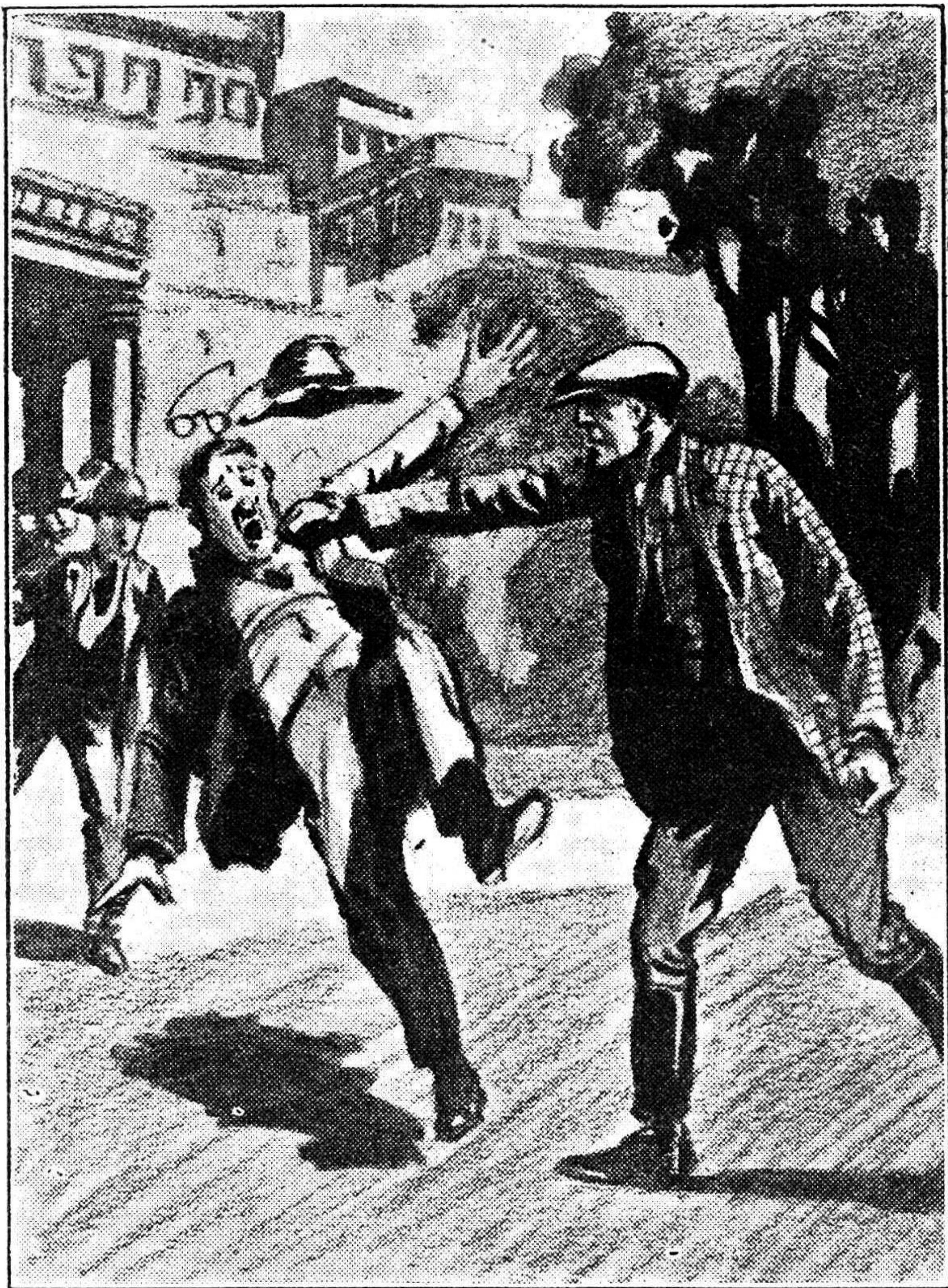


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The Above Exciting Incident occurs in This Week's Story :
THE REMOVE ON TOUR ; or, SIMON RATLEY'S
REVENGE !



Before he could move—before he could put a hand up to defend himself—Ratley's clenched fist drove itself with terrible force against the old peer's chin.

The Remove On Tour!



or,

Simon Ratley's Revenge

The extraordinary adventures that have befallen the schoolboy caravanners during the last few days of their holidays have prolonged their stay on the Bushwick estates much longer than they had originally intended. They are now on very good terms of friendship with the Earl of Bushwick, whom they have helped to rid of a rascally estate manager in the person of Simon Ratley. However, we have not quite heard the last of this gentleman, whose vindictive nature is already plotting vengeance against his former employer. Meanwhile, Nipper receives mysterious telegrams from Nelson Lee to the effect that the juniors are not to return to the school. The juniors are naturally delighted at the prospect of a longer holiday. At the same time, they cannot understand the reason of it. What has been happening at St. Frank's to account for these unusual messages for the boys to remain away? That is a question which I must leave Nipper to answer in the narrative below.—THE EDITOR.

CHAPTER I.

LORD BUSHWICK'S INVITATION.

JUST our luck," grunted Edward Oswald Handforth disgustedly.

He looked up into the sky with an indignant expression. And his rugged features became wet with the rain which was steadily falling. The whole atmosphere was filled with that pleasant earthy smell which arises from the countryside when rain falls after a long period of fine weather.

But Handforth did not appreciate the scent.

"As soon as ever we decide to break camp, and move on—this happens!" he exclaimed sourly. "I'm blessed if it isn't enough to make a fellow feel absolutely fed up!"

"Dear old lad, I agree," said Archie Glenthorne. "I mean to say, it's rather a frightful proposition when a chappie has to wade through considerable chunks of wetness, harnessing horses, and so forth."

I smiled.

"My dear chap, it's never any good grumbling at the weather," I said lightly. "We can't alter it, so what's the good of talking? At the same time, I'll admit that it's a bit unpleasant for us. But they have worse troubles at sea."

"With that remark I agree," put in Clarence Fellowe. "The rain comes gently tripping down, and o'er the land there rests a frown. The skies are grey and overcast, but surely such weather will not last?"

Handforth grunted.

"He even makes poetry about rain!" he said, with a sniff. "My hat! Can't you

talk without rhyming, you dummy? Can't you speak in plain English? Can't you use proper language?"

"I always do, my dear old chap—it flows from me as from a tap," replied Clarence mildly. "I pride myself upon my speech, so please don't quibble, I beseech."

We chuckled, and the long, lanky poet of the Remove strode off round one of the caravans, in search of some goods and chattels that had been left lying about. The fact was we were preparing to leave our present quarters.

For several days we had had been camping in one of the most beautiful valleys in the county of Hampshire. We were on the Bushwick Castle Estate, and we should have every reason to remember our stay in this location.

There were sixteen of us altogether—all Remove juniors from St. Frank's except for Willy Handforth, who belonged to the Third. And we had been enjoying a really wonderful caravan holiday—touring along the highways and by-ways, stopping just where we pleased, and lingering by the way-side.

We had seen some of the most beautiful of the English country scenes, but now it was time for us to return to St. Frank's. Indeed, it was past time. The new term was due to commence on the morrow, and we should only just have time to reach the old school. It would serve our purpose, of course, if we arrived any time during the day. But we wanted to reach the school not later than mid-afternoon.

And by starting at once we should be able to cover a good many miles before nightfall. Then, by rising early, and getting well on the road again, we should arrive at St. Frank's soon after noon.

That was the programme.

And, of course, we had no sooner come to this decision when clouds appeared in the sky, and the rain commenced to fall. It certainly was very bad luck—but, as I pointed out, it was quite useless to protest.

We had delayed our departure until the very last moment. We couldn't very well afford to remain here any longer. At a pinch we might have been able to start at daybreak the next morning, but this would have meant our arrival at St. Frank's in the late evening.

"Well, it's all in a day's work," said Pitt cheerfully. "And it's not as though we stayed here just for the fun of it. We've done some good work. We can look upon ourselves as public benefactors."

"Rather," said Church. "Why, if we hadn't stepped in, that chap Ratley would still be ruling over the simple country people about here—he would still be King of the Castle."

"And now he's like Humpty-Dumpty," remarked Pitt, with a chuckle. "In other words, he's had a great fall."

"The boot, what?" observed Archie. "That is to say, the jolly old sack. I'm

dashed glad that Ratley has been given his marching orders. I mean to say, it's nothing more nor less than a good old slab of justice."

"You bet it is, Archie," said Handforth. "The only thing I'm sorry about is that I didn't get a chance to slosh the bouncer. I've been waiting for days to have a regular scrap with him, and now he's gone!"

The fellows were referring to Mr. Simon Ratley—the man who had, until recently, occupied the important position of steward to the Bushwick estates. We had discovered, soon after our arrival in the valley, that Simon Ratley was a bully and a blackguard and a tyrant.

For years he had been doing practically as he liked, and all the people on the estate had grown to fear him—as though he were some kind of feudal baron of the Middle Ages.

And Lord Bushwick himself had known nothing of this.

The Earl, in fact, was such a peaceable old fellow and knew so little about business, that he had allowed Ratley to do exactly as he chose. He had placed the entire charge of the estate in Ratley's hands, and had left it there. And Ratley, by clever manipulation, had always led his lordship to understand that the estate was being run in the most perfect manner.

The very opposite was the case.

And the crisis had arrived when several members of the younger set had marched up to Bushwick Castle, intent upon doing damage. They had been led by a young fellow with anarchistic views—a youthful firebrand who had actually attempted to blow up the castle.

But we had frustrated this scheme. And there was another point that interested us, too. Simon Ratley had been unduly harsh to George Grant and his family. Grant was a clean-limbed young man who had previously held the position of electrical engineer at the castle.

He had lost this appointment because of Ratley's activities—and, to be quite truthful, it was Grant himself who had actually saved the castle from destruction. All this had happened two nights earlier.

And we had felt compelled to wait in the vicinity until we knew the result.

That result had been extremely gratifying.

For only this morning we had learned that Simon Ratley had been summarily dismissed by Lord Bushwick after a lengthy investigation. Driven by the recent events to hold a full inquiry, the Earl had discovered that Simon Ratley had not only been acting the part of a bully, but that he had also "cooked" his books. In other words, he had rendered false returns to his lordship, and had been making large sums of money for himself—criminally—in addition to his income.

His lordship had not prosecuted. He had simply kicked Ratley out, neck and crop,

together with two or three men who had been employed on the estate expressly for the steward's dishonest purposes.

These men had included an electrician who knew practically nothing about his work—the man whom Ratley had placed in Grant's position. The whole truth had come out at that inquiry, and Ratley and his bunch were dispensed with for good.

And to our great delight, we had heard that Grant had not only been reinstated, but that Lord Bushwick had asked him to fill the position of steward, too. And Grant was quite capable of the task. He was as honest as the day, and well deserving of the appointment.

So, as everything was now all right in the valley, we were going upon our way, feeling that our presence there had been of some use. The rain did not dampen our spirits exceedingly, although it dampened our clothing.

The camp was nearly ready for the final departure. Everything had been packed, and we were thinking about fetching the horses, and harnessing them. The whole camp was in a bustle of activity.

In the meantime, Lord Bushwick was standing at the window of his library, gazing moodily out upon the wet lawns and flower gardens—which were spread out in a wide array before the historic castle.

"Disgusting!" said Lord Bushwick firmly. "Absolutely disgusting! And this afternoon I intended telling Gibbons how to prepare those new flowerbeds. At the same time, the rain will probably do some good. We needed it badly. But why can't the rain come in the night? Infernal nuisance, coming in the afternoon!"

Lord Bushwick glared up at the sky in much the same manner as Handforth had done. He was quite pleased with the rain, but he could never see any earthly reason why it shouldn't come while he was asleep. It seemed ridiculous that the skies should weep during the glorious hours of daylight.

"I shall have to have a long talk with Gibbons about this!" murmured his lordship.

He almost spoke as though Gibbons was responsible for the rain coming in the afternoon. Gibbons was the head gardener, and whatever went wrong, he was blamed for it. Lord Bushwick was quite obstinate in that way.

He still stood there, staring out of the window. He knew well enough that the rain was needed. The flowers would simply drink in the moisture with huge gusto, and as for the rose bushes, they were positively wilting for need of rain. Therefore, although his lordship couldn't be in his garden, he was secretly pleased.

When it rained the Earl was like a dog without its master—he didn't know where to go, or what to do. He hated being indoors at the best of times. And here his gardens were calling to him. But they called in vain. Lord Bushwick didn't see

any reason why he should get soaked through.

Furthermore, he was quite alone. The Countess had gone on a trip to London for the day, and would not be back until the last train—which would land her at the castle at the unearthly hour of ten o'clock. By ten o'clock the whole valley would have been asleep for hours.

And there was no house party at the castle just now—although, within a week or two, the place would be ringing with the voices of throngs.

Lord Bushwick was alone in his great mansion—except, of course, for the large retinue of servants. But they were as widely separated from him as the poles are apart.

And as he stood there, he thought about Ratley, he thought about Grant, and he thought about the St. Frank's boys. His heart warmed as he remembered how the juniors had been the primary cause of bringing about a reform which had been long necessary.

"By gad!" he muttered. "Sound youngsters! As for that infernal rogue Ratley, he was lucky not to find himself in a prison cell! I'm deucedly glad that Grant is back again. I like the fellow, by gad!"

His lordship groped for his glasses, and toddled over to his desk. He intended looking through the long lists of accounts, once more—just to remind himself how foolish he had been to leave business matters so completely in Ratley's hands.

And just as he was sitting down, he had an idea.

Ideas were not frequent occurrences with Lord Bushwick—they were few and far between. But when they did come they had the distinction of being good ideas.

"Why, bless my soul!" he murmured. "Splendid—splendid! Why on earth didn't I think of it before? And to-day especially—as I can't go out. Why, good gracious me, it's the very thing!"

He rang the bell, and sat back in his chair, rubbing his hands together and chuckling.

And in a few moments Jevons glided into the room. Jevons was the butler, and he was a most dignified personage. He stood stiffly at attention as Lord Bushwick adjusted his glasses, and bent a beaming glance upon him.

"Ah, Jevons," said Lord Bushwick. "So here you are. Quite so—quite so! Now, let me see—I wanted you for something, didn't I?"

"You rang, your lordship."

"By gad, so I did," said the Earl, frowning. "Ah, yes! I want you to go down the road, Jevons. You understand? Down the road! After you get out of the drive, you turn to the left, and proceed for about half-a-mile. You will come upon an encampment consisting of four caravans, to say nothing of a large supply of boys. You will go at once, Jevons."

Jevons started.

"It is raining somewhat heavily, your lordship," he hinted.

"Raining?" said Lord Bushwick. "Good gracious! So it is! But that makes no difference, Jevons—surely a drop of rain isn't going to hurt you, man? You will tell these boys that I expressly wish them to visit me in the castle. Invite them to dinner—you understand? Dinner, Jevons. Oh, by the way, you will also instruct the housekeeper that I shall have about sixteen guests for dinner this evening. She will make her plans accordingly."

Jevons was too well trained to betray emotion, but he was inwardly shocked.

"Am I to understand, your lordship, that you are having these schoolboys to dinner?" he asked respectfully.

"Why, good gad, what have I just been telling you?" demanded the Earl.

"Begging your pardon, your lordship, but I doubt if her ladyship would approve," said Jevons. "It isn't for me to make any suggestions—"

"You are quite right, Jevons—it isn't!" interrupted his lordship tartly. "Upon my soul! How dare you? And deliver that message at once."

"Begging your pardon again, your lordship, but might I venture to suggest that the message be written, and delivered by one of the boys? I must point out, your lordship, that it is hardly in keeping with my position—"

"Ah, yes—to be sure," said the Earl, nodding. "To be sure, Jevons! Perhaps you are right. Wait! I won't be a moment."

He drew paper and pen towards him, and scrawled the invitation down. It sounded more like a command than anything else, but the sense of the message was quite clear. He placed it in an envelope, and handed it to Jevons.

And Jevons stiffly retired from the room, and came across a pageboy in the big hall.

"Look here, young Ted!" said Jevons severely. "I won't have you running down them stairs in that way! Kicking up all this dust—"

"Keep your hair on, Mr. Jevons," grinned young Ted. "What's it matter? Nobody's about—we've got the blooming castle to ourselves! The old bloke's in the library I know, but we don't take no notice of him!"

Jevons frowned.

"Never let me hear you referring to his lordship as the old bloke!" he reprimanded. "I don't know what you boys are coming to these days. You've got no sense of proportion, and don't even know your place!"

He gave the lad the letter, and told him to deliver it at once.

Thus it came about that ten minutes later young Ted sailed into the camp as large as life, whistling cheerily. As a matter of fact, young Ted was feeling quite gay, in spite of the rain.

He had had a large number of duties to perform that afternoon, but this unexpected jaunt to the St. Frank's camp automatically excused him. He fully intended popping down to the village afterwards for purposes of his own. Once out, he was out, in his own simple way of reasoning.

"A message for you, young gents," said young Ted cheerfully.

He stood before one of the caravans, grinning. He had visions of a tip—having heard rumours that these St. Frank's boys were somewhat wealthy. And young Ted was always out after tips. Tips were his one vice. He never knew when to stop asking.

Most of the juniors were sheltering from the rain—which had come on rather more heavily than before. And the caravans had not been shifted from their position. The horses were still peacefully grazing in a near by meadow.

"A message for us?" said Handforth, putting his head out of the window.

"Yes, young gent."

It was rather unfortunate that Handforth should have put his head out at that moment, for an overflow of rainwater from the roof overhead allowed itself to surge down. It descended upon the back of Handforth's neck with a swishing sound.

"Yaroooh!" howled Handforth, ducking wildly. "You—you rotter! What did you do that for? I'll jolly well biff you on the nose!"

"My heye!" said young Ted, grinning. "That was a nice one, that was!"

"Well, it hasn't done any harm," remarked Reggie Pitt. "His neck needed washing at the back."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Who said that?" roared Handforth, jumping down, and glaring at the other caravans. "Who said my neck needed washing? Come out here, you insulting rotter, and I'll roll you in the mud!"

"Thanks all the same, but I'd rather stay up here," smiled Pitt. "Better be careful, Handy—you mustn't give a bad impression to this youthful retainer from the castle gates!"

Handforth glared at the youthful retainer.

"Who told you to come here?" he demanded, pushing back his sleeves.

Young Ted adroitly dodged.

"Here, steady on, young gent!" he said hastily. "You ain't going to do anythink to me, are you? Sorry I laughed when that water hit you in the neck. But it did look funny—straight it did!"

"Oh, did it?" snapped Handforth. "Well, you'll look funny if you don't tell me what you're here for. Just curiosity, I suppose?"

"I brought this here letter, young gent," said the retainer.

He handed over the envelope—which was now in a sadly begrimed condition. Not only was it limp with rain, but young Ted was evidently not quite as clean as he ought to

be, for numerous finger-prints of the most grimy kind were plastered upon the expensive envelope. Handforth looked at the letter with repulsion.

"What's that?" he demanded.

"A letter from his lordship."

Handforth took it, opened it, and read the message. He seemed quite unconscious of the fact that he was still standing out in the rain. He gazed up at the rest of us, and grinned.

"I say, this is pretty good," he remarked. "We're invited to dinner at the castle. Lord Bushwick wants us all to go, and we've got to be there by half-past six."

"Oh, good!" said Fatty Little, his eyes sparkling. "We'll have a ripping feed, you can bet! I've longed to have an invitation to the castle, but I never thought it would happen. Good egg!"

Handforth turned away from young Ted and went towards his caravan.

"I come straight down with the message, sir," said the page boy, hintingly. "Run all the way down, I did—in this here rain, too."

"That's all right," said Handforth. "You're a bit late, but you needn't apologise!"

Young Ted looked crestfallen.

"Wet through I am, young gents," he remarked, with fading hope.

But a moment later his spirits were revived, for I handed him a shilling for himself, and Archie was rash enough to toss half-a-crown across. The fact of the matter was, Archie was feeling so pleased that he simply had to do something. The prospect of having dinner in the lordly surroundings of Bushwick Castle delighted Archie's aristocratic heart.

And young Ted went on his way rejoicing, and whistling "Coal Black Mammy" in such an atrocious way that even the birds fled at his approach.

Having gained possession of the letter, I read it through carefully—just to make sure that Handforth had read it a-right. He was quite capable of getting the wrong sense of any message.

"Yes, we're invited all right," I said slowly. "But I don't think we ought to accept."

"What!"

"It'll mean staying here until to-morrow," I pointed out. "We shan't get away from the castle until late this evening, and we can't very well break camp in the dark. So, boiled down, it simply means that we shan't arrive at St. Frank's until late to-morrow evening. They'll be worried about us, I expect."

"Let 'em worry," said Handforth. "A fat lot we care! It's not often we get invited to dinner in a place like Bushwick Castle. Besides, you don't suppose we're going to start off in this rain, do you?"

I was reluctant to do so. And indeed, after a little talk, we came to the conclusion that our only possible course was to accept. It wouldn't look well to refuse.

And the fact that it was raining so heavily made the prospect of immediate departure distinctly unpleasant.

So it was decided—we should go.

We little imagined what that visit to Bushwick Castle was to lead to!

CHAPTER II.

SIMON 'RATLEY'S REVENGE.



LORD BUSHWICK rubbed his hands together gleefully.

"Glorious!" he observed, sniffing the air. "Wonderful! Dear me! What a most delightful surprise."

He was standing out upon the terrace, attired in his oldest gardening clothing, and he certainly looked more like a passing tramp than the lord of all he surveyed.

The evening sun was shining upon him from a clear blue sky, and over in the east a few clouds were drifting away in a shame-faced kind of fashion, doing their best to hide behind a clump of yew trees.

And the sun, looking very much penitent, was peeping over the top of some chestnuts. The rain, to be quite straightforward, had ceased, and the summer's evening was as perfect as it could be.

The sudden change in the weather conditions had taken Lord Bushwick by surprise.

He had believed that he was doomed to remain indoors for the rest of the day. A spot of blue among the clouds, an hour earlier, had given him a faint hope. And then, as the minutes had elapsed, his spirits had risen like the mercury in a thermometer that is held in front of the fire.

And now, at six o'clock, there was every prospect of the day finishing in a burst of glorious sunshine. The gardens were looking magnificent. Everything was refreshed for its long wanted drink. The flowers were nodding in the evening breeze, shedding drops of glistening rain.

The rose bushes had never looked so perfect before, and the lawn was green and velvety. Birds were singing up in the trees, and the whole of nature was rejoicing in the peace of the evening.

"And now," said Lord Bushwick, "for Gibbons."

He strode forward with a grim expression on his face—until he realised that he was still attired in his slippers. This meant a return to the castle, and he grunted with displeasure as he made his way indoors.

But five minutes later he emerged, fully equipped for the work in hand, wearing a pair of thick boots that would have looked quite respectable on a bricklayer. Lord Bushwick cared nothing for appearances. He thought only of utility. As he was wont to say, what did it matter—everybody knew him in his own garden, and he was going to be comfortable, by gad!

He commenced the search for Gibbons, but

failed to find that elusive gentleman. Gibbons, as a matter of fact, had half suspected that his lordship would come out on the prowl, and was discreetly remaining in the background. Gibbons was a perfectly capable head gardener, but his employer worried him.

"Bless my soul," said the earl, coming to a halt against one of the flower-beds. "Good Heavens! Slugs! Dozens of them! This is appalling!"

He stared down at the ground with a fifty-horse-power gaze, as though expecting the slugs to wither up. But they didn't. Brought out by the rain, they leisurely wandered upon their various paths, totally unconscious of the dreadful fate which was almost upon them.

For Lord Bushwick was the enemy of all slugs. Once he was fairly on the track, the slugs had no chance whatever. During the next twenty minutes slaughter went on relentlessly in the quiet garden.

And Lord Bushwick was so engrossed in his task that he failed to observe the approach of guests. There were many of them—sixteen, to be exact. They came up the drive in an impressive procession.

Archie Glenthorne led the way. He had insisted upon this, but rather regretted his firmness later, for he was being constantly hustled. However, the whole party had arrived without mishap, so Archie was satisfied.

"Here we are," said Handforth. "Good business! I'm pretty hungry, I can tell you! The rain's affected my appetite, I expect. Good thing it cleared up—What's the matter with you, Arnold McClure?"

McClure, who had tugged at Handy's sleeve, turned red.

"Don't walk on that flower-bed, you ass!" he whispered.

"Flower-bed?" repeated Handforth, pausing. "What flower-bed?"

He looked down at his feet, and discovered that for the past minute he had been walking through some of Lord Bushwick's choicest flowers. But Handforth was not at all impressed. He sniffed.

"Oh, that!" he said carelessly. "I couldn't help that, could I? I've never known such a place—you can't walk two yards without coming across flowers. I call it a waste of money. The place looks awful!"

McClure breathed hard.

"You've got a right to your opinion, of course, but that's no reason why you should make a nuisance of yourself!" he said tartly. "If Lord Bushwick happens to see you he'll—Hi! Leggo! What do you think you're doing?"

"A nuisance, am I?" hooted Handforth, seizing McClure and hauling him along backwards by the collar. "You'd better understand that I don't allow anybody to talk to me like that!"

"Leggo, you lunatic!" gasped McClure. "This is my best suit! For goodness sake don't—Yaroooh!"

McClure suddenly tripped on a piece of rockery, and the next moment he was sitting gracefully in the midst of a bed of Lord Bushwick's choicest fuchsias. Not that McClure was thinking about the fuchsias. The soil was very damp, and he greatly objected to mud on his best clothes.

"Bless my soul!"

Lord Bushwick himself uttered that remark. He had been crouching down on the other side of the hedge, busily investigating the lair of a couple of snails. And Lord Bushwick had been so engrossed in his task that he had failed to observe the approach of his guests.

But it was quite impossible to be in ignorance of their presence any longer. For Arnold McClure was within a couple of feet of him, and the noise was somewhat deafening. For McClure was telling Handforth exactly what he thought of him. And Handforth was making grim preparations for battle.

Flinging his jacket off, and casting it away, he reached out to grasp his chum. But Lord Bushwick came toddling round from the other side of the hedge, his face wearing an expression of horror and indignation.

"What is all this?" he demanded breathlessly. "Good gracious me! What are you boys doing here? How dare you sit in my flower-beds? Why, upon my soul, those fuchsias are utterly ruined!"

"Oh, don't mind the fuchsias!" growled Handforth. "McClure told me that I was a nuisance, and I'm just going to show him—"

"That he was right?" asked Reggie Pitt.

"I won't have it!" said his lordship. "Do you hear me? Go away! And if you dare to come near this garden again, I will prosecute you for trespassing! I won't be bothered like this!"

He gazed at his trampled flower-beds with rising wrath.

"This—this is appalling!" he went on. "I've never known such destruction! Why, bless my soul, you do more damage than the slugs!"

Handforth glared.

"Are you calling me a slug?" he asked warmly. "I don't want to be disrespectful, Lord Bushwick, but it doesn't seem quite the thing for a host to call one of his guests a slug!"

"Absolutely not!" agreed Archie, nodding. "I mean, when you come to think of it, a slug is a dashed poisonous kind of reptile. One of those frightfully slimy things, that leaves a trail of cobweb behind it! Of course, we all admit that Handforth is somewhat trying—"

"Eh?" said Handforth, turning upon Archie aggressively.

"Trying," said Archie, with haste. "I mean to say, Handforth is trying to do the best he can," he added diplomatically. "But what he's trying to do, I'm dashed if I know! But it all seems fearfully wrong. It isn't the absolute thing to throw chappies

into beds of fuchsias! I mean to say, it isn't done!"

"Fathead!" said Handforth. "I've just done it!"

Lord Bushwick was more impatient than ever.

"Will you listen to me?" he demanded grimly. "Will you attend to what I am saying. I won't have all this commotion. Who are you? What do you want here? How dare you come interfering——"

"Well, I like that!" interrupted Handforth. "Interfering? I thought we were invited to dinner!"

"Invited to dinner!" retorted his lordship. "Nonsense, sir! Absolute nonsense! Who put such an absurd idea into your head? And don't tread on those geraniums! Bless my life and soul! This is terrible!"

Handforth got out of the geraniums with a snort, and most of the other fellows were looking at one another. Had there been some mistake? Was that letter from Lord Bushwick a fake, or what?

"If we've intruded, Lord Bushwick, we'll clear out," I said quietly. "But this afternoon we got a letter from you—at least, we thought it was from you. You invited us to dinner this evening, and told us to be here at six-thirty."

The Earl adjusted his glasses and gazed at me.

"Letter?" he repeated, his attention wandering towards the fuchsias. "I shall have to get Gibbons to see about this—Dinner? What on earth— Yes, yes! I seem to remember something about dinner! Let me see! I wonder if Gibbons will be able to repair all this terrible damage? Dinner?"

He looked at me, then he looked at the flower-beds, and for a few moments he was rather confused. He didn't know whether to talk about the dinner, or the invitation, or the fuchsias. But, finally, he gave a start.

"Oh!" he ejaculated. "You are the boys from St. Frank's?"

"That's it, sir."

"Why, yes—of course," said Lord Bushwick cordially. "Of course—of course! My dear boys, how are you? I—ahem—regret that you should have arrived in such an unfortunate manner, but boys, I suppose, will be boys. Eh? Well, well! So you have come to dinner? Splendid. I must confess that I had forgotten all about it. Dreadfully careless of me, but I am like that."

"It must be the weather," said Handforth in a whisper. "I've heard that all lunatics are affected by the weather."

Handforth's whisper was like anybody else's shout. And Lord Bushwick nodded.

"Exactly," he agreed. "It certainly was the weather. The sun came out, and I felt impelled to sally forth into the garden. But I really cannot understand your reference to lunatics. However, we will let that pass."

"Lucky for you!" murmured Church, nudging Handforth.



It was rather unfortunate that Handforth should have put his head out at that moment, for an overflow of rain-water from the roof overhead allowed itself to surge down. It descended upon the back of Handforth's neck with a swishing sound.

Handforth was looking very red, and he nudged Church in return to such good purpose that the latter gave a whoop, and nearly ruined another flower-bed. Trouble was only averted by the timely action of Christine, Pitt, myself, and one or two others—who surrounded Handforth, and hustled him away.

Lord Bushwick was very reluctant to leave the garden, but the sounding of the gong—the signal for dinner—made him realise that he had his duties to attend to.

"Ah, well, let us hope that the weather will be fine to-morrow," he said, with a sigh. "The sky appears to be clearing wonderfully. The cucumbers will be benefited. I have no doubt; and as for the tomatoes and the grapes——"

"Just a minute, Lord Bushwick!"

We all turned as the hail sounded in our rear.

And we looked at the newcomer with grim interest. Striding across the wet lawn was Simon Ratley, the late steward of Lord Bushwick's estate. The man was looking determined. His face was set fixedly, and his lips were drawn together in a thin line. He looked rather dangerous, in fact.

Ratley had been dismissed in dire disgrace, and had been fortunate to get away without finding himself in the hands of the police. That he should dare to come back in this bold way was altogether surprising.

The earl regarded him angrily.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded. "How dare you come here, Ratley? Upon my soul! You have the audacity of—"

"Wait a moment, Lord Bushwick," interrupted Simon Ratley. "I've come here to have a peaceful talk. I've been kicked out—I know it. Well, I want to make a fresh start, and I should like to have a few words with you in private."

"Impossible," snapped the earl. "The idea! I am amazed that you should approach me at all! Go away, sir! I have nothing to say!"

Ratley's eyes flashed.

"I shall only keep you a moment," he said tensely. "Come, we will talk here—on the edge of the lawn. But I don't want these infernal boys to overhear. The young blackguards—"

"That will do!" interrupted his lordship.

All the same, he accompanied Ratley to the edge of the lawn. I stood some little distance away on the terrace, with the other fellows. Ratley had given us a venomous look, but was now talking to the earl again.

"I vote we grab him and chuck him out," suggested Handforth aggressively. "I expect he's come here to make mischief of some kind. Let's go for the beast in a body and scrag him."

Nobody took any notice of Handy's wonderful suggestion.

And Simon Ratley talked to Lord Bushwick.

"I shall only detain you a minute," he was saying. "I can't expect any generosity from you, Lord Bushwick, after what has happened. But I've been dismissed from your service, and it would be impossible for me to obtain another position in this country."

"I sincerely hope so!" said the earl curtly. "You don't deserve a position, Ratley! Why, man alive, you're little better than a cur! Why on earth you have come to me is beyond my comprehension—"

"Wait!" interrupted Ratley. "I'm going abroad—I'm going to start again."

"England will not miss you, I am quite sure!" said the Earl tartly. "The air of this locality will be particularly sweet—as soon as you have departed."

Ratley turned just a shade paler. He seemed to be suffering from some inward emotion. His eyes were glittering in a

manner which suggested that he had been recently drinking. But he was by no means drunk. He was just in that condition when he was capable of any reckless action.

"I am keeping my patience with difficulty!" he said thickly. "As I just told you, Lord Bushwick, I'm going abroad. You are the only man I can approach for funds. I want you to give me two hundred pounds."

His lordship regarded the man in blank amazement.

"Good gracious me!" he ejaculated. "You—you seriously ask me for two hundred pounds?"

"I do—I demand it!"

"Upon my soul!" said the earl. "You demand it, eh? Why, you impudent scoundrel, I'll have you thrown off the premises unless you leave at once! I have never heard such arrogant insolence in all my life! Good gracious! How dare you? Do you hear me, sir? How dare you?"

"Oh, don't goad me!" snarled Ratley. "I must have that money—I shall have it! Will you give it to me quietly, or shall I—"

"Are you even daring to threaten me?" demanded the earl, his eyes flashing.

"I—I—"

"You may well stammer!" put in his lordship. "Go! At once! I absolutely refuse to have another word with you, Ratley! I am astonished beyond measure that you should come to me like this. That is my final word!"

Ratley bent nearer.

"You won't give me that money?" he said fiercely.

"No, by gad, I won't!" roared the earl. "You impertinent rascal— Why, what on earth— How—how dare you—?"

He broke off with a faint gasp, for Simon Ratley had suddenly changed. That glow in his eye had become a flame. His face went red with suddenly released fury. And the man literally hurled himself upon his late employer.

Lord Bushwick was quite unprepared for the attack.

He had no idea that it was coming. And before he could move—before he could even put up a hand to defend himself—Ratley's clenched fist drove itself with terrible force against the old peer's chin.

The Earl of Bushwick was lifted clean off his feet, and he toppled over with a groan. And he lay there, on the lawn, perfectly still.

CHAPTER III.

BY ORDER OF THE POLICE!



THE attack had been so sudden that it was all over in a dozen seconds.

Simon Ratley himself was positively livid with rage. No doubt he had believed from the first that there had been practically

no chance of obtaining what he had come for. Perhaps he had merely wanted to precipitate a quarrel. For, in his present mood, he obviously didn't care what happened to himself.

The juniors, standing on the terrace, saw the whole affair. But it was all over before they could make the slightest move to save his lordship from Simon Ratley's attack.

"Oh! He's—he's knocked the old chap down!"

"Biffed him clean in the jaw!"

"The brute!"

"Grab him!"

There was an immediate rush. The fellows were infuriated by Ratley's assault. Without the slightest justification, he had attacked Lord Bushwick with the utmost brutality.

And now Ratley was standing over the fallen peer, deliberately kicking at his prostrate form.

"You miserable dog!" he snarled hoarsely. "By thunder! I'll show you that I'm not the kind of man to be thwarted!"

He added a large number of oaths, and proceeded to kick with the utmost viciousness. His heavy boot thudded against Lord Bushwick's side, then against one of his legs, and then on his shin.

But before Ratley could continue this dastardly conduct, he found himself literally surrounded by enraged juniors. They seized him in a body, hauled him back across the lawn, and flung him on the grass.

"You—you young whelps——"

"Keep his foul mouth quiet!" I shouted angrily.

Fatty Little obliged, and did so with extreme simplicity. Ratley was sprawling on his back, held down by half a dozen fellows, and Fatty immediately took a seat upon Ratley's face, smothering the man in the most effectual manner.

"Hold him there!" I said. "Don't let him get up. We've got to call some of the servants—and then get the police! Quick, Tommy! Lend a hand, Reg! You, too, Bob! I'm afraid the earl's in a very bad way!"

Several of us hurried over to the Earl of Bushwick, while the remainder kept Simon Ratley down. The scoundrel struggled violently, but all his efforts were of no avail against the determination of the boys.

Bending over Lord Bushwick, I saw that he was unconscious.

That one driving blow from Ratley's fist had knocked his lordship clean out. Such a blow is capable of doing considerable damage to a young man. But to a man of Lord Bushwick's age, it was absolutely grave.

The poor old fellow lay there, looking singularly pitiful, his face as pale as chalk, his body twisted, and his legs folded under him in a grotesque fashion. Just for a moment I thought that he was dead. If this had been the case I should not have been greatly astonished—for a blow of that kind has killed a man on many an occasion.

"It's all right—he's breathing," I said quickly. "Oh, the cur! Fancy striking an old chap like this!"

"And kicking him afterwards!" said Pitt wrathfully.

"He'll get penal servitude for this!" declared Cecil de Valerie.

"Never mind what Ratley gets—let's carry the earl indoors," I said, looking round. "Come on, you chaps. Grab his feet. We'll take his head and shoulders. Willy!"

"Here I am!" said Handforth minor promptly.

"Dash indoors and wake some of those sleepy servants!" I ordered. "Everybody seems to be dead in this place! Get Jevons, the butler! Tell him to prepare the earl's bed-room— Wait a minute! Here's Jevons, now!"

The dignified butler had appeared on the terrace, and was coming towards us at a trot. For once in his life he had left his dignity indoors. He came up, panting, his face pale, his eyes anxious.

"Whatever's happened?" he gasped. "Oh, my lor! What's happened to the master, young gentlemen?"

"That foul-mouthed brute assaulted him!" I replied. "Call some of the others, Jevons— No, we can carry the poor old chap in. You go indoors and get the chamber-maid to prepare his lordship's room. And as soon as you've given those orders, telephone for the police and a doctor."

Jevons, greatly flustered, gazed down at his master with horror and a kind of fear. Then he pulled himself together, and hurried away. By this time other people were appearing.

I didn't exactly know how, but the news had got round—probably one of the servants had seen the attack from a window, and had passed the news round. Gibbons appeared, accompanied by a couple of under-gardeners, a chauffeur, and three stable men.

By this time Pitt and Christine and I were lifting Lord Bushwick from the ground. Tommy Watson and Willy Handforth helped. Then we proceeded to carry the unconscious nobleman into the castle.

"Thank goodness the countess is away!" remarked Pitt. "This would have given her an awful shock. By the time she gets back, perhaps his lordship will have recovered. Ratley ought to be boiled in oil for this? I never saw a more cowardly assault!"

"Absolutely not!" said Archie, who was hovering near by. "I've always regarded the blighter as a patch of rank vegetation, but it's absolutely up to me to apologise—to the rank vegetation! I mean, Ratley is nothing more or less than a frightfully frightful reptile."

In the meantime, Gibbons and the other men had taken action.

They had relieved Handforth and Co. of their charge. And Simon Ratley was now firmly held by the gardeners and the stable hands. The man was literally foaming at

the mouth with rage. He swore, and never relaxed his struggles for an instant.

And he was forced across the lawn, down one of the paths, towards the rear of the castle. And ten minutes later he was flung down into one of the ancient dungeons. In days gone by, these dungeons had held many a prisoner—all of them far better men than Simon Ratley.

As Handforth had indignantly declared, it was rough on the dungeon to shelter such a cur. But there was no question about the impregnability of Ratley's prison. The dungeon was of solid stone, with no window, and with a door that would have withstood a dynamite explosion.

Excitement ran high through the castle.

bringing the information that the local constable had gone into communication with his superiors by telephone. And an inspector and two men were now on their way from the nearest town.

The doctor's report was cheerful.

He declared that Lord Bushwick was suffering from slight concussion, and would probably recover consciousness within an hour. The blow had been a very severe one, and his lordship's jaw was badly bruised. In addition, he was suffering from serious contusions in his left side, his thigh, and his chin—these bruises being the results of Ratley's kicking.

The doctor declared that Lord Bushwick would have to remain quiet for at least a

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ADVENTURE

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The news had spread like wildfire. Page boys, chamber-maids, scullery girls, cooks, and various other members of the household were all talking at once. And it seemed to be a general idea that Lord Bushwick had been mortally injured.

By this time his lordship was lying on his bed. He was still unconscious, but a little colour had returned to his cheeks. And his breathing was regular, and his heart was beating soundly. I knew just a little about the work of a doctor, and was quite experienced in first aid. And with the help of the other fellows I did everything possible to make Lord Bushwick comfortable before the doctor arrived.

This gentleman turned up in due course,

week. Even at the expiration of that time, it was doubtful if he would be able to get about.

And, having heard the verdict, the St. Frank's fellows collected about downstairs in the great hall, the dining-room, or in any of the other vast reception-rooms.

Dinner was completely forgotten. At least, it was forgotten by Jevons and the other members of the domestic staff. But the juniors didn't forget it. They were hungry, and saw no reason why they should be done out of their feed. However, they were quite willing to wait until matters were a little more settled.

And then the police arrived.

The inspector proved to be a short, stout

little man with a moustache that resembled a yard broom. His face was red, and he soon showed that he was a genial, intelligent kind of man. There was nothing of the pomposity that one usually associates with rural inspectors. The two constables with him were big, brawny and stolid.

"If you want to know the details of the affair, Inspector Beech, you will have to ask the boys," said the doctor. "As far as I can understand, they were the only witnesses of the unfortunate affair."

The inspector turned to several of us.

"You saw this man attack his lordship?" he asked, licking his pencil.

"Yes, we were standing on the terrace," I replied.

"Just explain what happened, young gents," said Inspector Beech.

I did so, and he made copious notes in his fat book. Finally, when he had learned all that there was to learn, he turned to the doctor.

"Well, Dr. Braddon, I would like to see the patient as soon as possible," he exclaimed. "I must get his account—"

"I am extremely sorry, inspector, but it will be impossible for you to see his lordship until several days have elapsed," interrupted the doctor. "In any case, I cannot see that an interview is necessary. There are sixteen boys here, and they all witnessed the occurrence. Lord Bushwick is a kind-hearted man, and it is quite possible that he may hesitate to bring a charge against Ratley. That would be a pity, as the fellow is a rank hooligan."

"Do I understand from that that Lord Bushwick actually makes no charge?"

"My dear inspector, Lord Bushwick is still unconscious," said the doctor. "There are many people here, in the castle, who will charge Ratley with this brutal assault. You needn't worry about that. And the man deserves to suffer the full penalty of the law. That blow might easily have been fatal."

Inspector Beech made some more notes.

"Well, young gents, I shall be wanting you," he said, at length. "Some of you, anyway. It seems that you are the only witnesses, and you'll be needed in the court to give evidence."

"What? We shall be needed?" I asked quickly. "When?"

"To-morrow or the day after."

"But—but it's impossible!" I exclaimed. "We must leave here early to-morrow—it's the first day of the term, and we've got to get to St. Frank's. We daren't arrive later than nine o'clock in the evening."

"If we do, there'll be ructions," said Pitt.

The inspector stroked his ample chin.

"I'm sorry, but I can't let you go," he declared. "If there were any other witnesses, it would be a different matter. But we can't very well put this man in the dock on a charge of assault unless we can produce witnesses. And you're the only

people who saw the occurrence. I shall need your evidence, and you can't possibly get out of it."

"Well, that settles it," said Handforth calmly. "We'll all stay."

"But what about the Head?" asked Church. "We shall get into an awful row—"

"Rot!" interrupted Handforth. "We can't help it, I suppose, if we're detained by the police?"

"No—but it doesn't sound well to say it like that!" chuckled Pitt. "People might obtain a wrong impression—although they wouldn't be surprised as far as you're concerned, Handy. You ought to have been detained by the police long ago!"

"You—you funny fathead—"

"All right—don't start squabbling now!" I broke in. "Well, look here, inspector, if it's absolutely necessary for us to stay, we'll stay."

"It's not only necessary, but imperative."

"Then I shall have to send a telegram to St. Frank's in the morning," I went on. "Under the circumstances, I don't suppose the Head will kick if we're a couple of days late. And we shan't object to having two days extra holiday."

"Not a bit!" grinned Bob Christine. "I'm not feeling quite so angry with Ratley as I was! All the same, I hope that Lord Bushwick recovers quickly."

There was a good deal of discussion about this new situation.

It was most unexpected, in the first place. We had never believed that we should prolong our stay in the Bushwick valley. But, under the present circumstances, it was out of the question for us to depart according to our own schedule.

Simon Ratley was produced from the dungeon, and as soon as a few formalities were over, he was taken away by the inspector and his subordinates. We should hear on the morrow what we were to do. In the meantime we were to hold ourselves in readiness.

Dr. Braddon remained at the Castle. He wanted to be on the spot all the time, and he hurried back to the sick room as soon as he had finished with Inspector Beech. The countess was not expected back until fairly late, and the doctor was hoping that his patient would have recovered consciousness by then.

All the fellows were extremely sorry for his lordship, but, at the same time, they were rather bucked by the knowledge that there was no hurry to get back to St. Frank's on the morrow.

Dinner—rather late—was served as soon as everything was quiet, and the juniors discovered that their appetites had in no way been impaired by the Earl's unfortunate injury.

And just as the meal was over, and we were all feeling good, the doctor came down and cheerfully announced that the Earl had

recovered consciousness, and was sleeping peacefully.

"His injury is by no means grave—although it might well have been," added the medical man. "A week's rest in bed will see his lordship almost himself again."

So, feeling in the very best of spirits, we soon took our departure, and arrived in camp. And we went to bed thinking of the bustle that would prevail at St. Frank's on the morrow. And there was something extremely comforting in the lazy thought that we should remain on holiday—with a cast-iron excuse for not turning up.

Ratley's visit that evening had been rough on the Earl of Bushwick, but so far as we were concerned, we felt that life was rather good. "It's an ill wind——"

CHAPTER IV.

THE GATHERING OF THE CLANS!



ST. FRANK'S hummed with activity.

The day was perfect. And the sun shone from an almost cloudless sky. The old school was looking at its best—although the majority of the fellows who had recently arrived had no eyes for scenic beauty.

They were feeling rather depressed, in spite of the fine weather.

School again!

In such a month as this, with cricket and tennis and other sports calling them, the fellows rather jibbed at the prospect of returning to the same old grind of lessons—swotting away in the classrooms while the grass was green, and the soft breezes floated over the countryside.

"Why the dickens can't we have a holiday right from Whitsuntide?" grumbled Hubbard, as he lounged on the Ancient House steps, with his hands dug into his trouser pockets. "I think it's a shame, making us come back for this rotten term! We ought to be free until September!"

Owen major grinned.

"That's all very well, but the mighty ones in power fail to see eye to eye with us," he remarked. "If some of the fellows had their way, there wouldn't be any school at all! Perhaps it's a good thing that we've got to stick to rules and regulations."

"Oh rats!" growled Hubbard.

He was thinking of home, and the good times he had had. And, although there

was nothing very terrible in the prospect of spending the next few weeks at St. Frank's, Hubbard was feeling glum in the extreme.

"What about those other chaps?" he asked warmly.

"What other chaps?"

"Why, Nipper and Tregellis-West, and Pitt, and all that crowd?" said Hubbard.

"What about them?" asked Owen major.

"Why, you know they went off on that caravan tour. Goodness knows what happened to them afterwards—I've been too busy to think of that bunch. But I suppose they'll turn up as usual."

"Lucky bounders," said Hubbard enviously. "We didn't get any caravan tour. Some chaps have all the cream!"

Owen major made no comment, but passed on. He didn't believe in growling and grumbling at everything. He was one of those fellows who took everything philosophically.

Both houses at St. Frank's were bustling with activity. The Triangle was constantly being crossed and recrossed by juniors and seniors who were getting acquainted again, after the holidays.

Masters exchanged words of welcome, and over the whole school there prevailed a feeling of cheerfulness and light-hearted good nature. There were very few fellows like Hubbard. Once back at the old school, the fellows resigned themselves to the inevitable, and enjoyed life.

It was just about midday, and only half the chaps had turned up, so far. Crowds of them would arrive on the afternoon train, and by teatime the whole school would be complete—at least, should have been so.

"Anybody heard anything about Huggins?" inquired Owen major, as he joined a group of juniors near the gymnasium.

"Huggins?" repeated Clifton. "You mean Brent?"

"Oh, well, he was Huggins until he had that accident," said Owen major. "Is he coming back this term—or is he still ill?"

"I've heard that he's coming," said Canham. "Chambers of the Fifth told me that Brent's as well as ever, and that he'll take his place in the Remove as usual. I hope so, anyway. Brent's one of the best."

"Rather!"

The fellows were referring to the junior who had been known in the school, during the previous term, as "the bricklayer's son." At that time his name had been Alf Huggins, and he had been scorned and held in contempt.

But he had proved himself to be as true as a die, with heaps of good pluck, and manly courage. And then the school had learned, with something like amazement, that the boy they had despised was really the son of Sir John Brent, who was now the Chairman of the Board of Governors.

Alfred Brent had been badly injured just

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before the Whitsun holidays had commenced, and it had been decided that he would not take his place in the school for many weeks. But, according to the rumours that were going round, Alf had made a remarkable recovery, and would arrive with the rest of the fellows.

He had had several weeks of rest—for he had been taken from the school well before the holidays. And, as a matter of fact, while these Remove fellows were discussing him, Brent was just alighting from the train at the little village station.

"Bellton!" exclaimed Armstrong cheerfully. "Here we are, my sons!"

"Good egg!" exclaimed Doyle. "I'm fed up with the giddy train. How about popping in the tuck-shop, and getting some ice cream. I'll stand treat."

"Good wheeze!" said Griffith heartily.

The two chums of Study J—Griffith and Armstrong—had come down from London in company with Doyle and Alfred Brent. And now they sallied out of the station, and were soon strolling along the village high street.

Quite a number of others had come by that train, including a contingent for the River House School. But the St. Frank's fellows had taken no notice of the River House boys—for these latter belonged to the section known as the "honourables." And the honourables were no good.

Alfred Brent was looking just a little pale and wan, but he was fit, nevertheless. He had insisted upon coming to St. Frank's for the new term—his father had not been able to keep him away.

"I'll be glad to meet them other blokes—Nipper and them other chaps," he grinned. "Crikey! It won't 'arf be a bit of all right!"

Armstrong & Co. chuckled. Alf had used some of the expressions he had been in the habit of employing while he had posed as the bricklayer's son. In fact, he had grown so accustomed to talking in that way that he had had some little difficulty in getting out of it.

"Hallo!" said Armstrong. "It's Huggins again."

"Good old Huggins!" said Doyle. "Dash it all, I'm not sure that I don't like him better that way! He seems more like himself!"

"Sorry, but I can't keep it up this term," smiled Brent. "I've been doing my best to forget those words. Well, let's hope everything goes on all right now. I'm simply longing to see Archie again."

A rather tender light came into Alf's eyes. He and Archie Glenthorne had been study mates during that strenuous term, and although the school had been practically against him, Archie had stuck to Alf through thick and thin. And Alf was keenly anxious to see his aristocratic chum once more.

The four juniors turned into the little



Wellborne sailed through the air as he was suddenly released. He descended into the pond with a dull, splodgy thud.

establishment of Mr. Binks, in the High Street. The place was crowded, and Mr. Binks was hard at work serving pastries, cakes, ice-creams, and all manner of other luxuries. This was a red letter day for him.

And he thanked the stars that the weather was fine.

Mr. Binks always laid in huge supplies for the first day of term, and, being a business man, he simply filled his window with enticing looking, but extremely indigestible pastry. It required very strong minded juniors to pass that shop without being drawn through its portals.

And a wet day meant disaster for Mr. Binks. For rain meant that the juniors were in gloomy spirits, and they didn't care much about spending their money. Some, of course, took shelter in the little shop, but business was always better when weather was fine.

On this day, therefore, the place was packed.

"Oh! We don't seem to have much chance of being served," remarked Armstrong, as he pushed his way in. "Want all the room, you River House boulder? Clear out of the giddy way!"

"Mind your own dashed business!" said the River House boy.

He attempted to freeze Armstrong with a glare. This individual was no less a person than the Hon. Aubrey De Vere Wellborne, the leader of the smart set at the River House School.

And with him, were his two boon companions, the Hon. Bertram Carstairs, and the Hon. Cyril Coates. Speaking quite frankly, these three young specimens were snobs of the first water, and they were heartily despised by all manly juniors.

Wellborne & Co. led that section of the

River House which was known as The Honourables. It need not be supposed that all the River House boys were snobbish and priggish. Hal Brewster and Georgie Glynn and Dave Ascott were three of the best. They were the leaders of the Commoners, and they took a great pride in the fact that there were no titles in their families.

The River House School was an extremely expensive, select establishment, and it was only situated half-a-mile from St. Frank's itself—just on the outskirts of the village, in fact, near the banks of the River Stowe.

Dr. Molyneux Hogge, M.A., who presided over the River House School, always took particular care to see that his pupils were exclusively attired. Dr. Hogge attempted in every possible way to prove that his school, although a private one, and quite small, was just as excellent as the famous College near by.

The River House was only a small place, as schools go. There was only one under master, Mr. Wragg—the school itself consisted of just over thirty boys. Of these, the majority were Commoners. Wellborne and his smart set were the minority, and they were kept exclusively to themselves.

"Mind my own business, eh?" snapped Armstrong, as he glared at Wellborne. "I like that! I've got just as much right in this shop as you have! Another word from you, my lad, and I'll biff you on the nose! I'll spoil that nice monocle of yours, too! Swanky bounder!"

Wellborne stepped back a bit.

"Of course, I can't expect anything better from low bred rotters of your kind," he said sarcastically. "Thank goodness we haven't got any chaps like you at the River House."

Biff!

Armstrong's fist shot out, and the Hon. Aubrey howled.

"Yaroooh! Ow—wow!"

"That's for being funny!" said Armstrong aggressively.

"Young gentlemen—young gentlemen!" protested Mr. Binks, from behind the counter. "Please behave yourselves!"

"It's a wonder you allow these cads in your place at all, Mr. Binks!" snapped Armstrong. "You don't call Wellborne a young gentleman, I suppose? Huh! Wellborne! I should say he was badly born!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Very witty, isn't it?" sneered the Hon. Aubrey, as he backed away, holding his nose. "And, talkin' about rotten breedin', what price your pal?" he added, indicating Alf with a contemptuous nod of his head.

"What about our pal?" asked Griffith dangerously.

"Oh nothing," said the Hon. Aubrey. "Nothin' at all! Still, personally, I shouldn't care to mix with a cad whose pater mixes up mortar! The chap's nothing better than a road sweeper!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Hon. Cyril and the Hon. Bertram yelled with laughter at this wonderfully

humorous sally. If Handforth had been present, they would have been felled on the spot. But Armstrong was a pretty good substitute. Armstrong could be extremely aggressive when he liked.

"You—you miserable cads!" he roared. "You know jolly well that Alf is the son of Sir John Brent, the Chairman of our Governors——"

"Well, of course, that's in keepin' with the whole school," sneered the Hon. Aubrey. "Fancy a big school like St. Frank's havin' a bally cartage contractor for a chairman! I expect he 'worked' his title, too."

"You'd better not say much more!" interrupted Alf ominously.

His eyes were flashing, and his fists were clenched. But he was pushed aside by the other juniors. They would not allow Alf to take any part in this affair. He wasn't strong enough for fighting yet.

"Well, you chaps, there's only one thing to do, I reckon," said Armstrong. "There's a nice slimy pond across the road, and these giddy Honourables look a bit too swagger and dandy for my liking. How about spoiling their pretty appearance? Who's game?"

All the St. Frank's fellows answered at once.

The three River House cads hustled madly for the door.

"No you don't!" grinned Armstrong, barring the way. "You asked for it, my son, and you're going to get it!"

"If—if you dare to touch us, we'll yell for help!" roared the Hon. Aubrey. "If you lay a finger on us we'll have the police on you— Yow! Lemme go! You—you common cads— Yaroooh!"

The other River House boys protested in the same manner, but it was useless. They were firmly seized and held. Then, in the grasp of the determined St. Frank's juniors, they were rushed across the road at top speed.

There, just on the other side of a little patch of grass, lay a small pond. In the winter time it was really a wide portion of a ditch, but in June the ditch dried up, leaving this pool stagnant. It was now little better than a patch of mud, with a green, slimy surface.

"One—two—three!" yelled Armstrong.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Wellborne sailed through the air as he was suddenly released. He descended into the pond with a dull, splodgy, sugging thud. The mud oozed over him, and enveloped his person.

And immediately afterwards there were two more thuds. The Hon. Bertram and the Hon. Cyril shared the fate of their leader. The young idiots ought to have known that they had been asking for trouble by sneering at Alf Brent—who was now one of the most popular fellows in the Remove.

(Continued on page 15.)

ANOTHER THRILLING NEW NELSON LEE SERIAL BEGINS NEXT WEEK!



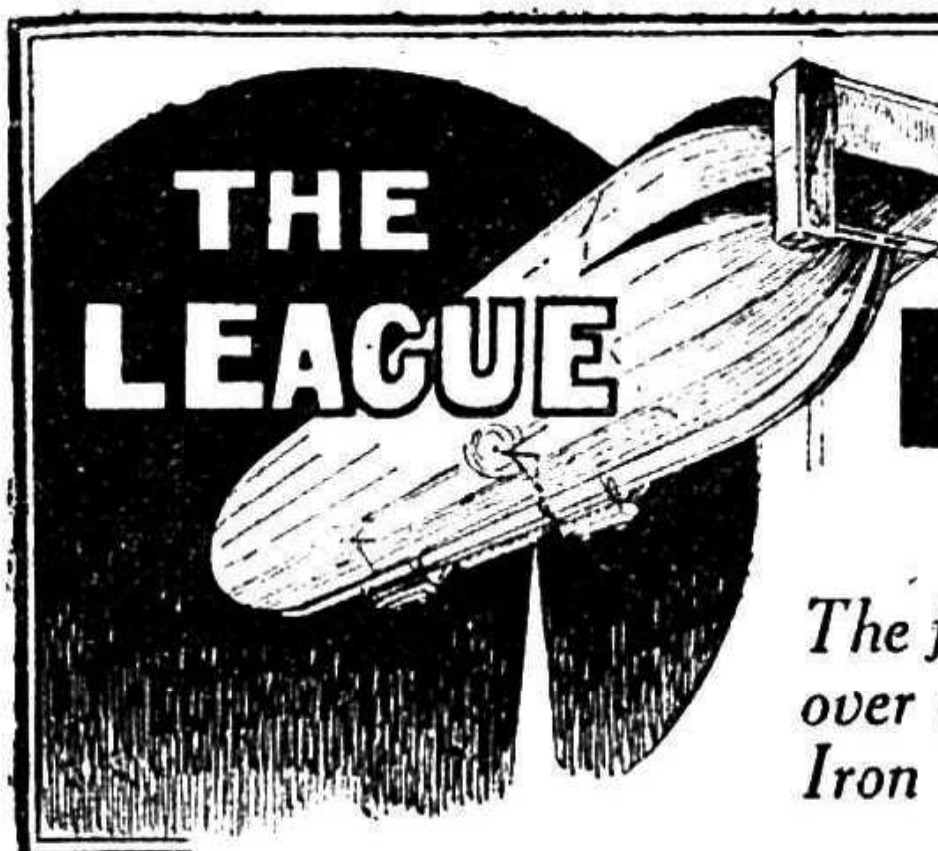
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OUR DETECTIVE STORY SECTION

No. 28.

PRESENTED WITH "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY."

June 16, 1923.



THE LEAGUE

OF THE IRON HAND



The final scenes of Nelson Lee's great triumph over the notorious criminal confederation of the Iron Hand and the end of "Number One."

NELSON LEE ON THE TRACK.

IT was close upon one o'clock in the morning when Donald reached his lodgings. On entering his sitting-room and turning up the gas, the first thing that caught his eye was a telegram.

Donald opened the telegram, and found that it was from Nelson Lee. It had been despatched from Guildford at ten o'clock, and ran as follows:

"Discovered to-night that Mandeville, of Hartop Manor, is Paul Herman. Police raided manor, but Herman escaped in motor. Cundle and all servants arrested. Your airship found in shed in grounds, undamaged. Police now guarding it, and will hand it over to you any time you like.

"NELSON LEE."

For a moment Donald's nerves thrilled with joy at the news that his airship had been recovered. A moment later, however, the look of sadness returned to his face. What advantage was it to have found his airship, if he had lost Vera?

He read the telegram again.

"Discovered to-night that Mandeville, of Hartop Manor, is Paul Herman. . . . Herman escaped in motor."

Donald trembled from head to foot with suppressed excitement, as a sudden idea occurred to him.

Mandeville was in love with Vera. Sir

Hugh had done his best to force her to marry him. Mandeville had escaped from Hartop, and would probably flee the country now that his identity had been discovered. He was madly in love with Vera, and Sir Hugh was his ally.

Was it possible that the man whom Donald had seen with Vera and Sir Hugh was Mandeville, alias Herman, in a fresh disguise, or undisguised? Had he fled to Portsmouth with the intention of leaving England by one of the yachts that lay in the harbour? Had he called at Moscar Grange on his way? Had he bribed Sir Hugh to help him to kidnap Vera? Had they drugged the girl, and brought her to Portsmouth? Was she now on her way to some foreign country in company with Herman?

The idea seemed too far fetched and fantastic to be entertained for a moment, yet, try as he would, Donald could not dismiss it from his mind. It haunted his dreams when he went to bed, and it was his first thought when he awoke next morning.

"I'll go to London and consult Nelson Lee!" he decided.

After calling at the hospital, where he learned that Sir Hugh had not yet recovered consciousness, Donald hurried to the railway station, caught a train to London Bridge, and presented himself at Nelson

Lee's rooms in Gray's Inn Road just before noon.

To his great disappointment, he learned from Nipper that the famous detective was not in town.

"About a couple of hours ago," explained Nipper, "the Chief Commissioner phoned the gov'nor from Scotland Yard. It seems that the servants at Moscar Grange had read in the papers this morning that Squire Mandeville was Paul Herman, and one of them had wired to the Chief Commissioner, telling him that Mandeville had turned up at the Grange last night, about half-past seven, that he and Sir Hugh and Miss Langford had left in a motor-car about eight o'clock; and that nothing had been seen or heard of them since.

"As soon as the gov'nor heard this," continued Nipper, "he decided to go down to Moscar and question the servants. He sent for a taxi, and—hallo! Where are you going?"

Donald had leaped to his feet, white with excitement, and had snatched up his hat. As the reader will readily understand, what Nipper had told him had more than confirmed his suspicions. There was no longer any doubt in his mind that the man he had seen with Vera and Sir Hugh on the previous night was Paul Herman.

In half a dozen hurried sentences, he explained his theory to Nipper, and announced his intention of following Nelson Lee to Moscar Grange without a moment's delay. Then he ran downstairs, jumped into his cab, which had waited, drove to Waterloo, and arrived at Moscar Grange about half-past two.

Here again, however, a fresh disappointment awaited him. Nelson Lee was not there!

"Whilst we were telling him what happened last night," said the butler, "a telegram arrived from the Chief-Constable of Portsmouth, saying that Sir Hugh was lying unconscious at the hospital there. The wire said that Sir Hugh had tried to commit suicide last night, and—"

"Yes, I know all about that," interrupted Donald impatiently. "So Mr. Lee has gone to Portsmouth, has he?"

"Yes, sir."

"I must follow him at once. What time is the next train?"

"I'm afraid there isn't a train before half-past four, sir."

Donald ground his teeth in impotent chagrin. But there was no help for it. He had not the means to engage a special train. For nearly two hours he paced to and fro on the station platform. Then he boarded the incoming train, and was back at the Royal Hospital two hours later.

"Is Mr. Nelson Lee here?" he asked of the hall-porter.

"Yes, sir. He's in the house-surgeon's room. This way, sir."

Nelson Lee listened to Donald's story with the profoundest interest, but made no comment until it was finished. Then he said:

"You haven't told me anything I didn't know. The house-surgeon has already told me all you told him last night, and I can only wonder that you and he hadn't wit enough to guess the cause of Sir Hugh's peculiar behaviour."

"You think he was insane?"

"Not at all. Herman is evidently a hypnotist, that's all. He hypnotised Miss Langford, and forced her to accompany him and Sir Hugh to Portsmouth. When they reached Gunter's Wharf, where Herman had probably a boat in waiting, he hypnotised Sir Hugh, ordered him to count five hundred, and then to blow his brains out."

"By Jove! I never thought of that!" exclaimed Donald. "That is the true explanation without a doubt. And where do you think Herman has taken Vera?"

The detective shook his head.

"That's a question I cannot possibly answer at present," he said. "I hope, however, to be able to answer it when Sir Hugh recovers consciousness again, if ever he does. That's why I'm waiting here."

"Then he has recovered consciousness once, has he?"

"Yes, at about half-past eleven this morning. The house-surgeon immediately summoned the police, and they questioned him for nearly half an hour, when he relapsed into unconsciousness again."

"And what did he tell them?" asked Donald eagerly.

"Nothing," said Nelson Lee. "Although he was perfectly conscious, he couldn't tell them how he came to Portsmouth, or who his companion was, or what had become of Miss Langford. His mind, in fact, was a perfect blank with regard to everything that happened last night."

"Impossible!" cried Donald. "He was lying!"

"Not at all," said Nelson Lee. "When Herman hypnotised him he evidently ordered him to forget everything that had happened with regard to the abduction of Miss Langford."

Donald made a gesture of despair.

"If your theory is correct," he said, "what hope is there if our being able to learn what has become of Vera, even if Sir Hugh recovers consciousness again."

The detective smiled, and shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm a bit of a hypnotist myself," he said. "If Sir Hugh regains consciousness, I shall try my hand on him. That is to say, I shall hypnotise him, and order him to tell me everything that—"

Before he could complete the sentence the door opened and the house-surgeon came in. He nodded to Donald, and turned excitedly to Nelson Lee.

"Come upstairs quickly," he said. "Sir Hugh has just recovered consciousness again,

but is sinking fast. There's not a moment to be lost if you wish to question him."

They hurried upstairs, and the house-surgeon opened the door of one of the small private wards which were set apart for special cases.

There was only one bed in the ward, and on this bed lay Sir Hugh Langford, with his head swathed in bandages. On one side of the bed stood a nurse; on the other sat a sergeant of police, who rose to his feet when the three men entered, and respectfully saluted.

Even Donald's untrained eyes perceived at a single glance that the house-surgeon had not exaggerated Sir Hugh's condition when he had said that he was "sinking fast." The baronet's face had assumed that ghastly, greyish-green tint which is one of the surest signs of impending death. His lips were absolutely bloodless, and his breathing was so faint as to be almost imperceptible.

He was staring straight ahead, with a peculiar vacant look in his eyes, when the three men entered the ward. At the sight of Donald a frown that was almost a scowl distorted his face; but it quickly vanished when he saw Nelson Lee, and was succeeded by a startled expression of mingled alarm and surprise.

"You recognise me, I see," said the detective, bending over the bed and speaking in a low, gentle voice. "But don't be frightened. I've only come to ask you a few questions."

He paused, and looked at the sick man fixedly for about thirty seconds; then he made a series of quick passes with his hands, and said quietly, but very firmly:

"Tell me exactly what happened last evening. You were with your niece and Mr. Mandeville, of Hartop Manor, but they both disappeared, leaving you standing alone on the wharf with a revolver in your hand. You counted up to five hundred, and then you shot yourself. Why did you do that? Tell me everything!"

"Yes, yes!" cried Sir Hugh Langford almost fiercely. "I will tell you everything! Write down what I tell you, and I will sign it in the presence of these witnesses. Quick! I know I am dying, and I do not wish to die without first exposing that scoundrel Mandeville!"

The detective whipped out his notebook and his fountain-pen, and seated himself on the edge of the bed.

"I'm ready," he said quietly.

"Last night, about half-past seven, Mr. Mandeville came to the Grange in his motor-car," said Sir Hugh, speaking slowly and deliberately, so as to give the detective time to write down what he said. "He confessed that he was Paul Herman, alias Number One, and he told me what had happened at Hartop Manor. He said he was about to flee the country, and he further informed me that he was the owner of a turbine yacht, known as the San Miguel, and also of a small

island which he had purchased some years ago in order to have a place to flee to when the crash came.

"The yacht, he said, was then at Portsmouth, and was always kept ready to sail at an hour's notice. The island, he said, was off the Azores. Nobody on the island, or on the yacht, knew that he was Paul Herman, or that he had any connection with the League of the Iron Hand. They only knew him as a wealthy Portuguese named Dom Jose da Silva.

"Mr. Mandeville, as you know, was madly in love with my niece, Miss Vera Langford. He was in possession of certain letters of mine, of a compromising nature, by means of which he forced me to aid his suit. His object in coming to the Grange last night was to offer to give me the letters on condition that I helped him to kidnap Vera and take her away with him.

"When I asked him how he proposed to persuade my niece to go with him, he said he was a hypnotist, and he would hypnotise her and command her to accompany him. To this—to my eternal shame—I consented; and he hypnotised Vera in the drawing-room. Then, after telling the servants we were going up to London to see a friend of Vera's who was seriously ill, we all three left the Grange in Mr. Mandeville's car.

"We abandoned the car on the outskirts of Petersfield and came to Portsmouth by train. Mr. Mandeville had wired to the captain of the yacht from Petersfield, and a boat was awaiting him at Gunter's Wharf. As soon as he had handed Vera into the boat, he drew me aside and gave me the letters, which I at once tore up and threw into the sea. Then I found that he was looking at me in a peculiar way, and almost before I had realised what was happening, he had hypnotised me in the same way that he had hypnotised Vera!

"After putting a revolver into my hand, he ordered me to count five hundred, and then to place the muzzle of the revolver to my right temple and press the trigger. At the same time he commanded me to forget everything that had happened since half-past seven.

"He then took his seat in the boat, by the side of Vera, and ordered the men to push off to the yacht. After his departure I started counting, and I had been counting about ten minutes or a quarter of an hour when Mr. Stuart rushed up to me and began to question me. I remember seeing him now, but at the time I was unconscious of his presence; and as soon as I had counted five hundred I raised the revolver to my head and pulled the trigger. After that I remember no more till I came to my senses this morning, and found myself in this ward."

During the greater part of this recital Sir Hugh's voice had been astonishingly strong and clear, his thirst for revenge sustaining him and enabling him to defy his rapidly-increasing weakness. Towards the end of

his confession, however, his voice began to fail; and as he finished his story he sank back on his pillow, gasping for breath, and apparently in the last stage of exhaustion.

"To the best of your knowledge, then," said Nelson Lee. "Paul Herman, alias Squire Mandeville, alias Dom Jose da Silva, is now on his way to the Azores, together with Miss Langford, on board the San Miguel?"

Sir Hugh nodded, and held out a shaking hand.

"Give me the pen and let me sign!" he murmured in a low, hoarse whisper. "Raise me up—quick!"

The detective placed the pen in his hand, and raised him into a sitting position again. Once, twice, thrice, Sir Hugh essayed in vain to write his name; then, with a final effort, he scrawled, "Hugh Langford" at the foot of the page.

Then the pen dropped from his trembling fingers, his head fell back on the detective's shoulder, and scarcely had the house-surgeon and the sergeant appended their signatures, as witnesses, ere an ominous rattle announced that the end had come, and that Vera Langford's guardian was dead.

OFF TO THE AZORES!

TWO hours later five men were engaged in earnest consultation in the private room of the Chief Constable of Portsmouth.

One of the men was the Chief Constable himself, and another was the borough coroner; the third was the Home Secretary—who chanced to be in the town for the purpose of addressing an important political meeting—the fourth was the Admiral in Command of the Portsmouth squadron; and the fifth was Nelson Lee.

At the moment when we enter the room the detective had just finished describing the events of the previous night, and had read Sir Hugh's confession.

"So now you are in possession of all the facts of the case, so far as they are known at present," he concluded. "Probably you are wondering why I have invited you four gentlemen to meet me here at such short notice. Before I explain my object, I wish to know if I may take it for granted that you all agree with me that no effort should be spared to lay Paul Herman by the heels, not only for his share in the crimes committed by the League of the Iron Hand, but also in order to rescue Miss Langford from his clutches."

"Certainly!" said his four companions in the same breath.

"And you agree that the sooner he is laid by the heels, the better?"

"Of course," said the Home Secretary. "On my return to London to-morrow, I will immediately lay the facts of the case before the Foreign Secretary. He, in his turn, will at once communicate with the Portuguese Government—in whose jurisdiction the island

lies—and proceedings will be instituted forthwith for Herman's extradition."

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"That would be a terribly slow and cumbersome proceeding," he said. "In the meantime, Herman might hear of the steps which were being taken against him, and might disappear from the island, taking Miss Langford with him."

"Well, have you a better plan?" inquired the Home Secretary.

"I have!" said Nelson Lee. "And it is for the purpose of laying my plan before you that I have invited you to meet me here. Of course, I am only a private individual, with no official standing, and I have no claim to—"

The Home Secretary interrupted him, with a gesture of dissent.

"You have every claim to take the lead in this affair," he said. "To you, more than any other man, England owes the fact that the League of the Iron Hand has been exterminated. As a member of the Government, I have no hesitation in saying that any plan which you propose shall be faithfully carried out."

"You mean that?" said Nelson Lee.

"Absolutely. What is your plan?"

"To follow Herman at once, in the swiftest available vessel the Navy can provide," said Nelson Lee, "to land a party of bluejackets on the island, to surround the house, to rescue Miss Langford, to arrest Herman, and bring him back to England."

The audacity of the detective's plan fairly took his hearer's breath away.

"But—but think of the enormous difficulties in the way of carrying out such a plan!" gasped the Home Secretary.

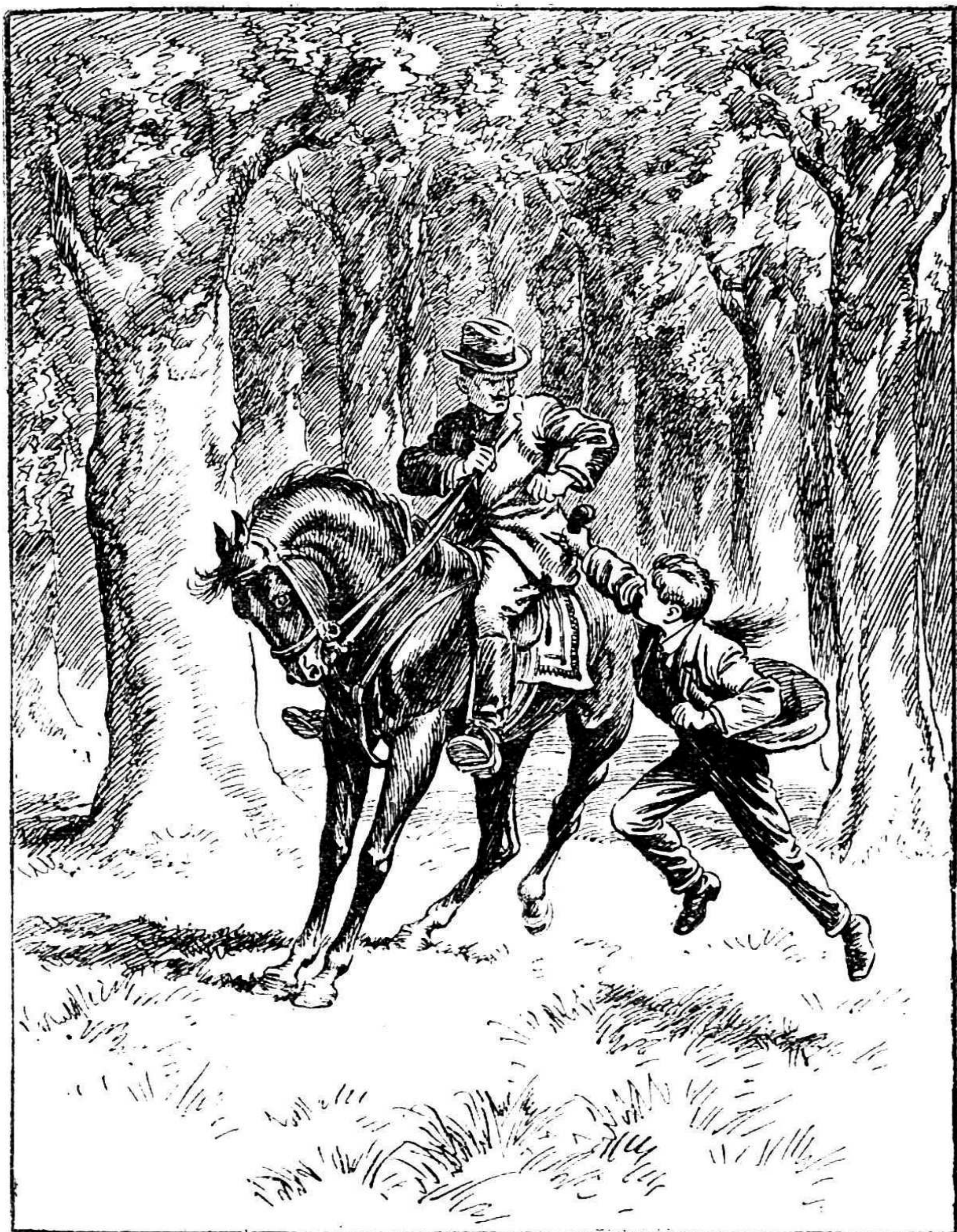
"I have thought of them!" said the detective calmly. "And the difficulties are insurmountable, unless you gentlemen consent to smooth them away. For instance," he continued, turning to the coroner, "my scheme is possibly doomed to failure unless I can count on your co-operation. That is why I asked you to be present at this conference."

"I'm sure I shall be only too glad to do anything in my power to further your scheme," said the coroner. "But in what way can I help you?"

"It is quite possible," said Nelson Lee, "that Herman may have confederates in this country who will keep him informed of all that happens. If you insist on holding a full inquiry into the circumstances of Sir Hugh Langford's death—as you, of course, have a right to do—the news will be published to the world that Mandeville was Herman, and that he left for the Azores last night in the San Miguel. If his confederates cabled this news to the Azores, Herman would instantly take to flight, and we might lose him."

"I quite see that," said the coroner. "What is it, then, you wish me to do?"

"I wish you," replied Nelson Lee, "to just formally open the inquest to-morrow,



At sight of the lad, Herman uttered a cry of triumph, and thrust his hand in his pocket in quest of his revolver. But Nipper was too quick for him. With the swiftness of a lightning flash he whipped out Herman's revolver, levelled it at the horse, and pressed the trigger!

and then adjourn it for a week. Will you do that?"

"Certainly," agreed the coroner readily. "Thank you!" said Lee, and turned to the Home Secretary. "Will you help me, too, Sir George?" he asked.

"With all my heart! What am I to do?"

"First of all," said the detective, "I want you to issue a warrant for Herman's arrest at once, and place it in my hands for execution. Then I shall be glad if you will arrange with the Foreign Office to communicate with the Portuguese Government, and obtain their permission for a squad of bluejackets to be landed on the island in order to effect Paul Herman's arrest."

"It shall be done," promised the Home Secretary.

"Finally," concluded Lee, turning to the admiral, "I want you to place at my disposal, not later than noon to-morrow, a vessel such as I have described. Can that be managed?"

"A gunboat shall be placed at your disposal, Mr. Lee," said the admiral.

.

And thus it came about that shortly after twelve on the morrow the gunboat Radium slipped her moorings and steamed out of Portsmouth Harbour, en route for the Azores. In addition to her crew she carried four passengers—Nelson Lee, Derrick O'Brien, Nipper, and Donald Stuart.

SWEPT OVERBOARD!

FOR the first two days the voyage of the Radium was as uneventful as can well be imagined. Aided by favouring breezes, the gunboat made such excellent progress that by noon on Friday she had covered nearly a thousand miles, and was within four hundred and fifty miles of her destination.

And then the trouble began.

Shortly after noon on Friday, a sudden commotion was heard in the engine-room, followed by a series of reports, which rivalled those of artillery for loudness. At the same time the vessel's propellers ceased to revolve; and when Nelson Lee—who was lunching with the officers in the ward-room—rushed out to ascertain the meaning of the uproar, he was met by the second engineer, who informed him that the engines had broken down, and that further progress was impossible until the necessary repairs had been effected.

So for twelve hours the vessel lay helpless and motionless, whilst the engineers and artificers toiled and sweated over their job. Then at last the joyful news was announced that the damage had been repaired, and once more the Radium was forging her way westward.

But her troubles were not yet over!

Until Sunday evening all went smoothly; but at about five o'clock—by which time she was within a hundred miles of the Azores—

the gunboat ran into the teeth of a westerly gale, which by six o'clock had developed into a veritable hurricane.

For eight hours the little vessel struggled gallantly against the elements, and then, at about two o'clock on Sunday morning, the climax came. The engines, which had only been temporarily repaired, broke down again.

Nipper was in his bunk at the time, fast asleep, despite the uproar of the gale, and dreaming of his last fight at St. Frank's. Awakened by the sudden stoppage of the engines, he sprang out of his bunk, slipped into his clothes, and hurried up on deck.

The night was intensely dark, and the gunboat was pitching and rolling like a thing bewitched, whilst ever and anon great seas broke over her and swept her deck from stem to stern. The port watch was on duty, and, as Nipper emerged on the quarter-deck, one of the men put up his hand and waved him back.

"Go below!" he shouted, raising his voice to make himself heard above the roaring of the sea and the howling of the wind. "It ain't safe for the likes of you to be on deck in a storm like this."

"Rats!" shouted Nipper, in a cheeky voice. "I wasn't born yesterday. What's up? Why have we stopped?"

The answer was never given, for at that moment the gunboat gave a sudden violent lurch, which flung Nipper off his feet. Ere he could pick himself up, an enormous sea broke over the port quarter, and came roaring across the deck like a miniature Niagara. Quick as thought the bluejacket sprang towards him, with the intention of dragging him into safety. But the hungry sea was quicker still, for even as the man stooped down and grabbed Nipper by the arm, the hissing cascade thundered down on them, and swept both of them overboard.

Nipper had a very hazy recollection of struggling madly to keep his head above the surface of the boiling sea; of seeing the lights of the gunboat gradually vanish in the distance; of turning over on his back and allowing the waves to carry him whithersoever they willed; of falling into a sort of mental torpor, from which he was suddenly roused by the sullen roar of breakers.

Turning swiftly on his side again, he dashed the water from his eyes, and eagerly peered through the darkness. Dimly he perceived the glistening line of surf and the blurred mass of a lofty cliff behind. Then a huge, foam-crested billow raised him on its smoking shoulder, bore him landwards at lightning speed, and finally flung him ashore, bruised and bleeding, with so much force that consciousness deserted him.

When his scattered sense returned the storm had passed away, and the newly risen sun was shining in a deep blue, cloudless sky. He was lying on a strip of sandy beach at the foot of the cliff he had seen before being washed ashore. Some distance on his right, rolling over and over in the surf, was the lifeless form of the bluejacket.

who had tried to save him, and who, less lucky than Nipper, had been dashed against a jagged spur of rock and killed on the spot.

Nipper dragged himself warily to his feet, and found, to his great relief, that he had escaped with nothing worse than a number of cuts and bruises.

With a view to taking stock of his surroundings, he decided to climb to the top of the cliff. Before doing so, he dragged the dead seaman beyond the reach of the waves; and as he did so a jack-knife fell out of the man's pocket. Little dreaming how useful the knife would prove, Nipper thrust it into his own pocket, covered the dead man's face with his handkerchief, and then swarmed up the steep and rugged cliff.

On reaching the summit, a sigh of relief rose to his lips. The island was inhabited. About three-quarters of a mile away he could see a white stone house of considerable size, standing in a well-kept park.

With hope renewed, Nipper struck a bee-line for the house, and presently came to a pair of iron gates, from which a winding drive led up to the house. The gates were closed and locked, and the inmates of the house had apparently not yet risen; for no sign of life was anywhere to be seen, many of the blinds were down, and no smoke was issuing from any of the chimneys.

"They aren't up yet," muttered Nipper, as he peered through the gates. "Now, what shall I do? Go up to the house and knock 'em up, or loaf around till I see somebody stirring?"

He decided on the former course, and a moment later he had climbed over the gates and was trudging up the drive. As he approached the house, he saw that one of the bed-room windows was open, and that a girl was sitting at the window, with her chin resting on her hands and her eyes fixed in a dreamy, far-away stare on the distant sea.

"Hello, there's somebody awake, after all!" mused Nipper. "She hasn't seen me yet, it seems. I'll step into the middle of the lawn and attract her attention."

Suiting the action to the word, he stepped on to the lawn in front of the house, and was just about to call to the girl, when he suddenly started back as though he had been struck.

Now that he had a full view of the girl's face, he recognised her instantly. It was Vera Langford. And even as he recognised her, the truth burst into his reeling brain.

He had been washed ashore on Paul Herman's island, and this was Paul Herman's house!

Scarcely had this amazing discovery dawned on him ere Vera caught sight of him, and quickly rose to her feet. Nipper instantly held up his hand as a warning to her to be cautious.

"Don't call out! Don't be alarmed!" he said, in a low but clear voice. "You're Miss Langford, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Vera, in an agitated voice. "You're Nipper. Is Mr. Nelson Lee here? Have you come to rescue me?"

"Mr. Lee isn't far away," said Nipper diplomatically. "And he's going to rescue you by and by. Is Paul Herman here?"

Vera shook her head, and a puzzled look crossed her face.

"Dom Jose da Silva, I mean," explained Nipper.

"Oh, yes; Dom Jose is here!" said Vera. "This is his house, and it was he who brought me here."

"Is everyone else in the house in bed?" Nipper asked.

"I believe so."

"Can you come out?"

"Yes."

"Then we'd better not talk here, for fear of somebody discovering me. Come down, and we'll go into the park, and I'll tell you all that's happened."

Vera disappeared from the window, and even as she did so, Nipper heard the sound of footsteps coming round the corner of the house.

Quivering with excitement, Nipper darted across the lawn and concealed himself behind a clump of bushes. And no sooner had he done so than Paul Herman, alias Dom Jose, strolled round the corner with the inevitable cigarette between his lips.

A moment later the front door opened, and Vera came out. At sight of Herman an involuntary cry of dismay burst from her lips.

"Ah, good morning!" said Herman, tossing away his cigarette and courteously raising his hat. "This is an unexpected pleasure. I didn't expect to find you astir so early. May I ask where you are going?"

"I—I'm going for a walk in the park!" faltered Vera.

"Delightful!" murmured Herman. "I will accompany you, and Bruno shall accompany us."

He stepped to the open door and whistled. Instantly a joyous bark was heard inside the house, and a full-grown mastiff dashed out and fawned at Herman's feet. Then, with ears erect and eyes aflame, he bounded across the lawn towards the clump of bushes behind which Nipper was concealed.

Nipper had seen the animal rush out of the house, and he realised that it was practically certain the hound would scent the presence of a stranger in the vicinity. He promptly thrust his hand into his pocket, whipped out the knife which had fallen from the dead bluejacket's pocket, and opened the blade.

Scarcely had he done so ere the mastiff gave vent to a low, suspicious growl, and then, as already described, he bounded towards the clump of bushes behind which Nipper was hiding.

Wondering at the dog's behaviour, Herman spun round on his heel with a startled exclamation.

"What's the meaning—?" he began; but

ere he could finish the sentence the mastiff came to a sudden halt on the near side of the clump, and began to bark excitedly.

"There must be somebody concealed behind those bushes," declared Herman, with a quick, suspicious glance at Vera. "I must investigate."

Suiting the action to the word, he drew a revolver from his pocket and strode across the lawn.

Seeing that further concealment was useless, Nipper sprang to his feet and emerged from behind the bushes. Herman recognised him at a glance, and pulled up with an involuntary cry of stupefaction.

"Nipper!" he gasped.

"That's me," said Nipper coolly.

For an instant Herman glared at him as though he doubted the evidence of his eyes, then he glanced at the mastiff and waved his hand.

"Seize him!" he cried hoarsely. "Good dog! Seize him, Bruno!"

With a sharp, excited yelp, the mastiff leaped at Nipper's throat. But Nipper was prepared for this. With the swiftness of a lightning flash he lunged out with his right—the hand which held the bluejacket's knife—and plunged the blade into the mastiff's heart.

As the dog fell writhing to the ground, in the throes of impending death, Herman flung up his hand with a savage imprecation and pressed the trigger of his revolver.

Crack!

Nipper threw up his arms, stumbled forward with a stifled groan, and sank in a huddled heap by the side of the dying dog.

At the same moment Vera uttered a low, despairing moan, covered her face with her hands, and fell fainting to the ground at the foot of the steps outside the front door.

For a moment Herman seemed undecided how to act. Quivering with suppressed excitement, he glanced at Vera, and then, with his revolver in his hand, he darted quickly across the lawn and stooped down to examine Nipper.

The events of the next half-dozen seconds followed each other with such bewildering rapidity that a detailed description is well nigh impossible.

Herman's bullet, it should be explained, had merely grazed Nipper's ear, and the nimble-witted youngster had only feigned to have been fatally wounded. And when Herman stooped down to examine him, he suddenly lashed out with his fist, planted his knuckles between the scoundrel's eyes, and sent him sprawling on his back.

As Herman fell, his revolver flew from his hand, and in less time than it takes to tell Nipper leaped to his feet, snatched up the revolver, and took to his heels with the fleetness of a hunted hare.

Foaming at the mouth with rage and chagrin, Herman picked himself up and dashed away in pursuit. But he was no match for the champion sprinter of St.

Frank's. At every stride Nipper increased his lead, and by the time that Herman had reached the confines of the park, Nipper had disappeared, and all trace of him was lost.

In the meantime the report of the revolver had awakened most of the servants, and when Herman returned to the house he found three or four of them gathered round Vera's unconscious form.

"What has happened, senor?" they cried, in Portuguese, as Herman approached.

Herman made no reply. It is doubtful, indeed, if he heard the question, for his brain was in a whirl of terror and despair.

How had Nipper come to the island? Why had he come? Who had come with him?

Obviously, he must have come in a vessel of some kind. But what kind? And where was the vessel now?

Had Nelson Lee come with him? It was highly probable—nay, it was practically certain! Then where was Nelson Lee now? Why had Nipper come to the house alone? Was Nelson Lee still aboard the vessel? Had he sent Nipper ashore to spy out the land? Or had he followed Nipper, and was lurking somewhere in the grounds?

Why had Nelson Lee and Nipper come to the island? Did they know, before they came, that the owner of the island was the fugitive president of the League of the Iron Hand? Had they discovered that Paul Herman, alias Squire Mandeville, alias Number One, was Dom Jose da Silva? Did they know that he had kidnapped Vera Langford? Had they traced him to the island? If so, how had they discovered these facts?

Such were a few of the questions which chased each other through Paul Herman's reeling brain as he approached the wondering servants who were gathered round the unconscious Vera.

"What has happened, senor?" they cried in chorus.

Without replying to their questions, without even glancing at Vera, Paul Herman strode into the house and snatched up a telescope which rested on a bracket in the entrance-hall. He then turned into one of the rooms and took out a fat roll of Bank of England notes, which he thrust into another pocket. Two minutes later he stood on the flat roof of the house, from which he commanded an uninterrupted view of the whole of the coast-line of the little island.

Raising his telescope to his eye, he focused it on a tiny bay on the east side of the island. A solitary vessel rode at anchor in the bay. It was the San Miguel—Herman's turbine yacht, in which he and Vera had voyaged from England. On board the yacht, as Herman knew, was a fast electric launch which could be lowered at a moment's notice.

He heaved a sigh of relief when he saw that the San Miguel was the only vessel in the bay. He had feared to see another vessel there—the vessel in which, as he sur-

mised, Nipper and Nelson Lee had come to the island.

He moved the glass up the east coast of the island, and round to the north. There was no vessel there. From the north he swept round to the west. There was no vessel there. His gaze travelled round to the south, then a savage imprecation rose to his lips.

A torpedo-gunboat, flying the British ensign was lying at anchor about two hundred yards from the shore. Being on the south side of the island, and the San Miguel being on the east side, the two vessels were invisible to each other; from which Herman guessed—and guessed correctly—that those on board the gunboat were unaware of the presence of the yacht, whilst those on board the yacht were equally ignorant of the presence of the gunboat.

"So that's how he came!" mused Herman, gazing at the gunboat and thinking of Nelson Lee. "Persuaded the Government to place a gunboat at his disposal. But he hasn't caught me yet. Even if he has already landed a party from the gunboat, I have still a sporting chance of beating him. If I can only get to the yacht, and lower the launch, before the hue and cry is raised, I can slip across to Fayal* and hide myself in Horta till I've time to hire a suitable vessel to take me across to New York."

But what about Vera Langford? Should he take her with him, or leave her behind?

For a moment, but only for a moment, Herman hesitated how to act. Then, realising how seriously he would handicap his chances of escape if he burdened himself with an unwilling companion, he reluctantly decided to leave her behind.

Tossing the telescope aside, he hastily descended from the roof. In the entrance-hall he encountered one of the servants, whose face was twitching with excitement, and whose glance was full of anxiety.

"Will you not now tell us what has happened, senor?" asked the servant eagerly. "Who fired that shot which we heard? Who slew the dog? Why did the senorita swoon?"

An almost imperceptible sigh of relief rose to Herman's lips. On seeing the servant's excited face his first thought had been that Vera had regained her senses and had betrayed him.

"The senorita, then, has not yet recovered from her swoon?" he said.

"No, senor."

"Have you carried her up to her room?"

"Not yet, senor. We have laid her on the couch in the dining-room."

"Well, carry her up to her room at once," said Herman. "I will join you there in a

few minutes, and tell you all that has happened."

Without giving the man time to reply, he hurried out of the house, ran round to a stone-flagged yard at the back, and darted into a stable in which stood a young and spirited horse.

Hastily untethering the halter by which it was secured, Herman led it out into the yard and sprang on to its back, without wasting time in saddling. A moment later he was galloping down the drive, en route for the little bay in which the San Miguel lay.

THE FATE OF PAUL HERMAN.

IT should here be explained that Herman's house was the only house on the island, and that his "retainers"—that is to say, the servants at the house and the officers and crew of the yacht—were its only inhabitants.

None of these men had the remotest idea that their employer was the notorious Paul Herman, or that he had any connection with the League of the Iron Hand. They believed that he was a wealthy Portugee, named Dom Jose da Silva; and it is only due to them to say that if they had known his real character, there was not a man amongst them who would not have denounced him to the police without a moment's hesitation.

If Nipper had been aware of these facts at the moment when he knocked Paul Herman down and snatched up his revolver, it is highly probable that his subsequent course of action would have been very different from what it actually was.

That is to say, if he had known that the servants were ignorant of Herman's identity—if he had known that they would have been only too willing to help him to secure so notorious a scoundrel—he would have covered Herman with the revolver and would have kept him at bay until the servants—who had been awakened by Herman's shot—arrived on the scene. He would then have told them who their master was, and would have called upon them to seize and bind him.

Being ignorant of the true state of affairs, however, Nipper took it for granted that the servants knew who Herman was, and that they were in league with him.

Naturally, therefore, when he knocked Paul Herman down, and leaped to his feet and snatched up Herman's revolver, his first thought was to make his escape before the servants appeared.

For some time after he had given Herman the slip, Nipper continued to run with unabated speed, neither knowing nor caring whither he was going. Then, panting and out of breath, but satisfied that he was safe for the present, he flung himself down at the foot of a lofty tree, almost in the centre of a little wood.

The wood was about midway between the house and the bay in which the San Miguel

* Fayal is one of the largest islands of the Azores group, and Horta is its principal seaport.

OUR DETECTIVE STORY SECTION

lay. Nipper, however, was ignorant of this fact, since both house and bay, as well as the yacht, were invisible from the wood. Needless to say, he was equally ignorant of the fact that the gunboat lay at anchor on the south coast of the island.

As a matter of fact, the whereabouts of the gunboat was the first subject which engaged his thoughts when, after flinging himself down at the foot of the tree, he started to review the situation and consider what was best to be done.

As the reader will remember, Nipper had been roused from sleep, about two o'clock in the morning, by the sudden stoppage of the gunboat's engines. After hurriedly dressing, he made his way on deck with the object of ascertaining the cause of the stoppage, but had been washed overboard before his object had been achieved. He was still in ignorance, therefore, of why the gunboat's engines had stopped.

Had the engines broken down again, as they had done on Friday afternoon? Was that the cause of the sudden stoppage? And if it was, how had it fared with the gunboat since?

Had she foundered in the storm? Had she been driven ashore on one of the many islands which compose the Azores group? Had she ridden out the gale? If so, and the crew were now engaged in repairing the damaged engines, how long would it be before she reached Paul Herman's island?

"If she weathered the storm," muttered Nipper to himself, after a long and earnest cogitation, "she's bound to arrive here to-day or to-morrow, and if I can only keep out of the clutches of Herman and his men until she arrives, I'll be as safe as the Bank of England! On the other hand, if the gunboat has been wrecked, and the guy'nor and all aboard have been drowned——"

He left the sentence unfinished, but the despairing look which crossed his face was a sufficient indication of the fate which he knew would be in store for him.

"However, it's no use crying out till you're hurt!" he continued philosophically. "In the meantime I'd better get to know, if possible, how big the island is.—— And I can't do better, by way of a beginning, than climb to the top of this tree and get a bird's-eye view of the place."

Suiting the action to the word, Nipper swarmed up the tree at the foot of which he had been resting.

"Hump! It's a smaller island than I expected!" he mused, as he perched himself astride one of the topmost branches. "I can see all round it from here. There's Herman's house, and—hallo!—there's a vessel over there! That's Herman's turbine yacht, no doubt. She's a smart-looking craft, but I'd rather have seen——"

His musings ended in a rapturous cry of delight, for at that moment, as his circling

glance swept southward, his eyes fell on the gunboat.

"The Radium!" he cried, nearly falling off the branch in his excitement. "Hurrah! I'm all right now! I've only to make a bee-line for the gunboat, and tell the guy'nor what I've seen, and the rest will be as easy as eating pie!"

His youthful face aglow with triumph, he quickly swarmed down to the foot of the tree. Scarcely had he reached the ground ere the sound of approaching hoofs fell on his ears, and before he had time to conceal himself a horse came galloping through the wood with Paul Herman on it.

At sight of the lad Herman uttered a cry of triumph, and thrust his hand in his pocket in quest of his revolver. But Nipper was too quick for him. With the swiftness of a lightning flash he whipped out Herman's revolver, levelled it at the horse, and pressed the trigger.

True to its aim, the bullet struck the horse on the near fore-leg, but even as the wounded animal crashed to the ground, Herman nimbly leaped off its back and rushed at Nipper with a shout of malignant fury.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Three times in quick succession Nipper fired, but excitement marred his aim, and all the shots flew wide. Ere he could fire again Herman hurled himself upon him, bore him to the ground, and wrested the revolver from his grasp.

"You can say your prayers now!" hissed Herman, as he planted one knee on Nipper's chest and brandished the revolver in front of the boy's face. "To you, as much as anybody, I owe my present plight; but whatever happens in the future I shall at least have the satisfaction of knowing that you didn't live to see——"

The taunt was never completed, for at that moment a crackling of the underbush was heard, and the next instant Nelson Lee dashed through the trees, followed by O'Brien, Donald Stuart, and a squad of blue-jackets.

Crack!

A revolver barked—it was Nelson Lee's—and a bullet struck Herman on the right wrist, shattering the bone.

With a piercing shriek, Herman dropped the revolver and staggered to his feet; but even as the detective rushed towards him, Paul Herman swiftly stooped down, picked up the revolver with his left hand, and clapped the muzzle to his own temple.

Like an arrow from a bow, Nelson Lee leaped forward. But he was too late. Ere he could reach Paul Herman's side the latter's finger pressed the trigger, and the next instant a lifeless form, lying at Nelson Lee's feet, was all that remained of the former chief of the League of the Iron Hand.

The rest is soon told. The breakdown of

the gunboat's engines had proved to be a very trifling matter, and as soon as the storm had abated the damage had been quickly repaired. The Radium had then put back to the island—past which she had drifted in the gale—and had anchored off the south coast. Nelson Lee and Donald, accompanied by a squad of bluejackets, had then rowed ashore, and had been on their way to Paul Herman's house—which they had sighted from the gunboat's deck—when they had heard the four shots which Nipper had fired in the wood.

What happened after that the reader already knows, and it only remains to add that after Nipper had told the story of his escape and his subsequent adventures, a move was made for the house.

By that time Vera had recovered from her faint, and had told the servants what Nipper had told her, namely, that “Dom Jose da

Silva” was Paul Herman. The result was that the servants received the detective and his companions with open arms, declaring—which was quite true—that they would have denounced their master long ago if they had known who he was.

Over the meeting between Vera and Donald we will draw a veil, since such reunions are too sacred to be described in cold print. Let it suffice to say that when the Radium returned to England, five days later, the reception which was accorded to the two young lovers by Press and public alike was hardly less enthusiastic than that accorded to Nelson Lee, Nipper, and O'Brien.

Within a month of their return Donald Stuart led Vera Langford to the altar in the parish church of Moscar, the important role of “best man” being enacted by Nelson Lee.

THE END.

BEGINNING NEXT WEEK!

*ANOTHER POWERFUL DETECTIVE
SERIAL STORY OF NELSON LEE*

entitled :—

THE SILVER DWARF!

It is a story that holds the reader spellbound from the first chapter to the conclusion.

Don't Forget ! It Starts Next Week !

OUR STUDIO PORTRAIT STUDIES

OF FAMOUS ST. FRANK'S CHARACTERS.

No. 3. LONGFELLOW (Clarence Fellowes).



Good Luck flows
from
Clarence Fellowes

(Continued from page 14.)

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors took a great delight in watching the efforts of Wellborne & Co. to extricate themselves from the muddy pond. Two minutes earlier, the three Honourables had been as neat as new pins—attired in the latest cut clothing, with spotless linen, and glittering footwear, to say nothing of gleaming toppers. Now they fairly wallowed in thick, greasy, oozing mud.

"Go it, Aubrey—you're winning!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Fall in again, Cyril—you're not quite covered!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Tuppence for the first chap who makes the shore!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The St. Frank's crowd, having amused themselves by watching for several minutes longer, recrossed the road and went back into Mr. Binks' tuck shop—much to that gentleman's relief. He had begun to fear that he had lost his customers.

Wellborne and Co. did not return. Even if they had desired to do so, they would have been kept away. The odour of that mud would not have improved Mr. Binks' stock.

So the three Honourables, looking quite terrible, dragged their way towards the River House School. They left behind them a trail of mud and a most unpleasant scent. The whole village street was saturated with it for a short time.

The Hon. Aubrey and his companions were in a vile temper, and they were absolutely determined to get their revenge, sooner or later.

In the meantime, Alf Brent and Armstrong and the rest continued their way to the school, after regaling themselves on ice cream and jam puffs, and cream tarts. They arrived in the Triangle just in time to see a telegraph boy riding up to the Ancient House steps—he had, in fact, passed them in the lane.

Nelson Lee was chatting with Mr. Clifford, the sports master. And the telegraph boy handed Lee a buff coloured envelope. The famous schoolmaster-detective had arrived an hour or so earlier.

During the holidays he had been working so hard that he really looked somewhat run down. He had happened to strike two exceedingly interesting cases and had devoted all his attention to them, just managing to clear things up in time for the new term.

For nights, Nelson Lee had enjoyed only two or three hours sleep. There were lines under his eyes, but he made light of them.

"I'll warrant this telegram is from Nipper," said Nelson Lee, as he ripped open the envelope. "I wonder if the young rascal is asking for extra time? I expected to find the caravan party here. They ought to have arrived yesterday, to be really on the safe side."

Mr. Clifford smiled, and Lee unfolded the telegram.

"Oh, indeed!" he murmured gruffly.

The sports master looked at him with frank curiosity.

"Yes, it's from Nipper," said Lee. "Read it."

Mr. Clifford did so, and then grinned. That telegram was rather long. And, as the gov'nor had said, it was from me. I had filled up nearly two telegraph forms. I explained about the attack on Lord Bushwick, how we had witnessed the affair, and added that we were required as witnesses, and couldn't possibly arrive at St. Frank's until at least two days had elapsed. If Lee didn't believe it, he could ring up the police.

"Do you think it's an excuse, Mr. Lee?" smiled Mr. Clifford.

"Well, hardly," replied the detective. "I honestly believe that Nipper made his plans so that he should arrive here to-day. But if the boys are required as witnesses by the police—well, there is nothing for them but to obey. I don't suppose it will matter in any case. The school won't shake down into the usual run of things until the beginning of next week."

Soon afterwards, Nelson Lee showed the telegram to Dr. Malcolm Stafford. The Head was rather grave at first, but couldn't help smiling. And he agreed with Nelson Lee that they could do nothing.

Therefore, soon afterwards Lee despatched a reply telegram, saying that the caravan party was to hold itself at the disposal of the police until they were no longer required. Then they were to hurry to the school as quickly as possible.

When we got that wire we all rejoiced.

"Everything's all right, you chaps," I said to Handforth and the rest, as they lounged about the camp. "We've got official permission, and we're as safe as houses."

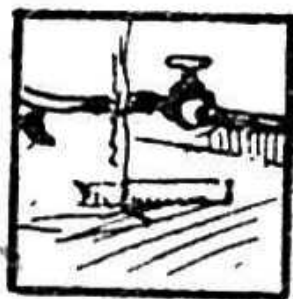
"Good egg!" said Reggie Pitt. "Let's hope the police delay matters for about a week."

"Rather!"

But there was not much chance of that. However, as we discussed the situation about the camp, we little dreamed of the startling circumstances that were destined to happen at St. Frank's almost at once—circumstances that would completely alter our own programme.

CHAPTER V.

THE WORKINGS OF FATE.



THE Hon. Aubrey De Wellborne scowled viciously.

"Yes, by gad, we'll pay them back!" he declared fiercely. "And, what's more, we'll send in a bill of damages to Dr. Stafford. I'm not goin' to have my clothes ruined for nothin'!"

"Rather not!" agreed the Hon. Bertram.

"Those dashed cads will have to pay! I'm goin' to claim twenty-five quid for my lot."

"Same here!" said the Hon. Cyril.

Wellborne nodded.

"Of course, we shall have to go easy," he remarked. "I mean, we can't very well explain why those beasts chucked us into the pond. There'll probably be an inquiry, and—"

He paused, as he glanced out of the window.

"Hallo!" he went on. "Here comes Fullwood!"

"An' his pals, too!" added Carstairs.

The River House boys were in their own study, from the window of which they could see out upon the gravel drive. The school, really, was a big, old-fashioned house which had originally been occupied as a private dwelling. Dr. Molyneux Hogge had bought the place, and turned it into a school.

The Honourables did not look exceedingly pleased, for they knew that Fullwood and Co. were coming along to see them. These St. Frank's juniors were kindred spirits, of course—but, somehow, Wellborne and Co. were not feeling any too well disposed towards the St. Frank's juniors just now.

Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell, the cads of the Remove, arrived. They entered the study as though it belonged to them. They were attired in the latest fashion, spotless from head to foot, and extremely nutty. Ralph Leslie Fullwood grinned cheerfully as he nodded.

"How goes it, my lad?" he asked. "Plenty of sport durin' the holidays? Did you spot any winners? I did pretty well at Kempton Park—"

"Blow Kempton Park!" snapped Wellborne. "Who told you to come here?"

Fullwood stared.

"I thought you'd like to see us," he said.

"Well, you thought wrong!" retorted the Hon. Aubrey. "I don't like to see you! Clear out! You an' your St. Frank's crowd make me sick!"

Gulliver and Bell began to look wrathful, but Fullwood merely grinned. He sat down, and lit a cigarette.

"As bad as that, eh?" he remarked coolly. "Of course, we've heard all about the pond incident, but you mustn't worry over that, Welly. You don't think we sympathise with Armstrong an' his gang? We hate the cads like poison—we're on your side."

Wellborne grunted.

"I'm not feelin' pally towards any St. Frank's chaps!" he said flatly. "Those bally rotters ruined all my clothin'—absolutely mucked up one of the best suits I ever had made!"

"Well, you can't blame me for that," said Ralph Leslie. "Don't be an ass, Wellborne! We're pals—always have been. Have a smoke. I want to give you some

good tips for Helmford races next week. I've got some rippin' information—straight from the giddy stable."

The Hon. Aubrey grunted again.

"Oh, all right—you can stay if you want to," he said grudgingly. "Thanks—I'll take one of those fags. But don't talk about that pond affair. If you do, I'll get wild."

The visitors remained discreetly silent on the subject. They could easily appreciate the fact that their hosts were still somewhat sore. And the conversation turned into other channels.

As a matter of fact, Fullwood and Co. had come expressly for the purpose of holding a racing confab. Backing horses was a serious crime both at St. Frank's and River House—a crime punishable by expulsion. But the Nuts indulged in "havin' a bit on the gee-gees" as quite a regular thing. They were always extremely cautious, and had never actually been caught so far.

They considered it very manly to smoke, and to associate with racing men and book-makers and the like. Unless they did that sort of thing, they were namby pamby. This, of course, was their own view. Among the decent fellows, they were always regarded as a set of snobs and cads.

Wellborne took a cigarette, and fitted it into an elaborate holder.

"All right—here's a light," said Fullwood. "Have a look at this."

He produced from his pocket a little nickel instrument—quite a pretty affair, standing on four claw-like legs. He put it on the table, and Wellborne and Co. stared at it.

"What's that thing?" asked the Hon. Cyril.

"One of those patent lighters," replied Fullwood. "As a matter of fact, I brought it here as a present for you chaps, but after the way you treated us when we came in I meant to take it away again. Still, it's all right now, so I'll leave it."

"Does it work?" asked Wellborne dubiously.

"Of course it works," retorted Fullwood. "We've got two in our study. I spotted 'em in Regent Street, the other day. Look! As simple as you like!"

He touched a little lever at the top of the lighter, and a spark instantly appeared igniting a little wick. And a steady white light burned with perfect serenity.

"I say, that's pretty good!" remarked the Hon. Aubrey, lighting his cigarette.

"Thanks awfully, Fully. Decent of you to remember us. It'll come in pretty handy."

"Put it out, you ass," said the Hon. Cyril. "Don't want to burn all the petrol away. I suppose you use petrol in the thing?"

"Petrol or benzene," agreed Fullwood.

"But you needn't worry about keeping it alight. It'll burn for hours. Don't you

see what a big container it's got? You can use it as a night light, if you want to. Just leave it there, and see how beautifully it works."

It seemed a trivial affair, but that little incident was to mean much later. The automatic lighter was left burning in the centre of the table. A tiny glow burned at the wick, but it was so small as to be hardly noticeable. And the racing specialists proceeded to compare notes regarding their activities during the holidays.

The study was fairly blue with smoke when the door opened, and Hal Brewster looked in. Brewster was a thoroughly decent sort—one of the best fellows in the school, and quite popular at St. Frank's, where he was a frequent visitor.

"I want to have a word with you, Wellborne," he said. "Pouf! You filthy rotters! This study smells like a pub! Haven't you got more sense than to smoke like chimneys on the first day of term?"

"Mind your own business!" said Wellborne.

"Smoking is a rotten, dirty habit!" said Brewster warmly. "It's not so bad when you're grown up—but it's beastly for a boy. Besides, it's against all regulations. Not that I'm interfering. If you're copped, don't blame me."

Wellborne glared.

"I shall blame you!" he snapped. "Shut that door, you fool! All the smoke's drifting out into the passage."

Hal Brewster chuckled.

"Old Wragg was out there a minute ago," he remarked cheerfully. "He's got a pretty long nose, too!"

"Shut that door!" roared the Hon. Aubrey. "An' get out! If you don't clear at once, we'll kick you out!"

Brewster didn't move.

"Come and do it!" he invited.

"By gad, I will!" bellowed Wellborne.

He was still in a temper from the other affair, and here he saw an opportunity of relieving his feelings. He threw his cigarette down, and rushed round the room. The other cads jumped to their feet, too.

"Lend a hand!" shouted the Hon. Aubrey.

"Anythin' to oblige," said Fullwood.

He was grinning, for this affair was after his own heart, too. For half-a-dozen of them to pile on to one fellow was just in Fullwood's style. An evenly contested fight was never suitable for Ralph Leslie.

The Nuts dashed at Brewster, and seized him. The next moment the leader of the Commoners was yanked forcibly through the doorway. But the cads had made another mistake.

Out in the passage were Georgie Glynn and Dave Ascott, Brewster's particular chums—to say nothing of Kingswood and Nofton and Robinson and Driscoll and

Buller and Grant. In fact, the passage seemed to be full of Commoners.

"Back up, you chaps!" hailed Brewster cheerfully.

"Hurrah!"

The Commoners sailed into the attack.

They had been hoping for something of this kind—a good excuse to have a scrap with the Honourables. They considered it very bad form to let the first day of term go by without squashing Wellborne and Co.

The Nuts received the shock of their lives.

They had no sooner grasped Brewster than the crowd of fellows came surging into the study. In the next moment a free fight was in progress.

"You—you cads!" hooted the Hon. Aubrey. "We've been tricked!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Don't you dare to touch us!" howled Fullwood. "We don't belong to your rotten school—"

"Thank goodness for that!" said Brewster. "We've got quite enough rotters here without you! You're going to be kicked out—and the shortest way will be through the window."

Fullwood and Co., accordingly, were hoofed out through the window. They tried to put up a fight but they really had no chance, Brewster and Co. fell upon them, and they were pitched out, one after the other. They arrived in disordered heaps in the courtyard. And, picking themselves up, they fled.

Wellborne and Co., in the meantime were dealt with drastically.

They were held down on the floor of their own study, and the Commoners proceeded to punish them in a fitting manner. On the table there was a box of a hundred cigarettes. Taking Wellborne first, they held him firmly, and proceeded to jam cigarettes into his mouth until that aperture was full. Then they ordered Wellborne to chew.

From the point of view of the Commoners, it was all extremely funny. But Wellborne and Co. saw no humour in the situation.

When it came to Carstair's turn, he struggled so violently that it was only with difficulty that he was held down. He kicked madly, and one of his boots struck a small side table with a crash.

The table overturned, smashing a pile of cups and saucers. And, a minute later Mr. Wragg strode into the study.

"Good Heavens!" shouted the under master. "What—what is this unseemly disturbance?"

"Just a little lark, sir," said Ascott breathlessly.

"A lark!" retorted Mr. Wragg. "I'm amazed! How dare you? Boys! You will come with me at once! Tea is served! You will all write two hundred lines for acting in a disgraceful manner."

There was no sense in arguing with Mr. Wragg. And, after all, two hundred lines

was nothing to worry about. Brewster and Co. went in to tea, feeling that they had started the term exceedingly well.

And Wellborne's study was deserted.

Before leaving that apartment, the juniors closed the window. And Mr. Wragg himself had slammed the door to. But nobody had taken notice of two very significant points. Indeed, it was impossible for them to have noticed these details. But it was extremely unfortunate that tea should have been served just at that time. For the study was left to itself, and nobody would go there for well over half-an-hour. On the table stood the little automatic lighter, with the flame still burning serenely and steadily.

And the side table remained overturned on the floor, with the broken cups and saucers scattered about. But something else had been reposing on that side table, too—a neat little gas ring, upon which Wellborne and Co. were wont to boil water with the purpose of making tea or cocoa.

The River House boys sometimes fed in their own studies, but tea was a set meal which had to be attended in the dining hall. It was different at St. Frank's, where nearly all the boys had tea in their own studies.

That little gas-ring had fallen with the table and the crockery. It was supplied by means of a rubber tube from a connection in the wall. And the tap was on the gas-ring itself.

Thus, when that little crash occurred, the tube was pulled completely away. And the gas poured into the room in a silent, invisible cloud. The pressure was not excessive, and there was no distinctive hiss. Nobody had known of that escape of gas, and the boys had been hustled out of the study so quickly by Mr. Wragg that they had had no time to look round.

And now they were seated at tea in the dining hall. Not one of them had the slightest suspicion that Fate had acted in a remarkable manner. But for that little automatic lighter on the table, the gas would have been harmless. Somebody would certainly have smelled the escape, and a mere opening of the window would have cleared the air.

But it was not to be.

There was the gas pouring into the room, and the window was closed and the door shut. And the little flame was burning on the table—waiting.

In the dining hall, Wellborne and Co. were feeling mad with everybody. This was one of the most unfortunate days they could remember, and they glowered fiercely round at the other fellows as they sat there, partaking of tea. Dr. Hogge was very severe on discipline. He would never allow any of the boys to miss a meal, unless they had a perfect excuse.

The doctor always presided in the dining hall, and it pleased him to see all his pupils before him. He was irritated if one or more

were absent. And there was a set time for tea—exactly half-an-hour.

During this period the boys' studies were left completely deserted. Not a soul went near them, for the domestic staff had quite sufficient to do in their own quarters.

Dr. Molyneux Hogge was looking very pleased with himself as he sat at the head of the principal tea-table. There were several new pupils this term, and every vacancy had been filled. There was every reason for Dr. Hogge to be highly pleased.

Tea was nearly over when the Headmaster rose to his feet.

"Boys, I should like to say a few words to you," he observed genially. "This is the first day of a new term, and I think it is my duty to address you, and wish you all success in your studies during the coming weeks of—"

Boo—o—oom!

Dr. Hogge staggered back, and the school started to its feet.

That boom was terrific—reverberating. The very walls seemed to rock. The windows rattled and shook. The crockery on the table clattered noisily. And then came a deadly, significant silence!

CHAPTER VI.

HOMELESS!



"GOOD HEAVENS!" shouted Dr. Hogge, in a startled voice.

"What—what was that, sir?" stammered Mr. Wragg nervously.

"Sounded like an explosion, sir," exclaimed Hal Brewster. "My hat! The whole place shook! It was like an earthquake! What in the world could it have been? We'd better go out and see—"

The door burst open, and a frightened-looking maidservant stood there.

"Oh, pup—please, sir!" she faltered hysterically.

"What is it—what is it?" snapped the Head.

He strode across to the girl and seized her arm. A glance along the passage had shown him that the air was full of dust. Dr. Hogge was filled with anxiety, and he urged the girl to speak.

"Come, come, Edith!" he exclaimed sharply. "What is the matter? What has happened? Tell me!"

"Oh, doctor, I'm sure I don't know!" panted the girl. "I—I was coming down the passage and I was knocked clean over, sir! It—it come from the young gentlemen's section, sir. Something must have happened in one of them studies!"

"Good gracious me!"

Another servant came rushing along the passage and screaming.

"Fire! Fire!" she shouted at the top of her voice.

"Great Scott!"

"The place is on fire!"

"Quick—let's get outside!"

Dr. Hogge turned swiftly.

"Order!" he shouted. "Boys, keep your places! Don't forget your fire drill! Attention! Mr. Wragg, march the boys out into the courtyard in an orderly fashion! See that there is no commotion!"

"Ye-yes, sir!" said Mr. Wragg feebly.

As a matter of fact, he was tottering at the knees, and was in no fit condition to take command of the school. But, by a masterly effort, he succeeded in pulling himself together. If he failed in a crisis like this, his services would be instantly dispensed with.

Dr. Hogge dashed away down the passage, and made off in the direction of the boys' studies. There was no question that the seat of the trouble was here. Every corridor was filled with smoke, and pungent fumes filled the atmosphere.

Presently, Dr. Hogge was compelled to halt. He was choking and gasping. He was quite close to two of the boys' studies, and, glancing in them, he saw that they were in good order, but that the windows were shattered to atoms. Then, looking ahead through the smother, he saw that one door was sagging on its hinges, blown to splinters. And the passage at this point was filled with debris.

From the door opening came choking volumes of smoke.

Dr. Hogge dashed up, holding his breath.

He could see little, owing to the smoke, but one glance showed him that the interior of the room was burning fiercely. The fire was quite local, but it was decidedly fierce. The flames were roaring in an appalling manner.

The thing had come so suddenly that Dr. Hogge had no time to think, or to be worried. Action was required—brisk, certain action. There was no sense in standing by and wringing his hands.

Although he did not pause to think, he instinctively knew that the explosion had been caused by gas. In some way or other one of these studies had become filled with gas, and had ignited.

And the explosion had caused the main itself to burst, and the gas was now pouring out in a deadly volume, burning. Unless very prompt action was taken, the whole school would be burnt to the ground.

Turning, the Headmaster staggered down the passage and reached one of the doors. He passed outside into the courtyard, and found that the school was already there. The boys were running about in great excitement, and had, indeed, already commenced to take steps to quell the flames.

Mr. Wragg had failed to control the crowd. This was chiefly on account of his own nervousness. Hal Brewster and Co., for example, saw no reason why they should stand there at attention, doing nothing, while they might be able to save the school from destruction.

Brewster himself had led a party of fellows to the main fire hydrant. And the



From the door opening came choking volumes of smoke. Dr. Hogge dashed up, holding his breath.

hose was now being uncoiled and prepared for action.

Dr. Hogge only looked at the boys for a moment or two, then he turned his attention to the house itself. He received something of a shock. The building was a large, tall, square one—one of those old-fashioned places that are not particularly handsome to look at.

Parts of the school were ivy covered, and tall, stately trees grew within the big courtyard, which was shut off from the road by means of a high wall.

And the west side of the building, where the boys' studies were situated, presented a sorry appearance. A great gaping hole had been blown into the lower part of the wall. The window of Wellborne's study had been forced completely out, together with a big section of brickwork.

For the explosion had been terrific.

Study No. 10—which was the one occupied by Wellborne and Co.—no longer existed. Every wall had been blown out, mainly into other studies, and one wall into the open air. The furniture was demolished, and the broken debris was now burning fiercely, with every prospect of spreading to the other rooms.

At the moment the fire was completely confined to this one spot, but the slightest delay would cause the flames to spread rapidly. And then, perhaps, they would get beyond control.

But the boys themselves were acting briskly.

In a very few moments the hose was hauled round the building, and somebody turned the water on. A great stream came surging out from the nozzle, and Brewster, who held the hose, directed the water at the seat of the fire.

Somebody else had hurried away to turn off the gas at the main. Once this was done the

danger would be greatly lessened. Dr. Hogge stood there, looking on, with mixed feelings.

He was appalled at this disaster to his beloved school, and at the same time he was filled with admiration at the prompt manner the boys had coped with the situation.

"It's all right, sir!" sang out Brewster. "It'll soon be out. No need to worry at all."

Dr. Hogge strode up.

"Splendid, my boys," he said warmly. "I must commend you for your quick wittedness. Yes, that's right—good! I think we will soon have the fire under control now."

"Rather, sir."

"It must have been a gas explosion, sir."

The Head nodded, becoming rather grim.

"Some carelessness, I have no doubt," he exclaimed, becoming calmer now that the danger was lessened. "Do any of you boys know which study this is?"

"No. 10, sir."

"Indeed—Wellborne's study!" said the Doctor. "Where is Wellborne? Oh, there you are," he added, looking round. "Wellborne! What do you know about this? How can you account for this disastrous explosion in your study?"

The hon. Aubrey was looking extremely scared.

"I can't account for it, sir," he replied.

"Perhaps I can, sir," put in Mr. Wragg, striding up.

Mr. Wragg was now feeling himself again. He had found that the danger was practically over and that the boys themselves had had sense enough to get the hose going.

"Well, Mr. Wragg?" said the Head.

"Just before tea, sir, I found a number of boys fighting and causing a considerable commotion in Wellborne's study," said the under-master. "I do not exactly know what took place there, but there can be no question that the gas was left on. Some rank carelessness, I am sure."

Dr. Hogge nodded.

"I shall have to hold a full inquiry into this matter," he declared. "If any of the boys are responsible, their punishment will be severe. Good heavens! The whole school might have been burnt to the ground!"

He confined his attention now to superintending the operations. And in less than twenty minutes the fire was out, and there was no further danger. Indeed, the whole affair had happened so quickly that hardly anybody else knew about it.

The report of the explosion had been heard throughout the neighbourhood—even as far distant as St. Frank's itself. People in the village came out of their little shops and cottages to look up and down the quiet, sunny high street. But there was nothing to account for that ominous boom.

And a casual glance at the River House School would not have brought enlightenment.

From the roadside, nothing out of the common was to be seen. The big building looked just as firm and just as solid as ever.

But round on the other wall, which was hidden from the road, the appearance was very different.

There was that great gaping hole, with steam issuing from it. Charred debris lay about the courtyard—bricks, portions of woodwork, etc. And, most significant of all, there was a great, jagged crack in the building, reaching upwards to the very eaves of the roof.

The damage to the study itself was a comparatively insignificant matter, and a gang of workmen could have made full repairs within a week.

But that crack in the wall was ominous.

The explosion had been so powerful that the whole building had rocked to its foundations on this side. That crack was the result. The complete wall was weakened, and Dr. Hogge was afraid that some fresh trouble might develop.

The gas had been turned off at the main, and everything was now quiet. A number of boys stood ready with the hose, in case the fire broke out afresh. But this was not probable, for the seat of the fire had been literally gutted.

"I'm blessed if I can see how it happened," muttered Wellborne, as he conferred with the Hon. Cyril and the Hon. Bertram. "We weren't even using the rotten gas! An' there wasn't a light in the study."

"It's a mystery," said Carstairs.

"Absolutely," put in Coates. "It looks to me as if somebody did it on purpose—some of those bally St. Frank's cads, perhaps."

"Oh, don't be an ass," growled Wellborne. "It was a gas explosion. It wasn't our fault, anyway! An' if we're blamed for it, I'll dashed well write to my pater. He'll kick up a fine dust, too. By gad! What a mess! We've got no study now!"

Dr. Hogge turned to the boys.

"Well, my lads, you needn't wait out here," he exclaimed. "You will proceed in just the usual manner, take no notice of this occurrence. I shall see that Wellborne is provided with another room for the time being. And to-morrow I shall hold a full inquiry."

"But it wasn't our fault, sir," said the Hon. Aubrey warmly.

"If you are not to blame, Wellborne, you will not be held responsible," said the doctor. "But it is most imperative that the truth should be discovered. Mr. Wragg, just a word with you, please."

"Certainly, sir," said Mr. Wragg.

He went over to the Head's side, and they both stood looking up at the wall.

"I shall want you to telephone at once to the gas company in Bannington and to a firm of contractors," said Dr. Hogge. "This matter must be dealt with immediately. How extremely unfortunate that we should commence the new term in such a manner. It is a sheer disaster for our school."

"I fancy we shall get over it, sir," said Mr. Wragg.

"Oh, certainly—undoubtedly," agreed the

Head. "I am thankful, indeed, that the boys took such prompt measures. I am proud of them. If the fire had spread—"

"You may be quite sure, sir, that I should never have allowed the boys to act in any way detrimental to the school," said Mr. Wragg. "Indeed, I think I can claim a little credit for what has been done. It was at my suggestion that the hose was so quickly got into action."

"Help!" murmured Dave Ascott. "What an awful fibber!"

"He was nearly scared out of his wits!"

"Of course he was!"

Dr. Hogge nodded, and smiled at Mr. Wragg.

"I am pleased to compliment you, Mr. Wragg," he said. "But please take a look at that crack in the wall. I don't quite like it, do you? I fear that it may cause a further collapse."

Mr. Wragg looked at the great crack with a quizzical eye.

"Oh, no, sir," he said. "You need have no fear about that. These walls are very solid, and there is not the slightest fear of any collapse. The builders will soon put—"

He paused suddenly, for a very curious rumbling sound made itself heard. The next moment Dr. Hogge seized the under-master and forcibly dragged him back. And they were only just in the nick of time to escape destruction.

Several boys dodged back at the same moment.

It was rather curious that Mr. Wragg should have stated his opinions so firmly—and that that opinion should have been so at fault. For the whole wall on that side of the building sagged away, and then collapsed into the courtyard with a thunderous crash that was absolutely deafening.

It was like a tremendous peal of thunder. The greater part of the wall detached itself from the building, bulged outwards in the most extraordinary manner, and then fell to the ground. It was miraculously lucky that nobody was caught in the fallen debris.

The courtyard was filled with choking masses of dust. And when it cleared, the whole school was astounded and staggered to find that the initial small disaster had become a veritable catastrophe.

The school resembled a house that had been hit by a gigantic bomb. Several rooms were exposed. The floors, with their beams, could be seen sagging, with furniture lying this way and that. Even the roof had taken a distinct downward trend at this point, as though this was liable to collapse also.

To put it bluntly, the River House School was in a precarious condition, and totally unfit for habitation.

That collapse of the wall had rendered the whole place dangerous. At any moment a further collapse might occur.

Prompt action might avert complete disaster, but it would be several weeks

before the school was fit for the boys to enter. Some of the fellows suggested that they could use the other side of the building; but Dr. Hogge would never agree to that. If another crash did come, it was quite on the cards that the whole school would tumble to bits, burying everybody within it.

Dr. Hogge was at his wits' end.

For some time he stood gazing up at the awful damage as though dazed. He didn't know what to do. His beloved school was in peril of complete demolition, and the very thought of that caused Dr. Hogge to clutch at his heart.

And what could he do with the boys?

Send them home? That would be a solution for the moment; but what about afterwards? Parents would not be willing to keep their sons at home indefinitely. And even a novice could see that there would be no hope of repairing the damage during this summer term.

In the meantime, Dr. Hogge could mentally picture his pupils being sent to other schools—scattered broadcast, as it were. He would probably never get the boys back again. And that would mean ruin.

Surely there must be some other solution.

And then Dr. Hogge had an idea.

Ten minutes later he was on his way up to St. Frank's. He had given precise instructions for the boys to remain well away from the school building; he had ordered all the servants out. Nothing was to be done until he returned.

And Dr. Hogge went towards St. Frank's with his scholastic face wearing a grimly determined look.

By the time he arrived in the Triangle of the famous old college he was surrounded by crowds of juniors. The news had already reached St. Frank's. How, nobody knew. But, in some mysterious fashion, everybody in the school knew that an explosion had occurred at the River House, and that the building had partially collapsed. In fact, they knew a lot more than this.

For example, Teddy Long positively declared that the River House was nothing more than a heap of ruins, and that Hal Brewster and Dave Ascott and half-a-dozen other fellows, had been buried in the ruins. Teddy Long was certain that at least a dozen chaps had perished.

And a further sensation was caused by the report that Dr. Hogge, seeing the catastrophe, had ended all his difficulties by committing suicide. It was even rumoured that the River House School had been deliberately blown up by Communists.

So the appearance of Dr. Hogge in person was rather comforting. The juniors, in fact, were just preparing to dash down to see the damage with their own eyes when Dr. Hogge appeared.

"What happened, sir?"

"What was the explosion at your place, sir?"

"How many chaps were killed?"

"Please, boys—please!" said the doctor protestingly. "I really cannot stop to answer your questions now. Nobody was killed, and I am thankful to say that there is not even an injury. But the school itself is badly damaged."

"Did somebody try to blow the place up, sir?"

"It was an accident—a gas explosion, followed by a collapse of the wall."

Having said that, Dr. Hogge succeeded in pushing his way through the throng, and he made his way to the Head's private door on the other side of the Triangle.

"There you are!" said Armstrong, with a sniff. "Where's that young bounder, Teddy Long? What does he mean by saying that a dozen chaps were killed?"

"The rotter!" said Griffith wrathfully. "Why, there's nothing to make a fuss about at all!"

Quite a number of the fellows seemed indignant. One might have imagined that they were disappointed at finding that nobody had perished. Teddy Long made himself scarce, and was not to be found.

In the meantime, Dr. Hogge was closeted with his illustrious confrere, Dr. Malcolm Stafford.

"I am deeply sorry to hear of your trouble, Dr. Hogge," said the Headmaster of St. Frank's, at length. "It is truly a disaster, and I am afraid I cannot offer any helpful suggestion. As far as I can see, it will be necessary for you to send all your boys back home—"

"But that will be disastrous, Dr. Stafford," interrupted the other. "You know what builders are nowadays; they require months to perform work that could have been done in so many weeks ten years ago. It will be well into the summer vacation before the River House is ready. And that means that I shall lose my boys from this term—and possibly for good."

"I think you are unduly pessimistic, Dr. Hogge."

"I have been wondering—I hesitate to make the suggestion," said Dr. Hogge diffidently. "Is it possible that you have any spare accommodation here? If you could only take my boys in for two days it will be sufficient. I should be able to make complete arrangements without sending the boys home. It would give me time, if you understand? And it would keep my school together."

The Head stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Well, Dr. Hogge, I am afraid your suggestion is a difficult one," he said. "However, I will consult with Mr. Lee, and obtain his view. It is quite possible that he would be able to suggest some alternative solution."

Five minutes later Nelson Lee was in close confab with the two Heads.

And in precisely half an hour matters were arranged. Nelson Lee pointed out to Dr. Stafford that sixteen Remove fellows were absent from St. Frank's, and could not arrive until at least two days had elapsed. As there were only thirty-three River House boys all told, this meant accommodating seventeen—for there was already room for sixteen.

And by means of a little arranging it was found possible to take in all the homeless River House fellows. The majority would be under the Ancient House roof, and a few in the College House.

It was quite a temporary scheme, and on the morrow Dr. Hogge would see about finding quarters for his boys. If possible, he wanted to keep them in the district.

And later on in the evening Hal Brewster and his merry men turned up. Wellborne & Co. arrived, too. They were heartily welcomed by the St. Frank's boys. The commoners were welcomed by the decent section, and the Honourables were welcomed by Fullwood and his set.

And the River House boys seemed to like it.

As a temporary measure, at least, they were St. Frank's boys, and they fairly revelled in the novelty.

CHAPTER VII.

NELSON LEE'S SCHEME.



"THIS," said Archie Glenthorne languidly, "is the life!"

He stretched himself with extreme comfort, and yawned.

"I mean to say, absolutely the stuff to give them!" he went on. "Sunshine by the gallon, no bally lessons to worry a chappie, and the good old simple life. It seems a bally shame that we should have to return to St. Frank's at all!"

"Lazy bones!" said Reggie Pitt severely.

At the same time, Pitt was rather enjoying himself. Two days had elapsed, and it was now evening. We were enjoying the warmth of the late sun, while Fatty Little was preparing one of his usual hearty meals. It didn't matter whether it was breakfast, luncheon, tea, or dinner, Fatty always seemed to have the idea that it was absolutely necessary to fill everybody up to the brim, so to speak.

We had already appeared at the police-court, and we had given our evidence against Simon Ratley, and had been extremely satisfied to learn that the late

steward was now committed for trial. He would appear at the County Assizes later on in the month. Possibly we should have to give our evidence against him; but we didn't worry much about that.

To our great satisfaction, Lord Bushwick was making rapid strides on the road to recovery. He was so well, in fact, that he insisted upon getting up and going into the garden. This was totally against the doctor's orders, and the latter would only agree on the condition that his lordship went in a bath-chair.

"I expect the other chaps are feeling pretty blue about us," remarked Tommy Watson. "For two days they've been pegging away at lessons, and we're still on a holiday."

"Oh, they're bound to be jealous," said Church. "I'm rather sorry that Ratley wasn't remanded for a week. With such a good excuse, it's a pity we couldn't stay on here a bit longer."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "I'm rather keen on getting back. This caravan idea is pretty good, but I'm rather fed-up with it. It'll be pretty decent to get back to St. Frank's, and start the old routine again."

We grinned. We knew very well that Handforth had only made that remark so that he should be in opposition to Church. Under no circumstances could he agree with his two chums. He looked upon it as a matter of necessity to contradict them on any and every occasion.

"Well, of course there's something in that," I said thoughtfully. "When you come to think of it, there's a good deal to do at St. Frank's—lessons, and cricket, and all the rest of it. I'm not tired of this life, but perhaps it won't be so bad to get back."

Handforth took the bait.

"Rubbish!" he snapped. "I could go on living like this for months! There's nothing more gorgeous than to roam about the country, stopping just where we like, and seeing all the sights."

"But I thought you wanted to get back?" I asked innocently.

"Eh?"

"I thought——"

I paused, and glanced round as a red-headed youth appeared on a somewhat shaky bicycle. He jumped off his machine, and stood there, regarding us with interest. I recognised him as the telegraph-boy from Market Bushwick.

"Postmaster, he told me to bring this to ye, young gents," said the youth. "It be a telegram, addressed to Master Nipper."

I rose to my feet, and took the wire.

"Trouble, I suppose," I said, with a grimace. "I'll bet it's from the gov'nor. We've got to get back in double quick time. There'll probably be a row with the Head when we arrive."

"That's right—be cheerful," said Pitt.

I tore the envelope open, and extracted the flimsy form. Then I stared at it rather

curiously. And there was every reason for me to be astonished. For the telegram ran in this fashion:

"Remain in present encampment until I instruct you further. Do not move from Bushwick.—NELSON LEE."

"Well, what does it say?" demanded Tommy Watson.

"Yes, begad! Let us hear!" said Tregellis West. "I'm frightfully curious, dear old boy—I am, really!"

"We've got to stop here until we get further orders," I said. "The gov'nor says that we mustn't move from this camp."

"What!"

"Mustn't move?"

"Tell us another one, you ass!"

The juniors crowded round, and read the telegram in amazement.

"I say, do you think it's genuine?" asked Pitt dubiously. "Mr. Lee knows that we finished with the police-court business to-day, and he probably expected us to get a move on this afternoon. Strictly speaking, we ought to be at St. Frank's by mid-day to-morrow."

"Yes," I said thoughtfully. "Look here, I don't believe this."

"Don't believe it?" said Handforth.

"I think it's a jape."

"A jape?"

"Somebody's having a game!"

"A game?"

"You—you gramophone!" I snapped. "What's the matter with you, Handy? Don't you know any words of your own?"

"If you're looking for a thick ear, I've got plenty I can supply!" said Handforth pointedly.

I looked at his ears.

"You certainly have got plenty!" I agreed. "Only two, but they stand out like Japanese fans!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But, joking aside——" I went on.

"Joking!" hooted Handforth. "Is that what you call joking? Calling my ears Japanese fans? Why, you lunatic, I'll jolly well——"

"For goodness' sake keep him quiet!" I groaned. "This telegram doesn't seem to be genuine. It's too easy. Instructions from the gov'nor to stay here as long as we like—at least, until we hear further. Perhaps Fullwood sent it, or some other practical joker. The idea was to make us stop here, and then get ourselves into trouble. I don't think we'll bite."

"But how can we get to know the truth?"

"I'll buzz to the castle and use the telephone," I said promptly. "It's not much of a trunk call, and I can be talking to the gov'nor in no time. I'll soon find out, whether that wire is bona-fide."

"Find out if it's what?" said Handforth.

"Genuine."

"That's not what you said——"

"Oh, my hat!" I groaned. "He wants

me to explain now! Life's too short, Handy. You stay here, chaps, and don't count too much on this telegram. Our own common sense tells us that it's too good to be true."

I had no difficulty in using the telephone at Bushwick Castle. Neither the Earl nor the Countess were available, but Jevons escorted me to the library, and left me alone with the instrument.

And within ten minutes the connection was made, and I was talking to St. Frank's. I was lucky enough to get hold of Nelson Lee at once.

"Why, is that you, Nipper?" came the gov'nor's voice, in surprise.

"Yes, sir. I'm talking from Bushwick Castle."

"So I imagined," said Nelson Lee. "Why have you telephoned?"

"Did you send me a wire this afternoon, sir?"

"Yes."

"Telling us to remain in our present encampment until we had further instructions?"

"Yes."

I nearly dropped the instrument in surprise.

"Then—then that wire was really from you?" I asked blankly.

"Of course it was. Whom did you think it was from?" asked the gov'nor. "Didn't I sign my name to the message?"

"Yes, but it seemed so funny!" I replied. "I mean, I thought we were wanted back at the school as quickly as possible. What's the idea, sir? How is it that we can stay in camp—"

"My dear Nipper, I cannot answer your questions over the telephone," broke in Nelson Lee. "You can be quite comfortable in mind. Dr. Stafford is fully acquainted with the whole position, and does not require any of you to return yet. There is an excellent reason for this, but I cannot explain now."

"How long shall we have to stay here, at Bushwick?"

But Nelson Lee didn't answer. I heard him give a laugh, and he told me to curb my curiosity. And that was all I could get out of him. I was very astonished—to say nothing of being pleased.

Having hung up the receiver, Nelson Lee chuckled to himself again. He sat back in his chair, and smiled, picturing my astonishment, far away in Bushwick Castle. Lee, of course, was sitting in his own study at St. Frank's.

"That has given Nipper something to think about," he murmured. "Of course, the boys probably know nothing of the events that have been taking place here. In that peaceful valley they never see newspapers, and are quite out of the everyday world. Well, all the better, perhaps."

Lee pushed the telephone instrument from him, and just then Tubbs, the Ancient House page boy tapped upon the door and entered.

"Well, Tubbs?"

"The 'Ead's compliments, sir, and would you kindly step into his study as soon as convenient, sir," said Tubbs politely.

Accordingly, three minutes later Nelson Lee walked into Dr. Stafford's sanctum. The Head was not alone. Sir John Brent was there—the Chairman of the Board of Governors. He greeted Lee warmly.

"Mr. Lee, I understand from the worthy doctor that you have a somewhat unusual scheme to put before us," said Sir John, after the greetings were over. "I think the Head knows all about it?"

"Yes—but Dr. Stafford did not like to act entirely upon his own initiative," smiled Nelson Lee. "I will preface my remarks by telling you at once that this scheme of mine is somewhat revolutionary, and it may not commend itself to you at the beginning."

Sir John smiled.

"I am quite sure that any suggestion of yours, Mr. Lee, will be thoroughly practical, at all events," he remarked. "It is, I understand, connected with the unfortunate affairs at the River House School?"

"Exactly," said Nelson Lee. "To put it concisely, we have thirty-three boys here who do not actually belong to the school. They are Dr. Hogge's boys. As you will doubtless realise, we are somewhat crowded, as accommodation is none too liberal. Were it not for the fact that sixteen of our own juniors were absent, we could never have taken these River House boys in."

"So I understand."

"Both Dr. Stafford and I are most anxious to help Dr. Hogge in his unfortunate predicament," continued Lee. "He is quite a near neighbour of ours, and I need not tell you that his school is most exclusive, and quite as superior, in its own way, as St. Frank's itself."

"Yes, yes," said Sir John. "I have always understood that the River House School is a particularly exclusive establishment."

Lee went on to explain Dr. Hogge's peculiar position—how he was afraid that his pupils would be lost to him for good if they were disbanded, and sent home for the whole term.

"It was Dr. Hogge's hope that he might be able to obtain temporary quarters in the neighbourhood," said Lee. "But he has exhausted every line of inquiry, and can find nothing. The school itself has been examined by experts, and they declare it to be very unsafe. Extensive work must be accomplished before the River House is habitable once more. Dr. Hogge intends to seize this opportunity to make a good many improvements, including the building of a modern gymnasium, a laboratory, and extensions to the dormitories and classrooms."

"Quite an enterprising programme," commented Sir John.

"Exactly," agreed Lee. "Now, my

suggestion is that Dr. Hogge's boys shall remain at St. Frank's during this period of transition, as it were. In order to find room for these River House boys it will be necessary for the entire Remove to withdraw. In other words, I am suggesting that the Remove Form should leave the school entirely."

The Chairman of the Governors stared, as well he might.

"But, my dear Mr. Lee, are you really serious?" he asked, in astonishment.

"Yes, Sir John, I am quite serious."

"But your suggestion is quite extraordinary," quoth Sir John. "Why, if so many boys are compelled to be elsewhere—"

"You suggest that the River House boys ought to leave, and not our own boys?" smiled the schoolmaster detective. "That, I will admit, appears to be the common-sense point of view. But I have very particular reasons for making this proposition. I desire to try a little experiment."

"Oh, indeed," said Sir John. "An experiment?"

"Precisely," continued Nelson Lee, rather amused by the Chairman's attitude. "But you need not look so alarmed, Sir John. What I am about to suggest for the benefit of the Remove boys would not apply to the contingent from the River House. To put it quite briefly, I suggest that the entire Remove should go on a tour."

"A tour?"

"In motor caravans," said Lee. "The weather is splendid for such a purpose, and I have an idea that the boys will work just as well, and they will see something of their own country—as all boys should."

"And, pray, what about their lessons?"

"Their lessons would proceed in just the same manner as usual," replied Lee. "There will be absolutely no alteration in the customary routine of the school. They would be under the command of a capable master, and when it comes to a question of sports, there will be endless opportunities. For they will be able to compete with schools at various points in their travels."

Sir John began to get more interested.

"By gad!" he said. "It seems better now that I come to analyse it," he remarked. "A caravan tour, eh? Just the younger boys—the Remove? For the summer term, you mean?"

"Exactly."

"And the lessons will not be interfered with?" asked Sir John. "Good! Well, I must admit that the idea somewhat appeals to me, but I cannot quite see how you will be able to manage the business part of the proposition, Mr. Lee."

"It so happens that that has already been arranged," smiled the Housemaster. "You may have heard of a certain Mr. Walter Langley? No? He was an unfortunate gentleman who had an idea of



Dr. Hogge nodded, and smiled at Mr. Wragg. "I am pleased to compliment you, Mr. Wragg," he said. "But please take a look at that crack in the wall. I don't quite like it, do you? I fear that it may cause a further collapse."

starting a touring school on exactly the same lines as I have indicated. He put all his capital into the venture. He had these caravans made—five or six of them. He had a tent especially constructed so that it could be used as a classroom and a dining room. And this tent is capable of being pitched with extreme ease, and is perfectly weather proof under all conditions."

"Dear me," said Sir John, with more interest than ever.

"With regard to the caravans themselves, they are palaces of luxury—and yet, at the same time, efficient in every sense of the word," continued Nelson Lee. "Each caravan is capable of comfortably accommodating eight boys. This will serve

as a bedroom, and a study. The beds are all constructed in such a manner that they can be folded out of the way during the daytime and completely hidden. And these six caravans are driven by expert men who will also act as servants during the period when they are not travelling along the road."

"Kindly explain in more detail, Mr. Lee."

"We will say, for example, that the Remove starts off on its tour," said Nelson Lee. "Well, a sixty mile journey is mapped out for the first day. In the evening, the camp is pitched, and the big tent is quickly erected. There will be a seventh motor vehicle—which carries the tent, the travelling kitchen, and even a laundry. The whole outfit is entirely self-contained. The boys will sleep just the same as they sleep at school. They will rise in the morning, and the customary routine will be employed—lessons commencing in the big tent just the same as they commence in the St. Frank's classrooms. When the time comes for dismissal, the men will take command of the tent, and immediately transform it into a dining hall."

"Employing some new magic, I presume?"

"Exactly," smiled Lee. For the desks are so arranged that by a few manipulations flaps are folded back, and the row of desks become a long, continuous table.

I should greatly like to show you this touring school, Sir John, so that you may be able to judge it all the better."

"Upon my soul!" said Sir John, "I am wonderfully interested. I feel that I should give much to be a boy again—and to go upon this wonderful tour."

"Just as an experiment, I thought we would send the Remove on this trip," continued Lee. "It seems that the time is ripe for it—particularly as we can very materially help Dr. Hogge at the same time. For, with the Remove away, there will be ample accommodation for all the River House scholars."

"Exactly—I see your point," nodded Sir John. "But I should like to know where this fabulous school is to be found—this touring collection of caravan marvels? And what of Mr. Walter Langley?"

"I regret to tell you that Mr. Langley died quite unexpectedly while he was making final preparations for starting his travelling school," replied Lee. "The complete outfit is now lying idle and is in the hands of Mr. Langley's executors. They have no desire to continue the scheme, and the whole collection of caravans is in the market at a ridiculously low figure. Or, if desired, I think they could be hired for a period of two or three months. I can readily understand that this tour would be somewhat more costly than the ordinary

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school routine, but I am convinced that the tour would be of great benefit to the boys, and of great benefit to the school, also. I do not think it would cost a penny in the long run."

"Well, Mr. Lee, I am greatly struck by this suggestion," declared Sir John. "Why if this trial trip succeeds, we can make a regular fine weather feature of this tour. We can send out the Third Form, and the Fifth Form, and even the Sixth. It will be a great attraction for the school. Parents will be delighted to think that their children have this great advantage. There is only one point I should like you to make clear. Will you take charge of this caravan trip?"

"Certainly, if it is your desire."

"Most decidedly it is," declared Sir John. "For the first tour, at all events, I think it would be advisable for you to take complete command."

"An excellent suggestion," put in Dr. Stafford, who had been listening with great interest. "Dr. Hogge, I am sure, will be only too delighted to take temporary charge of the Ancient House—where he will also have the River House boys under his personal care."

They continued talking for a full hour, discussing the scheme in all its aspects. And by the time Sir John took his departure the thing was as good as settled. And the Remove was in sublime ignorance of its coming good fortune.

But it was not to remain in ignorance for long!

CHAPTER VIII.

SOMETHING LIKE A SURPRISE!



REGINALD PITT scratched his head.

"Well, it beats me!" he said, in perplexity. "I'm absolutely stumped. Five clear days—nearly a week—and we haven't heard a giddy word! We simply drag on here, enjoying the simple life, and nothing happens."

"It's jolly queer," declared Handforth. "In fact, I'm beginning to think that there's something fishy about it. I wonder what all the chaps are saying at St. Frank's. Term started a week ago, and we haven't shown up yet."

All the juniors in the caravan camp were similarly puzzled.

They couldn't possibly understand the reason for this long delay. I was just as much in the dark as anyone. But I had Nelson Lee's assurance that everything was all right, so I didn't worry.

And why should we care?

We were having the time of our lives, enjoying the fine weather to the full. Lord Bushwick was about again, practically his old self, and we spent half our time roaming over the estates. His lordship had

given us full permission to do what we pleased.

And now the fifth day after that telegram was drawing to a close. It was evening—one of those lovely June evenings when there is scarcely a breath of wind, and the air is warm and clear, without being sultry.

All the juniors were in camp, and they were rather tired after a strenuous day exploring various sections of the Bushwick estate. Willy Handforth was busy sorting out all kinds of specimens that he had found. He was compelled to do this some distance from the camp, for the other chaps had passed a strict resolution that Willy was not to be allowed near if he carried any of his crawling horrors.

And, in just the same way as it happened before, the red-headed telegraph boy put in an appearance. We had looked for his coming so many times that we had almost given up hope of seeing him again.

As soon as he was sighted, coming along on his bicycle, a shout went up. All the juniors crowded out into the road to meet the telegraph messenger as soon as he jumped off his machine. In fact, he wasn't allowed to jump off—he was pulled off, much to his dismay.

"Gimme the telegram!" demanded Handforth fiercely.

"Steady on, young gents!" gasped the village boy. "What's the game? I ain't done nothin'—"

"Haven't you got a telegram for us?" yelled Handforth.

"'Tain't for you, sir," said the boy. "It's addressed to Master Nipper."

"Same thing," said Handy. "Hand it over to me!"

But the telegraph boy evidently had honest ideas about telegrams, for he absolutely refused to give it to anybody except myself. As soon as I got hold of it, the messenger had some peace, for he was left to himself and all the juniors crowded round me.

I quickly read the message.

And if the first wire from Nelson Lee had caused me surprise, this positively caused me amazement. I blinked at the telegram and then looked at the fellows. They were regarding me fixedly.

"Well?" they demanded, in one thunderous voice.

"Read it!" I said faintly.

By the way they grabbed it, it was very doubtful if it could be read at all. I expected it to be torn into a thousand fragments.

The message was this:

"Leave camp to-morrow early. Take caravans to Station Hotel, Great Wayling. Have made arrangements there for storage. Leave caravans in hotel garage. Have luggage packed and be ready by four p.m. precisely. Wait in hotel courtyard for my arrival.
NELSON LEE."

"Well I'm jiggered!" said Pitt. "What's the idea?"

"Blessed if I know."

"Why should we store the caravans in Great Wayling?" demanded Handforth.

"And where is Great Wayling, anyway?"

"It's a pretty big town, about ten miles away from here," I replied. "You ought to know—we passed through it. The Station Hotel is that fine big place just at the end of the High Street."

"It's extraordinary!" said Tommy Watson. "Why can't we go straight back to St. Frank's in the caravans? We could get there practically as quick as messing about storing the things and getting our luggage ready."

"Of course we could," said Christine. "And why should Mr. Lee come to us?"

"Ask me another," I said. "It's a puzzle to me. I can't make head or tail of it. But there you are—the guv'nor told us to wait until further instructions came along, so we'll do it."

At the same time I was considerably astonished. I couldn't see any earthly reason why Nelson Lee should leave St. Frank's and meet us in Great Wayling. He knew that we were capable of finding our own way back to the school. We didn't need any guide.

However, on the morrow we were up bright and early.

Every fellow in the party was agog with curiosity. They all wanted to know what the scheme was—why we should go so far out of our way, and why the guv'nor was coming along. And his message was so precise, too. We had to be ready at four o'clock to the minute. Again, why should we leave the caravans in a hotel garage so far away from the school?

There was a mystery about the whole affair that appealed to the juniors. If they had only known the actual truth, they would have been half dotty with excitement. But it was just like Nelson Lee to keep us all in the dark.

By nine o'clock the camp was completely packed up, and the caravans were ready for the start. And so we trundled away along the dusty country lane until we finally struck the main road.

It was one o'clock by the time we reached Great Wayling. The day was rather cloudy, but warm and fine.

We soon found that there was no foolery about that wire. The manager of the Station Hotel was expecting us. He had re-

ceived instructions from Nelson Lee, and a luncheon was already waiting to be served.

Our caravans were taken in charge by numerous ostlers, and they vanished into the rear quarters. But after lunch we had a busy time packing up all our various goods and chattels.

It was just three-thirty by the time we were in complete readiness. Our baggage was all packed and stacked up in the courtyard. And we stood there, looking first up and down the High Street, and then at one another. Something was going to happen.

But what?

We didn't know, and couldn't possibly imagine. Even the manager had been unable to satisfy our curiosity, although we had questioned him until he was nearly blue in the face. He could only say that Mr. Lee had arranged to be there in person at four o'clock, and would settle everything then.

"Well, we've only got twenty-five minutes to wait now," said Reggie Pitt, glancing at his watch. "Do you know, I've got an idea that we're not going back to St. Frank's."

"Oh, rot!" said Church. "What about our school work?"

"I don't know, but I've got that hunch," replied Pitt. "If we were going back to St. Frank's, Mr. Lee wouldn't have given us these queer instructions. It's not like him to do silly things, and you can bet there'll be a surprise before long."

"Absolutely," agreed Archie Glenthorne. "I mean to say, Mr. Lee's a dashed brainy cove. He wouldn't let us go rushing about, hither and thither, doing this and doing that. There's something behind the bally thing. And I must admit that my gear-box is frightfully rusty. It's absolutely incapable of coping with the good old problem!"

"Well, have patience—and you'll be rewarded," I said.

But, as a matter of fact, I was just as eager as all the others. And there we stood, waiting.

Even in our wildest moments we never guessed the truth.

For while we were standing there, the Caravan School was speeding on its way towards Great Wayling—the wonderful travelling school that was destined to take us to various parts of the country on one of the most surprising trips that any schoolboys ever indulged in!

There were some good times ahead for the Remove!

THE END.

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Editorial Announcement.

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NELSON LEE'S GREAT SCHEME.

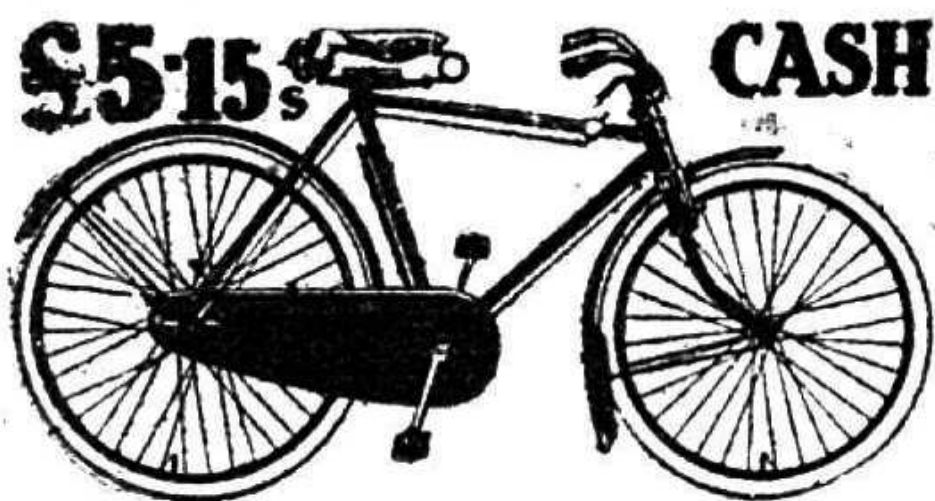
As explained in the story you have just read, St. Frank's is crowded out for the time being by the boys of the River House School. It was then that the idea occurred to Nelson Lee to send the whole of the Remove to join the holiday party and to form a caravan school. The scheme is quite a brilliant one, not only as a means of overcoming the existing congestion at St. Frank's, but from a point of view of

broadening and educating the minds of the boys as well as developing their health, it might be advantageously copied by many of our schools throughout the country. Anyhow, St. Frank's will take the lead and show how it can be done in a series of capital stories laid in those parts of England and Wales visited, and beginning next week with "THE TRAVELLING SCHOOL; or, St. Frank's in Glorious Devon!"

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