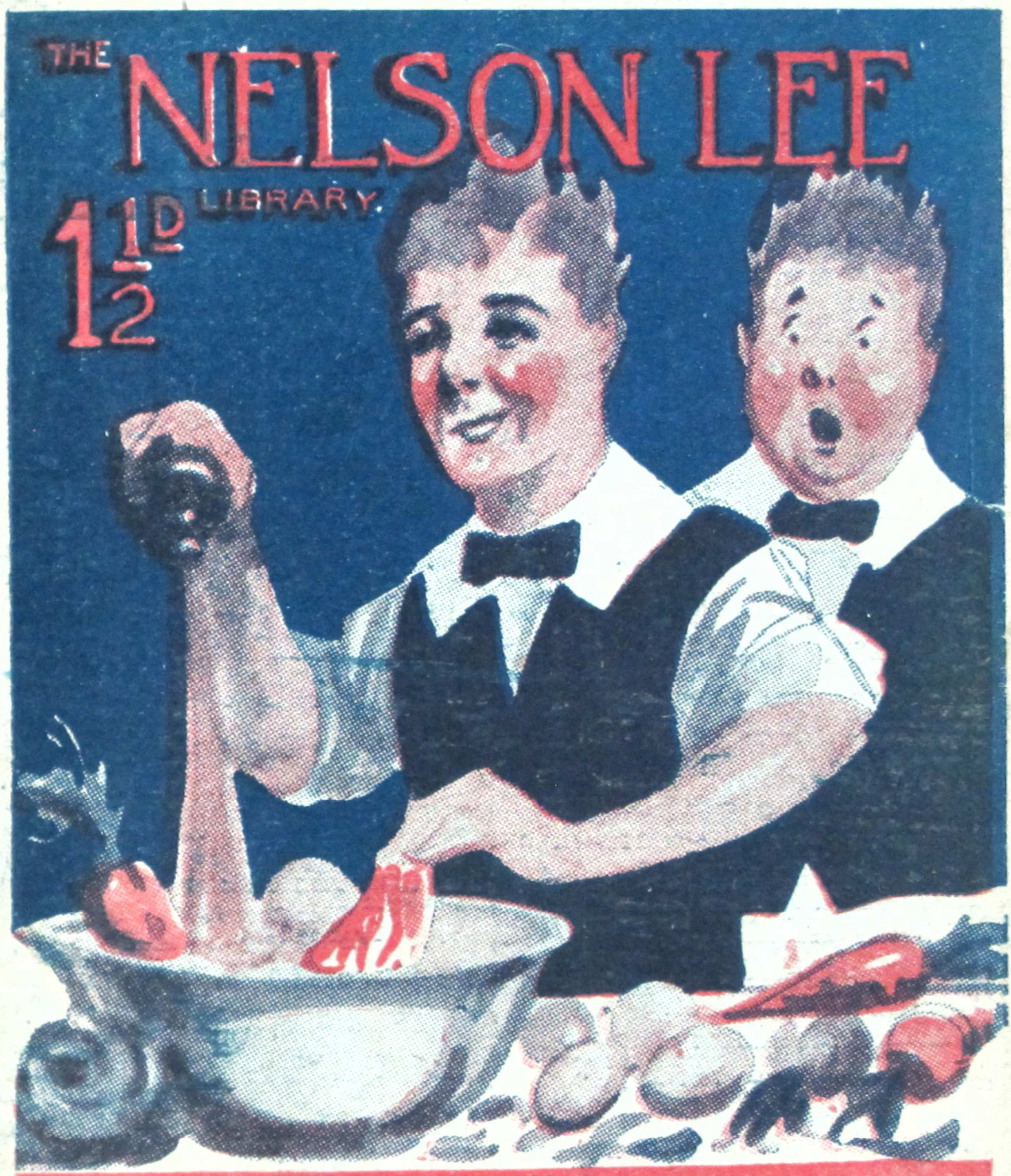
No. 251.—A Story of St. Frank's Without Servants!



HANDFORTH ADDS SAUCE TO THE SOUP.

The School On Strike

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "On His Uppers," "A Lesson Well Learnt," "The Schoolboy Agitators," etc.

March 27, 1920.

McCLURE

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

THE EVE OF BIG EVENTS.

"TO-MORROW at noon!" said Handforth mysteriously.

"Eh?"

"As the clock strikes twelve, so will the big event take place," declared Edward Oswald Handforth, rubbing his hands together. "Good! I shall be one of the first to cheer!"

"You mean the striko?" asked Church.

"What else should I mean?" demanded Handforth irritably. "Is anything else of importance going to happen to-morrow, you dotty ass? The strike's for justice! That's what it is, my son!"

"It's going to be a success, too," remarked Reginald Pitt, strolling over the three chums of Study D. "The Remove will give its whole support to the strikers, in any case; and I think they can rely upon the support of the Third and Fifth, too. The Sixth will probably stand aloof. Common or garden strikes are too degraded for the lordly Sixth!"

The juniors were in the common-room of the Ancient House at St. Frank's. It was nearly supper time, and there were only a few fellows in the apartment. I happened to look in a moment or two later, with Sir Montie Tregellis-West. We were looking for Tommy Watson, our study chum.

"Seen Watson knocking about?" I asked, looking round.

"He was in the tuckshop five minutes ago," said Pitt. "Thank goodness we shall have the tuckshop! I don't suppose Mrs. Hake will go on strike to-morrow. She's not a member of the paid staff."

I grinned.

"Better not speak so loud," I said. "The Governors are expecting a strike within a week or so, and I believe they're making preparations to clear all the present servants out. But they don't know that a strike is arranged for noon to-morrow. It'll be a bit of a surprise."

"Rather!" said Handforth. "That's just the idea of it. I don't believe in lightning strikes as a rule, but in this case the servants are fully justified. The governors have refused to listen to reason, so they must take the consequences."

Handforth was quite right in his remark. The Board of Governors had elected to be extremely autocratic, and they had ignored the school staff's appeal for a fair hearing. So the school staff was going to act drastically.

On the stroke of twelve, on the morrow, they would "down tools," so to speak, and walk out of the school. Every servant was included in the plan. The staff was solid to a man, solid to a woman, solid to a boy, and solid to a girl! Every single school-worker was to strike.

Gardeners, grooms, men-servants, pages, porters, cooks, scullery-boys, scullery-maids, kitchen-maids, housemaids, matrons—in fact, everybody—would cease work on the stroke of twelve.

It was to be a surprise strike.

The Governors certainly deserved it. They had been arbitrary and obstinate and extremely harsh. The school staff had an excellent case, or the juniors would not have supported them.

We not only supported it now, but we had pledged our word that we would help the strikers in every possible way until their demands had been met. These demands were absolutely reasonable.

The staff required a fifty per cent. advance of wages—just that, and nothing more. There was no trouble about working hours, or anything of that sort. Pay was the only point.

Although the cost of living—the cost of every article—had risen a hundred and two hundred per cent., the Governors had only advanced the wages of the servants a paltry ten per cent. They now offered a further twenty-five per cent. increase, and this offer the staff had rightly rejected.

They wanted fifty—and fifty they meant to get.

Twenty-five per cent. was a ridiculous offer, and the Governors ought to have known better. Perhaps they did; but, having taken up a stand, they were too high and mighty to give in. They fondly imagined that the staff would be afraid to strike. And, in any case, the Governors would have a new staff ready.

But they were reckoning without the boys.

The juniors, in particular, had made a vow that they would not recognise any new servants who were installed. If it came to such a thing, the new staff was likely to have a warm time of it.

And the Remove was hoping for some excitement. They would be glad of a little fun; they wanted the strike to happen. It had been decided that the boys would do no housework—they would do nothing. For, of course, to work would be to strike a blow at the strikers.

Seeing that we were in sympathy with the staff, we could not undertake to do any of the staff's work. So things were likely to be a bit mixed. The very thought of the school being without servants was exciting.

It was not generally known that the strike was to take place on the morrow. Only a select few in the Remove were in the secret. Some of us had attended a secret meeting of the strikers an hour earlier, when the resolution had been made. And we had promised to keep quiet. For we did not want the Governors to take any precautionary measures.

"Take my advice, I said, "and talk as little as possible. If Handy isn't careful, he'll let the cat out of the bag——"

"Rot!" said Handforth. "I can be trusted, I suppose?"

"Well, I'm not so sure——"

"What!"

"You've got a habit of talking a bit loudly, old son," I said. "If Fullwood, or one of those other cads happened to hear you, he might try to get some cheap glory by sneaking to the Head."

"But the Head's in sympathy with the strike," declared Church.

I nodded.

"In his heart, I believe he is," I agreed. "But he can't be in sympathy with it openly. It wouldn't do. He's got to see that law and order is maintained, and, if he hears that a strike is to take place to-morrow, he'll report to the Governors at once, and steps will be taken. It won't alter things, of course, but the surprise will be spoilt. So don't jaw about it."

"Good enough," said McClure. "Come on, Handy! Let's go along to tea, and we'll cut out the talk about the giddy staff."

Handforth sniffed.

"You needn't worry about me," he said. "I know what I'm doing all right. And I can be trusted to keep my head. As for letting the cat out of the bag, there's no danger whatever. The school staff is going on strike at noon to-morrow——"

"Dry up, you ass!" hissed Pitt.

"Eh?"

"Long's hovering about in the passage," whispered Pitt. "I just spotted him near the door. He's the biggest sneak in the Remove, and it's a ten to one chance that he's hanging about to hear what we're discussing. And then you get shouting about, instead of keeping quiet. You—you ought to be muzzled!"

Handforth glared.

"Do you want your nose punched, Reginald Pitt?" he roared.

"Oh, rats!"

Pitt turned away, and glanced out into the passage. But Teddy Long was not there now. Pitt glanced at us significantly.

"Did anybody see where Long went to?" he asked.

"I didn't see him at all," said Church.

"Well, he was there——"

"He scooted a second ago," I said grimly. "He's made for the Head's study, I expect. We'd better hurry along at once, and collar the young beggar. If he gets talking he'll do mischief."

Pitt looked alarmed.

"But we can't collar Long before he sneaks," he exclaimed. "He's almost at the Head's study by this time——"

"Yes; but the Head happens to be out, so his study will be locked," I said. "We shall catch Long on his way back, and we'll question him. If he denies everything, we'll bump him and warn him to keep his tongue still.

Handforth was the first out of the common-room. We hurried along the passage, and at last came within sight of Dr. Stafford's study. As we had expected, Teddy Long was just coming away.

He tried to dodge, but he was too late.

So he came along, whistling with apparent unconcern.

"Hold on, my son!" I said grimly. "We want you."

"You—you want mum-me?" gasped Long. "W-what for?"

"You sneaking little worm!" roared Handforth. "You've been——"

"Hold on!" I said. "Look here, Long, you've been to the Head's study ——"

"I—I haven't!" roared Long. "I—I haven't been anywhere near the Head's study! I—I just happened to be passing this way, that's all!"

"Five minutes ago you were outside the common-room," I went on. "You suddenly rushed off here, and we followed you. Did you hear Handforth saying anything in the common-room?"

Long attempted to bluster.

"I wasn't near the common-room at all," he said. "I don't know what the dickens you're talking about. It's all rot! Lemme go, you rotters! Can't a chap come to the Head's study——"

"You just said you hadn't been anywhere near the Head's study!"

"I—I mean——"

"You'd better not tell any more lies, you little worm!" roared Handforth. "You were listening outside the common-room door."

"I wasn't listening," declared Long stoutly. "I just happened to be near, and I didn't hear a thing."

"You said you didn't go to the common-room at all," I remarked. "The fact is, you tell so many lies that you contradict yourself in every breath. You're going to be bumped, my son!"

"Look here!" yelled Long. "If—if you touch me, I'll scream for help! And I'll tell the Head all about the strike—— I—I mean, I don't know anything about the strike——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was impossible to keep from laughing at the little bounder.

"I—I didn't hear Handforth saying anything," went on Long, tying himself into further knots. "How the dickens am I to know that the rotten servants are going on strike at noon —— I—I mean—— Oh, corks! I think you're a lot of beasts to keep me here like this! Yow! Leggo my arm, Handforth!"

The sneak of the Remove was held firmly.

"Understand this, Long," I said grimly. "If you breathe a word about the strike to the Head, or to any master, we'll bump you until you can't stand. If the Head gets to know, we shall be certain that you're the culprit, so be careful. We'll give you one or two bumps now, just as reminders."

"You—you—— Yaroooooh!"

Bump!

Long descended to the floor with a crash.

"Give him another one!" said Handforth. "One—two—three——"

Bump!

"Yow—ow—ow!" yelled Long wildly. "You—you rotters! I'll tell the Head everything! I'll tell him about the strike—— Yarooooh!"

Bump!

"I'll—I'll——"

"Well, what will you do?" demanded Handforth fiercely. "Will

you tell the Head anything, or will you be quiet? Choose, you little worm! Another fifteen bumps, or——"

"I—I won't say anything, you—you cads!" gasped Long. "Lemme go, you beasts! I don't care if the servants strike! I'll tell the Head——"

"What!" roared Handforth.

Bump!

"Yarooooh! Yow-ow-ow-oooop!" howled Teddy Long. "I—I won't say a thing! Ow! I'm sore all over! If—if you let me go now, I promise I won't sneak!"

"Better let the little rotter go now, Handy," I said. "If he breaks his word, we shall know all about it. He's the only outsider who knows the secret, so if it gets out he'll be the culprit."

"He'll be sorry for weeks if he gives the game away before to-morrow," said Handforth threateningly. "Clear off, Long, you little blighter!"

Teddy Long scooted away down the passage.

"Yah! Cads!" he roared, after he had reached the corner. "Beasts!"

He fled as fast as his legs would carry him after that, for Handforth gave chase. But before Handforth could capture Master Teddy, the bell rang for supper, and the juniors trooped into the dining-hall.

Everything was as usual.

One or two of the servants certainly seemed to be labouring from some inward excitement. But there was no sign of an actual revolt. It seemed that the staff had accepted the position.

But this was not the case, as we all knew.

And I want to emphasise once again that this prospective strike was absolutely and positively justified. Of that there was not the slightest doubt. The St. Frank's staff was paid a smaller wage, on the average, than any other school in the country of the same standing.

Even the Bannington Grammar School, which did not pretend to be so classy as St. Frank's, paid its staff a wage which amounted to nearly double as much as that which was given to the St. Frank's crowd.

It was not as though the school was in financial difficulties and could not afford a proper wage. St. Frank's was in a splendid position, and the Governors were well aware of this. The simple fact was that they were obstinate and behind the times. They did not seem to realise that, with the rising cost of commodities, it was necessary that wages should rise in proportion.

The question as to whether it was right or wrong did not enter into the matter. Higher wages generally mean higher prices, and then, again, higher wages, and so on, in the same vicious circle.

I don't pretend to know much about economics, and certainly those kind of matters don't worry my head. But I knew well enough that the St. Frank's staff, under the existing conditions, were deserving of better treatment than they had received. And, under the circumstances, I was in favour of the strike.

This somewhat surprised me, for, by instinct, I hate strikes, and think they ought to be avoided under all conditions. But when an employer refuses to seek reason, and when he treats his employees badly, it is time for something drastic to happen.

And something drastic was to happen now, or, at least, on the morrow.

The Remove looked forward to it as something in the nature of fun. The idea of the school being without a staff was distinctly entertaining, and the juniors would revel in the novel experience.

They didn't consider the affair seriously; they did not realise what it actually meant. They simply wanted it for the fun of the thing.

And so when the Remove went to bed that night there was a general feeling that the morrow would be worth living for—that events were to take place which would provide the term with a sensation which would be long remembered.

And the Remove was undoubtedly correct!

CHAPTER II.

On the Stroke of Twelve!

"SO far so good," remarked Tommy Watson, as he lounged against the big gateway with Tregellis-West and me. "Nothing has happened yet, and the Governors don't seem to suspect anything, either."

"They're still here, dear old boys," observed Sir Montie. "I thought perhaps they would return to London last night——"

"They did return," I interrupted.

"Begad! You are making a mistake, dear old fellow," declared Montie. "I saw Sir Roger at the Head's window as we crossed the Triangle."

"You might have seen Sir Roger, but you didn't see anybody else," I remarked. "He's the only one who'd been left behind—and perhaps he'll go to-day—at least, he might be preparing to go. When the strike happens he'll change his mind."

"Yes, rather," agreed Watson, grinning. "I say, what a glorious day! Just the kind of weather to encourage people to chuck work."

It was certainly a magnificent spring morning. The sun was shining gloriously, and the fresh green leaves of the trees were stirred gently by a soft, warm breeze. A few fleecy clouds hovered in the sky, and the day had the appearance of June, rather than March.

Throughout the school there was no indication that a drastic step was contemplated. Servants went about their daily duties in just the same manner as usual. Gardeners were at work, and all the members of the staff seemed to have no idea whatever of coming out on strike.

Warren, the porter, attired in his working green apron, was cleaning the brasswork on the big gates with far more vigour than usual. This seemed rather curious, and I wondered why he was expending so much energy.

"You feel like work this morning, don't you, old son?" I asked, strolling up.

"Beg pardon, Master Nipper," said Warren, pausing.

"What's the idea of rubbing so hard?"

"Well, ye see, young gent, I look at it like this 'ere," said Warren. "Like as not these 'ere gates won't be cleaned agin for over a week, so I thought I might as well give 'em an extra good doin' this morning."

"Begad! Quite a brain wave, dear old fellow," murmured Montie.

"Which I don't properly understand, Master Tregellis-West," said Warren. "I dunno about this 'ere strike. Somehow, I ain't quite satisfied that we're goin' to win. Mind ye, the money we get ain't good enough, but I shouldn't like to leave St. Frank's for all that."

"You won't leave," I said. "You're going to win the fight. Why, it's quite possible that the strike won't last for more than half-an-hour."

Warren scratched his head.

"I don't foller, sir," he said.

"Why, when Sir Roger Stone finds that you're determined—when he sees you all in the Triangle, ready to march out of the school—he'll probably cave in," I replied. "He'll be only too willing to grant your terms, so that you shall all go back to your work. A school like this without servants would be helpless."

"I do 'ope as you're right, Master Nipper," said Warren, brightening up. "If there's one thing I 'ate more than another, it's unpleasantness. It'll be fust class if we can get back to work without 'ardly any delay. But will Sir Roger be able to decide it like that?"

"Of course he will," I replied. "He's the chairman of the Governors, and in an emergency he can decide the matter without consulting the others."

"But what if he don't consent, Master Nipper?"

"Then you'll have to remain on strike."

"For 'ow long?"

"Until you win."

"But that may not be for weeks," argued Warren, who did not seem to be very much of an enthusiast. "And wot about my work? Who'll do that while I'm strikin? Everything will get horribly black and dirty, an' it'll mean double the work arterwards."

"That's one of the penalties you'll have to pay," I remarked. "Anyhow, you keep a stiff upper lip, Warren, old son, and everything will be all serene. There's certainly no need to worry yourself. I suppose the staff is solid?"

"The staff is which, sir?"

"Solid—all in agreement, I mean!"

"Every man an' every gal, sir," said Warren. "We're comin' out all at once, and there ain't a single black foot!"

"Black foot!" I grinned.

"That's wot Broome said, anyhow ——"

"You mean blackleg!" chuckled Watson.

"Well, I knew it was something of that sort," said Warren, continuing his rubbing. "I do 'ope as the strike ends

quick, that's all. If there's one thing I hate, it's being idle! I'm a rare man for work!"

"Yes, I've noticed it," grinned Watson.

The porter looked after us suspiciously as we walked away. His remark was not quite truthful. He had never displayed any particular liking for hard work, and it was not likely he was different now.

The majority of the fellows had no idea that a strike was to come about that day, and there were all sorts ot opinions passed by the juniors. In the Ancient House lobby a crowd was discussing the position. "There'll be no strike for weeks," declared Owen major. "It's my belief the servants have accepted the terms—twenty-five per cent. increase. It's something, anyhow."

"Only half what they wanted," said Hubbard. "Even fifty per cent. was moderate, taking everything into consideration. If the servants have accepted half what they were out for—well, they don't deserve any giddy sympathy."

"Hear, hear!"

Handforth grinned.

"You wait, my sons—you wait," he said mysteriously.

"Eh? Wait for what?"

"For what you will see," replied Handforth.

He strolled off, leaving the other fellows staring after him.

"He's dotty," declared Canham. "Wait, eh? We shall have to wait a good time if we're going to see a strike! The servants are a lot of blessed funks!"

This was the general opinion—and it was all the better. For there was not likely to be any warning of the coming surprise.

Morning lessons commenced, and the Remove settled itself down to work. Only a few of us looked forward with unusual eagerness to noon. At twelve o'clock we should be released, and it was at that hour that the strike would commence.

"I'm not altogether impressed with the hour, you know," murmured Handforth, while the Form-master's back was turned.

"Eh?" whispered McClure.

"Twelve o'clock is a fat-headed hour to strike," muttered Handforth. "How the dickens shall we get on for dinner? With all the servants gone, we sha'n't have any grub prepared——"

"Handforth!" said Mr. Crowell severely.

"Yes, sir?"

"You were talking!"

"Was I, sir?"

"You are well aware that you were talking, Handforth," snapped Mr. Crowell. "You will please write me fifty lines."

Handforth groaned and glared at McClure.

"You silly ass!" he hissed. "It was your fault——"

"Dry up, you fatheaded duffer!"

Handforth only just dried up in time, for Mr. Crowell turned again. And lessons proceeded smoothly until the school-clock boomed out the hour of twelve. Fortunately we got out of the class-room on the stroke.

"Into the Triangle, my sons!" I said briskly.

"Good!"

"What's the idea?" asked Owen major.

"You'll see—if you come," I replied.

A good number of the juniors crowded out into the Triangle. There was certainly nothing much to see. The sun was shining brilliantly, of course, and Warren was hovering about the gateway—but there was no crowd of servants.

"Twelve o'clock is twelve o'clock," nantly.

"Give 'em a chance," grinned Church. "They're supposed to leave their jobs at twelve. They can't all be out here in a second."

"Twelve o'clock is twelve o'clock," argued Handforth.

"Well, Warren's there!" I said. "He's got out of his uniform, too. That's a sure sign. Hallo! Here come more!"

Broome, and the four other gardeners appeared from the Head's garden. They were all smart and tidy, and it was obvious that they had "chucked" work. They had hardly appeared before Mrs. Poulter emerged from the rear of the Ancient House, followed by a dozen girls—scullery and kitchen and housemaids. Then came Tubbs and a few others.

"What the dickens is happening?" asked Owen major in surprise.

"Can't you see?" grinned Watson.

"My hat! There's another crowd coming from the College House!" ejaculated Canham.

It was true. The College House staff, much smaller than the Ancient House, was beginning to appear.

They came across the Triangle in an orderly throng, and joined the others in the vicinity of the gateway. Before ten minutes had elapsed practically every servant of St. Frank's was in the Triangle.

"My only hat!" exclaimed Hubbard. 'They must be mad."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "They're out on strike!"

"What?"

"On—on strike?" gasped Owen major.

"Yes, you ass!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!"

"It's a strike—the servants have downed tools!"

"Hurrah!"

"Good luck to 'em!"

"I shouldn't make too much fuss, if I were you," I remarked. "They're on strike now, but it may be all over in an hour or two. We're in sympathy with the staff, but there's no need to go too far."

"Hear, hear," said Watson.

"Rot!" said Handforth. "Give 'em a cheer!"

"Hurrah!"

"Good luck to the strikers!"

"Stick to your guns, and you'll win."

"Down with tyranny!"

"Down with sweating!"

"Down with everything!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors crowded round the strikers in an excited throng, and there was a considerable commotion in the Triangle. Seniors came out and looked on with expressions of stern disapproval—although, actually, they were as much in favour of the strike as anybody.

The fellows did not lose sight of the fact that if the staff remained out, there was a distinct possibility of the school being sent home. And this, as everybody agreed, was decidedly good.

The fags cheered wildly. They cheered for the sake of cheering, because most of them were too young to understand the issue. They would probably have cheered just the same if the strikers had been quite in the wrong.

"Well, what do you think about it, old son?" asked the Hon. Douglas Singleton, of the Remove, touching my arm.

I turned and smiled at the former spendthrift.

"Well, it's rather difficult to say just now, Duggy," I replied. "But if Sir Roger Stone has got an ounce of sense, he'll admit himself beaten. That's all. Anyhow, the staff means to win."

"Good," said Singleton. "I'm with them all along the bally line. But, somehow, I don't believe that they'll get their victory straight off. Sir Roger will be sensible if he caves in at once—but he won't, if I'm any judge of character."

"Well, we shall soon see," I observed, nodding my head.

Singleton looked across the Triangle in the direction of the Head's private residence. The door had just opened, and Sir Roger Stone stood there. Behind him was the Headmaster, and both of them wore expressions of considerable astonishment.

"Now for the giddy storm!" grinned Watson.

Sir Roger came striding across the Triangle, after pausing to have a few words with the Head. Dr. Stafford remained behind—probably upon Sir Roger's advice.

The chairman of the Governors jammed his eyeglasses on his nose just before he arrived at the crowd of strikers. He came to a halt in front of them, set his legs apart, and glared with anger.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded hotly. "How dare you leave your posts and come out here in this absurd manner? I demand an answer at once."

Sir Roger finished up by staring fully at Warren. And Warren's knees felt rather shaky.

"Which it's this way, sir," he said huskily. "Me an' these others—which I mean to say, the others and me—— Or, to put it more plain, all of us together, has decided to—to—— My heye! You see, sir, we thought—which is, they thought——"

"Confound it, man, can't you speak lucidly?" roared Sir Roger.

Warren drew himself up.

"Which I ain't drunk, if that's what you mean, sir!" he exclaimed warmly. "I ain't been drunk since—— I ain't never been drunk at all," he added hastily. "And it ain't fair to——"

"I never suggested you were drunk, you infernal idiot!" shouted Sir Roger. "Is there nobody here who can speak plainly? I demand to know the meaning of this extraordinary scene."

Broome, the head gardener, came hurrying up. He was the recognised leader of the strikers, for he was an honest, capable man, with a clear head, and a fine record. He had been in the service of the St. Frank's Governors for a good many years, and he was an extremely valuable man.

He was by no means an agitator, and he had mainly consented to accept the leadership in this affair so that he could curb any attempt at hotheaded violence among the younger strikers—if there was any evidence of such violence. So far, it was happy to state, there had been none.

"It's all right, Warren, I'll speak to Sir Roger," said Broome.

"Oh, you will, will you?" exclaimed the chairman sourly. "Let me tell you, my man, that I will not stand any nonsense from you—let me tell you that plainly! Unless you can offer me a very good explanation of this astounding scene, I shall be compelled to take very serious action."

"The fact is, sir, you gave me your decision last night as being final," said Broome. "You told the deputation, of which I was the head, that it was impossible to grant our very reasonable request——"

"Reasonable!" snorted Sir Roger. "Reasonable, be hanged, sir! Stuff and nonsense, sir. Your request, which practically amounts to a demand, was nothing better than a ridiculous absurdity. Fifty per cent. increase, eh? You may think yourselves very lucky to be granted half that amount."

Broome nodded.

"The staff held a meeting after you had given your decision, sir," he said. "We took it that you had spoken your last word——"

"And so I had," shouted Sir Roger. "What I said was final!"

"I am very sorry to hear that, sir," said Broome quietly. "A resolution was passed by us all that we should go on strike, and so we've all come out—every employee of the household staff, from both Houses."

Sir Roger seemed about to explode.

"On—on strike!" he thundered.

"Yes, sir."

"You—you impertinent rascal!" roared the baronet. "You dare to stand there and tell me that you have struck work! This—this is staggering! Everybody here will return to his post, at once—at once, I say! As for you, Brush, you will receive your notice at once."

"My name is Broome, sir!"

"I don't care what your name is!" shouted Sir Roger. "Broome or Brush—it makes no difference—I intend to sweep you out, neck and crop. Yes, sir, neck and crop! You are the leader of this infamous movement——"

"We're all in it together, sir," shouted Tubbs stoutly.

"Yes, sir!"

"It ain't fair to sack Broome, sir!"

"Silence!" thundered Sir Roger. "Broome will leave at once! And, as for the rest of you, you will return to your various duties without further delay. And, in consequence of this act of insubordination, your advance in wages will only be twenty per cent., and not twenty-five! That is my final decision."

A murmur of anger went up from the strikers. Sir Roger Stone was certainly not diplomatic, and he was the very last man in the world to deal with such a situation as this.

Nothing was more calculated to stiffen the strikers' backs than the words he had last uttered. Sir Roger not only refused to meet the demands, but he actually reduced his own offer!

It finally put the seal of determination on the strike.

"Now!" he roared. "Get back to your duties, you—you foolish people!"

"I'm sorry sir; but nobody will return to duty until we receive your promise of a fifty per cent. increase," said Broome quietly.

"Confound you!" shouted Sir Roger. "I will have nothing more to do with you, Broome! You are no longer a member of the school staff——"

"We won't none of us return until we get the fifty cents!" said Warren warmly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We're altogether!" shrieked one of the maidservants.

"Yes, all of us!"

"We won't go back until we've got what we want!"

"Hurrah!"

Sir Roger fairly danced with rage.

"This—this is outrageous!" he shouted, nearly boiling over. "I command you to return—— Good gracious! What are you doing? Where are you going to? Confound it, I insist upon ——"

Sir Roger paused, fairly at a loss for words. The strikers, to his utter amazement, were walking out of the gateway, in a steady file, and they took no notice whatever of his threats.

It was staggering.

Instead of returning to their duties, as he ordered, they were leaving the school. Nothing could have been more defiant. And the more Sir Roger raved, the less notice the strikers took of him.

"Hurrah!" roared Handforth. "Good luck to the strikers! Stick it out, and you'll win!"

"Hurrah!"

"Three cheers for the staff!"

Sir Roger turned upon the shouting juniors fiercely.

"Silence!" he thundered. "How—how dare you uphold this scandalous act of insubordination? How dare you?"

"We're only upholding right, sir!" shouted Handforth. "These people deserve what they're asking for, and the whole school thinks they ought to get it!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Well spoken, Handy!"

"How—how dare you?" stuttered Sir Roger, his face purple with rage. "Good gracious! Has everybody gone mad in this establishment? Are you all insane? Go into your houses at once, you impudent puppies!"

The juniors were too excited to take any notice of the order, and there was a rush for the gates. A huge crowd stood outside in the road, cheering the strikers as they marched down towards the village.

And Sir Roger, full realisation upon him at last, turned on his heel, and stamped away towards the Head's private door.

The blow had fallen—the school was on strike!

CHAPTER III.

HANDFORTH MAKES HIMSELF USEFUL.

"WELL, it's come!" said Reginald Pitt comfortably. "Here we are, in a school without any giddy servants, and there's no telling what will happen next."

"It's rather a problem," I said. "The masters will have a bit of trouble, I'm afraid. Without any servants, nothing can be done. It's pretty doubtful whether we shall get any dinner, in fact."

"Great doughnuts!" gasped Fatty Little, in alarm. "No—no dinner?"

"I don't suppose so."

"But—but that's awful!" panted the fat boy. "We—we must have dinner, you know! Great pancakes! And I've been in sympathy with the strikers all the time!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"They ought to be ashamed of themselves, going off like this—just before dinner!" exclaimed Fatty. "What are we going to do? How about grub? It's—it's awful! Surely the cook could have stayed behind——"

"My dear chap, the staff was solid, and it was really impossible to have it otherwise," interrupted Pitt. "If the thing's going to be a success, the only way is for the whole crowd to go on strike at once."

"Hear, hear!"

"And now we've got to sit tight, and see what happens," I remarked. "It'll be rather curious to watch how the Head deals with the problem. The only right thing to do is to get the strikers back, before they increase their demands."

"They won't do that, dear old boy," said Sir Montie. "They ain't extremists, begad! They've simply asked for a fair wage, an' are standin' up for their rights. That's all. Broome won't allow the hotheads to get the upper hand."

"Well, we shall see," remarked De Valerie. "For the present, we're in a decidedly big hole here, and there's no telling how we shall get out of it. Perhaps they'll get some servants in from Bannington——"

"Huh! They'd better try it!" said Handforth. "We're not going to have any giddy blacklegs! Not likely! If Sir Roger tries to get some new servants in, he'll find that the school is not only

sympathetic—but ready for action!"

"Yes, rather!"

"We won't stand any blacklegs!"

"Now, then, you kids, you're wanted in the hall at once!" exclaimed Morrow, bustling into the lobby. "Everybody's got to go—the whole school."

"My hat!" exclaimed Pitt. "Perhaps it means that we're going to be sent home!"

"Hurrah!"

The juniors were excited.

They hurried into Big Hall as fast as they could go, and when they arrived they found the Fifth and Sixth trooping in, to say nothing of the fag Forms. Within fifteen minutes the whole school was assembled, and Big Hall was filled with a buzz of subdued, excited voices.

Then the Headmaster appeared.

It was as though a magic spell had fallen over the big crowd. The murmur ceased, and a dead silence reigned. Every boy of St. Frank's had the very greatest respect for their reverend Head.

"Boys, I have something to say to you," exclaimed Dr. Stafford gravely. "It is quite unnecessary for me to tell you what has happened, for you all know. The entire staff of this school has acted in a very foolish manner. It has gone out on strike at a moment's notice, leaving us practically helpless."

"Good luck to 'em, sir!"

"We agree with the strikers, sir!"

"They deserve all they asked for!"

"Ahem!" coughed the Head. "It is not diplomatic for me to state my personal opinion, boys——"

"You agree with us, sir!" roared Handforth. "We all know it."

"Yes, rather!"

"You're fair, sir—fair and square!"

"Hurrah for Dr. Stafford!"

"Boys—boys! You must really curb your excitement!" exclaimed the Head sternly. "I thank you for your compliments, but you must understand that this is a very serious business, and, all said and done, the staff ought not to have left us in such a manner. I will admit that the Governors' decision was final, but the staff took it rather too literally. However, the blow has fallen, and we must make the best of it."

"Are the servants coming back, sir?"

"Are you going to grant them their demands?"

"It is not for me to grant anything, boys," said Dr. Stafford. "That rests entirely with the Governors, and I can only hope that this regrettable affair will soon be settled. It is quite possible that the trouble will last only a few hours, but I am afraid that we cannot accept this optimistic view. In the meantime, I urge all of you not to get excited, and to help in every way you can—help to reduce the difficulties under which we are at present placed."

"Yes, rather, sir!"

"Aren't we going to be sent home, sir?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There is no intention, at the moment, of closing the school," said the Head. "If we can rub along for a day or two as we are, there is no doubt that the trouble will be swiftly settled. In any case, nothing will be done hurriedly. Again, I urge you to keep your heads. You are free to have your own opinion with regard to this dispute—and I fancy I know what your opinion is—but I want you to keep out of the actual dispute. Remain onlookers, and all will be well!"

"Hurrah!"

"We'll keep calm, sir!"

"I really hope so, boys," said the Head. "And now I want each Form to go to its classroom. You will not be detained long, I may add. The various Form masters will address a few words to you, and then you will be released. But every boy must attend in the classroom. Dismiss!"

The school trooped out of Big Hall, wondering.

"Queer idea!" observed Somerton. "Why on earth have we got to go into the Form-room? It's not time for lessons!"

"Oh, there's something special on!" said Handforth. "I expect we're going to receive some more dope from old Crowell now. But if he thinks he can change our view, he's on the wrong tack. There'll be nothing doing."

"Rather not!" agreed Church. "We mean to stand by the staff all along the line. But I don't think Crowell will try to work us round, because he's of the same opinion as we are."

"Yes; he may be a strict bounder, but he's a sport," said Handforth. "He's one of the best in St. Frank's."

The Remove reached the Form-room, and the fellows got into their places rather unwillingly. For it was, of course, their own time now, and it didn't seem right to be in the classroom.

Mr. Crowell came bustling in.

"I'm glad to find, boys, that you have responded to the Headmaster's appeal so promptly!" he exclaimed, adjusting his eyeglasses. "Well, I shall only detain you a few moments."

"That's good, sir!"

"I merely wish to tell you of the impromptu plans we have made," said Mr. Crowell. "You must all realise, boys, that we are in a somewhat extraordinary position. We are a school without servants, and, unless we fend for ourselves, we shall not only starve, but suffer other inconveniences."

"By chutney!" said Fatty Little. "I call starving more than an inconvenience, sir!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Perhaps you are right, Little!" smiled Mr. Crowell. "Well, the fact remains that dinnertime is rapidly approaching and the kitchen is deserted. Unless we wish to go dinnerless, we must set ourselves to work."

"Yes, rather, sir," said Fatty.

"You are doubtless aware that the junior school is provided for by a separate kitchen," proceeded Mr. Crowell. "Therefore, I am calling for volunteers from the Remove, since the Remove is the senior form of the junior school. I think half a dozen of you will be quite sufficient; more of you would only cause confusion."

"I'm game, sir!" said Fatty promptly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I was sure that I could count upon you, Little," nodded Mr. Crowell. "Well, Nipper, won't you volunteer?"

"Certainly, sir," I replied.

Two dozen other hands went up, and Mr. Crowell shook his head.

"I am afraid I cannot choose you all, boys," he said. "I am gratified to find that you are so willing to help in this time of trial. Well, I will make the choice myself, and you must do your best to provide an eatable meal."

The other four temporary cooks were Handforth, Watson, Pitt, and De Valerie. As soon as the matter had been decided, the Form was dismissed, and I led the way to the kitchens. Everybody was hungry, so it was certain that we should get busy.

Several members of the Fifth were already in the senior kitchen, although they were sufficiently removed from us to avoid any clash or rivalry.

We found everything quite orderly. The kitchen staff had continued its duties in a correct manner until noon had struck—when they downed tools.

There was still a fire in the huge range, and great bowls of peeled potatoes were ready, which was a big consideration. Several huge puddings were also steaming on the stove, so it seemed that we should not have much to do.

"Oh, it's easy!" declared Fatty. "We shall be able to serve up dinner at the ordinary time. I'll see about these potatoes."

"Good!" said Handforth. "But there won't be half enough there. Some of you chaps had better get busy on the job of peeling another supply. Buck up!"

"And what are you going to do?" asked Pitt.

"I've got more important work on hand," said Handforth, peeling off his jacket and rolling up his sleeves. "What about the meat? To-day is Irish stew day, ain't it? Yes—there you are! Everything's all ready to put into the giddy saucepan."

On one of the side tables stood a number of dishes, piled up with cut carrots and peeled onions and chunks of meat. Handforth went over to the table, and was about to handle the meat, when De Valerie grabbed his arm.

"Wash your hands first, you dirty bounder!" he exclaimed. "They're all over ink, and goodness knows what else."

"Ink ain't poison," said Handforth, "and we can't afford to be particular. You can leave this stew to me; I'll make it. I know all about stews. I'll make something that will absolutely surprise you!"

"I'll bet you will!" I agreed. "I think Fatty had better take charge of the stew, my sons. I shall enjoy it all the more!"

"Yes," agreed Little. "I'll make the stew——"

"If you come near me, James Little, I'll punch your fat nose!" roared Handforth. "I'm making the stews, and I don't want any rot!"

"Yes; but look here——"

"You can go and eat coke!" snapped Handforth. "The stew's my job, and I'll fight any chap who tries to butt in! Go and cook the greens—go and set the tables—there's heaps to be done!"

"You'd better let him have his own

way," I put in. "I pity the stew, but if we stop here arguing, there won't be any dinner at all."

Handforth had his own way, mainly for the sake of peace. And he certainly bustled about with a will.

Before five minutes had elapsed, the stew was on the stove, in a great cauldron, and before long it boiled away merrily, and appetising odours arose on the atmosphere. The potatoes were soon on, and we were all kept very busy.

"There's a funny niff!" remarked Pitt suddenly.

"Eh?" said Handforth. "It must be those potatoes——"

"More likely to be your giddy stew!" said Fatty Little, sniffing the air. "It's none of my business, and I'm not going to interfere. But if I'd been making that stew I'd put more water in."

"Water!" exclaimed Handforth. "A fat lot you know about stews! You want to let the natural juices come out of the vegetables," he added, pulling the lid off the huge cauldron. "Great pip! What the dickens——"

He backed away, for a huge cloud of smoke came out of the cauldron.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's all very well to laugh!" roared Fatty. "Our dinner's ruined!"

"Rats," said Handforth. "The stew's only caught a bit!"

This was the literal truth.

The fire was rather too fierce, and the stew having been placed in the cauldron without any water, the meat had naturally been burning. The juices which had come from the vegetables had rapidly dried up.

Handforth, of course, went to the other extreme at once, and poured in about a gallon of water, drowning the stew completely.

"You ass!" said Watson. "It'll be like dishwater now."

"Rot! All that water will boil away, and a rich gravy will be left," said Handforth. "I know all about it—you can't teach me!"

The work proceeded fairly evenly after that, and there was not much trouble. The potatoes were cooked at last, and the cabbages seemed to be all right—at least, Fatty was satisfied with them. Fatty was also attending to the puddings, which were steaming merrily.

"Well, we shall have plenty to eat, even if the stew fails," remarked Pitt. "These puddings are full of currants, by the smell of 'em, and everybody's fond of currant duff. You'd better take one out and see if it's done, Fatty."

Little proceeded to do so, but Handforth butted in. He seemed to imagine that he was in sole charge of the operations.

While Fatty opened the big steamer, Handforth bustled about with a big fork—with which to "try" the puddings. He had been in the act of washing his hands when he started this operation, and he was rather soapy.

"Better go easy," I said. "We don't want the puddings to taste of soap——"

"Oh, they'll be all right," declared Handforth. "If you leave everything to me, there's no need to worry. Look out, you fat ass! I'm being scalded."

Between the pair of them, they finally decided that the currant duffs were done, so the steamer was placed aside. Then Handforth got on with his stew—for everything else was ready.

"All it wants now is the finishing touch—and that's everything," said Handforth. "A stew requires careful treatment, my sons. You need sauce and flavouring to make it rich. It's just the finish that makes it appetising."

"There are some sauces here," said Pitt. "I'll give you some——"

"Rats!" roared Handforth. "I'll choose the sauce! We want something thick—something rich and good!"

He strode across the kitchen to the shelf, and selected a large bottle of thick sauce. He apparently judged it by its appearance, and not by the label. For he poured the sauce into the stew without even glancing at the label.

Then he selected other bottles, and added all sorts of concoctions. And at last the stew was ready to be served.

"Ripping!" said Handforth, smackin his lips. "This'll be the best stew we've ever tasted."

"Better have a taste now," I advised. "Just to make sure."

"No. A cook who tastes his own grub isn't any good," said Handforth. "I know this is all right, so I'm not going to have any tasters."

"Oh, all right," I grinned. "Have your own way."

But I was doubtful. I had casually glanced at the sauce bottles which Handy had been using— and, somehow, I did

not fancy that the stew would be improved. It was a meat stew, and anchovy sauce could not possibly make it taste better. Furthermore, powdered chilis were not quite suitable, when thrown in with such a liberal hand as Handforth had used. He was probably attracted by the appearance of the stuff, and thought it would improve matters.

The Irish stew, in my opinion, would be a failure!

CHAPTER IV.

NOT QUITE A SUCCESS.

"SPLENDID, boys—splendid!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell approvingly. "You have done excellently. The dinner appears to be quite professional!"

Handforth beamed.

"That's good, sir," he said. "I was in charge, you know."

"Really, Handforth," said Mr. Crowell. "Well, the dinner does you credit—if it tastes as well as it looks."

"It'll be lovely, sir—take my word for it."

The dining-hall was packed. A good many fellows had been told off to act as waiters, and the novelty of the affair appealed to the juniors. The Fifth and Sixth seemed to be rather bored.

The stew was served out, and potatoes and cabbage added. Then, when everybody had his dinner before him, grace was said.

Then the meal commenced.

Handforth tasted one forkful, gulped, and looked alarmed. Then, with a firm, resolute expression on his face, he stood up.

"Stop!" he shouted, before anyone could eat.

Mr. Crowell looked up, astonished.

"Handforth!" he exclaimed. "What on earth is the matter?"

"I—I wish to say something, sir!"

"Well, say it, my boy," said the Form master.

"I think we are traitors to the staff," shouted Handforth, sweeping the Remove table with his gaze. "We are acting as blacklegs——"

"Handforth!" thundered Mr. Crowell.

"It's a fact, sir, and I feel bound to say it," went on Handforth firmly. "It only just occurred to me, you know. We've been preparing this food, and now we are sitting down to eat it!"

"Yes, rather!" said Fatty Little.

"Don't eat!" roared Handforth. "It's not fair! It's treachery!"

"How dare you, Handforth?" demanded Mr. Crowell, jumping up. "Sit down at once—do you hear? Have you taken leave of your senses?"

Handforth set his jaw.

"No, sir!" he replied resolutely. "As a matter of fact, I've just come to my senses! I've just realised what we're doing! To eat this dinner would be an act of treachery to the school staff!"

"My hat!"

"Sit down, you silly ass!"

"Dry up, Handy!"

"I refuse to dry up!" roared Handforth, wiping his mouth rather hastily for some reason. "I have taken up this stand, and I urge every fellow here to support me. We are in sympathy with the strike—that's well known—therefore we mustn't do a single thing to defeat the strikers! We're not blacklegs, and it's up to us to prove our sympathy for the staff by getting up in a body and walking out of the dining-hall. And after this we mustn't do a stroke of work—except lessons!"

"Mad!" said Pitt. "He's dotty!"

"Handforth, you will sit down at once," said Mr. Crowell angrily. "I will not allow you to continue this absurd scene——"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I must insist!" shouted Handforth. "Who's going to back me up?"

Nobody seemed to be inclined to accept.

"Rats!" said Fatty Little. "This dinner's prepared now, and we're going to eat it!"

"Hear, hear!"

"There may be something in what Handy says," remarked De Valerie. "But now that we've gone so far, we might as well wait until after dinner. Strictly speaking, we oughtn't to have done any work at all—because, by working, we're helping to defeat the strike. But I'm hungry, and I'm going to eat!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Rather!"

Handforth waved his arms wildly.

"The first chap who eats will be a traitor!" he roared in alarm.

"The first chap who eats will be poisoned, you mean," I murmured softly.

Mr. Crowell sat down.

"Handforth, you will write me two hundred lines for insubordination," he said coldly. "Now, boys, get on with your dinner!"

Handforth gave one look round—a look of despair, almost. He saw several juniors sampling the stew, and Handforth sat down abruptly, with a set expression on his rugged face.

"Ow! Yarooh!" howled Watson suddenly.

"Watson! What on earth——"

Tommy whipped out his handkerchief, and buried his face in it.

"I'm poisoned!" he gasped wildly, looking up. "I'm burnt all up! Oh, great Scot! I—I—— Yarooh!"

"Gug-gug-gug-grooh!" moaned Pitt faintly.

Groans and wails came from all sides of the table, and Mr. Crowell looked round in alarm.

He had not yet tasted the stew. I had wisely refrained also. Somehow, I didn't care for the odour which arose from it.

Fatty Little, however, had eaten several mouthfuls, and was still going strong. His appetite was so enormous that he was able to stick it. At the same time, I noticed that he was mainly attacking the potatoes and cabbage.

"Great pip!" exclaimed Hubbard. "This—this stuff's horrible! It—it tastes of fish, and boot polish, and soap, and it's like fire! My mouth's burnt up—and I only had one taste!"

The gasps and groans were still continuing.

"Boys, what is the meaning of this?" demanded Mr. Crowell angrily. "Is this supposed to be some idea of a joke? If so, I do not care for it, and I shall punish you severely unless you cease this nonsense at once."

"Oh, my goodness!" said Watson faintly. "Taste the stew, sir!"

Mr. Crowell regarded his plate suspiciously.

"I am not altogether sure that I require my dinner, my boy," he said. "I shall partake of my meal later. However, just to satisfy myself that you are making a fuss over nothing, I will take a mouthful."

He did so, and Handforth watched with horror.

Mr. Crowell's face, a moment later, was a study. He went red, made a wild grimace, and then gulped hard.

"Good—good heavens!" he panted thickly. "Give me some water—some water, quick! Oh, my goodness!"

He took one gulp, and then pushed the glass aside.

"Who—who is responsible for this ghastly concoction?" he demanded.

"Handforth, sir!" roared the whole Remove.

"I—I—I—I——" gasped Handforth.

"I have never tasted such a vile mixture in all my experience!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell, wiping his mouth. "It is not only uneatably hot, but there is a horribly fishy flavour which has quite turned my stomach. Have you been using chilis, Handforth?"

"I—I only put some sauce and stuff in, sir," said Handforth. "I thought it would improve it, you know!"

"I'm afraid, Handforth, that you have made a terrible mess of the whole dinner," said Mr. Crowell. "This stew is quite uneatable."

"And Handy knew it, too!" exclaimed Pitt grimly. "No wonder he told us not to eat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"No wonder he advised us not to be blacklegs, and warned everybody to leave his plate alone!" went on Pitt. "He tasted the fearful stuff himself, and wanted to prevent us tasting it! I vote we force him to eat his dinner."

"Hear, hear!"

"Jolly good idea!"

"You—you silly asses!" gasped Handforth. "I—I can't eat that awful stuff! It would kill me! I—I tried to stop you eating it—I only made a bloomer with the sauce, and——"

"That's no excuse," I interrupted sternly. "The verdict is that you shall eat your own concoction. Hold him, you chaps!"

Handforth was seized, and before we could be stopped by Mr. Crowell, several spoonfuls of the stew were forced down Handforth's throat. He gasped and struggled and howled.

"That'll do!" I grinned. "We don't want to kill him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Boys!" thundered Mr. Crowell. "Sit down at once—at once!"

The Remove fellows took their seats, but Handforth slithered on to the floor, and lay there moaning. There wasn't much wrong with him, but he thought it just as well to make the most of it.

And the stew certainly was abominable.

A good many juniors had hurried off to the kitchen to obtain currant puddings. When they were served out Handforth was feeling better, but he still looked very sickly and white about the gills.

"If there is any more horseplay I shall punish the whole Remove," said Mr. Crowell severely. "The stew was a failure, but, fortunately, there is an ample supply of pudding. You must fill in the gaps with this excellent dish. It was made, I believe, by the House cook."

"Yes, rather, sir," said Fatty. "This'll be all right."

The pudding was served out, but as soon as the juniors began eating it they paused, and there were many wry grimaces. Even Fatty Little, hungry as he was, surreptitiously emptied his mouth.

"Great doughnuts!" he gasped. "It's worse than the stew!"

"It's—it's horrible, said De Valerie. "It tastes like soap!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, I didn't make the giddy pudding," said Handforth thankfully. "You can't force any of that stuff down my throat."

"Dear me! The pudding certainly has a most remarkable flavour!" said Mr. Crowell, after sampling a minute fragment. "This is really extraordinary. I'm afraid, boys, that your dinner is a complete failure."

"We've had nothing, sir!" said Fatty plaintively. "And I'm as hungry as a horse, too! We've eaten nothing!"

"It is really unaccountable," said Mr. Crowell. "Are you sure that these puddings were made by the House cook?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then it would appear that the vindictive woman placed soap in them deliberately," explained Mr. Crowell, with a frown. "That is most unforgivable——"

"Hold on, sir," I interrupted. "I think Handforth is to blame."

"Me?" bellowed Handforth, jumping up.

"Yes," I replied.

"You—you——"

"Don't you remember you were washing your hands when Fatty took the lid off the steamer?" I asked. "The soap disappeared after that, I remember—and I'll bet a quid you dropped it into the puddings!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth blankly. "I—I wondered where that soap had got to——"

"Collar him!" roared Pitt. "We'll make him eat——"

"Hold the ass!" shouted De Valerie. "He's escaping——"

But Handforth had fled.

A number of fellows were about to give chase when Mr. Crowell stopped them.

"I cannot allow you to indulge in this rough behaviour here, boys," said the Form-master sternly. "Handforth was well meaning, no doubt, but his efforts were decidedly a failure."

"It was his own silly fault," declared Little. "He thought he could do everything—instead of leaving the cooking to chaps who knew all about it! And now we've got no dinner!"

"I am very sorry, Little, but you must go hungry for the time being," said Mr. Crowell. "The dinner, as I am aware, is a complete failure, and all we can do is to hope that matters will improve in the future. We certainly cannot go on at this rate. I suggest that some of you return to the kitchen, and prepare something else."

"Rather not, sir," said Owen major grimly. "I'm backing up Handforth."

"What!"

"I don't think we ought to prepare anything, sir. It's the duty of the school authorities to provide us with dinner," said Owen major. "We didn't come here to prepare our own food."

"Hear, hear!"

"Owen major, how dare you?" said Mr. Crowell hotly. "You know well enough that the circumstances are exceptional, and it is your duty to help in every way you can——"

"I don't see it, sir," interrupted the junior. "It's not our duty to prepare dinner. And I'm not going to do a stroke of work—household work. The school can't force me to, either. We

didn't come here to be made into servants!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Owen major, you will write me five hundred lines for that remark!" snapped Mr. Crowell. "It will teach you, perhaps, to be less independent——"

"If you give Owen lines, you'll have to give us lines as well," shouted Church, jumping up. "We're all of the same opinion!"

"Yes, rather!" said McClure.

"Very well, you will all take lines," snapped Mr. Crowell. "And if any other boy dares to—— Upon my soul! What—what is the meaning of this?"

He saw very soon what the meaning of it was. For the whole Remove, somewhat incensed, had risen to its feet. And it marched out of the dining-hall firmly, and in an orderly manner. I went with the rest of the fellows, of course.

It was an indication that the Remove approved of the strike, and did not intend to do the servants' work.

It was also an indication that the Remove was hungry, and meant to get food elsewhere!

CHAPTER V.

DINNER IN THE VILLAGE.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH was waiting out in the Triangle.

"Oh, so you've come out, have you?" he demanded crossly. "If you start any of your rot about that pudding I'll punch somebody's nose! How was I to know the beastly soap went into the steamer?"

"We won't discuss it, Handy," I said briskly. "The Remove has decided to support you. That is to say, we're not going to do any work that the servants ought to do——"

"Good!" exclaimed Handforth. "That's the style!"

"But what about dinner?" asked Fatty Little anxiously. "We must have some grub, you know. I'm starving!"

"Well, there's the tuckshop——"

"Mrs. Hake hasn't got anything except biscuits," said Fatty. "I went there before dinner. It's her cooking day, you know, and the stuff ain't ready until this afternoon. We're in a frightful hole! I think it's rotten of the servants to go on strike like this——"

"But you supported them, you—you turncoat!" exclaimed Handforth.

"He forgot all about the grub then," I grinned. "Fatty didn't seem to realise that a strike would lead to little inconveniences of this kind!"

The Remove was certainly in a considerable state of unrest. They were all strong, healthy boys, and they had eaten no dinner. They were hungry, and the prospect of going until teatime without food was not very enticing.

The strike presented itself to the Remove in a different light. The juniors now began to realise that they, themselves, would be greatly affected. And when their stomachs were affected—well, there was trouble.

"I vote we go down to the village," said De Valerie. "Old Binks is sure to have a good supply, and we can have a terrific feed."

"That's just what I was going to suggest," I said briskly.

"It's all very well for you chaps with money," exclaimed Owen major gloomily. "But what about us? I've only got sixpence, and you can't buy a dinner for sixpence. There are plenty of other chaps who are stony, too!"

"Yes, rather!"

"We ain't all rolling in tin!"

I looked round, and grinned.

"Friends, Romans, and countrymen, lend me your ears," I said calmly. "Listen to what your uncle has to say. We'll go down to Binko's, and eat everything we can—have a square meal, in fact. And when we've done, we'll tell old Binks to send his little account in to the Head."

"Begad!"

"My only hat!"

"But—but that wouldn't be playing the game!" said Pitt.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Well, it wouldn't be fair to make the Head pay——"

"My dear ass, who's suggesting that the Head should pay," I interrupted. "Your people pay your fees for you to be schooled and fed and housed. It's only right that you should be fed. The bill, therefore, will be paid out of the school funds. But it must be sent to the Head, in the natural order of things."

1. "How dare you leave your posts and come out in this manner!" raved Sir Roger.

2. Handforth's stew is not quite a success.

"Nipper's right," said Handforth. "I vote we hurry off."

"Yes, rather!"

Fatty Little had already departed. He evidently meant to make quite certain that there was plenty of food in the village, and he wanted to be on the job in advance.

When we reached Bellton, we found an air of unusual excitement in the little place. Knots of the school strikers were about, talking with the villagers, and discussing the situation.

We soon learned that the village people were in complete sympathy, and they showed their sympathy in a concrete form. For all the strikers had succeeded in obtaining temporary shelter.

And it was regarded as certain that they would win the fight. It would only be a matter of a day or two, at least, before the Governors were compelled to give in—that was the general impression.

"Well, Master Nipper, what's the news from the school?" asked Broome, as we passed him, talking with a little crowd of other strikers.

"There's no particular news, except that we've had no dinner," I replied.

"There! I knew what would happen!" exclaimed Mrs. Poulter, who was in the group. "I don't like this strike at all, Mr. Broome. All these poor boys having to go without their dinners on account of us—it don't seem right——"

"We couldn't do nothing else, ma'am," interrupted the gardener. "The staff voted for a strike, so we had to come out. And it's the only way to get our terms granted. Something drastic was necessary."

"But it's a shame that these poor boys——"

"Don't you worry, Mrs. Poulter," I said. "We can look after ourselves; and I don't suppose you'll be out for long. Most of the fellows are deciding to refuse all household work—they won't do a thing to help."

"That's good, Master Nipper!" said Broome.

"I don't see that it's good," argued Mrs. Poulter. "The poor lads won't have anything to eat, their beds won't be made, and goodness knows what'll happen. If they don't do nothing themselves——"

"But if we did household work, it would be up against you, Mrs. Poulter," put in De Valerie. "If the Governors find that we're willing to do the work ourselves, they won't trouble so much about granting your terms. But if we do nothing, and refuse to take any hand in the servants' duties, the Governors will be bound to get help—and there's nobody available but the ordinary school staff."

"That's quite right, sir," agreed Broome. "And it's very kind of you to help our cause so boldly. It'll be making things easier for us, sir, and I'm sure everybody appreciates it."

The strikers proved that they did, by cheering us heartily, and we passed along to Mr. Binks's tuckshop in quite a cheerful mood.

There was already a considerable crowd in the shop, and Mr. Binks was serving away for all he was worth. As it happened, he had a considerable stock in hand, and the rapid way in which it disappeared was somewhat remarkable.

In any case, the fellows had quite sufficient by the time the stock had gone, and it was felt that dinner was a success, after all.

"What about the bill, Master Nipper?" asked Mr. Binks, rather anxiously. "It's been a job to keep account of all that's gone, but I think I know fairly well. I daresay one of you young gents is standing the treat?"

"Not a bit like it, Binko," I replied. "We're not paying."

"Not—not paying!" exclaimed Mr. Binks, startled.

"Certainly not!"

"But—but——"

"This is our dinner," I explained. "We hadn't any at the school, so we came down here for it. All you have to do is to send in your little bill to the Head, and it'll be paid out of the school funds."

Mr. Binks looked doubtful.

"Are you sure of that, Master Nipper?" he asked.

"Positive!"

"But what if the Head won't pay?"

"Dear old boy, you needn't worry about that," put in Sir Montie. "If the Head refuses to pay up—which he won't—you can rely upon us to settle the account. You can take our word for it that you'll be paid, one way or the other, begad!"

"Thank you, young gent!" said Mr. Binks. "I'm satisfied now."

And so was the Remove.

Fortunately, it was a half holiday, so the fellows were not in any particular hurry to get back. There were no lessons that afternoon, and the juniors stopped about in the village, listening to what the strikers had to say.

It was quite a novel experience.

Timothy Tucker, of the Remove, actually made a speech. He collected a number of strikers round him, and addressed them earnestly. True, they didn't take much notice of what he said, but he was certainly amusing.

Sir Montie and Tommy and I, after strolling about for some time, decided to return to the school, to see how things were going on. We strolled up the lane leisurely, enjoying the bright afternoon sunshine.

"Well, there's no telling how it's going to end," I remarked. "We got over the dinner difficulty somehow, and tea, of course, we partake of in the usual way—in our own studies. But I don't know how we shall get on for supper."

"And brekker, in the morning," said Watson.

"We shall have to worry about these things when the time comes," I remarked. "I never believe in worrying myself in advance—it's not worth a fag!"

"Dear old fellow, I quite agree with you," said Sir Montie. "We decided to support the strikers, so we can't very well grumble now that they've taken matters into their own hands—we can't, really! The whole affair is frightfully interestin'."

We had nearly reached the school by this time, and as we approached the gateway, I noticed a face behind the hedge on the other side of the road. Somebody was concealed there—with Bellton Wood behind. I pretended to take no notice, and a moment later I saw that another face was there, too.

In fact, there were two men, and, for some mysterious reason, they were not over anxious to let themselves be seen. They appeared to be watching the school. I was quite interested in them, and determined to give them more attention. They were quite unaware that I had detected their presence.

"My sons, there's something queer afoot," I remarked, as we entered the Triangle.

"Eh?" said Watson. "What are you trying to get at?"

"Didn't you see them?" I asked.

"See them?" repeated Tommy. "See whom, you ass?"

"Those two men."

"Begad! Which two men, dear boy?"

"The two who were hiding behind the hedge out there——"

"Are you trying to pull our legs?" demanded Watson. "There were no men outside, in the road, or behind the giddy hedge. You must have been dreaming, or something. What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," I replied. "My eyes happen to be a bit sharper than yours—that's all. Anything mysterious always attracts me, and this little affair is mysterious. The puzzle is: Who are those two men, and why are they watching the school?"

My chums were convinced that I was joking, and they wanted to venture out again, in order to have a look at the two strangers. But I would not hear of this. I had another idea.

"Come with me, my children," I said smoothly. "I'll show you!"

The Ancient House was quiet—unusually quiet. The absence of the school staff was distinctly noticeable. And, with the majority of the boys absent, it seemed that St. Frank's was a dead place.

"Where are we off to?" demanded Watson, as I led the way into the house. "What's the idea of coming indoors when we want to see two men out in the road? You must be off your rocker?"

"Wait, my son—wait," I replied calmly.

"Dear Tommy, you must have patience," observed Montie. "You know what a remarkable chap Nipper is. He appears to be doin' somethin' totally opposed to reason, an' it turns out in the end that he's up to somethin' amazin'ly cute."

I chuckled.

"There's nothing amazingly cute about this," I remarked. "So don't be disappointed when you get no thunderbolt."

First of all, I led the way into Study C, where I procured a pair of powerful binoculars. Then I went upstairs, on to the landing, and then further up into the old tower of the Ancient House.

"Now do you understand?" I asked. "I want to have a look at those fellows on the quiet—if they're still there. We shall be able to see them distinctly"

through these glasses. And they can't see us."

"I knew it was somethin' deep," said Tregellis-West. "You're a frightfully deep bounder, Nipper! You are, really! I should never have thought of a rippin' idea like this."

I grinned as I focussed the binoculars. Gazing out of the slit-like window, I levelled the glasses at the hedge opposite the gateway. And there, sure enough, I could see the two mysterious strangers.

They were hidden from view of all the windows below, and from the ground floor also. This tower was the only spot which overlooked the edge, so the men apparently thought they were private and unobserved.

My chums and I looked through the glasses in turn.

The men were well-dressed, and both of them were fairly young. They were wearing lounge suits and soft felt hats. One moved off after ten minutes had elapsed, and vanished into the wood.

The other man remained at his post, watching the school with an attention which plainly showed that this was no mere casual curiosity.

"I wonder what his game can be?" said Watson, after a while.

"There's no telling," I replied, taking the glasses. "He may be merely an amateur artist, on the look-out for a good scene to paint. In any case, we don't want to make a mystery out of it until—— Hullo! That's queer!"

"What is, dear fellow?"

"The fellow is writing something on a piece of paper," I said. "Now he's rolling it up, and shoving it into a piece of stick. It seems to be hollow, and he's pushed it inside."

"A message for somebody," suggested Watson.

"Looks a bit like it," I said. "By jingo! He's put the stick into a little depression in that grassy bank! It's evidently a hiding-place! And now the fellow is making off into the wood."

Three minutes later there was not a sign of anybody. Both men had vanished; but one of them had left something of great interest behind. I determined to investigate further without a moment's delay.

"Come on!" I said crisply. "We'll have a look into this."

"Yes, rather!" declared Watson. "It looks jolly shady, to my mind."

We hurried downstairs, and then out into the open. It did not take us long to get into Bellton Woods. Then we worked our way along to the exact spot where we had seen the strangers.

"It seems to me," I remarked, "that the chap left a note for somebody else. He wrote something and concealed it. Well, he wouldn't have done that just for the fun of it. Some other man must know of a place, and will come here later on and search."

"But we're here first, old boy," observed Montie.

"Exactly," I agreed.

"That's all very well," said Watson. "But how are we going to find the note? We might search for hours——"

"Don't be so impatient, my son," I interrupted. "I distinctly saw where the thing was hidden—although, I'll admit, that the spot looks very different at close quarters. Still, a little more patience will bring its own reward."

We searched about for some time, and at last, as I had expected, we succeeded in locating the tiny crevice in the bank for which we had been searching. I inserted my hand, and withdrew it with a straight piece of stick grasped in my fingers.

"Well, that's a ripping find, I must say!" said Watson, with a sniff.

"You needn't sneer," I exclaimed. "Look at this."

I proceeded to investigate the stick. It was hollow, and after a little trouble I extracted a small roll of paper from the interior of the stick. My chums watched me with great interest.

"The plot thickens, begad," murmured Sir Montie. "This is getting frightfully dramatic—it is, really."

"What's it got on the paper?" demanded Watson practically.

I unfolded the little scrap of paper, gazed upon it, frowned, and then looked harder than ever.

For what I saw was this:

"XXX. 5638. 0-2-TRI. ZZ(X)ZZ. 1234."

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

"Oh, quite a lot," I replied. "It's so lucid that it doesn't need any thinking about! Just have a look at it, my children!"

My chums took the paper, and gazed at it in wonder.

"You—you ass!" exclaimed Watson. "There's no sense in this! It's simply a jumble of mixed-up rubbish."

"Dear old boy, I suspect that there is somethin' deeper in it—somethin' frightfully deep, begad," said Sir Montie, shaking his head. "There's no tellin' what these things mean, you know. Do you think you'll be able to decipher it, Nipper boy?"

"No, I don't."

"But you're frightfully clever at these things——"

"Rats!" I said. "A chap can't be clever when he's got no key. To understand this message it's necessary to have the key to the cipher. Quite apart from all that, what the dickens can it mean? Why has this message been left here? The whole thing's mysterious. Why were those two men lurking about, and why did they leave this mystic note inside a piece of stick?"

"Dear old fellow, it's no good askin' me these questions," said Sir Montie. "I'm more puzzled than you are. Don't you think you ought to tell Mr. Lee about it?"

"I shall certainly tell the guv'nor," I replied. "He might be able to discover the secret. Mr. Lee's hot stuff on these cypher messages."

I rolled the paper up again, and replaced it in the piece of stick. Then I pushed the stick back into the crevice.

"What's the idea of that?" asked Watson. "I thought you were going to show it to Mr. Lee?"

"I think it'll be just as well to leave it here for a bit, and see what happens," I replied. "I've memorised the message, anyhow, so it won't matter so much if somebody comes along and takes it——"

Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "I can hear somebody now."

We stood perfectly still and listened. Footsteps sounded quite distinctly in the wood. But the man himself was invisible; the trees hid him from view. I looked round quickly, and warned my chums not to speak.

"Slip down behind this hedge!" I whispered. "We'll watch."

Within a few seconds we had succeeded in getting down out of sight, but we could see everything that went on. And as we watched, filled with curiosity and a kind of mild excitement, a figure came into view.

"Great Scot!" muttered Watson. "Mr. Lee!"

"Begad!"

The newcomer was certainly Mr. Lee himself.

"Keep still!" I warned. "There's no need to move an inch. We'll just watch and see what the guv'nor does."

"But it doesn't seem right——"

"Rats! We'll disclose ourselves afterwards."

We watched, and to our astonishment we saw Nelson Lee go straight to the grassy bank, take out the piece of stick, and examine the paper. He smiled in rather a curious way, and placed the paper in his pocket.

And we gazed at one another in wonder. Had that message been left there for Nelson Lee? It certainly seemed like it. But we fully intended to get at the truth of the matter.

"Now we'll spring out," I muttered.

We lost no time in making our presence known, and Nelson Lee regarded us quite calmly and with a certain amount of amusement in his gaze.

"What is the meaning of this, boys?" he asked smoothly.

"I was just going to ask the same question, sir," I said. "How did you know that piece of paper was hidden there? And was it meant especially for you?"

"It was not intended for my eye, Nipper," replied Nelson Lee. "But before I answer any more questions, I want to know how you became aware of this little mystery. Tell me all about it."

This was not a long proceeding. I simply explained to the guv'nor how I had spotted the two strangers in the wood, and how we had observed the movements of the two men from the Ancient House tower.

"So we thought we'd better come down and investigate, sir," I concluded. "That's all. It seems jolly mysterious to me, and I should like to know exactly what it means. Is there a mystery, or are we being fooled?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I really don't know, Nipper," he replied. "My own experience is very similar to yours. I know nothing of the two men, but I observed their suspicious movements, and decided to keep my eyes upon them. I did so, and followed the second man through the wood to the moor—where he jumped upon a bicycle and rode away. I came back with the intention of examining the paper he left behind. Now you know as

much as I do, and I don't think either of us are very much enlightened."

"But what does the message mean, sir?"

"I have not the faintest idea."

"Do you think you'll be able to decipher it, sir?"

"The possibility is not at all remote."

"And what about the two men?" I went on. "Who are they, and why do they come here in such a queer fashion——"

"My dear Nipper, I cannot possibly answer those questions at the moment," interrupted Lee. "I certainly intend to investigate the matter, and I may as well tell you that I have an idea that we are on the edge of a very pretty little mystery. However, for the moment we will let it drop. Say nothing to the other boys of what has happened. The story must not be talked about, or our two mysterious friends will know that their movements were observed. So keep your tongues still."

Nelson Lee went off shortly after, leaving us rather more puzzled than before. There was a mystery—one of those mysteries which seemed likely to grow deeper. Personally, I rather liked it.

But I was unable to think further on the subject just then, for something happened which drove the matter completely out of my mind.

We had just got back into the Triangle when we were aware of the buzzing din of a motor-car. The next moment an old-fashioned car drove into the gateway—a big car, crowded with people.

We watched curiously.

The people in the car were a mixed lot, by the look of them. Some were men, others women and girls, and three common-looking youths. And they all stared about them in an inquisitive kind of way.

"Who the dickens are these merchants?" asked Watson.

"Blessed if I know," I replied. "Hallo! Here's Sir Roger—— Great Scot! Is it possible that——"

I paused, and watched, a grim suspicion in my mind. Sir Roger Stone came out, and halted in front of the car. He was rubbing his hands together with keen pleasure.

"Good!" he exclaimed heartily. "This is splendid, my good people—splendid! You will all go to the servants'-hall, and await your orders."

The newcomers crowded out of the car, and followed Sir Roger into the Ancient House. And we stood staring at one another with full understanding. Other juniors had been watching, also.

Reginald Pitt strolled up to us.

"What do you think of it?" he asked.

"I think something's going to happen very quickly," I replied grimly. "That crowd has been obtained by Sir Roger—servants from Bannington! I expect they were ordered by telephone, from an employment agency."

"That's about the size of it," said Pitt.

"Well, what are we going to do? What about the strikers? If these new servants keep coming in, the ordinary staff will be ousted, and they'll lose the fight."

"The Remove will have something to say about that," I declared firmly. "What's more, the Remove will have something to do. To begin with, we've got to hold a meeting in the common-room."

"Good!" said Watson. "When?"

"Now!" I replied. "Get the chaps together."

Most of the juniors had returned from the village by this time, and it wasn't long before the Remove was collected together in the Ancient House common-room. Only a few fellows were absent.

"What's the idea of this?" demanded Handforth. "I'm blessed if I can see any sense in calling a meeting now——"

"Don't you know what's happened?" I asked.

"No."

"Well, I'll tell you," I said. "There are some fellows who don't know. Ten minutes ago a collection of servants arrived from Bannington——"

"What?"

"Blacklegs?" roared Handforth angrily.

"Yes, if you like to call them by that name," I said. "They are blacklegs, in that sense—they've come to carry on the work of the staff. The question is this—are you willing to allow it?"

"No!" roared the crowd.

"Down with the blacklegs!"

"Hurrah!"

"We're not going to stand any nonsense——"

"Hold on, Handy," I shouted. "Let me do the speaking. These people have come here to work, and it's quite likely that another crowd will arrive tomorrow—if we don't do something in

the meantime. In the end it will simply mean that the strikers will be permanently dismissed. They'll lose the fight, and we shall have a complete new staff."

"The rotters!" shouted Hubbard. "We'll half-slaughter them!"

"Yes, rather!"

"We'll kick them out!"

"We'll duck them in the giddy fountain!" roared Handforth. "It's like their beastly nerve coming here——"

"Hold on!" I yelled. "Why on earth are you in such a hurry, Handy? It won't be fair to chuck these people out——"

"What!"

"To chuck these people out violently, I was going to say," I went on. "They were told that the jobs were open, and they naturally accepted. They can't be blamed, and it would be gross injustice to treat them roughly."

"Are you suggesting that we should allow them to stop?" demanded Handforth aggressively.

"No."

"But you just said——"

"If you'd only give me a chance to speak, I should make my meaning clear," I said. "I vote that the Remove takes a stand against this action of Sir Roger's—for he's responsible, of course. We won't allow these new servants to remain——"

"Rather not!"

"At the same time, we mustn't use violence," I said. "We'll take the people, and lead them off the premises, gently but firmly. We won't have any blacklegs in St. Frank's. We've pledged ourselves to support the strikers, and we've got to do it thoroughly. If we allow these new servants to remain, it will be the death-knell of the strike. So it's up to us to get busy."

"Hear, hear!"

"I quite agree, my dear sir—I quite agree," said Timothy Tucker, nodding. "I must admit that I am impressed. Your speech is distinctly promising. Admitted. Somehow or other, I feel that we are about to be successful."

"Speech!" yelled the crowd. "Go it, T. T.!"

Tucker beamed through his glasses.

"Comrades and fellow workers——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That is to say, comrades," said T. T. "I was thinking, for the moment, that I was addressing the honest toilers. But such is not the case. H'm! Admitted. Well, my friends, to put the matter in a nutshell, we must band ourselves together strongly. We must fight the cause of the sweated workers, and do everything in our power to defeat the evil designs of the bloated capitalist——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Organise—organise! That must be our watchword!" shouted Tucker. "We have agreed to assist in this most righteous strike. We have agreed to help the sweated servants of this establishment. The demands, they are all too small—all too modest; but that is their concern. If they are satisfied, all well and good. That is so. So we must set our faces against any blackleg labour being employed. If we remain inactive, it will mean disaster for our worthy friends—black and terrible disaster. So we must work with a mighty will to further this splendid cause, and I put it to the meeting that it is a treacherous act for Sir Roger to employ these blacklegs. I further call upon the meeting to pass a resolution in favour of expelling these new-comers from the honest walls of this great factory—that is to say, this plant for the manufacture of education!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old T.T."

The resolution was passed unanimously, and it was definitely decided that the Remove would not permit the temporary servants to remain at St. Frank's for a moment longer than was absolutely necessary.

The Remove was determined to take action!

———

CHAPTER VI.

DEALING WITH THE BLACKLEGS!

HANDFORTH held up his hand warningly.

"No jawing, remember," he said, in a stage whisper. "We've got to do this job quietly. Each victim has got to be selected separately. It's going to be a peaceful business, but if anybody starts hitting—well, we'll hit back."

"Good old Handy!" chuckled McClure. "You don't believe in peaceful methods, do you?"

Handforth grunted.

"I think it would be far better to chuck the bounders out, neck and crop!"

he replied. "They deserve it for coming here!"

Two hours had passed, and nothing had been done in the throwing-out line. The new staff, small as it was, had commenced work. In the kitchens, washing up was proceeding apace, and other work was going on at full speed.

Sir Roger, no doubt, believed that everything was all right, and that the Removites would take no action. It was now nearly dark, and the servants in the village had learned of the new servants' arrival. There was a certain amount of dismay among the strikers, and some of the hotheads were in favour of going up to the school, in order to make a demonstration.

But Broome was against this. He thought it would be better to wait, and so the demonstration did not come off. It was just as well, for we should be able to carry out our plans in comfort.

I was fully in agreement with the scheme. I knew how badly the staff had been treated, and it was grossly unfair that the pig-headed Sir Roger should be allowed to have his own way.

The school staff had waited for months without grumbling. It had waited patiently, expecting to receive justice; and now it was receiving injustice. It was little wonder that the Remove sided with the strikers. As a matter of fact, the whole school was with the staff. Even the masters sympathised.

So it was necessary for us to take action.

The Sixth was too lordly to engage in any such enterprise, the Fifth did not possess enough organisation, and the fags were useless. So it was up to the Remove to get busy.

I had made my plans carefully. Different bands of juniors were placed in various parts of the grounds, most of them near the school. Christine and Co., of the College House, were just as enthusiastic as ourselves, and they were carrying out their own part of the programme.

"Look out!" said Handforth suddenly. "The door's opened."

The chums of Study D had been posted near one of the side doors of the Ancient House. They watched, and saw a youth in an apron come out with a pail. Handforth and Co. immediately moved forward.

With a spring, they were upon the youth, and he dropped the pail with fright, incidentally smothering Handforth's boots with dirty water and potato peelings.

"You—you clumsy idiot!" roared Handforth.

"Corks!" exclaimed the boy. "You gave me a rare fright——"

"Look—look what you've done to my boots!" bellowed Handforth.

"I'm sorry, sir——"

"Rot! You shouldn't be such a clumsy ass!" snapped Handforth. "Another word from you, my son, and I'll punch your nose! You're coming with us—understand?"

"With you?" said the youth, staring. "Wot for?"

"Because you're a blackleg!"

"Get away!" grinned the youth. "You can't spring them yarns on me, young shaver. I've got this job, and I'm going to stick to it! See? An' if I 'ave any more o' your lip, I'll report you to one of the masters. You'd better clear off afore I lose my temper. See, my young kiddies?"

Handforth and Co. fairly gasped.

"You—you cheeky blighter!" roared Handforth. "My only hat! I've a good mind to wipe you up on the spot. Grab him, you chaps!"

"Hi, look here——"

But the youth was seized, and then he was rushed across the Triangle at express speed. He couldn't help himself, for Handforth, Church, and McClure were determined. They didn't stop until they were right out in the road.

"There you are!" panted Handforth. "You can clear off home!"

"You silly young fools——"

Smash!

Handforth's fist landed fairly in the centre of the youth's face. He went over with a thud, howling wildly. It was apparent that these new servants were far from being high-class.

"Clear off!" roared Handforth. "If you show your face at St. Frank's again, you'll get kicked out next time!"

Just at that moment Sir Montie and Tommy and I arrived with an unwilling companion—a man who had put up no resistance, but was distinctly alarmed.

"Now, old chap, the best thing you can do is to buzz off home," I said smoothly. "We're not allowing any temporary servants to remain at St. Frank's. Clear! Scoot! Bunk! Good-night!"

The man possessed no courage, for he

hurried off down the lane at a run. And then we noticed Handforth and Co., and we noticed their victim on the ground. He was still howling.

"I thought there was to be no violence, Handy," I said severely.

"Oh, talk sense!" snapped Handforth. "This insulting rotter called us fools and all sorts of other things. So I punched him—— My hat!"

The youth picked himself up, and a stone came whizzing past Handforth's head. At the same moment the youth commenced using foul language.

"Stop that!" I shouted angrily.

He didn't stop it, and we acted. We rushed at the young blackguard, seized him, and bumped him on the ground until he had no breath left. Then we gave him a final boot off, and he ran helter-skelter down the lane.

"That's two settled," I said. "The rest will soon be dealt with."

We returned to the attack, and each new servant was seized in turn. Some of them were obstinate, but they had to go. The women and girls, of course, were treated gently. In fact, no violence was necessary at all. We simply told them to clear off before they were forced to go—and they went.

In order to do this thoroughly, we invaded the kitchens. We interrupted all the work, and sent the new staff about its business, so to speak. Before an hour had elapsed, everybody had been seen off the premises, and everybody had been advised not to return. They took the advice.

And Sir Roger Stone, scenting the truth at last, came charging out into the Triangle, to discover the exact meaning of what had occurred. He had been ringing his bell for some time, but had received no reply. On going down to the servants' quarters, to investigate, he had found the place deserted; and so he had emerged into the Triangle, where the juniors were creating a considerable din.

"Hurrah for the strikers!"

"We won't have any blacklegs!"

"No fear!"

"Good luck to the good old staff!"

"Three groans for Sir Roger Stone!"

"Booh! Boo-ooooh!"

Sir Roger emerged just in time to hear it, and he fairly jumped with rage.

"Silence!" he roared. "Boys! How—how dare you create this disturbance ——"

"Three cheers for the strikers!"

"Hip, hip, hurrah!"

"Good luck to the staff!"

"Hurrah!"

"Down with the sweaters!"

"Silence—silence at once!" thundered Sir Roger. "I demand to know what you boys have been doing——"

"We've chucked out all your giddy blacklegs!" roared Handforth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"They've been sent home!"

"And they won't be allowed to return!"

"Not likely!"

Sir Roger gulped with rage.

"Is it possible that you have had the utter audacity—the unparallelled impudence—to interfere with the servants of this establishment?" he shouted. "Is it possible that you have sent them away ——"

"Yes, sir! It is possible, and it happens to be a fact!" I shouted. "We have agreed to support the strikers in their just cause, and we won't allow any new servants to work here!"

"What?" gasped Sir Roger. "You won't allow—— Great heavens! Am I hearing aright? You must be mad ——"

"We're not mad, sir," I interrupted. "We're simply determined—that's all!"

Sir Roger clenched his fists.

"I will punish the whole Remove with the utmost severity!" he declared. "I will see that every boy is caned and otherwise punished. To-morrow the servants will return——"

"No!"

"We won't allow them to stay!"

"Rather not!"

The uproar was considerable.

"Silence!" raved Sir Roger. "Every boy will receive a flogging——"

"Rats!" roared Handforth defiantly. "If you punish anybody in the Remove, you'll be sorry for it! For two pins we'll all go on strike, too!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm not joking," shouted Handforth. "I meant it! We can do it! We can strike in sympathy with the staff! We'll refuse to do all work—to write all impots—to accept any canings! They can't fight the whole crowd of us! I'm not suggesting that we should go on strike, but we'll soon do it if Sir Roger brings any of those servants back from Bannington!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Yes; rather!"

"Hurrah!"

"Good for you, Handy!"

The uproar was quite terrific, and Sir Roger Stone could not make himself heard, although he shouted at the top of his voice. He yelled away to the deserted air, for nobody took any notice.

And, truth to tell, Sir Roger was rather alarmed.

He realised that the best thing he could do would be to retire—until the storm was over. The Remove was in a reckless mood, and it would only require another small spark to set it right off.

Sir Roger retired into the House, followed by a perfect yell of derision and scorn. The chairman of the Governors writhed. That he—Sir Roger Stone—should be treated with such disrespect! It was appalling!

He stormed into Dr. Stafford's study.

"Did—did you hear?" he shouted hoarsely.

"My dear sir, I could not help hearing," said the Head. "The disturbance is considerable. But the boys have been aroused, and we cannot altogether blame them for——"

"Cannot blame them!" shouted Sir Roger. "Are you mad, sir? Do you realise that we have no servants? Do you realise that we are in the same position as before? These infernal boys have sent every servant away!"

"The position is very serious," said the Head. "There is no doubt with regard to that point, Sir Roger. I am greatly perturbed. If we are not careful, the boys will take matters into their own hands!"

"Good heavens! You speak as though the boys are capable of running the school!" said Sir Roger hotly. "They are to do as we say, Dr. Stafford! And I intend to have them punished——"

"They will probably create a grave disturbance," interrupted the Head anxiously. "We cannot afford to take any risks. It is a terrible pity this has come about. It seems so pointless, too. There was no necessity for all this trouble. I earnestly beg of you, Sir Roger, to consider——"

"I will consider nothing until the strikers return to the school!" snapped Sir Roger. "That is final!"

"But please consider——"

"I have considered," said Sir Roger. "The position may be serious, but we shall be the masters!"

The Head paced up and down agitatedly.

"Serious!" he echoed. "My dear sir, it is quite appalling! There's not a single servant in the school, and it is quite obvious that the boys do not intend to allow any outsiders to take the places of the strikers."

"The boys do not intend to allow it!" thundered Sir Roger. "Good gracious! Who are they—these boys? Are we to be browbeaten and dictated to by a parcel of impudent junior schoolboys?"

"That is really not the question, Sir Roger," said Dr. Stafford. "When large number of boys get together in this way—and when they have made up their minds to take a certain course—they are extremely difficult to deal with ——"

"You can inflict heavy punishments."

"Quite possibly," agreed the Head. "But I seriously doubt if that would remedy matters. After all, the boys have committed no breach of discipline. I shall punish them lightly, but not heavily."

"And why not heavily, pray?"

"I do not think it would be good policy. And, further, they're not deserving of heavy punishment," replied the Head. "Just at present they are in the very mood to do something reckless. I understand boys better than you do, Sir Roger, and, in my opinion, there is only one safe way out of the difficulty with which we are faced."

"And what solution is that?" demanded Sir Roger.

"I suggest that you grant the staff the fifty per cent. increase," said the Head quietly.

The chairman of the Governors started.

"You—you suggest that we should—surrender?" he exclaimed hoarsely.

"Yes, if you prefer to put it in that way," replied the Head. "It is my opinion that a fifty per cent. increase will not be at all unreasonable. Most of these servants are trustworthy people—men and women who have been in the service of this school for many years. They are deserving of generosity, and, without the slightest doubt, they are deserving of fair treatment."

"Stuff, sir! Stuff!" snapped Sir Roger hotly. "Upon my soul! You will be joining the strikers next! Whatever good qualities these people may have had, they have sacrificed all right to expect generosity. And I positively refuse to agree to their impudent demands. I refuse!"

The Head shrugged his shoulders.

"Then I'm afraid the trouble will be intensified," he said quietly. "Something must be done, at all events. We cannot go on in this way——"

"I will do something—I will even be generous!" exclaimed Sir Roger suddenly. "I told the strikers that they would only receive twenty per cent. increase when they returned, owing to their action in leaving this school. But now I will make a concession. I will raise the percentage to twenty-five once again—and I have no doubt that they will be only too willing to come back. They are only waiting for an opportunity to come to terms."

"I only hope you are right, Sir Roger," said the Head. "But, somehow, I feel that such is not the case. Your concession is actually no concession at all. You had already promised them an increase of five shillings in the pound——"

"But I reduced it," interrupted Sir Roger. "I will now see the leader of the staff, and give him my final offer. If he chooses to cast it aside—well, I shall take other steps immediately."

"I am afraid——"

"Good gracious! All you can do is to say that you are afraid!" shouted the baronet. "I am astonished at your attitude, Dr. Stafford! You appear to be in favour of this strike; you appear to be in sympathy with the strikers! You are entitled to your own opinion, of course; but the less we discuss the matter, the better. What is the name of the impudent rascal who calls himself the leader of these malcontents?"

"He's my head gardener, Broome," said the Head.

"The good-for-nothing ruffian!" snapped Sir Roger.

"On the contrary, Broome is a very respectable man," differed the Head. "He is steady, capable, and a first-class gardener. Seriously, Sir Roger, you are misjudging these people, and I hope it is not too late, even now, to bring you round to my own way of thinking."

"You will never do that—never!" snapped Sir Roger. "Where does this man live in the village—where is he staying at present?"

"I understand that Broome is finding accommodation, with a few others, at the King's Arms Hotel——"

"Huh! A suitable spot!" sneered Sir Roger. "Is there a telephone to this infernal place?"

"I believe there is."

Sir Roger consulted the directory, and a few moments later he was ringing up the King's Arms Hotel, in Bellton. Having got into touch with the proprietor, he requested that Broome should be sent to the instrument.

The strike leader was soon there.

"Oh, so you are Broome?" roared Sir Roger, into the transmitter.

"Yes, sir," came the voice over the wire. "I believe I am having the honour to speak to Sir Roger Stone?"

"Yes, you are!" shouted the baronet. "Come up here at once—to the school. Do you understand?"

"You want me to come up to the school at once, sir?"

"Yes—and make haste!" roared Sir Roger. "I have decided to be generous, and if you waste any time, I may change my mind."

He slammed the receiver on its hook, and the conversation was closed.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DECLARATION OF WAR.

FATTY LITTLE beamed.

"Everything's going to be all serene," he declared. "You ought to have seen the way we chucked those chaps off the school premises! We're not standing any nonsense—and the only servants we'll have are you fellows."

The fat boy was addressing a small crowd of strikers, and he called them all fellows, in spite of the fact that some of them were maidservants. The strikers were decidedly pleased with the news.

They all knew what had happened.

They all knew that some "blacklegs" had been obtained from Bannington, and it was gratifying to learn that the Remove had sent the outsiders off before they could really get to work.

"Nothing could 'ave 'appened better, Master Little," said Tubbs admiringly. "It'll soon be known how them fellers were treated—and it'll scare other chaps off proper."

"That's the very idea of it," remarked Pitt, nodding. "If the local chaps know that they'll be kicked out as soon as they get there, they won't even accept the job. These men came from Bannington;

so the Governors will have difficulty in getting Bannington people to come over. It's my belief that everything will be all serene before long. Sir Roger will be compelled to give in."

"Of course he will," said Fatty. "It can't last. And when it's all over I reckon we ought to have a terrific feed, to celebrate the victory."

"If you had your way," grinned Hart, "you'd have a terrific feed every hour! It's a wonder you're not in old Binko's shop now!"

"He's sold all his stock!" said Fatty sadly.

The fellows had come to the village in order to tell the strikers the news, and the strikers, accordingly, were feeling very cheerful. And then came a fresh piece of information.

Broome came hurrying along from the direction of the King's Arms.

And it was soon known that he had been sent for by Sir Roger Stone!

"It can mean only one thing—the Governors had decided to succumb; they had sent for Broome in order to tell him that the strikers' terms would be accepted.

This was quite taken for granted.

There was a good deal of cheering and plenty of excitement. Victory had come sooner than anybody had expected, and it was an absolute certainty that the staff would be back in the school before the evening was out.

It had certainly been worth striking for!

Broome went up to the school, escorted by a crowd. Some of them were fellow strikers, but they mostly consisted of juniors. Broome himself was quite calm and sedate.

He was a cool man, and it was not his habit to get excited. But as he went towards the Head's study, he looked confident and at ease. Sir Roger had said that he had made up his mind to be generous. It could mean only one thing.

Broome entered the school, and was soon tapping at the door of the Head's study.

"Come in!"

The strike leader entered.

"Ah, you have taken my advice!" exclaimed Sir Roger, glaring at the gardener. "It is just as well, Broome, for I was getting impatient. Well, my man, I have decided to overlook certain things, and to be lenient."

"Thank you, sir!"

"This morning, when you all left your posts, I told you that the only terms you would get would be an increase of twenty per cent!" exclaimed Sir Roger. "I have decided to cancel that decision, Broome. If you and your fellow servants return to St. Frank's within the hour, I am prepared to raise your wages in accordance with my original proposal."

Broome looked astonished.

"I don't quite understand, sir," he said slowly.

"Then you are dense, my man!"

"I understood, sir, that you were willing to grant us the fifty per cent increase," said Broome respectfully. "That was my impression——"

"Oh, was it?" exclaimed the baronet tartly. "Well, you'd better get that impression out of your mind as quickly as possible!"

"But, sir——"

"I have no intention of doing any such thing," proceeded Sir Roger. "You can consider yourself very lucky that I have agreed to raise your wages to the extent of twenty-five per cent. You will certainly not get a farthing more, after this disgraceful exhibition of insubordination."

Broome was disappointed and rather disgusted. It seemed paltry to him that Sir Roger should have brought him right from the village merely to tell him this. The baronet apparently believed that he was acting in a very generous way! He was not such a bad old sort, really, but he was obstinate and short-tempered.

"Well, Broome, what have you got to say?" he demanded.

"Nothing, sir."

"Nothing!" repeated Sir Roger. "Oh, indeed! You do not seem particularly pleased by my decision—not that I care whether you are pleased or displeased. Understand, my man, you must all be back at your posts within the hour."

"I'm sorry, sir," said Broome respectfully, "but, on behalf of the general staff, I cannot accept the terms you have mentioned."

Sir Roger opened and closed his mouth like a fish out of water.

"You—you—you cannot accept?" he gasped at last.

"No, sir."

"You impudent rascal——"

"I have no wish to be impudent, sir, and I'm very sorry indeed that anything like this has happened," said Broome. "I thought I should be the last man in the world to lead a strike; but everybody agrees that this was justified. And we can only return to our duties on the condition that we get our full demands met. We cannot undertake to return unless we receive the fifty per cent. increase.

Sir Roger was thunderstruck, but the Head sat back in his chair quite calmly, and did not seem at all astonished. He had, in fact, expected this to happen. It was obvious to him that it was the only thing that could have happened.

"Upon my soul!" shouted Sir Roger. "You—you dare to stand there, and tell me that you refuse my offer!"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well!" roared Sir Roger, dancing with rage. "Very well! This has decided me, finally! I was inclined to be generous, but now I will have no compunction whatever. You are dismissed from the service of the school, Broome."

"But if you would only listen, sir——"

"I will not listen to a word!"

"I'm sure I can convince you, sir, that we are not unreasonable," said Broome earnestly. "If you'll only hear me out, I will explain the whole position—and I am sure you will be sympathetic."

"I will listen to nothing——"

"One moment, Sir Roger," interrupted the Head. "Do you not think it would be as well to hear what Broome has to say?"

"No, Dr. Stafford, I do not think it would be as well," snapped Sir Roger. "This man is dismissed—he can find work elsewhere! And, what is more, he can convey the information to all the other strikers that they are dismissed, too—every man Jack of them! I will not have any further dealings with these people! They have taken this course, and they must accept the consequences! They shall certainly not return to their posts in this school."

Broome compressed his lips.

"I don't think it is quite fair, sir——" he began.

"I want to hear nothing further from you, my lad. You may go!" roared Sir Roger. "A new staff, complete, will be sent down from London at the earliest possible moment. They, I have no doubt, will be more contented. You may go, Broome!"

The head gardener turned, and left the Head's study without another word.

Truth to tell, he was inwardly alarmed.

He had hardly expected this termination. The strikers did not number thousands, and they had no great organisation to support them. If Sir Roger was really serious—if a complete new staff was actually sent down—then things would be in a bad way for the strikers.

They would have little or no chance of getting back.

Broome hardly knew how to tell his followers what had happened; and for a moment he even wondered if it would be policy to accept Sir Roger's terms on his own initiative. But he did not do so. He had taken up his stand, and he remained firm.

When he got to the village the news soon spread about, and there was much indignation, and a large amount of dismay. The strike was not going so successfully as the servants had thought! And then the Remove got to hear of the latest development.

And the Remove was furious.

Many of the juniors were in the village at the time—waiting to celebrate the good news when it arrived. But, instead of good news, bad news had come.

Handforth was particularly excited.

"There's no need for anybody to be worried!" he roared, addressing a big crowd. "We are going to support you all through, and we'll see that you get back into your old positions!"

"Hurrah!"

"If a new staff is sent down," continued Handforth, "the new staff will not be permitted to remain."

"Hear, hear!"

"That's the stuff, Handy!"

"I second Handforth's statement!" shouted De Valerie. "If a new staff comes, we'll make things so hot for them that they'll be glad to clear out. "We're all going to see this business through—and we're all going to see that justice is done. The strikers can rely upon the Remove to see them through."

"Yes, rather!"

"Good luck to the strikers!"

"Hurrah!"

"We're not going to stand any bunkum from Sir Roger!" roared Handforth. "This is practically a declaration of war—and it's a certainty that some exciting times are coming. All

you've got to do is to keep cool—like I am!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth was very far from being cool. But his attitude was similar to the rest of the fellows. I was feeling rather excited myself, if the truth must be told, and I was just as determined as Handforth to deal drastically with a new staff, if one was installed.

We had pledged ourselves to be loyal to the strikers, and the Remove was going to see fair play!

Sir Roger had declared war, and war it should be!

THE END.

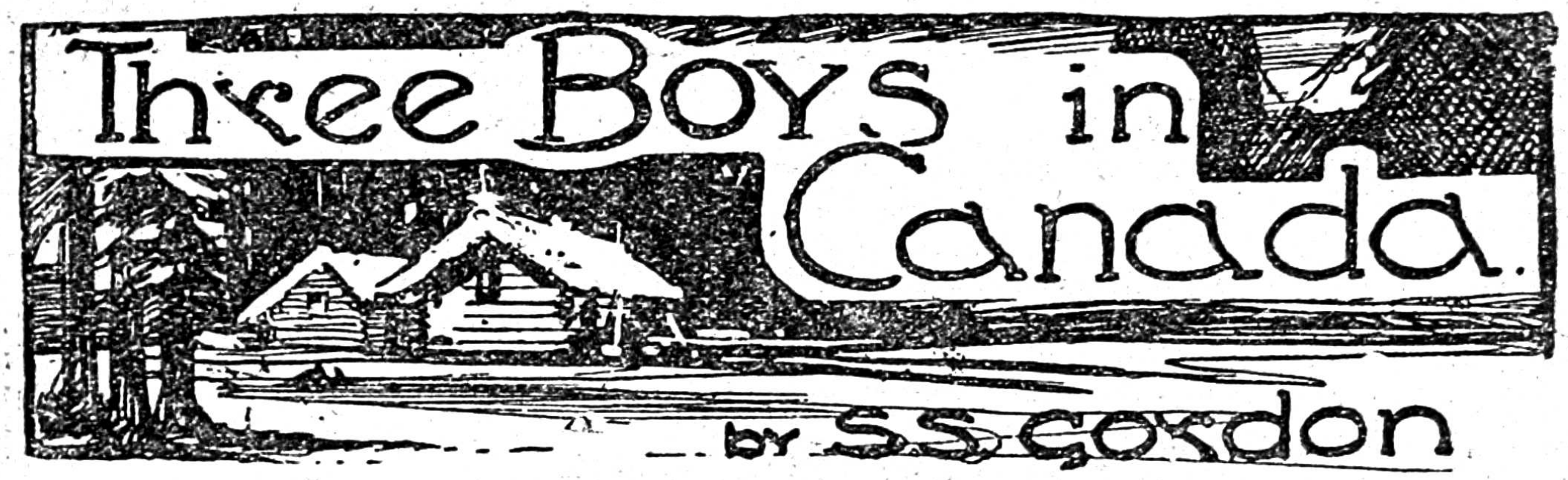
TO MY READERS.

IT *says much for the patience and sense of fair play constituting public opinion at St. Frank's that, notwithstanding the great inconveniences borne by both masters and boys in the absence of domestic labour, there was no embitterment of feeling towards the strikers. The attempt to introduce "blacklegs" from Bannington, and its attendant failure, should have warned Sir Roger Stone that he had gone too far, and that a graceful retreat was advisable to save his dignity, upon which he seemed to set such store. Doubtless he was overloaded with a sense of importance even for his exalted position as Chairman of the Governors, and it took the form of pride and obstinacy. The inevitable in all such cases is a crash from the sublime to the ridiculous. What schoolboy, who has ever pleaded guilty to perpetrating a prank, does not know how closely allied are the above-named moods! Talking of pranks reminds me that we are nearing April 1st, and that if Sir Roger Stone had known anything of boys' or their customs at public schools, he would scarcely have chosen this very date to send down to St. Frank's from London another batch of servants. This is merely asking for trouble, but such is what actually happens, and you can rely on the Remove making the most of it. In arranging for the new staff of domestics to arrive at the school on the night of April 1st after "lights out," Sir Roger fondly believes that he is outwitting the boys. But the boys get wind of it, and prepare a counter-stroke, with due regard to the anniversary of Fools' Day. Of this hoax, which was to set all Bellton and Bannington in uproarious laughter for many a day, you will have the opportunity of reading in next week's story under the title of "APRIL FOOLS! or, THE SCHOOL WITHOUT SERVANTS.*

Should the following notice chance to catch the eye of a reader to whom it is directed, I trust he will answer his mother's anxious appeal forthwith: "Dear Sid,—If you want to come home, come; if not, write. Mother worried.—E.L."

THE EDITOR.

YOU CAN BEGIN READING THIS FINE NEW SERIAL TO-DAY!



A Tale of Life and Adventure in the North-West.

INTRODUCTION.

JACK ROYCE, *returned from Canada, has called to see his brother,*

TEDDY ROYCE, *a clerk in London. While the brothers are together, they are aroused by a loud summons at the door.*

GERALD TELFORD *has been set upon by roughs, and seeks assistance of the Royces. The roughs are driven off. Later, Gerald is informed by his guardian, Mr. Cardone, that the money which the lad was to inherit is lost, with the exception of £50. The three lads agree to try their luck in Canada. They set sail for Montreal, and eventually reach Winnipeg. Throughout the journey they are shadowed by a man named Obed Snaith, one of the ruffians who had attacked Gerald in London, and who is believed to be in the pay of Mr. Cardone. While in Winnipeg, the chums rescue a man, nicknamed the Mad Prospector, from ruffians. The man, however, dies of his injuries, but gives the lads a secret chart of a rich gold discovery. The three lads proceed to Medicine Hat, south of Alberta, where they are offered work at St. Pierre, 150 miles further N.W. Jack is put in charge of the train taking them there, and observes Obed Snaith with the party. When they near the end of the journey, Jack discovers that Gerald is missing from the train, and suspects foul play. At St. Pierre the brothers Royce procure horses and set out to Devil's Falls in search of their chum. While crossing a dangerous trestle bridge spanning the Falls, they are attacked from behind by two men who had been following them.*

(*Now read on.*)

The Fight on the Trestle Bridge.

JACK'S heart began to beat a trifle fast as he recognised the menace in Obed Snaith's tones. There was also something about the big Swede's chuckle that set his nerves tingling.

"So you've come back to look for your dear little pal, eh?" said Snaith. "Waal, if ye look deep down enough, ye might find him; there's no sayin'."

He laughed again, and Jack's blood ran somewhat cold as he heard the words. His eyes would look down between the stringers of the bridge into the boiling flood a hundred feet beneath him. He could as yet see little of the waters, but the din they made was quite enough for him.

"So it was foul play, was it?" he asked hotly. "You—you threw him down there! Oh, my gracious! Gerald down there!"

Obed Snaith laughed again.

"Seeing your last minute has practically come, my friend," he said, "I might as well admit I did. I think you have been suspecting me all along, Mr. Royce, of having evil intentions towards Gerald Telford. You're a wise bird—much too wise for my liking. Well, if it's any satisfaction to you to know it, your suspicions were quite correct. What a mistake you made to come all the way back here, looking for Telford! All the good you did was to find a nice easy place for me and Hank here to dispose of two confounded busybodies in the same manner. Now, say your prayers; you're both going over in half a minute from now."

Teddy Royce had quite forgotten his giddiness now. He listened to this conversation with ever-widening eyes. He could hardly believe there was such wickedness in the world as this. Bred and brought up in a respectable, humdrum atmosphere, this sort of villainy was something entirely new to him. When he realised the predicament he and his brother were in, he was perhaps

surprised at himself that he did not feel much fear—perhaps he hadn't been close enough to death yet to understand what fear of it really meant; but he felt very angry.

"Dot man," said Olesen, the big Swede, pointing a great stump of a finger at Jack, "he yoost kicked me off der train to-night. Vot for you kill him quick? Vot for you not some fun mid him haf before. Ja! Dis is der very best place to make 'em yump!"

He pointed to the stringers at his feet.

"Der little von," he continued, giving Teddy a shake that awoke even more furious anger in the youngster's heart, "him dance like ein cat on der bricks hot—no?"

"Want a bit o' sport with 'em, eh, Hank?" laughed Obed Snaith. "Waal, we can have it with the kid. But the big feller can just go right over the edge now."

He reached out a hand to seize Jack Royce's arm. Jack, bad though the position was, had no intention of going under without a struggle. Besides himself, he was fearful over the position of Teddy. When Snaith reached out for him, he lashed out with all the force of his strong right arm, and, though his footing was insecure and slippery, succeeded in catching Snaith on the point of the chin, sending him staggering back.

This was plainly a piece of resistance neither Snaith nor Olesen had expected. They had probably quite taken it for granted that the Royces would put the odds down as too many against them and give in without a struggle; but, if they thought that, they had been sadly mistaken.

When Snaith staggered back from the blow, one of his feet, instead of catching the stringer behind him, missed it, and went clean through the space. Snaith gave out a shriek of fear, and threw his arms outwards. But his weight carried him down; his entire body went through the gap. But he plainly had a certain amount of luck, for he fell in such a position that he was able to grip one of the sleepers with each hand, and he hung there, bawling for help.

"Serves the beast right!" shouted Teddy, and at the same time lashed out in quick succession with both feet at the shins of the big Swede who was holding him. "Make me dance, would you?" the boy shrilled. "Not in these trousers!"

He hacked again, so furiously that the big Swede gave out a shriek of agony, and bent down to rub his shins. Teddy, his fighting blood now well up, and entirely heedless of the danger of tussling on this precarious foothold, deliberately smacked the big fellow several times in the face the while he rubbed himself.

"Oh!" roared Hank Olesen; and rushed forward at the boy.

But Teddy was nimble. He jumped backwards, and landed firmly. When it came to a dodging match between the agile little Britisher and this huge, clumsy animal of a Swede, Teddy had all the advantage.

In the meanwhile, Obed Snaith was hanging on with both hands, his feet dangling over the dreadful depths. He was shrieking for help, but, like a gnat at a bull, Teddy was keeping the Swede too much occupied to permit him to assist his associate.

Jack, now he had the chance, took out his revolver, and cocked it. He stared down at the yelling Snaith for a few seconds, biting his lips. He knew that, had he been in the same position as Snaith, the latter would undoubtedly have stamped on his hands or kicked at his head, or done something to make him release his hold. But Jack Royce was not the sort of fellow to take such an advantage of a beaten enemy. By a rare stroke of good fortune, coupled with a quickness of action that had surprised even himself, he had managed to turn the tables for the time being on his enemy. He considered he could afford to be generous.

By now the Swede and Teddy were dodging all over the trestle-bridge. The Swede had an ugly knife in his hand, and he was roaring like a baited bull; but Teddy was nimble enough to keep out of his way. He did not want assistance from Jack as yet.

Jack shifted the revolver to his left hand, and, stooping well down, seized Snaith's collar with his right. He gave a jerk that dragged Snaith half his length upwards. Snaith, screaming like a very coward, clawed at the wood of the stringers, and managed to rest his elbows on them. Jack braced himself for another jerk.

Then he changed his mind. He saw

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

that Snaith could hold nimself so for some time without undue fatigue, though it is to be doubted whether he could have pulled himself quite up to safety. Accordingly, Jack left him where he was, and stepped over to help his brother.

"Olesen," he ordered sharply, "sling that knife over!"

As the muzzle of Jack's revolver was within three feet of the big Swede's face as he spoke, it probably is not surprising that Hank obeyed with alacrity. The knife described an arc in the dawning light, and vanished over the edge of the bridge.

"Now," Jack ordered, "just you sit down, you great big slob! D'ye hear me? Sit down!"

Like a spanked schoolboy, Hank sat down on a timber, growling impotently. Jack handed the revolver over to his brother.

"Just keep it pointing at the swab," he said, "and if he moves so much as an eyelash, just bore holes through his big carcase. And don't hesitate to shoot!' he added.

"I sha'n't!" Teddy said simply, and pointed the cocked weapon straight at the heart of the big man.

Olesen let out another roar. It was now getting light enough to see the expression on his face. It was that of a thoroughly whipped bully, and was, furthermore, full of fear.

"Dot boy," he yelled, "him let it go off! Turn it away! Dot pistol might go off!"

"And if it does, you go off too!" Teddy said. "Off the earth, too!" he added. "All right, Jack, I've got the blighter where I want him."

Jack turned again to Snaith, who was struggling furiously to get his feet up on the bridge, but failing hopelessly. Jack leaned down, and groped behind the man with his hand. His fingers closed on a pistol Snaith was carrying in his hip-pocket, and he had it almost drawn out, when Snaith reached upwards and hooked a hand round Jack's neck. Jack was pulled on his face across two sleepers by the sudden weight. Snaith, with another yell, hooked his other arm about the Britisher. Jack was safe enough: he could not be dragged through the bridge as he was, but he plainly afforded an excellent means for Snaith to climb up.

Snaith hooked backwards with his feet, and got a toe-hold on a timber; then, with another jerk, he was lying across the timber close alongside Jack, his arms still holding the boy in a bear-like hug. Jack, for his part, closed his own arms about the man, though he still retained his grip on the captured revolver.

It was perilous, though. Over and over in each other's arms they rolled once or twice. A slight twist sideways might easily have resulted in both going through to their death together; but, setting his teeth, Jack fought with him. He was determined to have the fellow at his mercy, and, when it came to any sort of hand-to-hand work, Jack considered he was equal to most men—certainly equal to any man like Obed Snaith.

Teddy watched the fight anxiously; but he wisely kept out of it. He knew that Olesen, with half a chance, would probably either go to his confederate's assistance, or else would rush at the younger Royce, and take him in a bear-like hug. So, though he followed the fight, he kept one wary eye on the huge Swede, and absently fingered the hammer of the revolver, making it click in such a manner as to fetch protesting, frightened roars from the deep chest of the man.

At length, however, Jack found himself uppermost in the struggle. He got his knees into Snaith's chest, his knuckles into his throat. There he held him, while Snaith glared up at him like a trapped tiger.

"The sooner you quit this foolishness the better, Johnson!" Jack said, between his teeth. "Another move from you and I'm going to give you this clean between the two eyes—see?" He swung the captured revolver.

For answer, Snaith suddenly snapped at his hand with his teeth. He got them home, too. In the pain of the moment, Jack carried out his threat; and though it, perhaps, was not the nicest thing to do, it was, in the long run, the safest. He brought the scoundrel's revolver down with a smash on the man's face. Snaith gave a groan and lay quite still, stunned.

Jack, panting and looking very fierce, scrambled to his feet. He looked down at the inanimate Snaith for a moment,

(Continued overleaf.)

then stepped over to where Hank Olesen was sitting. The Swede, who had seen the manner in which his confederate had been treated, and being nothing more than a great, soft, white-livered cur, put his hands to his face and bawled for mercy.

"Stand up!" Jack ordered.

The man obeyed. Jack, livid with anger, took a running kick at him, which all but lifted him off his feet. Then he sailed in with his fists. Inside of a minute he had Olesen howling.

"There," said Jack, his temper cooling down somewhat. "I'll teach both of you to come interfering with me. Now, if you make a move from now on, I'll—by gad! I'll shoot you!"

Olesen lay on his back, bawling to the sky. Jack stared about him thoughtfully, and as it was now quite light enough to see what actually was below him, he stared through the sleepers into the turgid depths below.

The falls were magnificent, from any tourist's point of view; but Jack and Teddy, recollecting that they had been within an ace of being hurled down them at one time, surveyed them with feelings of horror.

"And—and that brute threw Gerald down there!" Jack muttered. "Poor Gerald! So it's all up with the boy; and we'll never know why Snaith so persistently dogged him. But I'm ready to swear, Teddy, that Septimus Cardone, Gerald's guardian, had something to do with this murder—for it is murder."

(To be continued.)

Printed and Published every Wednesday by the Proprietors, The Amalgamated Press, Limited. The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Subscription Rates: Inland, 11s. per annum. 5s. 6d for six months. Abroad, 8s. 10d. per annum; 4s. 5d. for six months. Sole Agents for South Africa: The Central News Agency, Limited. Sole Agents for Australia and New Zealand: Messrs. Gordon & Gotch, Limited; and for Canada: The Imperial News Company, Limited.