by the rear of the Ancient House—unseen and unheard. Here, everything was quiet, for the domestic staff had gone to bed. Phipps let himself in by

a pair mounted these quietly, picking their way on the uneven steps.

And, at length, they came to another door at the top. This, also, was unlocked, and they passed within.

"Now, Master Huggins, conversation is possible," said Phipps.

"But—but where are we?" asked Alf, in wonder.

"We are at the very top of the old tower, sir," replied Phipps. "You have seen it frequently enough from the exterior——"

"That great, old tower over the Ancient House?"

"Exactly," said Phipps.

Alf looked round in astonishment. They were in a kind of square apartment. Along one corner there was a camp bed—quite a comfortable-looking affair. And next to it was a small table, and upon this stood a tin of biscuits, some sardines, bread, and all sorts of other articles of food. There was also a spirit stove, a supply of water and condensed milk and tea and cocoa.

"I think you'll find everything necessary for your immediate needs, Master Huggins," said Phipps, as though this was quite an ordinary, every-day affair. "It was Master Archie who suggested these plans. You will remain here for the night."

Alf walked round, babbling with eagerness.

"Why, it's gorgeous!" he exclaimed. "I shall be comfy here!"

"I trust so, Master Huggins," said Phipps. "You need have no fear that your presence will be suspected. Nobody in the whole school will know of your occupation of this tower."

"But—but how long shall I be here?"

"That all depends, Master Huggins."

"On what?"

"I should prefer not to discuss the matter, sir," said Phipps firmly. "I am sorry, but the whole business is in a rather peculiar position. It is certain that you will be here to-morrow."

"Shall I see Archie?"

"It is possible that Master Archie will visit you," replied Phipps. "In any case, all you need do is to go to bed, and sleep. There is no danger—there is no fear of any interruptions."

Alf stared at him.

"Well, I'm blowed if you ain't a caution!" he said breathlessly. "You take it all so calm! Like as if this was your usual work!"

Phipps allowed himself to smile.

"There is no reason for excitement, sir," he replied. "And now—good-night, Master Huggins. I may as well tell you that on the morrow you will probably be produced."

"Produced?"

"Master Archie will bring you down from this tower, as there will be no further need for secrecy," explained Phipps. "And then, of course, everything will be all right."

A moment later Phipps had gone, closing the door behind him. But he left the key inside—so that Alf could open the door if he wished to. He would not feel such a prisoner. There was certainly no danger of Alf leaving his place of concealment.

The boy who had been expelled—the boy who had been hounded out—sat down on the edge of the camp bed, and took in two or three big, deep breaths.

"It's going to be all right!" he told himself tensely. "I know it! Everything will come out fine! And what a pal! Archie's the greatest chap that ever lived. He's a brick!"

And Alf fairly hugged himself.

He was certain that something good was coming. But little did he realise the intense, dramatic events which were due to take place before the light of day once more dawned upon St. Frank's!

THE END.

Editorial Announcement.

My Dear Readers,

Some weeks ago, just before he came to St. Frank's, Alf Huggins rendered Archie Glenthorne a service which the latter has not forgotten, for when Alf had to leave St. Frank's in disgrace, everyone thought him guilty of the brutal attack on Mr. Snuggs except the Genial Ass. Glenthorne remained staunch to his study chum. He refused to believe Alf capable of such a vicious attack on Mr. Snuggs. This belief has been strengthened by new evidence supplied by Phipps, and very soon Archie hopes to lay bare the whole truth before Dr. Stafford and to clear Alf of the monstrous imputation made against him by Mr. Snuggs.

NEXT WEEK'S STORY.

All this takes place next week in the grand, concluding story of the series: "THE PRISONER OF THE NORTH TOWER; or,

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THE EDITOR.

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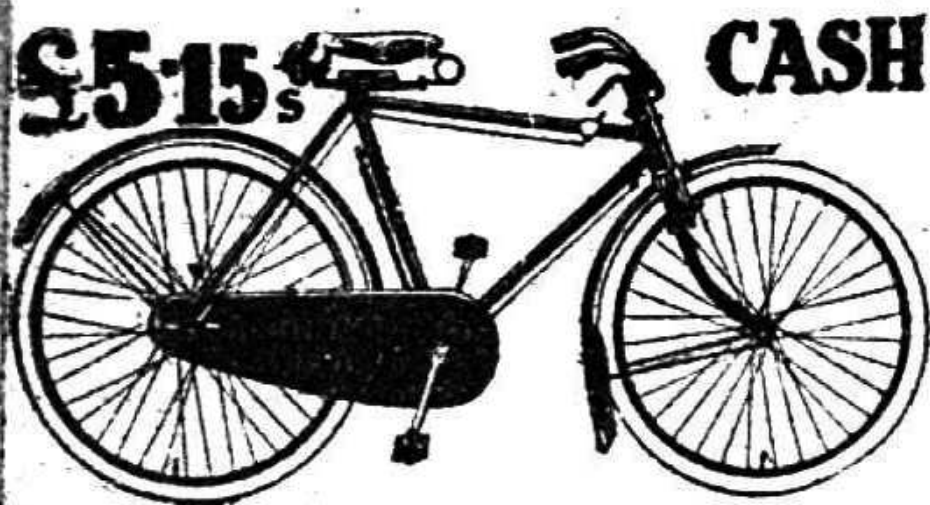
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