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HANDFORTH AND CO. MAKE THE REMOVE MASTER'S BED.

APRIL FOOLS;

Or, THE SCHOOL WITHOUT SERVANTS.

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 "A Lesson Well Learnt," "The Schoolboy Agitators," "The School on Strike," etc.

April 3, 1920.

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

THE SCHOOL WITHOUT SERVANTS.

"WAR to the giddy knife!" said Edward Oswald Handforth. "That's what it means now, my sons. Well, the Governors have asked for it, so they can't grumble."

"There's to be pretty lively times, too," I remarked. "We haven't got to the end of the strike yet."

"Begad! It's only just started, dear old boy," said Sir Montie Tregellis-West languidly. "We've managed to rub through to-day fairly all right, but I'm shockin'ly afraid that we shall have trouble to-morrow."

"Rats! It'll be all over to-morrow," declared McClure. "The school can't stand much of this. Sir Roger will be compelled to cave in to-morrow, and then the staff will come back."

"But the staff has been dismissed, you ass!"

"That doesn't matter," said McClure. "All the strikers have got the sack, I know. But they'll come back—they'll have to come back. We're not going to allow any other servants to get a footing here."

"Hear, hear!"

"No blacklegs allowed!"

"The old staff, or none!"

"Good!"

"That's the way to talk," said Handforth, nodding. "As long as we stick to that attitude we shall be all right. It rests with us, mainly. If we remain strong we shall win the day for the strikers. If we grow weak—well, it'll mean the permanent sack for the whole crowd."

There was a great deal of truth in Handforth's remark.

The Remove was discussing the exciting events of the day. Most of the fellows were gathered together in the junior common-room of the Ancient House. It was fairly late in the evening, and it would soon be supper-time.

Whether there would be any supper was another question!

For a remarkable state of affairs existed at St. Frank's. The school staff, to be blunt, was on strike! Not a single servant remained on the premises. In both houses the only inhabitants were boys and masters.

And the majority of the fellows were whole-heartedly in sympathy with the strikers. The Remove supported the staff's cause, and had pledged itself to help in every possible way. For the strike was fully justified.

Even the Head himself was disposed to sympathise. The trouble was quite simple, and ought to have been settled without a moment's delay. It would have been settled but for the obstinacy

of Sir Roger Stone, the chairman of the Board of Governors.

The staff had only received a ten per cent. advance in wages since the beginning of the war! And now, with goods double and treble the price, it was regarded as right and just that the servants should have a further fifty per cent. advance. Even then, the employees would be getting less than the employees of many other schools of the standing of St. Frank's.

The wage increase had been long delayed, and the household staff had at last become impatient. The juniors were responsible in a measure, for bringing the matter to a head.

Some of the fellows had discovered the truth regarding the wages question, and Handforth had lost no time in commencing a campaign. This had fired other juniors, with the result that the staff came to a full and sudden realisation of its position.

A deputation had waited upon the Head, asking him for the required advance. Dr. Stafford was unable to grant the increase personally, although he gave the staff fully to understand that he was in full agreement.

The Head had communicated with the Governors, with the result that the chairman, Sir Roger Stone, had come down with several other Governors. They had listened to the staff's grievance, and had generously granted a twenty-five per cent. increase!

Naturally, the servants were not satisfied with this, and when Sir Roger stated that his decision was absolutely final, there was only one course. The staff went on strike.

The blow had fallen in the morning, and for the whole day the school had been without servants. In the late afternoon a few men had come over from Bannington, to act as emergency hands—but these unfortunate individuals had been hurled off the premises—not violently, of course—by the Remove.

The Remove was standing by the strikers, and it could not allow blackleg labour to be employed. Not only this, but the fellows were determined not to do any household work on their own account.

Sir Roger, in a fit of anger, had sacked the whole staff, declaring that a new staff, complete in every detail, would be sent down from London. But the juniors would have something to say about that!

The Remove, in any case, was determined to see fair play, and the Remove would certainly refuse to allow a new staff to take possession of the school. Sir Roger, or no Sir Roger, the strikers were going to win!

But it looked like being a stiff fight.

This was quite wrong. There ought to have been no fight at all. The fifty per cent. asked for was not only reasonable, but surprisingly moderate. Nelson Lee himself had stated that the advance was not generous enough; the Head thought the same.

And yet the stubborn Governors refused to see reason; they turned a deaf ear to all commonsense advice. The truth was, they were old-fashioned and conservative in their views, and did not seem to realise the necessity for drastic changes. It was not the school staff's fault that the cost of every commodity had risen in price out of all proportion to its real value.

The ultimate fate of the strikers really depended upon the boys themselves. If the school continued to support the strike all would be well. The Governors would be bound to give in, sooner or later. But if the boys allowed a new staff to be installed, it was quite likely that the strikers would be defeated.

"We're not going to stand any bunkum," declared Handforth firmly. "The only servants who will be allowed to work here are our own servants. No outsiders allowed."

"That's the idea," said Pitt. "As long as we stick together——"

"Just a minute, you kids!"

Morrow, of the Sixth, appeared in the common-room. He looked round rather grimly, and the juniors waited, wondering what was coming.

"I want a dozen of you fellows at once," said Morrow.

"Oh!" said De Valerie. "What for?"

"You'll see before long——"

"That's not good enough, thanks," interrupted Handforth. "If you think we're going to prepare supper, you're off side, Morrow. There's nothing doing."

"No fear!"

"We're not sent to school to do servant's work!"

Morrow looked grim.

"Don't be a set of young asses," he said. "I'm as much in favour of this strike as you are——"

"Good for you, Morrow!"

"I'm quite in sympathy with the staff," went on the prefect, "and I think the Governors ought to grant the fifty per cent. rise in wages. At the same time, I don't happen to be a silly idiot!"

"Really?" said Handforth, in astonishment.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you try to be funny, my son, you'll get fifty lines to make your grin broader," said Morrow grimly. "Why can't you kids be sensible? What's the good of taking up an impossible attitude? You say you won't do any household work——"

"We won't!"

"Rather not!"

"My dear young asses, you'll be compelled to do it," said Morrow. "When you go to your dormitory you'll find your beds just as you left them this morning. You'll be doing household work in making those beds——"

"We shall get into 'em just as they are," said Handforth.

"And, in any case, I don't see the idea," went on the prefect. "We're all in this bowl of soup together, and we've got to do the best we can. It's almost a case of each fellow for himself. And to take up a stand, and say you won't do any household work, is simply idiotic. Chuck those ideas, and look alive. I want a dozen fellows, now at once."

"What for?" I asked. "What are we supposed to do?"

"Nothing much," replied Morrow. "I've got to take you round to the masters' bedrooms, and you'll have to make all the beds——"

"Not likely!"

"No giddy fear!"

"We ain't going to be chambermaids, thanks!"

"No bedmaking for us, Morrow!"

"Look here——" began the prefect warmly.

"We're not having any," roared Handforth. "Our people didn't send us here to do servant's work. I know the circumstances are exceptional, but that doesn't matter. If the servants had struck without reason we should have been against 'em—then we should have worked like fury on the house duties. But we ain't going to be blackiegs!"

"Hear, hear!"

"That's the talk, Handy!"

Morrow frowned.

"All right!" he exclaimed. "I've done the best I can with you—and I think you're a set of young mugs! Don't blame me for what happens."

The prefect strode out of the room, and the juniors discussed the situation warmly. Personally, I was rather amused. I didn't care particularly whether I did any household work or not. As Morrow said, the circumstances were exceptional. And we shouldn't really be blacklegs by doing a bit for the common cause. But I was prepared to act according to the vote of the Form.

"Dear old boy," murmured Sir Montie Tregellis-West, "it seems that we're goin' to have some trouble already."

"I shouldn't be at all surprised, Montie," I replied. "In fact, if I'm not mistaken, I can hear the fairy footsteps of Mr. Crowell at this very moment."

"Begad!"

I was right. For the next moment the door of the common-room opened, and Mr. Crowell, the Remove master, appeared. He was looking rather stern as he swept his eagle glance round the room.

"I sent Morrow here on a mission a few minutes ago," he said coldly. "I understand that you refused to obey Morrow's orders?"

"Silence!"

"Very well," said the Form master. "The Remove will be detained for half an hour after morning lessons to-morrow. Perhaps you will learn, during that half-hour, that a prefect is to be obeyed—and not flouted."

"But you don't understand, sir," exclaimed Handforth.

"I do understand," snapped Mr. Crowell. "This absurd notion about refusing housework is ridiculous. I require twelve boys at once. If you do not volunteer, you will be selected."

"But, sir——"

"Silence! I want no objections!"

The Remove fellows looked at one another rather blankly. There was no sidetracking Mr. Crowell, once he got fairly on the war path. And he seemed to be on the war path now. His word, with the Remove, was law.

"Well," he went on, after a grim pause, "who will volunteer?"

"Look here, sir, it doesn't seem right," declared Handforth. "We're pupils here—not servants——"

"I don't want any absurd talk from you, Handforth," interrupted Mr. Crowell icily. "Your unfortunate Form fellows suffer enough in that respect, without inflicting your conversation upon me!"

The juniors tittered, and Handforth turned red.

"I'm talking sense, sir!" he roared. "We're not supposed——"

"Rubbish!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell. "Rubbish, sir! It does not matter to me what you are supposed to do, and what you are not supposed to do. The school is in the predicament of being without servants—mainly because of your own actions——"

"My actions, sir?" exclaimed Handforth.

"I am referring to the whole Remove," said Mr. Crowell. "After the strike took place temporary servants were obtained from Bannington—but you boys took matters into your own hands, and conducted the new servants off the premises——"

"They were blacklegs, sir!"

"Yes, rather!"

"We weren't going to stand them here!"

"You are talking nonsense, boys!" said Mr. Crowell sharply. "Something has to be done in an emergency of this kind—and since you have deprived the school of the temporary servants, you must do some of the household work yourselves."

"Oh!"

"But we're not going to be blacklegs ——"

"Silence!" shouted the Form master. "I require twelve boys, and I am not willing to stand any further absurdity. You must hurry up. Who will volunteer?"

Nobody ventured to do so, and Mr. Crowell had no further patience. He selected Handforth and Co., De Valerie, Pitt, and several others. I was left out of it, and so were Tregellis-West and Watson.

The twelve unfortunate juniors glared at one another, and glared at Mr. Crowell. But they could not very well mutiny.

They were marched off upstairs, and divided into three parties, each party being in charge of a prefect.

Handforth and Co. and Hart formed one party, and they were placed under Morrow's charge.

Their duty was to make several beds.

"Beastly cheek, I call it," grumbled Handforth warmly. "I don't see why we should make beds. It's not fair to force the chaps to do anything. It's the duty of the Governors to provide the school with servants—and to pay them decently. Instead of that, the Governors mess everything up——"

"That's enough, Handforth," put in Morrow, briskly. "This way."

"Rats! I'm not ready yet——"

"Then you'd better be ready in two seconds, my lad," said the prefect.

"But look here——"

"Do you want me to go to Mr. Crowell?"

"Oh, it's rotten, that's all I can say," snapped Handforth. "It's a fine state of affairs, when we're forced to work like—like a giddy press gang!"

The first bedroom to receive attention from Handforth and Co. was Mr. Crowell's. As there were no servants in the school, the apartment was exactly as Mr. Crowell had left it that morning, and there was much to be done.

Handforth and Co. did much.

But, somehow, they progressed the wrong way. After ten minutes had elapsed Mr. Crowell's bedroom was in a far worse condition than it had been before the juniors had commenced operations.

The untidiness was appalling. Blankets lay all over the floor, one of the sheets had been trodden on profusely, and by no means improved in appearance. Feathers had been escaping from the pillow, and they were floating serenely in the air.

Morrow had been away for a few minutes, attending to other juniors, and when he returned he expected to find the bed made, and the room tidy.

He found hopeless confusion.

"Why, you young idiots," what's the meaning of this?" he demanded angrily. "Great Scot! What have you been doing here?"

"Making the bed and clearing up the room," said Church.

"Making the bed!" shouted Morrow. "Why, you young ass, the bed's all over the floor! Who split open that pillow?"

"Handforth trod upon it, I believe," explained Hart cheerfully. "You can't expect any pillow to stand treatment of

that kind. And you can't expect us to know anything about household work. We're doing our best——"

"Your worst, you mean!" exclaimed Morrow tartly. "Get busy now, and finish doing the bed. Buck up!"

The juniors bucked up. Church tossed the pillow across to McClure, McClure dodged, and it struck Morrow fairly in the chest. The feathers flew out in a huge cloud, smothering the prefect completely. He sat down on the floor with a bump, and resembled a snow man more than an ordinary senior.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Gug-gug-groooh!" gasped Morrow.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'll—I'll skin you for this!" yelled Morrow, jumping up, and sending the feathers flying still further. "You confounded—groooh!—young sweeps! I'll—I'll report you to——"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Church. "Here comes old Crowell!"

There was no time to escape. Mr. Crowell came charging into his bedroom, probably guessing that something was wrong by the fact that feathers were floating out into the passage like a miniature snowstorm.

"Good-good gracious me!" shouted the Form master. "What is the meaning of this? What—what—what——"

He broke off, spluttering, several of the feathers having entered his mouth.

"It seems to me these juniors are useless, sir," said Morrow fiercely. "All they can do is to make the confusion worse!"

"Upon my soul!" gasped Mr. Crowell. "The same thing is happening in the other bedrooms—the boys are creating muddle everywhere! Send them out, Morrow—send them out at once! I will have nothing more to do with them!"

Handforth and Co. and Hart were pitched out—very lucky to escape without lines. When they got downstairs in the lobby they grinned cheerfully, in common with a good many other juniors.

"Good!" said Handforth, with a chuckle. "That's the way to do it, my sons! I'll bet we sha'n't be asked to make beds again!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Rather not!"

It was quite certain that the masters would leave the boys severely alone in the future. The juniors could not very well be punished for inefficiency in household duties, although the masters knew well enough that the fellows had purposely made themselves awkward. It was decided that the best method was to leave them alone.

Something would have to be done, of course. The school was without servants, and there did not seem much likelihood of getting any. Sir Roger had left the school, and no local people would agree to take the jobs, for they knew well enough that the juniors would make things uncomfortable for them.

The strikers were still in the village—sticking together, and fully determined to hold out until their demands were met. Many of them were rather afraid. They had an idea that the forces against them were too strong, and they would be ultimately beaten.

But I had been down to the village earlier that day, with crowds of other juniors, and we had assured the staff that they had our full and complete support, and that we should do everything in our power to aid their cause.

Furthermore, the whole countryside was in sympathy, and the staff met nothing but kindliness on every hand. The goodhearted villagers were giving the strikers shelter and food, feeling certain that they would win the day.

The Remove, at all events, was determined that they should win.

But much excitement was to happen before victory came.

CHAPTER II.

THE TRICKS OF CHANCE.

"YAH, April fool!" shrieked Lemon of the Third.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was the next day—the first of April—and the fags were having a regular joy-day. Even the Removites indulged in a considerable amount of japing, but not to the extent which was usually the case.

For on this All Fools' Day the fellows had other things to think about—food and questions of similar gravity. Dinner had not been much of a success, although the school had provided plenty of food.

We had had tinned beef and bread in plenty—for this was easy to prepare—

finishing up with tinned fruit. But it did not satisfy the fellows as a properly cooked dinner would have done. And this sort of thing could not last, of course. The Governors probably realised this as much as the masters did.

It was rather a weak April Fools' Day, on the whole, and the japes which were indulged in were only of a mild form. But this day, as it happened, was to be one of very great importance. Some exciting events were destined to occur which would considerably alter the aspect of the whole situation.

Just before morning lessons, Morrow of the Sixth had occasion to go to the Headmaster's study. Morrow had been working hard, and he went to the Head for further orders, having been instructed to do so.

I had also made up my mind to visit Dr. Stafford, for I wanted to ask him, on behalf of the Remove, if it wouldn't be possible for us to get up a petition, signed by every fellow at St. Frank's, asking the Governors to grant the strikers' demands. But before getting up the petition I wanted the Head's consent.

Morrow found the Head's study empty, so he sat down in the easy-chair, and waited, smiling to himself. The Head, no doubt, was partaking of dinner, and Morrow hoped that he was enjoying it.

Ting-ting-ting-ting!

The twin bells of the telephone rang sharply, and Morrow started up in his chair. For a moment he hesitated, wondering whether he should call the Head, or answer the 'phone himself.

He decided, after a second or two, to see who the caller was, and to call Dr. Stafford if the matter was of any importance. So Morrow sat down at the Head's desk, lifted the receiver from its hook, and placed it to his ear.

To his astonishment, he heard two voices.

"Quite so—quite so, Sir Roger," came the Head's voice, with startling distinctness. "I understand you perfectly."

"You can hear everything I say?" came the voice of Sir Roger Stone, faint and far away, but quite distinct.

"Yes, I can hear well," said the Head. "The line is clear to-day, Sir Roger, considering that you are speaking from London."

Morrow was quite puzzled for a moment or two, then he jumped to the truth. He remembered that the Headmaster had an extension fitted in his dining-room, and he was obviously answering the telephone himself.

As is generally the case with an extension 'phone, both sets of bells ring simultaneously, and it is possible to talk from either instrument, or from both at the same time. Thus, Morrow could have spoken, and his voice would have been audible to the Head and Sir Roger. But Morrow remained silent.

It was quite easy for him to listen to everything that went on, without the other being aware of the fact. Extension telephones are ideal arrangements for anybody who wishes to overhear a private conversation in perfect safety.

Morrow was no eavesdropper, and his first impulse was to hang up the receiver at once, and wait until the Headmaster appeared.

But Morrow, after all, was only human. A decent, straight fellow, he nevertheless failed to resist the temptation to keep his ear to the telephone. For, in a measure, he was justified.

He heard one or two words which had the effect of setting all his scruples aside. The words came from Sir Roger.

"Listen, Stafford. I have something of great importance to tell you," came the baronet's voice, from far-off London. "I have engaged a complete new staff, and intend to send them down to St. Frank's to-day. The strikers, let me tell you, are utterly defeated, and they can starve for all I care."

Morrow set his teeth grimly.

He certainly would listen—and without compunction.

"I am sorry to hear you speaking so harshly, Sir Roger," came the Head's voice.

"Harshly!" snapped Sir Roger. "Nonsense! I am quite generous, and if the strikers had any sense, they would have accepted my terms. I have rung you up now because I wish to tell you of my plans. The new staff has been engaged, and has received its instructions. It will be installed at once."

"I am very sorry to hear this, Sir Roger," said Dr. Stafford gravely.

"Sorry! What do you mean?"

"I am thinking of our original staff——"

"Tut-tut! Put them out of your mind!" exclaimed Sir Roger curtly. "They deserve no sympathy whatever, and they will certainly receive none from me. I've arranged that the new servants shall arrive in Bannington to-night at ten-thirty. They will then be conveyed to St. Frank's in two char-a-bancs."

"But would it not be possible for them to come straight through to Bellton by the earlier train, and thus save the trouble of motoring?"

"My dear Stafford, I am afraid you are not very diplomatic. I have thought this matter out thoroughly. I do not want the new servants to arrive while the boys are about the school. According to my plan, the staff will get to St. Frank's after all the boys are in bed—and the school will awake in the morning to find the new staff fully installed. Do you not think it is rather neat?"

"I would prefer to pass no opinion."

"Just as you like!" snapped Sir Roger, over the wire. "I am afraid you are very half-hearted, Stafford—in fact, you are inclined to sympathise with those infernal strikers!"

"I am more than inclined," came the Head's voice. "I certainly do sympathise with them. Cannot you reconsider your decision——"

"Certainly not!" interrupted the baronet. "These people have elected to act in this way, and they must take the consequences. I have no pity to waste on them. Now, with regard to my arrangements. The new set of servants will be installed somewhere about eleven-thirty to-night, and when the boys awaken in the morning everything will be running smoothly."

"I am afraid there will be trouble ——"

"Rubbish, sir!" said Sir Roger. "I shall be there personally to see that no trouble arises. In fact, I am coming to St. Frank's almost at once. If there is any disturbance in the morning, I shall deal with it drastically."

"Very well, Sir Roger. Since you have taken this matter entirely into your own hands, I have no option but to stand in the background," said the Headmaster coldly. "I only trust that your efforts will be successful, although I must confess that I am troubled with grave misgivings."

"You will find that I am not easily baulked," said Sir Roger. "I have set my mind upon this plan, and I intend to carry it through. I have rung you up now, so that you should know well in advance—so that you may make certain preparations. But on no account allow any of the boys to obtain an inkling of what is to occur."

Morrow could tell that the conversation was nearly at a close, so he quietly placed the receiver back on its hook, and turned away from the instrument, his face very thoughtful and rather grim.

"Dotty?" inquired a pleasant voice.

Morrow started.

Then he became aware, for the first time, that Fenton of the Sixth was standing just inside the door. Edgar Fenton was the captain of the school, and one of the best. He regarded Morrow rather curiously.

"I—er—that is——"

Morrow paused, rather confused.

"What's the idea?" asked Fenton.

"Eh? The—the idea?"

"I've been standing here for about a Well, to tell you the truth, I was listen-" and you've had that receiver glued to your ear, but you haven't spoken a word. I thought you were waiting to get a number."

"No," said Morrow slowly. "I—— Well, to tell you the truth, I was listening to a conversation."

"You were doing what?"

"The Head's been speaking from the extension, you know," said Morrow. "He and Sir Roger, who seems to be in London, have been having a jaw. I thought I'd hang on, and hear what they had to say."

Fenton frowned.

"Hang it all, that wasn't quite the thing, old man!" he protested. "I don't quite agree——"

"Look here," interrupted Morrow grimly. "You can call me an eavesdropper, if you like, but I'm deucedly glad I listened. That confounded Sir Roger has played a dirty trick; and I am furious about it."

"I don't quite understand," said Fenton.

"It won't take me half a minute to explain——"

And just at that moment I happened to come along, to put my idea about a petition before the Head. It was rather curious that we should all go to the

Head's study at that time, but there was nothing very astonishing about it.

I was feeling a trifle uncertain as I arrived at the Head's study. I found the door slightly ajar, and I entered at once. Dr. Stafford wasn't there, but Fenton and Morrow were on the other side of the desk, with their backs towards me. I stood waiting for a second, until Morrow had finished speaking. I wasn't rude enough to interrupt.

"The facts are quite simple," Morrow was saying. "That old rotter has engaged a complete new staff, and it's coming down by the last train to-night—to Bannington. Do you get the idea? The new servants won't get here until after everybody's in bed, and when the school wakes up in the morning—well, everything will be going on as of old. And those poor people in the village will be completely beaten."

"Phew!" said Fenton slowly.

I suppose I had the same kind of feelings as Morrow. I wanted to hear more, without revealing my own presence. The seniors certainly wouldn't take me into their confidence—they were too high and mighty to share a secret with a mere junior. And I felt that it was most important that I should know of this new development.

So I quietly stepped back, until I was concealed by the door. Then I stood still, waiting for the seniors to continue. Thus, by the strange tricks of chance, representatives of the senior school and the junior school were in possession of the news almost as soon as the Headmaster himself!

"Phew!" repeated Fenton. "I don't blame you for listening, old man. So that's the game, is it? A complete new staff—and it's coming down to-night?"

"The new servants will reach Bannington at ten-thirty," said Morrow, in a low voice. "By George! Just think of the cunning of the scheme! I didn't think Sir Roger had enough wits. But it's mean—contemptible! He's bringing this new staff down, and planting it on the school in secret, so that we shall wake up in the morning and find the old staff whacked for good."

"It seems a bit dirty," agreed Fenton. "It's a beastly pity, too. I'm all in sympathy with our own people. They deserve fifty per cent. increase, and I wouldn't mind betting even money that Sir Roger is paying the new staff more than even the old staff have asked for. He's doing it simply out of spite—simply because he won't admit himself beaten. It's narrow-minded pigheadedness."

"Very likely," said Morrow. "But that doesn't alter the fact that we're faced with something unexpected. According to Sir Roger's plan, this new staff is to first appear before the school's eyes to-morrow morning."

"There'll be trouble!" declared the Captain.

"You think so?"

"Think so! Man alive, there'll be something like a revolt—in the junior school, at all events!" said Fenton grimly. "I've noticed the way these juniors have been backing up the strike, the Remove in particular. Those fellows have simply gone into it heart and soul, and they've pledged themselves to back up their old staff, and refuse to let anybody else work. What's going to happen in the morning?"

"Goodness knows!" said Morrow.

"Well, I can tell you. There'll be a revolt!" said Fenton. "The Remove will simply take matters into its own hands, and old Sir Roger will be ignored completely. There'll be ructions, with a capital R. And that's just what we don't want. There's no telling what will happen once the juniors let themselves go."

"But what can we do?" asked Morrow.

"I don't know."

"Neither do I. We can't breathe a word, because we're not supposed to know anything about this," said Morrow. "We've got to know of it in secret——"

"Hold on a minute!" interrupted Fenton. "Let me think!"

The two seniors were silent for a moment or two, and I was rather glad of it, for it gave me an opportunity to think, too. Fenton was quite right. If the school awoke on the morrow to find a new staff installed—well, there would be a terrific row. Sir Roger Stone would find himself in a big fix. Things would not go so smoothly as he fondly imagined. I was rather glad to find that Fenton was fully aware of the true feeling in the Remove, and that he was inclined to approve of it.

"Well, there's only one thing we can do, as far I can see," said Fenton, at length. "We shall have to take matters into our own hands."

"But how?"

"Easily enough," said the skipper. "Look here, we can slip out to-night, after lights out—without anybody knowing—and we can run over to Bannington on our bikes."

"But what on earth for?"

"To meet that train."

"But I don't quite see——"

"My dear chap, you're not quite so dull as all that," said Fenton. "We'll meet that train, and give the new staff a word of warning. We'll put it to them in plain language that the best thing they can do is to stop away, and that if they come to St. Frank's they'll do so at their own peril. It's a ten to one chance that the new crowd won't come at all."

"H'm! Perhaps you're right," said Morrow. "Anyhow, it's all we can do. But I'll tell you pretty plainly that we shall need to talk a good bit before we convince the crowd."

"You can leave it to me," said Fenton. "I'll easily——"

He broke off abruptly.

"Waiting for me, my boys?" came the Head's voice.

I started. Dr. Stafford had evidently just entered through the inner doorway. And I decided that my presence in that vicinity was no longer essential. It was far better for me to vanish quietly and unobtrusively.

So I vanished.

CHAPTER III.

AN OPPORTUNITY NOT TO BE MISSED.

"BEGAD!"

Sir Montie Tregellis-West uttered that exclamation as I burst into Study C.

"Listen, you chaps!" I said tensely. "I've just heard something——"

"Dear old boy, pray calm yourself," said Montie, adjusting his glasses, and regarding me with disapproval. "It is most unusual for you to look so excited, it is really. Has somethin' happened?"

"No," I replied; "but something is going to happen!"

"Dear fellow, that is a rather mysterious remark," said Tregellis-West. "I suspect that there is somethin' deep behind it."

"Rats!" exclaimed Tommy Watson. "I can't see——"

"Listen!" I broke in. "I've just heard——"

Clang, clang, clang!

"The bell for afternoon lessons?" asked Tommy. "So have I!"

"Hang the thing!" I exclaimed. "I wanted to speak to you chaps on a most important subject. We shall have to leave it until after lessons now. Just our beastly luck! Still, it will keep all right."

"You—you bounder!" said Watson indignantly. "You make us curious, and then suggest waiting until lessons are over! Can't you tell us now? There's heaps of time before we need go to the class-room."

"Sorry!" I said firmly. "This subject will take up a lot of time, so the best thing is to say nothing until afterwards. I shall then call a meeting of the Remove—or, at least, of the most important fellows."

My chums didn't exactly like it, but I knew better than to say anything then. In fact, it was far better in every way to wait until lessons were over for the day. I should really have thought of that at first. Mr. Crowell would probably know of Sir Roger Stone's plan, and it would never do to give the Form-master an inkling of the truth—that we knew of the scheme.

So we waded through lessons unwillingly and impatiently. The rest of the fellows knew nothing, of course, and Mr. Crowell seemed quite unsuspicious. He was looking very tired and weary, however—which was not very surprising, for he had a host of other duties on his shoulders now-a-days. He and the other masters were all helping with the household work, spending every minute of their spare time performing work which should have been done by the staff.

It was impossible for the situation to last, and Sir Roger evidently meant to bring matters to a head as soon as possible.

At last the hour came for dismissal. The Remove streamed out of the Form-room with thoughts of tea. This meal was always prepared in the studies, so there would be nothing unusual in it. But before the fellows could get really busy I sent the word round to collect in the common-room. But I only invited the juniors I could trust.

They turned up promptly—Handforth and Co., Pitt, Hart, Grey, De Valerie, Burton, Singleton, Farman, Tucker, Somerton and a few others. They were all looking rather curious and impatient.

"What's the idea of this?" asked Handforth bluntly.

"It's a confab," I explained. "Or, in other words, a pow-wow."

"But what about?" demanded Pitt.

"A First of April Jape."

"You—you ass!" said Handforth witheringly. "We can't be bothered with kids' japes when we're in the middle of a strike! We ought to let the fags spend their time on japes this year. You're dotty, Nipper!"

"Thanks!" I said. "But if you'll only listen——"

"I'd rather have tea, thanks," interrupted Handforth. "I don't see why I should listen to your giddy rot! I'm going back to my study——"

"You're not!" I said firmly. "Hold him, you chaps!"

Handforth was held.

"Lemme go, you—you rotters!" he roared. "I'll—I'll——"

"This jape is a very special one," I went on. "It is seasonable, and it is also connected with the strike. We've got an opportunity which we simply can't afford to miss—under any circumstances."

"This is frightfully interesting, old man!" said the Hon. Douglas Singleton languidly. "I'm all on tenterhooks, egad! What's the bally idea? Where do we come in? What's the joke?"

"It's not much of a joke," I said grimly. "Look here, I'm going to tell you all something which is absolutely secret—which you must keep to yourselves. If any word leaks out the whole thing will be spoilt!"

"We'll keep quiet," said Pitt. "You needn't be afraid that we'll jaw."

"Let's hear the fatheaded idea!" snapped Handforth. "What's the sense of keeping us here like—like a lot of sheep?"

"Well, the fact is, Sir Roger has planned to deal a deathblow to the strikers," I explained. "To-night, after we have all gone to bed, a new staff will be installed—a new staff, complete to the last man!"

"What!"

"Great pip!"

"It—it can't be true!"

"It is true!" I said grimly. "And we've got to face the situation."

"How do you know this?" demanded Handforth excitedly. "Great goodness! A new staff—installed after we've gone to bed! The cunning old rotter! There'll be ructions——"

"Yes; but we shall have a decent brekker in the morning!" said Fatty Little, with enthusiasm. "No more bread and lemonade, no more bully beef for dinner, no more—— Yaroooooo! Ow! Yow! What the stewed rhubarb ——"

"If you start talking about grub again we'll chuck you outside!" roared Handforth, who had punched Fatty's nose somewhat severely. "You traitor! Thinking about your fat tummy instead of the honour of the strikers! You —you gormandiser!"

"Ease up, Handy," I grinned. "Leave Fatty alone. We've got important business to discuss. If you'll all listen I'll tell you how I got to know of this affair, and how I propose to deal with it."

"Good egg!"

"Go it, Nipper!"

It didn't take me long to explain to the fellows how I had overheard Morrow and Fenton talking, and how they were preparing to warn the new staff. Then I went on to discuss my own scheme, and the juniors listened with great interest and attention. Their faces were flushed with excitement and enthusiasm when I had finished. Everybody was looking pleased.

"Great!" declared Pitt. "Great, old man!"

"Hear, hear!"

"A terrific idea!"

"Begad! Rather!" said Sir Montie. "It is such a frightfully good idea, Nipper boy, that I am at a loss to express my admiration. It is top-hole—it is, really! You deserve a meda!!"

"The new crowd will be dished properly!" chuckled De Valerie.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Sir Roger will be dished, too!" I grinned. "In fact, I think we shall be able to work the wheeze beautifully. But we shall have to keep it dark until the time comes. If the Head gets to hear a word we shall be watched, or something, then we shall be foiled, as the villain says in the play."

Handforth looked thoughtful.

"Of course, it's a decent idea," he admitted grudgingly. "I don't exactly see how we can improve upon it. I should have thought of it myself, of course——"

"Naturally," I said. "We all know that, Handy. You're a wonderful chap for thinking of ideas—after other people have thought of them!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, well, I expect you to be jealous," said Handforth, with a sniff. "I'm never fully appreciated. If there was anything like justice in this world, I should have been Captain of the Remove long ago——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Not that I imply any slight upon Nipper," went on Handforth. "He's all right—a fairly decent skipper, in fact. What I'm amazed at is that you fellows should choose Nipper for a captain while I'm ready to accept the job ——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My dear old Handy, we didn't come here to enter into a laughing competition," grinned Pitt. "You'd better dry up before we all make ourselves weak. You're perfectly all right as an ornament, but you mustn't get any of those wild ideas into your head about being captain. Nipper's the right man in the right place, and if we wanted any proof of that, we've got it now. This latest scheme of his is absolutely top-notch. It's the best thing we've planned for terms!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Fenton and Morrow have arranged things in their own weak little way, but that's no good to the Remove," remarked Singleton. "It's quite amazing how these seniors think they're doing wonders, and the Remove can beat them hands down every time."

I grinned.

"Well, you see, Fenton and Morrow are prefects, and it's below their dignity to indulge in anything in the nature of a jape," I explained. "Their game is a staid one—a solemn affair. But ours will create a terrific impression."

"Yes, rather!"

"And a bit of an uproar, too," remarked Church. "When Sir Roger finds out how he's been dished, he'll tear his hair."

"Impossible!" said Hart. "He's bald!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I must say that I am impressed," observed Timothy Tucker. "The scheme is a good one—admitted. The position is this, my dear sir. We have decided to support the strikers, and therefore we must support the strikers."

"Exactly," grinned Handforth.

"H'm! I should suggest more violent measures, if I had my own way," went on T.T., blinking at us, and holding his head on one side. "The position is this, when you realise the fundamental basis of this argument, there can be no denying that the sweated toilers who have ceased work were fully justified in their action. It is well known to you all that for many years these unfortunate people—these miserable wage-earners—have been ground down under the heel of the despotic capitalist. The time has now arrived when their vision has been cleared, when they see the truth in the correct perspective, when they are no longer blinded and confused by the poisonous dope which is periodically administered to them by the shameless autocrats who hold the reins of power!"

"Good!" I chuckled. "What book did you pinch that from?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go it, Tucker! You're better than a gramophone!"

"My dear friends, it is not necessary for me to remind you that I am speaking from my heart, that my speeches are entirely unpremeditated and extemporaneous——"

"Phew!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"It's a wonder he doesn't crack his jaw!"

"But what does it mean?" asked Church practically.

T. T. looked round pityingly.

"Naturally, I am well aware I am wasting my efforts in debating any subject with a mere handful," he observed. "I realise that; but, at the same time I prefer to do so in order to amuse myself. Admitted. That is so. However, as I was saying, my remarks are entirely extemporaneous—or, in other words, I do not descend to the practice of quoting passages from the speeches of other people. With regard to this scheme, promulgated by our comrade, Nipper, I have only a few words to say."

"Good!"

"Don't take five hours, lunatic!"

"I do not intend to keep you even a fifth of that amount of time," said T. T. "Comrade Nipper has put forward a plan which will have the desired effect. At the same time, I wish you all to understand that I should advocate something more drastic. The position is this: Sir Roger Stone, who represents the harsh, unbending, ruling class, has dared to set himself against the real people who count—the workers—the honest, innocent, peaceful toilers. He has treated them as a savage would treat his dogs. And he now proposes to cast them aside to starve, and to install his own hirelings. This, as you know, is deplorable—lamentable in the extreme. Quite so. I should propose that these hirelings be taken out on to Bannington Moor, and left upon that cold expanse for the night, so that they will be able to realise their true position. As for Sir Roger, I propose that we take him to the river, immerse him completely, and keep him there until he promises to agree to our own terms—for we, of course, represent the down-trodden masses."

"I'm afraid your scheme wouldn't work, old son," I chuckled. "At the same time, it's an immense relief to find that you only propose mild measures. I was afraid that you'd bring in bombs and dynamite, and suggest mining the giddy school!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Dear, dear, dear!" exclaimed Tucker, shaking his head. "Do I hear aright? Is it possible, my dear sir, that you are poking fun at me? I am a peaceful person, and violence is the very last thought in my mind. I am totally opposed to all violence. It is against my principles to strike——"

"And yet you're upholding the servants' strike!" grinned Handforth.

"My dear sir, your brains appear to be lamentably weak!" said T. T. "In fact, your brains are in a truly pitiable condition. I was about to say that I do not believe in striking physically—I do not believe in fighting of any description—— Ow! Yaroooh! Dear me! I am considerably hurt! Dear, dear, dear!"

Handforth rolled down his sleeve.

"If you don't believe in striking, I do!" he declared. "And if you want another example of my striking power, just repeat that bit about my brains being weak!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I think we'll declare the meeting closed, before T. T. finds himself ready to go into the Sanny!" I chuckled. "Let's get off to tea—and, remember, not a word! And don't give any sign, either. The whole success of this affair depends upon secrecy."

"Admitted," said Tucker. "I must remark, my dear sir, that you strike some brainy notions. In fact, your brain works so rapidly that I marvel how you keep your thoughts connected."

Sir Montie Tregellis-West chuckled.

"Begad!" he exclaimed. "You evidently fail to understand, dear old boy. Nipper's brain is somethin' exceptional—somethin' entirely different from all other brains. It's simply amazin' how he can work things out—it is, really. When you've known him a little longer, you'll feel shockingly small. That's how I feel. He's got more wits than all the rest of us put together, begad!"

"Rats!" I said cheerfully. "I didn't ask you to blow my trumpet, Montie—besides which, you're talking out of your hat. Let's get off to tea. I'm hungry, and I could just do with a good feed."

During the rest of the evening we went on just as usual. Nobody gave an inkling of what was afoot. Even Handforth managed to keep quiet, and when bedtime came the prefects and masters had received no hint. It was fondly imagined that the whole school was in total ignorance of Sir Roger Stone's plan.

The lights were put out as usual, but the Remove did not go to sleep as usual. A certain number of fellows slumbered, of course—those who were not in the know. But practically every fellow who had been selected for the night's work remained awake.

Not a move was made until the school clock chimed ten.

By this time, according to all rule, the junior school should have been asleep. But as the last chime died away I slipped out of the bed in the gloom, and found that fully a dozen other fellows were doing the same.

"Good!" I murmured. "They're evidently keen!"

I had been afraid that the bulk of my supporters would want to keep their beds once they got in. But they were eager to carry out this project of mine, and it

seemed that everything was going smoothly.

The night was very mild—really a splendid night for the beginning of April. Hardly a breath of wind stirred, and the stars were shining from a clear sky.

"Everybody getting up?" I whispered.

"Yes, I think so," said Watson. "I can see Fatty just crawling out of bed, anyhow. Handforth and Co. are nearly dressed——"

"Don't let them leave the dormitory first," I broke in. "We don't want to give the game away before we start!"

Handforth turned round and glared.

"You silly ass!" he hissed. "If you think I shall give the game away——"

"Dry up, my son!" I interrupted. "There's no need to make a fuss. If I offended you I apologise in ten different positions, and I humbly crave your forgiveness. Only, for goodness sake, do keep quiet."

"Since you've apologised," said Handforth condescendingly, "I'll overlook the matter."

I grinned at my chums in the gloom. Handy was apparently quite ignorant of the fact that I had been pulling his leg. But it had the effect of keeping him quiet until everybody was ready to leave the dormitory.

Then, with Study C leading, we crept out and made our way downstairs. I was fairly certain that Fenton and Morrow would start out on their bicycles at about ten minutes past ten—they couldn't very well get out much sooner, for they went to bed later than the Remove.

They would easily be able to reach Bannington, by riding hard, by ten-thirty. So I reckoned that we had just gauged it nicely.

And, as a matter of fact, my calculation was correct.

We had hardly got into position round the bicycle shed when two figures stole out from the Ancient House and ran lightly across the Triangle. They were the figures of Fenton and Morrow, of the Sixth, and they entered the bike shed like a couple of shadows, totally unaware of the fact that twenty Removites were round the place.

"Now's our chance," I whispered. "We haven't got a second to lose."

"Come on!"

"Pile in, you chaps!"

We entered the bicycle shed in a crowd, and for a moment were rather confused by the darkness. Then came Fenton's voice.

"What's the meaning of this?" he demanded quickly.

"Keep your hair on, Fenton," I said. "We've just come——"

"Nipper!" exclaimed the school captain. "You cheeky young sweep! What are you doing out of your dormitory?"

"Well, the fact is, I've brought a number of fellows, and the idea is to capture you and Morrow," I said calmly.

"What!"

"You silly young idiot!" snapped Morrow. "We're in a hurry——"

"And so are we," I interrupted. "Now, look here, we don't want to use any violence, but we shall be compelled to do so if you don't give in quietly."

"Well, of all the nerve," stormed Fenton. "Go indoors, you confounded young beggar, and take five hundred lines for being out of bed——"

"Wait a minute," I interrupted again. "We all know your little wheeze. You are just off to Bannington to meet the ten-thirty train—as a matter of fact, it won't get in until about a quarter-to-eleven, but that's a detail. Your idea is to meet the new staff——"

"How on earth do you know anything about the new staff?" demanded Fenton angrily. "It seems to me that you've been spying——"

"Rats!" I said. "If you'll only listen quietly for a minute or two, I'll explain. We're in a terrific hurry, and we can't possibly stop more than two minutes. I know you're on the side of the old staff, so you'll approve of this plan."

"I'll give you one minute to explain," said Fenton grimly.

I believe it took me less than a minute—but Fenton and Morrow understood perfectly, and by the time I had finished they were grinning.

"Perhaps it's just as well," said Fenton. "Strictly speaking, I shall be defying the school rules in letting you go—but this is an exceptional occasion, and I'll wink at the fact that you left the school. Morrow and I will go back to bed, and we'll know nothing about this."

"Good!" I said crisply. "You're a brick, Fenton."

"Rather," whispered Pitt. "It's saved us a lot of trouble, too, and we shall be able to get off right at once."

"Half a minute," said Fenton, touching

my arm. "I shall be awfully interested to know what our fate would have been if we had refused to agree to your scheme?"

I grinned.

"Well, to put it plainly, we should have collared you," I said with perfect frankness. "We should have bound you up, and left you down the shed with four chaps on guard. And you would have been kept prisoners until we returned."

"Well, of all the unblushing cheek!" said Fenton. "I ought to be furious, but somehow I rather admire you, Nipper. Clear off before it is too late. You'll have to buzz like the deuce."

Exactly one minute later we had started for Bannington.

CHAPTER IV.

APRIL FOOLS.

"A BIT late, ain't ye, Bill?"

"Seems like it, mate—but that's nothin' unusual. These 'ere expresses never come in prompt nowadays."

Bill nodded as he relit his pipe. He and his companion were standing in the yard at Bannington Station. The two gentlemen in question were the drivers of the char-a-bancs which had been hired to convey a large party from Bannington to St. Frank's. The two men practically had the station to themselves. It was just after ten-thirty, and Bannington was one of those very respectable country towns which retire to bed somewhere in the region of nine-thirty.

The station was nearly always deserted when the last train arrived, and as a rule only one or two passengers alighted, and it was quite a novelty for anybody to board it.

Bannington was a junction, but this particular train did not connect with any other, and really only stopped in order to set down and pick up mails—to say nothing of sundry milk cans—both empty and full.

The char-a-bancs were big affairs, and they were standing one behind the other a short distance from the booking-office entrance. Bill and his companion were leaning against the side of the rear vehicle, taking things easy.

They were quite unaware of the fact that within the last minute a large number of junior schoolboys had ridden up on their bicycles—hot, dusty, breathless. At the same time, the juniors were triumphant.

We knew that we had arrived in time.

It had been a very near thing, for there had been no margin of time to waste. The only junior who had failed to keep up with the rest was Fatty Little. He had fallen behind, and had probably elected to return to St. Frank's—for it was certainly impossible to obtain any grub in Bannington at that hour.

We did not ride up to the station, of course, and halted at the bend, and pushed our bicycles through the hedge into a meadow which adjoined the goods yard. Then we crept forward without wasting a moment.

For, in the distance, we could hear a warning rumble.

The train was approaching.

"We shall have to buck up—there's hardly a minute to spare," I whispered urgently. "Don't forget that you're in charge of the attacking party, Pitt—and everything rests upon your doing the job thoroughly."

"You can count on me," said Pitt. "We'll get busy at once. Are you fellows ready?"

"Yes."

"Good! Then come on!"

Pitt led the way through the hedge, and was followed by seven other juniors. The eight juniors walked across the station yard openly, and approached the two drivers who were still lounging against the rear char-a-banc. Both men turned, and regarded the juniors with curiosity.

"Now!" said Pitt briskly.

There was no time for explaining matters—it would be far better to use force—and go into details afterwards.

Pitt and three others pounced upon Bill, and the remaining four juniors gave their full attention to Bill's companion. The onslaught was so sudden that the two men had no time to prepare themselves.

They were bowled over at once.

Then, kicking and struggling, they were rapidly half-carried, half-dragged across the yard, through the hedge, into

the meadow. The men were startled and somewhat scared, and they hardly knew what was happening.

"You—you young varmints!" gasped one of them. "What's the meanin' of this 'ere? If you don't lemme go——"

"No need to get excited, old son," interrupted Pitt. "Keep quiet, and don't struggle—and you'll be all right. You're a prisoner."

"Wot the thunder——"

"'Elp!" yelled the other man faintly.

"Keep that idiot quiet!" hissed Pitt. "If we're disturbed now it'll be all up."

"Don't you worry!" came Handforth's voice. "He won't yell any more. McClure's sitting on his face!"

Pitt chuckled.

"So you see, my bonny boy, if you start yelling, somebody will sit on your face," he said, addressing his own prisoner. "We took this course because it was quickest. We merely want to get you away from your 'buses, that's all. We're not going to hurt you, and here's ten bob to relieve your injured feelings. Your pal's getting ten bob, too!"

The prisoner ceased to struggle.

"But wot's the idea?" he demanded, making sure of the ten shillings by pocketing it at once. "The train's just in, and we've got to drive a crowd of people away——"

"You won't be driving to-night," put in Pitt. "We've got somebody else on the job."

"But wot the blazes——"

"Just a little April Fool joke," exclaimed Hart. "We don't mean any harm to you, and everything will be all serene. Whether you struggle or whether you remain a willing prisoner, it makes no difference—you've got to do what we say. So it'll be more amiable all round if you accept the situation philosophically."

Bill scratched his head.

"I don't know about accepting it philo—philo—what you said!" he exclaimed. "We've had orders from our boss to meet that there train, an' we shall get into a bloomin' row for this business——"

"No, you won't," said Pitt. "We shall explain everything to your boss in the morning, and you can't get into any bother because you were forced into this affair. You're prisoners, so the blame is on us. But as it's only a joke, there'll be no harm done. Besides, we'll explain."

Pitt did so—and, meanwhile was also explaining to the other man. The pair soon realised the futility of struggling, and they agreed to accept the position in a cheerful manner, which was all to the good. They became willing prisoners—which was just as well, for there was nothing else for it.

And while Pitt and Handforth and their companions were engaged upon this work, I was busy in another direction. I lost no time in struggling into an overcoat and peak cap—which really belonged to Bill.

The Hon. Douglas did likewise with another coat and cap. Then we took our places in the driving seats of the caravans. In the gloom it was really impossible to detect whom we actually were. In our peak caps we looked like the original drivers. We had our collars turned up, and it had only taken a few moments to fix false moustaches, with which I had come fully provided.

We looked the parts to perfection.

The other juniors remained out of sight. The station yard was still quite deserted, and there was no sign of anything unusual about the place. The Removites were only hanging about in case we were detected, and then an alternative plan was to be put into execution.

I always believe in being on the safe side, and in being fully prepared for any emergency.

My only doubt was that the Hon. Douglas Singleton would be unable to manage the big char-a-banc. I was quite capable of dealing with my own vehicle. I considered myself something of an expert behind the wheel of a motor-car, and that's not bragging.

I've driven touring-cars, racing-cars, motor lorries, and all sorts of things with engines. And a char-a-banc, although cumbersome and clumsy, is quite easy to manage if you don't take a fancy to cornering too sharply. You've got to remember that there's a big length of char-a-banc behind you.

Singleton was a good driver, on the whole, although inclined to be a bit reckless. But as I was going to lead the way, and as we should take the journey pretty sedately, I considered that we should get through without mishap. The roads were very quiet, and we were not likely to meet any other traffic. So,

everything considered, our scheme was not so wild as it would seem at first sight.

Anyhow, we were determined to carry it through.

The train came in only a second or two after we had taken our places, and we could tell by the banging of carriage-doors that an unusual number of passengers were alighting. Before the train started on its journey again, the crowd began to stream through the booking-office into the yard.

It was impossible to see them distinctly, owing to the gloom, but we could tell at once that they were the people we were expecting.

Elderly men, young men, youths, matrons and girls—in fact, the complete staff for both Houses at St. Frank's. They were all there. Gardeners, porters, grooms, pages, cooks, scullery-maids, kitchenmaids, and all the rest of them. Sir Roger had evidently done the thing thoroughly.

One man—an elderly individual with a somewhat beery voice—seemed to be in charge of the party. I judged him to be the person who was allotted to the position of butler to the Headmaster. He carried himself with dignity, and spoke in measured monotonous tones, with a touch of haughtiness.

He approached the first char-a-banc.

"Ah, my man, I presume that you are here in readiness to convey my party to St. Frank's College?" he inquired, looking up at me.

"Yessir," I replied gruffly.

"Good!" said the man. "There is no necessity to drive rapidly—you can take the journey quietly, my man. I object to rushing through country lanes at night time."

"Trust me, sir," I said, in a deep voice. "We'll take you through all right. Jump in as soon as you like, sir!"

Everything was working smoothly. The new staff for St. Frank's arranged themselves comfortably into the two char-a-bancs. There was ample room for them, and, at last, they were all ready, and we got the word to proceed. The engines were already running, so we had no difficulty in starting off.

I pulled out the clutch, set the gears into low, and then accelerated, as I eased the clutch back again. We glided off smoothly, but I took the turning into the road very cautiously. I was pleased to find that the Hon. Douglas negotiated the corner without mishap.

Then we started off through Bannington.

The main scheme had worked, and there was no need to adopt the alternative. Therefore, the other juniors lost no time in getting on to their bicycles and setting off for St. Frank's, although they took great care not to overtake us.

We went on through the night smoothly and easily, and did not meet any other vehicle during the whole course of our ride. It was surprisingly simple, in fact, and Singleton proved himself capable of dealing with his char-a-banc admirably. He kept about a hundred yards behind me, and never got into trouble.

Our passengers had not the slightest suspicion of the truth. They probably thought that we were a pair of exceedingly morose drivers, for in answer to one or two remarks addressed to me by a servant girl who was sitting next to my seat, I merely gave a non-committal grunt! I was not to be drawn into conversation.

Discovery with the journey only half completed would be fatal. So we went on without any trouble arising, and at last arrived at our destination.

Needless to say, it was not St. Frank's.

The building was a big, old-fashioned place, standing close to the road, with lights in the lower windows, and with the front door standing wide open. In the darkness of the night, it was really impossible for the servants to see that the establishment was nothing more nor less than the South View Hotel.

Moreover, it was situated on the outskirts of Caistowe!

"Here we are, sir!" I shouted gruffly, as I pulled up.

The passengers proceeded to tumble down, and they stood in a big crowd outside the entrance, being fully under the impression that this place was St. Frank's. They were all strangers to the district, so it was impossible for them to even guess at the truth.

How could they guess that they had been fooled?

For this is what it amounted to. The entire new staff for St. Frank's had been converted into very fine examples of April fools.

1. "Good gracious!" said Sir Roger. "What is the meaning of this?"
2. Sir Roger found himself staring into the faces of two masked men.

As soon as the char-a-bancs were emptied, I jumped down, closed all the doors quickly, leapt back into my place, and drove off. The Hon. Douglas Singleton did the same. We had disappeared down the road almost before three minutes had elapsed. And we had a good reason for this.

We did not want the fooled ones to learn the truth while we were about, for our object was to leave them stranded in Caistowe.

Half a mile along the road, well out of sight, I pulled my cumbersome vehicle to a standstill, and jumped down. Singleton was just behind, and as he pulled up I ran up to him. He was grinning joyfully.

"A regular success—what?" he chuckled.

"Terrific!" I exclaimed gleefully. "My only hat! I'll bet they're tearing their hair now! I've never known anybody to be so beautifully diddled before. You've done well, Duggy!"

"Rats!" said the Hon. Douglas. "There was nothing easier than to keep behind you. This joke will be talked about the district for years to come. I've heard of April fools, but these people are a super variety of the breed!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

I jumped back into my place, and we were soon bowling along again—but not towards Bannington, but in the direction of St. Frank's. My little scheme was by no means ended.

Meanwhile, events were happening at Caistowe.

The butler individual had been attending to his flock for a moment or two, seeing that everything was in order. And he was quite astonished when he turned round to find the two char-a-bancs vanishing down the road.

"Well, that's queer," he said. "They didn't even wait to get a tip—and I was going to give them sixpence each, too!"

"They're a pair of miserable fellows, Mr. Bates," said one of the other men. "I didn't hear them speak a word the whole time."

"But we've got here," said Bates, with satisfaction. "I had better go in first, and see what arrangements have been made. Don't seem to be a very big place, after all," he added, looking up at the building. "I always thought St. Frank's was much larger than this."

"I daresay it goes back a good way," said the other man. "You can't see very well at night, anyhow."

"I suppose that's what it is," agreed Bates.

He went through the crowd to the open front door, and entered. A well-dressed man was standing there, looking on with a slight air of amusement. He was the manager, and he knew all about it.

As a matter of fact, I had arranged things with him in the early evening, having had my plans all cut and dried well in advance. I had fixed up with the hotel to give the whole crowd accommodation for the night, and, as the season had not started, the hotel had been able to fix things up.

Bates looked round him with some air of surprise as he walked into the lobby. It certainly did not look much like the entrance to a school. There were one or two paintings hanging on the walls, and they were of a distinctly sporting type. An advertisement of a famous whisky was also prominent, and the whole appearance of the place suggested its actual character.

"Good-evening, sir!" said Bates.

"Good-evening, sir!" replied the manager politely.

Bates started.

He thought he had been addressing the Headmaster, but this evidently could not be the case. No Headmaster would have addressed him so respectfully.

"I thought perhaps we should see Sir Roger Stone," said Bates. "But maybe you could tell me if the Headmaster is about?"

"The Headmaster?" repeated the manager. "The Headmaster of what?"

"Why, this school, of course," said Bates, wondering how on earth his companion could be so dense. "But perhaps the Head's in bed?"

The manager smiled.

"My dear sir, you are evidently labouring under a misapprehension," he said pleasantly. "No doubt you believe that this establishment is a school."

Bates stared.

"A school! Of course it's a school!" he repeated. "It's St. Frank's College, and I've come down with the new staff. I am the Headmaster's butler, and I hope you will tell me what arrangements have been made."

"Certainly," said the manager. "There will be sleeping accommodation

for you all, and breakfast in the morning. After that I have no further instructions. I presume you will return to London."

"Return to London!" shouted Bates. "We have come here permanently, as the new staff——"

"But I require no new staff," interjected the manager, keeping up the joke. "You are quite mistaken, my man."

Other servants had come in, and they were looking dismayed and amazed. The juniors had had very little compunction in dealing with them in this way, for, after all, they were blacklegs, and they knew perfectly well that they were driving other people out of work.

"You—you require no staff!" shouted Bates. "But—but we have been engaged by Sir Roger Stone to——"

"I have never met the gentleman," said the hotel manager. "Moreover, it will probably make matters clearer if I tell you that this establishment is not St. Frank's College——"

"Not—not St. Frank's!"

"Certainly not!"

"But—but——" Bates paused, too startled to form his words. "I—I—— Good heavens! There must be a mistake!"

"There is a mistake," said the manager smoothly.

"Where are we, sir?" asked one of the other men.

"You are in the South View Hotel ——"

"What!" yelled Bates, losing his dignity.

"The South View Hotel," explained the manager. "This town is Caistowe, on the coast, several miles from St. Frank's. Evidently, there has been some little error somewhere."

Bates forgot himself, and swore violently.

"It's a trick!" he shouted, white with fury. "We've been fooled——"

"Dear me! Perhaps that is so," said the hotel manager. "Now I come to think of it, to-day is the First of April!"

The servants were flabbergasted.

"Them drivers!" gasped one man. "They was pretty close, wasn't they? Didn't say a bloomin' word! An' no wonder, Mr. Bates! They knew all the time that they was foolin' us—and they brought us 'ere, instead of to the school!"

"Somebody will suffer for this!" grated the butler. "By thunder! We've got to get to St. Frank's——"

"I'm afraid you won't get there to-night," said the manager. "You will find no conveyances in Caistowe, and the distance is too far to walk. If I were you, I'd make the best of a bad job, and stay here. It's my belief those boys at the school have been up to some of their little jokes!"

Bates swore again.

"Jokes!" he snapped. "A fine joke ——"

"I must ask you not to use bad language here," interrupted the manager sharply.

Bates felt like saying many choice things, and so did the others. They were a rough, coarse crowd, altogether; and it was obvious that Sir Roger had collected them together hurriedly, and without discretion. They were certainly not the type of people who would be suitable for St. Frank's.

And they were fooled completely. They were compelled to admit it. The fact had to be faced, whether they liked it or not.

The whole crowd of them were—April fools.

CHAPTER V.

FURTHER EXCITEMENT.

SIR ROGER STONE rubbed his hands together pleasantly.

"They will soon be here now, my dear Stafford!" he exclaimed, twisting his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. "The clock has already struck eleven, so we shall soon hear the char-a-bancs in the Triangle."

The Head nodded.

"Yes," he said. "I do not quite agree with this new move of yours, Sir Roger. Personally, I do not consider it fair to the other servants——"

"Other servants! What other servants?"

"I am referring to our old staff——"

"I shall be obliged if you will cease to refer to that ungrateful set of misguided humanity," said Sir Roger stiffly. "They have ceased to be connected with this establishment, and they will certainly not return to the school—under

any circumstances. As I have already explained to you, they have forfeited the right to remain in the service of St. Frank's."

"It is useless for us to argue, of course," said the Head. "But I entirely fail to follow your line of reasoning, Sir Roger. You have obtained a new staff—that doesn't mean to say that our troubles are at an end. The majority of these people may be totally unsuitable, and there will be endless trouble in finding necessary substitutes. Whereas our old staff is within a mile of the school, ready to return the very instant it receives your word."

"And my promise to increase the wages by fifty per cent.," said Sir Roger curtly.

"Well, yes——"

"They are wasting their time by remaining in the district," snapped the baronet. "They will certainly receive no recognition from me, and their exorbitant demands will be ignored."

The Head shrugged his shoulders.

"I am deeply sorry that it has been necessary to adopt these somewhat dubious methods. May I ask what rate of pay you have agreed to allow the new staff?"

"No, you may not!" said Sir Roger. "Really, Stafford, I have no time to go into financial details at the moment. These people will be here almost at once, and I must be ready for them."

The Head could hardly keep himself silent. He knew positively well that Sir Roger had been obliged to offer high wages in order to get the new staff to come, probably even higher wages than the strikers demanded. But, in spite of this, he would not give in. He set his face against anything which would develop into the nature of a victory for the strikers.

"The strikers are beaten!" exclaimed Sir Roger. "By these prompt measures, I am complete master of the situation, and I rather pride myself that I have dealt with it in a commonsense, business-like manner."

The Head preferred to keep his own opinion on the subject, so he said nothing. It was just as well, or Sir Roger would have heard a few truths which would not have caused him an excessive amount of pleasure.

Hoot-hoot!

The chairman of the Governors came to a halt, and held his hand.

"A motor horn!" he exclaimed. "Ah, they are arriving! Rather late, but perhaps their train was behind time."

It was very late indeed, but Sir Roger did not think much of this. He was simply anxious to welcome the new staff, and to prove to the Head that everything was all in order.

Sir Roger opened the door of the Head's study, passed out into the passage, and was soon in the Triangle. Two big motor char-a-bancs had just driven in, and they stood there in the dense gloom, softly palpitating. Both vehicles were full of people.

And, needless to say, I was at the wheel of one, and Singleton was at the wheel of the other.

"Ah, my friends, so you have arrived safely!" said Sir Roger, moving forward and peering up at us unseeingly in the darkness. "Which is Bates? I wish to have a word——"

"Talking to me, sir?" inquired Pitt, leaning forward.

He really imitated Bates's tone quite admirably, although he had only heard the man speaking for a few moments. However, he was quite good enough to pass muster with Sir Roger, who was quite unsuspicious.

"Yes, Bates," he exclaimed. "I require you to take all these good people into the servants' hall at once. You will line up there, and then await my coming. I intend to address you all as soon as you get indoors."

"Yes, sir," said Pitt respectfully. "Thank you, sir!"

Sir Roger gave a few directions as to how the servants' hall should be reached, and then went back to the Head's house.

The new staff—or what appeared to be the new staff—descended from the char-a-bancs, and stood in a big crowd, whispering together in low voices.

In the gloom, they certainly looked all right. Some were bearded, some were apparently women and girls, and some merely had big overcoats and slouch hats. They lost no time in making their way into the servants' hall.

And here, under the direction of the second edition of Bates, they lined up into an orderly throng.

Pitt had taken care to switch on only one light, and the servants' hall was accordingly only dimly illuminated.

Sir Roger, who had gone back to the Head's study for a moment, was rub-

bing his hands together with fresh enjoyment. He was so pleased with himself, in fact, that the Head was inclined to feel rather disgusted. Sir Roger was glouting over his triumph in a manner which did not meet with Dr. Stafford's approval.

"They're all here, Stafford—everyone of them!" exclaimed Sir Roger. "I now intend to go down to the servants' hall, and give Bates orders for the morning. Bates is your new butler, and for the moment he is nominally in charge of the others. Perhaps you would care to come down, too——"

"I would prefer not to," said the Head coldly.

"Just as you wish," exclaimed Sir Roger. "I may as well tell you, Stafford, that I am not at all in favour of your attitude."

The baronet swept out of the study, leaving the Head with compressed lips. These two were quite polite towards one another, but they were inwardly hostile. It was not to be wondered at.

Sir Roger made his way down to the servants' hall, triumphantly telling himself that the strikers were beaten, and that it was impossible for them to create any disturbance. They would recognise the fact that they had been defeated, and on the morrow they would leave the neighbourhood for their various homes, or, if they had no homes, to seek fresh employment. They would certainly not return to St. Frank's.

The servants' hall was very dim when Sir Roger entered, and a subdued buzz of voices ceased at once. Sir Roger looked round, and noted with satisfaction that the new servants were all lined up in pairs.

They stood at attention, respectful and humble.

"Ah, my good people, I am pleased to find that you arrived safely," said Sir Roger pleasantly. "I am sure that you will be comfortable here, once you have settled down. You need not be afraid that your predecessors will create any disturbance. I shall take care that order is maintained. I promised you double wages for the first month, in order to induce you to take this slight risk, and I shall expect you to keep to the bargain. You are also aware that the Governors have agreed to pay you a very liberal wage, and this wage is, on the average, even more than the strikers were demanding. However, it is not my way to accept defeat, so I have engaged you in preference to taking back the discontented people who left their work at a moment's notice. I want you to thoroughly understand that——"

"You old rotter!"

"It's a shame to treat the strikers like that!"

"If you can pay a new staff full wages, you can pay the old staff!"

"They deserve it!"

"They've been here for years!"

"Shame!"

Sir Roger gave a violent start, and caught his breath in sharply. These interruptions were in boyish voices, and they appeared to come from the new servants. How could it be possible?

The fact of the matter was, the fellows had grown impatient and angry at Sir Roger's words, and they found it impossible to contain themselves.

"Good gracious!" said Sir Roger. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"April fool!"

"Ever been had?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You've been spoofed, you old bounder!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Sir Roger nearly had a fit. Before his eyes, the new servants were peeling off their outer garments—the girls included! And they stood revealed as junior schoolboys, attired in Etons!

The shock was almost too much for Sir Roger. For one terrible moment he thought it was a dreadful dream—he thought that his senses were playing tricks with him. But after he had rubbed his eyes the scene remained the same, and the uproar increased with every second that passed.

Yells of laughter, jeers, shouts of indignation and derision, rang through the servants' hall. And Sir Roger found himself in the centre of this howling crowd, utterly unable to protect himself, and with no way to freedom.

"Good heavens!" he gasped. "This—this is intolerable!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"How do you like being made an April fool?"

"You'll find your precious new staff stranded!" yelled Handforth. "They're stranded at——"

"Dry up, you ass!" hissed Pitt. "No need to give the game away."

Sir Roger, full realisation dawning upon him, danced with fury.

"Stop!" he shouted. "Stop at once!"

"Yah!"

"Go and eat coke!"

"We don't take orders from you!"

"This—this is rank rebellion!" bellowed Sir Roger. "Where are the servants? I command you to answer me! What have you done with the staff ——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"They'll never come to St. Frank's."

"Or, if they do come, they'll leave within an hour!" roared Handforth. "We'll boot the whole crowd off the promises!"

"Yes, rather! We know what they are now!"

"Accepting double wages to do other poor people out of their jobs!" shouted Tucker angrily. "The whole affair is disgraceful, and I call upon my comrades and friends to maintain this attitude continuously."

"Hear, hear!"

Sir Roger found that it was impossible to make himself heard. He shouted, he raved, he made himself hoarse. But the juniors took no notice. And they streamed out of the servants' hall, reckless, wildly yelling, and utterly regardless of the consequences. They were far too excited to think of any possible punishments.

Sir Roger found himself alone at last; and by this time he was almost incoherent with alarm and anger. He didn't know what had happened—he was confused—but one fact was clear.

The Remove had fooled him!

The Remove had utterly ruined his scheme, in spite of all the secrecy, and everything was upset and wrecked. The new staff had not turned up, and it was impossible to tell what had become of them.

Sir Roger fairly tore back into the Head's study. He found Dr. Stafford sitting at his desk, looking rather curious, but by no means alarmed. The Head had heard the uproar, of course, but he probably decided that Sir Roger was the correct person to deal with it. The baronet had been taking a good deal on his own shoulders of late, so the Head saw no reason why he should not take some more.

"Good gracious!" he exclaimed, as Sir Roger appeared. "What on earth is the matter?"

There was every reason for his startled inquiry. For Sir Roger Stone presented a remarkable spectacle. His face was almost purple with rage. His eyes were blazing, he quivered and shook as he stood, and for a few moments he found it impossible to speak, although he attempted to do so.

"My dear sir, you must calm yourself!" exclaimed the Head. "You must——"

"Calm myself!" rasped Sir Roger, his voice cracked with excitement. "You are mad, sir! Do you know what has happened? Confound it, sir, can't you do something, instead of standing there like a dummy?"

"But I fail to understand——"

"We have been tricked, sir! Tricked!" thundered Sir Roger.

"Dear me!"

"We've been made fools of!" roared the other. "Those infernal junior boys have played one of their tricks. They pretended to be the servants, and came here dressed up in all manner of attire!"

The Head, in spite of his agitation, could hardly refrain from smiling.

"Don't you realise what I am saying, Stafford?" shouted Sir Roger thickly. "Good heavens, man! Don't stand there as though you were struck dumb. Say something—do something! Every one of those boys shall be expelled!"

"My dear sir, pray be reasonable!" interjected the Head. "It will be impossible to expel everybody, and, although this joke is to be regretted, you must remember that the boys are granted a certain amount of licence on this particular day——"

"What does it matter what day it is?" demanded Sir Roger furiously.

"It is the first of April——"

"Bah! What do I care?" snarled Sir Roger. "I have been duped and deceived by a parcel of wretched schoolboys! They shall suffer for it, by gad! And what of the staff I engaged? What has become of those people?"

"Really, sir, I cannot tell you——"

"You cannot do anything—you cannot even appreciate what this means!" snapped the baronet harshly. "But this is the last straw! Good heavens! After this affair I shall take other measures—and those boys will suffer for their impudence!"

Sir Roger was very furious, and he hardly knew what he was saying. But there was not the slightest doubt that the Remove's jape had been an unqualified success. Upstairs, the fellows were celebrating.

"Hurrah!"

"The old bounder was diddled beautifully!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And we've remained true to the old staff," said Handforth. "Good business! They'll get their old jobs back again, and Sir Roger will have to give in."

"Yes, rather!"

Fenton, of the Sixth, put his head into the Remove dormitory.

"What's all this confounded noise in here?" he demanded.

"It worked, Fenton!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Do you know it's practically midnight?" said the head prefect. "If you don't make less noise, you'll get into terrific trouble. Get into your beds, and be quiet. I'll give a hundred lines to the first fellow who shouts again."

Fenton, of course, was only doing his duty. But he knew well enough that our scheme had met with full and complete success. He did not need to inquire about details. Our very attitude showed how the land lay.

Fenton left the dormitory a minute or two afterwards, and some of the fellows were inclined to let themselves go once more. "Better go easy!" I said warmly. "We don't want to cause any trouble, you know. We've had our joke, and there's an end of it. 'Nuff's as good as a feast."

"Dear old boy, you're quite right," observed Sir Montie. "I can do with some sleep now—I can, really! An' we shall wake up in the mornin' to find the school as staffless as ever, begad!"

"We shall probably find trouble, too," I said grimly. "There'll be a big inquiry over this, and some of us are going to catch it warm. Not that I care—it was worth a dozen whoppings!"

"Hear, hear!" said Handforth. "I'm willing to take my share——"

"Shush!" hissed McClure suddenly. "What was that?"

"Nothing, you ass——"

"Yes, it was," I interrupted. "I heard something, Handy. Dry up!"

Everybody in the dormitory dried up for a moment, and the room became quite silent. And, clearly and distinctly, through the open windows came a cry—a cry in a voice which we well knew.

The voice was that of Sir Roger Stone, and the word he uttered was unmistakable.

"Help! Help!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE BANDITS.

THE Removites gazed at one another wonderingly.

"Great Scott!"

"What's the old idiot yelling for help for?"

"Perhaps he and the Head are having a fight!" suggested Handforth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, it's not impossible," argued Handy. "Sir Roger's an excitable sort, and he was fairly off his rocker when we left the servants' hall. I expect he went to the Head's study, and kicked up a fuss. An argument followed. Sir Roger punched the Head's nose, and then the Head punched Sir Roger's. I expect they're going at it hammer and tongs now, with the Head getting the best of it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly ass!" I exclaimed. "The Head doesn't adopt Study D measures, Handy. This is serious, by the sound of it, and I'm going downstairs to investigate. Who's coming with me?"

"I am!" said Handforth promptly.

"I'll come, too," said Watson.

A good many fellows agreed, but the majority were somewhat nervous of approaching the Head's study at such an hour. Besides, they were nearly all undressed, and there was no time to waste.

I led the way out of the dormitory, with about eight fellows in my rear. Meanwhile, something of a dramatic character was taking place in the Head's study. Dr. Stafford himself had left the apartment, probably to retire for the night, for it was really impossible to talk rationally with Sir Roger in his present mood. The baronet had been left alone.

For some time he paced up and down

restlessly, unable to collect his thoughts. Then, feeling hot and ruffled, he went to the window, flung up the blind, and pushed open the lower sash.

Sir Roger leaned out into the night air.

Then he received a terrible shock.

He found himself staring into the faces of two masked men.

For a second Sir Roger stood frozen to the spot, hardly able to believe the evidence of his own eyes. Then the two masked men rose, and, as Sir Roger backed away from the window, they entered.

"Help!" shouted the baronet wildly. "Help!"

"Stop that game!" said one of the men harshly. "Stop it, I say, or I'll drill holes through you!"

He produced a wicked-looking pistol from his pocket, and levelled it at Sir Roger's head. The chairman of the Governors was in a panic, and he hardly knew what he was doing.

"Help—help!" he shouted again.

"If he makes another sound, Mike, plug him!" rasped one of the men. "We can't stand for no durned foolery. We've come to clear the safe, and if this guy interferes any—well, he'll quit!"

The other man nodded, and he, too, produced a pistol. Sir Roger gazed at them dumbly, his blood cold with fright. Then he sank down into a chair, his knees being no longer capable of performing their natural duties.

"What—what is the meaning of this?" he gasped faintly. "You—you unmitigated scoundrels——"

"Cut the jaw, boss!" interrupted one of the men. "The less talkin' you do, the better. But I guess you'd better tell us where the valuables are."

"I will tell you nothing—nothing whatever!" panted Sir Roger. "I—I mean, I think you will find some treasury notes in the top drawer. I have also got a few shillings on me. Be—be careful with those revolvers."

"As long as you remain peaceable, boss, we'll be as easy as kittens to handle," said Mike. "You don't need to worry any."

It was impossible for Sir Roger to do anything. The masked bandits were evidently desperate men. They wore long coats and caps, with the peaks pulled over their eyes, and their black masks reached almost to their mouths.

And just at that moment the door opened, and Nelson Lee appeared, having come to investigate the cause of the shouts.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed calmly, as he found himself looking into the barrel of a pistol. "This is rather interesting!"

The famous schoolmaster-detective was by no means dismayed. He seemed to be as cool as ever. The bandits probably knew him, for they exchanged swift glances, and took care to back towards the window. It was easy to deal with Sir Roger, but Nelson Lee was a different proposition.

"No tricks, boss!" said one of the men hoarsely. "We come here to get what we could, and you'd best shell out quick! These guns are liable to go off!"

Nelson Lee stood quite still for a moment. He apparently realised that resistance was useless. There was no sense in risking life or limb. He and Sir Roger were covered, and the bandits could shoot them as they stood.

"One moment," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "We will see what we can do. You have come at a rather awkward time!"

Lee went to a big safe, the door of which stood ajar, and Sir Roger watched him fascinatedly. The two bandits remained still.

Lee took out two big bundles of treasury notes. They probably represented nothing short of five hundred pounds.

"There you are, my friends," said the detective. "Since you have us in your power, we can do nothing but succumb."

He tossed the two bundles of notes across, and the bandits saw what they were in a moment. They came to the conclusion that it would be better for them to escape at once—while they had the chance.

So, without a word, they backed out of the window, and disappeared into the night.

"Good heavens!" gasped Sir Roger, mopping his brow. "I—I thought they were going to shoot us!"

And just at that moment I burst into the study, followed by the other juniors.

"What's wrong here?" I asked rapidly. "Oh! I—I beg your pardon, sir——"

"You have just come at the right moment, Nipper," said Nelson Lee briskly. "Two ruffians have just escaped by means of the window, after robbing us of two bundles of notes."

"My hat!" exclaimed Handforth, who was near the window. "I can see the beggars dodging across the Triangle. This way, you chaps!"

The juniors crowded out after Handforth, and, after a second's hesitation, I followed them. We could easily make full inquiries afterwards.

My only little worry was that Nelson Lee could allow the men to escape without lifting his finger to stop them. What could it be? Perhaps he had had no chance——

"One minute, Nipper," called the guv'nor. "I should not advise you to follow those men."

"Why not, sir?"

"They appear to be fully armed."

"That's all the more reason why we should follow!" I exclaimed warmly.

I rushed off without waiting further, and Sir Roger turned to Nelson Lee with a somewhat scared expression on his face.

"You should not have let them go, Mr. Lee!" he exclaimed, calmed and sobered by the dramatic interlude. "There is no telling what those ruffians will do—no telling at all!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"You need have no fear, my dear sir," he said. "Nipper is a very capable youngster, and he can look after himself quite easily. I would have given chase myself, only I am wearing thin slippers, and I am afraid I could not have negotiated the rough ground."

Meanwhile, we were hurrying down the lane at top speed, Handforth leading. We were in full cry after the bandits, who had taken to their heels as soon as they found that the chase was on.

As I ran I wondered who these men could be. And, somehow, I had an idea that they were not merely chance burglars, who had come to the school on this particular night on the off chance.

For I remembered something which had occurred only a day or so earlier—something which had puzzled me considerably at the time, but which I had hopes of clearing up sooner or later.

Nelson Lee himself had also been puzzled, and I had intended speaking to him on the subject, but had forgotten to do so, owing to the many other events which had been piling on top of one another of late.

And as we ran down the lane, in chase of these men, my thoughts were rapid. I brought to mind the incident of the cipher message, and I came to the conclusion that there was some connection somewhere.

Montie and Tommy and I had seen two mysterious strangers hovering about the school one afternoon. Their movements had been decidedly queer, for after one had vanished into Bellton Wood, the other had scrawled a message, and had concealed it in a small hollow stick. This, naturally, excited our interest, and we had proceeded to investigate without delay.

The message, when we found it, proved to be a mere jumble of letters and figures, with seemingly no rhyme or reason. Nelson Lee had been on the same track at the same time, and he had taken the cipher message with him, in order to decode it, if this were at all possible.

There the incident had ended. At least, I knew nothing more, although I was fully determined to press the matter in the near future. For I was fairly certain in my own mind that it would develop into something bigger. It was the beginning of a little mystery—and mysteries always interest me.

Was it possible that these two masked bandits were those two men who had acted so strangely a short time earlier? As we hurried in pursuit, I realised that the possibility was not too remote to be feasible.

But, as it turned out, my surmise was quite wrong—these armed desperadoes were in no way connected with the other two. The pair evidently only thought of escape, for they did not pause once.

They pelted down the road desperately. And when they reached the old stile which led into Bellton Wood, they jumped over hurriedly—or, at least, they intended to do so. But one of them stumbled, tripped forward, and fell heavily.

He attempted to recover himself, but his foot was caught, and his companion

was compelled to run back and help him to extricate the foot.

And by the time it was done, the pursuers were at hand.

"Stop!" shouted Handforth. "You'd better give in while you've got the chance! Pile in, you fellows——"

"Stand back!" shouted one of the men hoarsely.

"Rats!" roared Handforth. "We're going to——"

"Another step, and I'll pull the trigger!"

"I don't believe that bunkum!" roared Handforth defiantly.

He moved forward before anybody could stop him.

Click!

The pistol in the bandit's hand gave a peculiar sound, and the next moment Handforth staggered, and fell. But he was on his feet again in a moment, his hand to his face. And when I rushed up close I saw that his hand was red—his face was streaming with blood!

"Good heavens!" I gasped. "You're shot!"

Handforth gave a hoarse laugh.

"I don't care!" he gasped. "I'm capable of standing it! I shall keep on until I drop in my tracks!"

"But you're smothered with blood!" shouted Pitt, horrified. "You're wounded!"

Handforth groaned.

"Yes, I believe I am!" he gasped. "I—I'm going to punch that chap's nose before I die. This way—charge!"

Handforth was game, in spite of his fatal injury, and he rushed forward with open defiance, the other fellows backing him up in the excitement of the moment.

But Handforth stumbled, rolled over and lay still.

"Stand back!" shouted the two bandits. "Gee whiz! This is gettin' tight, pard! Fire!"

Click! Click!

Something struck my face, but the next moment we were all upon the desperate rascals, and they were bowled over and lay flat on their backs. They gasped and struggled, but it was useless.

I put my hand to my face—and it came away red!

But, strangely enough, I did not seem to be suffering from an injury. So I did not worry myself about the matter. Moreover, I was beginning to guess things. I ripped the mask from one of the bandits, and grinned.

"You giddy spoofer!" I exclaimed.

"Ease up!" gasped the bandit. "You're bound to admit it was a good jape, though!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Pitt. "Brewster! Brewster of the River House! And the other chap is Ascott. The awful frauds!"

The two desperate bandits were none other than Hal Brewster and Dave Ascott, juniors of the River House School!

They had played a trick upon St. Frank's—and had played it well, too. We allowed them to get up; and, some distance in the rear, Handforth still lay upon the ground, with Church and McClure bending over him. They were unaware of the truth.

"But what about these pistols?" demanded Watson. "It's a bit risky, you know——"

"Rats!" grinned Brewster. "They're only squirters—water pistols, filled with red ink! They couldn't hurt a fly!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Begad, it's rather rich—it is, really!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's right—laugh!" came Handforth's voice from the rear. "Laugh away, while I lie here dying——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you callous bounder!" groaned Handforth. "I'm wounded! I'm streaming with blood——"

"Can't you give a hand, you chaps?" gasped Church. "We—we can't find out where he's wounded——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's not very surprising, considering that he is not wounded at all!" I grinned. "Poor old Handy! He's not due to leave us this time!"

"I tell you he's bleeding!" roared Church.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's red ink, you ass!"

"What!" howled Handforth, jumping up with amazing alacrity, considering that he was dying. "Red ink! Great pip! I—I wondered where the wound was——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you cackling idiots!" roared Handforth, glaring round. "There's a fat lot to laugh about, I must say! And what sort of bandits are they to go round squirting red ink at people?"

"They're only River House chaps," explained Pitt. "Pals of ours, in fact—Brewster and Ascott, of the Fourth."

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth, taking a deep breath. "All right! I'm going to punch their noses——"

"Ease up!" grinned Brewster. "The jape wasn't against you fellows. We were only pulling old Sir Roger's head!"

"But we diddled Mr. Lee, too!" chuckled Ascott. "That's the rich part of it! We never hoped to get such a success as this!"

"Tell us all about it," I said.

"Well, we heard that Sir Roger was making himself jolly unpleasant," said Brewster, "and we thought it a pretty good wheeze to work out an April fool jape. So we crept up to the school, with the idea of holding up Sir Roger—just as a lark. Practically all the chaps in the Fourth know about it, so you can bet we're only having a game. But we couldn't see our bird at first, so we hung about for a bit, and then spotted his shadow on the blind of the Head's study."

"Well?"

"After that, we crept up and waited," said Brewster. "And before we could even decide what to do, Sir Roger opened the window and spotted us. So, instead of bunking, we started on the job at once, and dished the old merchant beautifully."

"To say nothing of dishing Mr. Lee!" put in Ascott, with a chuckle. "We didn't want that, but we had to keep it up once we'd started. Mr. Lee's too much of a sport to be wild about it afterwards. He'll see the point of the joke all right."

"Of course he will," I said. "But I can't believe that he's been fooled. The guv'nor isn't the kind of man to be dished easily, you know. Did he give you any money?"

"Rather!" said Ascott. "He went to the safe, and gave us two bundles of notes—hundreds of quids!"

"What!"

"Gammon!"

"Don't talk rot!"

"It's a fact," said Brewster. "I suppose he was afraid of us shooting Sir Roger, or something, and got rid of us as quickly as possible. Anyhow, we've got the notes—two fat bundles!"

"Look here!" said Ascott triumphantly.

He produced his own bundle, pulled the heavy elastic band off, and passed the notes round. I took one, feeling surprised and disappointed. I gave the guv'nor credit for being keener.

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Pitt. "Fancy Mr. Lee throwing up the sponge like that! I thought better of him——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" I yelled.

"What the dickens——"

"Oh, my goodness!" I exclaimed, grinning broadly. "This is rich—beautifully rich!"

"What do you mean, you ass?"

"Examine those notes carefully, Brewster," I said calmly.

"Ex-examine 'em?"

"Yes. They're duds!"

"What!"

"They're spoof notes!" I grinned. "No wonder Mr. Lee handed them over. You've been fooled, too! It's a case of the foolers fooled!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But—but——"

Brewster and Ascott paused as they feverishly examined their bundles of notes. They were obliged to admit, a moment later, that what I said was the truth. All the notes were spurious—palpable imitations which would not have passed muster with a short-sighted man on a foggy day.

"Well, my hat!" said Brewster, taking a deep breath. "This is just about the limit! We went to St. Frank's to fool Sir Roger, and we were fooled by Nelson Lee!"

"In fact," said Pitt calmly, "it's been a pretty foolish evening all round!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER VII.

NOTHING ELSE FOR IT.

HAL BREWSTER grinned.

"Well, you'd better take charge of these notes," he said. "Even if they had been genuine, we shouldn't have wanted them—we only did the thing for a lark. I say, you'd better not explain who we are, or we might get sacked——"

"You wouldn't get sacked," I said. "Mr. Lee would see to that. But it'll

be better, perhaps, to keep it quiet. We'll simply say you were two River House chaps, and leave it at that. I don't suppose there'll be any inquiry."

"I hope not, anyhow," said Brewster.

We parted a few moments later, and made our way back towards St. Frank's in quite a cheerful frame of mind.

The night had been a very exciting one, altogether, and we had nothing to grumble at. We had fooled the blackleg staff, then we had fooled Sir Roger, and after that the River House chaps had come along, and had created some more fun. Altogether, it had been an evening of diverting episodes. Whether the Head and Sir Roger would look at it in the same light was a different matter.

We soon arrived in the Triangle, and then made our way across to the Head's private room. It was standing open, and we piled in, wondering what would happen, and were soon within Dr. Stafford's study.

Nelson Lee was still there with Sir Roger.

"Well, Nipper, what success?" he asked pleasantly.

"We captured them, sir——"

"What!" shouted Sir Roger. "Then where are they, you impudent young rascal. Why have you not brought them ——"

"You see, Sir Roger, the bandits were not very dangerous, after all," explained Nelson Lee, before I could speak. "They were merely a couple of junior schoolboys, armed with harmless water pistols."

"My hat! How did you know, sir?" asked Watson blankly.

Lee chuckled.

"My dear lad, I happen to possess two eyes," he replied smoothly. "I knew what the game was at once, and I allowed the young rascals to have their little joke. Surely you do not imagine that I should have acted so tamely if the intruders had been actual bandits?"

"We did think it was a bit queer, sir," said Pitt. "And you fooled the chaps nicely, as it turned out."

"But—but what about the notes?" demanded Sir Roger. "You gave those informal boys two big bundles——"

"Here they are, sir," I interrupted, placing them on the desk.

"Their face value is perfectly nil," remarked Nelson Lee. "You, see, Sir Roger, they are merely imitation Treasury notes, such as are used for theatrical purposes. I knew they were in the safe, so I saw no reason why I should not participate in the spirit of the affair."

"H'm! Ridiculous!" snapped Sir Roger. "I shall see that those young rascals are severely punished——"

"That will be rather difficult, I am afraid," interrupted Nelson Lee. "Both the boys were masked, and it will be difficult to identify them. Take my advice, Sir Roger, and let the matter drop. By insisting on punishment, you will only invite publicity, and the story will not lose anything by being repeated in the village!"

"Then I will say nothing. Perhaps it is just as well," snapped Sir Roger irritably. "The boys ought to be horsewhipped, nevertheless!"

"Good old guv'nor!" I murmured. "He's a brick!"

"Begad, rather!"

"He knows who the chaps are as well as we do," I went on. "But he won't say a word—he's as fond of a joke as anybody."

The little incident was over, but before we went to bed Sir Roger had a few more words to say.

"It is just as well that you boys have come here," he exclaimed grimly. "You will please tell me the meaning of the disgraceful affair connected with the new servants. I am quite correct in suspecting that you boys are the ringleaders of the whole affair—and I want the truth from you."

"Very well, sir," I said quietly. "I have every intention of telling you the truth. It was my idea in the first place—my plan to trick the new servants into going to some other place instead of St. Frank's——"

"Oh, indeed!" snapped Sir Roger, harshly. "So that was your idea, was it?"

"Yes, sir."

"What is your name?"

"Nipper, sir."

Sir Roger darted a glance at Nelson Lee.

"Well, it does not matter who you are—it is no concern of mine," he exclaimed. "You have been guilty of disgraceful conduct, and you must suffer the consequence. Mr. Lee will be able to afford you no protection, let me tell you. You will be flogged and expelled from St. Frank's in disgrace!"

"Oh!"

"Shame!"

"It's not fair!"

"And, what's more, we won't stand it!" shouted Handforth recklessly. "We are all in it together, and if Nipper is expelled, we want to be expelled, too!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Good old Handy!"

"We all back you up, Nipper!"

"Silence!" thundered Sir Roger. "How dare you create this commotion in this apartment? Since you have adopted this attitude, I shall not hesitate to recommend the expulsion of you all. The Headmaster will attend to that duty in the morning."

"If he does, sir, he'll have to expel the whole Remove," said Pitt grimly. "Everybody will back us up, and there will be another strike if these harsh measures are adopted."

Sir Roger glared.

"Are you daring to threaten me, boys?" he demanded.

"Not at all, sir!" said Pitt. "It's not a threat. There's such a feeling about the school that any injustice will act like a torch to a barrel of gunpowder. There'll be the biggest trouble on record."

Sir Roger fumed.

"The whole position is intolerable," he declared. "I do not intend to be fooled about any longer—that is final!"

"Then the best thing you can do, sir, is to have the old staff back," I said quietly. "They're willing to return at an hour's notice if you'll only grant their wishes—and even then they'll be cheaper than the crowd you thought about having here."

"I do not want any advice from you, young man," snapped Sir Roger harshly. "And I insist upon you telling me where those servants are——"

"I'm sorry, sir, but it can't be done. And if the new staff comes in to-morrow, the Remove will not be able to acknowledge it. We have agreed that we shall only recognise the old servants——"

"Enough of this!" snapped Sir Roger. "You will go to bed—every one of you. I need time to think. Go!"

We went, only too glad to escape. It was quite clear that the chairman of the Governors was in a state of indecision. He hardly know which way to turn. And this was certainly not to be wondered at.

After we had gone he turned to Nelson Lee with set lips.

"This position is getting unbearable, Lee!" he exclaimed. "These confounded boys are interfering at every turn. Before long the whole school will be ruled by the Remove! Good heavens! I hardly know whether I am on my head or my heels. In any case, I have come to a fixed decision."

"That, at all events, is hopeful," said Nelson Lee.

They continued talking for some time, and, meanwhile, the Remove got to bed, and lost no time in dropping off to sleep.

In the morning there was nothing unusual. The new staff had not arrived, and breakfast would apparently be a patched-up meal. The whole school was in a state of disorganisation and chaos.

Everybody was laughing over the adventure of the night before, for the whole school knew the truth by now.

And then we were ordered to collect in Big Hall—the Head, it seemed, was about to make an announcement.

Many of the Remove fellows felt rather nervous, for they came to the only possible conclusion. The Remove was to be victimised for its part in the affair of the previous night. It was the only thing to think.

"You kids are going to be warmed up a bit now," observed Chambers of the Fifth, as we went in.

"Rats!" said Handforth. "We won't stand any rot!"

"You have my sympathy, anyhow," said Chambers. "It'll be a dirty trick if that fried-faced old bounder punishes you. That jape of yours last night was worth quids. You deserve to be knighted."

"Such praise from Chambers is praise indeed," observed Pitt solemnly. "Will the heavens fall? The Fifth actually approves of a jape by the Remove! Wonders will never cease!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I didn't tell you to be cheeky, did I?" said Chambers loftily.

We grinned, and went to our places.

And a few minutes later the Headmaster appeared on the raised platform, and stood for a moment or two chatting with Sir Roger Stone and Nelson Lee. Then the Head faced the crowded hall.

"Boys, I have an announcement to make to you," he said in his deep voice.

"Sir Roger Stone, under the exceptional circumstances which you all know of, has decided upon a course which, I am sure, will be popular. In brief, you will all leave St. Frank's to-day for your Easter holidays——"

"Oh!"

It was a general exclamation of surprise and delight.

"I am aware that you are not due to go for another two or three days," went on the Head. "But the position here is so awkward that it is the best possible solution to the problem. There will be no lessons to-day——"

"Hurrah!"

"Oh, good!"

"Ripping!"

"You will pack up and leave by any train you wish," proceeded the Head, through the din. "You are dismissed!"

"Hurrah!"

"Three cheers for the Head!"

Everybody was shouting and cheering and yelling with delight—particularly the juniors.

It was a complete surprise.

Nobody had suspected that the school would be sent off home for the Easter holidays so soon. It was the best possible solution, as the Head had said. But the juniors were forgetting one thing.

"Look here, you chaps," I said warningly. "We've got our holidays, and we're all going away, but the strikers haven't won, have they?"

"Well, not exactly," said Watson.

"And the reason for this scheme is pretty obvious," I went on. "Sir Roger means to get rid of us so that he can make his arrangements in peace. We shall come back to find a new staff installed—and the other chucked off for good. We're not going to stand that!"

"Rather not!"

"There's another thing," I went on. "How are the strikers going to live during the fortnight to come? We shall be away, and there'll be nothing doing. We expected to have things settled within a day or two—but this means it won't be settled. So we've got to get busy."

"How?"

"Well, I think it's up to us to raise a subscription for the old staff," I said. "Not only the Remove, but the whole school. If we can only supply the old staff with sufficient funds to carry them over—to secure their board and lodging in the district, we can look after them afterwards, when we come back. We can champion their cause again, and see that they win the day."

"Good idea," said Handforth.

"Rather!"

The subscription was approved by everybody. Of course, many of the fellows could only afford a mere shilling or less. But it all mounted up. A large number of Removites went round the school with specially prepared bags.

Contributions were dropped in these. Sixth Formers and Fifth Formers contributed generously, and altogether a very respectable sum was raised. The total subscription amounted to eighty-seven pounds ten.

"Splendid!" I exclaimed, after the count was over. "This'll do top hole. We'll take it down to old Broome at once!"

Broome was the head gardener, and the leader of the strikers.

We found him with a good few other members of the dismissed staff collected round him in the village High Street. Warren was there, looking very gloomy, and Tubbs was by no means cheerful.

"Looks bad, Master Nipper," said Tubbs, as we came up. "You're all going away to-day, so we can't hold out until you come back. It's the sack for the lot of us, and—and I didn't want to leave St. Frank's!"

"Don't you worry, my son," I said, patting the pageboy on the back. "Before long you'll be back in your old job. We're not going to let anybody else pinch it."

Tubb's didn't quite understand, but when I presented the subscription to Broome, there was general excitement among the strikers.

The word soon got round, and there was any amount of cheering. We assured the staff that they had our full support, and that we should take up their cause with renewed vigour when we returned from the holidays.

"It's too good of you, young gentlemen," said Broome, gratefully. "I'm sure we all appreciate it to the full. And I do hope we shall be able to come back to our old jobs."

"Of course you will," I said. "That's a certainty."

There was a lot more cheering, and

every time a group of St. Frank's fellows appeared, they were greeted warmly and enthusiastically.

Sir Montie and Tommy and I went up to London by the afternoon train, and in the same carriage was Handforth and Co., Pitt, De Valerie, and a good many others. It was a tight squeeze, in fact.

And before we reached our destination a certain appointment had been made. We all agreed to meet on Easter Monday to have a regular spree together. For once we were going to be really democratic, and would enjoy ourselves with 'Arry and 'Arriet.

In short, we arranged to meet on Hampstead Heath, and to spend the day on the roundabouts and at the cocoanut shies.

We anticipated having an enjoyable day, but not one of us had the slightest idea of what was to actually take place.

For that day on 'Appy 'Anipstead was destined to prove a day of fun, excitement and thrills!

THE END.

TO MY READERS.

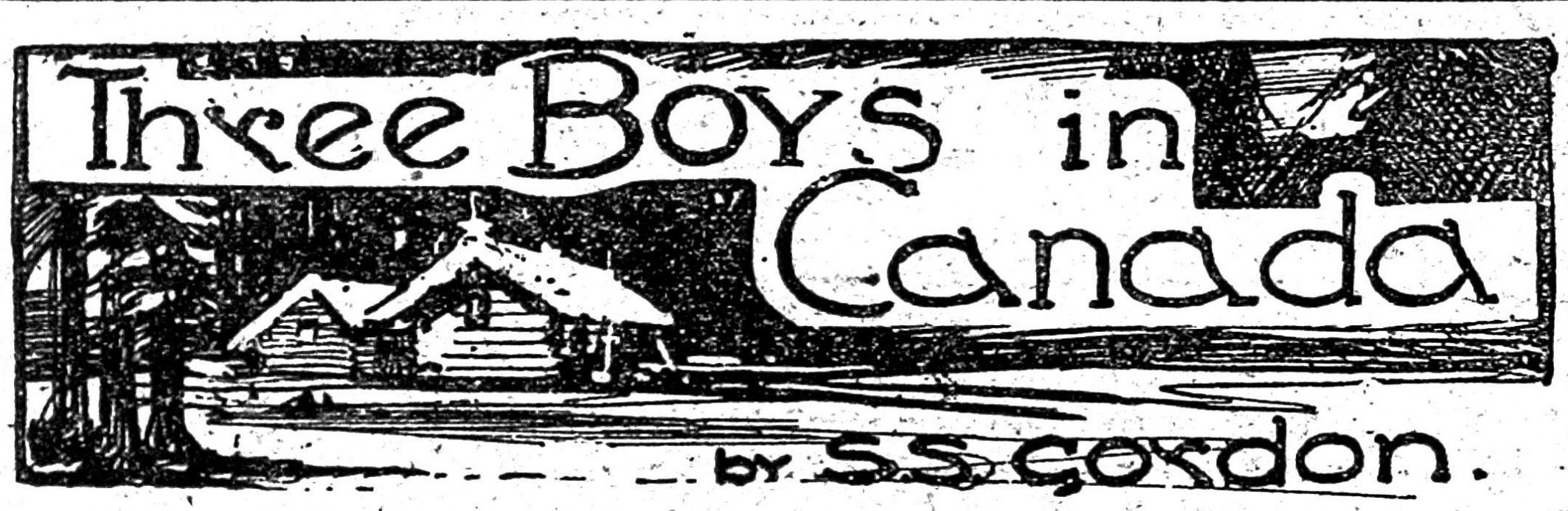
SO much attention has been given in the above story to the servants' strike and the April Fool hoax, that some of my readers may have ceased to attach any importance to the appearance of the unknown men in Bellton Wood—described in last week's story—resulting in the find by Nipper, and afterwards by Nelson Lee, of the cryptic message on a piece of paper concealed in a hollow stick. It is a clue which up to the present has led to nothing. Nevertheless, a detective, especially one with Nelson Lee's reputation, could not afford to neglect to watch for further developments, and I would advise all my readers who are interested in detection, to follow carefully the subsequent events in this series that may appear to have some bearing on this clue.

You will be able to read next week how the famous juniors of St. Frank's spend the Easter Bank Holiday, in the rollicking story called "ST. FRANK'S AT 'APPY 'AMPSTEAD!" Wherever these high-spirited youngsters go, they always manage to create a lively scene, and I can promise you that their holiday experiences at Hampstead will be no exception to this rule. If you have never been to Hampstead Heath on a Bank Holiday, you have missed a treat; but if you fail to read of St. Frank's adventures on the famous heath, well, you will have missed a feast. 'Arry and 'Arriet will be there in all their glory, dressed up to the nines in their pearlies and fevvers; you will read of the swings and the roundabouts, the coker-nut shies and side shows, all of which will be well-flavoured with some priceless gems of cockney humour.

Several of my readers who remember that magnificent African serial, "The House in the Jungle," by Alfred Armitage, will be pleased to hear that they can buy it now as a complete story in "The Boys' Friend 4d. Library." Another of our serials, and one comparatively recent, entitled, "In Trackless Space," by Robert W. Comrade, which enjoyed such widespread popularity that I have been encouraged to hasten its re-publication in book form, appears in "The Boys' Friend 4d. Library" this month. My advice to you, my readers, is to get a copy while you can, as there is certain to be a great run on this wonderful story of adventure to the planets.

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. From St. Pierre the brothers Royce set out in search of their missing chums, whom they suspect to have been pushed off the train at Devil's Falls. On the trestle bridge over the Falls they are attacked by Obed Snaith and Olesen, a burly Swede, but the boys get the best of the fight.*

(*Now read on.*)

The Finding of Gerald:

TEDDY, staring down, shuddered as he saw, besides the foaming, roaring waters, many great jagged rocks beneath him. It was these rocks, there in the midst of the rapids at the foot of the falls, that caused most of the upheaval of the water.

"Poor Gerald!" he said. "Hard luck on the old chap!"

He stopped, and, going to the extreme edge of the bridge, knelt down, placed his hand on the very low parapet, and leaned as far over as he dared.

"What's that lying down there, Jack?" he asked; and pointed.

Directly below him, jammed, as it seemed, between two of the immense upright piles that supported the bridge, was a great rock whose top was flat, instead of being rough and jagged, as the others were. Jack stared through the strengthening daylight. Something dark and apparently shapeless seemed to be lying on that rock. It was very indistinct, for it was blurred in their sight by the spray that the waters were throwing on high; but, getting accustomed to the spray, the light growing momentarily stronger, Jack at length was sure he could make out what the black patch was.

"It's a man!" he said.

"Can it—can it be Gerald?" Teddy asked, his heart missing a beat at the thought.

Jack stared harder. Far down, dreadfully far down, that solitary figure, whoever it was, lay stretched upon its face on the flattened surface of the rock. One edge of the rock was, it seemed, within a couple of feet of one of the great piles. Between the pile and the rock the water raced and foamed, and lifted itself so that at times it washed over the rock, and washed over the figure of the man upon it.

"If it is Gerald," said Jack solemnly, "he must be dead. No man could fall

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

from this height on to that solid rock and live. Every bone in his body must be broken. Oh, the poor lad! And I" —he laughed a little brokenly—" and I had called myself his protector! The mockery of it!"

" But perhaps he's alive," said Teddy, half impelled to say it out of youthful hope, half out of pity for his brother who was taking this so badly.

" If he isn't," said Jack, suddenly fierce again, and he turned to the still unconscious Snaith, " I believe I'll kill that man! But he must be dead. Still, even if he is, we must make some effort to get him away from there. But how?"

He looked up and down the falls. The rock on which the figure lay was in the very middle. There could be no hope of reaching it from the banks at the ends of the bridge, even had the banks not been sheer, which they were.

Jack thoughtfully looked down on the lattice-work of timber below him that made up the trestles of the bridge. There was nothing about them that could be called like a ladder, and yet Jack slowly remembered an occasion when, working on a similar bridge to this, he had climbed up and down, monkey-like, from rough timber to rough timber. Then, of course, he had merely carried a hammer and an axe. He wondered now if he could climb down and, reaching the figure below him, carry it up again.

Teddy must have guessed something of what was passing through his brother's mind. He watched Jack silently for a while, and as they thought, they forgot their recent enemies. And Hank Olesen, the big cowardly Swede, seeing the attention of the Britishers was drawn from him, took advantage of the opportunity, and, with characteristic disregard for his less fortunate comrade's well-being, slipped away along the bridge. Nor did the Royce boys notice him.

" Are you going to try to get down?" asked Teddy; then, as Jack made no reply, but stared down into the depths: " Let me, old man; I'm lighter than you."

" But I don't think you could get Gerald's weight up, even if you got down safely, old lad," said Jack. " I'm not sure if I could. It doesn't look a very promising climb down, let alone up again. Still, if that's Gerald——"

He sucked his tongue; then suddenly, as though desirous of getting to work before he changed his mind again, he sat down on the sleeper he had stood on, dropped his legs through, let his weight rest on his hands, and hung in space for a moment. Teddy shuddered, and scarcely dared to watch him.

He waved his feet about, while his fingers dug into the timber on which he hung. His toes felt something solid; it was a strut, or brace. He closed his eyes and let go with his hands. Then he threw his weight forward, and both arms gripped the main upright timber. For the moment he was safe. He looked down then, and saw the waters below him. Now they looked very dreadful to him, worse than they had looked when he had been on comparatively secure footing above. He had worked on the construction of such a bridge as this, as had been said, but never one over a rapid like this one made by the Devil's Falls. He felt his senses swim, and set his teeth and shut his eyes, and strove with all the power of his strong will to fight down the nervousness that he felt growing upon him. Teddy looked down through the sleepers at him anxiously, and prayed for his brother's safety.

Once on the way down, Jack clenched his teeth grimly, and resolutely refused to think of the danger of his undertaking. He knew well that a single false step would send him hurtling down into the turgid depths below, whose thunder smote deafeningly on his ears, growing, it seemed, louder and more menacing every moment. Or, if he did not strike the thrashing waters, he knew he would drop on something else, perhaps worse; for the flat rock upon which Gerald lay was directly beneath him now.

He worked himself downwards, now resting his feet on a timber, now hanging by his hands from another. The rough timber splinters pierced his work-hardened hands many a time, causing him to bite his lips with the pain of it; at times he saw, in the place where he had hung for a moment, dark red smears—his own blood. But he cared nothing for this; his whole mind was centred on the one thing—to get down to Gerald's side, to examine his friend, and find out the worst.

At length he was level with the rock. Here, to bridge the narrow gash between

(Continued overleaf.)

rock and timber, he had to feel outwards with one foot. When he had one boot planted firmly on the rock, he pushed himself off the bridge's framework with one hand, gave a jump, and at length was on his knees beside Gerald.

He looked directly upwards for a moment. The top of the bridge, where Teddy was, seemed very high up; he wondered to himself that he had managed to get down here from it at the cost of so little harm to himself. He sucked his bleeding fingers, waved a hand towards the face of Teddy, which he saw faintly, peering through the timbers, then bent over Telford.

The feeling Jack was next conscious of was one of joy. A moment's work with his fingers about his friend's breast, and he knew Gerald was not dead; though how he still happened to be alive was one of the biggest mysteries he knew of. Sufficient was it then to know Gerald was alive. He cupped his hands about his mouth, and roared the good tidings up to his brother.

Stranger still, Jack considered, he could not feel any broken bones about his friend's body. Gerald's head bore a sadly bruised cut; but his skull had not been fractured. The boy's heart was going faintly, and Gerald's face was as white as death. But, considering the lad was saturated, owing to the spray that dashed about the rock, it was hardly surprising that he lay like this. The exposure, Jack considered, had as much to do with his unconsciousness as any physical hurt.

Jack's next act was a characteristically unselfish one. He himself was comparatively dry as yet, though the spray was rapidly wetting him through. He stripped off his coat and shirt, and with these he began to rub at Gerald's body, after stripping his friend also of his saturated clothes. Gerald's body was as cold and flabby as wet clay. But under Jack's brisk effort, the heat gradually began to return. There was no danger of Jack catching a chill just then; he was working too hard; indeed, he soon was perspiring freely with his exertions. And he also glowed with the satisfaction of seeing that all his efforts were bringing about the desired end. Some vestige of colour began to show in Gerald's previously corpse-like body. The lad's heart began to beat more briskly. Jack worked harder still, even, and, at length, Gerald heaved a great sigh, and his eyes flickered open.

(To be continued.)

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