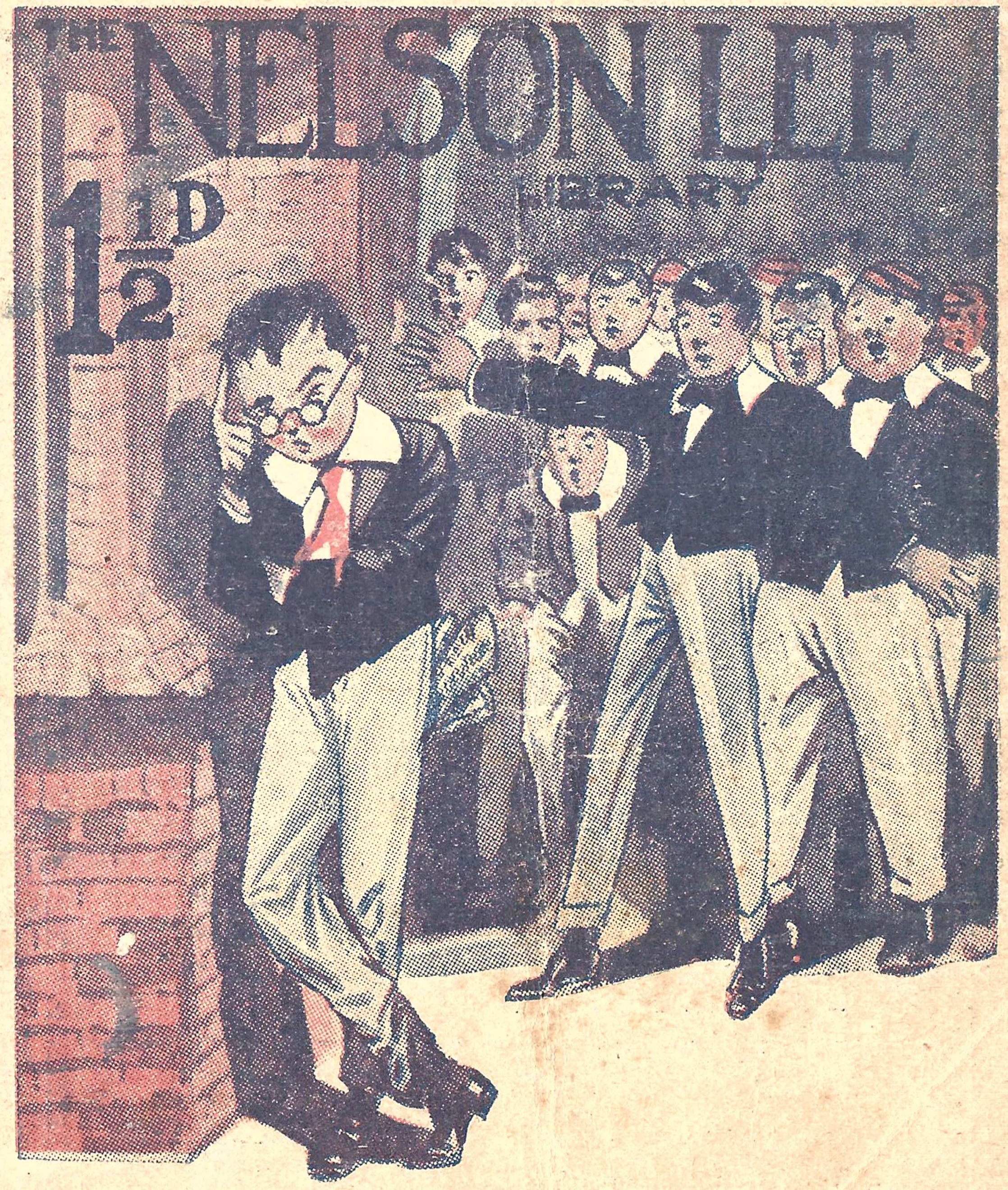

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

HANDFORTH AND CO. FIRST.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH, of the Remove Form at St. Frank's, stood in the big enclosure at Victoria Station, looking somewhat forsaken and forlorn. His trunks stood close by, and he clutched a handbag.

"Jolly queer!" he muttered. "The train goes in half a giddy hour, and there's not a fellow to be seen!"

He stared about anxiously. He was not accustomed to this feeling of isolation. On the first day of term it was usual for Victoria Station to be thronged with St. Frank's fellows at this hour.

The Easter holidays were over, and Handforth was returning to the old school on the Sussex coast—or, at least, within three miles of the coast. And Handforth didn't like being alone. He couldn't understand it.

Suddenly he let out a yell—a most startling yell—and an old lady who was just passing nearly fainted on the spot. Handforth's voice was inclined to be somewhat disconcerting.

"Dear, dear!" exclaimed the old lady. "Whatever is the matter?"

Handforth didn't even notice her.

"Hi!" he roared. "I say, Churchy!"

Other people grinned, and Handforth waved his hands like a windmill. A junior, attired in an overcoat and topper, and carrying a small portmanteau, turned his head in Handforth's direction and nodded.

He approached.

"What's the idea, Handy?" he asked. "Giving a public performance?"

"You silly fathead!" said Handforth, by way of greeting. "What's the meaning of this? Why didn't you come before, you ass?"

"Plenty of time for the train, isn't there?" asked Church, of the Remove.

"Yes, but——"

"Where are all the other chaps?" went on Church, looking round. "I expected to find the gang here. They'll have to buck up if they're going by the noon train. Perhaps they all mean to come on later."

"Looks like it," said Handforth. "But it's queer, all the same. I suppose you got a letter yesterday?"

"Yes."

"A lot of tommy-rot, I call it!" exclaimed Handforth warmly. "Making us all go back before the time! I expect it's a rotten dodge of Sir Roger Stone's. How he came to be elected Chairman of the Governors is more than I can understand! A pigheaded old bounder like he is oughtn't to be allowed

on a committee, or a board, or anything of that sort."

"Well, it's no good grumbling," said Church. "Strictly speaking, the new term doesn't begin until to-morrow, but I expect there's something at the bottom of it. We wouldn't have been instructed to turn up to-day otherwise. What did it say in your letter, Handy?"

"You can have a look at it," said Handforth.

He produced a letter from his pocket, and unfolded it, and passed it to Church. The other junior nodded.

"Just the same as mine," he remarked. "Everybody had one, of course."

The communication was written on a sheet of St. Frank's paper, which was neatly printed and of the finest quality. Only the masters were privileged to use this stationery.

Several lines of typewriting were visible on the sheet, and the message was exceedingly abrupt and formal. It simply instructed the recipient to return to St. Frank's on the Monday instead of the Tuesday.

"One of Sir Roger's stunts, I expect," went on Church. "He's too blessed dignified to sign his giddy name, so he sent these things out. I shall be jolly glad when he clears off altogether. Why he keeps hanging about the school is more than I can understand. There'll be ructions if he——"

"Hallo!" interrupted Handforth. "I can see Clurey!"

"Where?"

"Over there, by the exit which leads to the Underground," said Handforth. "He looks pretty loaded up, too. It's a bit rummy we don't see anybody else, though. I wonder where the others are!"

They waved, and McClure saw them at once. He came over, loaded with bags and packages.

"Phew! Thank goodness!" he exclaimed. "Jolly pleased to see you chaps again. How's everything going?"

"Same as usual," said Handforth. "I suppose you had a pretty decent time at home?"

"Not so bad," said McClure, setting his packages down. "Nothing exciting, though—nothing like that ripping adventure of ours on Hampstead Heath. Seen anything of Nipper, or the others?"

"Not yet," said Church.

"Lazy bounders!" exclaimed McClure. "I say, what do you think of this beastly idea, fetching us back a day before the time? I call it a bit offside, if you want my opinion. I half decided not to come to-day."

"It's just as well you did come," said Handforth. "There'll be terrific trouble if some of the fellows ignore that letter. Sir Roger's down there, I expect, and he'll make it hot for anybody who flouts him. At the same time, I think it's jolly rotten. You've got a typewritten letter, I suppose?"

"Well, I haven't got it now; but it came yesterday," said McClure. "I can't understand why the other fellows haven't turned up. There's always a tremendous crowd by this train. It'll be rather a lark if we're the only three to obey that giddy letter."

"Oh, it's not that!" said Church. "The others will be down later on. Well, we'd better get our places in the train. There's not much time."

The famous trio of Study D bustled about, and very shortly afterwards they were comfortably seated in the express, their luggage safely stowed in the guards' van. The train steamed out at last, but it carried no other St. Frank's fellows. The journey down was quite devoid of incident.

Naturally, there were sundry squabbles between Handforth and Co. They had never been known to complete a journey without squabbles. By the time the trio tumbled out of the express at Bannington they were all looking somewhat the worse for wear.

Handforth was dusty and his collar was crumpled. Church had a black eye, and McClure's nose was certainly larger than it ought to have been. These casualties were the result of an argument which had commenced quite peacefully, but which had ended in a deadly battle. It had only been stopped by the train pulling up a station, where the guard came along and rescued Church from Handforth's grasp. McClure had been discovered seeking refuge under the seat.

But this, of course, was quite a trifle, and the three juniors were perfectly amiable by the time they reached Bannington. Their squabbles never ended in a quarrel. And it was generally the case that after they had been separated for some time, the arguments became

more than usually violent. Possibly, Handforth considered that it was up to him to make up for lost time. And, in any case, it was only right that he should assert his authority in a most unmistakable manner on the first day of term. It wouldn't do to give Church and McClure too much rope. This, of course, was Handforth's opinion. Church and McClure held opinions of quite a different character.

"Well, here we are again," said Handforth briskly. "And the grubby old local is waiting, as usual, to take us on to Bellton. What I can't understand is why the other fellows aren't here."

"Well, there's no need to worry about it," said Church. "We shall see plenty of 'em later on."

They transferred into the local train, with their baggage, and in due course they arrived at Bellton, the little village near which St. Frank's was situated. Afternoon was now advanced, but the sun was shining warmly and brightly, and the whole countryside looked delightful in its new spring coat.

The aged porter regarded the juniors rather curiously as they stood on the platform, surrounded by their goods and chattels.

"Is the luggage brake up here, Wiggins?" asked Handforth briskly.

"Which it ain't, young gent," said the porter, in a wheezy voice. "I don't reckon it will be up, either. Leastways, not until to-morrow."

"Why not?"

"Seein' as the young gents won't be comin' down until to-morrow, I don't reckon it'll be much good sendin' the brake," said Wiggins. "I'm rare surprised to see you to-day—that I am. Skool don't start until to-morrow."

"That's all you know, old son," said Handforth. "We've been called back a day before time, and it's the first day of term to-day. I suppose it was an oversight of the Head's not to send you a telegram!"

Church and McClure grinned, and the old porter scratched his head. Handforth and Co. left most of their luggage in the station—to be sent up later—and they walked through the village, carrying only light bags.

Everybody seemed surprised to see them, and the juniors became rather tired of it. They were fed up with explaining to all and sundry that this was really the first day of term, and not to-morrow.

"Must be a jolly dense lot about here," said Handforth gruffly, after they had passed through the village. "You might think we were zoological specimens, by the way everybody stared at us. Potty, I call it!"

They passed on, up the shady lane, and at last arrived within sight of St. Frank's. The great building was looking very quiet and still on this sunshiny afternoon. Smoke was ascending lazily from a few chimneys, but there was no sign of life otherwise.

It was strange, too, that the huge gates should be locked, for it was the custom, on the first day of the new term, to have them thrown open wide. But now they were certainly locked, and Handforth and Co. could not see any sign of life in the deserted Triangle.

The Ancient House and the College House were looking desolate. The door of the Ancient House stood slightly open, it was true, but over everything there reigned an unaccountable peace.

"This seems jolly funny," remarked Church. "Locked out, and everything deserted. As a rule, it's all bustle and noise. I wonder what the giddy idea is? Dozens of chaps ought to be here by this time."

Handforth grunted.

"Well, I'm not going to hang about here," he declared. "There's nobody to open the gates, so we'll nip over the wall. Come on, my sons!"

They walked along for a few yards, and then scaled the wall, at a point where the task was comparatively easy. They dropped into the Triangle, and then walked across to the Ancient House, feeling, somehow, that they were trespassing. It was rather a curious sensation, but they couldn't get rid of it.

Entering the Ancient House lobby, they came to a halt. The silence here was worse than the silence outside. Not a sound could be heard. Everything was absolutely still. The effect was depressing.

"I say! This is rotten!" muttered Church. "What on earth's the matter?"

"Blessed if I know!" whispered McClure. "The place seems more like a cemetery than a school!"

"I feel as though I were in church," said Handforth.

They spoke in very low voices—not deliberately, but instinctively. Their surroundings were so strange that it was impossible to talk in the usual loud, careless fashion. Something certainly was vastly wrong.

"Let's go along to the study, and get rid of these bags," said Church. "We can go and inquire afterwards. The Head's bound to be here—and most of the other masters, I expect. Come on!" They passed down the passage, and their footsteps echoed in a hollow, eerie kind of fashion. They felt more than ever that they had the whole place to themselves. Arriving at Study D, they entered, and found that familiar apartment cold and cheerless—and uncomfortably tidy.

"Hallo! There's a letter on the mantelpiece," said McClure.

Handforth walked across the room, and seized the letter. He stared at it curiously, a frown puckering his forehead.

"Who's it to?" asked Church.

"All of us!"

"Eh?"

"It's addressed to all three of us," said Handforth. "And, what's more, it's in Nipper's handwriting. Have a look for yourself."

He showed it to his chums, and they saw that the missive was addressed to "Messrs. Handforth and Co., Study D, Ancient House, St. Frank's, Sussex."

"Yes, that looks like Nipper's fist," said McClure. "What's he got to say, Handy? Open it, and see."

Handforth tore open the envelope, and he unfolded a sheet of paper, and stared at it. As he did so an expression of astonishment came into his face. This expression was quickly merged into a frown of wrath. And, finally, he let out a perfect bellow of indignant fury.

"The—the funny rotter!" he shouted, glaring.

"But, what the dickens——"

"What the deuce——"

"Look at it!" roared Handforth. "By George! Read this—— Read it, you chaps, and then you'll understand."

Church and McClure gazed wonderingly at the note, which ran as under:

"Dear Old Things,—Thought I'd just drop this line to cheer you up on arrival. You each deserve a pat for being so obedient. The letters you received weren't signed, and I had a reason for this. I thought perhaps you wouldn't obey if you knew that your instructions to return to school a day earlier were given by, Yours to a cinder, NIPPER.

"P.S.—The fact is, my children, you've been fooled. I just did it to see if you would obey orders. It's still April, don't forget!"

Handforth and Co. gazed at one another rather helplessly.

"Fooled!" gasped Church. "Dished—diddled! Oh, my only topper! The term doesn't start until to-morrow, after all—and we've been brought down here for nothing!"

"No wonder we didn't see any other chaps on the station," said McClure. "No wonder we didn't find the gates open!"

"I'll—I'll slaughter the ass when he comes!" roared Handforth. "By George! I'll absolutely bust him up!"

"Rats!" said Church. "You know jolly well Nipper's the best fighter in the Remove! You couldn't do it, Handy!"

"You wait and see," said Handforth grimly.

"And, after all, you must admit it's a pretty good joke," said Church, with a faint grin. "We've been spoofed beautifully, and now I come to think of it——"

"Joke!" yelled Handforth. "Do you call it a joke to make fools of us like this? It's not April the first! If it had been we should have been suspicious!"

"I'm blessed if I can understand how we came to be such mugs," said McClure. "We might have known there was something fishy about it. The letters weren't signed, and they were typewritten. Of course, we simply obeyed Nipper's instructions, not the Head's, or Sir Roger's. We shall be the laughing stock of the giddy school to-morrow."

Handforth breathed hard.

"We'll see about that!" he snapped. "Great pip! I'll have my own back for this! I'll make Nipper—— Hallo! What the dickens do you want? Who told you to shove your nose in here? Clear!"

Handforth glared at a man who had just entered the doorway—a young man attired in a green apron, and carrying a broom. He was a stranger to the juniors, and he regarded them in a manner which was not exactly amiable.

"Who told you to come in 'ere?" he demanded roughly.

"Who—who told us?" gasped Handforth. "Why, you cheeky rotter——"

"I don't want no lip!" snapped the fellow. "You'd best clear out afore I chuck you out!"

"Be—before you chuck us out!" exclaimed Handforth faintly.

"Yes, kid; that's what I said, an' that's what I meant!" exclaimed the man. "Like your bloomin' nerve, walkin' in 'ere, as if you owned the place! This property is private, an' the best thing you can do is to——"

"You—you insolent bounder!" roared Handforth. "Who the dickens do you think you are, ordering us out of our own study?"

The man's manner changed.

"Your own study?" he repeated.

"Yes!"

"Do you young gents belong to the school?"

Handforth gazed at his chums.

"Do—do we belong to the school?" he gasped. "Oh, my hat! I say, you chaps, do we belong to the Ancient House? Is the sun shining! Does the earth go round? Why, you—you silly idiot," he went on, turning to the man, "we belong to the Remove, and this is our study!"

"Oh!" said the fellow, taken aback. "I—I beg pardon, I'm sure, young gents. I didn't know as you were belongin' to this school. I thought the boys wasn't coming down until tomorrow."

"You shouldn't think—your head doesn't seem capable of it!" said Handforth sourly. "And who the merry deuce do you think you are? What's the idea of walking in here and ordering us about? We haven't seen you before."

"I'm the porter, sir."

"Eh?"

"The which?"

"The what?"

"I'm the new porter—Smith," explained the man.

"Rot!" said Handforth. "Warren's the porter——"

"He was, but he's been sacked, sir," said Smith. "Everybody's new here now. We've been 'ere for some days, gettin' used to the place. There's a complete new staff on the premises."

Handforth took a deep breath.

"A new staff!" he echoed. "Ye gods and little bloaters! So—so that's the wheeze! While we've been away on the holidays, Sir Roger has installed a new crowd of servants, and the old staff has been left in the lurch! My only hat! There'll be trouble over this!"

And Handforth was probably right.

CHAPTER II.

A WORD OF WARNING.

ALTHOUGH the chums of Study D had been half-expecting to hear news of this nature, it nevertheless came as a bit of a shock to them. During the holidays Sir Roger Stone had engaged a complete new staff of servants, and these people were now in full possession of the school.

Handforth and Co. had anticipated that Sir Roger would do something of the kind, but it was disconcerting to learn that the baronet's plans had been so well carried out. It was evident that Sir Roger was in grim earnest.

The whole thing was unjust, too, and it had only been brought about because of Sir Roger's obstinacy.

The original staff had committed the unpardonable sin of going on strike for a fifty per cent. advance in wages—an advance which they were more than entitled to. They had waited long for an increase in wages, but it had not come.

And when they had dared to suggest that they deserved one, the chairman of the governors had thought otherwise.

As a result, a strike had taken place, and Sir Roger, instead of granting the very reasonable demands, had dismissed the whole crowd, and had engaged this new staff to take its place.

He had attempted to do so before the holidays, but the Remove, by an astute move, had frustrated his designs. Sir Roger had thereupon sent the boys home a day or two before the holidays were due to commence.

And now, on their return, they would find new servants everywhere—and the old servants sacked for good.

Handforth and Co. were somewhat startled.

"Well, I can hardly believe it, you know," said Church. "I had an idea that things would be arranged while we were away, and that when we came back we should find everything going on as usual. What are we going to do?"

"Kick up the dust!" replied Handforth promptly.

They were out in the Triangle now, alone once more.

"Yes, by George, we'll kick up the dust!" repeated Handforth. "We pledged ourselves to help the strikers, and we'll do it! We're not going to see this beastly crowd step into the shoes of our old staff! There'll be terrific trouble to-morrow, when all the fellows get to know about it."

"Yes, rather!"

"There'll probably be a revolt," went on Handforth pleasantly. "I shall be one of the first to join, in any case. Sir Roger ought to be boiled in oil for doing a dirty trick like this!"

"But what if the old servants have gone home?" asked Church. "Supposing they cleared out of the district? It's quite likely that they have, you know. They might have given it up as hopeless, after the new staff came in. It's not much good us making a fuss ——"

"Isn't it?" demanded Handforth. "The people haven't cleared out of the country, I suppose? They can all be brought back by a sheaf of telegrams. But let's go down to the village, and see what's been happening. The fact is, we oughtn't to have gone away at all!"

Church and McClure grinned at the idea of missing the holidays for the sake of the household staff. The juniors were loyal to the strikers, but not to such an extent as that.

They went down the village at a brisk walk, and when they arrived, had no difficulty in locating Warren, the porter, and Tubbs, the pageboy. The pair were walking up the High Street, looking very disconsolate. And before Handforth could reach them, they were joined by Broome, the head gardener. Broome was really the leader of the strikers, and a quiet, level-headed, respectable man.

"Well, how goes it?" called out Handforth cheerily.

The trio turned, and their faces expressed the welcome they felt at the sight of the juniors.

"My, but I'm glad to see you again, Master Handforth," said Tubbs eagerly. "I thought you wasn't coming down until to-morrow."

Handforth coughed.

"Ahem! We—er—— As a matter of fact, we thought we'd come down in a day in advance," he said hastily. "But how goes it? Still as determined as ever?"

"I'm afraid things are a bit bad, Master Handforth," said Broome gravely.

"Which it is they're mortal bad," observed Warren, shaking his head.

"You mustn't lose heart," said McClure. "Everything will come all right before long. You've only got to stick out——"

"I don't know that that'll be any good now, sir," said Broome. "You see, they've got a new staff up at the school, an' it's not likely they'll take us back now. I reckon the best thing we can do is to look for new jobs. We've been beaten by the governors—fairly beaten, and that's a fact!"

"Rot!" said Handforth bluntly. "Don't talk out of your hat, Broomey! Have you forgotten the Remove?"

"No, Master Handforth, but——"

"You can rely on us to see you through," interrupted Handforth confidently. "Are you all here, in the village?"

"Yes, sir, all of us."

"Still hoping that you'll win the fight—eh?"

"We did hope so at one time, Master Handforth," said Tubbs glumly; "but it don't seem much good hopin' now. Some of 'em are talking about going away by the end of the week."

"If they can't talk better sense than that, I should advise them to say nothing at all," exclaimed Handforth. "You can bet your boots that you're going to win this fight, my sons. There's no doubt about it. The chaps won't see injustice done—and this new staff won't last a week. In due course you'll all be back in your old posts, so all you've got to do is to keep merry and bright, and trust in the Remove. We won't let you down."

The juniors cheered up the strikers considerably. A good many others came up, and by the time Handforth and Co. parted from them, they were feeling far happier and more optimistic.

"Now, what's the best thing to be done?" asked Handforth, as he and his chums sat in the tuck-shop, partaking of tea.

"Why, we'll go up to the school as soon as we've finished this grub," said Church. "We can sleep in the Remove dormitory——"

"Not me!" said Handforth. "I'm not going to be up there without the other fellows. These new servants seem to be a pretty mouldy lot, and I don't want anything to do with them."

"But we must sleep somewhere," said Church. "It's not worth going home again—in fact, I couldn't afford the fare. And you're not proposing that we should take a room in one of the village inns, are you?"

"I was thinking about Dr. Brett," said Handforth.

"By Jove! That's a good idea!" said McClure.

"The doctor's a decent chap—one of the best," went on Handforth. "He won't mind giving us a spare room for to-night, and we sha'n't mind explaining the position to him. He'll sympathise with us, and agree that Nipper is a funny fathead!"

So, after tea, the juniors made their way to Dr. Brett's house, which was situated on the Caistowe Road, just on the outskirts of Bellton.

Dr. Brett was in, and he immediately expressed his willingness to give the juniors a room for the night.

"Certainly, boys—certainly!" he exclaimed heartily. "You are quite welcome to stay with me. But how is it that you are here so early? I understood that the school did not reassemble until to-morrow?"

Handforth explained.

"So we came down," he concluded. "And we found that fatheaded note of Nipper's waiting for us! I don't mind a sensible joke, but——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the doctor.

"Eh?" gasped Handforth.

"Excuse me, boys," grinned Brett. "I can't help smiling! Perhaps you may not see it in the right light, but I regard this joke as an excellent one! You came down here a day too early! Ha, ha! Quite amusing!"

"Oh, killing, sir!" said Handforth sarcastically.

"But it was only a joke, so you must not do anything rash to-morrow," went on the doctor. "For example, it would not be polite to punch Nipper's nose—neither would it be discreet. I understand that Nipper's left possesses a drive that will put anybody to sleep for quite a while. And his right is an ugly customer to meet with anything less than armour plating."

Handforth sniffed.

"Nipper's able to fight, I know," he said; "but I'm going to make him sit up for making a fool of me."

"But, my dear fellow, that was not Nipper's doing!" smiled Brett. "You must blame Nature——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Church and McClure.

It was fortunate for them that they were safely in Dr. Brett's sitting-room. Otherwise there would have been gore spilt on the spot. For a second or two it seemed that Handforth was about to let fly—but he thought better of it.

And by the time the evening was over, Handy was in a splendid humour. He had enjoyed himself greatly, and even went so far as to say that it was a good thing they had come down a day earlier—for they had had such a decent time.

"Then there's no need to punch Nipper?" suggested Church.

"No, I don't think there is," agreed Handforth. "On second thoughts, I've a good mind to let the silly ass off!"

"Never spoil a good mind," said McClure.

"I'll consider it in the morning," went on Handforth. "If everything goes on all right I'll be easy with Nipper, and overlook his terrific nerve. But if he starts crowing or anything like that—well, he'll regret it."

"He won't start crowing, old son—it's not his way," declared Church. "He'll be bland and polite, and there'll be a quiet grin on his chivvy when he asks us how we got on. We'll make out we enjoyed ourselves immensely, and that'll take all the point out of the joke."

Handforth, much to his chums' relief, was inclined to agree.

And in the morning, after a healthy night's sleep, the trio rose refreshed and contented. They were very glad, now, that they had been fooled. For they were on the scene first of anybody, and felt rather superior in consequence.

They knew pretty well by which train the majority of the Remove fellows would arrive, so they decided to be on the platform at Bannington, in order to give a word of warning in good time.

Handforth and Co. were waiting when the express steamed in. The very instant the train stopped, dozens of carriage doors opened, and scores of St. Frank's fellows poured out. Removites, Fifth Formers, Sixth Formers, fags, and all manner of Saints, in fact.

Needless to say, Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West and myself were fully in evidence. We spotted Handforth and Co. at once, and I grinned broadly to my chums.

"Now for ructions," I murmured. "This is where I get slaughtered, my sons!"

Handforth skated over the platform towards us.

"Hallo, you chaps!" he said amiably. "How goes it?"

"Fine, thanks," I replied. "Got down early, didn't you?"

Handforth nodded.

"Yesterday, as a matter of fact," he said. "Some funny idiot, with a brain as big as a sixpence, thought he'd be clever. He spoofed us into coming down a day before the time—but we didn't mind. Rather glad of it, in fact. We've had a ripping time—the guests of Dr. Brett, you know!"

"Good old Handy!" I chuckled, taking his fist. "I didn't think you'd take it so nicely. Good man! The joke was against you, but you've turned it against me. Hope you weren't upset at all?"

"Rather not," said Church. "We've had a fine old time. And, what's more, we've been making discoveries. What do you think? When we went to St. Frank's, we found that a complete——"

"Let me do the jawing!" interrupted Handforth. "The fact is, Nipper, we're up against something big this time, and you can take it from me that there'll be ructions of five hundred horse-power."

I nodded.

"I know what you're going to say," I remarked.

"Eh?"

"There's a new household staff in possession of St. Frank's," I went on. "In fact, the place is filled with new servants, and the old staff—which has been at St. Frank's for years—has been discarded."

"Yes, that's right," said Handforth. "Who told you?"

"Nobody."

"You silly ass——"

"Thanks," I said. "The fact is, Handy, I guessed the truth. It was the one thing I did expect, to tell you the truth. We know what a pig-headed bounder Sir Roger is, and during the holidays he had an opportunity to work out his precious little scheme."

"And are you willing to stand it?" demanded Handforth warmly.

"Rather not," I replied. "We're going to fight this situation—fight it boldly and determinedly. The Remove won't allow the new staff to remain, I can tell you. We shall have our work cut out, but we shall win in the end."

"Good man!" said Handforth heartily. "That's the talk!"

"Dear old boy, talk won't do the trick," observed Sir Montie Tregellis-West, adjusting his pince-nez. "We shall have to take action, begad; but I'm frightfully puzzled as to what action would be possible."

"We'll pitch the whole crowd out!" said Handforth.

"Begad! That'll be a terrific task ——"

"Rot!" said Handforth. "There are plenty of us."

"Perhaps there are, dear fellow, but this case isn't like the one we had to deal with before the holidays," said Sir Montie. "Sir Roger obtained a few temporary servants from Bannington, an' it was quite easy to get rid of them. But it won't be so easy to tackle a whole staff—it won't, really."

I nodded.

"You're right, Montie," I said. "We shall need something more than force—we shall need strategy and ability. But we'll leave all plans over until we get to St. Frank's. We can't do anything here. The local train goes in a few minutes."

So we lost no time in getting aboard, and were soon rattling along towards Bellton. Having arrived, there was the usual bustle and confusion and noise. The whole platform was thronged with shouting juniors, and we were glad to get away.

When we arrived at the school we found that a good deal of excitement was afoot. Everybody knew about the new staff.

The majority of the seniors were inclined to be resigned; they did not express any intention of revolting against this act of injustice. But the juniors were loud in their condemnation of Sir Roger's action, for it was quite clear that the chairman of the Governors was wholly responsible for the situation.

"Seems that we're pretty well baffled this time, you know," remarked the Hon. Douglas Singleton, meeting us on

the steps of the Ancient House. "Sir Roger means to have things his own way."

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

"Haven't you seen the notices?"

"What notices?"

"Oh, well, of course you don't realise what it means," said the Hon. Douglas. "Just go into the lobby, and have a look at the notice on the board. There's another one—exactly the same—in the Formroom, and another in the Remove passage. And I believe there's one in the dormitory. They mean us to see the bally things, egad!"

We entered the lobby curiously, wondering what the notices could be. It was not necessary for us to wonder long. A good many fellows were crowded round the notice-board, and we pushed our way through until we came in front of it.

"My only hat!" exclaimed Watson blankly.

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "This is serious—it is, really!"

And it certainly gave us food for thought.

The notice was only short, and it ran something like this:

"NOTICE.

"Every employee of the household staff has been given precise instructions to report, without a moment's delay, any interference by the boys. It is to be clearly understood that no boy—or party of boys—is to interfere with the servants, either when they are on duty, or off duty. If an employee should report hostile action, of any description, on the part of a boy—or boys—of a particular Form, punishment will follow. And this punishment will not be confined to the offenders, but the whole of that Form will be detained within gates for the period of three days.

MALCOLM STAFFORD,
Headmaster."

"Phew!" I whistled. "This is pretty steep, and no mistake! We shall have to go pretty carefully, if we want to take any action."

"The Head ought to be jolly well ashamed of himself," declared Owen major warmly. "Why, he's just as bad as Sir Roger!"

"Yes, rather!"

"It's a shame!"

"Hold on!" I put in. "It's no good blaming the Head for this——"

"Rats! He's signed the notice!"

"Very likely," I retorted. "But an under official of the Government often signs a notice which has really been prepared by the Prime Minister——"

"Who's talking about Prime Ministers?" asked Watson, in surprise.

"My dear chap, I merely make use of a parallel," I explained. "This case is just the same. Sir Roger worded that notice—we can take that for granted—but he naturally couldn't sign it himself. The Head has control here, so the Head had to do the signing—whether he liked it or not. We know he sympathises with the old staff, so we can sympathise with him—for being compelled to put his name to a notice that he doesn't agree with."

"Well, it's rotten—that's all I can say!" declared Pitt. "If we handle any of the servants, the whole Form will suffer, and that's not fair to the other fellows."

"The innocent will have to suffer for the guilty—that's all!" declared Handforth. "And if the whole Form goes for the blacklegs, the whole Form won't grumble if it's gated. All we can do is to combine, act solid, so to speak!"

"Exactly, my dear friends, exactly!" agreed Timothy Tucker, of the Remove. "That is the one remark I was about to make. In every great industrial dispute, it is always necessary to combine forces. Admitted. You must realise that in order to force the hated capitalist to succumb, it is necessary to use a combination of forces. And we, in this instance, can do the same. There is no reason why we should not force these bloated autocrats to——"

"Ring off, you gramophone!" interrupted Handforth tartly.

"What is this—what is this?" demanded T.T., striking one of his famous attitudes. "Do I hear aright? Is it possible that I have been called a gramophone? Dear, dear! It is my intention to make an hour's speech——"

"Is it, really?" asked Pitt.

"Exactly."

"And when will you start?"

"Now—at once," said Tucker. "I intend to address you on the subject of evolution, and to point out how closely allied it is with the problems of capital and labour. It is a remarkable fact—and a most deplorable fact—that the working classes of this country are grossly mis-

represented—— Dear me! This is most remarkable!"

Timothy Tucker broke off, and gazed round the lobby in mild indignation. He gazed at blank walls and empty air.

His audience had vanished.

CHAPTER III.

PUT TO THE VOTE.

"A PENNY for 'em, dear old boy!" remarked Sir Montie smilingly.

"Eh?"

"A penny for your thoughts ——"

"There's no need to waste your money, old son," I interrupted. "You can guess what my thoughts are with only a very small expenditure of brain energy."

"The new staff an' the strikers?"

"Yes, of course," I replied. "It's a bit of a problem, and it needs thinking over, too. We shall have to get our wits to work."

Sir Montie shook his head.

"It's no good askin' me to do that, dear old fellow," he said. "I always find that my brains are shockin'ly dormant when they are expected to be particularly bright. I don't know why it is, but——"

"But rats!" I interrupted. "You needn't work that rubbish on me, Montie. In this study we know what your brain power is, in spite of your modesty. We know that when it comes to a pinch, you simply scintillate with ideas."

"Begad!" said Sir Montie mildly. "Pray don't be so ridiculous!"

He helped himself to a sandwich, and Tommy Watson and I smiled. We were partaking of tea in Study C, and it was an exceptionally good spread. Practically every junior study made a big splash on the first day of term. For the moment the staff had been forgotten, and the juniors were enjoying themselves.

But I hadn't forgotten the position, and it was up to me to make a suggestion—it was expected of me.

As Captain of the Remove, the other juniors looked to me to lead the way, and this, of course, was only natural. I was quite ready with suggestions, but I was afraid the Remove would not be ready to follow.

"I don't see that we can do anything much," remarked Watson, as he refilled my teacup. "It's a cert that there'll be ructions from the other fellows if we interfere with the servants, and get the Form gated. Sir Roger seems to have put the stopper on things pretty effectively."

"He has, if we like to submit," I replied. "Of course, we can adopt slow measures, but I don't much care for that idea."

"Slow measures?"

"Exactly. We can grumble at everything the servants do," I replied. "That won't be interfering—it'll be criticising. We can make a fuss over the grub, we can complain about the boots, we can be discontented with the bedmaking ——"

"But what's the good of that?"

"It wouldn't be much good if only a few of us did it," I replied. "But, if we all grumbled—and were grumbling every hour—well, the staff would get sick of it. They wouldn't wait to be sacked, or chucked out, they'd clear off on their own accord. Don't you see the wheeze?"

"Begad, rather!"

"It seems a very good wheeze, too!" said Watson.

"It would be if everybody in the school adopted it," I replied. "But I'm rather afraid to tackle the job; I don't think we should get fully supported. And, in any case, it's a slow business, and pretty dull. I'm after something more exciting—something a bit startling, you know."

Watson nodded.

"Yes; but what can we do?" he asked.

"Well, I've got an idea in my head; but I don't think I'll moot it just at present," I said. "I'll let it simmer and develop. In the meantime, I think the best thing we can do is to take a vote of the Form."

"What kind of a vote?"

"We'll hold a meeting directly after tea, and I'll suggest that these notices should be ignored. Then we'll organise, and pitch the blacklegs out. Once they've got the order of the boot, they won't return in a hurry. Organised action now—right at the start—will have full effect. But if we leave it over until to-morrow—well, the task will be a lot more difficult."

My chums agreed with me, but they

were rather curious about the idea which I was allowing to simmer. I allowed them to be curious, for the scheme was by no means tangible as yet.

As soon as tea was finished we went round to the other studies, and informed the fellows that a meeting was to be held in the Common-room at once—a Form meeting, and everybody was expected to be present.

Within twenty minutes the Common room was packed. Not a single junior failed to turn up. A Form meeting was always attended to the last man, because it generally meant that something was to be put to the vote, and every fellow was wanted.

"Now, then, you chaps, not so much noise!" I shouted, jumping on the table, and looking round. "I've got something to say——"

"Hear, hear!"

"Go it, Nipper!"

"On the ball!"

"If you'll give me a chance to speak, I shall have much pleasure in getting started," I said sarcastically. "Don't interrupt, and listen. You are all aware of the position with regard to the household staff. You all know that Sir Roger Stone has double-crossed us, as they put it in the States——"

"The old rotter!"

"He ought to be kicked!"

"It's no good talking like that," I went on. "We've got to do the best we can, and I appeal to everybody in this room to vote as I suggest. And I suggest that we should ignore the notices altogether, and organise ourselves into a band of determined ejectors. In other words, we'll get busy, and pitch out these usurpers, and show Sir Roger that we are not prepared to stand any nonsense."

"Hear, hear!" roared Handforth.

"Hear, hear!" echoed Church and McClure dutifully.

"Good idea!"

"We're with you, Nipper!"

"We'll back you up!"

"Count on us!"

It sounded, during the first moment or two, as though I had all the fellows with me, for shouts of approval came from every section of the crowded room. But, unfortunately, the very opposite was the case.

"Rats!"

"Talk sense!"

"We can't ignore these notices!"

"We're not all anxious to be gated!"

"No fear!"

Quite a chorus of voices went up.

"Let the new servants stop!" said Fullwood sourly. "They're just as good as the others, anyhow. What's the good of makin' a bally fuss over nothin'? I never could see the reason for all this tommy rot!"

"Shut up, you cad!" roared Handforth. "If you talk like that again, I'll punch your silly nose!"

"Fullwood's not far wrong, after all," remarked Hubbard.

"What's that?"

"I agree with what Fullwood says," went on Hubbard. "I'm not willing to be gated, anyhow. And if we all made fools of ourselves by trying to chuck the servants out, we should be gated for a fortnight, not three days! I suggest that we leave things as they are. It's too late to interfere."

"Hear, hear!"

"Rather!"

"We can't do anything now," said Owen major.

I looked round at the juniors grimly.

"Well, I can't say that I admire your determination," I declared. "You don't seem to realise that all you've got to do is to stick together. If we only take up a firm stand, we shall win the day. And if the new servants are chucked out it will be a victory for us, and a victory for the old staff."

"Hear, hear," said Pitt. "I agree."

"I must admit that I am impressed," observed Timothy Tucker. "Yes, my dear sir; I am certainly impressed. Admitted. I will even go so far as to say that I am deeply impressed. Your words are absolutely in accordance with my own thoughts, and I now intend to say a few words on the subject——"

"Wait until I've finished, you ass!" I said severely.

T.T. ignored me.

"Comrades and fellow sufferers," he exclaimed, waving his hand, in order to indicate that he included everybody in the room. "I stand before you now in order to address you on a most important subject. It is, indeed, a vital subject. You've got to realise one thing. You've got to realise two things. In fact, you've got to realise three things."

"I know what they are," said Pitt. "One is that you're an ass, another is that you're a fathead, and the third is

that you're a lunatic. We realise all those points, old son!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"This is most distressing," said T.T., with dignity. "I am shocked—deeply shocked—that you should joke upon such serious matters. Comrades, listen to me! The three things I want you to realise are these—firstly, we are fighting against autocracy; secondly, we have pledged ourselves to assist the strikers in every way; and, thirdly, it is our duty—our positive duty—to work our very hardest for the good of the cause. That is so. And, further, I will say that it is no time to back out of our obligations. We must work with might and main for the overthrow of these tyrants. And, in order to accomplish our object, the first essential is to rid the establishment of this element of blackleg labour——"

"Hear, hear!"

"Good old T.T.!"

"Every sensible chap ought to agree with what Tucker has been saying," I broke in. "He's a bit too extreme for my liking, and he's a bit dotty, but now and again his reasoning is sound. Stripped of all its embellishments, his argument is this—that we've got to put our own feelings aside, and do everything in our power to restore the original staff—to get them back in their old places. It's not as though they struck work without justification. I should be the very first chap to condemn them if they had left their work because of some trivial dispute. Too many strikes start like that nowadays. I should have been the first to take pleasure in seeing every man and woman lose their jobs for good. But this case is quite different. The servants only struck after Sir Roger had refused to listen to their extremely reasonable requests. A more orderly lot of people you couldn't wish to see—a more peaceable crowd never existed. And it's absolutely rotten that they should be chucked aside in favour of a crowd that isn't half so capable. We ought to do everything in our power to help the old staff. And I repeat that it is up to the Remove to vote solid in favour of taking prompt and definite action."

"Good!" said Handforth. "I'm with you."

"Same here," declared Pitt.

A good many other fellows agreed, but I noticed that a larger proportion remained silent.

"Well, we've got to put the matter to the vote," I said at last. "There's no sense in wasting time like this. Hands up everybody who agrees to chuck the new staff out. It's understood that the majority will be allowed to decide the issue."

Watson and Sir Montie and Handforth and Co. and all the rest of our supporters put their hands up at once. But a good many fellows did nothing—they simply waited.

The count was taken, and then the rest were invited to vote. Those who were in favour of letting matters stand put up their hands.

They outnumbered us completely. By a large majority the Remove decided to remain inactive, and to do nothing to interfere with the new staff.

"You—you traitors!" roared Handforth. "Is this what you call loyalty? Is this what you call keeping your word?"

"Oh, come off it!" growled Armstrong. "I'm not willing to be gated for three days at a time, even if you are. Sir Roger has whacked us, and the best thing we can do is to accept the position. There's no sense in kicking."

"Of course not!"

"We'd better knuckle under gracefully."

"Hear, hear!"

"But—but, you rotters——" began Handforth.

"Hold on, old son!" I interrupted. "It's no good making a fuss. The vote's been taken, and we all agreed to accept the decision of the majority. Well, the majority is in favour of letting the new servants alone—so we can't touch them."

Handforth glared.

"Are you suggesting that we should forsake the old staff?" he roared.

"No."

"But you said——"

"I said that we mustn't interfere with the new servants," I exclaimed. "But that doesn't mean to say we're going to remain idle. Now that force has been disposed of, only one course is left—and that's strategy. Instead of applying force, we've got to use strategic methods. And perhaps it will be more successful, after all—and certainly far less trouble. I've got a bit of an idea now—an idea that combines both strategy and action."

"What is it?" asked Pitt.

"I'll think it over more carefully

before I tell you." I replied. "You can be certain that I shall adopt the scheme, now that the Form has agreed to remain inactive."

"You ass, I haven't agreed!" snapped Handforth.

"Neither have I, if it comes to that," said De Valerie. "But it's the majority that counts, Handy. I'm jolly glad to see that Nipper is as determined as ever, and we can be sure that something good will result."

And with that the meeting broke up. Certainly Timothy Tucker attempted to make another speech—he was a terror on speeches—but the Removites, unfortunately for T.T., did not feel inclined to wait until he had finished. As a matter of fact, they didn't wait until he had started.

And we soon found that all the other Forms were almost of the same opinion as the Remove. It was felt that the time for action had passed and that the school could do nothing.

"Well, it's up to us now," I remarked to my chums when we had got back into Study C. "We can't do anything to-night, but I'll guarantee that things will happen to-morrow."

"What sort of things?" asked Watson.

"I don't know yet," I replied. "But Sir Roger is here, and he won't be able to crow for long. In the meantime we'll lay low and allow him to think that he has beaten us to the wide. It'll be all the better——"

"Heard the latest, you chaps?" asked Hart, putting his head in the door.

"More notices?" said Watson.

"No," replied Hart. "One of the chaps has been pumping the page-boy—a kid named Hodge—and it seems that the new staff is getting just about double the wages of the old staff!"

"Begad!"

"Oh, that's rot!" said Watson.

"Well, I heard it for a fact, anyhow," declared Hart. "A nice state of affairs, eh? Sir Roger refused the strikers a fifty per cent. advance, but he's giving these new bounders a hundred per cent. advance!"

Sir Montie looked grave.

"If this is true, it is frightfully bad," he exclaimed. "I have never heard of anythin' more shockin'ly unjust—to refuse the old servants ten shillin's more in the pound, and to grant the new servants a pound in the pound!"

"Terrible!" said Hart, grinning.

"It is no laughin' matter, you unfeelin' bounder!"

"I know that," said Hart. "But it seems a bit humorous, when you look at it in one way. The whole thing's a farce, and Sir Roger ought to be put away in a place for tame lunatics."

"He found he couldn't get servants at his own price," I said grimly, "so he's paying through the nose, rather than admit himself beaten. I don't admire his sense of honour."

Soon afterwards I made a point of going round and making a few inquiries on my own account. And it was not long before I discovered that Hart was quite correct. The new staff was getting double the wages of the old!

Many of the juniors were indignant and angry—but what could they do?

How was it possible to deal with the situation?

They didn't know—but I did!

CHAPTER IV.

SOMETHING FISHY.

JELTON didn't impress me as being a very nice individual.

I met him for the first time just before tea, and I met him again afterwards, later on in the evening. At the first meeting I had a vague idea that I had seen him before; at the second meeting I was sure of it.

He was the Head's new butler.

A biggish man of about thirty-three—young for a butler—very smart and upright, and perfect in his speech, he had dark hair and keen eyes, and looked altogether too good for his post.

I was thinking about him when I returned to Study C, after my round of inquiries. And Sir Montie and Tommy listened to my report with interest. This, of course, was my second meeting with the butler.

"So it's a fact, then," said Watson. "The new staff is being paid double the wages of the old retainers. A rotten shame I call it. I suppose you asked several of the servants, eh?"

"Yes," I replied slowly.

"And they all told the same yarn?"

"Pretty nearly."

"Dear boys, it's a beastly injustice——"

"But I didn't ask Jelton," I added absently.

"Really, Nipper, you interrupted me," said Montie, with a frown.

"Eh? Oh, I'm sorry, old son," I exclaimed. "Accept my full and overflowing apologies. Please carry on."

"Wait a minute," said Watson. "What's that you were saying about Jelly, or something?"

"I was talking about Jelton, you ass!"

"And who the merry dickens is Jelton?" demanded Tommy.

"The Head's new butler," I replied. "Haven't you seen him?"

"No."

"I think I caught sight of him, dear boy," said Sir Montie; "a tall, dark fellow, with piercin' eyes. Somehow or other he seemed to remind me of somebody I have seen before. Fancy, I suppose."

I looked at Tregellis-West sharply.

"You've seen him before?" I asked. "Are you sure?"

"Well, dear old boy, I'm not sure," replied my noble chum. "I am only sayin' that he seemed to remind me of somebody, although I can't place him. I expect it is merely a chance resemblance ——"

"Don't you believe it," I interrupted. "I had the same vague idea when I saw Jelton for the first time before tea. I met him in the passage not long ago, and my suspicions were confirmed."

"Begad! Your—suspicions?"

"Yes," I replied grimly. "I know where we saw the man before—we all saw him, in fact, Tommy included. Can't you remember, Montie?"

Sir Montie scratched his nose.

"I've got a shocking memory," he murmured. "I don't remember at all, dear old boy. It is absurd, of course, an' I hope you will give me a reminder before I have an attack of brain fever. Thinkin' always upsets me—it does, really. I suppose my brain ain't capable of standin' much exercise!"

I grinned.

"Think of the old tower," I said calmly.

"Begad! I fail to see the meanin' of your remark, old boy."

"So do I!" said Tommy Watson. "The old tower! We haven't been up there for ages. The last time was when we watched those two men in the wood through a pair of binoculars——"

"Begad!" ejaculated Sir Montie abruptly.

"Well?" I said.

"Jelton—Jelton is one of the men we watched!"

"Exactly!"

"Dear old chap, this—this is startlin'," exclaimed Montie, gazing at me with mild animation through his pince-nez. "I remember quite distinctly now. Jelton is one of those men—the one who put somethin' into a hollow piece of stick."

"The cipher message," I said.

"What's all this double Dutch?" demanded Watson. "I remember the incident, of course. We watched a couple of suspicious characters, and one of the beggars put a roll of paper into a hollow stick. We found it afterwards, and then Mr. Lee took possession of it—not that it was any good. The paper only contained a few letters and figures."

"A message in cipher," I remarked.

"Very likely; but what's that got to do with Jelton?"

"Everything," I replied. "He's one of those two men—and it looks fishy, to my mind. Jelton didn't look like a butler then. The chap was smart and obviously up to no good. He's managed to get this position in St. Frank's—and we can take it for granted that he's up to some deep game. He was spying out the lie of the land before, and now he's within the camp."

"But what for?"

"I don't know," I said. "But perhaps the guv'nor will know. I'm going along to his study now, to ask a few questions. You fellows wait here until I come back. I sha'n't be long."

I lost no time in hurrying to Nelson Lee's study. Jelton's presence in the school was strange, and I was fairly certain that the guv'nor would know something about it.

I found Nelson Lee sorting out papers and books in his study.

"Well, Nipper, how is everything going?" he asked genially, as I entered the room and closed the door. "I can see that you ase bubbling with excitement under your calm exterior. What's the trouble?"

"Have you seen Jelton, sir?" I asked abruptly.

Nelson Lee gave me a keen look.

"Yes," he replied. "You mean the butler? Why do you ask?"

"Have you seen him before?" I questioned.

"As a matter of fact, I have," said the guv'nor. "I saw him a day or two before the holidays, Nipper."

"Over in Bellton Wood?"

"Yes. I am glad to find that you are observant, too, young 'un," said Nelson Lee. "The man who is filling the position of the headmaster's butler is the individual who kindly left a message in cipher for me to examine."

"That's what I think, sir," I said. "What can his game be?"

"Possibly he is bent upon obtaining possession of the school plate—the special stuff which is always reserved for grand occasions," said Nelson Lee. "It might interest you to know, Nipper, that his companion—the other man we saw on that day—is now in the College House, occupying the post of porter."

"The other man?" I echoed. "Then they are both in London?"

"Yes, of course," said Lee. "It is clear that the two men are working together. They are here for no good purpose, and I intend keeping a sharp look-out. With regard to that cipher message, I have conquered it!"

"Really, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"It was quite simple—once I had got the key," went on the guv'nor. "You see, Nipper, the key was extremely difficult to find, and I spent many puzzled hours over the task. It is hardly necessary for me to go into details regarding the solution—it will be sufficient for me to show you the deciphered message."

"Is it startling, sir?" I asked.

"Not particularly."

Nelson Lee passed over a slip of paper, and on it I saw:

"XXX. 5638. 0-2-TRI. ZZ(X)ZZ. 1234.
Watch. Go wary. Wait. Chance coming."

"I can't see how you arrived at the solution, sir; but that's a detail," I said. "Well, this seems a bit fishy, at all events. Watch and wait and go wary. It seems to me that those fellows were watching the school for some reason—waiting for a chance to get in."

"I imagine that you are right, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "They are undoubtedly two crooks, and they lost no time in coming down here when they heard that the school was devoid of servants, and unprotected. They delayed action, however, in favour of a better scheme. As you know, they managed to obtain employment as butler and porter respectively, and now they are in the school, securely installed in good positions. They will be able to deliver their blow when it best suits them."

"What blow, sir?"

"Well, I have no doubt that the bait is undoubtedly the school plate. It is quite a valuable collection, and there will be many other prizes also. It was well worth while for the men to attempt this trick——"

"But they forgot that you were here, sir," I grinned. "Or, if they didn't forget it, they ignored it. What idiots to shove their heads into the lion's cage!"

"I am highly complimented, young 'un," smiled Nelson Lee. "I naturally expect you to keep what I have told you a secret. And when I say that, I mean that you must tell nobody except your own immediate chums—fellows whom you can trust. You will probably be interested to learn that these two men—Jelton and White—are well known to me, and well known to the police."

"You know them, sir?" I repeated. "Do you mean that they are professionals?"

"Yes, of course," said Lee. "At present they are disguised, and they probably consider themselves perfectly safe. But I can promise you that they will not be successful in their precious scheme."

"Well, that's obvious—with you loose about the premises, sir," I remarked. "By Jove! This is rather good. It adds a bit of excitement. But why don't you expose the rotters, and have them arrested?"

"Because I have no evidence."

"But you said they are well-known crooks——"

"Quite possibly; but it is doubtful if even the police have any specific charge to make against them," said Nelson Lee. "I could certainly have the men dismissed—but that would be very poor satisfaction. I intend to wait until the time is ripe. I will watch, and catch the pair red-handed—that will be a far more satisfactory method. Don't you agree with me, Nipper?"

"Rather, sir!" I replied. "I hope that everything will be all right about servants. It's a dirty trick of Sir Roger's to get this new staff in—and I don't

think much of his selection, anyhow. We don't want professional crooks running wild about the place."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"You must remember that Sir Roger is somewhat headstrong," he exclaimed. "He made up his mind to have his own way—and rather than take back the strikers, he engaged a new staff——"

"At double the wages!"

"Yes, I believe that is correct," said Lee.

"Do you agree with it, sir?"

"I certainly do not," said the guv'nor. "I think Sir Roger has made himself pretty foolish—but when a man in his position acts in that way, it is very difficult to deal with him. It is most unjust to the regular staff, and I wish I could think of some solution."

"Don't you worry your head about that, sir," I said calmly. "I've thought of a solution—and before long you'll see a few changes."

Nelson Lee regarded me severely.

"If you are thinking of anything drastic," he began.

"It's all right, sir; don't you worry your head," I interrupted. "The wheeze is a bit drastic, but the Remove will take the consequences."

"You must tell me what this scheme is."

"I'm sorry, sir, but it can't be did," I said firmly.

"You impudent young rascal——"

"Steady on, guv'nor," I protested. "How many times have you formed plans and refused to let me into the secret? Dozens of times! Well, this is where I get a bit of my own back," I added with relish. "I've made a plan, and I'm going to keep you in the dark."

Nelson Lee frowned.

"I regret to say, Nipper, that your impertinence is increasing," he declared. "You dare to stand before your Housemaster, and refuse to obey his orders ——"

"Oh, come off it, sir," I grinned.

"What!"

"You're not my Housemaster now," I explained blandly. "You're yourself—just the guv'nor. We're not master and pupil when we're in private. And what you've got to do is to wait and see. I'll guarantee that we have the old staff back, happy and joyful, within a week."

Nelson Lee shrugged his shoulders.

"I am afraid you are beyond hope, Nipper," he said, with a sigh. "You get worse instead of better. I won't attempt to argue, but I can assure you that if you do anything very drastic, you will be punished. I certainly disagree with Sir Roger's methods, and I sympathise with the strikers. At the same time, it is not possible for me to openly defy the Governors——"

"It's not possible for you to defy them, I'll admit," I broke in. "It wouldn't be the right thing, sir. But with me it's different—and that's where I hold the trump card. Sir Roger isn't going to have it all his own way, I can tell you. And the knowledge that he has brought two crooks into the school strengthens my hand enormously."

"Well, I suppose it does, in a way," agreed Nelson Lee. "Talking about the crooks, reminds me that I have a little scheme of my own in process of completion."

"What's that, sir?"

The guv'nor's eyes twinkled.

"What is sauce for the goose, Nipper, is sauce for the gander!" he observed smoothly. "I shall keep my scheme to myself."

"Well, you called yourself a goose—not me!" I grinned. "But I'll make a guess at that scheme. If I'm right, will you tell me?"

"I might."

"Well, I reckon you're planning something to make the rotters get busy," I said. "In other words, you're going to lead them into a trap."

"I must acknowledge that you are rather cute this evening, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "Yes, my plan is certainly something of that nature—but I have no intention of divulging the details. Furthermore, I am somewhat tired of your presence, and the sooner you relieve me of it, the better."

"There's nothing like being blunt, sir," I remarked. "And why do I pain you so much? Why is my absence required?"

"Because I wish to think—because if you remain much longer I shall probably take it into my head to cane you for impertinence," said Nelson Lee sternly. "And you needn't think that I'm joking."

I chuckled.

"I don't think anything about it," I said. "I know you're joking, sir. You

1. Jelton's eyes gleamed. He had overheard every word.

2. Sir Roger gasped with amazement at the strange and sinister appearance of the six black-hooded figures.

wouldn't cane me at any price—it couldn't be done."

I retired from the guv'nor's study before he had an opportunity of convincing me that it could be done. And I went back to my own quarters feeling decidedly pleased. It seemed that there would shortly be excitement all round.

CHAPTER V.

T. T. ON THE JOB.

TIMOTHY TUCKER stood in the middle of the Ancient House lobby, humming weirdly to himself. He was apparently deeply in thought, and quite oblivious to his immediate surroundings.

It was the following day, and morning lessons were over. Dinner was over, also, and most of the fellows were in the open—out in the bright April sunshine. The day was a perfect one, and the juniors thought of their own pleasure—as was only natural. They went to the river, to the playing fields, and arranged picnics.

But Timothy Tucker was evidently bent upon a different mission.

He was pulling papers from his breast pocket, and an extraordinary assortment they proved to be.

Crumpled, grimy envelopes, folded newspapers of ancient date, odds and ends of every size and description. Ninety per cent. of the stuff was sheer waste paper, and why on earth T.T. carried it about with him was a mystery nobody could fathom. He didn't know himself, and whenever he wanted any particular paper he was obliged to sort out the lot.

Tucker evidently found what he was looking for, for his hum grew louder, and he nodded to himself with approval as he slipped an envelope into a handy pocket—an envelope with many notes upon it.

And T.T. burst into song, murmuring to himself without any pretence of keeping to a tune.

"I've been in many wars," he sang shrilly. "I've seen many things. Oh, yes, I've been in many wars! Some people say this, some people say that, but I always say the other! I've been in many wars! I've been——"

"Encore!" grinned De Valerie, appearing at that moment. "You ought to go on a concert platform, my son. Your voice is wonderful."

"No impudence," said Tucker severely. "No impudence from little lads. Do you realise who you are talking to? Do you know who I am?"

"Well, you seem more like an escaped lunatic than anything——"

"How dare you?" demanded T.T., sticking his chin forward. "How dare you, my dear sir? I am he of the big head! I am the great Professor Nutblossom. And I want no impertinent remarks from brainless youths. My voice is my own, and if I choose to sing, I will sing as much as I please——"

"Well, we don't want to hear your beastly voice," said Handforth, coming up. "It sounds like a mangle that hasn't been oiled for a century!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You're jealous," said T.T. warmly. "But this is not the first time I have suffered the same complaint. I look down upon you all. I regard you as mere dirt. Quite so. H'm! H'm! Admitted!"

"What are you going to do this afternoon?" asked Church grinning.

"Fancy asking that!" said Handforth. "He's going to a whist drive!"

"Nothing of the sort, my lad—nothing of the sort!" said Tucker. "As a matter of fact, finances will not allow of such recreation. I must admit that I should favour a whist drive if I had the necessary resources. Furthermore, I fear there is no whist drive being held during the afternoon. I have other plans in mind. Quite so. And after all this I need a drink. Your faces have made me positively thirsty."

T.T. marched out of the lobby with his head on one side, and made a bee-line for Mrs. Hake's tuck-shop. He had not sufficient funds to attend a whist drive, but he still had a few coppers in his pocket.

Mrs. Hake saw him coming—it was always possible to recognise T.T. a mile off—and by the time Tucker entered the tuck-shop, a foaming glass of fizzy lemonade was waiting for him.

His order was always the same, so Mrs. Hake had no fear of making an

error. Tucker took the glass, and drank the contents down at a gulp—incidentally spilling a considerable portion of the lemonade over his waistcoat.

He shook the glass as though his hand suffered from ague, in order to be sure of obtaining the final drops.

"Splendid, my dear, splendid!" he exclaimed. "I must admit that this drink is wonderfully refreshing."

"That'll be a penny, Master Tucker," said Mrs. Hake.

"Certainly, my dear," said T.T., taking out a penny, and tossing it. "Dear, dear! Tails! This is bad!"

He tossed again.

"Ah, head! H'm!" he murmured. "Yes, I think my financial resources will permit me to partake of another glass. But we will go by the decision of the coin." He tossed again. "Tails! Dear, dear!"

He tossed once more, and again the coin showed tails. But Tucker placed twopence on the counter, and called for another drink. As he had intended having two drinks from the very start, Mrs. Hake failed to see the reason for his tossing.

But as it was a general custom of his, she was used to it. She was also used to being addressed as "my dear"—a liberty no other junior would dream of taking. But from Tucker it seemed perfectly natural.

"Ah, now I feel ready for the afternoon's work," said T.T., wiping a few drops of lemonade from his waistcoat with his coatsleeve. "Well, sweet one, I must bid you good-bye. Shake hands, my dear, shake hands!"

He extended the tips of his fingers, and Mrs. Hake smiled broadly.

"Get away with you, Master Tucker," she said. "I'm sure I don't know where I've seen a boy like you before——"

"Won't you shake hands, my dear?" asked Tucker, in an aggrieved voice. "Oh, sweet one, kiss me!"

Mrs. Hake responded to his loving appeal by grasping a broom, and Tucker beat a precipitate retreat out of the doorway, shaking his head sadly. He marched straight into the Triangle, and went down the lane to the village.

When he arrived on the green he looked round him. The sun was shining gloriously, but one or two clouds in the sky gave promise of a shower or two. It was April, and showers were to be expected—although they did not seriously inconvenience any outdoor pastime.

"H'm! Most extraordinary," murmured Tucker. "I fail to see any member of the old staff."

Almost in the centre of the green stood the stump of a tree which had been blown down during a gale some years before. Tucker mounted the stump, took out his crumpled envelopes, and commenced addressing the empty air. Apparently he was practising for the real thing.

"Comrades, fellow workers, and sons of toil!" he shouted. "I am standing on this platform to-day with the object of addressing you on a most important subject—I might say it is a most vital subject. In fact, I shall not be exaggerating when I describe the subject as being positively urgent. Naturally, the question concerns the autocratic attitude of the Governors of St. Frank's School. To get down to the fundamental basis of the argument, I must tell you that Sir Roger Stone is the chief cause of all the trouble. He is a fair example of the hated capitalist——"

"He, he, he," tittered the audience. This consisted of three little urchins of about five years of age. They stared up at Tucker with great delight, being under the impression, no doubt, that he was doing this for their especial amusement.

"Go away—go away!" said Tucker severely. "How dare you stand there and make those faces at me?"

"Ain't you givin' a speech, mister?" asked one of the urchins.

"I have no intention of going into an argument," retorted Tucker. "H'm! to return to the serious facts. I must remind you——"

He came to a halt, and looked across the green with mild approval. Quite a number of people were strolling across the grass in his direction. It was early closing day, and the village tradespeople were taking a holiday.

Tucker was well known, for he had made speeches on the green before, and he was always amusing. In addition to the villagers, several members of the old staff gathered round.

And Tubbs, the ex-page-boy, was running round, telling all the other strikers that Tucker was on his hind legs, spouting. Within five minutes T.T.'s audience

numbered at least fifty people, and more were coming up every minute.

"Good-afternoon, Master Tucker," said Broome, the strike leader. "I've been told that you've been making a speech."

"That is so," replied Tucker. "I intend to put some startling facts before you—some facts which, I am sure, will lead you to take immediate action. It is necessary that somebody should do this work?"

"Hear, hear!"

"Go it, Master Tucker!"

T.T. consulted his envelope. Whether he saw anything on it was doubtful, for the notes had been made in pencil, and continual rubbing in his pocket had not improved the legibility of the writing—which had been well nigh hopeless to begin with.

"Comrades," shouted Tucker. "Comrades and fellow-sufferers! I am also addressing the inhabitants of this peaceful village—I am addressing the countryside, and I call upon every man, woman, and child to rise up and stamp out this deadly imposition. I will now proceed to get down to facts—I will develop my argument so that it will sink into your proletarian minds."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It is no laughing matter, let me tell you," said Tucker warmly. "You are all aware of the fact—the shameful fact—that Sir Roger Stone has dismissed every employee of St. Frank's College. He has dismissed them solely because they had the unpardonable audacity to ask for an increase in wages. Think of it, my friends, think of it, and ponder! With the price of commodities soaring higher and higher with every week that passes, is it not reasonable that wages should soar accordingly?"

"I don't see that argument, youngster," said one of the audience. "If wages didn't soar, prices wouldn't soar ——"

"Ah, my dear friend, you are labouring under a pitiful delusion," said Tucker. "You've got to realise that we are in a vicious circle—that, under the capitalistic system, the prices of commodities generally soar before wages are increased. What is the solution? Obviously, the only step to take is to increase the wages, in order to meet the increased cost of living.

"It is very seldom that wages are increased before the capitalistic class increase their prices. However, I have not come here to discuss matters of ecomomic interest. I am here to deal with a personal matter—a matter which affects this district alone—a matter which affects every individual now before me. It is a moral question, a question of right and wrong, and I appeal to you to give me your full support in this local fight."

"What's the argument, young 'un, anyhow?"

"My friends, picture to yourselves the agony that will be caused to these strikers if they are not re-instated," shouted Tucker, warming to his work. "Many years ago, in a certain Northern town, people under similar circumstances—working in large factories—struck work on similar grounds. Not having the necessary support, they were thrown out of employment in mid-winter, and the suffering consequent upon that base action of the employers led to the deaths of many innocent people."

"That doesn't apply to this, young man," cried the village grocer. "These people won't die if they don't get back to their jobs—there are plenty of other jobs waiting for them. And it ain't mid-winter, neither. The best thing you can do is to stick to what you are going to say."

T.T. bestowed a pitiful glance upon the interrupter.

"Ah, my friend, that is where you are sadly in error," he said. "The analogy of the case is obviously unapparent to you, and I can only conclude that you have in mind the biological laws relating to anthropology——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The kid's off his chump!" said somebody.

"Why don't he stick to the point?"

"That is exactly what I am doing," declared T.T. "Our friend on the left undoubtedly believes in the theory of the survival of the fittest. But as I was remarking, I have no intention of digressing from my central subject. You all know that these workers were dismissed without reason—that is, without adequate reason. They asked for a rise of fifty per cent., and it was refused.

What could they do but take matters into their own hands, and strike?"

"It hasn't done 'em much good, by the looks of it."

"Ah, but wait!" said Tucker. "The fight is by no means over, and I can assure you that in a very short time there will be a different story to tell. Quite so. It is agreed by everybody, I take it, that the St. Frank's strikers have been treated unjustly and harshly."

"Hear, hear."

"Yes, sonny, we all agree there."

"It's been a shameful business!"

Practically everybody in the crowd voiced their approval—and the crowd had now grown to considerable proportions, the majority being village people who were curious to hear what was being said.

"Very well!" shouted Tucker. "Very well, my comrades! I will now tell you a startling fact—a fact that will cause you to boil with indignation—a fact that will make you long to do something to show your disapproval. You know that the strikers were refused a fifty per cent. increase of wages. But you do not know that the new staff is receiving precisely double the wages of the old staff!"

"That ain't true, Master Tucker, is it?" asked Tubbs.

"It is true!" roared Tucker. "I appeal to you, my friends, to give me your support. Think of it! Think of the position! These harmless people have been cast out of their employment, they have been sent away because they asked for a living wage. And they are left neglected while other workers are brought down from London, and paid not fifty per cent. more, but one hundred per cent.!"

"Shame!"

"It's dirty—that's what it is!"

"And who must we thank for this base treatment?" demanded Tucker. "Not the Headmaster—no! Dr. Stafford is a gentleman—a member of the bourgeoise, I will admit—but a worker, nevertheless; a splendid, upright man of kindly, noble disposition. I am prepared to battle with anybody who dares to breathe a word against the name of my beloved Headmaster!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Three cheers for the 'Ead!" shouted Tubbs.

The cheers were given with a will.

"No, it is not the Headmaster that must be blamed," continued Tucker. "It is the school governors who are responsible, and not only the governors, but the chairman. He is the principal offender; in fact, the only offender, for this matter was left to his discretion. And he, in his little-minded, bigoted way, has decreed that these honest workers shall starve, while the blacklegs receive double wages! It is shameful—it is iniquitous—it is beyond endurance!"

"Hear, hear!"

"It ain't fair, anyhow!"

"It is disgraceful!" roared Tucker. "And I ask you, comrades—I ask you tons of soil——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Er—I—I should say, sons of toil!" exclaimed Tucker, reddening. "I ask you to assist me in a material way. There is no sense in passing resolutions, and in agreeing with my views if you do nothing else. You must follow me to the school—everybody here! You must come with me, and show your disapproval in the strongest possible manner. Remember the injustice of it all! Bear in mind the fact that these new servants are fully aware of their position, and they are laughing up their sleeves. They are blacklegs, and they are an unworthy set of useless rotters! There is not one servant who is half as capable as the old staff, and they are up at the school, taking the double money, and sneering at the people they have usurped. I ask everybody here to follow me to St. Frank's, and to create a hostile demonstration in the Triangle. It will possibly bring Sir Roger to his senses."

"Good idea, young 'un! We'll follow you!" roared a burly farm hand.

A great many others agreed, and when Tucker jumped down from the stump, he marched off across the green, and was followed by forty or fifty people. The others, who were inclined to hang behind, took their courage in both hands, and joined in the crowd. In fact, Timothy Tucker's meeting had been a far greater success than he had hoped for. Quite an army marched up the lane.

Handforth and Co. happened to be going to the village, and they stopped in the middle of the road as they saw the oncoming throng.

"What the dickens is all this?" said Handforth blankly.

"Looks like a route march!" said Church. "They're all village people, too, and—— Hallo! Tucker seems to be at the head."

"My only hat!" grinned McClure.

"The young ass has been up to his tricks again," said Handforth severely. "He must have been making a speech, and he's got this crowd of people to follow him."

The juniors went down to meet the demonstrators, and they soon saw that there were no strikers in the party. The old staff had remained behind in the village, for they did not care to go to the school. From first to last, they were determined to maintain an attitude of strict honesty and peacefulness. They would never allow themselves to be accused of violence.

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

"I must admit, my dear sir, that I am not impressed by your appearance," said Tucker severely. "You will oblige me by removing your face out of my vision. When I gaze upon it I get a pain down my spine!"

"You—you insulting rotter!" exclaimed Handforth.

The demonstration would have come to a halt abruptly if Church and McClure had not pointed out to their leader that Tucker was not worth wasting blows upon, and that it was far better to let him have his own way.

"All right!" growled Handforth. "I'll overlook your insolence this time, my son; but if you cheek me again I'll wipe you up! What's the idea of bringing all these people up to the school?"

"Your brain power is not sufficiently developed to allow you to understand," said Tucker loftily. "We are intent upon making a demonstration, my dear sir—a demonstration against the autocratic methods of Sir Roger Stone."

Tucker would say no more, and Handforth and Co. were left to mingle with the crowd. They marched up the lane with everybody, and when the throng turned into the Triangle there was a rush from all quarters. Such a scene as this had not been witnessed at St. Frank's for many a day.

The Triangle was simply packed with boys, villagers, and other people. And the shouting and cheering was terrific.

The juniors soon found out what the game was, and they lost no time in taking the lead. In fact, they worked up the feelings of the crowd to such an extent that anger was denoted on many faces.

"Down with injustice!"

"Down with the blacklegs!"

"We demand that the strikers shall be reinstated!"

"Hear, hear!"

The noise increased, and it was quite obvious that the masters knew all about it, but for some time nobody appeared. Then the window of the Head's study was thrown open, and Sir Roger Stone himself came into view.

He was greeted by a perfect storm of booing and hissing, and it seemed to take him aback. He glared at the demonstrators with rising fury.

"How dare you?" he roared. "Leave these premises at once! At once, do you hear! How dare you trespass——"

"Let the strikers go back!"

"It's unfair to pay the new staff double wages!"

"Shame!"

"It's disgraceful!"

"Silence!" thundered Sir Roger. "If you will listen for a moment, I will tell you the whole truth of this matter, and then you will realise how foolish you are!"

"Yah! We don't want to hear!"

"Yes, we do!"

"Let's hear what Sir Roger has got to say!"

The majority of the demonstrators were anxious to hear Sir Roger's version, and there was a sudden hush in the Triangle. Those people who wanted to shout were kept in check by the fact that they would have been alone.

Sir Roger rubbed his hands together with pleasure. He had got command of the situation, and he felt that he had won.

"I am rather glad that you have come," he exclaimed. "For now I have an opportunity of explaining the precise position, and I suspect that you have been kept in the dark hitherto. You may as well know now—once and for all—that I am absolutely firm, and that nothing will alter the present situa-

tion. The old staff will never return ——"

"Oh!"

"They made unreasonable demands, and those demands were refused," went on Sir Roger. "Instead of negotiating further, the servants took matters into their own hands——"

"You wouldn't let them negotiate!"

"You told them that your decision was final!"

"Well, no matter," said Sir Roger hastily. "The staff took matters into its own hands, and left work at a moment's notice. The servants went on strike, and, by taking that action, they renounced all right to be considered in the slightest degree. They renounced all right to be reinstated, and they will therefore be well advised to leave the neighbourhood as soon as possible. That is all I have to say."

Sir Roger's statement was not received with much approval. In fact, the demonstration became worse, and a regular roar of anger went up. The scene in the Triangle was a wild one. and many of the demonstrators looked quite dangerous.

"If you do not all leave the premises at once," roared Sir Roger, "I will ring up the police, and have you thrown off!"

This did not help matters, and for fully half an hour the noise in the Triangle was deafening. There was not the slightest doubt that Sir Roger was the most unpopular man in the district, and he was "given furiously to think." He saw quite plainly that things would be unpleasant for him unless a change was brought about.

But his obstinate nature asserted itself, and he was determined to remain absolutely firm.

It was fortunate that the crowds were not composed of rowdies, or there would have been a considerable amount of damage done. The people were peaceful villagers, and violence was not a part of their programme.

However, the whole affair had been sufficient to show Sir Roger that the matter was not over by any means. Timothy Tucker had done quite a large amount of good by his speech, and the effect of it was to be made evident before so very long. Sir Roger had commenced to think, and it was a good sign

CHAPTER VI.

VALUABLE INFORMATION.

"BEGAD! You are as bad as you were last night, dear old boy!" exclaimed Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "You are neglectin' your tea in the most disgraceful manner."

I started, and helped myself to a piece of bread-and-butter.

We were in Study C, and the April sunshine was streaming through the window.

"Still thinking about the same subject?" asked Watson. "Or are you pondering over T. T.'s little stunt this afternoon?"

"T. T. did some good, I believe," I replied. "But I'm afraid it won't have any effect unless it is followed up by something more drastic. That's what I've been thinking about."

"Something more drastic?"

"Yes."

"The same as you were thinkin' about last night, dear fellow?" asked Sir Montie. "That frightfully deep scheme to bring matters to a head?"

"Exactly," I remarked. "And this time I've got it all clear, and the time for action has come. In fact, we must act to-night, or not at all."

"Why?"

"Because Sir Roger is leaving."

"To-night?"

"Yes; by the last train," I replied. "The guv'no told me half an hour ago. That demonstration was a bit of a shock to Sir Roger, and he means to slip off in the dark, on the quiet."

"And you mean to do something before he goes?" asked Tommy.

"Yes."

"Well, what's the wheeze?"

I bent forward over the table.

"The wheeze, my sons, is this," I said softly. "Lend me your ears, and listen. If you don't approve, say so. In any case, I shall welcome any suggestions. Three heads are better than one, and any plan is always capable of improvement."

And while we went on with our tea, I explained to my chums the daring plan which had entered my head. At first they were rather incredulous, then they became interested, and were finally quite excited.

"Well, what's the verdict?" I asked, at last.

"It's—it's terrific!" gasped Watson breathlessly.

"Toppin', dear old boy!" said Sir Montie. "But I am wonderin' if it will be possible to carry the scheme out. It'll be frightfully risky, an' it's shockin'ly drastic——"

"Of course it's drastic," I agreed. "That's the very idea of it. The time has gone for any gentle methods. Once Sir Roger has left the school, we shall be unable to deal with him personally—and that's the only method that will count!"

"But what about afterwards?" asked Watson. "We shall be flogged, or sacked, or some thing!"

"No fear," I said. "We shall make a stipulation that nobody is to be punished. You can trust me to do the thing properly."

"It—it seems terribly daring——"

"That's the very reason it should prove a success," I said. "I think I'm a pretty good judge of character, and I believe Sir Roger will turn up trumps."

"What!"

"It's a fact," I said. "He's not such a bad old stick at heart. He's simply obstinate, and won't see reason."

"Well, I believe that, too," agreed Montie.

"If the truth were only known, he's as sorry for the strikers as anybody, but having taken up a stand he thinks that he's obliged to stick to it or lose his dignity," I declared. "That's the long and the short of it. Well, my sons, we've got to show Sir Roger that dignity isn't everything, and the sooner we make our final plans the better. We haven't got any too much time to make preparations. It'll be a rush all along."

"Yes, rather!" said Watson. "Who else are you going to take into the secret?"

"Only five or six fellows immediately," I said. "Pitt will be one, Grey another, De Valerie, Somerton, Fatty Little, and Singleton. They'll do splendidly."

"What about Handforth and Co.?"

"I think we'd better leave them out until later on," I said. "We can't afford to take the slightest risk in a thing of this sort. Handforth's a good chap—one of the best—but he's got a habit of giving secrets away unintentionally. So we'll do without his services. We'd better get the other fellows in here as soon as possible, and put the wheeze to them."

So, ten minutes later, Study C was filled with curious visitors. They were eager to know what the game was, for they guessed at once that something special was in the wind. I quickly outlined my idea, and the juniors listened with growing excitement.

"It's splendid, Nipper!" declared Reginald Pitt, at last. "We can always trust you to think of something decent in an emergency. It's a great idea, and I don't see how it can fail to have the right effect."

"Hear, hear!"

"But—but don't you think we shall over-reach ourselves?" asked De Valerie. "It's a pretty bold proposition."

"All the better," I said. "We've proved that ordinary methods are useless, so the only thing to do is to use strategy and force combined. As long as we stick to the plan we shall be secure."

One or two of the fellows made minor suggestions, and for half an hour we discussed the plan in detail.

Then, with all our movements cut and dried, we proceeded to get busy on the essential work.

We were determined to see that justice was done, and the only way was to make Sir Roger give in by force. The position was vital now. Another day or two would make it impossible for the old staff to come back. Unless something was done now—at once, we would have to accept the position as it stood.

And, in the meantime, other events were taking place.

In fact, we were to learn before long that two or three sets of circumstances would ultimately lead to one destination that night—each independent of the other.

Jelton, the Head's new butler, was an important factor in the case.

Some little time after tea, he received a ring from the Head's study, and he immediately went in answer—for Jelton was a dutiful man, and he performed his work without the slightest fault. He was undoubtedly a crook in disguise, but he played his part well.

He advanced along the passage, and as he came near the door of the Head's study he saw that it was slightly ajar. And Jelton heard the voices of Dr. Stafford and Mr. Crowell—and the

Head's voice was slightly raised, and it was evident that he was somewhat excited.

"My dear Crowell, the jewellery must leave the school to-morrow," the Head was saying. "It simply must! I simply dare not keep it in my safe after to-night. The responsibility is too great for me."

"Ten thousand pounds is a large amount, I agree," said Mr. Crowell.

Jelton came to a halt, his eyes gleaming. He had overheard every word quite clearly, and they caused him to stop. He glanced up and down the passage, and saw that he was quite alone.

He remained still, listening.

The Head was talking quite naturally, and he was not to suppose that his butler would creep up and listen at the door. In any case, what did it matter if anybody overheard? His safe was a good one, and burglar-proof. Only expert cracksmen would be able to open it—and it was absurd to suppose that any cracksmen were on the premises. But Jelton was greatly interested.

He listened more intently than ever.

"Ten thousand pounds' worth of jewellery is a big responsibility for any man," exclaimed the Head. "I would not have consented to deal with the matter, only my friend particularly asked me to keep it in my safe until to-morrow. Of course, it will be off my hands by the morning—but that doesn't alter my responsibility for to-night."

"How many keys to the safe are there?" asked Mr. Crowell.

"Two—I have one, and Sir Roger the other."

"Then you are quite safe," smiled the Form-master. "There is no risk at all, sir. And jewellery is easily traced, even if it is stolen."

"Sometimes, Mr. Crowell—sometimes," exclaimed the Head; "not always. Unmounted diamonds and rubies are extremely difficult to trace, let me tell you—and they are just the kind of gems a burglar likes to get hold of, for they are easily sold. Fortunately, nobody outside knows of these stones, and to-morrow, in any case, I shall be relieved in mind. Now, with regard to those history books you were referring to, I think you will find them on the second shelf in the library. I can assure you, Crowell, that they will help you in your work. I wish you every success with the great book you are writing. I have no doubt that it will be regarded as a classic before many years have passed."

"You flatter me, sir," said Mr. Crowell.

Jelton tiptoed back a few paces, and then moved forward, coughing in a natural manner. He arrived at the door, and tapped.

"Come in!" called the Head.

The butler entered.

"You rang, sir!" he said smoothly.

"Yes, Jelton," agreed Dr. Stafford, "I want you to do something for me."

Jelton took his orders, and proceeded to carry them out. When he had finished, ten minutes later, he was free for an hour. And Jelton did not lose any time. He left the Ancient House shortly afterwards.

He went straight across the Triangle to the College House, went round to the servants' quarters, and sought out White, the porter.

"You are wanted over in the other House," said Jelton, with dignity.

"Yes, sir," said the porter.

They went across the Triangle, but, instead of entering the Ancient House, the pair slipped among the trees near the monastery ruins, and finally came to a halt. It was quite dark, and nobody had seen their movements. As soon as they were alone, their manner changed.

"Well, what's the idea, old man?" asked White curiously.

"Man alive, I've got on to something big!" declared Jelton, in an eager voice. "I never dreamed that we should have such luck. We came here, expecting to pick up two or three hundred quid at the most!"

"We shall be lucky to do that!" said White.

"Do you realise that we can put our hands on a cool ten thousand?" asked Jelton tensely.

"Nonsense!"

"It's the truth, I tell you——"

"You can't kid me like that!" said the other man, shaking his head. "Why, there's not ten thousand pounds' worth of stuff in the school—not that we could carry away, at all events."

Jelton smiled.

"That's what I thought an hour ago," he said. "But I know differently now. Luck's with us, Jim—absolutely with us. I happened to go to Stafford's study, and

the door was ajar. The Head was talking to another master, and I listened.

"A bit risky, wasn't it?"

"Not at all. There was nobody about, and I stood no chance of being spotted," said Jelton. "They were talking about a parcel of diamonds and rubies."

"Great Scott!"

"It's the truth," went on Jelton. "By what I could understand, the sparklers were given to Stafford to take care of for a day or two, because he's got a safe. Anyhow, they're there—unset diamonds and rubies, and they're worth ten thousand of the best. Think of it, Jim! If we can only pull off this game we shall be able to clear right off, and have five thousand each!"

"But are you certain?" demanded White, becoming excited. "Don't you think you might have misunderstood ——"

"I couldn't misunderstand," declared Jelton. "Stafford is anxious about the things, and doesn't like them being in his safe. What we've got to do is to get busy on the job as soon as we can. Nobody suspects us, and we shall have absolutely a clear field. It's the best chance that ever came our way."

White nodded.

"We can make our plans to-day, and crack the crib to-morrow night," he declared. "By thunder! What a game ——"

"To-morrow night!" echoed Jelton. "That'll be too late. It's to-night or never! Those sparklers won't be in the safe until to-morrow—they're going to be shifted in the morning. It's the luckiest thing in the world that I got the tip this evening. It gives us a chance."

White grasped his companion's arm.

"How can we do it?" he asked tensely.

"It'll be a stiff job, but we'll manage ——"

"Is the safe a big one?"

"Not very; and I reckon we ought to get through within an hour," said Jelton. "We shall have the whole place to ourselves, and that's a comfort. There'll be no fear of interruption, and the alarm won't be given until the morning. So, if we get busy at midnight, we shall have four or five hours clear to make our get away. I tell you it's great, Jim! It's the chance of a lifetime!"

The two men continued talking for some little time, and, finally, they fixed upon a definite plan, and shook hands upon it.

It was not the only plan that had been fixed for that night!

CHAPTER VII.

ROUGH ON SIR ROGER.

FATTY LITTLE looked discontented.

He was lounging in the Ancient House lobby, his hands stuck into his trousers pockets, and his fat figure was propped against the wall.

"Yes, it's rotten," he exclaimed. "That's the only word for it. I wouldn't mind so much if we had a decent cook in the place, but the stuff we have now isn't good enough for a workhouse!"

"Poor old Fatty!" grinned Augustus Hart.

"It's all very well to laugh!" growled the fat junior. "But you haven't got an appetite like I have. Just look at the dinner we had to-day! The meat wasn't cooked properly, the potatoes were wretched, and the pudding we had afterwards wasn't fit for pigs to eat. I reckon Sir Roger ought to be boiled for engaging a cook like that! I don't know what we're going to do."

"We shall have to grin and bear it until the old staff returns."

Fatty sniffed.

"If it ever does return!" he exclaimed. "There's supper to-night—it'll be ready soon, and all we shall have will be bread and butter and prison tea! And we don't get half enough of it, even then. I'm going to get up a petition to take to the Head. It's the only way to get something done."

Fatty Little marched off, disconsolate. The tuck shop was closed, and he was hungry. The larder in his study was bare, so there was nothing to do except wait until supper-time came along.

Tommy Watson and I passed the fat boy as he came along the passage.

"Hallo! What's the matter?" asked Watson.

"I expect he's eaten so much that he's uncomfortable," I remarked.

"Great pancakes!" exclaimed Fatty. "Eaten so much! Why, I'm starving.

you ass! All I've had since tea is half a dozen of Mrs. Hake's jam tarts, two sausage rolls, and four cakes."

"Is that all?" I asked sympathetically. "I suppose you starved at tea-time?"

"Pretty nearly," replied Fatty. "We only had two tins of sardines between us, and two loaves of bread—and what's the good of two loaves of bread for three fellows? Of course, we had a lot of bloater-paste, and two bobs' worth of cakes; but it was only a snack, at the best. I popped into Pitt's study later on, and had another tea with him; but he hadn't got much on the table——"

"You giddy glutton!" said Watson. "By what I can hear, you've eaten enough for a dozen chaps since tea-time! And now you're grumbling about being starved!"

"If you can't last until supper-time, you'd better pop along to Study C," I said. "You'll find something in the cupboard."

The fat boy's eyes gleamed.

"Oh, good!" he exclaimed. "Have you got something decent there?"

"Well, it's something we can't do without," I replied. "You open the cupboard, and you'll find it full up—full right up!"

"My hat!" said Fatty. "What with?"

"Air!" I replied. "You can have the lot, and welcome!"

We passed on, leaving Fatty glaring after us with indignation. We chuckled, and left the Ancient House. We had important business to attend to, and out in the lane we met two or three other fellows.

"How long before the train goes?" asked Pitt softly.

"About half an hour," I replied. "Sir Roger will be coming pretty soon."

Less than ten minutes later, when the Triangle was still and dark and quiet, Sir Roger Stone emerged from the Head's private doorway, and walked sharply towards the gates. He was carrying a light rug and a handbag, and he was attired in overcoat and a soft felt hat.

He intended walking to the station—mainly because he wished to leave the district without the villagers getting to know. If one of the school broughams drove through the High Street, people would guess at once that Sir Roger was leaving, and there would probably be a demonstration at the station.

So Sir Roger walked, feeling certain that he would pass unnoticed in the gloom.

He walked briskly down the lane. Not another soul was within sight, and the baronet was thinking deeply as he walked.

Then, abruptly, his attention became arrested by something in front! Was it fancy, or did he actually see several forms looming up out of the gloom?

They had appeared as though from nowhere, and stood across the lane in a line—six of them—six figures of uncertain shape.

Sir Roger paused for a moment, and he had an idea of turning back. But that would have been undignified.

So he set his teeth and walked on.

The figures did not move—they remained across the road, barring his path. And then he saw something which caused him to come to a dead halt. He stood there, staring, and wondering if this was a dream.

The six figures were unrecognisable—they wore long black robes which reached their feet, and headgear which concealed all features. Only eyeholes were left, and Sir Roger fairly gasped with amazement.

It was impossible to recognise the six, and the baronet had not the faintest suspicion of their identity. It was a mystery. He turned, intending to rush back to the school; but he was not allowed to make the move.

Two of the figures dodged behind him, and his arms were seized.

The others closed round, and in less than ten seconds Sir Roger was helpless.

"How—how dare you?" he demanded huskily. "Let me go at once! What—what is the meaning of this outrageous affair?"

The cloaked figures maintained a stony silence.

"Who are you?" stormed Sir Roger. "Answer me, confound you!"

Still a stony silence.

"I will have the law on you!" roared the prisoner. "If you don't release me at once, I will have every one of you arrested and thrown into prison. This—this is an outrage! Release me!"

His captors maintained their uncanny silence, and it rather got on Sir Roger's nerves. He stormed, he threatened, he raved.

But all to no purpose.

Still protesting, he was forced into the depths of the wood; then, in the midst of his kidnappers, he was taken along through the wood.

Once he attempted to struggle—to get free; but he did not make any attempt again, for he found that he was helpless. It was far better to submit quietly; it was certainly less painful.

Out of the wood, Sir Roger found himself near the river. He was led straight to the bank, his mind in a perfect maze. For one horrible moment he thought that he was about to be thrown into the water—and he couldn't swim a stroke!

"What—what do you intend to do to me?" he panted hoarsely. "If this is an attempt at blackmail, I will pay you everything I have on me to let me go free. This is positively unheard of! Good gracious!"

He was given a push forward—only a gentle one, but it landed him in a boat, which was drawn up close to the river bank, and which had been almost concealed.

His six captors got into the boat with him, and they rowed noiselessly across the stretch of water.

But not to the opposite bank. The boat was headed for a little island in mid-stream—Willard's Island, as it was called. This was owing to the fact that many years earlier an eccentric old man with plenty of money had built a kind of miniature castle on the island.

It had never been fully completed, and old Willard had died, so the building had been left to stand as it was—useless, but ornamental. It was known in the district as Willard's Folly.

Sir Roger was landed on the island, and now his captors did not keep such a close guard over him. Escape was impossible. The two cloaked leaders of the Sixth moved forward towards the picturesque building. Sir Roger was compelled to follow, and the others brought up the rear.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Sir Roger, as he was forced through a doorway. "What do you intend doing with me? I demand to know! I have a train to catch, and——"

Sir Roger ceased speaking, for he realised that his train had gone, and that it was quite useless appealing to these mysterious people, in any case. They remained deadly silent.

Even their footfalls were deadened, and the whole experience was most unnerving. Sir Roger had never experienced anything like it in the course of his career. He had read of such things in sensational novels, but he had never dreamed that anything of a similar nature could occur in real life.

Through two dark and damp rooms he was led. Then a door was opened—a heavy stone door—and he was forced down a flight of narrow steps. At the bottom a light was burning—a dim, shaded light.

Sir Roger found himself in a passage.

At the end of this passage stood a door, slightly ajar. This, too, was of stone, but everything was dry down here.

The atmosphere was comfortably warm, and within the cellar, for such it evidently was, another light was burning, equally dim. It was so dim that Sir Roger could only see his captors very hazily.

He looked round the apartment in wonder. An oil-stove was burning, making the air dry and cosy. The bare walls had been draped, and a carpet adorned the floor. Over one side stood a comfortable-looking camp bedstead, with blankets, sheets, and everything complete.

There was an easy-chair, a table, books to read, and an assortment of crockery. On the table, too, stood many articles of food, and a large jug of drinking water. A spirit stove and a kettle were near by. In fact, that little cellar was replete with every article necessary.

Sir Roger was led to the easy-chair, and sat down in it. Then his captors slowly filed out of the room, still uttering no sound.

The door was closed with a thud, and heavy bolts were shot. Then came dead and utter silence.

Sir Roger was left absolutely alone.

"Well, upon my soul!" he ejaculated, mopping his brow. "This—this is astounding! Am I dreaming, or could it have actually happened?"

He got up from his chair, and walked round the cellar. He could not help admitting to himself that he had been treated with consideration throughout the ordeal. His captors had not hurt him in the least, and they had prepared everything for his comfort, as though he were an honoured guest.

But he was a prisoner.

Escape was absolutely impossible.

The cellar door was of thick stone, and the bolts on the other side were heavy and serviceable.

Without outside assistance, Sir Roger could never escape.

He sat down at last, and tried to arrive at a solution of the mystery. But he found this impossible.

He was in a greater maze than ever.

The scoundrels had demanded no money—they had said nothing. Sir Roger had been brought to this place, and had been left.

What could be the meaning of it?

If he could have seen outside at that moment, he would have understood. To anybody else, perhaps, the solution was easy to get at, but Sir Roger never dreamed of the actual facts.

Outside, under the stars, the six hooded figures were divesting themselves of their strange garments.

And they stood revealed—as, of course, you've guessed—as six members of the Remove Form.

I was the leader, and my trusted lieutenants were Watson, Tregellis-West, Pitt, De valerie, and Singleton. We had thought it better to say nothing—to maintain a deadly silence.

For one thing, it was far more effective, and, furthermore, there was no risk of Sir Roger recognising our voices.

"Well, my sons, what about it?" I whispered joyfully.

"Begad!" said Sir Montie. "We did the trick beautifully, dear old boy!"

"And Sir Roger doesn't know a giddy thing," grinned Pitt. "It's rather rough on him; but he's been asking for trouble all along, so he can't grumble now he's found some."

"But I don't quite see the idea of it," remarked the Hon. Douglas. "Why have we left him alone?"

"Just for effect," I explained. "It's far better than making our demands at once. At the present moment Sir Roger is furious—he hasn't had time to calm down—and if we started making our suggestions now, he'd simply refuse everything. It'll be far better to stick to the original plan."

"And what's that?"

"My dear Duggie, I explained it all at first."

"Yes, but I've forgotten," said Singleton calmly. "I've got a beastly memory, you know, and there's been so much excitement that I don't know quite where I am."

I grinned.

"Well, it's easy," I said. "We've collared Sir Roger because it's my belief that only drastic action will win the day for us, or, rather, for the strikers. The only thing is to force Sir Roger's hand—to make him agree. So we've taken measures that will ensure success."

"Perhaps," said Watson.

"You're a cheerful bounder, aren't you?" said Pitt. "This wheeze can't help being successful. It's bound to work out all right."

"Let's hope so, dear old boys!"

"Well, we shall know by to-morrow," I went on. "The idea is to leave him here all night, and in the morning we'll visit him again—cloaked in the same way—and we'll make our demands. He'll be calmed down by that time, and I believe he'll be only too willing to agree to what we say."

"And what shall we say?"

"I'll do the talking," I said. "And as the price of Sir Roger's freedom, I shall extract a promise from him that all the strikers will be reinstated within twenty-four hours."

"And supposing he refuses?"

"We'll hold him a prisoner until he agrees."

"We might have to hold him a fortnight——"

"Not likely," I said, shaking my head. "It's my belief he'll give in to-morrow. But, at the outside, I give him two days. And we shall also stipulate that he doesn't punish any of us."

"Well, it sounds all right, and I believe it'll work," declared Pitt. "All we can do is to hope for the best, and I wouldn't mind betting anybody that we succeed."

"Half a tick," said Watson. "What if Sir Roger escapes?"

We glared at him.

"You ass!"

"You fathead!"

"You lunatic!"

"You silly josser!"

"Look here, what's the idea of calling me all those names?" demanded Watson.

"You deserve to be called worse," I replied. "How can Sir Roger escape?"

"Well, he can get out of the cellar——"

"It's bolted on the outside," said

Pitt. "You don't suppose that Sir Roger can smash that stone door with his fist, do you?"

Watson shook his head obstinately.

"Somebody might come along by accident, and let him out," he remarked.

"What a cheerful chap!" grinned De Valerie. "In any case, we shouldn't come to any harm. Sir Roger doesn't know who we are, and he would suspect a gang of blackmailers, and certainly not us."

"I thought it all out at first," I said. "Which ever way you look at it, we're safe. There's no sense in making conjectures, or wondering how it will end. We've started the game, and we've got to go through with it. Sir Roger's an obstinate old buffer, but he's good-hearted, and it's my belief that he'll laugh over the whole business when it's done with. He's just that kind of man."

"Let's hope you're right," said Pitt.

We concealed our cloaks, got back into the boat, and rowed across to the river bank. Then we trotted back to St. Frank's by the river bank, and across the playing fields. Nobody saw us enter the Ancient House, and we were all safe.

Nobody would worry about Sir Roger, because he was supposed to be on the train for London, and there would be no search for him.

All we had to do was to wait.

But I had been reckoning without the others factors in the case, factors of which I knew nothing at the time.

Everything came out all right in the end, that goes without saying.

But a great deal of excitement and adventure was destined to occur before the strikers were reinstated, and before Sir Roger Stone laughed—as I guessed he would laugh—over the whole business.

Some strenuous times were ahead!

THE END.

TO MY READERS.

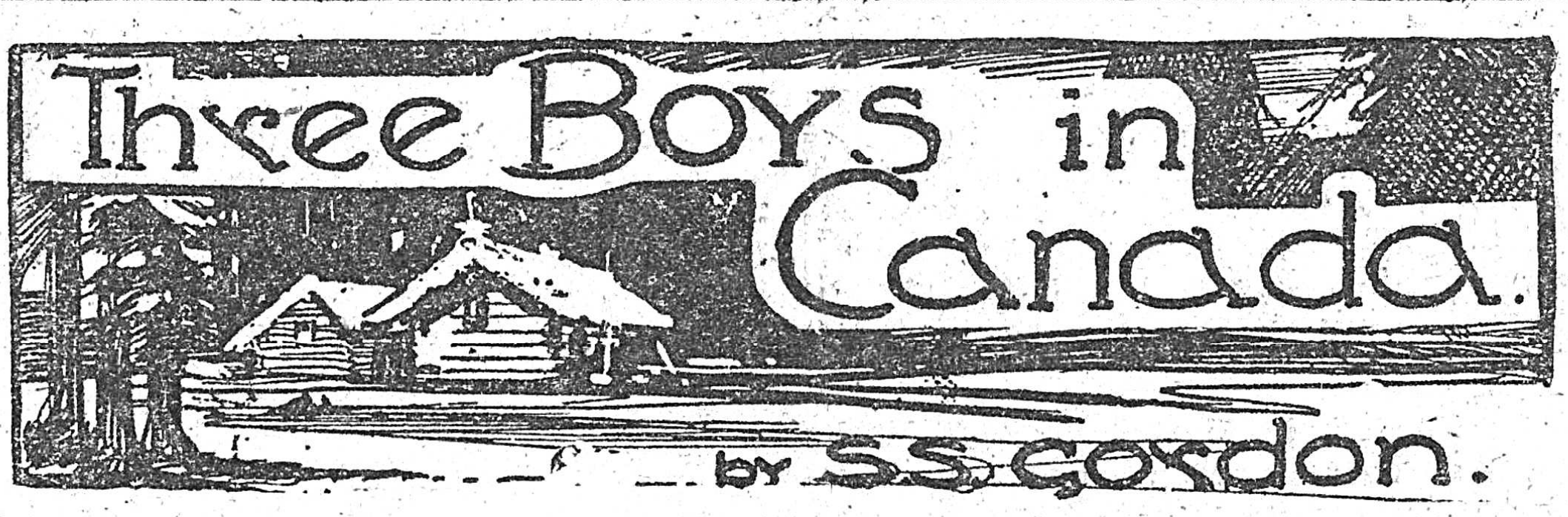
NIPPER'S strategy has so far succeeded, and Sir Roger is now probably stamping and fuming on Willard's Island, believing himself to be the victim of bandits and thieves. In his calmer moments it may seem queer to the baronet that his captors had not overlooked such personal comforts as a bed, an armchair, and a table with refreshments, and books to read. However, if this unusual thoughtfulness on the part of his waylayers mystified Sir Roger, it certainly served to put him in a better humour to pass with more fortitude the inconvenience of his temporary exile.

It was not the intention of Nipper to keep the chairman of the Governors waiting long in suspense as to the reason of detaining him. Delay, in any case, might prove fatal to the whole scheme. So at midnight it was decided to pay a visit to their captive and explain the situation. Nipper is confident that Sir Roger will give way to the strikers' demands under gentle but firm persuasion.

But certain unforeseen events take place which interfere with Nipper's plans, for Jelton, the crooked new butler, has chosen this same night to make his big haul of the gems in the Headmaster's safe. As to how this comes about, bringing with it the end of the servants' strike, you will read in next week's story, called "THE PRISONER OF THE ISLAND!"

THE EDITOR.

YOU CAN BEGIN READING THIS SPLENDID 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 chum, 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. Gerald is discovered unconscious on a rock at the bottom of the falls, and after great difficulty is rescued from his perilous position. (Now read on.)*

Sanderson's Offer.

"CARE for a surveying trip?" Sanderson, the chief superintendent of railroad construction, asked Jack Royce, his brother, and Gerald, as the four sat over a little camp-fire built in a clearing near Lake St Pierre Camp. "Pick and shovel work isn't altogether your line, after all, is it?"

"Any old sort of work's my line," said Jack stoutly. "And my brother and Gerald here are getting hardened to it."

The Royce brothers and Gerald Telford had been working on the railroad grading gang for a matter of three weeks. As Jack said, the two younger boys were getting accustomed to the heavy work. Jack, as a foreman, had got his gang into good working order. He had had no trouble of any sort with his mixed crew of labourers and teamsters.

Nor had they seen a sign of Johnson—or Snaith, to give him the name he really owned, and which the American police knew so well. Olesen, the big Swede, also had disappeared, apparently for ever. The life of the three chums had been very smooth, and not at all unpleasant. Gerald had speedily recovered from his experience at the Devil's Falls. He had shown himself to be, although a greenhorn, a fellow of wonderfully tough constitution. Also, when others, and rougher than he, had tried to haze him, he had proved himself to be no mean hand with the fists. One or two hulking bullies now thought he was a far different sort of fellow from the sort he had first been set down as.

"Anyhow," said Sanderson, who, besides being a very influential man in the railroad construction world, was a firm friend of Jack Royce's, "I've got a rare chance for you. I want a chain foreman, and two or three more chain men. The work's not too hard, though the

conditions are distinctly—well, rough. The pay's better than I can give you here. And you'll have a chance of seeing some really new country. We're going to spy out a new line from Edmonton, north-west over the Rockies, through Grand Cougar Pass, and then, making a wide sweep, touching Dead Breed Lake, shall drop down to Vancouver again. The line will open up a wonderful lot of grand new country. Thought you'd jump at the job, Royce!"

Teddy Royce half-rose to his feet.

"Dead Breed Lake!" he exclaimed. "Why, Jack, that's the lake named by the Mad Prospector on his chart; the place where all the gold is. If we're going there, it'll be a snap for us!"

He broke off, blushing, as he saw Sanderson eyeing him quizzically. Jack's face was creased by a little smile.

"You remember the Mad Prospector, Sanderson?" Jack said, to his chief. "Old Mervyn? Well, we saw him in Winnipeg—dying. He said he had found his gold mine, and gave us the chart showing the way to it."

"And it's in the neighbourhood of Dead Breed Lake, is it?" Sanderson asked gravely. "Poor old Mervyn! We used to chaff him unmercifully about his rainbow trail. Well, boys, if you care to take my offer, you can have as much time off as you want when we get to Dead Breed Lake, and then you can prospect. I owe you more than that, Royce, my lad," he added, holding out his hand.

"We'll go with the surveying party," said Jack quietly; "and we might have a look round for that gold mine, too, though I've not got much faith in it. Anyhow, it will give these boys a fine chance to see new country—and it's a bit further north than I have been myself, too. Thanks, Sanderson!"

Accordingly, the thing settled, the three chums packed up their "turkeys" the following morning, and boarded the work-train that was going back to Medicine Hat. They had a fairly good send-off from the construction gang, for they had grown popular on the whole with their comrades. Everybody knew, of course, what work they were going in for next—even the foreigners. Most of their comrades merely envied them. One man, however—a Swede—as soon as he knew, straightway sat down and addressed a letter to a fellow countryman of his. The letter was written in Swedish. The writer seemed in a great hurry to get it off by the same train as that the three chums were using back to Medicine Hat.

The letter was addressed to Hendrik Olesen, and, had Jack Royce only seen its contents, and understood them, he certainly would have received great cause to think. For the letter referred solely to the future movements of the Royce brothers and Gerald, and enjoined the recipient to let "Johnson" know.

Teddy and Gerald on their own.

THE Royces and Gerald Telford did not know, when they boarded the train at Medicine Hat for Edmonton, that they were being dogged again. They did not know that the letter sent to Hank Olesen, the big Swede, had been handed to Obed Snaith, who had made certain unsportsmanlike arrangements with a member of the new surveying gang—the cook,, as a matter of fact. The cook, for a consideration, was to keep in touch with Obed Snaith and the big Swede, who, had Jack Royce but known it, followed the party on the next train for Edmonton.

However, times soon became far too busy for Jack, Teddy, or Gerald to give a moment's thought to their past adventures and the troubles brought about by the machinations of this American ex-convict Snaith. Work on a surveying gang is arduous in the extreme, and the life is very rigorous. No stationary camps for any surveying party. Each night finds the party camped somewhere else; each day's end finds another stretch of new, practically unexplored, country staked out with little pegs, showing those who follow with the grading plough, the scraper, the sleepers, and the rails, which way the new railroad is to take.

If Teddy, the adventure loving, the romantic of soul, had ever wished for a roving life, he got it now. No matter what the weather was like, Simpson, the chief surveyor—a young English M.I.C.E.—forged ahead. Things went on swimmingly, seven days a week, until the party found themselves right in amongst the Rocky Mountains of Northern Alberta. It was only when

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

they reached this rough country that any sort of real excitement came about.

Each day, without fail, after the final meal of the evening, the cook—one Ambrose Connell absented himself from camp, and those who noticed his absence might also have noted that he always went back along the route they had come. But nobody troubled themselves about the cook, a surly, ill-tempered, disobliging, and very unpopular man. Had anybody followed him, however, they certainly would have found that each night he joined a small party of two camped in the rear of the surveying party. And that little party of two consisted of Obed Snaith and Hank Olesen.

Jack, Teddy, and Gerald, dog-tired after their strenuous day, lay one night before a little campfire, with their blankets to cover them, and only the star-spangled sky for a roof. As they lay there, Jack and Gerald smoking, Teddy wishing he were old enough to do the same, the talk worked round to the Mad Prospector's mine. This mine, ever since their start out with the surveying gang, had been very much in Teddy's thoughts—when he had had time to think. Gerald also began to look forward with eagerness to the time when the surveyors should reach the neighbourhood of Dead Breed Lake. Jack Royce appeared to be the only one of the trio who looked on the prospect of Dead Breed Lake making them all rich men for life with indifference.

"Well, then, let's have a look at the chart again," said Gerald, after several attempts to draw Jack into the conversation. "If you're not interested, Teddy and I are, you old grouser! So hand it over!"

"It's in my kit-bag," said Jack, turning on his back, and watching the smoke from his pipe as it curled up into the starry sky. "Teddy, go and get it."

Teddy kicked his blankets away from him, and walked over to where the kit-bags of the party had been dumped after having been unloaded from the backs of the packhorses whose duty it was to carry them. He did not ransack his brother's bag, as Jack had carelessly suggested, but carried the bag over to where his brother and their friend were lying.

As he returned towards the little campfire, and as he came within earshot of it, he stumbled over something, and went flying on his face, Jack's kit-bag going far enough. Ruefully, Teddy picked himself up, and looked down to ascertain the cause of his fall. He found he had stumbled over the prone figure of a man, lying wrapped up in a blanket, who had apparently been asleep.

"Clumsy young fool!" this man growled, and Teddy recognised him as Connell, the cook. Perhaps it occurred to Teddy that this was an odd place for the man to be sleeping. Had it been any other man than the cook, it would not have been strange, for men in that party generally lay down where they wished and how they wished. But a cook is usually supposed to sleep near his cookery equipment and fires.

"Well," said Teddy sharply, "if you will go sprawling about all over the shop, cook, I don't see how you can blame anybody for treading on you. And," he added, a little fierily, "please don't call me a clumsy fool, either, cook, or—or——"

The cook muttered something, and thrust out his blanket-covered feet. It may have been accident, it may have been design; but, whichever it was, the result was the same. The cook's toes caught Teddy behind the knees and hooked him clean off his feet again. Teddy subsided to the ground with a loud cry of wrath.

He was up again in a moment.

"I'll teach you, you rotten food-spoiler!" he cried, clenching his fists. "Get up, you stomach murderer! You can't boil water without burning it! I'm not afraid of anybody like you!"

He took a certain amount of risk in saying what he did, for the cook was a large, strong man of wicked temper. Had Teddy's challenge been accepted, the chances are that Jack Royce would have been required to defend his brother. But it wasn't. Instead of taking any action, the cook growled something again, rolled over once or twice in his blanket, and lay still, swaddled from top to toe. Teddy shrugged his shoulders, gazed down on the man for a space, then continued his way to the fire he was sharing with Jack and Gerald.

One slight thing Teddy in his indignation failed to notice; when the cook rolled over, he got several feet nearer their fire. Still, even if he had noticed the fact, Teddy would have had no cause to think anything of it.

(To be continued.)

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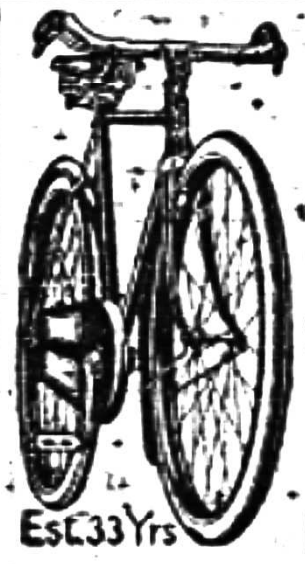

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