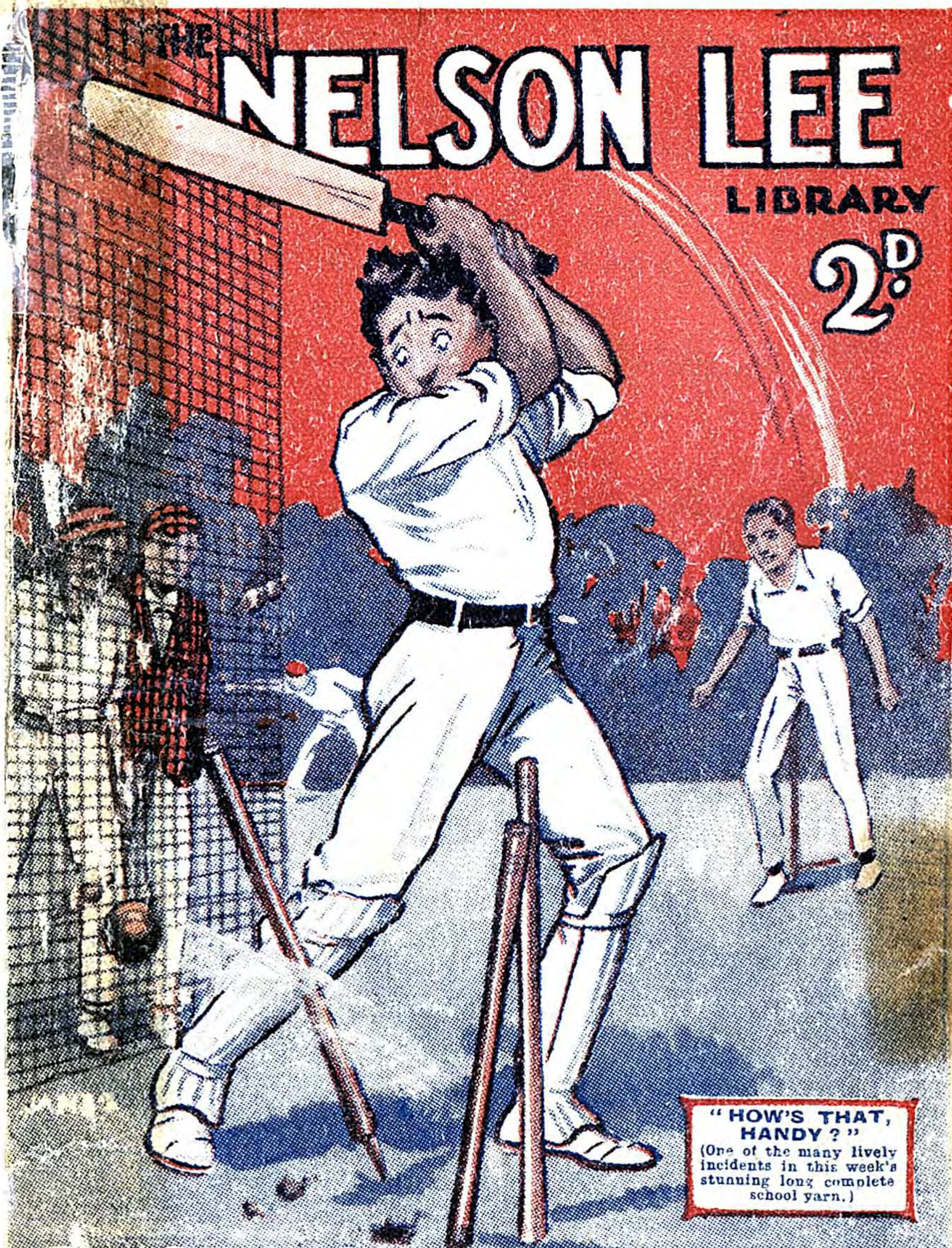


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**"HOW'S THAT,
HANDY?"**

(One of the many lively
incidents in this week's
stunning long complete
school yarn.)

SPORTS MAD at St FRANKS!

New Series No. 1.

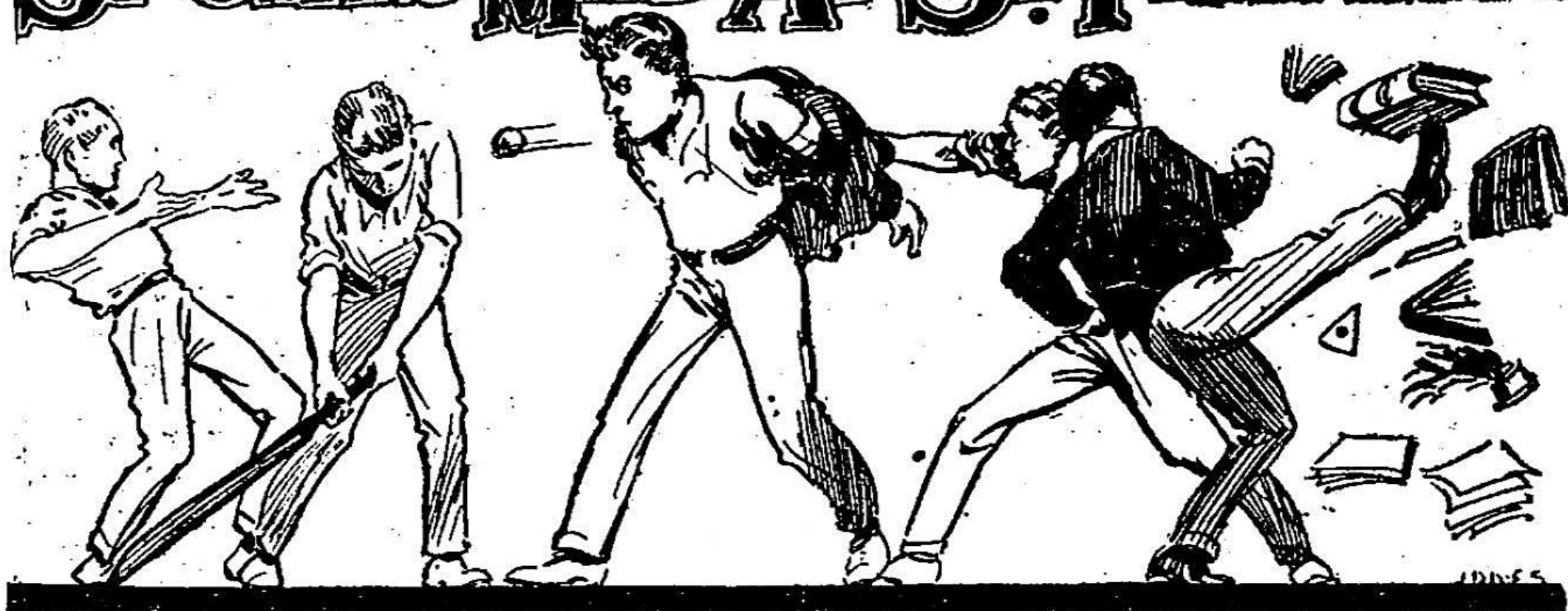
OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

May 1st, 1926.



Handforth grabbed De Valerie's arm. "What's this?" Edward Oswald asked fiercely. "What the dickens do you mean by getting thick with this cad?" and he pointed a quivering finger at Forrest. The leader of the Study A cads glared, and De Valerie flushed as he said: "Wouldn't it be a good idea to mind your own business?" Handforth gulped at the rebuff: evidently his "fact" was not appreciated.

SPORTS MAD AT ST. FRANK'S!



Cricket—test matches—SCHOOLBOY test matches! What a stunning idea! It was Dick Hamilton's great brain-wave. Read all about it in this rousing first-of-a-new-series yarn of fun and sport at St. Frank's.

By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

CHAPTER 1.

HANDFORTH DOESN'T APPROVE.

"TIGERS!"
 "Eh?"
 "Tigers!" repeated Edward Oswald Handforth thoughtfully.

Church and McClure, rather startled, looked at their leader. The famous chums of the Remove were just settling down to tea in Study D in the Ancient House at St. Frank's. The sunlight was streaming through the window, and a gentle breeze was stirring the curtains.

"Tigers?" repeated Church. "Where?"

"Here!" said Handforth.

"You silly ass——"

"Three of 'em," added Edward Oswald, nodding. "You're Tigers, and I'm a Tiger."

McClure pushed his chair back hastily.

"You've gone dotty!" he ejaculated, in alarm. "What the dickens do you mean by sitting there and calling us tigers? Not five minutes ago you said that Church and I were a couple of asses! And this afternoon you called us mules!"

"I was wrong," said Handforth tartly.

"You're sheep!"

"Look here, you fathead——"

"Sheep!" repeated Handforth, with emphasis. "At least, you don't seem to have

any more brains than an average nanny-goat. Don't we all belong to the Tiger Patrol, you cuckoo?"

"Oh, you mean the Scouts?" said McClure, light dawning upon him. "I was beginning to think that this study was a giddy menagerie! What about the Scouts, anyhow?"

"I'm the leader of the Tiger Patrol," replied Handforth, "and I mean to make things hum this term. We're going in for scouting, to the exclusion of all else! That's final!"

Church helped himself to fish paste.

"Just as you like, of course," he said agreeably. "But I had a hazy notion that you were keen on cricket. But I suppose you bought that new bat just to look at?"

"And those pads as an ornament for the wall?" added McClure carelessly.

Handforth started.

"Cricket, eh?" he said. "Oh, I forgot about cricket! The First Eleven can't very well get along without me, of course. I shall have to spare them a bit of time."

"You were always a generous chap, Handy," said Church, grinning. "But where does Fenton come in? He's cricket captain, you know, and I don't seem to remember that he's gone mad about your batting. And he's been ridiculously quiet about your bowling, too."

Handforth frowned.

"If you're trying to be sarcastic, my lad, you'd better dry up!" he said tartly. "This is the time of year for sports. The season for outdoor games and exercise. To-morrow's the first day of term, and, strictly speaking, it's a bit of a dirty trick to drag us down here to-day. But we're here, and we've got to make the best of it."

"I heard that Fenton's got some big scheme on for gingering up sports generally this term," said Church.

"All the more power to his arm!" Handforth exclaimed.

"Lessons to-morrow morning!" McClure reminded them dismally.

"They ought to be abolished!" snorted Handforth. "Lessons, by George! They're all right in the winter-time, but it's an absolute sin to make us stew in the classrooms this weather. I've a good mind to go and see the Head about it!"

"My hat!" ejaculated McClure abruptly. "There he is again!"

"Eh? Who?"

"De Valerie."

"What about him?"

"He's just crossing the West Square," said McClure, frowning.

"The scoundrel!" said Handforth indignantly. "How dare he cross the West Square? You—you hopeless ass!" he added, dropping his pretence. "Is there any reason why De Valerie shouldn't cross the West Square without your royal permission?"

"It's not that," said McClure. "He's with Forrest."

"Forrest!"

"Yes, and he was with him this afternoon, too," growled McClure. "They're as thick as thieves. And De Valerie is one of our best bowlers. I've heard that he's done some wonderful things during the holidays—been coached by real county cricketers, who were staying with his people."

Handforth rose to his feet and went to the window.

Cecil de Valerie, of Study G, was moving towards the West Arch with Bernard Forrest. They were, apparently, on the very best of terms, and Handforth frowned darkly.

The affair was nothing to do with him, of course, but he seemed to imagine that he was required to do something. Forrest, the leader of the Study A cads, was several kinds of a young rascal. And Cecil De Valerie was a thoroughly decent fellow. A trifle unreliable, perhaps, when it came to a matter of temper, but he was an excellent cricketer.

"I'm going to inquire into this—but I'll be tactful!" said Handforth grimly.

"Hold on, old man!" urged Church. "You can't interfere——"

But Handforth hurried out of the study, ran down the passage, and hurled himself through the lobby, and out of doors by way of the main entrance. He arrived in the picturesque old Triangle, in time to come face to face with Forrest and De Valerie just under the arch.

"Oh," said Handforth fiercely, "what's this?"

"Hallo, Handy!" said De Valerie, nodding cheerily. "Haven't seen you this term yet. What's what?"

"You ought to know!" snorted Handforth, grabbing his arm and pointing at Forrest. "What the dickens do you mean by getting thick with this cad?"

Cecil De Valerie flushed.

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to mind your own business?" he asked quietly.

"Good for you, Val!" said Forrest, with a glare at Handforth.

"Fortunately, I don't have to ask your permission before I get thick with anybody," went on De Valerie, with deliberate coldness. "I'm sorry you've chosen to make yourself unpleasant, Handforth. But you can't help butting into other people's affairs, can you?"

Edward Oswald gulped at the rebuff.

"Why, you—you silly lunatic," he roared, "who's butting in? Forrest's a cad, and I've always looked upon you as a decent chap. I don't like to see a clean fellow soiling himself!"

"This is something new!" said De Valerie. "The President of the St. Frank's Society for Public Morals has issued his decree! Sorry, Handy, old man, but I can get along quite nicely without your advice—or interference. Didn't you say something about tea, Forrest?"

"Yes, it's all ready."

"Good!" said De Valerie. "Let's go indoors."

They went into the Ancient House, and Edward Oswald Handforth stood there, an expression of blank amazement on his rugged features. He had always known that De Valerie was a touchy sort of chap, but he had hardly expected such an icy rebuff.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he ejaculated. "The hopeless chump!"

Nothing touched Handforth on the raw more than a suggestion that he was trying to preach. Any junior who preached was simply beyond the pale. He was regarded by all and sundry as a prig and a bore.

"Souse my scuppers!" exclaimed a brisk, cheery voice. "Anything wrong, messmate? Feeling a bit gloomy because we've started on another voyage?"

Tom Burton, better known as the Bo'sun, came across the Triangle with Alec Duncan, one of this term's new boys. Alec was a New Zealander, and a great friend of Jerry Dodd's—Jerry being an Australian boy. The affable Bo'sun was proudly showing the new boy round.

"There's nothing wrong with me," said Handforth gruffly. "It's that ass, De Valerie! He's getting chummy with Forrest! And when I tried to give him the tip, he didn't seem to like it!"

"It's a delicate thing, shipmate, to give advice of that kind," said Tom Burton, shaking his head. "Far better let him steer his own course. You've met Handforth, haven't you, Alec?"

"Yes, during the holidays," said Duncan, nodding and smiling. "I say, Handforth, this

school is grand! Back home in New Zealand I had an idea that St. Frank's was great, but it's miles better than I expected."

"It's not so bad," admitted Handforth grudgingly.

Burton grinned. If Duncan had uttered one word of adverse criticism, the New Zealander would have been flat on his back in about ten seconds, laid low by one of Handforth's celebrated rights. For Edward Oswald, in his heart, considered that St. Frank's was the only spot on earth worth including on any map.

They stood there, looking at the school. In the evening sunlight, St. Frank's was at its best. The imposing grey buildings were of granite, many of the walls covered with clinging ivy; the stone-flagged Triangle, with the fountain playing gently in the centre, the stately old elm-trees, and the thickly-foliaged chestnuts made a delightful picture.

There were five Houses at St. Frank's, counting the School House, which stood at the apex of the Triangle, immediately facing the main gates. Coming through these latter, one could not help being impressed by the architectural beauty of the stately buildings.

On the left, the chapel, the West House, and the Ancient House, with the high dividing tower and the cool depths of the West Arch. It was just the same on the right, only here stood the gymnasium, and the East House and the Modern House.

"What lies beyond the School House?" asked Duncan curiously.

"You mean under Big Arch?" asked Burton. "Strictly speaking, it's out of bounds, but we're permitted to go there to-day. The Inner Court, you know, with the Head's House farther beyond. Let's steer a course that way."

They went off, and Edward Oswald Handforth grunted. He had half a mind to go to Study A, and pull Cecil De Valerie out by sheer force. But he wisely decided against this. Instead, he went back to Study D, and proceeded to shatter the peace of Church and McClure.

"Think of it!" he said indignantly. "He's actually having tea with Forrest and Gulliver and Bell in Study A! Those awful cads, you know! Why, it's—it's a tragedy!"

"If De Valerie likes to be an idiot, why should we worry?" asked Church. "He's old enough to look after himself, isn't he? If you say anything to him, you'll only make him a lot worse."

Handforth nodded.

"That's what I can't understand!" he said bitterly. "There must be something wrong with the man's mentality! I've only got to breathe a suggestion to him, and he wants to do exactly the opposite!"

"Well, it's a human weakness, you know —" began McClure.

"Weakness!" thundered Handforth. "It simply proved that he's a born idiot! If anybody suggests anything to me, do I make a fuss, and want to do something else? Huh!

I've no patience with such obstinate bounders!"

Church made a curious sound, and fainted gracefully into McClure's arms. But fortunately Handforth failed to observe this little manoeuvre. He was busily pitying Cecil De Valerie for being such a pig-headed mule. It never occurred to him that he possessed the same weakness himself—only in a more marked degree!

CHAPTER 2.

FENTON MEANS BUSINESS.



EDGAR FENTON, the popular captain of St. Frank's, thrust his hands into his trousers-pockets and grinned.

"It's all right! Don't get the wind up!" he said genially. "I'm not going to keep you here for long. Not so much restlessness over in the off-side corner, you Third-Form youngsters! I've got something important to say, and you've got to hear it whether you want to or not!"

"All right, Fenton—choke it up!"

"Don't forget it's sunshiny outside!"

"Show some speed, old man!"

Edgar Fenton was standing on the raised platform in Big Hall, and he was facing the entire school. It was on the following morning, and prayers were just over. There were no masters present, and so there was a free-and-easy feeling in the air.

"I have got the Head's permission to jaw at you for five minutes," continued the school skipper. "If you keep interrupting, it'll probably stretch to ten minutes before I've done. So it's up to you. You needn't worry. I'm not going to lecture about discipline or work. I'm here to have a friendly chat on the subject of sport."

"Good man!"

"Cricket in particular," went on Fenton. "The school did pretty well last season, but not nearly good enough to satisfy me. This summer we've got to beat our own record. I am skipper, but I can't do anything unless you all back me up."

"Hear, hear!"

"Good old Fenton!"

"It's the spirit that counts mostly," said Fenton, becoming serious. "I'm not referring to the actual members of the Elevens, but to everybody. The majority of you won't take part—that is, active part—in any of the big matches this season. That's obvious! But you'll all have the opportunity of watching them. You'll all be able to help or hinder the games."

"I'm not much of a hand at making a speech, but you'll probably understand what I'm getting at. It's the school spirit that counts. I want us all to work up a solid, one hundred per cent. enthusiasm for sports. And I include everybody. All you fellows who haven't taken much interest in games and sports had better look to your laurels!

There are going to be no exceptions this term!"

"What rot!" growled Bernard Forrest, of the Remove.

"Catch us wastin' our time on games!" sneered Gulliver.

"Dry up, you rotters!" snapped two or three other juniors.

"The fact is, I thought it would be rather a good idea to hold a sort of sports carnival," went on Fenton. "Sculling—swimming—boxing—cricket. Get the idea? A regular sixty-mile-an-hour whirlwind of contests. I've got most of the events mapped out, but I'm not going to bore you with the details just now. I've just given you the main idea."

"Hear, hear!"

"It's a topping suggestion, Fenton!"

"Rather!"

Over three-fourths of the school hummed with excitement, and Edgar Fenton had already gone up enormously in the estimation of the majority. But a species of acute alarm had taken possession of the slackers.

"When I referred to spirit just now, I meant—well, I meant spirit," said Fenton, seeking the expression he wanted. "I'm a rotten speaker, I know, but I hope you've grabbed the idea. I want us all to devote ourselves to enthusiastic rivalry. Let one House go all out against the other. Do you see what I mean? Make up your minds that your own particular House is going to wipe all the others off the map! And let all of us do the same—without any exceptions. A certain proportion will fall by the wayside, perhaps, but they'll have the satisfaction of knowing that they've done their best."

"Hurrah!"

"We'll back you up, Fenton, old son!"

"Hear, hear!"

"I think you've got me, eh?" went on the captain cheerfully. "Mind you, it's got to be a friendly sort of business. We'll all strain our nerves and sinews to be top dogs, but let's be clean. And there's another point—don't get over-enthusiastic. That'll be fatal. Whatever you do, keep your balance. And always remember that we're here, first and foremost, to work in the Form-rooms."

A loud and prolonged groan greeted this home truth.

"Chuck it, Fenton!" shouted somebody. "Don't spoil everything!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm not spoiling everything," said Fenton grimly. "And, although you may not like to admit it, the cold truth is that we're all here for the purpose of work. There's a kind of popular superstition that a chap comes to school to learn such nonsense as grammar and arithmetic and geography. A foolish notion, no doubt, but there it is!"

The school was grinning at Fenton's gentle sarcasm.

"And there are certain gentlemen within these walls who like to see a little progress," continued Fenton. "Housemasters, for example, are inclined to get distinctly ratty if a fellow regards cricket with more enthusiasm than mathematics. Form-masters

have been known to go grey in a term if their flocks develop a hankering after the clock-watching habit. In other words, although we want to do big things at games and sport, we mustn't do so at the expense of school work. I don't want this sports carnival to interfere with studies."

More prolonged groans from the school.

"I'm speaking solely about our spare time," said Fenton impressively. "Instead of slack-ing, we've got to use the precious hours for practising and working up a record sports spirit. Let every spare minute be a sports minute! That's the slogan we've got to adopt!"

"Hear, hear!"

"We'll back you up, Fenton, old man!"

"Every time!"

"I propose that the first item shall be a match between the First and Second Elevens," continued Fenton. "That'll be for next week, and in the meantime the teams will be selected after we've had some House matches. And the first contest in the other sports might be a sculling event. We'll make it a regular competition, and the honours will go to the best eight."

"Each House has got to make a big bid for the honours. That's the very idea of the carnival. At the end of term the House with the most points will win the cup, or whatever else we decide upon. It's only a suggestion so far, but it'll soon take concrete shape. Oh, and there's something else, too," added Fenton. "I think it'll be a good idea, this term, for all important cricket fixtures to be two-day matches."

"By George, that's a ripping idea!" shouted Handforth approvingly.

"Rather!"

"There's not much chance of a team distinguishing itself in a one-day match," continued Fenton. "But there mustn't be any slackening of studies because of the new rule. All lost time will have to be made up. I've had a long talk with the Head and he's firm on that point. So it's only fair that you should know exactly how the matter stands."

Fenton only discussed a few more points, and then the school was permitted to disperse. And there was plenty to talk about! In every House the fellows were excitedly and animatedly discussing the coming carnival.

CHAPTER 3.

CRICKET!



ERROLD DODD, more familiarly known as plain Jerry, was fairly bubbling with enthusiasm as he faced Tom Burton and Alec Duncan in

Study F ten minutes later.

"This new idea of Fenton's is real dinkum oil!" said the Australian junior. "I'm not so keen on the sculling and swimming, but the cricket ought to be the best we've ever had."

"Souse me, shipmate, you're right!" agreed the Bo'sun. "If only Fenton can work up that sporting spirit——"

"It's not Fenton's job," interrupted Jerry, shaking his head. "Fenton can't do much unless the school backs him up. That sporting spirit has got to be fanned into flame by the whole school—by every fellow of the Form. It's the only way to get things done. If we're all keen on the same subject, St. Frank's will beat the country at cricket this term."

"I'm afraid I shan't get much of a look in," said Alec Duncan ruefully. "I'm not much of a hand at cricket."

The Cornstalk junior clapped him on the back.

"Don't you worry about that," he said. "We'll soon make a cricketer of you, Alec! De Valerie wasn't particularly good last season, but he's a red-hot bonzer bowler now! So I hear, anyhow. I'm keen to have a look at his form at the nets."

"Well, let's go outside, and hear what the rest of the chaps are saying," suggested Burton. "Lessons pretty soon, you know, and we shall be in the class-rooms before we know where we are."

They went out, momentarily depressed. It was altogether too bad for these lessons to interfere with the most important thing in school life! It was all very well for Fenton to talk about studies, but how many fellows put their studies before sport? What was the good of coming to school, anyhow?

The Triangle was animated. Groups of fellows from all the Houses were standing about, discussing the sensation. For, in a way, Edgar Fenton's pronouncement had been sensational.

All the sports enthusiasts were as keen as mustard, and the majority of the lukewarms were being invested with a new interest. Fenton hadn't said a great deal, but every word of his free-and-easy speech had gone home. It was likely that a great many fellows would throw their personal hobbies aside for a while, and concentrate upon the House games. There was every chance that the keenest possible rivalry would be engendered.

And in a certain minor section a very real alarm was apparent. In St. Frank's, as in every other big public school, a few boys were utterly contemptuous of sports. Forrest & Co., of Study A, for example, were looking very troubled this morning. They were slackers of the most pronounced type, and they regarded Fenton as a madman.

There were others who held the same view; Kenmore of the Sixth was one, Grayson and Shaw of the Fifth were two more, and freaks like Timothy Tucker and Teddy Long and Clarence Fellowe and Enoch Snipe were agog with deep and alarmed concern.

Handforth, of course, was one of the red-hot enthusiasts.

Judging from his talk, one might have imagined that the suggestion was his. In fact, he carelessly explained that Fenton had only forestalled him by a mere fluke, since he

had had this great scheme in mind for weeks. But as nobody took much notice of Edward Oswald's "hot air," it didn't matter.

"You chaps, too," said Handforth, fixing Church and McClure with a grim gaze. "I'm going to make you into champions! Just place yourselves under my control, and you'll emerge with flying colours. You're pretty good at cricket, Churchy, and you'll be in the First Eleven yet."

"Yes, when the moon grows whiskers!" said Church tartly.

"As for you, Mac, I'll coach you in swimming and running," continued Handforth generously. "We'll start this afternoon."

"But I can whack you at swimming now!" said McClure. "What's the good of a coach who can't beat his pupil?"

"You can whack me at swimming?" snorted Handforth.

"Well, last summer——"

"Blow last summer!" interrupted Handforth loftily. "You can't judge a chap's form by what he did in the past. I'm going to show you—— Hallo! There's that giddy Irish bounder! They've shoved him in the Fourth, haven't they?"

"Yes, he's in the Modern House," said Church. "He's sharing Study 8 with the South African chap, Vandyke. I hear that Vandyke is hot stuff at cricket, too. And he's keen on Rugger."

"Then he'll be no good here!" said Handforth firmly. "Soccer's our game. A lot of rot, of course, because Rugger's miles better. Next season we'll play Rugger, if I've got any say!"

Church and McClure didn't continue the argument. As they considered that Handforth had no say whatever, they had no hope that Rugby football would be introduced for the next season. But they thought it unnecessary to mention this to Handforth.

Terry O'Grady and Herbert Vandyke were great chums. They were both new boys, and they were talking with Alec Duncan and Jerry Dodd. Hussi Kahn was there, too. The Indian junior was somehow attracted by these fellows from far over seas. And it wasn't long before Clive Russell, the Canadian junior, strolled up.

"Hallo! You Empire fellows seem to feel a mutual attraction," smiled Dick Hamilton, as he joined them. "We've got the British Empire fairly well represented now, haven't we?"

"You've said something!" grinned Clive Russell.

Dick Hamilton, more commonly known as Nipper, was the captain of junior sports, in addition to being the Remove skipper. He wasn't particularly obtrusive, but he was exceedingly capable. Where Handforth was heard like a roll of thunder, Dick Hamilton was heard as a whisper. But Dick's whisper was a hundred times more effective than Handy's thunder.

"Let me see," went on Nipper, glancing round the group. "Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India, and Ireland! We're just about all complete."

"What about Scotland?" demanded McClure warmly.

"Aren't you Scotch, you ass?"

"I think I've got Scottish blood in me, but I'm not really Scotch," replied McClure. "But I suppose I'd pass for one in a muster."

"Ah, Brother Horace, here we see a very interesting spectacle," exclaimed William Napoleon Browne, halting on his way across the Triangle. "A gathering of the Empire units, I take it?"

Browne was the captain of the Fifth, and quite a unique character in his way. He was, perhaps, the coolest fellow in the whole of St. Frank's, in addition to being one of the most capable. His cricket record was brilliant. And Horace Stevens, his study chum, was fairly good at sports, too, although recently he had been devoting a lot of his time to acting.

"I cannot but approve of this excellent innovation," continued Browne benevolently. "Surely this is an occasion for action? Would it not be a brainy move to form an Empire Club? An Empire Circle? Always remember, brothers, that the Empire spirit is as important as the sports spirit! All hail to Greater Britain!"

"By Jove, there's something in that, too!" said Clive Russell, with sparkling eyes. "Why not an Empire Circle, you fellows? I guess it would be the real goods, eh? We'll elect a leader, too, and hold meetings."

"The suggestion is excellently approved of," said Hussi Khan, nodding. "For are we not all lamentably staunch to the powerful and prosperous flag? Let us honour the old Mother Country."

"Hear, hear!" chuckled Alec Duncan. "It's a great scheme."

William Napoleon Browne beamed.

"Meagre praise, but it will suffice," he observed. "I rather expected more, but one must be content with a few scattered crumbs. An Empire Circle at St. Frank's must inevitably mean the fostering of a more slablike Empire spirit. In case you should require any flags, always remember that moderation is the watchword."

"You guys don't know a thing about flags!" put in Ulysses Spencer Adams, the American boy. "Aw, gee! You need to go to the United States for that sort of dope! Oh, boy! Wait until the 4th of July! See the parades down Fifth Avenue. Say, some nifty sight. I guess there'll be so many flags that you won't see Fifth Avenue for Stars and Stripes!"

"Precisely!" said Browne gently. "While approving of patriotic flag-wagging, Brother Adams, I venture to suggest that that sort of thing can be slightly overdone. We, in this long-deceased country, are apt to hesitate before converting ourselves into dancing dervishes."

"My land! Can you beat that?" said Ulysses, in astonishment. "Where do you get that stuff? We're cool in America, kiddo! But when we see the Stars and Stripes we kind of go nutty with honest-to-goodness patriotism!"

"A frank and honest statement," beamed Browne. "But when you see less nuttiness among Britons, Brother Adams, do not fall into the fatal trap of imagining that we are less patriotic. We may be sluggish—we may be snail-like—but I venture to suggest that we get there. Let me cite the fable of the Hare and the Tortoise. Think it over, Brother Adams!"

The British Empire chuckled, and America glared.

"Geewinnikers!" he ejaculated. "I guess he means that America's the hare and Britain's the tortoise. Surest thing, you know! We're the hares, all right! Browne's sure said a mouthful!"

"But in the fable the tortoise wins!" said Dick Hamilton gently.

"How come?" asked Adams. "Say, you mean—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The American boy stalked off indignantly as the whole crowd yelled with laughter at his expense.

"Trust old Browne to take anybody down a peg or two!" grinned Willy Handforth approvingly. "He's nearly as good as me at the game!"

Willy was the captain of the Third—and enjoyed the doubtful honour of being Edward Oswald Handforth's minor. Curiously enough, the desire to forget this fact was mutual with both the brothers. But the reason for forgetting it was totally different in either case.

"Where's Pitt?" went on Willy. "Anybody seen Reggie Pitt? I'm after a place in the Second Eleven, and—"

"You young ass!" snorted his major. "No fags allowed in real cricket! Take my advice, and stick to your marbles!"



CHAPTER 4.

FORREST AND CO. ARE ALARMED.

MOST of the fellows around grinned.

"Marbles!" echoed Willy Handforth indignantly.

"Well, conkers, then."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you hopeless chump!" roared Willy. "We don't play conkers in the Third—or marbles, either! We've got some cricketers that even the Australian Test Team skipper would be glad to get hold of!"

Jerry Dodd yelled.

"Our team doesn't want any recruits from the Third," he grinned. "It doesn't need any recruits from anywhere! I feel sorry for England this year."

"Oh!" said about a dozen voices. "Why?"

"Well, some of you fellows seem to think that England stands a chance of winning the Ashes," said the Australian junior. "It's the biggest mistake you ever made. I don't like to put it bluntly, but poor old England doesn't stand a dog's chance. And that's no guyver, either!"



"I want to warn you against Forrest & Co.," said Handforth impressively, quite unaware of the fact that he had overturned De Valerie's inkpot and that his white flannel trousers were rapidly absorbing large quantities of blue-black fluid. "Forrest is no good, Gulliver and Bell are worse!" Handforth snorted. "And, mind you, I'm telling you this for your own good!" De Valerie sat back and grinned.

Jerry didn't mean to be boastful, but it was his one weakness to possess an inflated enthusiasm for his own country. And he could hardly be blamed for that. In the midst of so many of Australia's cricket opponents, he felt it necessary to exaggerate his optimism. And the thought of Australia losing the Ashes this year was just as ridiculous as the idea of flying to New South Wales in an hour. Both were impossible.

"By jings, you'll be lucky to win one game out of the five!" went on Jerry scornfully. "Who cares for your Carrs and your Tates and your Hobbses. They won't get a look in against the Aussies."

Jerry scarcely seemed to realise that he was causing severe blood pressure among the entire circle. Faces were becoming flushed, and eyes were glancing. Jerry Dodd was in imminent danger of being hurled into the fountain pool.

"Hold on!" said Willy, before any action could be taken. "I've got something to say to this giddy Gumsucker."

Jerry Dodd leapt a yard into the air. He wasn't antagonistic towards Victoria, but he happened to come from New South Wales. And to be called a Gumsucker was calculated to arouse his ire. For, in Australia, Victoria and New South Wales are deadly rivals.

"I'm not a Gumsucker!" he snorted indignantly.

"Well, a Wheatstick, then," said Willy. "I've got something to say—"

"I'm a Cornstalk!" howled Jerry.

"All right—don't get excited about it," went on Willy calmly. "You can be a Cornstalk if you like. We don't mind. We English chaps are awfully generous like that. But about this cricket. If Australia doesn't knock England into a cocked hat during these Test Matches, it ought to go home like a puppy with its tail between its legs."

"What?" said Nipper, staring. "Are you suggesting that Australia's going to win the rubber?"

"Not likely," said Willy. "I'm just saying that Australia ought to! And the fact that Australia won't will make England's victory all the more terrific. I'm sick of all this piffle about the Test Matches! Haven't you fellows ever given the thing a thought? Australia ought to win. She's got every advantage, and she'd look a lot better if she didn't pretend that the odds are even."

"You're crazy!" said Jerry Dodd warmly. "Aren't the odds even?"

"Just about as even as sending one of our best Soccer clubs to Australia to play football," retorted Willy pointedly. "Cricket's the national game of Australia—and Soccer's the national game of England."

"Oh, that's all rot!" began Jerry.

"You think it over, and you'll agree with

me," went on the shrewd Third Former. "Why, in Australia you can play cricket during the whole summer with hardly a break. Your men look upon cricket as a religion—they're at it every day. But what sort of practice do our cricketers get?"

"By Jove, there's something in it, you know!" remarked Church.

"What's our summer like?" continued Willy, with a sniff. "Why, in half our big county games the crowd sits round watching the umpires jabbing things into the pitch to see if it's hard enough! In some games there's about ten minutes' play before the luncheon interval, and then a sweet little shower comes, and washes the rest of the game away. And that goes on all over the country all through the summer! And you talk about the odds being even!"

Jerry looked thoughtful.

"I'm sorry if I was boastful," he said, cooling down. "Now you put it like that, I suppose our men do stand the best chance."

"I should jolly well think they do!" growled Willy. "I'm glad you realise it! But what's going to happen if Australia wins the Test Matches? The whole of Australia will roar as though they've done something wonderful! And it's only what a sensible chap would expect them to do! And our cricket experts will write yards of gloomy tosh for the papers, and talk about England's decline!"

"By George!" said Handforth. "My minor's right!"

"It must be a good argument, Ted, if you can see it!" said Willy, grinning. "Don't forget, all the rest of you! England starts on these Test Matches with a jolly big handicap, and if she wins she'll perform a giddy miracle! And the age of miracles is *not* past!" he added emphatically.

"Well I'm blessed!" said Jerry Dodd, as Willy strolled off.

"And that," said Clive Russell, "is that! It strikes me, Jerry, old man, that Willy has quietly ticked you off!"

"The cheeky young bounder!" growled the Australian junior.

But, inwardly, he knew that Willy had been expressing some very brainy reasoning.

"I've never looked at it like that before, you know," said Cecil De Valerie thoughtfully. "What did Australia say when our footballers went over there and whacked every team they met?"

"They kept jolly quiet, and said nothing else could be expected," said Handforth warmly. "But England doesn't say that about cricket, does she? She welcomes the Australians with open arms, and treats 'em as equals! And yet they're miles better than our men—or ought to be."

"Oh, well, we don't want to jaw about Australia all the time, do we?" said De Valerie. "Besides, the Test Matches aren't coming off yet. Where's Somerton? Anybody seen the ass?"

De Valerie went off in search of his study mate—the youthful Duke of Somerton. But just as he was entering the Ancient House

he ran into Bernard Forrest and Albert Gulliver and George Bell—the caddish trio of Study A.

"Oh, here you are!" said Forrest. "Just looking for you, Val, old man."

"Well, I'm looking for Somerton, so you'll soon lose me again," replied De Valerie.

"Sorry, Forrest, but I can't stop—"

"Bother Somerton," interrupted Forrest easily. "Come along to the study, Val. We want to show you something. A new card trick, you know. Something jolly clever. With a little wangling a chap can make a good bit of cash out of it. A sort of variation of 'Find the Lady.'"

De Valerie frowned.

"I'm not interested in cards," he said tartly. "I told you that before, Forrest. I'm going all out for cricket this term. And, with luck, I might be able to get a place in the First Eleven. If I aim for the First, there's just a chance that I shall get into the Second, anyhow."

Bernard Forrest took De Valerie's arm.

"Come along to the study," he said persuasively. "We've been looking for you! You ought not to desert us like this—after the good times we had during holidays. Come along to the study!"

"Oh, right-ho," agreed De Valerie weakly. "Just as you like."

He didn't notice the Duke of Somerton at the top of the stairs. But the Duke of Somerton noticed him. The spectacle was not a pleasant one for De Valerie's chum. For De Valerie was arm-in-arm with the cads.

In Study A, Forrest closed the door.

"Now, Val, look here," he said coolly. "What's all this rot about cricket? I thought you were going to be a sport this term?"

"That's why I'm going in for cricket," said De Valerie.

"Chuck it, old son," put in Gulliver. "We had some good times during the vac., an' we don't want to stop them now. This rotten idea of Fenton's has got into your head."

"What rotten idea?"

"This infernal Sports Carnival," growled Forrest. "Of all the unutterable tosh, that's about the thickest! Why, at this rate, we shall be expected to turn out for running practice, or swimming lessons, or some frightful idiocy of that sort!"

Cecil De Valerie made for the door.

"If that's the way you look upon Fenton's scheme, I'm finished!" he retorted. "I think it's the finest wheeze that any school captain has ever trotted out! And I'm going in for cricket this term, as I told you before."

The cads held him back. They were rather proud of the fact that they had won him over, and they didn't want to see him slip away. They were filled with alarm at the prospect of compulsory sports practice, and De Valerie might be very useful to them.

"Look here, Val, cheese it!" said Forrest smoothly. "Why sweat yourself over cricket? You'll get nothing out of it. Don't kid yourself that you'll get a place in the First or Second! You'll slog at practice until you're

ready to drop, and you'll never get anything better than a place in the House team. It's not worth the candle, my lad!"

De Valerie smiled.

"You can't get me round like that," he replied. "Nothing doing, Forrest! I'll admit I may have to wait for my chance, but if I practice hard enough I shall get it. And that's as it should be. You don't value a thing unless you've sweated for it."

"But, my dear chap, think of the fag——"

"It's all a matter of opinion," interrupted De Valerie. "It may be a fag to you, Forrest, but it'll be a pleasure to me. Just a different point of view—that's all. You three slackers think it's a torture if you have to do an hour's easy exercise. And look at you! A weedy, pasty-faced crowd of drones! I wouldn't be like you for a fortune!"

The three "drones" were no longer "pasty-faced."

"You'd better go easy!" snorted Forrest, his face flushed.

"No offence, of course," went on De Valerie, grinning. "Don't get ratty, you chumps! I'm not being nasty—I'm only giving you the straight tip. There's no reason why we shouldn't keep on good terms. I believe in being friendly all round."

"You won't be friendly with us if you say things like that!" retorted Forrest sourly. "Look here, Val, we'll forget all about it if you'll come to tea this evening. We want to have a talk about this sports rot. We're not keen on it at all, and perhaps you can give us a few tips."

"How to slip out of compulsory practice, eh?"

"Well, not exactly that," put in Gulliver. "But if we've got you for a pal, we might be able to fluff a bit. Be a sport, and give us a hand. We're not keen on this rotten carnival."

De Valerie chuckled.

"I'll think about it," he said agreeably. "I might come—— Well, there goes the bell, so it's us for the Form-room. My hat! The first lessons of term! What a beautiful prospect!"



CHAPTER 5.

SOMERTON DOESN'T HELP.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH caught hold of Somerton's arm as the latter was passing up the Form-room to his usual place.

"Just a minute, Somerton," said the leader of Study D mysteriously. "I've got something to say to you."

He gave the youthful duke such a suspicious look that Somerton jumped to a wrong conclusion.

"It's all right—don't bother about my bags," he said, smiling.

"Your bags?"

"I know they're inky," went on Somerton. "I was filling my fountain-pen this morning,

and something seemed to go wrong. You needn't bother about my shoes, either. They may be old, but they're comfortable."

Handforth stared at Somerton in amazement. Until that moment he hadn't realised that there was anything wrong with him. But now that Somerton had drawn attention to the fact, Handforth could see that he was as careless and as untidy as ever. His trousers were baggy, ink-stained, and generally frightful. Two of his waistcoat buttons were missing, his collar was crumpled, and his hair was untidy.

For a duke in his own right, with an annual rent-roll amounting to tens of thousands of pounds, he wasn't particularly careful about his appearance. A stranger might have thought that his parents or guardians were desperately poor. But Somerton was celebrated as the most untidy fellow in the Remove.

"My hat! You do look a bit of a wreck!" admitted Handforth. "But I wasn't going to speak to you about your clobber, you chump! I don't care if you go about wrapped in newspapers! I want to talk about something else. I've got a bone to pick with you!"

"I'm fairly strong," said Somerton. "Go ahead!"

"Why don't you look after De Valerie?" demanded Handforth accusingly.

The schoolboy duke looked uncomfortable. "You've noticed it, too, then?" he asked in a low voice. "The hopeless idiot! I saw him arm-in-arm with Forrest not twenty minutes ago!"

"And he had tea with those Study A cads last night!" said Handforth. "You're De Valerie's study mate, aren't you?"

"Well, yes."

"You call yourself his pal?"

"Of course I do——"

"Then why the dickens don't you look after him?" demanded Handforth indignantly. "Why do you let him fall into the clutches of the Israelites?"

"I suppose you mean the Philistines?" asked Somerton.

"What's the difference?" said Handforth impatiently. "Why can't you keep the chap in the straight path? I tried to jaw him last night, and he only seemed to be worse."

"Oh, you did!" said Somerton. "That explains it."

"Explains what?"

"Well, you're not very tactful, old man——"

"You howling, fatheaded dummy!" roared Handforth. "Are you trying to tell me that I've got no tact? You gibbering lunatic——"

"Handforth!" thundered Mr. Crowell, entering the Form-room at that moment. "How dare you use such terms to Somerton? And what do you mean by quarrelling in front of my desk? Go to your place at once, sir!"

Somerton went, but Handforth stood his ground.

"I can't help it, sir!" he snorted. "Somerton just told me that I'm tactless!"

The Form tittered, and Mr. Crowell's eyes twinkled.

"A perfectly ridiculous accusation, Handforth!" he said drily. "You'd better go to your place, and we'll say no more about it. I don't want to commence the new term by giving you an imposition."

Even Handforth could see a plain hint like that, and he went to his desk with an antagonistic glare in Somerton's direction. The schoolboy duke did not mend matters by broadly grinning.

Not that Somerton really felt like grinning. He was decidedly worried about Cecil De Valerie. He hadn't said much to his study chum so far, but he decided that he would raise the subject after lessons. It would be better, perhaps, to get in a word before Handforth started again. Handforth had an unfortunate delusion that he was not only the captain of the Form, but the guide and counsellor for the entire Ancient House.

Morning school wasn't half so bad as everybody had feared. Anticipation is always worse than realisation. But Mr. Crowell, of course, was unusually easy. The first day of term was never a strict day.

As soon as lessons were over Somerton went straight to his study. He had been thinking a good deal during the morning, and he had decided that it would be far better to "have it out" with Cecil De Valerie at once.

It was a decidedly unpleasant business, but it was no goodfunking it. It was particularly obnoxious to Somerton, for he was one of the most good-tempered fellows in the Junior School—easy-going and harmless. He wanted nothing better than to rub along amiably with everybody.

As he had hoped, De Valerie came in almost immediately afterwards. He came in with a rush, and made for the corner where he had left his cricket bat. He paused abruptly upon seeing Somerton near the window.

"Oh, hallo!" he said awkwardly.

"Hallo!" said Somerton.

There was a pause. They hadn't exchanged many words since arriving on the previous afternoon. At the end of the last term they had parted staunch friends, with all sorts of promises for the immediate future. But they hadn't seen one another at all during the holidays, and ever since they had got back there had been a sort of coldness. This was partly because Somerton had seen De Valerie enter the school in a very friendly manner with Bernard Forrest. And there seemed to be something on De Valerie's mind, too—something that had caused him to hold aloof.

"Just come for my bat," he said, at length.

"Practice?" asked Somerton.

"Yes."

"I hear you're hot stuff this term?"

"Oh, you can't take any notice of those silly rumours," said De Valerie. "I had a bit of practice at home. We had some friends staying with us, and one of them is a county cricketer. He gave us some awfully good tips—and a lot of coaching, too."

"You're going in for cricket this term, then?"

"Rather," said De Valerie. "Why?"

"Oh, well, I don't know! I thought perhaps—" Somerton paused, finding it difficult to say what he required. "Well, hang it, Val!" he broke out gruffly. "Isn't it a bit thick, the way you're treating me?"

De Valerie looked at his companion. Somerton had suddenly flushed furiously, and he was looking angry.

"What do you mean—the way I'm treating you?" asked Val.

"If you don't know what I mean, I'll say no more!" retorted the schoolboy duke. "You'd better go to your new friends. You've hardly spoken half a dozen words to me since you came yesterday. Not that I care, of course!" he added, turning aside. "Please yourself!"

If Cecil de Valerie had laughed at this moment, and had taken the hint with a good grace, everything would have been all right. But he didn't laugh. His eyes blazed, and he fairly glared.

CHAPTER 6.

DE VALERIE DRIFTS.



It was a ridiculous storm in a teacup. Such a pity, too. A couple of friendly words, and there would have been no misunderstanding. But Cecil de Valerie knew only too well that his chum was justified, and it angered him the more.

"Look here, Sommy, I don't want you to dictate to me!" said Cecil de Valerie curtly.

"Dictate be hanged! I'm only trying—"

"You're trying to be infernally nasty!" snapped De Valerie. "Can't I say a dozen words to a man without you jumping down my throat? As a matter of fact, I met Forrest once or twice during the vac., and he's not half so bad as he's painted."

"And I suppose Gulliver and Bell are a pair of desirable young sports?"

"Don't be a fool!" retorted De Valerie. "I like to be on good terms with everybody. And I shan't ask your permission before I choose my friends, either! What's the idea of being so beastly unpleasant?"

The Duke of Somerton glared.

"You're not unpleasant, are you?" he asked hotly.

"I wasn't until you started on me!"

"Rats! You've been nasty ever since yesterday."

"That's only because you tried to give me the cold shoulder," said De Valerie. "As soon as you spotted me with Forrest, you froze up. Go to the deuce! For two pins I'll clear out of this study altogether!"

"I don't care!"

"Oh, you want me to go, then?"

"If you're going to remain in your present mood, it'll be a jolly good riddance!" snapped

Somerton. "I can tell you plainly that I don't want any pal of Forrest's in here. Forrest's a cad of the first water—a smoking, card-playing, gambling young blackguard! Go and cling round his neck all you like!"

"Do you think I care a rap for Forrest?" roared De Valerie.

"Birds of a feather, you know!" retorted Somerton.

He regretted the words as soon as they had been spoken, but he was so incensed that they had been forced out. He didn't often lose his temper—amiable fellows seldom do—but, when he did lose it, he made a thorough job of it.

"Why, confound your nerve!" shouted De Valerie fiercely. "I won't stick in this rotten study another minute! What's more, I'll go to tea with Forrest & Co. this evening! You can brood here alone!"

De Valerie's fury was fanned by the twitchings of his own conscience. He knew, all the time, that he was at fault—and that Somerton was justified in his anger. And he knew that he had been an idiot to have anything to do with Forrest. But, being human, wild horses wouldn't have made him admit it.

Handforth's well-meant interference the previous evening had made De Valerie all the more perverse, and his old chum's attitude now fairly cast the die. And yet De Valerie knew well enough that he was utterly and absolutely in the wrong.

He had met Forrest & Co. quite by chance during the holidays, and he had gone out with them once or twice—not because he liked them, but because they were the only St. Frank's fellows he had encountered. They hadn't seemed so bad, and he thought that perhaps the general opinion of them was rather harsh.

And on the first day of the term he couldn't very well ignore them altogether, so he had made himself pleasant. Now, however, he regarded them as quite desirable youths, and he looked upon the Duke of Somerton as an unutterable cad.

He tucked his bat under his arm, and strode out.

"Hold on, Val——" began Somerton.

But De Valerie took no notice of him, and stalked out. He made his way to Little Side in a rare temper, and found Dick Hamilton busy at the nets with other members of the Junior House team. Before the First v. Second match there would be any number of House games.

"Just the man I wanted!" said Nipper briskly, tossing the ball to De Valerie. "I've heard you're mustard at bowling. Let's have a look at you."

"Thanks all the same, I'd rather not," growled De Valerie.

The next second he called himself a hopeless idiot—for he was as keen as possible to bowl. And Nipper didn't ask him a second time, either! He stood idly by while the others practised.

"Hang!" muttered De Valerie savagely.

"Speaking to me?" said Handforth, who was passing.

"No!"

"Well, you needn't bite me!"

"Can't I breathe without somebody interfering?" snapped De Valerie.

"You're in a rotten temper, my lad," said Handforth, with an admonishing frown. "Ickle boys shouldn't lose their ickle tempers! And there's another thing, too——"

"Go and eat coke!" roared Cecil.

"By George!" snorted Handforth. "Are you talking to me?"

"Yes, I am!"

"I won't biff you over," said Handforth, cooling down suddenly. "I can see what's the matter with you, my son. You're feeling ashamed of yourself because you've been chumming up with those Study A rotters. Take my advice, and leave 'em alone!"

"I don't want your advice!"

"Of course you don't!" agreed Handforth. "Nobody likes taking good advice. Forrest is an outsider, and we don't want to see you backsliding. Come and have a go at the nets, and don't be an ass! I've decided to coach you, and make you a good cricketer."

De Valerie seemed very unappreciative.

"Oh, have you?" he said sourly. "Well, you can go and boil yourself! You can take your coaching where it's wanted. It wouldn't be a bad idea to start with yourself. Goodness knows, you're pretty rotten at the game. Your minor can whack you any day!"

He strode off, more savage than ever, and Handforth stood looking after him with wide-open mouth.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he ejaculated. "Did you hear that?"

Church and McClure were just in the rear, and they nodded.

"You couldn't expect anything else, Handy," said Church. "Why the dickens couldn't you leave the chap alone? He's not so bad; but he's touchy to-day, and you've made him worse than ever."

"What's the good of a chap if he can't take some well-meant advice?" snorted Handforth. "Blow him! I shan't argue the next time I meet him—I'll give him a taste of my right, and see how he likes it."

He went to the nets, and he was so indignant that he slogged recklessly, and made very little impression upon the Junior skipper.

"It's no good, Handy, old man," said Dick Hamilton. "You'll have to moderate your style a bit. You'd be out first ball if you used those tactics in a match."

Handforth stared.

"I'd like to see the bowler who can get me out!" he retorted indignantly.

"Jerry!" called Nipper, grinning.

Jerry Dodd obliged, and sent down a deadly yorker which had Handforth guessing all the way. He swiped wildly, and his leg stump sagged dolefully.

"There he is!" said Nipper, with a chuckle.

"Eh? Who?" gasped Handforth.

"Didn't you say you'd like to see the chap who could get you out?" asked Dick blandly.

"Let it be a lesson to you, my son, not to get reckless. The main duty of a batsman is to guard his wicket. If he can't do that, he's no good—no matter how hard he can slog. We want you, Handy—you're a run-getter. But we want you to be a bit more cautious."

Handforth was considerably mollified. He regarded Nipper's criticism as a mere exhibition of jealousy, and remarked that it was an everlasting tragedy for the Junior eleven that he—Handforth—wasn't the skipper. Curiously enough, the Junior eleven would have regarded it as an everlasting tragedy if he had been.



CHAPTER 7.

A GOOD SHOWING.

DICK HAMILTON stopped Somerton in the lobby, just after dinner.

"I say, Sommy, what's the matter with Val?" he asked. "I wanted to see his bowling this morning, but he wouldn't hear of it. Seemed to be in a pretty beastly temper, too!"

"Oh, it's nothing!" said Somerton uncomfortably.

Dick regarded him shrewdly, and nodded.

"Row?" he asked, with sympathy.

"Just a bit of one—not much."

"Over Forrest, I suppose?" nodded Nipper.

"Yes, I've noticed that Val has been thick with those Study A cads to-day. What on earth's the matter with him? He hasn't left Study G, has he?"

"Not yet," growled the schoolboy duke.

"Oh, he's going, then?"

"So he says," replied Somerton. "I haven't spoken to him for over an hour. He'll probably get right by this evening if I leave him severely alone. He's a good chap, Nipper; but he's touchy."

"Too touchy," said Nipper grimly. "What he really needs is a thundering good hiding. I don't believe in these chaps who are so jolly sensitive. But perhaps you'd better let well alone. He's a good man, and I don't want to lose him. And I understand he's hot on bowling."

"If Forrest & Co. get hold of him, he won't do much bowling," said Somerton, with a sniff. "Of course, you can see what their game is. They've got the wind up about Fenton's speech this morning, and they think that Val will be able to help them to dodge the compulsory practice. The whole thing's rotten. I want Val back in my study."

"So that he can help you to dodge the compulsory practice?"

"Well, I wouldn't be so sure," grinned Somerton. "I'm no good at games and things—and I'm a lazy beggar, anyhow."

"Nothing like being frank," said Dick, smiling. "But it won't do, Sommy—and you can't spoof me with that rot. Wait until you get that sports spirit! You'll be so energetic that you'll leap out of bed at five o'clock

every morning. Why, even Archie is waking up!"

"What-ho!" agreed Archie Glenthorne, coming up behind. "I mean to say, talk of angels, and—zing!—up they come—what? Like one of those dashed thingummyjigs at the good old conjuring show!"

The genial ass of the Remove was as elegant as ever—gloriously resplendent in spotless white flannels—a tribute to the sunny day. He was looking happy and peaceful, and his monocle gleamed in his eye.

"Yes, I was just telling Somerton you're waking up, Archie," smiled Nipper. "You've decided to get up at five o'clock every morning, haven't you?"

"Good gad!" said Archie. "I mean to say, what do you take me for, laddie? The dear old buffer who leaps over the bedstead, and takes a bally mile in one dashed stride? Absolutely nothing doing, old thing! Archie would be dead in a week!"

"Brent told me that you were keen on these sports."

"What-ho!" agreed Archie, nodding. "As a matter of fact, yes. That is to say, the thing struck me as being distinctly fruity. The good old dashing spirit, what? Swimming, running and all that sort of stuff? If it's the order of the day, laddie, you won't find a Glenthorne wanting! Absolutely not!"

He suddenly gave a violent start, and winced.

"Odds scarecrows and apparitions!" he exclaimed, staggering back. "I mean to say, Somerton, old fright! Those bags, dash it! Those fearful shoes! Those waistcoat! That is, I mean——"

"Don't you start, for goodness' sake!" growled Somerton.

"But, my dear chappie, pause!" pleaded Archie, pained. "I've seen more respectable things than you legging it along the good old highway! I mean to say, these dashed tramps can't help it. But you—I mean, we lads of the village are obliged to meet you occasionally. Isn't it a bit foul?"

"It's no good, Archie. You'll never make him any different, so you needn't try," grinned Nipper. "All right, Tommy—just coming," he added, as Watson hailed him.

Archie toddled off to his own study, and the Duke of Somerton made a point of going out of doors—so that he shouldn't come across De Valerie.

During afternoon lessons, the latter was quiet and subdued; but he buttonholed Nipper the very instant the Form was dismissed.

"I say, old man, I'm sorry I was such a beast this morning," he said awkwardly. "Any chance of a bit of practice now?"

"Rather!" said Dick promptly. "Come straight out, and we'll have a go at the nets."

He was glad to see that De Valerie was coming round, and he pretended to know nothing about the upset with Somerton. They went out to Little Side, and a throng of other Removites and Fourth-Formers followed.

De Valerie was a fairly good bat; he never had been brilliant, but there had been many rumours lately about his bowling. It was known that his people were friendly with more than one famous county cricketer, and De Valerie had been getting in quite a lot of useful practice during the holidays. In schoolboy cricket a fellow frequently develops very rapidly, and reveals qualities that had never hitherto been suspected.

After ten minutes Nipper was almost excited.

"Handy, old man—he's not only hot, but scorching!" he confided to Edward Oswald Handforth. "Jove, look at the speed! If he goes on at this rate, he'll be one of our fastest bowlers— Out, my lad! Good!"

There was certainly something terrific about Cecil de Valerie's bowling. It came to Dick Hamilton as a complete surprise, for he had never thought a lot of De Valerie as a bowler. His run was not particularly long, but he managed to send the leather down the pitch with devastating speed.

"Not so bad!" admitted Handforth critically. "With a little coaching from me he might be a really decent bowler. But he'll need to get some twist on the ball before he's effective."

"Twist?" said Reggie Pitt breathlessly. "Have you faced him? If not, go and have a try, O moulder of emptiness!"

"You silly ass—"

"He's got a curl on that ball which would give you a permanent wave," declared Reggie. "It's absolutely horrible. He took my middle stump out at the third ball, and I didn't even get a knock."

Reggie Pitt was the skipper of the West House Junior Eleven, and one of the most decent chaps in the Remove. Indeed, but for Dick Hamilton's presence, he would have been Form captain, and chief of all Junior sports. But Reggie was quite willing to leave these duties in Dick's capable hands.

Nipper soon tested De Valerie's bowling himself, and although he was one of the best batsmen in the Remove, he found it difficult to get any of De Valerie's deliveries away. They were, indeed, deadly.

"I can see you reaching the First Eleven before a month is over," declared Nipper later. "Topping, old man! Keep it up, and you'll make history! You're almost as good as Jerry Dodd!"

Cecil de Valerie flushed.

"Thanks!" he said quietly. "I've made up my mind to go into cricket heart and soul this term. Any chance of my being included in the team for our match against the West House to-morrow?"

"Your name's down already," replied Nipper promptly. "And it's more than likely that you'll be picked for the Second Eleven in the big match."

"In fact, it's nearly a cert.," said Reggie Pitt.

"You mean that?" asked De Valerie eagerly.

"Of course I do!"

Reggie was captain of the Second Eleven—a very responsible position, for the Second included several seniors. These fellows considered it highly undignified to have a junior as captain, but there was no question of age where cricket was concerned. The most capable man held the reins.

Edgar Fenton was the skipper of the First Eleven, and both Dick Hamilton and Jerry Dodd were members of it—otherwise one of them might have skippered the Second. Reggie Pitt was undoubtedly the next best man for the job.

De Valerie was so pleased that he had forgotten his tiff with the Duke of Somerton; if he thought of Forrest & Co. at all, it was with scorn. And they had advised him to throw cricket up!

Edward Oswald Handforth descended upon him, bursting with energy.

"You've got to leave yourself in my hands, Val, my lad," he declared briskly. "I've made up my mind to coach you."

De Valerie didn't faint with delight.

"Thanks all the same—" he began.

"You needn't try to thank me," interrupted Handforth, clapping him on the back. "I've seen your form, and I'm pleased with it. Just put yourself under my command, and I'll have you in the First Eleven before you can kick off a daisy head!"

"Thanks awfully," said De Valerie calmly. "And by the way, Handy, congratulations."

"Eh? What for?"

"Congrats. on your new appointment."

"What appointment?"

"Haven't they made you skipper of the First Eleven?" asked De Valerie, in surprise. "By the way you were talking, I thought Fenton had resigned in your favour!"

Handforth glared

"I didn't ask you to be funny!" he said tartly. "Fenton is a good chap, but he hasn't got enough sense to do a brainy thing like that! I'm going to coach you because I can see the possibilities. But don't you hobnob with those cads of Study A. That's the first order—"

"Confound your interference!" snapped De Valerie, frowning.

The blundering Edward Oswald had made another mistake. He could not have mentioned Forrest & Co. at a more inopportune moment. Cecil De Valerie's frame of mind was such that he still needed only a slight reminder to make him raw again.

"If I like to be friendly with Forrest and his pals, I'll be friendly with them!" he went on curtly. "So you'd better mind your own business, Handforth. I don't like people who stick their noses where they're not wanted."

There was no necessity for these blunt words, and De Valerie knew it better than anybody. But he couldn't restrain them. Those few words of Handforth's had swept him back into his awkward mood.

"Why, you touchy fathead!" snorted Handforth. "If I wasn't a good-tempered chap, I'd biff you over! But you can't try that rot with me! If I see you with Forrest again I'll make short work—"

But Cecil De Valerie was walking off, and to Handforth's utter consternation, he went straight over to the pavilion, and joined Forrest and Gulliver and Bell—who were lounging there. There was something absolutely deliberate in De Valerie's action.

"Well I'm jiggered!" said Handforth darkly.

Cecil De Valerie was strolling away, arm-in-arm with Bernard Forrest, and with Gulliver and Bell on either flank.

So much for Handforth's well-meant efforts!

CHAPTER 8.

DICK HAMILTON'S BRAIN-WAVE.



STUDY C, in the Ancient House, was looking very cheery.

Dick Hamilton & Co. were at tea. It was designed to be a somewhat hurried meal, so that they could dash out again. The weather was so fine that it was a shame not to take advantage of it.

"Don't forget Fenton's slogan, my sons," said Nipper. "Every minute's got to be a sports minute."

"He said every spare minute," remarked Tommy Watson. "And a chap must have tea, I suppose? Montie, old son, pass the sardines!"

Sir Montie Tregellis-West, the third occupant of the study, obliged with the sardines. He was very much of a swell in his own way, but he was the first to admit that he couldn't approach Archie Glenthorne, when it came to sheer splendour.

"Have the lot, dear old boy," he said generously. "I'm rather keen on this tongue. Frightfully appetisin', you know, with watercress an' lettuce. Nipper, dear old fellow, what about the mayonnaise? Begad! Don't scoff the lot!"

"I'm pretty pleased with De Valerie," said Dick thoughtfully—his mind more on the cricket than on the meal. "I noticed he went off, with Forrest & Co., but I think the ass only did it to make Handforth wild. But it's a dangerous sort of business, at the best."

"Those Study A rotters might win him over and spoil him for cricket," said Watson. "Hadn't we better give them a warning, and tell De Valerie—"

"We don't want to try any of Handy's dodges," interrupted Nipper, shaking his head. "You can take it from me, Tommy, that human nature is a rummy mixture! A sports skipper needs to be as tactful as a giddy diplomat! Unless he's careful, he's always treading on somebody's corns."

"Begad!" said Sir Montie. "There's somethin' in that, Nipper! These arguments in the papers, you know, about the Test Match cricketers. A frightful amount of people seem to be dissatisfied."

"Yes, it's bound to happen that way," agreed Nipper. "Somebody wants to know why so-and-so isn't selected—somebody else

is terribly indignant because such-and-such a man has been passed over. If they'd let the Selection Committee get on with the job there wouldn't be half so much trouble."

"Did you hear young Willy's argument this morning?" grinned Watson. "About the Australians, I mean?"

"Yes, and there was something in it, too," replied Nipper. "If England wins this year's series of Tests, she'll deserve full honours. It's going to be a jolly stiff fight, my lads. I don't suppose we shall see any of the games, worse luck!"

"Oh, well, our own cricket will be pretty good, if Fenton carries out his plan," said Watson. "It's a pity they couldn't play one of the Tests on our ground!" he added, with a grin. "Very thoughtless of them!"

"A Test Match at St. Frank's, eh?" chuckled Nipper. "By Jove, that would create a bit of a sensation. Even if we could only have a sort of minor Test Match, it would be— Eh? I wonder—"

Nipper broke off, and laid down his teacup. There was a little gleam in his eye, but it was only slight. Evidently an idea had come to him. But it wasn't yet developed.

"Of course, there's one Australian here—old Jerry," he murmured. "I believe they've got two at the River House, too. Those Bayliss brothers—one in the Fifth and one in the Fourth."

"Really, old boy, we haven't the faintest idea what you're talkin' about," protested Montie. "Bayliss brothers?"

"Bayliss major and Bayliss minor—two Australian chaps at River House School," explained Watson. "They were there last term. Came from Perth, I believe."

"But Perth is in Scotland, dear old thing," said Sir Montie gently.

"Not that Perth," said Watson. "There's one in Australia."

"Yes, by Jove, and two at Helmford!" murmured Nipper.

"Eh? Two Perths at—"

"And I'm pretty certain there's one at Yexford," said Dick Hamilton. "And if I can remember— Barcliffe? Surely there's one there?"

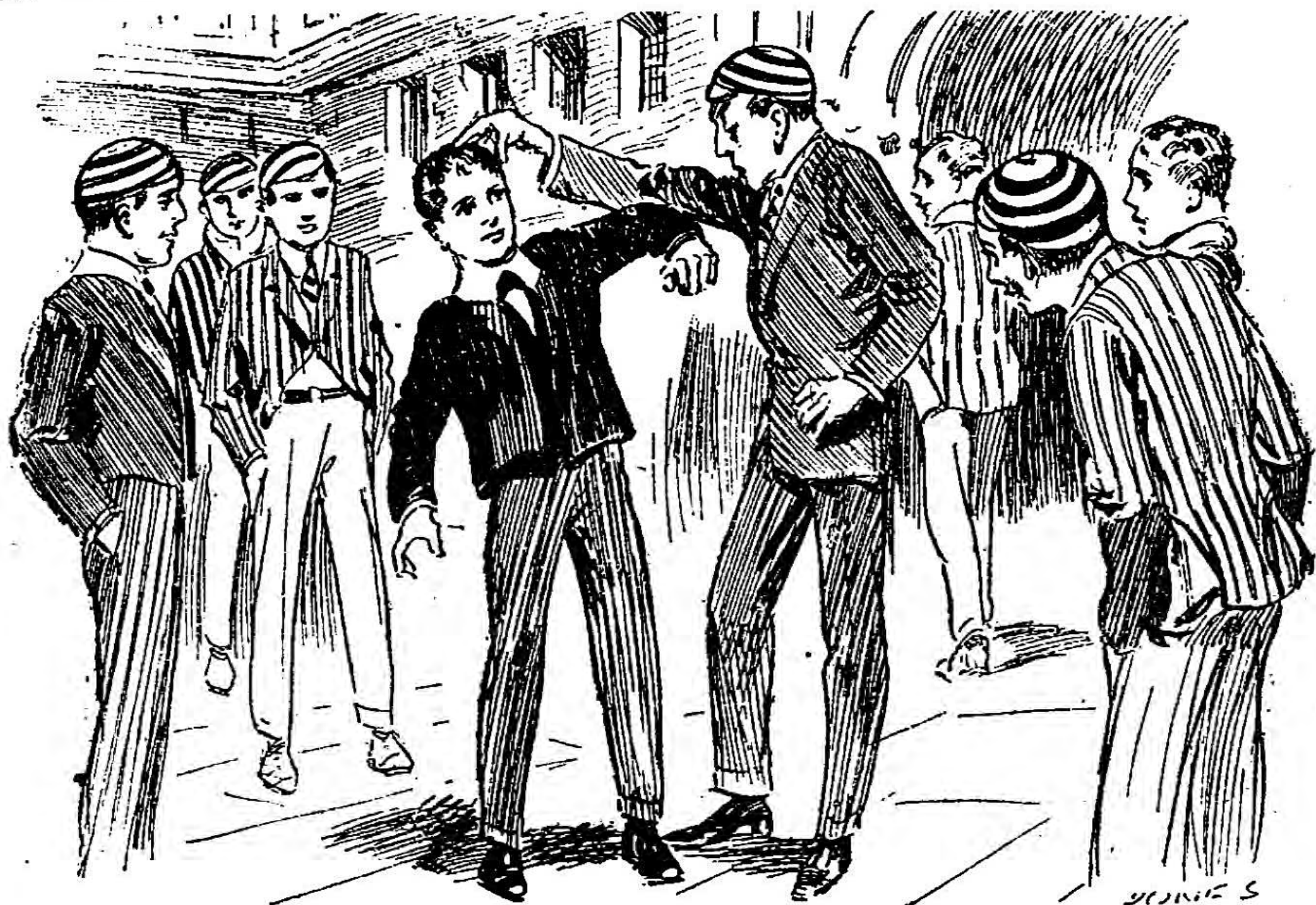
"One what?" asked Tommy and Montie, staring at him blankly.

"One Australian chap," replied Nipper, his eyes now gleaming with inward excitement. "One at St. Frank's, two at the River House, two at Helmford, one at Yexford, one at Barcliffe, one at Hazelhurst— That's eight, isn't it? Can you chaps think of any more?"

"They've got two Australian fellows at Bannington Grammar School," said Watson. "They're both seniors, though—came from Melbourne, I understand."

"Why, yes!" shouted Nipper. "That makes ten, doesn't it?"

"Eight and two always used to, dear old boy; but what's all the excitement about?" asked Tregellis-West mildly. "It's not like you to get all hot and bothered, begad!"



"Whence that brilliant idea emanates passes my comprehension," said William Napoleon Browne, as he felt Dick Hamilton's head gingerly. "Ah, as I thought! Not merely one bump of brilliance, but many of them! Brothers, observe the contours! Here we have a head of startling dimensions——"

The juniors around interrupted him with a roar of laughter, and Dick jerked himself away.

"And what's the idea of counting up all the Australian chaps you can think of?" asked Watson, staring.

"Hold on!" gasped Dick Hamilton. "What about Redcliffe? They've got three there! Fancy me forgetting that! Three! That makes thirteen!"

"How frightful!" said Sir Montie. "An unlucky number, begad!"

"Unlucky your aunt!" breathed Nipper. "It doesn't make thirteen at all."

"Ten and three don't make thirteen?"

"No, my lad, ten and three make a cricket eleven and two reserves!" retorted Dick Hamilton. "Think of it! An Australian Eleven collected from all these schools—and not one of them's more than thirty miles away. It could be done!"

"An Australian Eleven!" shouted Watson.

"Yes, it could be done!" repeated Dick.

"What the dickens——"

"Easy!" said Nipper, leaning back in his chair, and closing his eyes. "It's a dead certainty that they'll all be hot cricketers. They wouldn't be Australians unless they were. By Jove, if we could only fix up a match or two——"

"What the thunder are you talking about?" roared Tommy Watson, exasperated. "Are you suggesting that an Aussie Eleven should be formed by these chaps—so that they can play against St. Frank's?"

"That's the idea," said Nipper, nodding. "But why not do the thing thoroughly? A

series of real Test Matches, you know! Five fixtures—and each game a two-day match! Young England v. Young Australia!"

Sir Montie gasped.

"Begad!" he said, dropping his pince-nez.

"You—you mean——"

"Exactly!"

"A—a kind of miniature Test series," gurgled Watson. "A copy of the genuine article, eh? And during the same season, too! I say, what a gorgeous idea! What a stunning wheeze!"

"Dear old boy, it's the brain-wave of the century!" exclaimed Sir Montie, his breath nearly taken away. "Instead of England v. Australia, we'll have Young England v. Young Australia! But would it work, begad? An' would Fenton allow it? It's a frightfully audacious suggestion—it is, really!"

"And how do we know that all these Australian chaps are good cricketers?" demanded Watson excitedly.

"We can take that for granted," replied Nipper. "I know for a fact that four of them are seniors—big fellows, with formidable records. Beaton, of Redcliffe, for example. He's from Sydney, you know, and he's the champion cricketer of the Redcliffe Eleven."

"My only hat!"

"Let's go and put it to Fenton!" suggested Watson breathlessly.

"Wait a minute—let's finish tea," urged Dick. "This thing wants thinking out, too."

"Rather, old boy," nodded Sir Montie. "We can make up the Australian team, but what about England?"

"We shall be England, my lad."

"Begad!"

"Don't you see?" asked Nipper. "Our First Eleven—barring Jerry Dodd—will make a fine England team. Any chap who isn't English won't be selected, that's all. And the thing will be absolutely genuine—England v. Australia on a small scale. And I don't see why we shouldn't have a trophy, or something—I say, this is too big to keep! Let's go to Fenton now."

And Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West, who had lost all interest in their tea, carried the vote unanimously.



CHAPTER 9.

FENTON APPROVES.

EDGAR FENTON was entertaining Morrow to tea in his study when Dick Hamilton & Co. arrived. They broke in unceremoniously—a most unusual thing for the level-headed chums of Study C.

"Don't trouble to knock!" said Fenton genially. "Come in, you fellows, and make yourselves at home!"

"Sorry, Fenton—"

"And so you ought to be!" interrupted the school captain, changing his tone. "What's the idea of this invasion? Don't you know your manners in the Remove? I didn't think you were the sort of fellows—"

"But it's jolly important, Fenton," put in Nipper. "I've got an idea—and I think it's a pretty good one. I wanted to hear your opinion before I mooted it to anybody else. It's about cricket."

"In that case I'll forgive you," said Fenton generously.

"And it's all wrapped up with this sports carnival scheme of yours," went on Dick. "It'll fit in gloriously—if you'll only adopt it."

"Well, let's hear what the masterpiece is before we go any further," said Fenton, with a smile. "By Jove, you're all looking pretty flushed! It must be something extra special."

Nipper explained in a few brisk, business-like sentences. At first Fenton and Morrow were dubious. But before Nipper had finished they, too, were affected, and their eyes were sparkling.

"Well, what about it?" concluded Dick Hamilton. "That's the wheeze in a nutshell, Fenton. A series of five games—just like the real Test Matches. All of them to be played on Big Side here, and—"

"Young England v. Young Australia!" murmured Fenton. "Arthur, old man, it sounds good."

"It's marvellous!" said Morrow breathlessly.

Nipper flushed.

"Then—then you'll do something about it?" he asked. "You'll write to all those captains, and ask if they'll co-operate in the wheeze? Think of the spice it'll give our ordinary games. Everybody will be on the qui-vive to win a place in the Test Eleven! And I thought about some sort of trophy—"

"A mere waste of good metal, if you're thinking of a cup," said Fenton. "No, my lad, there's something better. We'll just fight for the Ashes."

"By Jove! Like—like the real Test Matches!"

"Why not?" asked Fenton. "We can call ours the School Ashes. I say, Arthur, this is an absolutely brilliant idea! Shall we adopt it? We shall! Why, it's dazzling—and the extraordinary thing is that nobody thought of it before."

Both the Sixth-Formers were looking excited. Morrow was the head prefect of the West House, and one of the best all-round sportsmen in the school. He, like Fenton, could see the wonderful possibilities.

"Of course, we can't do anything else but push the thing along!" he exclaimed. "The ordinary games will be interesting enough, but this series of Tests ought to be the sensation of the public schools. And we shall whack all the others, because the matches will be played on our ground."

Edgar Fenton nodded.

"I'll write to those captains this evening," he said firmly. "Of course, they'll jump at it. No earthly reason why they shouldn't. Hamilton, old man, let me congratulate you."

"Thanks," said Nipper. "As long as you approve, that's all I care. Now we can go back to our tea, and finish it in comfort."

"All right," said Fenton. "I'll see you about things later. I shall probably want your advice. You seem to be a man of bulging brain-power. We shall have to watch over you night and day!"

Nipper grinned, and he and his chums went back to Study C, collecting Handforth & Co. and Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey on the way. When they heard the news, they were startled, and wouldn't quite believe it at first. But they were soon convinced; even Handforth was obliged to confess that the plan was too heavenly for mere earthly praise.

"Of course, Jerry Dodd will be playing against St. Frank's in these matches, won't he?" he asked.

"Naturally."

"He'll be a stiff customer!" remarked Reggie Pitt. "He's one of our best bowlers! Still, they won't be school matches, so it doesn't matter where the Australian chaps come from. They're merely chosen because of their nationality, and Jerry, being an Australian, will be as eligible as any of the others."

"Of course," said Nipper. "I'm not quite certain how I thought of the idea. It came all of a sudden—"

"Just my luck, of course," interrupted Handforth. "You only forestalled me by half an hour, you bounder! It's my idea, really."

"But, you fathead, Hamilton only thought of it twenty minutes ago!" grinned Church.

"Exactly," said Handforth coolly. "I said half an hour, didn't I? I should have had the idea in about ten minutes if this boulder hadn't thought of it! I'm always being dished like that."

The door opened, and William Napoleon Browne came in. For a moment he said nothing, but gazed at Nipper with awed reverence.

"Where is this massive and gilt-edged brain?" he asked solemnly. "Brother Handforth, be good enough to remove your person from the proximity of Brother Hamilton. Are you not aware of the fact that he is precious beyond all price? For was it not his genius which brought forth the one outstanding idea of the twentieth century?"

Browne advanced, and glanced at the others.

"I trust, Brother Watson, that you have made arrangements to insure Brother Hamilton's brain for a colossal figure? Imagine the tragedy if something suddenly snapped! And one is never certain with these men of genius!"

Nipper grinned.

"When you've quite finished rotting, you funny ass, perhaps you'll pass a lucid opinion on the scheme," he said. "You appear to think it's pretty good, eh?"

"Whence that brilliant idea emanates passes my comprehension," said William Napoleon Browne, as he felt Nipper's head gingerly. "As I thought! Not merely one bump of brilliance, but many of them. Brothers, observe the contours! Here we have a head of startling dimensions."

The juniors around interrupted him with a roar of laughter.

"When you've done messing my hair about, I'll be glad!" snorted Dick, jerking himself away. "Cheese it, Browne! What do you think I am—a monstrosity of some sort?"

"Scarcely a monstrosity, Brother Hamilton, but undoubtedly a man of marked ability," replied William Napoleon. "In the past we have had such celebrities as Darwin, Watts, and Huxley. We have Edison, Marconi, and Maxim. But the name of Hamilton will ring through the ages as that of the fellow who thought of the greatest idea——"

"Chuck it!" roared Nipper, exasperated.

"Alas! for my simple desire to give praise where praise is due," sighed Browne. "Let it be sufficient for me to say that I am moved. No adequate words will flow from my paralysed lips. Brothers, I am utterly dumb."

"You sound like it," grinned Handforth. "But I'm not surprised that you look a bit dazed. A series of Test Matches for St. Frank's, by George! Why, an idea like that is worth framing!"

"A totally inadequate suggestion," scoffed Browne. "It shall be engraved on a golden tablet, and placed within a diamond-studded platinum casket."

It pleased him to use these exaggerated terms of praise, but he was genuinely delighted. And when the school in general

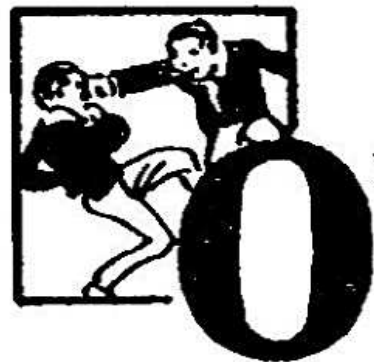
got to hear of the suggestion, there was a sensation. There wasn't a House in which the proposed Test Matches did not form the sole topic of conversation. For it was something so entirely new, something so daring and novel.

It was only the first day of term, and already it promised to be the most exciting term of the year.

Unfortunately, the majority of the fellows were forgetting all about Fenton's injunction to consider their studies first. The sports fever was spreading rapidly, and lessons were being regarded as a nuisance.

CHAPTER 10.

DE VALERIE GETS VIOLENT.



ON the Wednesday evening, the River Stowe presented an animated spectacle.

A day or two had passed, and there had been feverish activity in the meantime. For there was not only the cricket to be considered, but the sculling. The rival eights had been out on the river at every favourable opportunity.

Cecil De Valerie was included in the Ancient House boat, and he was very proud of the distinction. But he was still on strained terms with the Duke of Somerton. Somehow, they had done nothing to heal the breach. Somerton had made no advances, and De Valerie had held aloof.

In the meantime, he had, apparently, gone over to Study A for good, and was constantly seen with Forrest & Co. But it was only pique on his part, for he was growing to dislike the cads more and more every hour.

But he obstinately refused to enter Study G again until Somerton made some sort of suggestion. He was annoyed, too, because everybody else took no notice of him, and his pretended friendship for the Study A trio. Dick Hamilton hadn't even mentioned it, for the simple reason that Dick was wise. He was convinced that De Valerie would come round of his own accord before very long.

This evening there was the contest between the Ancient House and West House eights. The winner would meet either the Modern House or the East House in the final. The latter was to be rowed the next day.

The weather remained fine, and, although there had been a slight shower or two, the evening was brilliant, with a blue sky and a hot sun. The banks of the river were lined with keen spectators, most of them being Removites and Fourth-Formers. For these river contests were junior affairs.

Here and there were small groups of summery-clad girls, too. For Irene Manners & Co., of the Moor View school, were almost as keenly interested in the forthcoming race as the St. Frank's fellows themselves.

"Of course, it's a walk-over for us," said Owen major, of the West House. "We've got the best stroke, and our boat's done the

measured mile in twenty-five seconds less than those Ancient House snails."

"Better not be too sure of it," said Jack Grey, shaking his head. "I'm in our boat, but we shall have to do wonders to beat Hamilton's crew. But we're all out to do our best, and we can't do more. It's ripping sport."

"Rather!"

The race itself was an exciting one. And the picture, at the start, was one that aroused immense enthusiasm. The River Stowe came fairly close to St. Frank's at one point—flowing, indeed, past the playing fields. It was very broad here, and there was a splendid stretch down-stream towards Bellton—past Willard's Island, and then beyond. The boat race was along these beautiful reaches of the river.

On one side, the towing-path was crowded with fellows, and on the other side groups were seeking the best vantage-points in the meadows.

The two long, fragile-looking boats started off like a single piece of machinery, every scull dipping with precision.

"They're off!"

"Hurrah!"

"Go it, Ancient House!"

"Rats! West House is leading!"

"Good old Pitt!"

De Valerie, in the Ancient House boat, worked with every ounce of his strength. He was filled with a keen desire to be in the winning boat. Every fellow, if it came to that, felt this ambition. But it was more marked in Cecil De Valerie, for he wanted to show the rest of the Remove that he didn't really care two straws about Forrest & Co.

If the Ancient House lost, there were plenty of fellows who might suggest that De Valerie had sold the race. Any sort of association with Forrest & Co. led to these suspicions.

Not that De Valerie need have worried.

In the final stretch, after the Ancient House boat had been half a length behind for several hundred yards, Nipper increased the length and the speed of his stroke. His men responded gloriously, and in a final burst the Ancient House crew forged ahead, and shot past the winning-post, the winners by a bare quarter-length.

"Oh, good old Hamilton!"

"Hurrah!"

"Ancient House wins!"

"I knew they'd win!" cried Irene Manners enthusiastically.

"Didn't I say so from the very first?" asked Handforth, with supreme confidence. "You've only got to rely on my judgment, and you can't go far wrong."

Handforth & Co. were standing on the bank, with Irene Manners and Doris Berkeley and Marjorie Temple. All three girls chuckled.

"That's not quite what you said before the start, Ted," remarked Irene. "You were complaining because you weren't a member of the eight, and you said the result was a foregone conclusion."

"That we should lose!" grinned Church.

"Oh, well, I changed my mind after that," explained Handforth, with the coolest possible effrontery. "Anyhow, Ancient House has won, and we're booked for the final. It's our contest. We're bound to get the honours for the boat-race—and that'll make a good start in the carnival."

"Let's go and give the chaps a cheer," suggested Doris. "They're looking used up, poor beggars! It must have been awfully strenuous."

But ten minutes after the race the contestants were fully recovered, and the boats were paddled leisurely back up river amid the enthusiastic applause of the onlookers. The Ancient House fellows were fairly mobbed as they stepped ashore.

"Jolly good, old man!" declared Forrest, clapping Cecil De Valerie on the back. "I'm not particularly keen on this sort of thing myself, but I've got to hand you my congrats!"

"Thanks," said De Valerie.

"Same here!" added Gulliver and Bell.

Nobody else came forward and congratulated De Valerie, and the fact struck him as being somewhat ironic. It was just these three cads who had given him a word of praise. Not even his old chum had come! He looked everywhere for the Duke of Somerton, but there was no sign of him.

"What does he care?" thought De Valerie bitterly.

As a matter of fact, Somerton was within ten yards of him at that very moment, but the boat-house intervened, to say nothing of a press of fellows. If De Valerie had only looked, he would have discovered that Somerton was searching for him.

But he was carried off by Forrest & Co. at once. The cads of Study A were adopting a new policy. They were being very friendly towards De Valerie, and were making no attempts to dissuade him from sport. Later on, perhaps, they would find him very useful, if compulsory sports practice was instituted.

De Valerie changed, and came out again, drawn naturally towards the river in order to witness the race between the Modern House and the East House, which was timed for an hour after the other. The respective winners would meet in the final on the morrow.

"We don't want to look at this," said Forrest, as he and his chums led De Valerie along the river bank. "I've got another idea. By gad, Gully, they're still there!"

"Good egg!" grinned Gulliver.

They paused near a clump of willows, and De Valerie noticed that they were watching two of the Moor View girls. These latter were Winnie Pitt and Mary Summers. They made an entrancing picture as they stood there on the river bank, half-leaning over the water, watching for the boats to come. Both girls were in white, and their pretty faces were aglow with enthusiasm.

"What's the idea?" asked De Valerie curiously.

"We spotted those two peaches earlier," chuckled Bernard Forrest. "They're still in the same place—and those willows are handy. Nobody will be able to spot us as we get near. Are you game for a bit of sport?"

De Valerie was distinctly suspicious.

"What do you call sport?" he asked.

"Well, there are four of us, and those two girls are alone," grinned Forrest. "How about pinching a kiss each? I've got a grudge against that Summers girl, too! She smacked my face the other day, and I'm going to make her pay for it!"

Cecil De Valerie felt himself growing hot. He had no rooted objections to kissing a pretty girl, but Forrest's idea of such a pastime was a bit warped. To suggest that the four of them should take a mean advantage of those two unsuspecting girls was just about the last word in caddishness.

"I say, do you mean this?" asked De Valerie.

"Mean what?"

"Why, about kissing these girls?"

"Of course we mean it, you ass!" grinned Forrest. "Aren't you game for a bit of fun? They're a couple of little spitfires—and that makes it all the sweeter!"

Cecil De Valerie was amazed that the cads of Study A should so misunderstand him. They took it for granted that his own standards were on a level with theirs. Although he had shown them plainly enough that he had no sympathy with their smoking and card-playing and gambling, they assumed that he was perfectly ready to take part in a "joke" of the most contemptible description.

"Wait a minute!" said De Valerie, laying a hand on Forrest's arm. "I don't agree to this, Forrest."

"Oh!" said Forrest, glaring.

"You can't do it!" went on De Valerie. "Don't be such a set of cads! Those two girls are practically alone, and it would be a rotten trick to take advantage of their helplessness. Besides, they're right on the edge, and if we start any rot like that, they might fall in."

Forrest nodded.

"Just what I was thinking, too," he said coolly. "But the water's only three or four feet deep just there, and it would be rather good to see 'em dashing off home like a couple of drowned rats!"

Gulliver and Bell chuckled, and De Valerie clenched his fists.

"It seems to me that words are just about useless!" he snapped fiercely.

CHAPTER 11.

THE OLIVE BRANCH.



CRASH!

Bernard Forrest had plenty of warning—for there was no mistaking Cecil De Valerie's preparations. But, somehow, Forrest had foolishly assumed that it was a bluff.

He didn't assume it now. De Valerie's fist had come round, and it had smashed into Forrest's face with devastating force. The leader of the cads went down with a wild howl. Gulliver and Bell looked on, aghast. And two exclamations from down stream indicated that the girls, too, were taking an interest in the proceedings.

"You—you mad idiot!" gurgled Forrest, sitting up. "What the—"

"Get up, you blackguard, and I'll knock you down again!" panted De Valerie. "And if you make any attempt to touch those girls I'll thrash you until you can't see!"

"Keep him back, you chaps!" panted Forrest, in alarm. "Grab him! Do you hear me? Pull him back, confound you!"

"Come on!" said De Valerie, twirling round, and facing Gulliver and Bell. "Hold me back! By Jove, try it on and see what you'll get!" He examined their faces contemptuously. "I never realised what a pair of wash-outs you were! I've simply got to slosh you—I can't help it!"

Biff! Crash!

Bell received the right on the point of his nose, and Gulliver was the unhappy victim of a devastating left on the chin. Judging from the manner in which they collapsed, one might have supposed that De Valerie was Jack Dempsey himself. But Gulliver and Bell were celebrated for their lack of staying power.

"What's the idea?" snarled Forrest, picking himself up. "You—you madman! I thought we were pals?"

"You thought wrong!"

"But we've done nothing!" panted Forrest furiously. "Just because we suggested a bit of a lark with those girls—"

"If that's what you call a lark, I'm glad you suggested it!" interrupted Val. "It shows me what a fool I've been to have anything to do with you at all! Come near me, Forrest, and I'll knock you down again!"

Mary Summers and Winnie Pitt, hearing the howls and sounds of strife, were cautiously approaching—although partially concealed by the screening willows. They were both feeling somewhat indignant.

"It's De Valerie!" Winnie was saying. "Did you see him? He knocked them down without any provocation at all! I thought he was better than that!"

"Well, anyhow, he knew who to knock down!" murmured Mary.

Forrest, unconscious of the girls' nearer proximity, was glaring at De Valerie with baleful eyes. Gulliver and Bell were picking themselves up, and backing hastily away.

"You've gone off your rocker!" snapped Forrest. "What's the matter with you, Val?"

"Don't you call me 'Val'!"

"I only suggested that we should grab those girls from behind, and kiss them!" retorted Forrest hotly. "Nothing wrong in that, I suppose? And what if they did fall in the river? By gad! Sir Knight to the rescue!" he added contemptuously. "The giddy, chivalrous—"

"Better stop that!" said De Valerie thickly.

"Be hanged to you! I'll stop when I like— Look out! What the— You infernal fool—"

Bernard Forrest certainly stopped, for De Valerie attacked him again—this time with such whirlwind force that the leader of Study A thought that a cyclone had hit him. He was bowled over by a simultaneous uppercut and a direct punch in the centre of the chest.

"Now go for those girls if you can!" panted De Valerie, glancing round. "Hallo! They've gone! Good! Thank goodness they didn't know anything about it!"

But Mary Summers and Winnie Pitt knew everything about it—and they had a complete understanding of the situation. They had heard Forrest's words, and they knew that De Valerie's violence was solely in their interests.

"Jolly decent of him," said Mary, as they paused further down stream. "I say, Win. I don't quite like it, you know. I think we ought to go back—"

"Better not!" advised Winnie, with a thoughtful frown that was singularly like her brother Reggie's. "De Valerie was looking after himself all right, and he'd only be uncomfortable if he knew that we'd heard. This is a case where we've got to use a little discretion."

"Perhaps you're right," admitted Mary, nodding.

Cecil De Valerie was making his way up stream—having left the cads in a disordered heap. He had decided, then and there, to have nothing more to do with them whatever. And he was feeling happier that he had felt for days. After all, Forrest & Co. had some little excuse for being astonished.

Under normal conditions, even De Valerie wouldn't have slogged into them like that. But he had been subconsciously fed up with them all along, and he grasped at the faintest excuse to use his fists. And he used them drastically. He had thoroughly enjoyed that brief minute of battle.

"Anyhow, that beastly business is settled!" he told himself contentedly. "No more rotten pretence! By Jove, I wonder if old Sommy— Yes, blow it! It's about time we finished up with all that rot."

He hurried to the school, regardless of the cheering from down the river—cheering, by the way, which betokened the victory of the Modern House Eight. De Valerie wasn't interested in the boat-race.

He had made up his mind to hurry indoors before anybody else came back—and to shift his books into Study G again. He would be able to explain to Somerton later, when the latter came in.

There was something springy in De Valerie's heels as he crossed the Triangle. Everything was beginning to look rather ripping. He had done well in the boat-race, and he had impressed the Junior sports skipper with his bowling. And he had thrown over Forrest & Co. As far as he could see, there was nothing else in life that really mattered.

"Hanged if I can understand why I stuck those miserable cads!" he muttered, amazed



De Valerie's fist caught Forrest with devastating force, and he received his medicine a few seconds later. Bell took a right, and the girls saw everything that passed, and they realised that De-

at himself. "Obstinacy, I suppose! I'm a blithering idiot—that's what's the matter with me! Somebody ought to kick me!"

He hurried into the Ancient House, and burst into Study G breathlessly. He would just have time to get his things in—

"Hallo!" said Somerton awkwardly.

De Valerie stared. He had been so confident of finding the room empty that he hardly knew what to say for a moment. But the Duke of Somerton was sitting at the table, having apparently been engaged in the task of ruining the blotting pad. He had been scrawling weird-looking faces upon it with a pencil. But it is only fair to explain that Somerton's artistic activities had been unconscious.

"I—I thought—"

"That's all right, Val," said Somerton. "Didn't know I was here, eh? Anything you want? Or have you come back?"

"I've come back," said De Valerie gruffly.

"Good man!"



leader of the cads went down with a wild howl. Gulliver at the point of the nose and he, too, collapsed. The two lerie had saved them from the insults of the trio of cads.

Not another word was exchanged. Cecil De Valerie went out again, secured his books, and returned to Study G. They both tacitly agreed to say nothing—and to go on from that point as usual. Somerton was genuinely delighted, but he didn't want to say too much, in case he touched his chum on the raw somewhere.

De Valerie stood it for twenty minutes or so, and then he grunted.

"I say, this is rot," he growled at last.

"What is?"

"Why, this—this silence," replied De Valerie. "I've just had an unholy bust-up with Forrest & Co."

"Oh?"

"Thought you might like to know."

"My dear chap, I'm delighted," said Somerton. "I hope you left a few marks? I hope it wasn't a mere word battle?"

"Not exactly," said Val. "The filthy cads wanted to drag me into one of their usual questionable games, and I got wild and biffed

them over. I wouldn't touch 'em again with a barge-pole."

And De Valerie went into a long explanation, and the Duke of Somerton thought he had never heard anything quite so entertaining.

CHAPTER 12.

HANDFORTH'S FAMOUS TACT.



HALF an hour later, when most of the fellows had come in, it was general knowledge that Somerton and De Valerie had chummed up again. Edward Oswald Handforth buttonholed the schoolboy duke in a corner of the Junior Common-room.

"Glad to see you two chaps have recovered your senses," he said generously. "Where's De Valerie?"

"In the study—but don't interfere, for goodness' sake!" urged Somerton.

"Interfere?"

"Well, things seem to be O.K. now—and we don't want a lot of jaw about it," said Somerton pointedly. "Val's a good sort, but he's so jolly sensitive. He might take things the wrong way if you congratulated him, or any rot like that."

Handforth glared.

"Can't you trust my tact?" he asked indignantly.

"Your what?"

"Tact!"

"It's the one quality you don't possess, old man!" said Somerton gently. "I don't like to point these things out, but I can't help it. You're one of the best chaps in the Remove—but everybody knows that you're a bit of a ram-headed blunderer."

"Why, you—you—"

"No offence, of course," beamed Somerton disarmingly. "But do steer clear of Val. He's had a fearful row with Forrest & Co., and he's smashed 'em up a bit. Everything's all right again."

Handforth sniffed.

"Oh, well, it's one of my misfortunes that I should always be misunderstood," he said bitterly. "It's no good wiping up the floor with you—and it wouldn't improve you in the least."

He walked off, rather indignant, and inflicted his views upon Church and McClure—who were just getting down to prep. in Study D. Work, after all, had to be done, and it wasn't any good looking at it. The best thing was to grab it with both hands, and wrestle.

"Cheese it, Handy!" complained Church, as Edward Oswald aired his grievance. "Can't you see we're busy? This grammar is enough to give me a stiff neck! And poor old Mac is nearly dead with that rotten Latin!"

McClure uttered a low groan, and waved a feeble hand.

"Don't disturb me!" he said fiercely.

"You silly fatheads!" said Handforth. "Somerton and De Valerie have kissed, and

they're friends again! I think it's up to me to say a few fatherly words to old Val. We don't want any more of these squabbles, and a discreet word at a time like this would be valuable."

Church and McClure forgot their prep.

"Better stay here, Handy!" said Church urgently. "You'll only cause a fearful mix-up if you go to De Valerie now. If those fat-heads are pals again, take my advice and let well alone."

"Of course!" agreed McClure.

After all their experience of Edward Oswald Handforth, they should have known better. For this was the one certain way of making him carry out his peace-making plan. If they had paused to think, they would have urged him on, and hailed his suggestion with enthusiasm. And in that case Handforth would have contemptuously decided against it.

They thought of this obvious move when it was too late—after their volcanic leader had marched out of the study.

"Better go after him, eh?" suggested Church.

"No good now," growled McClure. "He's done the damage by this time."

"But he's only been gone a minute."

"Handy can do terrible damage in a minute!" said McClure, shaking his head. "If we interfere we shall only make things worse. What chumps we were not to agree with him!"

In the meantime, Handforth was in Study G, his intentions being of the most fatherly description. He was overflowing with good advice, and his attitude was one of kindly tolerance.

"Of course, I don't want to butt in," he was saying. "I wouldn't dream of forcing my opinions where they're not wanted, De Valerie—but I'm not the sort of fellow to do anything tactless."

Cecil De Valerie, disturbed in the middle of his own prep., was sitting back in his chair, and Handforth was sprawling over a corner of the table. Incidentally, he had knocked the ink-pot over, and was sitting in a puddle of blue-black fluid. His white flannels were scarcely being improved, but De Valerie thought it unnecessary to bother about such a trifle.

"Always pleased to welcome you, old man, but make it swift, won't you?" he asked. "There's not much time left, and I've got to do all this work. What's the exact idea of this visit?"

"I want to warn you against Forrest & Co.," said Handforth impressively.

For a moment a cloud passed over De Valerie's face. He was annoyed. But, fortunately, he saw the humorous side of this affair, too. And he conquered his rising ire.

"That's very good of you," he said drily.

"Rats!" said Handforth. "I'm just saying this for your own good, my lad! Forrest is absolutely no good. Gulliver and Bell are worse. Now that you've thrown them overboard I can speak freely. Somerton's a jolly good chap, and you've been treating him rottenly."

If this was an example of Handforth's tact, Somerton's assertion was undoubtedly correct.

"If it's all the same to you, Handy, I think Somerton and I can get along quite nicely, without any of your generous interference," said De Valerie quietly. "I'm not quite so touchy as I was a day or two ago, or I might get wild. All the same, the least said the soonest mended."

Handforth stared.

"Mind you, I'm telling you this for your own good!" he snorted.

"You'd do far better to go away and take that stain out of your bags!" said De Valerie coldly. "Somerton and I are friends again, and there's quite a distinct chance we shall remain friends—unless asses of your sort butt in. That's blunt."

"Why, you—you silly ass!" thundered Handforth, leaping off the table, and pushing back his sleeves. "Put up your hands! I'm going to smash you! Before I've finished, you won't be recognisable!"

De Valerie roared.

"Is this what you call a tactful, peaceful word of advice?" he grinned. "Handy, old man, I'm afraid you'll never make a name for yourself in the Diplomatic Service. My hat! Just look at your bags!"

Edward Oswald was nonplussed. He couldn't very well slaughter a fellow who persisted in lying back in his chair and grinning. And that second reference to his white flannels caused him to glance round. An uneven patch of blue-black met his gaze.

"Great Scott!" he gasped. "My new flannels!"

"I thought, perhaps, you were keen on supplying a little ornamentation," said De Valerie, with a chuckle.

"Who—who did this?" howled Handforth.

"You did!"

"You fathead! I wouldn't ruin my own togs!"

"Well, anyhow, you sat down on the ink-pot five minutes ago, and deliberately tipped it over, so I thought you were keen on that sort of thing," explained Val. "This is what comes of sitting on the table. When's your birthday, old man?"

"My birthday? Why?"

"Oh, I'd like to know—that's all."

"My birthday's April 18th, you ass!" growled Edward Oswald.

"A pity—nearly a year to wait," said De Valerie regretfully. "I thought about buying you a little present—a booklet on manners and etiquette. It's distinctly against the rules to sit down on people's tables. And it's considered bad form to go about with ink blots all over your bags!"

"You—you—"

"Never mistake your flannels for blotting paper!" warned De Valerie. "It's a fatal error that can only lead to trouble—"

But Handforth refused to listen any more. He stormed out of the study, and slammed the door. He could deal effectively with fellows who got wild, and made hot retorts. But he was powerless when they persisted in grinning like Cheshire cats, and making

foolish jokes. He went back to Study D thoroughly disgusted.

Church and McClure were just finishing their prep., and Handforth hadn't even started his. They could guess, in the first moment, their leader's mission had not been an unqualified success.

But they never breathed a word.

Silently they stole out of the study, and left Edward Oswald in full possession. When it came to a question of tact, Church and McClure could beat their leader hollow. Experience is a great teacher!

CHAPTER 13.

THE LUCKY TWENTY-TWO.



RALPH LESLIE FULLWOOD smiled contentedly.

"There it is!" he said, nodding towards the notice-board. "Jolly thoughtful of Fenton to get it up so early."

There was something very peaceful about Fullwood's tone, and Clive Russell, his study mate, was under no difficulty in explaining it. For Fullwood was looking at the list of names for the First Eleven, and his was included.

It was Thursday morning, and although it wasn't a half-holiday to-day, there was a tremendous programme on the way. First and foremost, cricket practice, more important than ever now that the teams had been selected. Then, in the evening, there would be the boat-race—the final, between the Ancient House and the Modern House.

The winners would receive the opening honours of the sports carnival, and there was tremendous keenness between the rival crews. The East House and the West House were out of it, but they were keenly interested.

And then, on the morrow, the big trial game would start, the match between the First and Second Elevens. The best men would ultimately be chosen from both teams for the first Test Match.

The school was agog over this latter project, too. For Edgar Fenton had heard from all the school captains he had approached—Bannington Grammar School, Helmford College, Yexford, and others—and the Test Series scheme had met with universal enthusiasm.

Not only the captains had written to Fenton, but all the Australian boys, too. And it turned out that these latter were cricketers all, with the single exception of one delicate youth, who was more or less of a cripple. But there were sufficient without him to make up a sound team.

The whole of St. Frank's had heard the news, and it was something to know that the idea had been definitely adopted and settled. Indeed, the first Test Match was already fixed for the following week. And this week's trial game between the First and Second was a crucial one. Keen as the young cricketers

were to get their places for the big school matches, there was an almost fanatical eagerness to figure in the Test Match Eleven. The thing had gripped the school's fancy.

"Now you're happy, I suppose?" asked Clive Russell, smiling.

"Rather!" replied Fullwood. "And you can bet that I'll work like steam to keep my place in the First. According to all reports, these Test Matches are going to be the very dickens!"

"Difficult?"

"I hear that most of these Australian chaps are absolutely red-hot!" said Fullwood. "If Jerry Dodd is anything to judge by, they'll win every giddy match, and leave us flat. But I can't believe it. They can't all be cricketing marvels like Jerry!"

It was quite early, and many of the juniors were not yet down. Handforth & Co. were just descending the stairs, and Edward Oswald was apparently aware of the fact that the First Eleven list was up.

"No need to look at it, of course," he was saying. "My name's bound to be there. Fenton wouldn't be dotty enough to leave me out."

"You mustn't take anything for granted, old man," said Church warningly. "Fenton's a fine chap, but I wouldn't guarantee—"

"Rats!" said Handforth loftily. "Here we are!"

He glanced at the notice casually, and Fullwood and Russell watched him in silent amusement. Handforth always took things for granted, and he was always amazed when things didn't turn out as he had anticipated. His eyes opened wide when he failed to read his own name.

"What's this?" he asked thickly. "Who's been messing about with this list?"

"It's just as Fenton pinned it up, old man," said Fullwood.

"Yes, but—but it's all wrong!" roared Handforth indignantly. "Where's my name?"

"It doesn't seem to be there," said Church, searching the list closely. "No, it's not there, Handy. Fenton, Morrow, Wilson, Rees, Browne, Stevens, Hodder, Hamilton, Kahn, Dodd, Fullwood. No, it's a sad thing, Handy, but you're not in the First!"

Handforth simply couldn't believe it.

"But—but Fenton's dotty!" he gasped. "How the dickens can he expect to win the match without me?"

"He seems to be an optimist, but you can never tell with these cricket captains," said Fullwood solemnly. "They get all sorts of queer ideas, Handy. And the worst of it is, you can't argue with them!"

"Can't you?" bellowed Handforth. "Just you wait—Hullo! What's this?"

Reggie Pitt had just come in.

"Morning, you chaps," said the West House junior skipper cheerily. "I thought you'd like to see the list for the Second Eleven. I'm going to pin it up on the board. Fenton's made his choice, and I've taken the throw-outs!"

But this was only Pitt's little joke, for he was very proud of his team, and very optimistic concerning the match. To be exact, he was fully determined that his men should show the First Eleven exactly how cricket ought to be played.

He pinned the notice up, and the juniors pressed round. The list was as follows: Pitt, Grey, De Valerie, Parry, Christine, Phillips, Handforth, Church, Chambers, Boots, Handforth minor.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" exclaimed Fullwood, in astonishment. "Are you playing young Willy?"

"Why not?" asked Pitt.

"But, my dear chap, he's in the Third!" protested Fullwood. "He's only a fag——"

"I don't choose men according to age or size," interrupted Pitt. "I choose them according to ability. Have you seen Willy this term? He's a young demon. Anyhow, it's only a trial game, and if he doesn't put up a good showing he won't get another chance."

Edward Oswald, who had been making curious noises at the back of his throat, suddenly let forth a great roar.

"By George!" he bellowed. "There's my name!"

"Exactly," said Pitt, nodding.

"With—with my minor!" hooted Handforth.

"The honour is yours, old man!"

"And I'm a throw-out!" howled Handforth indignantly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That was only a figure of speech, of course," grinned Reggie. "Take my word for it that every man on that list is a first-class cricketer. I wasn't quite sure about your name, Handy, but I thought it just as well to guard against murder being done. If Willy was in, and you were out—— Well, the poor kid's life wouldn't have been worth a cent!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth was so indignant that words failed him. He had taken it for granted that he would be included in the First Eleven, and in his eyes it was a positive disgrace that he should figure merely in the Second. Yet, in his heart, he was extremely delighted. For it was a big honour to be included in either team.

"Not that I expected anything else!" he said bitterly, after he had cooled down. "Nobody ever gives me my due. But you might as well know at once, Pitt, that we don't stand an earthly chance of winning!"

"I was afraid of that when I put your name down," said Pitt.

"You fathead!" snorted Handforth. "I mean my minor! How do you expect to beat the First with a giddy fag in the team? It's simply asking for trouble! Well, I've warned you, so don't blame me when everything goes to pot."

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He stalked off, feeling that he had done everything possible. Under the circumstances he decided not to go to Fenton and kick up a fuss regarding his exclusion from the First. Fenton was a good sort, but he seemed very dense at times.

At St. Frank's the important School Elevens were chosen irrespective of Form or House. There were, of course, Form teams and House teams, and there was a minor game of some kind in progress practically every evening of the week if the weather was fine. But the representative St. Frank's Elevens were selected purely according to merit.

Thus it was possible for a Third-Former to figure in the First Eleven if his play was good enough. Willy had played for the First before now, and had acquitted himself well. But, on the whole, Fenton had considered him too young for a regular place in the First.

It frequently happened that seniors and juniors rubbed shoulders in the same Eleven, and although the seniors as a whole were inclined to deprecate this system, Fenton had found that it worked excellently. Since he had included junior blood in his big Elevens, the St. Frank's cricket had been enormously improved.

Unfortunately for the hopes of practice, rain fell heavily that morning, and although the weather cleared up in the afternoon, the sky was still overcast, and the cricket fields were sodden. No further practice was possible. But there was the boat-race as a kind of balm.

And this created big interest, too.

It was considered to be a certain win for the Ancient House, and Cecil De Valerie had never felt happier than when he took his seat in the Ancient House boat. His hopes were all being realised this term.

He didn't know it, but he had only just missed his place in the First Eleven by a hair's-breadth, for Fenton had his eye on him, and would keep his eye on him during the trial game.

The Ancient House Eight had the fight of its life that evening. For Buster Boots and his men put up such an excellent tussle that the race was nearly a dead heat. Only by the barest possible margin did the Ancient House win, thus gaining the first honours in the carnival.

De Valerie was feeling happier than ever. And he realised to the full how sensible he had been in throwing over Forrest & Co.

Not that Forrest & Co. had finished with him yet!

CHAPTER 14.

THE TRIAL MATCH.



MR. CROWELL, the master of the Remove, frowned over the top of his glasses as he looked at his Form the next morning.

"Preposterous!" he said testily.

"Rather, sir," agreed the Remove.

"Eh?" said Mr. Crowell. "What do you mean?"

"We thought you meant it was preposterous, sir, to be stuck in here on such a lovely morning," explained Tommy Watson. "The match starts at half-past eleven, sir, and——"

"I am well aware that the match starts at half-past eleven, Watson," interrupted Mr. Crowell tartly. "And I am also aware that nine desks in this apartment are empty. The same nine will be empty to-morrow morning! I'm sure I don't know what things are coming to nowadays."

The Form regarded Mr. Crowell in amazement.

Everybody there was utterly miserable, because they were compelled to stew away at lessons while the cricketers were loosening up outside, and while the trial game was on the point of starting. All the members of the team were, of course, exempted from lessons on the occasion of a big match.

"Don't you believe in cricket, sir?" asked McClure indignantly.

"I am a great lover of cricket, my boy, but there is such a thing as losing one's head," retorted Mr. Crowell, with compressed lips. "I am very sorry that such a sound man as Fenton should have suggested these two-day matches. The matter becomes a serious one when so many junior boys are involved."

The Remove couldn't understand this argument at all.

"But think of the honour to the junior school, sir!" protested Somerton. "We're all proud to have nine of our men in the teams, and they've got to make up for lost time in their studies, haven't they?"

"That is the supposition, but I am by no means optimistic on the point," replied Mr. Crowell sourly. "I have experienced this 'making up' business before. It very seldom gets done. I should not object to a one-day match—to-morrow, for example—since to-morrow is a half-holiday, in any case. But it is perfectly absurd to waste the whole of Friday on a mere trial game."

Mr. Crowell spoke strongly. He was a stickler for discipline, and he took the view that the boys came to school to gain knowledge—not to spend their time on the playing fields. He had no objection to the forthcoming Test Matches occupying two days. But it seemed to him a sheer extravagance to take two days over the trial match.

The Form, on the other hand, thought it was the height of tyranny to keep any of them at lessons at all. In their eyes the trial match was an occasion of supreme importance, and if the headmaster had had an ounce of sense, he would have given the school two days' clear holiday. But who can expect a headmaster to have any sense?

Out on Big Side there was an air of quiet activity. The ground was in good condition again, for there had been no rain since the previous morning, and the wicket was in fine condition. It was sunny, too, with periods

of cloud. Only a slight breeze was blowing.

Fenton won the toss, and elected to open the batting. So the Second Eleven went out into the field, and Fenton and Morrow took their places at the wicket. Before half an hour had passed they were set, and Reggie Pitt's best bowlers failed to shift them.

When the school came out after morning lessons, there was considerable excitement. For Fenton and Morrow were still in, and the score stood at 67. The onlookers hadn't missed much, for the cricket so far had been of the sort that is not exhilarating to watch.

For Fenton and Morrow had opened cautiously. During the first three overs they had scored merely 2 runs. Later on, however, the batsmen began to get the hang of the bowling, and once they were set they opened out well.

When the luncheon interval came, the score stood at 75 for no wickets, and the Second Eleven bowlers were politely asked by the crowd what they thought they were up to. De Valerie met the Duke of Somerton near the ropes as he came off the field.

"You mustn't take any notice of the score," said De Valerie. "We'll probably get the pair of 'em out after the interval, and then the other wickets will fall quickly."

"Have you done any bowling yet?" asked Somerton.

Val looked rather glum.

"Pitt put me on for a couple of overs, but I was rotten," he said. "Couldn't do a thing. Every ball loose, and they knocked five boundaries! I suppose I was nervous."

"Why not ask him to give you another chance?"

"Not likely," said De Valerie. "I made a mess of it, and I suppose I've gone off colour. If Pitt chucks me the ball again, I'll see if I'm better, but I made an awful showing this morning."

That little item affected Cecil De Valerie enormously. He had secured his place in the Second Eleven on account of his bowling, and he had failed. He was only hoping that he might have another chance during the afternoon.

As a matter of fact, he had.

Half an hour after play had restarted Fenton was caught in the slips, and by the time the score had reached a century, two others were out. By three o'clock, the figures were looking a trifle better—117 for three.

William Napoleon Browne was in now, and Jerry Dodd was at the other end. Two of the best batsmen in the school! And didn't the Second Eleven know it!

The cool and collected Browne proceeded to do just as he liked with the bowling, and Jerry Dodd, after a cautious opening, helped nobly in the stand. Pitt's bowlers were helpless. It was at this point that Cecil De Valerie received his second chance.

It came unexpectedly, and he went on to bowl with the grim determination to knock Browne's middle stump out of the ground. His first delivery was so loose that Browne calmly sent it across the pavilion for a 6.

In that over, in fact, Browne scarcely did any running at all, and the score was increased by 18 runs.

De Valerie remained on for another two overs, but he was nervous and uneasy. He couldn't find his true form at all. The batsmen scored rapidly from his bowling, and Pitt was compelled to take him off again.

"Sorry, old man, but you're too expensive," he said.

"I'm rotten!" growled De Valerie. "Awfully sorry!"

When tea-time came the position was worse. 209 for five. By this time practically the entire school was round the ropes, watching eagerly. And quite a number of the Moor View girls had come along to watch.

Nipper was unfortunate, being caught out for only 5, and Fullwood tried to make amends by polishing off a masterly 19. Less than half-an-hour after tea, the First Eleven was all out.

And their total score stood at 273.

"My hat! That's a nice little figure to beat, isn't it?" said Pitt, as he talked with his men. "It seems to me that we're in for a hot time, my lads. Handy, I shan't put you in first. I'll leave you to pull the game out of the fire if the opening men fail."

"Leave it to me," said Handforth confidently. "I'm not so sure, though," he added. "I think I'll go in first with you, Pitt. If not, I shan't get a knock this evening. There's only another hour for play!"

"Which proves the wisdom of making it a two-day match," declared Grey. "Where the dickens should we have been if it was only a one-day game?"

The Second Eleven was faced with a heavy task. It was only to be expected, of course, that the First should be the better team of the two, but the Second had confidently expected to do a lot better. De Valerie, perhaps, was the outstanding failure of the game.

He had been included in the Second Eleven because of his bowling, and he hadn't obtained a single wicket, and his bowling had cost a heavy toll of runs. De Valerie was not allowed to forget the fact, either, for lots of ill-natured fellows seized the opportunity for crowing.

And then another disaster took place.

Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey went out to open the batting for the Second Eleven. And in the first ball of the over—the very first delivery—Fenton neatly lifted Reggie Pitt's off-stump out of the ground!

CHAPTER 15.

DISASTER!



OVER the green turf rang a chorus of dismay.

"Oh, my hat!"

"Out, by Jingo!"

"Poor old Reggie's got a duck! What rotten bad luck!"



The Third Form fairly mobbed Willy Handforth as he came off the field. He had thoroughly distinguished himself at the wicket; he had defied the wiles of the First Eleven's star bowlers, and his fellow-fags were distinctly pleased with him.

Pitt carried his bat back to the pavilion with a rueful grimace. It was certainly the height of bad luck, for he was an excellent bat, and to be clean-bowled with the very first delivery was a misfortune of overwhelming significance.

For not only was a good man out, but the rest of the team were depressed. And nothing is more fatal to a batsman than nervousness or depression. Church was the next man in, and Church managed to keep his end up until the over finished. The spectators were beginning to lose interest, for it seemed positively certain that there was no chance of any spectacular hitting.

With Fenton bowling at one end, and Browne at the other, the Second Eleven men were having a warm time of it. For Browne was just as good a bowler as he was a batsman.

"How's that?"

"Out, by George!" roared Handforth.

Jack Grey was out, caught by the wicket-keeper. And the score stood at 1 run for two wickets!

"Church, you rotter, if you don't make some runs, I'll jolly well biff you when you come in!" yelled Handforth indignantly. "Don't forget the honour of Study D! Look here, I'm going in next!" he added as Jack Grey came in.

Handforth was as good as his word, but he simply walked to the wicket, and walked back again. In his enthusiasm, he slogged

at the first ball, and delivered it beautifully into the waiting hands of Dick Hamilton, in the deep field.

"Out!" yelled the crowd.

"Rot!" snorted Handforth. "That was a boundary!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Nipper, you ass, what's the idea?" belted Handforth indignantly. "Leave that ball alone!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth made his way back to the pavilion in a kind of daze, and Jack Grey could hardly forbear a grin.

"You're a nice chap, aren't you," he said, "telling Church to make a lot of runs, and then scoring a duck yourself?"

"It was a fluke!" said Handforth fiercely.

"Unfortunately flukes count!" growled Jack. "And it wasn't a fluke, either. You couldn't have sent that ball to Nipper better if you'd tried to. I've never seen such a rotten stroke!"

It was rather curious that Church should actually make 10 runs before succumbing to Browne's bowling. But he took a long while over it, and had the unnerving experience of seeing his fellow-batsmen dismissed one after the other.

To be quite candid, the Second Eleven collapsed. Practically the entire team was skittled out, and the disaster can be judged from the score at the close of the day's play.

For there was no time for the First Eleven to commence their second innings.

First Eleven, 273; Second Eleven, 21.

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Pitt, as he and his men prepared to go to their various Houses. "Did you ever know such a whacking in all your giddy life? We've got a deficit of over 250! Hopeless, of course!"

"Rats!" said Handforth, who never threw up the sponge. "Nothing to worry about there, you ass! Wait until to-morrow morning!"

"I'm an optimist, too, Handy, but I don't happen to be dotty!" growled Pitt. "We don't stand an earthly!"

"Rats!" said Handforth, with supreme confidence. "We've only got to wipe out the First Eleven for about 50 runs in the morning, and then score 300 ourselves, and then we're safe!"

"Is that all?" asked Church.

"Easy!" groaned De Valerie.

"That reminds me, Val, your bowling was too ghastly for words," said Reggie, frowning. "I'll give you another chance in the morning, but I hope you'll show a bit of your old form."

"I—I'll try," muttered De Valerie gloomily.

Later on, as he was going down the junior corridor in the Ancient House, he passed Bernard Forrest, in the doorway of Study A.

"Just a minute, Val," said Forrest genially.

"Sorry, can't stop!"

"Don't be a miserable rotter!" said Forrest. "I want to apologise for what happened the other night. I acted like a cad, and I deserved that hiding you gave me. I want to have things all right again."

De Valerie hesitated. Somerton, it happened, was out, having gone into Bannington with one or two of the other juniors. De Valerie was feeling pretty miserable over his failure, and he was afraid to go to the common-room, because the fellows would chip him unmercifully.

And Forrest's apology had certainly been handsome. It would have been boorish to keep up any sort of ill-feeling after an open confession of guilt like that. De Valerie went into Study A.

He didn't know that Bernard Forrest had made a bet with Gulliver and Bell that he would win De Valerie back again. Gulliver and Bell had scorned the very idea, and had considered themselves on a safe wager. They hadn't guessed that their cunning leader would eat humble-pie for the mere sake of winning the bet. Forrest, too, was rather anxious to entice De Valerie back into the fold—if only to dish Handforth and Nipper and the others. He took a pleasure in these mean, petty actions.

As for De Valerie, he felt a little tinge of relief as he sat down in Study A. These

fellows were rotters, perhaps, but there was a certain free-and-easy atmosphere about the study. And instead of chipping him, Forrest & Co. sympathised. That was worth a lot, anyhow, to a fellow in De Valerie's present mood.

"Hard lines, old man," Forrest was saying, as they entered the study. "You had some pretty beastly luck to-day. I could have kicked some of those rotters who chipped you."

"Well I'm hanged!" said Gulliver blankly.

"My only hat!" gurgled Bell.

They had a brief vision of twenty shillings vanishing into Forrest's pocket. Obviously, they had lost their bet already.

"You—you've got him here, then—" asked Gulliver.

"Shut up, confound you!" growled Forrest. "I've brought Val here to make him comfortable. No good asking you to have a cigarette, I suppose, old man?"

De Valerie frowned.

"I wish you'd chuck up that sort of rot," he said. "Why can't you be decent, Forrest? I don't want to preach——"

"Then let's talk about cricket," interrupted Forrest genially. "We're all entitled to our little weaknesses, I suppose? Do you honestly think that there's anything in this cricket stuff? Look at the sweat you've had! Early-morning practice, out at the nets every blessed minute of the day. And what's the result? Where do you stand?"

De Valerie was silent.

"You won't get another chance, my son," went on Forrest. "After your form to-day, Pitt wouldn't have you as a gift. Take my advice, and chuck it up, it's not worth the candle."

"It doesn't seem to be, does it?" muttered De Valerie. "I've got to stick it to-morrow, though—although I suppose I shall make a worse mess of it than ever. It's a rummy thing how a fellow does well at practice, and then crumples up when he's really needed."

Forrest nodded.

"It only leads to disappointments and worry," he said. "I take the safe course, and steer clear of the whole bally shoot! I don't want to persuade you one way or the other, but if you stick at this cricket rot after to-morrow you'll be a chump!"

De Valerie had something of the same idea himself, and he tried to throw off the feeling of depression. He partially succeeded, for when he left Study A, about an hour later, he was much more cheerful.

It was decidedly unfortunate that he should walk right into the arms of the Duke of Somerton.

His study chum looked at him strangely.

"I've been looking for you for half an hour, Val," he said.

"Oh!"

"Naturally, I never thought of looking in that den," went on Somerton quietly. "I hope you enjoyed yourself. What was it—a little game of nap, or merely a smoke?"

Somerton was feeling sadly disappointed. He had searched everywhere for De Valerie,

never dreaming of the possibility that his chum would be in Study A. He couldn't possibly help the bitterness in his tone.

"Don't be an ass!" growled De Valerie. "I've only been having a chat."

"I thought you'd finished with those outsiders?"

"Outsiders or not, they're the only fellows who helped to cheer me up after to-day's failure," retorted De Valerie warmly. "You didn't do much in that direction, did you? You went off to Bannington!"

Somerton flushed.

"Hang it, I had an appointment——"

"Oh, all right—it doesn't matter," said De Valerie shortly. "Let's forget about it. We're not going to start another row, I suppose?"

"Of course not," said Somerton quietly.

CHAPTER 16.

SOMETHING LIKE A SURPRISE.



THE First Eleven were exceedingly cheerful when they took the field on the next morning.

For, of course, the Second Eleven was obliged to bat again. The general idea was to get the match finished by lunch-time, and leave the afternoon clear for relaxation on the river.

Fenton considered it a foregone conclusion that the Second Eleven would be all out again for a moderate figure, and the match would be over. But the Second Eleven had quite a different opinion on the matter.

The weather still continued fine, and the wicket was in perfect condition. Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey, opening the innings, soon proved that they were very different men from yesterday. In fact, the First Eleven became exasperated. This was nothing more nor less than cool cheek, defying their best bowlers.

When the school came out after morning lessons there was a big surprise awaiting it. Most of the juniors were anticipating an empty cricket field—with the game all over.

"Even if they're not all out, they'll be as good as finished," said Forrest, as he hurried to Big Side with his chums. "Hallo, there seems to be some mistake. What on earth—— I say, look at that board!"

"Well I'm jiggered!" gasped Gulliver.

The score-board made this astounding announcement—97 for one.

"Why, it's—it's impossible!" ejaculated Bell. "All out yesterday for 21, and now they've scored 97 for one wicket! I don't believe it! Some fathead is playin' about with the score-board!"

But it was the honest truth, and there was a tremendous amount of excitement when the story got about. Reggie Pitt was batting grimly and strongly, and his own personal score had already passed the half-century. Church was with him now, and Church was apparently set. He wasn't spectacular, and he wasn't daring—but he was safe.

When the luncheon interval came the century had been passed, and there was still only one wicket down. This was a different story! And the First Eleven, in the field, was not feeling quite so confident.

Fenton and his men felt sure, of course, that they would win the match by a clear innings, but it wasn't to be such a walk-over as they had expected. The afternoon would make a big difference.

The afternoon did.

After Church was out, with 9 runs to his credit, Edward Oswald Handforth went in. But this time he didn't come out during the same minute. He slogged as recklessly as ever—but luck seemed to be with him. The runs mounted up with surprising speed. Handforth put up a spectacular display, knocking Browne and Fenton to the boundary time after time.

Even Jerry Dodd could make no impression on him. At last Reggie Pitt succumbed to one of Dodd's yorkers, and a yell went up when Willy Handforth went out to join his major. It was rather fitting that Willy should go in while Edward Oswald was batting.

"Of all the silly rot!" snorted Handforth, as his minor passed him on the pitch. "You leave it all to me, my lad! Don't try any of your funny business! We're going to win this match!"

"It's as good as won already!" grinned Willy.

For half an hour the school enjoyed a rare treat. The Handforth brothers were impregnable. Fenton was simply fuming with exasperation. It was ridiculous for this reckless Removite and this cool fag to defy all the wiles of the First Eleven's star bowlers!

Willy proved his value to-day. On the previous evening he had suffered from the same disease as all the other members of the Second Eleven, and had scored practically nothing. But to-day he knocked up 28 runs off his own bat before being caught in the slips.

"Hurrah!"

"Well done, young Willy!"

"Good old Third!"

The good old Third fairly mobbed Willy as he came off. And Edward Oswald soon followed, for just after he had scored his 50 he made a rash attempt to make a 2 into a 3, and paid the penalty by being run out.

The rest of the team kept up the good work, and there was no collapse. In fact, to state the truth at once, the Second Eleven scored the magnificent total of 299 all out—thus compelling the First Eleven to go in for a second innings.

"By Jove, Pitt, your men have done fine!" exclaimed Fenton enthusiastically. "I can see one or two of them being picked for the test match next week."

"I hope so," said Pitt, flushing.

"Like your nerve to force us in again!" chuckled Fenton.

De Valerie had only scored 7 runs, but he was feeling the general optimism, and he begged Pitt to give him an early chance with the ball.

"I'll tell you what," said Pitt. "We've put up a good fight, and there's not much hope, so you might as well take the first over. The First Eleven has only got to score 50 to whack us."

And then the miracle happened.

In the very first over Cecil De Valerie took two wickets!

His bowling was deadly this afternoon. The school watched, entranced. Fenton and Wilson dismissed for three runs! And Morrow followed only five minutes later, caught and bowled by John Busterfield Boots.

In the fifth over Willy covered himself with glory by making an almost impossible catch, and dismissing the redoubtable Browne for a duck. William Napoleon shook his head sadly at Willy as he walked in.

"While admiring your monkey-like prowess, Brother William, I wish you had chosen another victim," he said sorrowfully.

The tail of the First Eleven collapsed. One after another they were skittled out—and the last wicket fell, amid wild excitement, with the total score standing at 46.

"We've won!" howled Handforth, leaping about two yards in the air. "Hurrah!"

"We've whacked 'em by two giddy runs!" panted De Valerie. "Or is it three—or one? Who cares? They're beaten, anyhow!"

"Yes, by Jove, and we've got to thank your bowling, largely," said Pitt enthusiastically. "Good man! If you're not picked for the test match next week, I'll eat my boots!"

De Valerie was about the happiest fellow in St. Frank's as he strolled towards the Ancient House, arm-in-arm with the Duke of Somerton. Just before they got to the Triangle they passed Forrest & Co. The cads of Study A were not looking particularly happy. Perhaps they had been making a few bets, and had lost.

"Just a minute, Val, old man," said Bernard Forrest smoothly.

Cecil De Valerie looked at him straight in the eye.

"Sorry—nothing doing!" he said, with an air of finality.

The Duke of Somerton said nothing, but, as they passed on, De Valerie felt an added pressure on his arm.

THE END.

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CHAPTER 1.

A MEAN THEFT.

"EH? Who—what the——" Nipper flung off the bed-covers and started up as a terrific thudding sounded on the door of his bed-room.

Through the window, the grey light of a chilly dawn lit the room in ghostly fashion, and the onslaught continued with a vigour that threatened to shatter the panels of the door.

"What—who's that?" he gasped.

"Master Nipper! You're wanted on the telephone!" came the shrill voice of Nelson Lee's landlady. "Master Nipper!" And the thudding on the door was resumed.

Nipper grinned as he slipped out of bed and grabbed a dressing-gown. He whipped the door open, and the buxom Mrs. Jones all but tumbled into his arms.

"Oh, you've awoke, have you?" she exclaimed. "Here 'ave I been nigh bringin' the door down for the last ten minutes! You're wanted on the telephone—leastways, Mr. Lee is, but as 'e's bin out all night, I s'pose you'll do. Somebody wants you urgent, an' 'ere 'ave I 'ad to drag out o' my bed at five o'clock in the mornin' just to——"

But Nipper didn't wait to hear anything more. He edged past her, and went streaking down the stairs. Nelson Lee had been out all night on a case, and Nipper thought the call might be from his guv'nor. He grabbed the receiver.

"Hallo! Hallo!" he yelled. "No, this isn't Mr. Lee. It's—— Oh, is that you, Mr. Daniels? Wha-a-at? Your safe burst open—your bit o' money gone? Gosh, that's rotten! You bet I'll come! I'll be with you in—— Yes, I should just think you are shaken up! Yes, I'll come. I'll start the minute I've got some clothes on! Good-bye!"

Nipper hung up the receiver, and raced to his bed-room again. He dressed hastily, wondering why in the world any sane crook could have broken into Jacob Daniels' shop—a grimy little place in Dalton Lane, Victoria way. Its owner was a kindly old dealer in secondhand goods.

So far as Nipper knew, there wasn't a thing in the shop to attract a real crook, though one of the local toughs might have broken in

on the chance of finding something. Very probably that was what had happened. He wondered why Mr. Daniels had not called in the police. On the other hand, it was natural for the grey-haired old chap to turn to Nelson Lee, for Daniels had a cunning knowledge of postage stamps, and had more than once helped the guv'nor in big cases of stamp forgery.

And many a rare stamp had Mr. Daniels pressed on Nipper for his own collection. He always laughed, and waved Nipper's money aside, pretending he'd made a lucky find out of old stock.

It seemed rotten that his money should have been stolen; he hadn't much to start with—of that Nipper was certain. Anyway, if he could lay hands on the mean beggar who had robbed the old man, he'd have a jolly good shot to get the money back—or make the brute pay for taking it.

Scribbling a note to the guv'nor, Nipper routed out his motor-bike, and raced through the empty streets. Rounding Westminster Abbey, he dived into the network of byways, and, turning into Dalton Lane, made straight for Mr. Daniels' shop.

He found the door wide open, and stared in blank amazement at the sight which met his eyes. Secondhand goods were piled in confusion all over the floor—chairs and vases, dusty pictures, and old books by the score.

Mr. Daniels was sitting in a corner, his head on his hands. He looked up as Nipper came in, and the boy saw that the old chap was pale and shaken. He staggered when he got to his feet.

"Hallo, Mr. Daniels!" Nipper said. "What's been happening? It looks as if an earthquake has broken loose during the night!"

"Is it you, Master Nipper?" Daniels mumbled stupidly. "Fine mess, isn't it? And the money gone, besides!"

It was then that Nipper saw that the old fellow's eyes gleamed with a strange brightness beneath the lids; that, and his dazedness, and the ghastly pallor of his face, made the boy stare at him again. He realised then that Mr. Daniels was still in the grip of some drug, and the old chap admitted having a nasty taste in his mouth!

But who would want to drug the second-

hand dealer, and wreck his shop like this? Burglars don't go pulling a place to pieces for the fun of the thing; they only want to fill their pockets, and clear off as quickly as they can.

Then Nipper got a glimpse of the back room that Mr. Daniels called his "office." Like the shop, the whole place was in disorder, with the little safe lying face downwards, its wall-plate of thin steel showing a jagged hole of fused edges.

"Gosh!" Nipper gasped. "That was done with a thermite flame! My hat, you've had a tip-top cracksman on this job! What was his idea? I could have opened this safe with a tin-opener in about half-an-hour!"

"Knew there was something wrong—moment I roused up," Daniels muttered, as if to himself.

"How much cash did you have in the safe?" Nipper demanded.

"'Bout twenty pounds," Daniels mumbled, and he swayed on his feet as he spoke. "Downstairs, somehow, found this—and wanted Nelson Lee."

Nipper saw that the old chap was still dazed and shaky.

"Look here, Mr. Daniels!" Nipper said. "What you want is a real good hot drink. Suppose you toddle along, and brew a gallon or so of coffee?"

"You're right, lad," Daniels nodded. "You'll work better without me hinderin' you."

Nipper watched the old chap anxiously until he was sure Daniels could look after himself, then turned again to the strangely-wrecked safe.

CHAPTER 2.

NIPPER GETS BUSY.

THE daylight, entering through a grimy skylight, was soon strong enough to show how ruthlessly Daniels' property had been dealt with. Masses of receipted bills, stock-books, and papers had been lifted from the safe and tossed all over the floor. The little cash-box that had been in the safe had been forced with a chisel, and its contents had been taken; but the twenty pounds it had held must have proved a mere detail to a cracksman with the latest devices of safe-breakers at his disposal.

Nipper carefully searched the broken safe for finger-prints, but the expert cracksman had evidently worn gloves, and had left no tell-tale marks behind him.

"Um! And I thought I had some blundering rough to deal with," Nipper muttered. "Here's a fellow using thermite and gloves—an expert crook wasting time on a slum shop! Doesn't fit in, somehow, but I'll stake my bike to a butter-bean it wasn't Daniels' bit o' money he was after!"

Yet what else could it have been? Returning to the shop, Nipper stared again at the stuff piled knee-deep on the floor. It was even worse than he had thought, for he now saw that the paper was hanging in huge

strips from the wall, and that the glass show-cases had been wrenched from the counter! It was either the work of a madman, or of a very determined searcher.

Nipper pottered about without much luck until Daniels appeared with a steaming jug of coffee in his hand. As the old dealer poured out a cup for Nipper, the boy saw that he was looking more himself; in fact, he was staring at Nipper in eager curiosity.

But Nipper shook his head.

"I haven't found a trace of anything yet," he said. "But I'm jolly well certain it wasn't your twenty pounds that attracted this customer!" Then he added: "Have you any idea how you came to swallow those knock-out drops that put you to sleep last night?"

Old Daniels looked at him for a moment or so.

"Oh, I've been drugged, have I?" he said slowly. "I thought there was somethin' mighty wrong with me! Well, I can guess how the trick was worked, but not who worked it," he went on slowly. "Y'see, I usually have a cup of cocoa in the shop about seven o'clock every night, and last night three or four customers came in while I was drinking it."

"And any one of 'em could have dropped some stuff in while your back was turned," Nipper answered.

Opening the kitchen door, Nipper and Daniels began a tour of the house, and Nipper grew more and more puzzled with every room they entered. Both kitchen and bed-room had been turned upside-down, furniture and pictures had been ruthlessly smashed, the contents of drawers had been pitched pell-mell on the floors.

But the most amazing sight of all was reserved for what Daniels called his "rubbish" room. Actually, it was a place used as storage for goods too damaged or worthless to tempt even his humble customers—books without binding, frames without pictures, and crockery only fit for the dustbin.

For some minutes, Nipper prowled about the room. Sunlight lit up the dust-covered floor, and, quite suddenly, Nipper found himself staring at little specks that sparkled in the dust! He frowned, wondering if his eyes were playing tricks. Dust didn't usually sparkle. There must be something mixed in with it!

Keeping his eye on the tiny specks, he dropped to his knees, brought out the strong magnifying-glass he always carried, and stared at the place from different angles.

"Come over here, Mr. Daniels," he said presently. "Don't cross the sun's path—step this side! Now look through my glass, and tell me what those crimson flashes mean!"

"Can't see anything," Daniels muttered, the glass to his eyes. "Hallo! Now I see what you're driving at—little bits of red mixed in with the dirt!" He sniffed, and handed the glass back to Nipper. "But I can't see that patch of coloured dust bringin' back my twenty quid, an' that's all I'm interested in."

But Nipper was too busy to argue. He took a used envelope from his pocket, and scooped up every speck of dust that showed a trace of colour.

"Come on, Mr. Daniels!" he cried, jumping to his feet. "I remember seeing a microscope in the shop. I want to have a squint at this stuff through it."

By the time the old chap had reached the shop, Nipper had found the battered microscope, and was pouring a portion of the dust on to its glass screen. Then, focussing the eyepiece, he studied the crimson specks with a care that made Daniels smile.

"You haven't found a handful o' rubies, by any chance?" he asked, his smile growing wider.

"No; but I've found scrapings of paint," Nipper answered crisply. "And they're new scrapings, Mr. Daniels, or the dust would soon have taken the shine out of them." He stared thoughtfully at the grey-haired old dealer. "You say the lumber-room only held rubbish, but I'm beginning to think you are wrong. Anyway, this paint might have been scratched from one of the pictures up there, and I'm going back to find out."

CHAPTER 3.

THE GUNMAN.

IT took Nipper and Mr. Daniels exactly ten minutes to toss the lumber-room rubbish right and left, and to dig out eight grimy daubs. Carrying these to the sunlit window, Nipper glanced quickly at each in turn, and finally pounced on one that showed a ship afire at sea.

"Here you are, Mr. Daniels," he said eagerly. "The other seven pictures are unmarked; but this one, you'll notice, has had the paint carefully scratched away from this corner!"

Growing interested at last, the old dealer looked closer, and saw that a good half-inch of paint had been flaked away from the canvas.

"Now, I wonder why anybody wanted to do that?" he muttered. "It isn't as if the picture was worth anything. None of them are in this room."

"Somebody thought it worth while to examine it pretty carefully, anyway," Nipper answered quickly. "Ah! Here's the artist's initials: 'H. H.' Now, have you any idea where the thing came from, Mr. Daniels?"

The old dealer turned the grimy frame over and over, as if he expected to find the ex-owner's name and address printed in full somewhere. Failing in that, he shook his head, and confessed himself beaten.

"It's bin here a long time. That's all I can say off-hand," he answered. "But I've a stock-book in the office. That might tell us something, if we can lay hands on it."

A short search amongst the office papers brought the stock-book to light, and Nipper began to skim rapidly through every item relating to pictures.

But he had to turn a long way back before he found the entry he sought.

"Here you are!" he cried suddenly. "Listen, Mr. Daniels: 'Bought from Mrs. Hoddy—three oils. 1. Soldier home from war. 2. Sunset on the Wash. 3. Burning ship at sea.'" He dropped the book, and stared at the dealer in excitement. "That's the bunch! Here's the 'burning ship,' with a lump of its paint peeled away! The 'soldier's' upstairs, without a mark on it. But where's 'sunset'? That one isn't in the lumber-room. It's missing! Now, d'you think you've sold it, Mr. Daniels, or that you've placed it somewhere away from the others?"

"I've done neither," Daniels answered quickly. "Soon's you mentioned the name of Hoddy, I remembered. Why, I've known Mrs. Hoddy this fifteen years—a poor old woman who hawks flowers for a living. When times have——"

"Yes, but what about the pictures?" Nipper yelled, almost dancing with impatience.

"It's all coming back to me now," Daniels nodded. "I can remember that night she came in—the three pictures under her shawl. They were awful daubs, an' I told her to take 'em away. But she looked so hungry, I just had to call her back and give her ten bob——" He suddenly forgot Mrs. Hoddy, and stood staring at Nipper with his mouth open. "Well, if I'm not an old blockhead! Why, Master Nipper, if I hadn't forgotten they were up in that lumber-room, I might have sold 'em as late as last night!"

"What's that?" Nipper yelled. "You mean to say somebody was asking for them—and you've only just remembered to tell me?"

"I don't mean that anybody was actually askin' for them," Daniels answered. "I only mean that a chap came in here last night wanting to buy some pictures. There wasn't one in the shop that would satisfy him, but these things in the lumber-room might ha' done, if only I'd remembered them."

"Then that's the chap we've got to look for!" Nipper cried. "What sort of a fellow was he—have you ever seen him before?"

Mr. Daniels shook his head.

"He's never been in this shop before, I'm sure of that," he said. "Heavy-built, surly, brute he was—looked like a 'bruiser' who'd got too old for his job. He said he'd call back some day——"

"Ay, he called back last night," Nipper grinned. "Can't you see, Mr. Daniels, it was Mrs. Hoddy's pictures he was looking for? He knew they were here, somewhere, and when he found he couldn't buy them, he simply waltzed along in the middle of the night and took the one he wanted."

"But I'd ha' given him the lot if he'd only asked for them," Daniels said ruefully.

"Yes, but perhaps he dare not ask for them," Nipper explained. "Anyway, I want to find out why he's gone to all this trouble, just to steal a rotten daub that doesn't seem worth sixpence. But it must have a value, and perhaps Mrs. Hoddy will know more about it than you do."

"We'll soon find out," Daniels promptly replied. "She only lives at the end of the lane—No. 6, Batman's Alley. We'll run round there now."

But Nipper was determined to go alone and to question Mrs. Hoddy in his own way.

"You've got plenty to do, straightening up your shop," he said, making for the street door. "I'll run round to Batman's Alley, but I'll come straight back and let you know what Mrs. Hoddy has to say."

CHAPTER 4.

THE WIDOW HODDY'S SECRET.

BATMAN'S ALLEY proved to be a narrow entry at the far end of Dalton Lane. A boy standing at its entrance told Nipper that Mrs. Hoddy lived in the basement of No. 6, and Nipper was glad to find a set of steps that saved him having to enter the house above.

His first knock on the area door remained unanswered. His quick ears caught the sounds of someone scurrying about in the place, but that was soon followed by a complete silence. Knocking again, he heard a faltering voice inviting him to enter, and on opening the door he saw a thin, frail woman standing near an inner door, her hands clasped nervously together.

"Are you Mrs. Hoddy?" Nipper inquired, wondering why the woman looked so frightened.

"That's me, sir," she whispered.

She stammered the words out, and she looked anywhere but at Nipper's face. The boy could see she was terrified at his sudden appearance.

"I won't keep you a jiffy, Mrs. Hoddy," he said. "I only want to ask you a few questions, about some old pictures you sold to Jacob Daniels."

At the mention of Daniels' name, Mrs. Hoddy flinched as if someone had struck her.

"Are you from the—the police?" she whispered.

"No," Nipper answered quickly. "I've come straight from Mr. Daniels' shop, just to hear how those pictures you sold him came into your hands."

"I'd ha' thought Mr. Daniels knew," Mrs. Hoddy replied. "They were painted by my husband—'Arry 'Oddy, who died nigh six years ago."

Nipper stared and frowned.

"Harry Hoddy?" he repeated. "I seem to remember that name—wonder where I've heard it?" He thought for a moment, then gave it up. "So your husband was an artist, eh?" he asked.

"A pavement artist," Mrs. Hoddy explained. "E was a cripple, really, an' used to make a living by chalk drawings in the streets. But he liked doin' oil-paintings, when 'e 'ad a shilling to buy a bit o' canvas—an' them three I sold Daniels was the last 'e ever done."

Nipper felt certain she was speaking the truth. Yet, if she was, there could be no

value in the things she had sold—so why should anyone go and tear Daniels' shop and house to pieces for the sake of stealing one?

"If you'd—" She broke off, glancing nervously over her shoulder.

"I'm trying to remember something about your husband," Nipper cut in. "I don't want to rake up old troubles, Mrs. Hoddy, but what did your Harry die of?"

"You'll learn more, my boy, if you will ask—who killed him?"

At the sound of the strange voice, Mrs. Hoddy uttered a little scream of fear. She was staring past Nipper—staring in terror at a tall, thin man whose aquiline nose, firm lips, and eyes of steely-grey told of determination combined with great mental ability.

"Guv'nor!" Nipper cried, dashing across the room. "I was beginning to worry about you—"

"You generally are," Nelson Lee interrupted, his eyes twinkling. "If I'm an hour late for dinner, you begin looking in the papers to see what has happened to me. In this case, an absconding bank official kept me busy all night. But suppose we return to Mrs. Hoddy, and the question of who killed her husband."

The effect of his words on the white-haired widow was really amazing. Glaring wildly about the place like a trapped mouse, she made as if to dash to the inner room near which she was standing, then suddenly drew back and burst into a storm of weeping.

"Perhaps I had better tell the tale, Mrs. Hoddy," Nelson Lee suggested, not unkindly. "I suppose, Nipper, you would hardly remember the unfortunate affair known as 'The Crutch Murder'?"

Nipper's eyes opened with surprise.

"But I do remember it!" he cried. "Why, sir, I do believe it happened in this Batman's Alley!"

"In this very house, my boy," the great detective answered calmly. "Is that not so, Mrs. Hoddy?"

"Y-yes, sir," the widow sobbed. "An' I thought I'd heard the last of the 'orrible business."

"Wasn't a chap named Beeman arrested for the crime?" Nipper asked.

"He was, my lad," Nelson Lee nodded.

"A very queer case—it was eventually reduced to one of manslaughter, you'll remember. It was hinted that Miles Beeman and Harry Hoddy were partners in some very clever thieving—though the truth was never really known, Nipper."

"It was all lies," Mrs. Hoddy suddenly cried, never realising how cleverly the famous investigator had led her on. "I'll tell you now that my 'Arry didn't hardly know Beeman, who never came here but that once!"

"But that once was enough to cause Harry's death," Lee suggested significantly.

Mrs. Hoddy glanced uneasily round the place.

"It was just a sudden quarrel—like's might happen to anyone," she protested. "I was back there, in me bed-room, when I heard 'em argyin' about something Beeman



Nelson Lee flurled himself forward in one swift leap that carried him like a battering-ram into the opening door. Nipper glimpsed a squat, ugly brute framed in the doorway; he saw the red flash of a second shot—and then he raced to his guv'nor's aid.

said he'd lost. Then I see Beeman grab 'Arry's crutch an' 'it 'im one over the head. But 'e never meant to kill 'im——"

"I am sure he did not," Nelson Lee agreed. He crossed to the fireplace and stood looking down at it. "But what did Beeman say to you, Mrs. Hoddy, when he saw what he had done?"

"'E told me 'Arry had——" Her voice faltered and broke. "I—I—— He said as 'ow 'Arry 'ad broken a promise 'e made," she corrected lamely.

By now, Nelson Lee was leaning over the tumble-down fireplace, examining another of the dead artist's pictures. He appeared to be paying scant attention to the widow's tale; in fact, as her voice whimpered to silence, he yawned loudly, turned his back on the inner door, and made as if to leave the place.

"Nipper, you've been very keen in the matter of that crimson dust," he said, venting another loud yawn. "But I am convinced you are quite wrong in connecting it with Daniels' present troubles."

Nipper's mouth was actually opening to argue the question, when he noticed the guv'nor's left hand working and pulling at a firebrick that was already partly adrift from the crazy structure.

Swift as thought itself, Nelson Lee whirled round and flung the heavy brick with the force of a fired shell! Straight at the inner door it crashed, at the height of a man's head. To be followed instantly by a hoarse,

snarling yell and the sharp explosion of a bursting gun!

But, as if on springs, Nelson Lee had crouched low, and now hurled himself forward in one swift leap that carried him like a battering-ram into the opening door! Nipper caught one glimpse of a squat, ugly brute framed in the doorway, saw the red flash of a second shot—then raced in to the guv'nor's aid!

But long before he got to Lee's side, the detective's right fist had rocked home on the man's jaw, and the fellow dropped—knocked out!

"Gosh!" Nipper panted. "You're not hurt, guv'nor—he didn't get you?"

"Not a bit!" Nelson Lee answered cheerfully. "Now hand me the gun he dropped, Nipper, and beg the loan of Widow Hoddy's clothes-line."

Nipper didn't quite understand all that was happening, and a score of questions were trembling on his lips, but he knew better than to ask them just then. He helped Nelson Lee as he deftly trussed the bullet-headed man hand and foot, and it was just as the vicious-looking crook was regaining consciousness that Nipper heard voices in the outer room.

"Here's the neighbours crowding in, guv'nor," he grinned. "They must have heard the shooting—and they sound as if they're all asking questions at once."

With an exclamation of annoyance, Nelson Lee strode out, forced his way through the

people, and whispered to Mrs. Hoddy to clear the room; then, when they were at last alone, he turned to her with one of his rare smiles.

"Miles Beeman will never trouble you again, Mrs. Hoddy," he said.

"Miles Beeman—the chap who killed Hoddy!" Nipper yelled. "You mean that's the fellow we've got inside there—but what's he got to do with the Daniels' affair?"

"Everything," Nelson Lee answered. "I arrived at Daniels' shop about one minute after you had left, Nipper. The moment Daniels mentioned the name of Hoddy, my mind flew back to the Crutch murder and the part Beeman had played in it."

"He was released yesterday, and hurried straight here," Mrs. Hoddy said. "He asked me about 'Arry's old pictures, and when I told him I'd had to sell them to Mr. Daniels he hurried out again."

"And he went straight round to Daniels' shop," Nipper explained. "He wanted those pictures mighty badly, but I can't yet see what he wanted them for."

"Yet it was your cute work in finding the crimson dust that has solved the mystery," Nelson Lee said, his eyes twinkling.

"But I only found some scrapings of paint," Nipper protested. "What are you getting at, guv'nor?"

"Six years ago, Miles Beeman was one of the cleverest cracksmen of the day," Nelson Lee answered. "There was no crib too difficult for Miles to crack, but all these years he's spent in prison he has had to nurse the thought that his finest scoop was stolen from him by his own friend."

"You mean it was stolen by Hoddy—and hidden in one of his pictures?" Nipper cried.

Nelson Lee nodded, and turned to Mrs. Hoddy.

"When Beeman came back here this morning, he carried one of Harry's old pictures," he said. "He was working on it when Nipper knocked on your door, and I've no doubt he snatched up the picture and threatened to shoot you, if you betrayed his presence here."

"He took the picture with him," Mrs. Hoddy answered, "and swore he'd shoot anyone as tried to get it off him."

"Then that blessed old picture's somewhere in your room, missus," Nipper cried. "And, by your leave, I'm going after it!"

In a flash, Nipper had dodged into the little bed-room and was out again. He now carried a canvas about twelve inches by ten

—but he was staring at it as if he could hardly believe his eyes.

"Here's a picture, guv'nor, but it isn't one of Hoddy's," he yelled. "Why, it's a real beauty—it's worth money!"

"I'm quite sure it is," Nelson Lee agreed drily.

He took the picture from Nipper's hands, carefully examined the life-like face that laughed up from the canvas, and nodded satisfaction.

"That, my boy, is Rembrandt's 'Happy Warrior'!" he said quietly. "It was once owned by Lady Kenwright, and it is valued at £6,000!"

"And it was stolen by Beeman—and stolen again by Hoddy?" Nipper gasped.

"But 'Arry wasn't a thief—I can't believe it!" Mrs. Hoddy cried.

"He was not the actual thief—but he was asked by Beeman to hide the thing, because the police were on Beeman's track for quite another job," Nelson Lee explained. "Your husband did hide it—by varnishing the surface and overpainting his own stuff on it; but, having got it, he was loth to surrender it, and that led to the quarrel—and Harry's death!"

"But what could Beeman have done with it?" Nipper asked. "Selling a famous picture isn't like selling a box of cigars."

"Its recovery carried a reward of a thousand pounds!" the great detective answered.

"There's not the least doubt of what Beeman meant to do. He returned here, as the safest place to flake away Hoddy's painting, and in a day or two the 'Happy Warrior' would have been handed back to Lady Kenwright—on the understanding of no questions asked, but the £1,000 reward paid!"

"And to think as I sold it for 'arf-a-crown!" the widow sighed.

"The reward will still be paid—and divided between you and Daniels," Nelson Lee said quietly.

"But you—and Master Nipper?" Mrs. Hoddy faltered.

"We were commissioned to find Daniels' twenty pounds," Nipper grinned. "We'll charge him a ten per cent fee, eh, guv'nor?"

Nelson Lee laughed.

"It's your case, so make your own fee," he replied. "And, by the way, your case will not be rounded off until you rout out the nearest constable and see our bullet-headed gunman safely in the lock-up."

Nipper took the hint—and departed.

THE END.

"THE CASE OF THE STOLEN MESSENGER!"

Nipper answered a frantic telephone call from Nelson Lee, and his response led him into a whole series of thrilling and amazing adventures. Read all about it in this exciting complete story—

COMING NEXT WEEK!

YOUR EDITOR'S CORNER.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Well, here is the first issue of the new NELSON LEE LIBRARY, with the bigger pictures, the bigger pages, the bigger type, and the longer stories that I promised you last week. What do you think of it? Pretty good, eh? It is certainly an improvement on the old issues, good though they were!

And what do you think of this week's St. Frank's yarn? Good, too? Would you believe that there is an even better one coming along next Wednesday? It is a fact!

"HANDFORTH'S BAD DAY!" is quite the best story that Mr. Brooks has written for you up to the present. That is saying a lot, I know; but, if you remember, I promised you that this new series was absolutely going to beat everything that he has ever done before. It gets better and better as it goes along, and there really are some fine yarns due in the future.

NELSON LEE.

How do you like renewing your acquaintance with Nelson Lee and Nipper in their detective rôle again? Of course, these stories deal only with their special cases—and they are all the more thrilling for that.

Next Wednesday they are featured in "THE CASE OF THE STOLEN MESSENGER."

Strange things happen in London, and this story deals with one of the strangest of all. It is a baffling mystery, and Nipper plays a very big part in solving it; at any rate, he gets Nelson Lee out of a very tight corner. Nipper would, of course!

CRICKET.

On page 40 of this issue you will find an article entitled, "GETTING READY FOR CRICKET." It contains quite a number of useful hints for those of you who are keen on the great summer game—and who isn't? With the famous Aussies over here, and with St. Frank's simply bubbling over with cricket enthusiasm, I expect everybody is digging out last year's bat and pads, polishing up the old cricket stumps, trying on last season's cricket boots, and all that sort of thing.

You will find this article helpful, and next week it will be followed up by another which will give you a few tips for improving your play. By the way, these chats have been written by a real cricket expert, so you can rely upon what he tells you.

SHOES!

Some of you fellows must have very well-developed bumps of curiosity, judging by the questions which turn up in my daily mail-bag. Here is a queer inquiry which arrived this morning: Do racehorses wear shoes?

That little query comes from J. M. (Exeter). Apparently he has had some little argument about it. J. M. thinks that racehorses do wear shoes, but not ordinary shoes. One of his pals argues that they don't wear shoes at all. He is right—and so is J. M.!

Sometimes racehorses run in shoes, and sometimes they don't; it depends very much on the horse. If the animal wears shoes, they are special ones, made of aluminium, and not very much larger than the heel-tips that occasionally go on ordinary boots. These aluminium shoes weigh barely an ounce each,

and they are put on just before the race, special aluminium nails being used for the job.

After the race the shoes are taken off, and are replaced by the ordinary type.

Sometimes a horse will race with no shoes at all, but it is more usual to give him the little aluminium shoes. It is very seldom indeed that a horse races

with ordinary iron shoes, unless he is being run merely to get him used to the crowds.

THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE.

On page 42 you will find a chat from the Chief Officer, in which he tells what some of the busy Leagueites are doing.

The numbers of League members is still steadily increasing, and this enlarged issue of the NELSON LEE LIBRARY provides a good opportunity for obtaining new introductions.

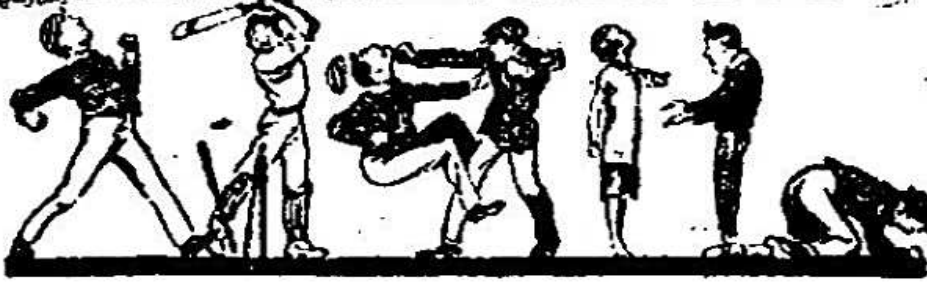
IN GENERAL.

I think you will agree that this week's issue of the NELSON LEE LIBRARY might safely be called a bumper number. Next Wednesday is even better. I anticipate a terrific rush to purchase copies of the old paper the moment that the news of its permanent enlargement gets about—so watch out that you don't miss next Wednesday's issue.

It is easy enough to make sure of it. Just ask your newsagent to put a copy aside for you. He won't mind; in fact, he will be rather pleased to do so. Drop in at his shop next time you are passing, and tell him that you'd like the NELSON LEE LIBRARY saved for you every week. If you do that, there'll never be a chance of having him tell you that he is sorry, but he has—sold out!

NEXT WEDNESDAY—

HANDFORTH'S BAD DAY!



Getting Ready for Cricket

This cheery article tells you how to prepare your cricket gear for the great summer game.

THE longer days that we have all been waiting for are here now, and once again cricket is the only thing that matters, apart from such hum-drum things as school or work, of course.

The longer days mean that you can have proper games and matches after the day's work—that is one of cricket's advantages over football. You can only play footer on Saturday afternoons—and probably you will be finding your left over from last season's tackle insufficient or already wearing out. Then, if you are lucky—meaning if you can persuade someone to provide the money, or if the members' subscriptions have been rolling in regularly—your thoughts will be turning to new tackle, and you will be hurrying with a light heart to the sports outfitters.

But don't be too hasty! Cricket tackle, particularly bats, need very careful selection, and if you possibly can, you would be wise to get someone who thoroughly understands these things to go along with you. If you must go by yourself, here's a little advice for when you're choosing your bat.

By the way, if it's a toss-up between two good bats or four cheaper ones, plump for the two good ones. A cheap bat is seldom satisfactory, whereas a good one is a joy for ever, for it will give a good deal better service without needing constant repair, you will play better cricket with it, and it will last very much longer.

Colour Counts.

Choose a white bat if you want the best. The whiter the wood the better the willow, as a rule, for the best bats are made of the wood taken from the heart of the tree-trunk, which is whiter than that nearer the outside.

Get a straight grain if possible, and as regards the splice, remember that a cane and rubber one is the best. Don't choose a bat with a big "bulge." A "slim" bat is more useful.

A very important thing is the weight of the bat. You are sometimes tempted to buy bats that are too heavy for you because it seems so much more important to have a heavy bat. But it's no use looking important if by so doing you're going to spoil your game, is it? Don't buy the first bat the dealer shows you. Try several, and take your time about choosing. To test a bat for its weight, try making several strokes, and notice whether it allows your wrists full play. If it doesn't, it is too heavy. The sure test is to make a forward drive; if you can do this without difficulty, then the bat is all right.

Last season two friends of mine took me along in great pride to exhibit their new tackle. It was fine tackle, all first-class, but the bats—I'm sure they'd just about have killed all the cricket in those lads if they'd

used them all the season. They were beautiful bats—they'd cost 38s. apiece—but they were much too heavy. In fact, many a professional cricketer would have chosen a lighter one, and they were well on the heavy side for me.

A word about the handle. Don't have a handle that is too thick for you to hold comfortably. Although a rubber may be a help to you, do without one if it is going to make the handle too thick.

As regards balls, there is little in the choosing of them, apart from getting them the correct size. Don't be led into buying a larger ball than is suitable for you just because it looks "older." The ball that you can grasp firmly in your hand is the one you want, and if you are buying for a club, it is just as well to let the bowlers choose their own balls. Then you know they are satisfied. Unless you are wealthier than most young cricketers you will have to be content with composite balls, leather ones costing, as they do, from 12s. 6d. to 16s. 6d. In spite of their costliness they wouldn't last the season out, and as there are always balls lost, leather is inclined to be too much of a luxury.

Whilst you are in the shop, get three pairs of gloves for the stumper and batsmen. Most of you may scorn the idea of wearing gloves for batting, but if you're going to do any serious cricket, a few swollen knuckles and bruised hands may show you the wisdom of wearing them. They feel awkward at first, but you soon get used to them. The same is true of pads. You're bound to get hit about the legs if you don't wear them, and there's no sense in asking for cracks and bruises, now, is there?

Oil Well and Often.

About looking after your precious bats, or, if you are having to make do with last season's, bringing them up to the scratch and keeping them there.

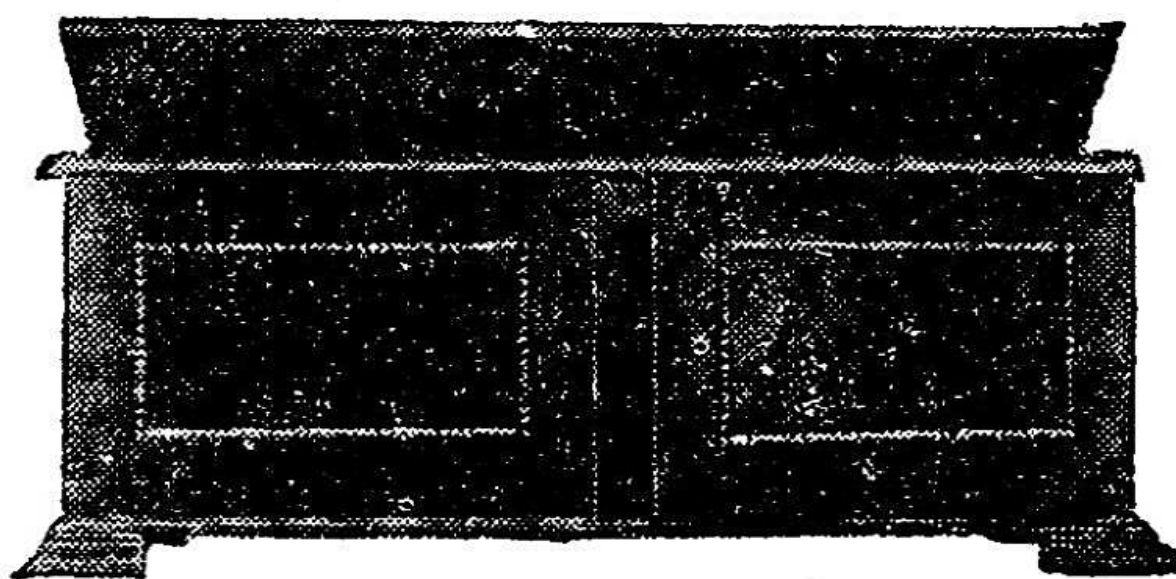
In the first place you must oil them. Oil them well and oil them often. Twice a week isn't too often if they are in constant use, and certainly they should be done every week. The shop where you buy them will give you the right kind of oil, and you should give them thorough baths in this. You will not mind the trouble if you bear in mind how you are prolonging the life of your bat. Keep the oil away from the splice if you can.

Some time or other your bats are sure to require binding, but be advised and leave this to the man who knows how to do it. The shopman who sold you the bat will usually charge very little for doing it. There is an idea among some boys that you preserve the bat by binding it as soon as you get it. But this is a mistake. Never bind it until it begins to split or break, then take it along to the expert.

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THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE

THE CHIEF OFFICER'S CHAT

(All **LETTERS** in reference to the League should be addressed to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, London, E.C.4.)

MY DEAR LEAGUEITES,

No doubt this first issue of the enlarged NELSON LEE LIBRARY will introduce the old paper to quite a number of new readers.

As Chief Officer, I get lots of letters with questions as to the various ways in which our League can be of service to its members. I hope, possibly next week, to talk to you about what we might call the "machinery" of the League. In other words, to tell you once again all about the advantages of joining the League.

We are approaching holiday-time, and I am ready to give personal advice to any member who wants to know anything about where to go, what to see, cost, etc., whether he is going on a walking tour, cycling, or on a camping jaunt; only do, please, enclose a stamped and addressed envelope for your reply, and you shall have it by return of post.

WHAT MEMBERS ARE DOING.

My letter-bag is crammed, as usual. Graham Watson, Winchester Road, Basingstoke, wants to hear from members. He is O.O. for his district.

Sinclair R. Dobie, 22, Grand Parade, Eastbourne, is going to run a magazine, and for this he will write a yarn featuring St. Frank's characters.

S. T. Stephenson, 1, Chapel Street, Greysouthen, Cockermouth, Cumberland, holds a record for the NELSON LEE LIBRARY. He has read the yarns for nine years. I kept his letter a week or two, to draw attention to the fact in this big boom issue. He says: "There is no book that will compare with the NELSON LEE LIBRARY." And so say all of us!

H. Moyne, 27, Dover Street, Grimsby, rolls up with a topping letter. I can tell him that he will find the League helpful in his particular ambition.

H. Bevington, 33, Long Acre, Nechells, Birmingham, is troubled about the lack of Birmingham members. Brum is a vast centre, and though Nechells wants more support, the League has many supporters in the Midland hardware village. I ask this correspondent to do as he suggests, and work up Nechells. He has his job as Acting O.O.

O.O. P. W. Malaghan, 27, St. Paul's Road, London, S.E. 17, should call his chums together and settle about procedure. I am sure he will find more readers, and at the same time make plenty of friends. As O.O. he has everything in his hands.

O.O. Frank E. Coomber has moved to 38, Corrine Road, Tufnell Park, London, N., and he suggests that he shall continue serving for Kentish Town. Nothing better. Kentish Town is a big district, and offers lots of scope.

Robert Cunliffe, 82, Morris Street, Preston, Lancs, wants to see the old yarns republished. These bygone stories of the NELSON LEE LIBRARY will see the light in the famous MONSTER LIBRARY.

K. Simpson, The Ivies, Westfield, Selby, asks about the same thing. This correspondent much wishes to read the earlier tales of Nelson Lee. The MONSTER LIBRARY has these on its programme.

Richard Orrell, 11, Lea Street, Miry Lane, Wigan, weighs in with a sportsmanlike letter. He is no end keen on the League, but he says he has few chums. That's just the point! So many friends write to me to this effect, but by getting the idea of the League and what it means known amongst a few fellows real advance is made.

I get letters from hard-working members who say they are short of spare time. That's how it is with all of us. We would not have it otherwise. The fellow with hardly a minute to call his own always proves efficient at whatever he puts his hand to. The St. Frank's League wants members and supporters who are up to their eyes in work. They can assist a lot. Others who have more leisure can take on the heavier tasks of organisation. In the Midlands, clubs have been formed by NELSON LEE readers just in the interests of lonely pals who have not much opportunity of making friends.

BADGES!

Here I may as well mention that the question of issuing badges to all members is under consideration. Myriads of my supporters say a badge is necessary. I don't blame 'em for their opinion; we do want a badge, and if I can work the matter without making any undue call on the financial resources of my chums—a thing I should hate to do—badges we will have. Real, topping, high-class badges. And if the badge does come, it will be the smartest little emblem. It will show at a glance that the wearer is a member of the St. Frank's League, and it will carry our motto, "Consilio et Animis," which means Wisdom and Boldness.

When I first formed the St. Frank's League, I considered this slogan could not be beaten. It has proved its inspiring worth all along the line. A fellow wants to aim at wisdom, but he does not want to be handicapped by too much thinking, an overdose of pre-occupation and doubt, when speedy action is called for. It is speedy action, right swift and to the point, which does more to carry on the world than anything else. No good standing dithering and looking on when one is wanted for special service. We all are wanted for such service, take it from me.



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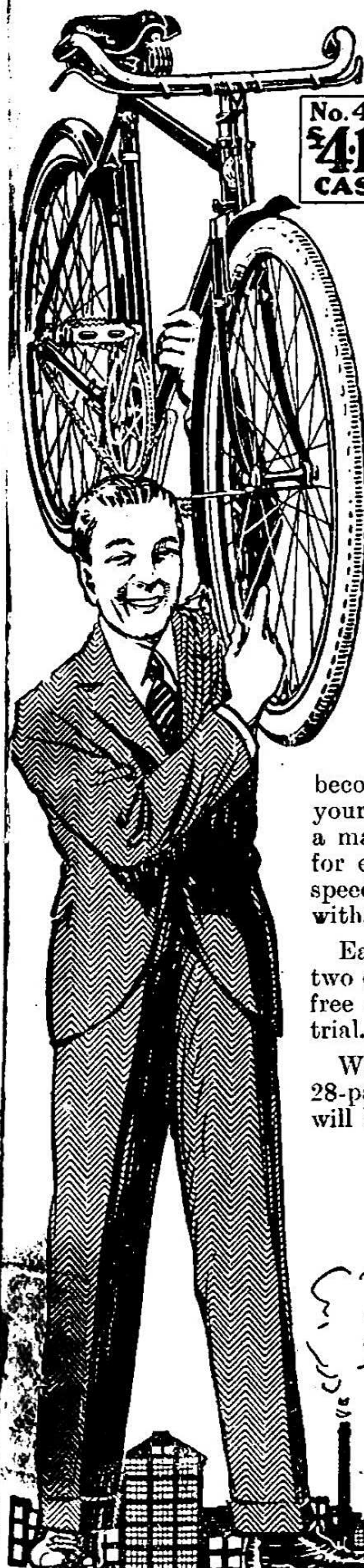
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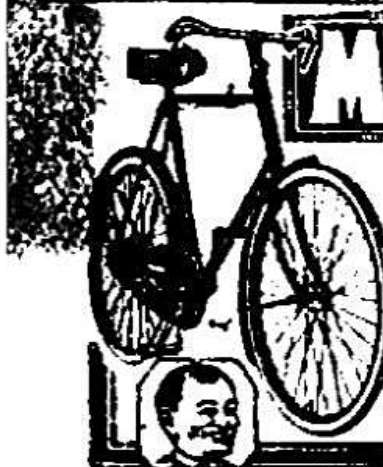
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