

FUN AND THRILLS! STUNNING SCHOOLBOY ADVENTURE YARN—COMPLETE INSIDE!

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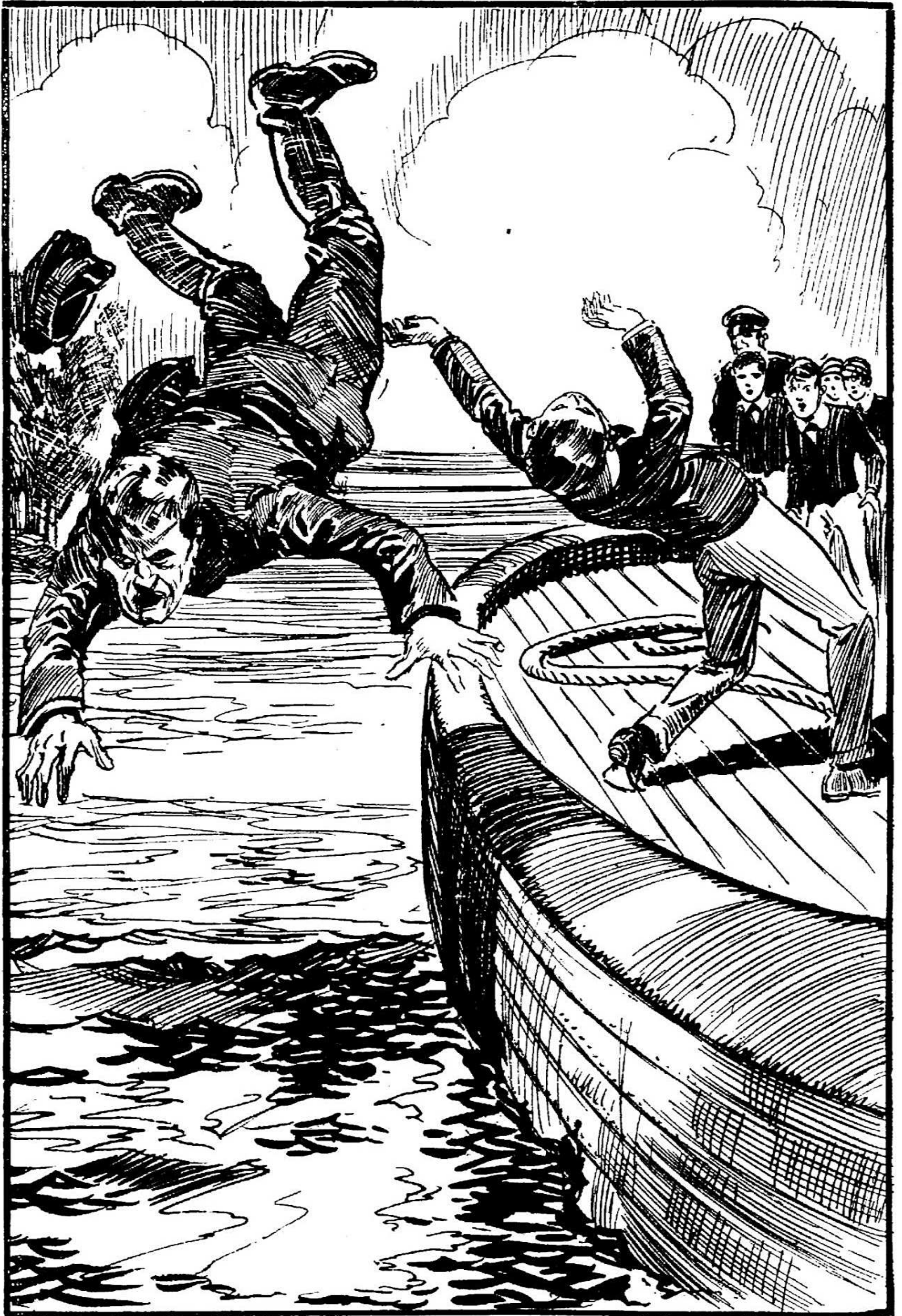
THE SCHOOLBOY BARGEES!

A rollicking long complete story of the Boys of St. Frank's.

New Series No. 49.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

April 9th, 1927.



Sawkins charged forward madly at Nipper, who realising he stood no chance against the big, bullying bargee, ducked adroitly. The man blundered over him with terrific force, shot through the air and plunged into the placid river!

ROLLICKING SCHOOLBOY ADVENTURE!**The SCHOOLBOY BARGEES!**

By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

"Yo-heave-ho!" The Boys of St. Frank's have a rousing time as bargees in this stunning long complete yarn.

CHAPTER I.

THE BARGEES IN CAMP!

CAPTAIN JOSHUA PEPPER removed the aged briar pipe from his mouth, thoughtfully scratched his chin with the stem of it, and gave voice.

"Bust me if I ever see the like!" he said firmly.

Having made which remark, he put the pipe back into his mouth, leaned more firmly on the gate, and contemplated the view with a sort of dazed astonishment for five solid minutes.

Unquestionably, the view was worth contemplating. The River Nare stretched along just in front of the gateway, and this particular reach was one of the most picturesque along the whole stream. Meadows and fields rose undulatingly into the distance, and the opposite bank of the river was lined with graceful willows.

To add to Captain Pepper's contentment, the April morning was delightfully sunny and warm, and on every hand there were eloquent signs that spring had arrived. It was, indeed, more like an early summer's morning.

Immediately behind Captain Pepper stood the quaintly-gabled building in which he had just breakfasted—in other words, the Three

Anchors Tavern. Through one of the open windows came the sound of the landlord humming throatily as he polished a few glasses.

But Captain Joshua Pepper listened to none of these sounds. He gazed at none of these gems of scenery. His whole attention was given fixedly to a couple of barges which had evidently moored against the river-bank overnight. Captain Pepper had retired very early, and he had not seen their arrival. He seemed to be making up for his omission now.

The two barges were moored to the bank, one behind the other, and smoke was rising cheerily from a camp fire on the grassy river-bank. A party of bargees were evidently preparing breakfast. Captain Joshua Pepper removed his pipe again; once more he scratched his chin with the stem, and observed that he was busted if he ever see the like. Apparently, Captain Pepper was not a man of vivid imagination, and he was apt to repeat himself.

However, he made a big effort, and progressed fairly well.

"Thirty year I bin on this 'ere river, an' I don't reckon there ain't a barge but wot I ain't seen," he declared. "But I'm dinged

if I ever come across the like o' this! No!" said Captain Pepper. "Not in thirty year!"

He addressed the view with some vehemence, and then had another look at the two strange barges. He tipped his dingy peaked cap on one side, rubbed his bald spot, and shook his head dubiously. After that he proceeded to stroke his chin for a minute or two. But none of these operations solved the riddle which so intrigued him.

"It ain't natural!" he said complainingly. "Darn my hide if it is! Seems like I'll 'ave to make a few inquiries into this 'ere! That's wot I'll 'ave to do. It ain't natural!"

He was evidently in no hurry to make his inquiries—for he took a firmer hold on the top of the gate, and watched the operations in the neighbouring camp. The bargees, in particular, attracted his attention. Being a bargee himself—of thirty years' experience on this very river—Captain Pepper took a friendly interest in these strangers.

They didn't appear to be ordinary bargees. There was something a little different about them. One, a rather stout individual, was performing conjuring tricks with a frying pan over the camp fire. And another bargee near by thought fit to protest.

"Good gad!" said this denizen of the river. "Kindly refrain from splashing the good old bacon juice over the landscape, dash you! I mean to say, a chappie likes to be greaseless, even if he is a bargee!"

"Can't be too particular, Archie," replied the cook cheerfully. "Who says bacon?"

Apparently, everybody said bacon at once, and there was a bit of a scramble for the spoils. And Captain Joshua Pepper, having heard a few echoes of the aggrieved bargee's remarks, shook his head in blank bewilderment.

"Beats me!" he said, looking into the bowl of his pipe with an injured air. "That's wot it does! Beats me 'oller! Boys! A parcel o' young schoolboys wot don't know the difference a-tween a 'atch an' a anchor! Bust me if I ever see the like!"

Undoubtedly there was some justification for the worthy man's astonishment. Such bargees as these had never been seen on the River Nare before. There appeared to be about twenty of them—ten from each barge. This was another cause for comment. Captain Pepper had seldom had more than two men with him to form his entire crew.

The camp was quite happy, judging by the sound of the cheery voices and the shouts of laughter which occasionally went up. Breakfast was a leisurely meal, too, and nobody seemed to be anxious to proceed with the labours of the day.

"This is the best idea we've struck for years!" said the captain of the barge Penelope. "There's no need to tell you fellows that it was my suggestion in the first place."

"Rats!" said one of the others. "Dry up, Handy! It was Nipper's idea. He spoke about it before you did."

The captain of the Araminta grinned.

"All right," he said cheerily. "Don't let's argue about it. Handy can take the credit if he wants it. But, to be perfectly truthful, I believe we both received the brain-wave at about the same minute."

"Anyhow, it's better than being at St. Frank's, where everything's flooded out," said one of the other bargees, as he helped himself to a slab of bread. "Archie, kindly shove the butter this way."

"Absolutely," said Archie Glenthorpe. "Some foul miscreant has littered the good old cow-grease with tea-leaves, but I understand that we're supposed to wink at these dashed things."

And breakfast went on comfortably. The Schoolboy Bargees of St. Frank's were unquestionably having a high old time.



CHAPTER 2.

CAPTAIN PEPPER PAYS A CALL!

"ORNIN', young gents!"

Dick Hamilton and several of the other juniors glanced round as they heard the greeting. They

beheld a short, sturdy man of elderly aspect, dressed in a weather-beaten reefer suit, and a shiny peaked cap. His face was lined and wrinkled, and seemed to be of the texture of leather. He was smiling jovially, and his eyes had almost disappeared behind the puckering wrinkles which surrounded them.

"Good-morning, cap'n!" said Nipper genially. "Fatty, a cup of tea for the visitor! Make yourself at home, cap'n!"

Nipper had taken an instant liking to this weather-beaten old river man, and the other juniors were regarding him with approval, too. There was, indeed, something very attractive about Captain Joshua Pepper. He seemed to be the soul of good nature and joviality.

"Well, bust me if ye ain't real gents!" he said, as he removed his pipe, and regarded the circle. "Mind ye, I ain't inquisitive, an' it ain't my 'abit to put meself where I ain't wanted. Joshua Pepper's my name, young gents—Cap'n Joshua Pepper, of the barge Gladys."

"Pleased to meet you," said Reggie Pitt. "This is Cap'n Handforth, of the barge Penelope. And here, on my right, we have Cap'n Hamilton, of the barge Araminta. The rest of us, of course, are merely the smaller fry—the crews. We all greet you, Cap'n Pepper."

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "What-ho! Under the circs, oid spicy one, we'll waive the matter of personal introduction. I don't usually chat with chappies unless the formalities have been observed, but I've heard that bargees aren't so frightfully particular. what?"

"Bust my eyes!" remarked Captain Pepper.

"I beg your pardon?" said Archie. "I mean, what?"

"Beats me 'oller!" said the mariner. Nipper grinned.

"I expect you're wondering why we St. Frank's chaps are in charge of the barges, eh?" he asked. "Is that it, cap'n?"

"Young gent, that's just wot I am wonderin'," declared the skipper. "Never did I see the like o' this 'ere—not in the 'ole course o' my thirty year on this blamed river! Fair took me all of a 'eap, you did, as soon as I set eyes on ye!"

"By the way, where's the Gladys?" put in Handforth. "I don't see any sign of her. If you're going up river, cap'n, you might come along——"

"The pore old Gladys ain't exackly 'erself," interrupted Captain Pepper, shaking his head, and sitting down on an up-turned pail. "Ran into a wharf, she did, when this busted flood come along. Undergoin' repairs, young gents, an' won't be ready till next week. 'Ateful, that's wot it is. Me stuck 'ere at the Three Anchors, wi' nothin' t' do. I allus wos a man wot liked work. That's me!"

"You can join our crews!" said Pitt promptly. "Anybody who is fond of work is always welcome. Church, pass Cap'n Pepper another cup of tea!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The skipper looked round the circle, smiling.

"But 'ere I am, a-talkin' about meself, an' I'm still fair mazed at you young gents bein' in charge o' these 'ere barges."

"Well, it's not a long story," said Nipper cheerfully. "We're from St. Frank's, cap'n. You know St. Frank's College, I suppose?"

The skipper scratched his goatee thoughtfully.

"That there big school down the Stowe, ain't it?" he asked.

"Yes—on the right, a mile before you get to Bellton."

"Darn me if ye ain't right!" declared Captain Pepper enthusiastically.

"We're discovered!" murmured Pitt. "And I thought we were fooling everybody that we looked like real bargees!"

"The flood hit St. Frank's pretty hard, captain," went on Nipper. "No need to tell

you all the details; but it so happened that there were no masters on the spot, and the whole school was marooned."

"I know," said Captain Pepper, nodding. "I knew a feller once—Joe Briggs, 'is name was, from Wappin'. Or was it Rotherhithe? Joe Briggs was marooned once. A fair knock-out, young gents, accordin' to wot Joe tells me. Out in the Pacific, arter one o' them cyclones. It seems that Joe was washed away on a 'atch——"

"Exactly!" said Nipper soothingly. "We're all sorry for Joe Briggs, but he doesn't seem to be in the picture. I was saying that St. Frank's was marooned. The flood hit the school with tremendous force when the reservoir burst. I suppose you heard about it?"

"'Eard about it?" said Captain Pepper. "Wasn't I on the Stowe when it 'appened? Mind ye, I was up river, so the old Gladys didn't get caught. She rammed the wharf arterwards——"

"Anyhow, we had a few days of pretty tough going," continued Dick, realising that it was unwise to give Captain Pepper an opportunity of rambling on. "A crowd of us thought we'd escape, and we built a sort of ark."

"A ark?" repeated the skipper.

"Yes," said Handforth. "It was my idea."

"Borrowed, with compliments, from Mr. Noah!" explained Pitt.

"You fathead! This ark of mine——"

"As a matter of fact, it was only a barn," said Nipper, rather spoiling the effect. "You see, we had rescued these two barges from the flood earlier. We found them drifting away without any crews, or anything."

Captain Pepper cocked an eye at the two vessels.

"Can't say as I know 'em," he said. "Rummy, too! There ain't many barges wot I ain't familiar with. They're noo—that's wot it is. Ain't bin on the river long, I s'pose."

"They belong to the Caistowe Water Haulage Co., Ltd.——"

"Ay, good people!" nodded the skipper. "Fust-class owners, by wot I've 'eard. Good pay, an' allus plenty o' work. O' course, the Gladys is my own barge. As trim a little craft as ever you see."

"Well, these barges were decrelict, so we



CAPTAIN JOSHUA PEPPER

The cheery old salt who has many exciting adventures with the St. Frank's bargees!

roped them in," explained Nipper. "But, as there wasn't room enough for everybody who wanted to go, we managed to get a barn aboard."

Captain Pepper scratched his head.

"A barn?" he repeated. "Bust me, it don't seem nateral!"

"Well, as a matter of fact, it wasn't natural," grinned Nipper. "The barn was derelict, too, and practically jammed herself in position. We only needed to do a bit of hoisting, and luck did the rest. We started off down the river with the idea of getting into Bannington, but the wind was against us, and we were blown into the main current."

"Ah!" said Captain Pepper significantly.

"And the long and the short of it was, we were taken right down to Caistowe and out to sea," said Nipper. "That was the night of last Saturday, and since then we've been coming up the Nare!"

"Wot I can't understand is 'ow you got up the river," said the captain. "At sea, ye was? I ain't never 'eard the like! I once knew a feller from Bristol wot was blown to sea in a barge, but 'e went ashore on the Cornish coast somewhere, an' there wasn't nothin' left but splinters. The pore feller was in 'orspital for nigh on—"

"We had some trouble at sea," Nipper cut in gently. "The two barges, you see, were lashed together, and the barn was a bit rocky. Still, we managed to tip the whole contrivance overboard, and the barges were allowed to separate. And in the morning some fishing boats came along, and took most of the crowd to Caistowe. The rest of us decided to stick to the barges, and to take them back to the owners."

"Salvage!" explained Handforth. "That's what we're after!"



CHAPTER 3.

CAPTAIN PEPPER SIGNS ON!

CAPTAIN JOSHUA PEPPER rubbed his bald spot.

"Salvage, eh?" he said.

"Well, I'm busted!"

Handforth was looking red. He suddenly noticed that nineteen pairs of eyes were regarding him with fierce, concentrated censure. It had been previously agreed that nobody should breathe a word about the salvage idea. And Handforth had trotted it out with all his characteristic forgetfulness.

"Oh, crumbs!" he gasped. "I—I'd overlooked—I mean, the fact is—Salvage?" He laughed scornfully. "What rot! Of course, anybody's liable to make a joke!"

Nipper grinned.

"Well, it doesn't matter," he said. "Yes, Captain Pepper, we're after salvage. Might as well be perfectly frank about it. After the main crowd had been rescued, ten

of us stayed on each barge—as prize crews, you understand."

"That's dashed good," said Archie. "Prize crews, what? That is to say, the pick of the good old bunch!"

"No, Archie, it's just a term," grinned Nipper. "It means that we're in charge of these vessels until we can hand them over to the real owners. We saved them from destruction so we can claim the legal compensation for bringing them back."

"Ye're right there," agreed Captain Pepper, nodding. "Salvage, eh? Ten years back I knew a bloke named Jerry Binns, a nice-spoken bloke, too. In the North Sea fishin', 'e was. An' one day 'e comes acrost a steamer without no cap'n or crew aboard. So ole Jerry sez to 'is mates, 'e sez: 'This 'ere tub is ours, an'll we'll get the salvage.' The idea wasn't bad, but ole Jerry didn't know nothin' about steam. So when 'e piled the blamed steamer on a sandbank, an' she broke 'er back, there wasn't enough words in the English langwidge as Jerry could use—an' 'e was a fair trier, too. Well, arter 'e got ashore—"

"A sad story," said Nipper. "Our hearts bleed for Jerry Binns, but as all this happened ten years ago, I dare say he's got over it. We're more interested in matters of moment."

Captain Pepper nodded.

"But 'ow," he asked, "did ye get these craft up river?"

"Well, the tide was running strong, and we were practically carried ashore on it," explained De Valerie. "Nipper got busy with some local fishermen, and they helped us to haul the barges into the river. And since then we've been acting as bargees."

"Jolly hard work, too," said Handforth. "Lugging these great things up stream has been killing."

"Not to you," said Church tartly. "As skipper, you seem to think that your job is to stand on deck and give orders. We're the chaps who have to trudge the towing-path."

"Well, you needn't argue," said Nipper pacifically. "That's the position, Cap'n Pepper. I knew we couldn't get the barges back to Caistowe direct over fifteen miles of sea, so I thought it rather a good scheme to get into the Nare, and then up to the junction of the Stowe."

"A darned good idea, too," said the mariner. "Bust me, if you boys ain't a set o' young wonders! Takin' these 'ere barges back to their owners for salvage! Reminds me o' some boys down at Southend—"

"We've heard that the river is safely navigable all the way up," went on Nipper.

"Is that right, cap'n?"

"Wot, the Nare?"

"Yes."

"Like a pond," declared the skipper. "That's wot she's like. We didn't 'ave no floods on this river. Not likely! Leastways, not wot you might call floods. She rose a bit, mebbe, an' some o' the

meadows was covered. But we didn't get nothin' like the Stowe got."

"Have you heard anything fresh about the floods?" asked Handforth.

"Ay, they're goin' down."

"Good egg!"

"A man come along yesterday, an' sez the Stowe ain't no more than five feet above normal," went on Captain Pepper. "This 'ere fine weather is wot's done it. Another day o' two, young gents, an' there won't be no floods."

"Then you think we shall be able to navigate the Stowe all right?"

"I ain't so sure," replied the skipper significantly. "I ain't the kind o' man to dishearten anybody, but I ain't s' sure. Bust me if I am! A tricky business, young gents—that's wot it is."

"Oh, we'll manage——"

"In the fust place, these 'ere barges ain't moored like wot they ought t' be," continued the skipper severely. "It didn't take me long to see as 'ow you was amatoors. It ain't so bad goin' up stream, mind ye. Jest 'ard work. But when ye get t' the Stowe I ain't so sure. Like as not ye'll 'ave accidents."

"Accidents?" asked Handforth.

"Mebbe ye'll wreck both these 'ere barges," said Captain Pepper.

"What I like," said Pitt, "is your cheery, comforting note."

The old skipper looked at him, and frowned.

"I ain't kiddin' of ye, young gent!" he replied. "I'm jest tellin' ye the truth. Like as not ye'll meet wi' disaster—unless, o' course, ye've got somebody wi' ye wot understands the 'andlin' o' barges, an' the navigation o' fast-runnin' rivers."

"H'm!" said Nipper thoughtfully. "I was afraid of it, you fellows. Captain Pepper's right."

"Oh, we shall be able to manage," growled Handforth. "We've brought the barges along so far, and there's no reason——"

"By Jove!" said Nipper. "How about you, Captain Pepper?"

"Me?"

"You say you like work, and your own barge is under repair," went on Nipper. "Would you like to come along with us, and lend a hand?"

Captain Pepper removed his pipe, and frowned.

"Who, me?" he said slowly.

"Yes, you've had thirty years' experience on the river."

"Bust my eyes!" said the captain. "Blamed if it ain't an idea! Never struck me, mark ye! I wasn't askin' for no——"

"Of course not," said Dick. "We know that, cap'n. But it seems to me that you're just the right man in the right spot—and at the right time. We could do with you just now."

"I'll come wi' ye!" declared Captain Pepper promptly. "I won't take no command, nor interfere wi' your own arrangements—but I'll jest advise ye. I ain't as

young as I was, an' wot strength I got 'as gone to me 'ead! I'm willin' to come along, an' tell ye wot t' do when the time comes. An' I don't want no pay for it either!" he added gruffly. "It'll be a 'oliday. If there's one thing I 'ate wuss'n another, it's to spend day arter day in a bloomin' pub! Fair gives me the 'orror, it does. The river fer 'me, me lads, every time! Yes, I'll come wi' ye, an' I don't want no pay. So don't rile me by offerin'——"

"You'll have to take your equal share of the salvage," declared Nipper.

"Not me!" said the captain indignantly. "I didn't 'elp to salve these 'ere barges. I'm offerin' t' come becos I'd give anythink t' get away from that there landlord o' the Three Anchors! Now, if ever I see a fool in my life, that bloke—— There was a man down at Little Sidcott once—mate of a sailin' barge, 'e was. Name o' 'Arry Riley. One day 'e come t' me an' arst——"

"Tell us another time, cap'n," said Nipper, jumping up. "It's up to us to push off. The morning's going, and we're not. How long do you think it'll be before you can get ready?"

"Who, me?"

"Yes."

"I'm ready now," replied Captain Pepper. "It'll take me two minutes t' get my kit, an' I'll be out 'ere afore ye can unbend t' ropes."

He went off with a cheerful nod, and Nipper looked relieved.

"Well, that's that!" he said contentedly. "I've been worrying about a navigator ever since we started, and Captain Pepper's the very man."



CHAPTER 4.

HANDY SPENDS HIS SHARE!

ALTHOUGH they had intended telling nobody about the salvage idea, all the schoolboy bargees were relieved and happy

to have Captain Joshua Pepper with them. Nipper, in particular, was aware that a weight had been lifted off his mind.

He and the rest were game enough to take their chance, but Nipper had always felt that the project might collapse, once they reached the junction of the Nare and the Stowe. Hauling the barges up the Nare was a simple matter, and it was almost impossible to go wrong. The stream was flowing with more force than usual, but it was by no means difficult. There were plenty of hard workers to trudge along the towing-path.

But when the Stowe was reached, the story would be different.

The fork was rather a sharp one, for at this point the Nare branched off in one direction, whilst the Stowe took another. And the barges from that point, instead of going up stream, would drift down. And the Stowe, as Nipper was well aware, was still in flood. It was a great relief to know that

a man of vast experience was with them. Under his guidance, there could be no possibility of disaster.

And all the juniors had taken to Captain Pepper, too. He was such a jovial, smiling old boy. His reluctance to take any part of the salvage money was genuine. In fact, he repeated several times that he would regard the whole adventure as a holiday. He was at a loose end while his own barge was being repaired, so why shouldn't he travel with the boys, and let them have the benefit of his experience?

And so, after half an hour's delay in getting started, the *Araminta* and the *Penelope* proceeded on their way up stream, one about a hundred yards behind the other.

The Nare was broad here, and the current easy. The boys found it possible to take the work in shifts, five at a time. Handforth & Co., after an hour's spell, sat on the after-hatch, resting their aching muscles. Reggie Pitt and Jack Grey were there, too. The other five members of the *Penelope's* crew were at the tow-ropes.

Handforth regarded them severely.

"Lazy beggars!" he said. "They're not putting their backs into it. We're dropping behind. Nipper's barge is two hundred yards ahead now, and if these slackers keep on like this, we shall be a mile behind at dinner-time."

"Three of them are Third Formers, don't forget," said Church. "Give 'em a chance!"

"What difference does that make?" demanded Handforth. "My minor's as strong as I am—and so are those cheeky chums of his. It's just plain laziness."

"Well, don't worry," said Pitt. "The *Araminta's* easing down a bit now. They're changing the watch, and it'll give us a chance to make up the leeway. Excuse the nautical terms, but one is apt to get into the habit."

"Salvage!" said Handforth dreamily. "Jolly decent of old Pepper to refuse his whack. It'll make a difference of a hundred pounds, more or less, to us!"

"A hundred pounds?" said Church.

"Something like that."

"Something," said Pitt, "but not much."

"Eh?"

"In fact, not a bit like it!" continued Reggie. "Are you kidding yourself, Handy, that we're going to get about two thousand pounds salvage money for these barges?"

"Kidding myself?" repeated Handforth. "Of course not! We shall get it! At a rough estimate, I suggest three thousand pounds salvage for the two!"

"At a rough estimate?" asked Church.

"Yes."

"Very rough!" said Church.

"Of course, it might be more," went on Handforth abstractedly. "Anyhow, I know what I'm going to do with my five hundred quid."

"Your which?"

"My five hundred quid."

"Are you proposing to take a sixth share of that three thousand, all to yourself?"

asked McClure indignantly. "Five hundred pounds into three thousand only goes six times, Handy—and there are twenty of us!"

"Twenty!" said Handforth. "By George! I—I hadn't reckoned—"

"It'll be something in the nature of a hundred and fifty pounds each—if we get the three thousand," said Church, after a painful mental struggle.

"Oh, rats!" frowned Handforth. "That's rotten! Still, I dare say I shall be able to manage. I'm not saying anything about my Austin Seven—nothing against it—but it's not large enough. I'm proposing to buy a big car with my share of the salvage money."

"Why not get a motor-bus while you're at it?" suggested McClure sarcastically. "Why not take the whole three thousand quid yourself?"

"Don't be funny!" said Handforth curtly. "With a hundred and fifty pounds, I can pick up a jolly good car. In fact, I can get one for much less. With the rest, I'm going to refurnish Study D."

"Good-morning, Mr. Everyman!" murmured Pitt. "What can we do for you today? We'll furnish your study throughout, and if you can't manage the first instalment, never mind! As for the monthly payments, spend them in the tuck shop. We trust you!"

"You—you babbling ass!" roared Handforth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Aren't you going to furnish by easy payments?" asked Pitt, in surprise.

"No, I'm not!" snorted Handforth. "I'm going to spend a lot of the money on decorations."

"In Study D?"

"Yes."

"No need to spend money on it," said Pitt. "I've seen lots of decorations in Study D, when you've been busy with your fists. Church and McClure have been decorated in the most wonderful colours—"

"Rats!" interrupted Handforth. "The day before that giddy flood came, I was planning to re-paper the study, and I haven't given up the idea."

"I think it'll need re-papering now," grinned Church. "No study is improved by being filled with water for a week or two. But the school authorities will do that, you fathead!"

"Of course they will—after a style," replied Handforth. "But it won't satisfy me! So I'm going to do my own decorations."

"And I'll bet they won't satisfy them!" declared Pitt. "Take my advice, Handy, and wake up."

"Wake up?"

"Yes, you're in a trance," said Pitt. "This three thousand pound vision of yours is only a mirage. You're staring at it longingly, and you can see it in the distance. But when you get there, it'll be a thing of no substance. Wisdom by R. Pitt—free, gratis, and for nothing!"



"I'll punch your nose if you don't get off this barge!" exclaimed Handforth, thrusting his beefy fist under Sawkin's nose. The blustering bargee was finding that these schoolboys weren't afraid of him, for all his sixteen stone!



CHAPTER 5.

HANDY THINKS OTHERWISE!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH looked scornful.

"If that's what you call wisdom, you can keep it!"

he said tartly.

"Alas!" sighed Pitt. "Wasted words! Of what use is it to cast pearls before swine?"

"Pearls?" jeered Handforth. "Do you call those words of yours pearls?"

"I leave that for others," said Pitt modestly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Church and McClure were howling, but Handforth couldn't see the joke.

"Never mind!" said Pitt gently. "It'll save a lot of trouble if we change the subject."

"You silly fatheads——" Handforth paused, and his face went red. "Why," he gasped. "What the—— You—you rotter, Pitt! What's that you said about casting pearls before swine?"

"Merely a famous quotation——"

"You called me a pig!" hooted Handforth.

"Now, I ask you," said Pitt, waxing indignant, and appealing to the others. "Did I call Handy a pig? Did I? Thank goodness I've got three witnesses. Speak up, and hear me out. Did I call Handy a pig?"

"No!" said the three, in one solid voice. Handforth breathed hard.

"You distinctly said——" he began.

"It's no good, Handy—you can't accuse me of things like that when I've got three witnesses to bear me out," continued Reggie Pitt. "And I maintain what I said in the first place, too. You're looking at a mirage. That salvage money won't come to a tenth of what you're dreaming."

"What!" ejaculated Handforth.

"If we collect three hundred pounds net, we shall do well," said Pitt.

"Three hundred pounds net!" echoed Handforth. "But—but that'll only be—— Lemme see! Twenty of us, aren't there? Great Scott! That'll only be twenty pounds each!"

"Go down to the bottom of the class!" said Pitt sternly.

"Eh?"

"Take two hours' detention for rotten arithmetic!"

"You silly ass——"

"Mental arithmetic was always Handy's weak suit," said Church.

"What d'you mean—weak suit?" demanded Handforth. "We're not talking about suits! I'll admit I've got a few tears in my bags——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I meant cards, Handy—a weak suit——"

"Cards?" gasped Edward Oswald, who always took everything too literally. "Who the dickens mentioned cards?"

"Never mind," said Pitt. "Let's continue about the salvage money. It's an intriguing

topic. So full of visions. Fifteen pounds each will be the figure, old man, if we get three hundred. But, in my humble opinion, we shall be pretty lucky if we cash in with a tenner each all round."

"Sixpence!" yelled Handforth.

"I said a tenner—not a tanner!" frowned Pitt. "I don't use those low, common terms."

Handforth breathed hard.

"Rot!" he said. "You're dotty! What's the good of ten quid to me?"

"We'll take your share, if you like," said Church obligingly.

"Oh, you will?" hooted Handforth.

"Well, you said you didn't want it——"

"Ten pounds!" snapped Edward Oswald. "Why it's silly piffle! Two barges like these—practically new—and salvaged from certain destruction! It isn't worth all this labour and trouble, if we only get ten quid each!"

"Ah, but what about the romance of it?" asked Reggie, waving his hand towards the green meadows. "What about the call of spring? Have you no soul for poetry, Handy?"

"Poetry?" repeated Handforth. "If you start reciting poetry here, I'll chuck you overboard!"

"Lost!" sighed Pitt. "Well, let's pay a formal visit to the Araminta, Jack. I'm in the mood for one of Captain Pepper's reminiscences. He seems to be causing much hilarity among the others."

And the chums of Study K leapt lightly ashore from the slow moving barge and joined the group on the Araminta's deck. The bargees who were hauling this craft made sundry selfish remarks concerning the added load, but Pitt and Grey treated these comments with the indifference they deserved. Captain Pepper was turning out to be a great talker, and many of his yarns were, indeed, highly diverting.

Handforth & Co. remained on the Penelope. Edward Oswald had relapsed in his former state of dreaminess. Probably he was thinking of the money that was coming to him—or that he thought was coming to him. Or perhaps he was only making some artistic plans for the redecoration of Study D.

"Perhaps you're right, Handy," remarked Church, after a while. "It does seem a bit of a sweat, you know. Hauling these giddy barges for days and then getting only ten quid each!"

"Not worth the candle," agreed McClure.

"Eh?" said Handforth, starting out of his abstraction.

"It's not worth the candle," repeated Mac.

"What's not worth the candle?"

"Salvaging these barges," said Church. "Think of all this hard work, and all this inconvenience. If we had gone with the other fellows we should have been home by now, enjoying the holiday."

"Holiday?" repeated Handforth. "What d'you call this?"

"It's more like seven days' hard labour!" said McClure, with feeling. "We shan't get more than ten pounds each, and, by gum, we shall earn it!"

Handforth regarded him severely.

"Earn it!" he repeated. "You mercurial rotter!"

"I suppose you mean mercenary?" asked Mac.

"You needn't quibble about a word!" roared Handforth. "I'm ashamed of you! Wanting money for doing a good turn to the owners of these barges. We're Boy Scouts, aren't we?"

"Well, yes," said Mac feebly. "But not just now——"

"Once a Boy Scout—always a Boy Scout!" said Handforth firmly.

"I suppose you'll be leading your troop when you're ninety?" asked Church.

"Boy Scouts are supposed to do good turns without expecting tips, or any payment of any kind," insisted Handforth. "Look at Captain Pepper! Is he expecting any payment?"

"First time I knew he was a Boy Scout," said McClure in surprise.

"He isn't, you howling ass!"

"But you distinctly said——"

"I'm talking about money!" roared Handforth. "As I said before, I'm ashamed of you! You ought to be only too jolly glad to help this good work along without expecting a penny! Why this river life is a holiday in itself. We're enjoying ourselves, aren't we?"

"Of course we are," said Mac. "But Churchy and I were only agreeing with what you said about the salvage money. We shan't mind if we don't get a red cent. But you seem to want a bit more."

"He expects the owners to make him a present of the barges!" said Church sarcastically.

Handforth started.

"Oh, well, of course, that's different," he said, realising that he was in a trap. "When it comes to salvage money—— H'm! Perhaps you're right! It might be better to wait until we deliver up the barges. And we shall be on the safe side, if we expect no salvage at all!"

"Now and again," said Church, "you seem to have a grain of sense in that chunk of concrete you call your head."



CHAPTER 6.

THE STOWE ONCE MORE!

VENING found the two barges moored snugly against the left bank of the River Stowe, just at the junction of that stream

with the Nare.

The schoolboy bargees were satisfied.

They had hoped to get to this point by

nightfall, and had previously decided to camp here. But without Captain Joshua Pepper's help, and without his advice, it is doubtful if the object would have been achieved.

All day the genial old bargee had made his influence felt. To most of the fellows, it seemed that he had lazed his hours away, talking and smoking, and doing nothing towards the actual work. But a word here, a suggestion there, had worked wonders. Nipper knew, at all events, that Captain Pepper's presence was of very material value.

He knew exactly what to do at every awkward bend, and at the locks alone his presence on the leading barge was a boon and a blessing. Without him the boys might have had a great deal of trouble. With him, all possible difficulties were smoothed away.

In the first place, he knew precisely how to act, and, in the second place, the lock-keepers were all old friends of his. He had known them for years, and at the first sight of him they put themselves out to help.

Nipper needed no further proof that Captain Pepper was a man to be treasured. He was liked everywhere. Not half an hour passed on the river without somebody shouting a cheery welcome to him. The old skipper's popularity was a sure proof of his sterling character.

So, at the end of that day, tired and satisfied, the schoolboy bargees made camp on the river bank.

The weather was so fine that they preferred the open air to the stuffiness of the cabins. Indeed, there wasn't sufficient room in the cabins. When it came to sleeping, they occupied the holds.

Of course, at the commencement of this trip, they had laid in supplies. They had plenty of food—for the cargo of one barge consisted of groceries and provisions—mostly tinned goods. Archie Glenthorne and two or three of the other moneyed fellows had cheerfully "hacked out," and mattresses and bedding had been procured, to say nothing of a supply of crockery and cooking utensils. And the fellows were revelling in new laid eggs, milk from the neighbouring farms, and other delicacies. They had recently had their fill of tinned stuff!

The weather remained glorious, as though April had made up its mind to work overtime to compensate for the wretched rains of March. It was real spring now, and the bright sunshine and the clear skies had an invigorating influence on the schoolboys.

"I'm longing to get to St. Frank's again," remarked De Valerie, as they sat round the camp-fire. "I want to see if the old school is high and dry again. What's the betting?"

"I wouldn't risk my oldest boots on it!" said Pitt. "The Stowe Valley was flooded so thoroughly that it might take weeks for all that water to drain away."

"But there's no sign of floods here," said Grey.

"No, we're miles above the reservoir," put

in Nipper. "The floods are the worst below that point. But, somehow, I've got an idea that we shall get a pleasant surprise when we go past St. Frank's to-morrow."

"To-morrow?" echoed Val. "Think we shall get there to-morrow?"

Captain Pepper reckons we shall pass the school some time during the afternoon," replied Nipper. "Perhaps we shall have to camp there, or even higher up. It all depends how the floods are."

"There never ain't no tellin'," observed Captain Pepper. "Sometimes a flood will hang about for weeks, an' then, ag'in, sometimes it won't. With this 'ere weather, the valley ought to be dry ag'in within a few days. But I've known floods wot didn't shift for a month."

"Let's hope this isn't one of them," said Handforth.

"I was once stuck on a mudbank for five solid days," said the skipper reminiscently. "That was when I 'ad old Sam Trotter wi' me as mate. A rare bloke, was Sam. Dead now, pore ole feller! Thought 'e was doin' somethin' clever by retirin' from the river an' takin' up a job as potman in a Caistowe pub. The pore ole feller started chuckin' a chap out wot was too full. An' the chap chucked ole Sam out instead. I didn't know anythin' about it till arterwards, or I'd a-sent some flowers to the funeral. Ole Sam might a-bin alive to-day if 'e'd stuck to ole Gladys."

"Good gad!" said Archie. "I trust the widow is bearing up well?"

"Widder?" said the skipper. "I'm talkin' about my barge."

"Oh, absolutely!" said Archie. "You mean your barge! Sorrow!"

"Me an' ole Sam 'ad a rare time when we was stuck on that mudbank," continued Captain Pepper. "The wust of it was, our food give out towards the third day, an' we looked like a couple o' starvin' scarecrows on the fourth."

"Well, let's take a stroll round, you fellows, before turning in," suggested Nipper, getting to his feet. "We all want to be up early, so we must be in our blankets soon after dark."

Two or three of the other juniors voted for the stroll. Many fellows were washing up, and doing the general work of the camp—it was their turn for these duties. Everybody had had an excellent supper, and they were feeling very comfortable and content.

The day had been a hard, strenuous one, and it was some satisfaction to know that there would be no towing on the morrow. For the barges would be going down-stream, and would only have to be kept under control.

Nipper was accompanied by Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson, and they strolled along the towing-path leisurely, going towards a riverside inn which was just visible round the bend. There were big locks

at this junction of the two rivers, and it seemed to be a kind of hamlet.

"Dear old boys, it's a frightfully good idea to take exercise," said Sir Montie, "but it seems to me we've had a good supply durin' the day. I may be wrong, of course—"

"A little walk after supper is always beneficial," said Nipper. "Besides, look at the scenery! By Jove, what a glorious evening! Isn't it ripping to see a real break in the weather at last, and to know that Easter will soon be here? And then, after that—cricket!"

"Rather!" said Tommy Watson. "Cricket! Our football has been messed up pretty badly, but cricket will have its compensations. I hope to goodness our pitches won't be ruined. Little Side might be nothing better than a bog, you know," he added anxiously.

"Nature's a wonderful restorer," said Nipper comfortingly. "She does an awful lot of damage one week, but before you know where you are, she's repaired it all. This warm, dry weather is an example of it. Nature feels ashamed of herself, and she's making amends."

"Begad, old boy, you're absolutely right," said Sir Montie. "This sort of rippin' weather is not due for another two or three weeks. It'll make a wonderful difference—"

He paused, glancing severely at a man who was looking over a neighbouring hedge.

"Frightfully bad form!" went on Montie.

"Staring at us, you mean?" murmured Nipper. "We mustn't be offended. We're rummy-looking bargees, you know."

The inquisitive individual was a few yards farther on. The river lay on one side of the broad towing-path, and a hedge on the other. There were some allotments, or vegetable gardens, beyond. The lights of the inn were just beginning to twinkle in the dusk ahead. A few stars were beginning to brighten the dying sunset. There was no breath of wind, the air was mild, and the whole of Nature was at peace. It was such a contrast to the weather of the previous week that it seemed too good to be true.

"Half a minute, young shavers!"

Nipper & Co. glanced up and found that the man behind the hedge was addressing them.



CHAPTER 7.

THE REAL CAPTAINS!

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST was shocked.

"I hope the chap isn't addressin' us!" he murmured. "I'm a good-

tempered fellow, but when it comes to bein' addressed as a 'young shaver'—"

"You from them barges?" asked the man.

There could be no doubt of it now. Nipper and his chums paused, and found that the man was nodding down-stream to the spot where the Araminta and the Penelope were

moored. This fellow was no river-dweller, but struck Nipper as being a farm labourer.

"As a matter of fact, we are," replied Nipper, seeing no reason why he should withhold the obvious information. "Of course, we're St. Frank's fellows really."

"From the big school down by Bellton, eh?"

"Yes."

"Thought you was somethin' a bit different from the usual," said the man. "My name's Hooker."

"Pleased to meet you!" said Sir Montie stiffly. "I think we'll stroll back, old boys—"

"Just a minute," interrupted Mr. Hooker.

He was a man who evidently belonged to that section of the community which believed itself to be the perfect equal of the best. Not that the juniors desired to be "sir'd" every minute. They much preferred conversation without it. This man, however, was so obviously a good-for-nothing that they had no desire to continue the conversation.

"Just a minute," repeated the man.

"What's the names o' them barges?"

"Frightful nerve!" breathed Sir Montie.

"One's the Araminta and the other's the Penelope," replied Nipper.

Mr. Hooker slapped his thigh.

"I knew it!" he said triumphantly.

"Then if you knew it, what did you want to ask for?" demanded Watson bluntly.

"I knew it; but I wasn't sure, if you see what I mean," replied Mr. Hooker. "I reckernised their cut as they was comin' round out o' the Nare. I knew I'd seen them barges afore, though I never knew 'em to come up the Nare."

"You seem to be full of information," remarked Nipper drily. "I suppose you live here?"

"That's my cottage," said Mr. Hooker, pointing vaguely in the rear.

"Charming, I'm sure!" said Nipper.

"There ain't many barges I don't see," declared Mr. Hooker. "I'm allus here of an evenin', workin' at my land. By gum! Ole Sawkins an' ole Clamp 'ud give somethin' to know about these 'ere barges."

"Clamp?" repeated Nipper.

"Sawkins?" said Watson.

"Ay!" said Mr. Hooker mysteriously.

"Never did I expect to see these 'ere barges agin. I know somethin' about 'em, I do!"

"Is it something very bad?" asked Nipper.

He wasn't particularly curious, but he saw no reason why he should not draw this man on. The juniors had been wondering for some days how these two barges had come to be derelict on the flood. They had assumed that the vessels got adrift during the worst part of the flood. It might be as well to know the actual truth. Mr. Hooker seemed to know what the truth was.

"Bad?" he repeated. "It's what I'd call disgraceful!"

"Begad!" said Montie.

"But I'm blessed if I can understand why they come up the Nare," added Mr. Hooker.

"DAD READS IT NOW!"

"Laugh! I feel like bustin' when I think of it. My old dad says to me the other Wednesday: 'What the dickens is that paper you've got there? You're always reading it—lemme have a look at it!' Right in the middle of a Jack, Sam and Pete yarn I was, too. He grabs the BOYS' REALM off me and rants on: 'You sit there chortling and chuckling like you were reading something funny! Pack it up and go out and chop some firewood for your mother!' So I goes out and chops wood. When I looked through the window, there was my dad with his nose dug right into the old REALM, grinning like a two-year-old. Took it off to work with him, he did! I wondered what dad would say when he came back, and I looked at him when he came in. He was grinning, an' he says: 'That chap Pete's a regular lad—got any back numbers, son?' You could ha' knocked me down with a sledge-hammer when he said that, an' when I went up to bed he was looking at last week's copy! Now he reads the REALM regular on Wednesdays—gives me the tuppence for it and all!"



Every *The Boys* **REALM** Price
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scratching his head. "That's what beats me! The last I saw o' them barges they was on the Stowe 'ere, an' it was took for granted they'd drifted down the river and got wrecked. I thought they was out in the sea by this time, an' sunk to the bottom."

"If it'll give you any satisfaction to know, they would have been at the bottom of the sea but for us," replied Nipper. "We saved them, and, as the Nare was not in flood, we came up that way."

"Oh," said Mr. Hooker, "I see! That's how it is, is it?"

"Yes, that's how it is," said Nipper.

He knew that his chums were regarding him with disapproval, but he had an object in continuing this conversation. After all, it really made no difference, for the school-boy barges were making no secret of their salvage efforts. Nobody could stop them so long as they remained in possession of the barges. The vessels were theirs by right of salvage.

"I know something about them barges, I do," declared Mr. Hooker grimly.

"So you remarked before" replied Nipper.

"What's more, Sawkins an' Clamp would give their right hands to know that them barges are safe an' sound," continued Mr. Hooker. "They'd give a year's pay for just one sight of 'em!"

"We should know what the dickens you're driving at a lot better if you told us who Sawkins and Clamp are," put in Watson.

"Captain Sawkins is the skipper of the *Araminta* an' Captain Clamp is the skipper o' the *Penelope*," replied Mr. Hooker. "O' course, they ain't real cap'n's—not what you might call cap'n's. Just bargees. As ripe a pair of blackguards as ever I saw!"

"Then they don't associate with Captain Pepper?" asked Sir Montie.

Mr. Hooker shook his head.

"Old Pepper wouldn't look at 'em," he replied. "In fact, I don't believe 'e knows 'em—they ain't bin on the river long. They ain't our sort, either—not them drunken sort. The landlord of the Angler might like 'em, but nobody else don't. Not as I'm all in favour of old Pepper," he added. "A decent ole man maybe, but a bit stuck-up. Many's the time I've wished 'im 'good-evening,' but 'e ain't 'ardly looked at me!"

This struck Nipper as a good indication of Captain Pepper's excellent judgment.

"So Sawkins and Clamp don't seem popular?" he asked.

"They're a pair of wrong 'uns!" declared Mr. Hooker, lowering his voice, as though Messrs. Sawkins and Clamp were crouching behind a hedge somewhere. "I'll tell you how them barges came to be driftin' on the flood derelict."

"Now you're talking!" said Nipper.

"Them barges was moored a mile or two down stream," continued Mr. Hooker. "You

remember when the flood first started? Well, them two was up 'ere, in the Angler, both 'arf seas over. The landlord went to 'em, an' warned 'em what might 'appen, but they didn't take no notice. Rainin' cats an' dogs, it was, an' the river risin' every hour."

"And they left their barges unattended?" asked Nipper, in surprise. "Weren't the crews on board?"

"On board?" said Mr. Hooker scornfully. "They was in the pub, too! Sawkins an' Clamp was so soused they didn't care what 'appened. It didn't worry them whether the river took 'old o' their barges, or whether it didn't. They were too drunk to care!"

"And do you mean to say that they could have saved those barges?"

"O' course they could," replied Mr. Hooker. "Easy! Didn't the landlord warn 'em? If you don't believe me, go an' ask him," added Mr. Hooker, pointing to the inn. "Go an' ask him! He'll tell you just the same as me. Them blackguards chucked them barges away, an' everybody round 'ere knows it!"



CHAPTER 8.

THE BARGEES' DECISION!

NIPPER was convinced that this man was telling the truth.

His vehement suggestion for them to verify his statements by appealing to the landlord was eloquent. He would not have invited such corroboration unless he had been absolutely sure of himself. But Nipper thought it just as well to make absolutely certain.

"Did you see these bargees?" he asked.

"See 'em?" laughed Mr. Hooker.

"Wasn't I in the tap-room all the evenin'?"

"I can quite believe you were," said Nipper promptly.

"All the evenin'," insisted Mr. Hooker.

"That's where I was—right in the tap-room. I know what I'm talkin' about, young fellers! Everybody was gettin' the wind up about the floods, an' lots o' bargees were 'urryin' to look after their craft. But Sawkins an' Clamp didn't care tuppence—nor did their crews, either. Soused, they was," added the man, as though he hadn't sprung this surprise before. "Roarin' drunk!"

"This was in the evening, you say?"

"Yes."

"And when did Sawkins and Clamp find out what had happened to their barges?"

"Why, not until the next mornin'," replied Mr. Hooker. "You see, they was stayin' at the Angler, scein' as they was held up by the river, an' couldn't go any further. That's why they got sort o' careless, like."

"And are they stopping at the Angler now?" asked Nipper quickly.

"Not likely!" said the other. "They cleared!"

"After they heard what their drunkenness had resulted in, eh?"

"If you ask me," said Mr. Hooker, "they was ashamed o' themselves. I don't wonder at it, neither. It would ha' bin easy for them to 'ave saved them barges from driftin' into the valley. They only needed proper lookin' after."

"Well, we're in charge of the barges now—"

"And good luck to you!" said Mr. Hooker, nodding. "Them fellers don't deserve bein' in charge o' such good boats. I 'ear they've bin trampin' up an' down the river for miles, tryin' to find out where their craft 'ad got to. O' course, they never 'oped to find 'ein," he added. "Old Sawkins was well nigh off his nut when 'e found out that the Araminta was gorn. An' old Clamp swore somethin' awful when there wasn't no Penelope to be found."

"Well, they only got their deserts," growled Watson. "They shouldn't desert their barges like that. I expect they'll get the sack!"

"More like they'll get prison!" said Mr. Hooker. "Criminal neglect—that's what it was. But it wouldn't surprise me if them fellers came along this very minute," he added, looking up and down. "It wouldn't surprise me in the least. They're somewhere round these parts. Dursn't go back to report, nor anythin'!"

"Oh, well, thanks for the information!" said Nipper. "It doesn't matter to us, of course, how the barges got adrift, or who was in charge of them. We found them derelict, and we're going to hand them over to the owners."

They nodded to Mr. Hooker, and strolled back towards their camp in the deepening dusk.

They found the two barges snug for the night, with a good many of the fellows already preparing for sleep. Handforth gave Nipper & Co. a curious glance as they stepped on board.

"Who were you talking to?" he asked.

Nipper briefly explained.

"I'm not surprised," said Handforth, at last. "In fact, it's just what we expected. Two jolly fine barges like this couldn't get adrift unless there had been some beastly carelessness."

"But they're ours!" said Church.

"Of course, they are!" replied Nipper. "It makes no difference to us. At the same time, it's a bit comforting."

"What's comforting?" asked Handforth.

"To hear this."

"You don't understand," said Nipper.

"Supposing we had discovered that the skippers of these barges were sound, honest chaps, who had lost them through sheer ill-luck? Quite possible, you know. During that first night of the flood, any barges might have got adrift."

"Well?"

"Well, there you are!" said Nipper. "We should have felt pretty rotten if we had come across two kindly old bargees like Captain Pepper. In fact, we should have

felt uncomfortable about remaining in charge of 'em!"

"Yes, I see what you mean now," agreed Handforth, nodding. "As we know what rotters these men are, we're perfectly easy in mind about demanding salvage, eh?"

"That's it," said Nipper. "These boats were abandoned by incompetent and unworthy captains. Sawkins and Clamp deserve the sack, and we needn't feel any pangs."

"I don't feel any pangs," retorted Handforth. "I've changed my mind about that salvage. When I get my three hundred pounds——"

"Your what?"

"My ten pounds——"

"That's better!"

"When I get my ten pounds, I shall hand it over to some of you other fellows," said Handforth generously. "The fact is, I shan't be comfortable in keeping it."

"There's nothing uncomfortable in keeping what you haven't got," said Church.

"I won't touch a penny!" roared Handforth.

"By Jove, that's not a bad idea," said Nipper thoughtfully. "Why not all follow Handy's example? Why not get this salvage money, and hand it straight over to the Flood Distress Fund?"

"The which?"

"Hand it over to relieve the hardship in Bellton, particularly," went on Nipper. "If we're lucky enough to get two or three hundred pounds, that'll be a nice slice of money, and we shall feel that this salvage work of ours has been worth while!"

Archie Glenthorne beamed through his monocle.

"If I may say so, laddie, the scheme is sound," he declared. "Absolutely gilt-edged and bound in half-Morocco! One of the ripest schemes that has come under our notice for some time."

"Hear, hear!"

"Let's give the money to Bellton."

"When we get it," added Nipper. "And if we get it."

"There's no 'if' about it!" exclaimed Handforth grimly. "If this money is going to charity, the owners will have to pay up pretty stiffly! We can haggle with them, and demand the utmost penny! It would be pretty bad form to do it on our own account—but for charity we can demand practically what we like."

Some of the fellows felt just a shade disappointed at the prospect of losing the money they had already spent in their mind's eye. Then they remembered the terrible picture that Bellton had presented—flooded so deeply, that the picturesque little village had almost vanished.

They turned in, curiously content.

In a way, it was a relief to know they wouldn't get any money for themselves—it saved all bother of wondering how much

each share would come to. And it made them feel rather good when they thought of the distress that this salvage money would alleviate.



CHAPTER 9.

FOR INFORMATION RECEIVED!

MR. WILLIAM HOOKER lounged against the bar in the tap-room of the Angler. An hour had passed since his chat with

Nipper & Co. and he was now enjoying that evening recreation which he felt was his due. Naturally, his conversation turned on the subject of the schoolboy bargees.

"Eard about them barges?" he inquired of the landlord.

"Yes," said the landlord. "Funny thing, Hooker. I thought those boats were gone for good."

"That's what I thought, too," agreed Mr. Hooker. "By gum! I wonder what old Sawkins'll say when he finds out?"

"It doesn't interest me what he'll say," said the landlord. "And it oughtn't to interest you, either, Hooker," he added sharply. "It strikes me you're too fond of interfering with other people's business!"

Mr. Hooker was aggrieved.

"Sawkins an' Clamp was drunk that night, wasn't they?" he demanded.

"It's none of your affair!"

"Yes, but wasn't they?" persisted the man.

"I haven't denied it," growled the landlord. "If it comes to that, they were drunk, and I don't want to see them in my house again. After what happened about those barges, those fellows ought to be glad to be out of the district."

"Then I was right, Mr. Williams," said the man. "From the very first, I said it was a disgraceful thing for them rotten bargees to be drunk when they ought to 'ave been lookin' arter their boats."

"Ho!" grinned Mr. Williams. "The pot calling the kettle black, eh?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Mr. Hooker aggressively.

"You'll do!" grinned the landlord.

Mr. Hooker thought it wise not to pursue the subject, and he felt rather reluctant to order another pot of beer. He went out of the inn shortly afterwards, and turned along the towing-path, in the opposite direction to where the barges lay. He had a little errand to go on before returning home, and it took him out beyond the limits of the tiny hamlet.

"Blamed nuisance!" he muttered. "Just like the missus to want that chicken to-night. Wimmen are all the same—can't never wait for anything. Like as not, I'll fall in the river, an' get drowned."

In this pessimistic frame of mind, and with a sense of injury weighing upon him, Mr.

Hooker continued his walk. And he hardly noticed a group of six men coming towards him, until he nearly collided with them.

"That's the Angler," he heard a gruff voice saying. "About time we come to it, too."

Mr. Hooker stopped dead.

He recognised the voice of Samuel Sawkins. And, in a flash, he knew that these men were the two bargees and their crews. Mr. Hooker experienced a sensation of triumph. Hadn't he told those schoolboys that Sawkins and Clamp might come along at any minute?

"Evenin', Cap'n Sawkins," said Mr. Hooker.

The group of men paused. In the dim dusk, two of them could be recognised as the skippers—both of them wearing shiny peaked caps. The other men were a nondescript quartette, wearing blue jerseys beneath their jackets. They were not typical rivermen. Sawkins and Clamp were of such a type that they naturally gathered the worst about them.

"Who's that?" demanded the burlier of the two skippers.

"Me—Bill Hooker."

"Never 'eard of you!" said Captain Sawkins contemptuously.

"Me, neither!" declared Captain Clamp, with conviction.

Mr. Hooker felt more injured than ever, and in his resentment he made a remark which could scarcely be termed a happy one.

"Never 'eard o' me!" he said. "Wasn't I in the Angler with you that night when your barges got adrift?"

"I don't want to 'ear nothin' about that night!" snarled Captain Sawkins aggressively.

"Nor me, neither!" agreed Captain Clamp.

They were feeling utterly weary, and hardly in the mood for conversation with a man who was a perfect stranger to them. Truth to tell, they neither remembered much about that fatal night. For days they had been wandering about, hoping to gain some information concerning the *Araminta* and the *Penelope*.

But all their efforts had been in vain. To-day, they had been laboriously inventing a false story, which, they fondly hoped, would cover up their guilt. They had not reported to their owners yet, and were afraid to do so. They were living in doubt and misery.

"You ain't 'eard nothin', I suppose?" suggested Mr. Hooker.

"No, we ain't!" snapped Captain Sawkins.

"Well, I 'ave!" said Mr. Hooker.

The words had the effect he desired. For the bargees were about to push on. In fact, they had been about to push Mr. Hooker with some violence at the same time. But they checked themselves. Sawkins, a big man with a red, aggressive, bloated face, pushed his head forward. Captain Clamp, a wizened-looking rascal, followed his example.

"What's that?" demanded Captain Sawkins.

"I thought mebbe you 'ad 'eard somethin' about them barges o' yours," remarked Mr. Hooker, disliking the attitude of these men.

"The blamed things have gorn down the river," said Captain Clamp, in a melancholy voice. "Sunk by this time, I'll lay!"

Mr. Hooker did some quick thinking.

"Them barges is safe," he said briefly.

"Wot!"

"Safe!" said Mr. Hooker impressively.

"Safe!" shouted Captain Sawkins, grasping the man by the arm, and holding him.

"Ow d'you know?"

"'Ere, leggo!" complained Mr. Hooker. "I'll tell you where them barges are, if you want'er know."

"We do want'er know!"

"Well, ain't you going to offer me something for the information?" asked Mr. Hooker cunningly. "I've always looked upon you gents as friends o' mine. I'm willing to oblige any friends o' mine——"

"'E's lyin'!" put in Captain Clamp. "Don't take no notice of 'im, Sam! 'Aven't we 'eard from 'undreds o' people that them barges was swept down by the floods?"

"They was saved!" said Mr. Hooker quickly. "I can prove it, too! If you don't want the information, you can go without it!" he added gruffly. "It ain't no concern 'o mine!"

He turned away. Apparently, he did not hold these men in such contempt as he had tried to make Nipper & Co. believe. At all events, he was quite prepared to take advantage of the bargees.

"'Old 'ard!" growled Captain Sawkins harshly. "I know you now!" he added, peering closer. "I've seen your ugly mug about this part afore! I'll give yer ten bob for this 'ere infermation."

"It's worth more than ten bob!" protested Mr. Hooker.

"Ten bob, an' not a cent more!" said Captain Sawkins. "I wouldn't risk another penny on yer!"

"Me, neither!" vowed Captain Clamp.

"Make it a quid, an' I'll take you straight to them barges now!" said Mr. Hooker breathlessly. "I know exactly where they are, an' there's only a lot o' boys in charge of 'em."

The two skippers held a brief consultation. Two greasy ten-shilling notes passed into Mr. Hooker's possession.



CHAPTER 10.

CAPTAIN SAWKINS MEANS BUSINESS!

"ELL?" demanded Sawkins threateningly. "Don't kid yourself, young feller me lad! We're goin' to keep you with us until you show us them barges! An' if yer can't do it,



Handforth sent one man staggering with a terrific right to the jaw, but Jerry Dodd and Archie Glenthorne were thrown overboard. Although the schoolboys were fighting valiantly, their opponents—armed with sticks, and much bigger—were masters of the situation and looked like capturing the barges.

we gets that quid back, an' we punches your 'ead! See?"

"Don't you trust me?" complained Mr. Hooker.

"No, we blamed well don't!"

"Well, there they are—you can see the lights from 'ere!" said Mr. Hooker, pointing down the towing path, past the Angler. "Them's your barges—them two, moored against the bank."

Captain Sawkins stared, and drew a deep breath. He was certainly exasperated to discover that they had handed over a pound of their limited capital, to be told that the barges were in sight all the time.

"I don't believe it!" said Captain Sawkins.

"All right—go an' look at the names!"

"That's what I am a-goin' to do," said the burly bargeman. "'Ere, you fellers! Grab 'old o' this swab, an' 'old 'im tight. If 'e 'ollers, don't take no notice of 'im. I ain't takin' no chances"

"It's a try-on—that's what it is!" said Captain Clamp.

They were both convinced that Mr. Hooker had been lying. They had made so many inquiries about the *Araminta* and the *Penelope*, and had heard from so many sources that the two barges were lost, that they had

given up all hope of ever seeing them again. It was perfectly ridiculous for this man to attempt to fool them in this way.

They went down the towing-path, and passed the doors of the *Angler* rather reluctantly. They soon came upon the two barges, nestling against the grassy bank.

There was something very peaceful about them.

A soft radiance was gleaming out from the skylights, and drifting smoke curled from the chimneys. While most of the juniors had gone to sleep. Nipper, Pitt, Handforth, and a few others were still awake in the cabins, talking and laughing. They were all thoroughly enjoying this adventure.

Captain Sawkins came to a halt just before they reached the barges. He could only see them dimly, and it was impossible to identify them unless he got very close.

"You stay 'ere, an' 'old this feller!" he exclaimed softly. "Don't forget—'old 'im!"

"We'll 'old 'im!" muttered the crew.

"Come on, Jim—let's 'ave a closer look," said Sawkins.

They crept along on tiptoe. They were still of the firm opinion that these barges were strangers, and they did not want to excite inquiries by being seen.

They had reached the bows of the first one, and Captain Sawkins bent low.

"See anythin'?" whispered Captain Clamp.

"Cuss my bones!" gasped Captain Sawkins. "It's 'er! It's the old Araminta! Crikey, Jim, am I dreamin', or what?"

But Captain Clamp had rushed off to the other barge, and came back like a man in a daze.

"It's them, all right," he muttered hoarsely.

"Our barges," breathed Sawkins. "What are we goin' to do about it, Jim? Our barges—'ere, in front of our very eyes! An' we thought they was sunk. I was never so surprised in the 'ole o' my life!"

"Me, neither!"

The two barge captains stood there, stupefied by the magnitude of this discovery. A minute earlier they had believed that the Araminta and the Penelope were either wrecked somewhere in the lower reaches of the Stowe, or sunk out in the Channel. And yet here they were—both of them apparently as whole and perfect as ever!

"Well?" asked Clamp, after a long pause. "What about it?"

"What about it?" breathed Captain Sawkins. "We're goin' to 'ave 'em—that's what we're goin' to do, Jim. They're our barges, ain't they?"

"We're their skippers, anyway!"

"That's the same thing!" growled Sawkins, his voice vibrating with the intensity of this great moment. "All right, you men! You can let that feller go!"

"Lumme!" said one of the men. "They ain't our ole tubs, are they?"

"Didn't I tell you they was?" asked Mr. Hooker indignantly. "I wouldn't tell you no lies about a thing like this!"

The two barge captains took no notice of him. They allowed him to depart, and they held a short consultation with their four men. And after about two minutes, the quartette moved off, halting about twenty yards away. Captain Sawkins and Captain Clamp went on the deck of the Araminta.

"Anybody 'ere?" shouted Sawkins loudly.

Down in the cabin Nipper, Reggie Pitt, Handforth, and Captain Joshua Pepper were just finishing what the latter termed a "yarn." Captain Sawkins' voice came down to them through the skylight like a blast from a foghorn.

"Who the dickens is that?" said Pitt.

"Goodness knows!" replied Nipper. "We'd better go up and see, I suppose. No, don't you bother, cap'n; you just stay here. It's time for you to turn in, anyhow."

Captain Pepper nodded.

"Mebbe it is," he agreed. "But if there's any trouble, young gents, call down for me. Only I don't see as 'ow there can be. We're all snug 'ere, an' we ain't in nobody's way."

The three juniors went up the little stairway, and found themselves confronted by two dim figures in the gloom of the late evening. The air around them was reminiscent of stale rum and shag tobacco.

"Anything wrong?" asked Nipper curiously.

Captain Sawkins coughed.

"Axin' yer pardon, young gent, but is this 'ere barge the Araminta, of Caistowe?" he asked politely.

"Yes."

"An' is that there barge the Penelope?"

"Right again," nodded Nipper. "What about them?"

Captain Sawkins coughed again.

"Well, the fact is, me an' old Jim 'ere 'ave 'ad a lot o' bad luck," he said, in an apologetic tone of voice. "Real bad luck! An' we thought mebbe you'd do the decent thing, like, an' sort of 'elp us along."

"My hat!" murmured Handforth. "Beggars!"

As Handforth's murmur was like anybody else's shout, the two bargees heard his remark quite distinctly. Captain Sawkins managed to control himself.

"We ain't no beggars!" he said thickly.

"Eh?" gasped Handforth. "I didn't mean you to hear——"

"We're 'onest bargemen—that's wot we are!" declared Captain Sawkins indignantly. "'Onest bargemen wot 'ave 'ad bad luck. I ain't never took a penny o' charity in the 'ole o' my life!"

"Nor me, neither!" said Captain Clamp, with emphasis.

"Sorry!" said Handforth, in confusion.

"No, the fact is, we've 'ad a 'ard time," continued Captain Sawkins. "You boys are in charge o' these 'ere barges, ain't you? Well, me an' ole Jim Clamp 'ere——"

"Clamp!" echoed the three juniors.

"Yes, young gents. As I was sayin'——"

"Then you're Captain Sawkins, I suppose?" asked Nipper ominously.



CHAPTER 11.

NOTHING DOING!

FOR a moment there was silence. The schoolboy bargees stood eyeing their rivals curiously. So these men were the ill-famed Sawkins and Clamp! They were the men who had abandoned their charges to the flood.

But Nipper did not want to be unjust. He had heard only Mr. Hooker's story, and somehow Nipper had a shrewd suspicion that Mr. Hooker was neither reliable nor truthful. But these two men certainly corroborated Mr. Hooker's tale, for they were a coarse-looking pair.

"So you're Captain Sawkins?" repeated Nipper. "And you've had some bad luck?"

Captain Sawkins was not very pleased. The fact that these boys knew his name rather ruined the little story he had prepared, and for a moment this sudden development took the wind out of his sails. If they knew his name, they probably knew his record! But Captain Sawkins was a trier.

"Werry bad luck!" he said ingratiatingly. "Ye see, old Jim Clamp an' me is the skippers o' these two barges."

"We know that!" said Handforth grimly.

"Half a tick, Handy—leave this to me!" said Nipper. "In case you don't know it, Captain Sawkins, these barges are now in charge of us. We belong to St. Frank's. We found the two boats drifting, derelict, without anybody in charge. I think you know what that means."

Captain Sawkins uttered a cleverly contrived groan.

"Just our luck, Jim!" he said miserably. "These 'ere young gents found our barges an' kindly took charge of 'em for us. O' course, we knows we ain't got no right to ask favours. but mebbe you're just lookin' arter 'em until we come along, eh?"

"Mebbe!" said Handforth gruffly.

"An', again, mebbe not!" murmured Reggie Pitt.

"The fact is, young gents, ole Jim Clamp was ill on that night, when the flood started," continued Sawkins.

"Yes, we heard about that," said Handforth. "You were ill, too."

The burly bargee started.

"I wasn't ill!" he denied. "Not me!"

"You were so dizzy you couldn't stand," Nipper reminded him.

"Ah, you've bin 'earin' them lies!" roared Captain Sawkins, as another idea occurred to him. "Lots o' nasty-minded blokes 'ave bin sayin' as 'ow Jim an' me was drunk that night. I dessay you've 'eard it, ain't you? Well, it's all wrong."

"What's the truth, then?" asked Nipper.

"Why, Jim was ill, so I took 'im along to the Angler to see wot the landlord could do for 'im," said Sawkins. "I was rare scared, I can tell ye. An' while we was there, the floods rose an' took both our barges off!"

All right as far as it went, but it didn't go far enough. Nipper quickly put his finger on the flaw.

"And, knowing the serious possibility of the flood rising, you took all your own crew, and all Captain Clamp's crew, with you?" he asked smoothly. "How do you account for that, Captain Sawkins?"

The man gasped.

"Them blamed fools got scared an' run off!" he lied.

"You oughtn't to have let them run off," retorted Nipper. "You can't be a real skipper if you can't control your crew! It's not my job to criticise you, but you've just admitted it. Sorry, Captain Sawkins, but it's a bit too thin."

"What d'ye mean—too thin?"

"Well, I don't believe you, that's all."

"Don't believe that pore ole Jim was ill that night?"

"No, I don't!"

"Don't believe that——"

"It's no good arguing," interrupted Nipper. "These barges are now under our charge, and we're going to keep aboard until we hand them over to the owners."

"You ain't goin' to stand this, are you, Sam?" asked Captain Clamp excitedly. "You ain't goin' to let these durned schoolboys chuck you off your own deck, are you? We're the skippers o' these boats, an' if they don't treat us proper, we'll——"

"Shut up, blame you!" snarled Sawkins.

He turned quickly to the juniors.

"Excitable bloke, ole Jim," he said. "I ain't usin' no threats, mind, but I think you'd best 'and these barges over to us. That's all I've got to say."

"In that case, Captain Sawkins—good-night!" said Nipper.

"What d'ye mean—good-night?"

"If you've got nothing more to say——"

"Ho, I know wot you're arter!" interrupted Sawkins, his temper getting the better of his judgment. "Think ye'll get salvage, don't ye? You found these 'ere barges derelict—so they're yours! Not while I'm alive! Not while Sam Sawkins 'as got any breath left!"

"Why, you—you——" began Handforth.

"I'll give ye five minutes to get off!" bellowed Sawkins. "An' if the 'ole crowd o' you ain't quit by then, I'll come along wi' my men, an' chuck you off! 'Ow d'you like the sound o' that?"

He was more in his element now, and his voice had risen considerably. He realised that subterfuge was out of the question. The juniors had heard the truth in advance, so Sawkins thought that his only profitable course was to become aggressive.

"I'm glad you've shown your true colours, Captain Sawkins," said Nipper grimly. "My last doubt has gone. I know what you are now—a loud-mouth ruffian!"

"Wot!" roared Sawkins.

"Get off this deck!" rapped out Nipper.

The burly bargee staggered back.

"Did you 'ear that, Jim?" he said hoarsely. "Ordered off me own deck! Did you ever 'ear the like of it?"

"Never!" swore Jim. "Not in all me born days!"

"I'll give you one minute, Captain Sawkins," added Nipper.

"Why, you—you interferin' young brat of a schoolboy!" bellowed Sawkins. "I'll swipe your 'ead off! This is my barge, an' I'm the master of it!"

"That's just your little mistake," replied Nipper. "You might have been master of this barge once, but you abandoned her to the flood through incompetence and drunken neglect, and you've no more right on this deck than the first tramp off the highway. Get off!"

"Why, wot the——"

"Get off!" thundered Nipper.

Both Sawkins and Clamp were at a loss. To be spoken to in this way by a schoolboy took them so completely aback that they could not find words. They just stood there, glaring helplessly.

One thing was certain—the schoolboy bargees were not going to be easily ousted from their position.



CHAPTER 12.

SAWKINS GETS DAMPED!

APTAIN SAMUEL SAWKINS had planned it all out so easily.

He and his fellow bargee would go aboard, use soft words to begin with, and if these failed they would try intimidation. Somehow, the scheme hadn't worked. At all events, Captain Sawkins did not see the slightest sign of intimidation in Nipper. The leader of the St. Frank's Remove was calmly contemptuous. He had sized these men up accurately.

It would have been different if the two barges were in the charge of men—other river workers who could look after themselves. But these guardians were just boys—and junior schoolboys at that. Captain Sawkins had not anticipated the slightest trouble.

In fact, he had thought that they would flee in all directions at the first sign of trouble. Captain Sawkins' mistake was due to the fact that he had never had any previous dealings with the Remove.

Handforth was fuming. He had wanted to say a few words to these men, but Nipper had dealt so firmly with them that he had had no excuse to interrupt. Besides, Reggie Pitt was holding a restraining hand on his arm.

"Well, are you going?" asked Nipper curtly.

Captain Sawkins recovered his breath. Clamp, after all, was only an echo, and had no initiative of his own. He allowed his burly comrade to do all the talking.

"I'm going when it suits me!" replied Sawkins, in a thick voice. "I ain't goin' at your orders, nor anybody else's. Understand?"

"You'd better change your view, then, because, unless you're gone within a minute we'll put you off!" said Nipper. "I oughtn't to allow you that concession, you blackguard, but I don't want any violence here."

"Let's chuck him overboard!" shouted Handforth.

"Half a tick, Handy—give him a chance!"

Other juniors were on the scene now, of course. They had been aroused by the altercation, and had come up from below. Another group stood on the deck of the Penelope, watching and listening. And Captain Sawkins, noting these dim figures, began to see that he and his companions were at a disadvantage.

But it went against nature to crawl away with his tail between his legs, as it were. He was famed for his fighting powers, and he had never been known to refuse a challenge.

Captain Pepper arrived at that minute, and he stood looking at the two bargemen, weighing them up. Then he withdrew the

pipe from his mouth, and pointed the stem of it towards the bank.

"You'd best get ashore," he said briefly.

In the gloom Captain Sawkins could see that here was a man—a man of the river at that. Looking closer, Sawkins noted that Captain Pepper was elderly, and obviously useless in a fight. A momentary fear was allayed.

"An' 'oo the thunder are you?" he demanded.

"It ain't no interest to you who I am, or wot I am," replied Captain Pepper. "I've 'eard all wot you've bin sayin', an' bust me if I ever 'eard the like afore! You ain't no more right on this 'ere barge than a crab. So the sooner you gits off the better!"

"You knaws a lot, don't you?" snarled Sawkins.

"I knaws that these young gents salved these barges, an' I knaws that I'm 'elpin' them to take 'em safely down river to Caistowe," replied Captain Pepper calmly. "An' I knaws that if you starts any monkey business we can 'ave the police on you. That's wot I knaws! You can't fool me wi' none o' your bluff, mate! Salvage is salvage—as you, bein' a bargeman, ought to know! This 'ere craft was abandoned, an' they've got no more to do wi' you than—"

"All right—all right!" interrupted Sawkins harshly. "But you ain't 'eard the last o' this. No, cuss me, not by long chalks!" he added threateningly. "You ain't done wi' Sam Sawkins!"

Handforth pushed forward.

"Are you trying to threaten us?" he roared.

"I don't want to talk wi' you——"

"I'll punch your nose if you don't obey Nipper's orders, and get off!" snorted Handforth indignantly.

"You punch my nose?"

"Yes, I will!"

"Punch my nose?" bellowed Sawkins.

"Yes, blow you!"

"All right, then—do it!"

Handforth did it.

He did it thoroughly. Captain Sawkins, in his rage, had given the invitation without the slightest expectation of it being accepted. The very thought of a schoolboy punching him was too ridiculous for words. His contempt had been supreme.

Crash!

Captain Sawkins' contempt was supreme no longer. Handforth's right felt like a sledge-hammer. His clenched fist crashed into the bargee's face with all the force of Handforth's shoulder behind it. The man staggered back, roaring with agony and dismay.

"Come on! Want another?" yelled Handforth. "I'll teach you to——"

"Chuck it, Handy—chuck it!" snapped Nipper. "I wanted to avoid this scene, and——"

"Look out!" gasped Reggie Pitt.

Sawkins, absolutely blind with fury, hurled himself at Handforth like a raging bull. It

was a fierce, dastardly attack, for the bargee used one of his heavy boots to hack at the junior's shin. By a miracle Handforth dodged, or his leg might have been broken.

"You cowardly hound!" he panted.

"On him!"

"Drag him off!"

In another moment Pitt, Nipper and several other fellows were hauling Sawkins back. They reeled across the deck, and in the confusion Captain Clamp got ashore, and ran off as fast as his rickety legs would carry him. Captain Clamp was no fighter.

"Let him go!" shouted Handforth. "Think I can't fight him?"

"Don't be an ass, Handy—he's like a savage!" panted Nipper.

Sawkins, in fact, was giving the group of juniors a lot of trouble. He had enormous strength. They veered this way and that, and the burly bargeman was bellowing at the top of his voice. He had a vague idea, perhaps, that his ruffianly crew would come to his rescue.

Then Pitt and Nipper happened to stumble over a loose rope as they were sent backwards by the force of one of Sawkins' rushes. They tripped and fell. A terrific heave, and the bargee was free.

"I'll learn ye!" he shouted furiously.

He stamped his feet on the deck, and swung round with ferocious temper.

"This is my barge!" he shouted. "Understand? I'm master aboard this craft, an' I don't stand no nonsense from nobody! Get off, the 'ole crowd o' you!"

"Yah! Get off yourself!"

"We're masters now!"

"Hear, hear!"

Sawkins charged forward madly. He was no great thinker, but he had always been known as a bulldog fighter. The man was one of the worst ruffians that the River Stowe had ever known.

And a minute later the Stowe knew him more intimately still.

He rushed across the deck, charging at Nipper, since Nipper was the one he hated the most. There were no other juniors near at hand that second, and Nipper had no desire to have his ribs smashed in. He was well aware of his limitations, and a sixteen-stone bargee, with fists like hams, was no fair antagonist for a single schoolboy.

But Nipper didn't dodge. He ducked.

Captain Sawkins blundered over with terrific force, shot through the air, and plunged into the placid river with such a splash that the Araminta rocked to and fro.



CHAPTER 13.

NOT SO EASY.

URRAH!"

"That'll cool him down!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors ran to the side of the barge and watched the drenched

Captain Sawkins as he splashed away towards the stern. He could swim, but his heavy clothing hampered him.

Nipper, bruised from the effect of that concussion, ran up.

"Catch hold!" he sang out. "Here's a rope!"

Sawkins snarled out a watery curse.

"Ang yourself with it!" he panted harshly.

"You rotter!"

"Don't help him, Nipper!"

The juniors watched indignantly as Captain Sawkins got round the stern of the barge, and clawed at the bank. A minute later he had pulled himself up, and was standing on the grass. He looked a different figure now, and his temper was even worse than before.

"I'll get even!" he snarled. "Don't ye kid yerselves, you young varmin'ts! I'll make ye pay fer this!"

"Go and eat coke!"

"We're not afraid of you, you hooligan!"

"You'll be afraid o' me soon!" shouted Sawkins. "I'll 'ave ye off that barge before long, mark my words! I'm 'er skipper, an' I won't put up wi' no nonsense!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I tell ye——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Ridicule was worse than anything, and the ruffianly bargee realised that he was cutting a very sorry figure now. With a huge effort he got himself under control and turned on his heel. He strode away and joined the four men who comprised the crew. A little farther off, Mr. Hooker was standing, watching the proceedings with obvious interest. Perhaps he had an idea that he might make a bit more money. Already, this was one of his lucky evenings.

"We got rid o' the rotter, anyhow," said Nipper cheerfully. "Of all the nerve—trying to order us off. After he had deliberately abandoned the barge to the floods! Naturally, he wants to get control of her again, so that he can pretend to his owners that he's been faithful to duty. We're not believing any of those yarns!"

"Just a minute, young gents."

It was the voice of Captain Clamp. He was standing on the river bank, and his thin, wizened figure was crouched ready to flee at the first indication of trouble. He had come back, hoping to succeed where his aggressive comrade had failed.

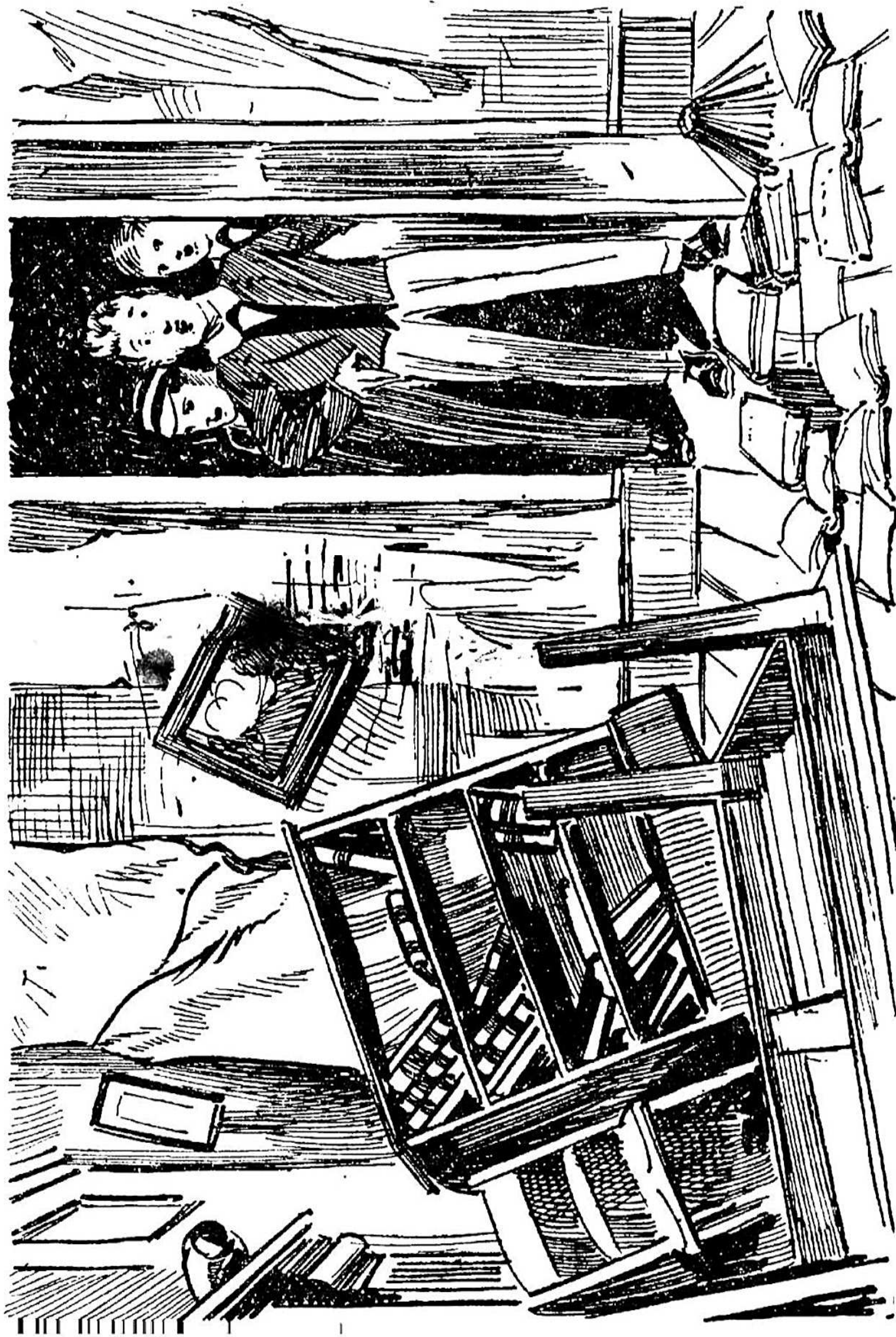
The juniors walked across the deck.

"What do you want?" asked Nipper.

"About there 'ere barges——"

"They're ours!" interrupted Handforth fiercely.

"I ain't denyin' of it, sir," panted Captain Clamp. "It don't do to take too much notice o' Sam Sawkins. I'm the skipper o' the Penelope, an' it'll mean the sack for me if I don't take my barge back to Caistowe."



“Great pip!” gasped Handforth feebly as, followed by Church and McClure, he entered Study D. He had expected to find it a bit upside down after the flood, but this—why, the usually cosy den was all wreckage! The table was upset, the bookcase had fallen from its fastenings; books littered the floor, and the wallpaper had peeled off. Everything, in fact, was hopelessly damaged.

"That's all right," said Handforth. "You deserve the sack!"

"Ave a 'eart, young gent," pleaded the man. "I ain't tellin' no lies. I was drunk that night all right, an' I accepts the blame. But if you've got any feelin's in yer, you'll gimme my barge back! I've got a wife an' kids at 'ome, an' they're like to starve."

The juniors hesitated. This sort of tone was different to that adopted by Captain Sawkins, and although they were contemptuous, they felt no desire to lay hands on the man. He was too much of a craven.

Before they could answer, Sawkins came running up.

"Come wi' me, you fool!" he shouted. "You ain't goin' to git over these boys by tellin' them lies."

"Lies!" stammered Clamp feebly. "You ain't got no wife nor kids——"
"Ha, ha, ha!"
"You beastly old fraud!" shouted Church. "And we were beginning to feel sorry for you, too."

"Look wot you've done!" wailed Captain Clamp miserably. "Arter I nearly did the trick, too!"

"Never you mind about that!" interrupted Sawkins. "We'll git both these barges, Jim, or my name ain't wot it is! I don't want you to take nothin' from these young demons out o' kindness. They've chucked me in the river, an' I'll make 'em pay for it! I won't 'ave no dealin's wi' any of 'em!"

They went off together, and Nipper grunted.

"Of course, we shouldn't have given up the Penelope, in any case," he said.

"You mean, I shouldn't!" growled Handforth. "I'm the captain of the Penelope, don't forget, and I wasn't spoofed by that man's rot. But I'm blessed if I can understand why Sawkins came along like that."

"Easy!" said Pitt. "He's so jolly wild that he's made up his mind to kick us all out. He's not going to take any favours from us—and he won't let Clamp take any, either. Children, I'm afraid there'll be no bed-time story to-night! The prospect seems sinister."

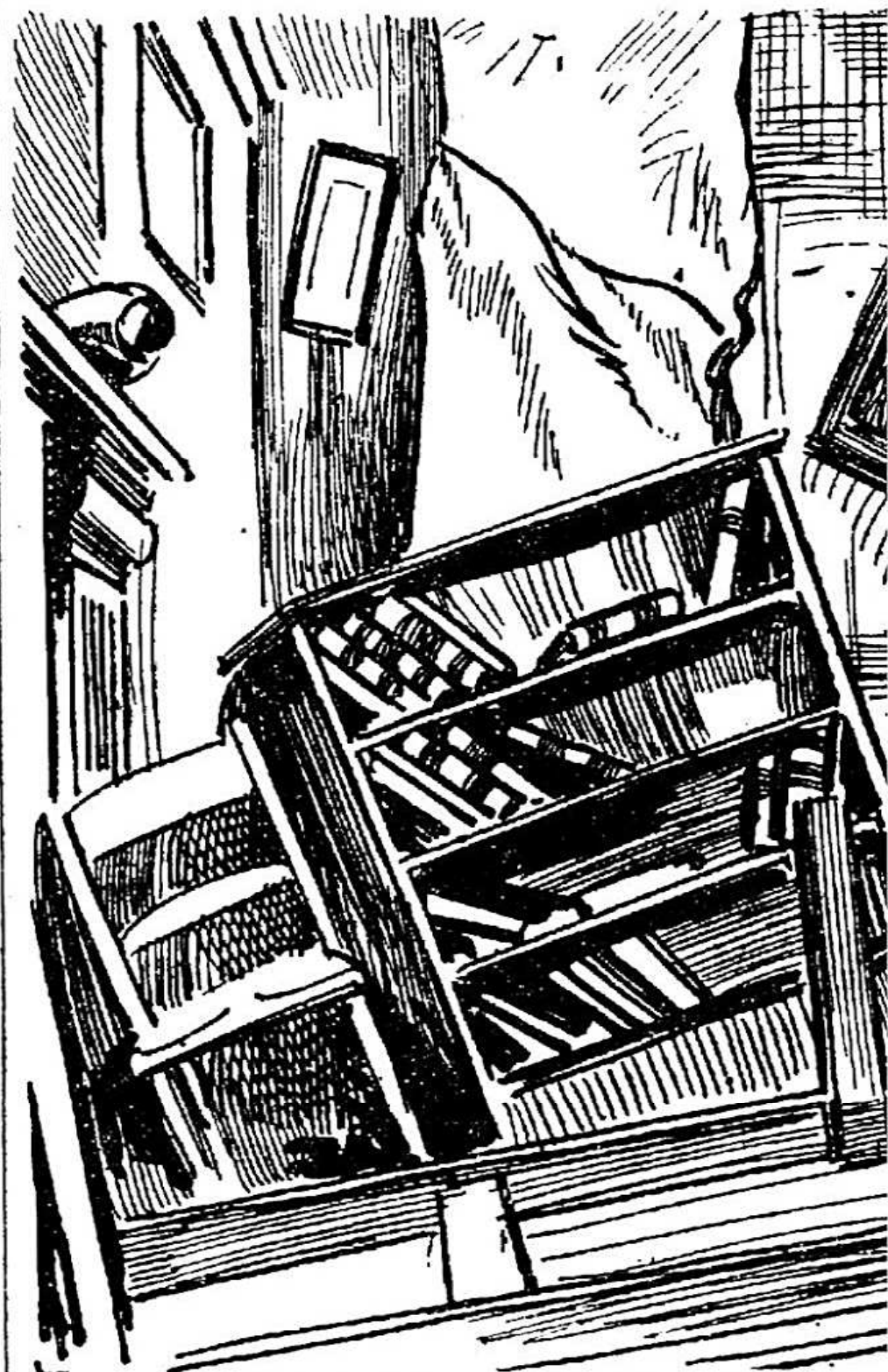
"By George!" breathed Handforth. "You think they'll attack us?"

"I'd back my sea-boots on it!" said Reggie. "What do you say, Nipper?"

"Yes, we shall have to keep a careful watch," he replied. "There are some more of those rotters along the towing-path, and they'll probably attempt to attack us later on. We shall have to be on our guard."

"They can't attack us," said Handforth tartly. "There aren't more than half a dozen of them, altogether, and we're twenty. What do we care for a bunch of loafers like that?"

But Nipper was very thoughtful. In the meantime, Captain Sawkins was talking to his men. He had cooled down somewhat, and he was rather regretting his recent action in dragging Clamp away.



"Great pip!" gasped Handforth feebly as, expected to find it a bit upside down after the table was upset, the bookcase had its wallpaper had peeled off.

"Spoilt everythin', you did!" Clamp was complaining.

"Don't fool yourself!" growled Sawkins. "Them boys wouldn't 'ave 'anded over your barge, you old scarecrow! Not likely! They mean to git salvage, an' the only way we can git rid of 'em is to chuck 'em off."

Sawkins was feeling desperate. Earlier, he had been in the uttermost depths of melancholy, believing his barge to be sunk. But now that he found her safe and sound, with only schoolboys in charge, his exasperation was acute. There was only one thing to be done—and that thing was to regain command by force. Force was the only argument these schoolboys would succumb to.

It was the parting of the ways for Captain Sawkins and Captain Clamp, so to speak. Either they drove these boys off the barges to-night, or they would be utterly ruined. It was a big stake. Once back in command, they could do practically as they pleased—for possession is nine points of the law. If any awkward questions were asked by their owners, it would be easy enough to fake up a story.

But if these boys maintained control, some-



and McClure, he entered Study D. He had y, the usually cosy den was all wreckage! things; books littered the floor, and the was hopelessly damaged.

thing worse than the sack yawned before the two bargees. They would never be able to get another command on this river, and possibly not on any river.

"We've got to think this thing over, and plan it proper," said Sawkins, breathing hard. "But fust of all, I've got to git out o' these wet clothes. We'll go along to the Angler, an'—"

"Just a minute!" said a voice.

"Wot, you ag'in?" said Sawkins, turning round and glaring.

"You'd best not go to the Angler," said Mr. Hooker. "I 'eard the landlord say, wi' my own ears, that if you went in there 'e'd chuck you out. After what happened about them barges, Captain Sawkins, you ain't got such a good name about 'ere."

"I got to go somewhere," snarled Sawkins.

It was not the first time he had been barred from an inn, but it did not please him in the slightest degree. And in his soaked condition, he certainly had to go somewhere. Mr. Hooker solved the problem.

"You can come 'ome with me if you like," he said. "I only live a 'undred yards away. The missus will be in bed by this time—an'

if she ain't I'll soon get rid of 'er. I dessay I could rig you up wi' some dry clothes, too. I'm an obligin' sort."

"Ow much will you charge?" demanded Sawkins sourly.



CHAPTER 14.

PREPARING FOR TROUBLE!

LAS, for our dream of peace and Arcadian happiness!" said Reggie Pitt regretfully. "What changes these human passions bring

about! An hour ago, all harmony—and now, warfare!"

"Well, we've got to face it, and we'd better prepare ourselves for an exciting night," said Nipper practically. "We can be certain of one thing—those beggars will come back. They're desperate, and they'll try to chuck us off these barges."

Handforth grunted.

"We're not afraid of a handful of ruffians like that," he said tartly. "Thank goodness they've shown us their characters. We know what to do row. How long do you think it'll be before they come back?"

"We can't say—but when they do come back, they'll be pretty tough," replied Nipper. "Quite likely they'll bring sticks, too. Where's Captain Pepper?"

"I ain't far off, young gent," said the friendly, old bargee.

He was sitting on one of the hatches, meditatively smoking his pipe.

"This is a nice go, isn't it, cap'n?" asked Nipper.

"Reminds me of a affair wot took place down the Nare, two year back," said Captain Pepper. "There was a barge called the Suzanne—a tidy boat, she was—an' 'er skipper was a 'ulkin' bloke named Bob Thompson. Well, this 'ere Bob Thompson fell foul of a chap wot was—"

"We're awfully interested, really, but won't it do another time?" asked Nipper politely.

Captain Pepper chuckled.

"Just as ye like!" he said complacently. "A fair old nuisance, ain't I? Affable—that's me. I can't 'elp it, young gents—I was born that way. I allus did like to be affable, an' there you 'ave it in a nutshell. I wanted to tell you this 'ere story about Bob Thompson, just to show you that all bargees ain't blackguards."

"We know it already," said Handforth. "In fact, I'll bet there are more bargees like you, Cap'n Pepper, than like that brute Sawkins!"

"Werry kind of you—an' werry true," agreed the captain. "There ain't many like Sawkins, thank goodness. Bust me if I ever come across another like 'im—unless it was this 'ere Bob Thompson. A real bad lot, 'e was!"

"Well, leaving Bob Thompson aside for the minute, what do you think we ought to do?" asked Nipper. "Get into mid-stream?"

"It's the fust thing I was goin' to suggest," agreed Captain Pepper. "The river ain't wide, just 'ere, an' that's the wust of it. Now, down in the next reach, we could git so far from the bank that——"

"But we're not in the next reach," interrupted Nipper.

"Can't we go to it?" asked Handforth.

"I wouldn't advise it," said Captain Pepper, shaking his head. "That's where my experience comes in. It's a tricky business, goin' down stream when it's pitch dark, like this 'ere. An' like as not, you'll run into the bank, an' do some damage. No, we'd best stay 'ere, an' heave the old barges into mid-stream. That's about the best move."

And the juniors forthwith set about accomplishing the change. They had moored close to the bank, with never a thought of danger. It had never occurred to them that the former captains of these craft would come along, and attempt to take them again by force. The night had come down pitchily dark. The stars were twinkling, but there was no moon. The air was calm, too, and nothing could be heard except the trickling of the river as it gurgled and rushed past the barges, and through the reeds.

This mid-stream move was about the only thing that could be done, but it was not likely to be very effective. For the river was narrow here, and it was difficult to keep the barges in position. However, Nipper was not at all pessimistic. He was quite convinced that they would be able to spend the night in comparative peace. If Sawkins and Co. came, they would be effectively dealt with.

In the meantime, the racals were plotting.

They had gone to Mr. Hooker's home—a small cottage, several hundred yards away from the inn. And here the six men partook of a plain, but hearty supper, Mr. Hooker attending to all their wants. He saw to it that they paid well for the meal.

Sawkins, too, had obtained his change of clothing, Mr. Hooker having parted with an aged suit at an exorbitant price. He was taking advantage of Sawkins' present, reckless mood. The ruffianly bargee had a few pounds left, and he didn't care how rapidly they went, so long as he achieved his object to-night. To be back on board the *Araminta* was Captain Sawkins' one obsession.

Captain Clamp was not so enthusiastic, having seen what had happened to his comrade. But his anxiety over the general posi-

tion was sufficient to make him giye his full support to the scheme.

The four men were game enough. Their own fate hung in the balance, too. They were the crews, and they would get the sack with their skippers, once the owners heard the truth. So everybody had a personal interest in this business.

"It ought to be easy," said Sawkins, as he pushed his plate away, at the end of the meal. "There ain't more than ten or twelve boys, all told, an' there's seven of us——"

"Six!" corrected Mr. Hooker.

"Six!" said Sawkins contemptuously. "I was forgettin' that one of us was a rabbit!"

"Look 'ere——" began Mr. Hooker indignantly.

"All right—it don't matter," said Sawkins. "You ain't one of us, anyhow, but if you was a man, instead of wot you are, you wouldn't need askin'—arter the money you 'ave robbed me of."

Mr. Hooker had been about to warn Sawkins that there were twenty boys to contend with, and not merely a dozen, but after this he kept his mouth shut.

"Yes, it ought to be easy," repeated the ringleader. "We'd best wait about another hour—in fact, we'd best wait until arter midnight. We don't want a crowd lookin' on from the pub. We'll do this job when everythin's quiet for the night. We'll steal up quiet, an' take the *Araminta* fust, all of us springin' aboard at once."

"Wot if they shift them barges?" asked one of the men.

Captain Sawkins started.

"Why, there ain't no chance—— No!" he said, with quick relief. "They wouldn't go down the river in the dark. Too risky—specially with a strong current runnin', like wot it is. No, they'll be there—or, even if they ain't, they won't be far down."

"Wouldn't it be best to take the *Penelope* fust?" suggested Clamp.

"No, it wouldn't!"

"I was only thinkin'——"

"You ain't no good fer thinkin'!" said Sawkins sourly. "In fact, you ain't no good for nothin'. Might as well leave you behind, if it comes to that."

Captain Clamp, crushed, fell silent.

"Well, there ain't nothin' more to plan, except that we'll get sticks ready," continued Sawkins. "Big sticks, too. An' arter we make the attack, it won't be five minutes afore we're in command again!"



CHAPTER 15.

THE ATTACK!

ONE o'clock sounded distantly and vaguely from a far off church clock-tower. The night was wonderfully still—more like June than April. It was dark, for the moon had not yet risen.

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The Angler was dark, and every other dwelling in the district was equally asleep. Even the lights on the two barges had been extinguished.

A group of shadowy figures appeared against the hedge near the towing-path. They came creeping along. There were ten of them. For Captain Sawkins had decided to make assurance doubly sure by getting some help. So he had pressed into service several of Mr. Hooker's acquaintances. They were rough youths, who were only too willing to earn a few shillings. And the task seemed easy enough—driving a few schoolboys out of a couple of barges.

"Blame me, if we ain't chose the right minnit!" murmured Sawkins, as he came to a halt. "Them kids 'ave turned in, an' it'll be as easy as winkin'!"

He was exultant.

He had half expected to find the schoolboys on deck, waiting and watching. But it was clear enough that they had all turned in, obviously satisfied that they were in no danger from an attack.

"Lumme, them barges is in mid-stream!" murmured one of the crew.

"Yes, I see that!" frowned Sawkins. "Well, it don't make no odds. We can jump it!"

"Jump it!" breathed Captain Clamp, with a start.

"Not you!" said Sawkins. "You'd best stay on the towin' path an' watch. Us men'll do the jumpin'."

"Ain't I a man?" asked Clamp complainingly.

Captain Sawkins regarded him with scorn.

"I wouldn't like to say wot you was," he replied. "If I was to guess, I should say a cross betwix a 'airy old goat and a caterpillar. You'll owe me something, Jim Clamp, arter I've got your barge back for ye!"

Clamp said no more. He didn't really like Captain Sawkins. It is difficult to imagine how anybody could like him. Until the disaster Captain Clamp had only had a casual acquaintanceship with the burly rascal. But they had both lost their barges on the same night, and it had drawn them together.

Captain Sawkins was feeling very confident. If he had had any doubts before, they were all gone now. This task of throwing out the schoolboys was going to be easy. The party numbered ten instead of six—or nine, not counting Clamp. And they were all armed with heavy sticks, cut from Mr. Hooker's hedge.

Sawkins had no intention of doing the boys any grievous injury—he wanted no police proceedings after this—and he had warned his men accordingly. At the same time, those sticks would be useful. The youngsters would be scared at the very sight of them, and, if they had any fight in them, it would soon be squashed.

And here were the barges, deserted!

Sawkins fairly chuckled at the sight. He

could see what it meant. The boys had merely put the barges in mid-stream, and thought that this precaution would be sufficient. But the leap from the bank to the deck was one which any active man could take with certainty. And, as there was no sense in delay, Sawkins gave the order.

"Now then—all together!" he muttered. "On the fust barge! We'll grab the old Araminta to begin with!"

Sawkins was making certain of his own barge. He would help with the recapture of the Penelope later on, but he wasn't taking any chances with the other.

There was a sudden rush, and then the nine men took off from the bank, and thudded down upon the Araminta's deck with tremendous commotion. There was no need for any further secrecy. For this noise must have awakened everybody on both barges.

"Make for the 'atchways!" roared Sawkins. "Grab the young varmint as they come up an' pitch 'em overboard!"

It was a master scheme. The water between the barge and the towing-path was not more than five feet deep, and the boys were bound to be good swimmers, anyhow. A wetting would take all the fight out of them—as Sawkins knew from his own experience. Thus he expected the capture to be effected within a minute.

But appearances are not always to be relied upon.

The nine men had made the leap with perfect success. But the very instant they touched the deck figures rose from the shadows on the other side of the barge, and sprang to meet the attackers.

"Hurrah!"

"At 'em, Remove!"

"Down with these ruffians!"

"Smash 'em!"

Sawkins & Co. were so surprised that for a moment they were unprepared. Figures leapt at them from the gloom, and they had no time to use their sticks.

Crash!

"That's one for you!" roared Handforth excitedly as Sawkins took the punch on the point of his chin. "Come on, you fellows—into the river with 'em!"

"Rather!"

Within a moment the fight was joined. The schoolboy bargees had not been caught napping, after all. They were, in fact, very wide awake! Not one of them had been below, but all had waited patiently, hiding on deck, certain that this attack would come sooner or later.

The battle looked like being serious.

For, after the first shock of surprise, Sawkins and his supporters recovered. There seemed to be about sixteen boys altogether, but four others came leaping over from the adjoining barge. And the entire St. Frank's force entered into the battle.

Swish!

A stick whistled through the air, and missed Handforth's head by half an inch. He spun round, furious.

"You dangerous brute!" he roared.

"Look out, Nipper!" yelled Watson.
"They're on you!"

Nipper turned, but one of the sticks slashed him on the arm and rendered him momentarily helpless. The agony was excruciating, and before he could move another vicious blow cracked him on the side of the head, and he pitched forward.

"The curs!" he shouted desperately.
"They're using sticks!"

Splash!

Archie Glenthorne and Jerry Dodd were pitched into the river simultaneously. The fighting was going on all over the wide expanse of the barge, and was developing into a series of hand-to-hand encounters between different sections. And the men had all the advantage.

Even without the sticks they were vastly heavier than the boys, and quite irresponsible in their style of fighting. This was no time for fancy work. They were here with one idea—to throw the boys overboard.

Handforth was battling valiantly, thoroughly in his element. But even he found it impossible to carry on without help. Captain Sawkins was lashing at him with his heavy stick, and Church had already received a dizzy blow on the forehead, and had toppled into the water.

Further down the deck Willy Handforth was performing wonders on his own. Willy was a smaller edition of his aggressive brother, and he had the advantage of being as quick as an eel. Again and again he dashed in, and got home some telling thrusts

at the ruffians. And every time he dodged the cowardly blows that were aimed at him.

On the opposite deck Fullwood and Boots had just been thrown overboard, and as yet not one of the invaders had fallen. With those sticks they were the masters of the situation. Over a third of the boys had been accounted for, and the rest were weakening.

The battle was going in favour of the enemy!



CHAPTER 16.

THE VICTORS!

NIPPER, reeling dazedly, looked about him.

"Oh, my hat!" he muttered, in dismay.

It was impossible to see clearly in the intense gloom of the night, but there could be no mistaking the general trend of the battle. Sawkins & Co. were leaping about, swinging their sticks and making ordinary fist-fighting impossible.

Four or five juniors were clutching at the barge, and attempting to pull themselves out of the water. Two others were sent hurtling overboard at the same minute. Sawkins was shouting at the top of his voice.

"We're winnin', mates!" he roared.
"Come on—one more drive, an' we'll clear the 'ole bunch away!"

"We've beat 'em, cap'n!" shouted one of his crew.

"Beat 'em 'oller!" declared the skipper.

"Oh, have you?" shouted Handforth, rush-

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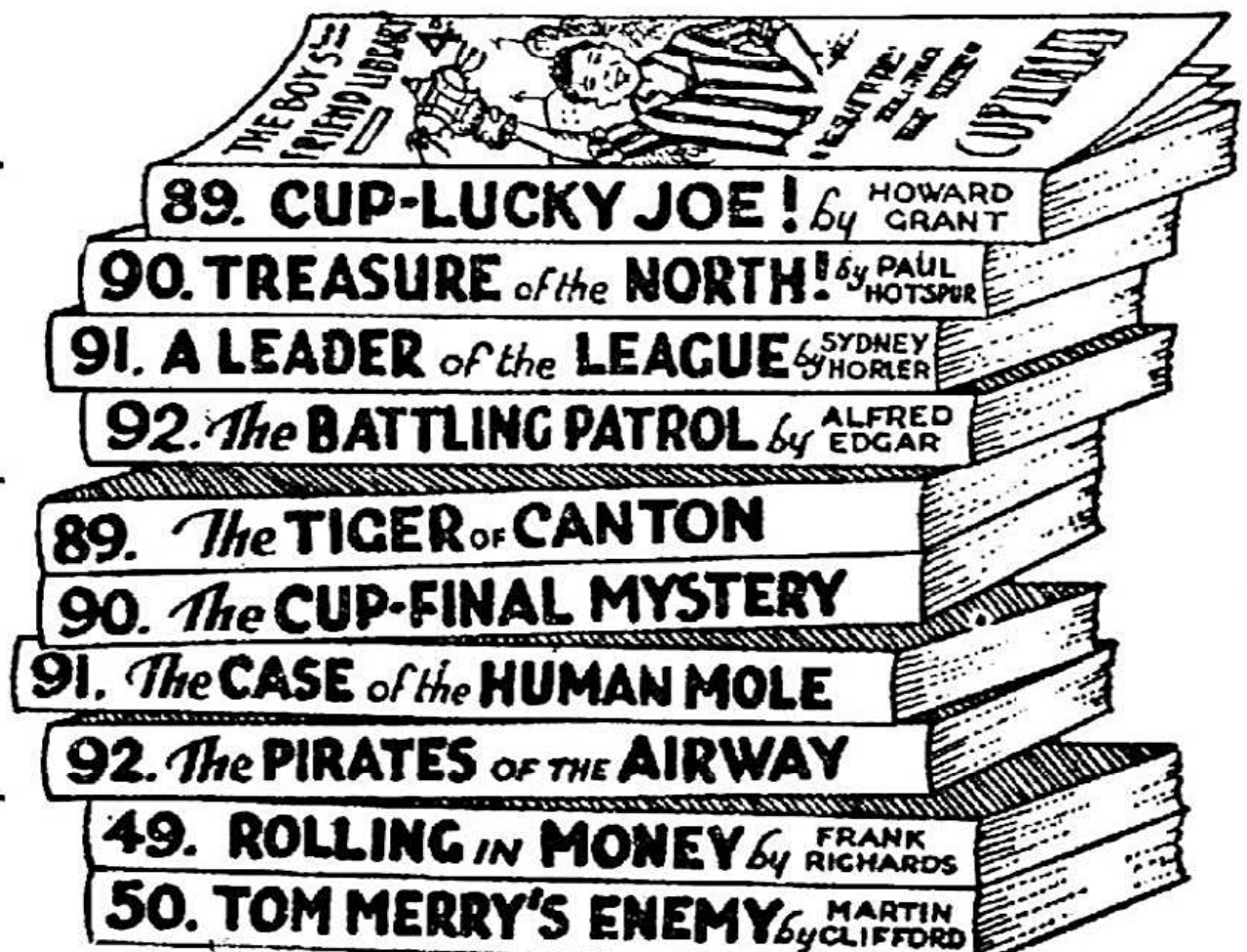
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ing gamely into the attack again. "We're not beaten yet, you rotters! Come on, the Remove! Smash 'em! We're not whacked!"

"Absolutely not!"

"Hurrah!"

All those juniors who remained whole were fighting with as much vigour as ever. Even Archie Glenthorne, usually so languid, had scrambled back out of the water, and was putting up a formidable defence. Two of the attackers had felt the full weight of his fist, and they hadn't liked the sample at all.

But Nipper, as he rushed to join in the fray again, realised that it was a hopeless fight. They had only reckoned upon six men, and they had never believed that sticks would be used.

The whole position was becoming desperate.

Handforth, great fighter though he was, felt weak and exhausted after he had received several vicious cracks with those sticks. His head was singing, his right shin was causing him agony, and his rage was so tremendous that he fought blindly, and thus played into the enemy's hands.

Almost before he knew it, one of the bargees kicked out a heavy foot, and Handforth went hurtling over, to roll across the deck, and then splash into the river. Three others had gone down, too.

"We've won!" roared Sawkins victoriously.

"Oh, goodness!" muttered Nipper.

He could see that the battle was lost. Half a dozen fellows were struggling in the river, and another seven or eight were reeling about the decks, badly hurt, and the rest were carrying on with the fight against all odds. It would be a matter of seconds now—

Nipper turned sharply.

The sound of squeaking rowlocks had come to his ears—the sound of splashing oars. The next second a boat rammed against the side of the barge, slid along, and half a dozen sturdy men leapt on board.

"By hokey!" roared one of them. "We're just in time, mates!"

"Hurrah!" yelled one of the juniors. "Reinforcements!"

"Come on, St. Frank's! Never say die!"

The juniors knew in a moment that these strangers were on their side. The men were even burlier than Sawkins' crowd, and they entered into the battle in a businesslike way which struck terror into the enemy.

Two of Sawkins' crew were sent smashing down, senseless, by the first two drives from sledge-hammer-like fists. The juniors were reforming, too, and entering into the battle with renewed hope and vigour. Handforth and two or three of the others who had gone overboard were now on deck again, ready for more fighting. Captain Sawkins' prophecy had not been fulfilled. A wetting might have knocked the battle out of him—but it didn't knock the battle out of them!

On the contrary, it infuriated them, and made them more dangerous than ever. The battle that now developed on the *Araminta* was truly terrific. And with six men to help

the juniors, the result was placed beyond all doubt.

Nipper had no idea who these men were, or whence they had come. But that they were friends had already been abundantly made manifest. They were hearty men, broad-shouldered, with deep voices and useful fists. They joined in the fight as though they did this sort of thing every night of their lives.

"Were beat, cap'n!" gasped one of the enemy.

"Cuss these interferin' hounds!" snarled Sawkins. "It ain't their bizness, an'—"

Something rammed into his face—something that felt like the prow of a ship, but was really only a fist. Captain Sawkins turned a complete somersault, and landed in the water flat. He simply sank, gurgling feebly. Two of his men grabbed him and dragged him across to the bank. And within another ten seconds the last of the foes had been vanquished.

Four of the nine had got ashore, three others were plunging out of the water, and the remaining two were just being heaved overside by these handy friends who had come up so magically out of the night.

"Phew!" breathed Handforth. "That was pretty hot!"

"I—I thought we were dished!" said Church dazedly.

"Look!" said Reggie Pitt, clutching at Nipper's arm.

In the gloom they saw a boat alongside. It contained one man—a stumpy individual with a grizzled face, who was pulling placidly and contentedly at his ancient briar.

"Captain Pepper!" ejaculated Nipper.

"That's me!" said the old mariner, nodding.

"Why, you old fraud," yelled Nipper, "we thought you were below in the cabin—asleep! Isn't that what you said?"

"I ain't allus quite truthful," confessed Captain Pepper apologetically. "Mind ye, I don't 'old wi' real, deceptive lies. But I thought mebbe you young gents might need some 'elp."

"But—but—"

"Bust my eyes, I never see such a fight!" declared Captain Pepper. "At fust, I thought we was too late—"

"But who are they?" asked Nipper.

"Friends o' mine," said the genial old bargee, as he came on board. "I didn't take no 'and in the fight, because I ain't so young as I was. Mind ye, I can still use me fists—"

"Cap'n Pepper's one of the best!" interrupted a bluff, burly man, with a youthful face. "Ain't you, papa? Known him all my life, I 'ave! We'd do anything for Cap'n Pepper, young gents."

"I believe it," said Nipper fervently. "But it so happens that you've done something for us, too—and we're grateful. You came along in the nick of time."

There was much scurrying about while the

bruises and knocks were attended to, soaked clothes being stripped ready for drying in front of the fires in the barge cabins. Captain Pepper, it appeared, had stolen off unknown to the schoolboys. Instead of being asleep in the cabin, he had visited a couple of barges which lay moored to the river bank, half a mile farther up. And the crews, without asking any questions, had come with him to lend a hand in case they were needed. Captain Pepper was not only of great use as a navigator, but the St. Frank's fellows unanimously agreed that he had other sterling qualities.

An hour later the moon had risen, and the night was perfectly peaceful once more. The friendly barges had gone back to their own craft, laughing heartily and making light of the whole incident. Handforth and his crew had returned to the Penelope, and all the juniors who had been soaked were in their blankets. The alarms of the night were over. For it was a moral certainly that Sawkins & Co. would make no further attempt.

On the Araminta's deck, Nipper and Reggie Pitt were keeping watch, and Captain Pepper was just preparing to go below.

"Well, young gents, it was a bit of excitement while it lasted, an' I dessay you've 'ad some nasty knocks. But if you want to 'ear about a real fight, I'll tell you what 'appened aboard the Priscilla Ann. Bust me, that fight was a real one! It was like this 'ere. The skipper, a bloke o' the name o' Tom Bates, was one o' them 'ere calm, peaceful coves. Well, it was 'is birthday, I remember, an'——"

"Is this a long one?" interrupted Nipper gently.

Captain Joshua Pepper grinned.

"I may be gettin' old, but I ain't dense," he said, his face wrinkling up into a smile. "I can take a 'int wi' the best. Right you are, young gents! I'll leave it till to-morrer, an' I'll tell ye the yarn as we're goin' down river. Don't fergit t' remind me of Tom Bates, o' the old Priscilla Ann. As thrillin' a yarn as ever you 'eard!"

He stumped below, and Nipper chuckled.

"He's a good old boy," he murmured. "But if we listened to every yarn he wanted to tell us, we should keep him up all night."

Reggie Pitt yawred, and then attempted to stifle it.

"By the way, now that we're on the subject of keeping up all night, what about us?" he asked casually. "Are we booked for——"

"I don't think it's really necessary to keep a watch but there's nothing like being on the safe side," said Nipper thoughtfully. "After what's happened, we don't want to take any more chances. We'll keep watch till four o'clock, and then wake some of the others. But I fanc' that Messrs. Sawkins, Clamp, and Company have had their 'ill."

"Fill!" said Pitt brightly. "A cheery idea! I am reminded of a certain gnawing

pain beneath the belt. It is five or six hours since we stoked the engines. How about a few biscuits, and sundry nibbles of cheese, to while away the second dog-watch?"



CHAPTER 17.

BACK AT ST. FRANK'S.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH pointed.

"There's the clock-tower!" he exclaimed excitedly.

"By jingo, yes!"

"Hurrah!"

"Good old St. Frank's!"

One might have supposed that the juniors had been away from the school for a year or two, instead of a few days. They were crowding on the decks of the barges, staring across the meadows towards St. Frank's.

But there was some excuse for them.

These days had been unusual ones, and it seemed to them that weeks had passed. There was something else, too. When they had recently left St. Frank's, they had gone off in Handforth's Ark, and the whole Stowe Valley had been inundated. The floods had stretched everywhere—over marshes, meadows, fields, and farmlands. Bellton Village had been practically submerged. And St. Frank's itself had been like a suburb of Venice.

So it was only natural that the fellows should be intensely eager to see what changes had taken place. That the floods had miraculously gone down was obvious, for they had been gliding down the River Stowe all the morning, and the banks had been defined almost all the way. Here and there the water expanded out over low-lying meadows; but, in the main, the great floods had gone.

The day was glorious—hot, sunny, and cloudless.

What a contrast to the weather they had first experienced. It was almost incredible, and several of the juniors rather wondered if they would soon wake up. Summer seemed to have come a month or two before its time. But then, England is always apt to experience a week of such weather in April.

"I wonder if there's anybody left at St. Frank's now?" asked Handforth, turning to the others. "Three parts of the fellows were still there when we came away. How many days ago was it? Three? Five? Seven? I'm jiggered if I haven't lost count of the time lately."

"Well never mind—the floods are gone, and the weather's glorious," said Nipper. "Don't let's bother about counting up the days. The sooner we can forget this period, the better!"

"Hear hear!" said Tommy Watson.

From early morning, the two barges had



Fatty Little attracted the attention of Captain Sawkins. "Yah, you rotter!" he yelled. The rascally bargee gave a bellow of taunting laughter, little realising that the other boys of the Remove were swarming through the water to recapture the stolen barges.

been on the move, with Captain Pepper a constant help. His knowledge was invaluable, and the schoolboy bargees blessed the hour that had brought the old captain into their ranks. Without him, indeed, they doubted if they could have completed this salvage job. On the top of all this, the affable old bargee was a never-failing source of amusement, with his quaint reminiscences.

But nobody had any ears for them just now. It was just after mid-day, and the barges had entered upon a reach of the river where the clock-tower of St. Frank's could be seen peeping up beyond the trees. Then they caught glimpses of the Head's house, and a corner of the Modern House. But a bend in the river shut out the view, and they swung gently and sedately down towards Willard's Island.

"We want to moor here, cap'n," said Nipper, as he went up to their old friend. "It's time for the mid-day meal, anyhow. While we're stopped, we want to go and have a look at St. Frank's."

"A werry natural want, too," agreed Captain Pepper. "Bust me, if I don't come an' 'ave a look at the old place meself."

"That's the idea," said the juniors enthusiastically.

"Hallo!" shouted somebody. "Willard's Island!"

Another landmark had come into view.

Once again, Willard's Island was visible. The waters had receded, and the island was looking battered, forlorn, and muddy.

The river was still high. It would be paltering with the truth to say that the floods had completely vanished. They hadn't! In all the low-lying marshes and meadows, the waters stretched away just as before. And yet, not just as before. There was something different. The glorious spring sunshine and the intense blue of the sky made all the difference. The floods, instead of being desolate wastes of murky water, were transformed into something pleasant. All their grim, bleak look had vanished.

And the best part of the countryside, too, had emerged. Muddy, slimy, and bedraggled—but bearing up well under the influence of the hot, drying sunshine.

"We can land!" said Nipper gleefully. "Look, the playing fields are all high and dry now. We may get muddy going over them, but who cares?"

"Nobody," said half a doz voices.

They all marvelled. It seemed almost incredible that that great expanse of water could have drained away in so short a time. But it is generally the way with all floods. Once they start going in earnest, they disappear as though by magic.

The barges, having moored in close proximity to Willard's Island, there was an

immediate rush. Captain Pepper had placed the craft close against the river bank, and the fellows leapt ashore without delay. Even Fatty Little went with them. Food was his greatest aim in life, but for once he succumbed to the general infection, and deserted dinner, for the sake of going to St. Frank's with the rest.

Curiosity was the root cause of this stampede.

The fellows found themselves on Little Side, after plunging ankle deep through thick mud. The playing fields were spongy and sodden, but in a much better condition than anybody had dared to hope. The grass was looking drab and murky, but the very fact that the grass itself was visible was a joy.

"Come on!" said Handforth exultantly. "Let's get along to the school. The floods have gone."

"Hurrah!"

"Not a sign of them left!"

"Rats!" said De Valerie. "There are plenty of signs left, but a week or two of this fine weather, and nobody will ever know that the water was ten or twelve feet deep here. Why, when we come back after the Easter holidays, everything will be normal."

"But there must be an awful lot of distress lower down the valley," said Nipper thoughtfully. "Let's hope these barge owners do the right thing; and pay up a nice chunk of salvage money."

They ploughed their way over Little Side, their feet sinking deep into the boggy ground. It had been noted, with a feeling of sorrow, that the boat-house and bathing sheds had been swept completely away. And now the fellows could see that the junior pavilion was in a sad condition—half-wrecked, and looking very forlorn. But they knew that repairs would quickly be effected, so there wasn't much to worry about.

"The Triangle!" said Nipper, as they passed through the gateway.

"Oh, my hat!"

"What a sight!"

"Poor old Triangle!"

They entered, their feet sinking into thick, greasy mud, the surface of which was caked and hardened by the sunshine of the past few days.

Usually, the old Triangle at St. Frank's was delightfully picturesque with its elms, its fountain, its paved pathways and gravel. The elms were still there, doing their utmost to look pleasant. The fountain could be seen, too, beneath its coating of mud. But the gravel and the pathways had gone—all smothered by the thick deposits which the flood had left behind. The picture would have been dreary in the extreme but for the bright sunshine and the background of the blue sky.

The juniors advanced, eager and curious.



CHAPTER 18.

THE OLD HAUNTS!

NATURALLY, the juniors broke up once they had got into the Triangle.

Nipper, Watson, Handforth & Co., and a few others made a bee-line for the Ancient House. Pitt, Grey, Trotwood, and their fellow compatriots of the West House were equally keen to get into their own quarters. In the same way, Buste, Boots and Bob Christine went into the Modern House. They were all anxious to have a look at the devastation in the spots where it affected them most.

On the whole, everybody was delightfully surprised

Nipper & Co., hurrying through the open doorway of the Ancient House, paused in the lobby. The floor was muddy, the walls were damp and grimy, but the flood had not caused any grave damage.

"Nobody about!" said Handforth, as he looked round. "I wonder where the dickens everybody's got to"

"You needn't wonder," said Nipper. "Naturally, they've gone home."

"You mean there isn't anybody here at all?"

"None of the fellows, of course," said Nipper. "Didn't Mr. Lee say that he would get them away at the earliest possible moment? I'll bet everybody left St. Frank's the day before yesterday. They won't come back till after the holidays."

"And by that time," said De Valerie, "the old school will be looking herself again."

Two or three workmen came out, and they regarded the juniors curiously. They had every reason to. The fellows were all dishevelled and untidy—with grimy collars, muddy clothing, and sundry rents and tears. They had been through rough times, and they had had no opportunity of obtaining a change of clothing.

"Why, I thought you were all gone!" said one of the workmen.

"We're another party—just come off a barge," explained Nipper. "Too long to explain now, but I dare say you'll hear all about it later. Everybody's gone, eh?"

"All the young gentlemen, if that's what you mean, sir," said the workman, "went two or three days ago."

"And now the school is full of you men, I expect?"

"Swarming with us," smiled the workman. "There's nigh on thirty in this building alone. We're from London, sir. The school people mean to do this job thoroughly, I reckon. Not enough men round these parts to cope with it."

"Yes, they're too busy locally," agreed Nipper. "Well, let's come and have a look at the studies, you chaps."

"Rather!" said Handforth.

NEXT WEDNESDAY!**"SPRING-CLEANING
AT ST. FRANK'S!"**

After the flood, spring-cleaning at the school is a real necessity.

Therefore, Handy purchases blue wallpaper with red spots, together with sundry pots of paint, and announces that he is going to redecorate Study D.

Handy carries out his intentions—at least, he tries to! Some of the juniors say that it is the pattern on the wallpaper that drives Handy dotty, others that it is the amount of paste he swallows.

Anyway, Handy has a lively time—and so does everyone else. This screamingly-funny yarn of the Boys of St. Frank's is full of japes and rollicking incident. You can make SURE of getting it if you order your copy in advance.

Another amazing instalment from :

"THE BURIED WORLD!"

Are you telling your pals about this startling serial?

**ORDER IN ADVANCE!**

Going down the Junior passage was like exploring a new realm. Everything was the same, and yet it was different. Debris was everywhere—grime, dried mud, and peeling, mildewed walls.

The Junior studies had not yet been touched, for the workmen seemed to be concentrating their attentions upon the domestic quarters—the electric power house—the drains—the heating system, and so forth.

Handforth opened the door of Study D, and strode in.

"Great pip!" he said feebly.

Nipper and Tregellis-West and Watson were next door, staring in very much the same way into Study C. Handforth advanced, with Church and McClure close behind him. Study D was a picture.

That usually cosy den was all wreckage.

The table was upside down, the bookcase had fallen from its fastenings, and books were littered on the floor—looking bloated and puffy, with the covers in rags, and with the bindings generally detached from the pages. The oilcloth was puffed up and ruined, the wall-paper was half peeled off in the most depressing way, and everything,

from one end of the room to the other, was hopelessly beyond recall.

"Oh, my goodness!" said Handforth dazedly.

Church and McClure were not so deeply affected.

"Well, what did you expect to find?" asked Church.

"I know! But—but— This!"

"Well, the flood swept down on the school without warning, and nobody had any time to rescue a single thing from the studies," said McClure. "Of course, we shall get new books. All our personal things will be replaced, too. We're bound to be compensated. Stands to reason!"

Handforth brightened up after the first shock had worn off.

"Oh, well, perhaps it's all for the best," he said. "Before the flood, I was talking about re-papering the study, wasn't I?"

"Let's go and have a look at the classroom," said Church briskly.

"Eh?"

"Or the Common-room," said McClure enthusiastically. "I'll bet the Common-room's in a frightful mess! Come on, Handy! One

look at this place is enough for us, and——”

“I was talking,” said Handforth coldly.

“Yes, but——”

“I was talking about re-papering this room,” insisted Handforth.

His chums, seeing that it was useless, gave in.

“Well?” they said, in sad, resigned voices.

“This wreckage just gives me the opportunity I wanted,” said Handforth, waxing eloquent. “We won’t let these silly workmen shove on a drab, ugly wall-paper. We will do this room ourselves.”

“Will we?” asked Church. “Aren’t we going home, then?”

He was staggered at the effect of that sarcastic remark.

“By George!” ejaculated Handforth. “There’s an idea! Strictly speaking, the holidays don’t start yet—we ought to be at school still. I’m not keen on going home yet.”

“Not keen on going home!” gasped McClure.

“No fear,” said Handforth. “After we’ve taken those barges to Caistowe, we’ll come back and start on this study. We’ll do some spring cleaning, and then we’ll re-paper the place, paint it, and——”

“You—you ass!” roared Church. “You can jolly well do it alone, then. You won’t catch us making idiots of ourselves.”

Handforth stroked his chin.

“In fact, there’s no reason for us to go to Caistowe, if it comes to that,” he went on. “Those other chaps can look after the barges now. I vote we stop here and get busy straight away!”

“All right,” said Church. “Let’s vote—two against, one for! It’s no good, Handy—you’re in a minority!”

But Handforth didn’t bite.

“My vote counts above yours!” he said indifferently. “We’ll go straight into Bannington on my Austin Seven, and——”

“You’d better tip the water out of it first!” suggested Church.

“Water!”

“You left it in the garage, didn’t you?”

“Great Scott!” yelled Handforth, aghast. “Then—then my Austin must have been under the flood!”

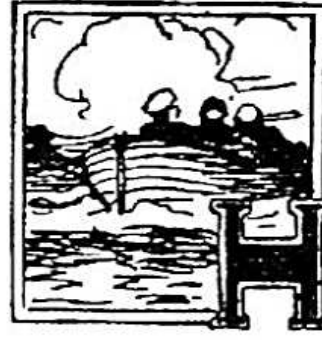
“He’s full of startling theories!” said Church, wonderingly. “Now, how the dickens did he guess that his Austin had been under the flood?”

But Handforth wasn’t staying. He leapt to the door, rushed out, and went tearing away down the Junior passage. He rushed past a crowd of fellows in the Triangle, and pelted off towards the garage. But before he had covered ten yards he was pulled up by a shout. No ordinary shout could have stopped him at a time like this. But it wasn’t an ordinary shout. It was a tremendous yell of alarm that was filled with the uttermost urgency.

“Hi! Quick, you chaps!”

The voice was that of Buster Boots, and he was waving madly.

“The barges—the barges!” he bellowed. “That beast, Sawkins, and his crowd are pinching the barges!”



CHAPTER 19.

IN THE NICK OF TIME!

HANDFORTH spun round, his heart throbbing wildly.

“What?” he shouted.

“You’re mad!”

Other members of the schoolboy bargee party were appearing from all quarters. Not one of them had missed that clarion call. John Busterfield Boots found himself surrounded as he stood in the triangle.

“I happened to look out of one of the Modern House windows!” he panted. “We can see the river from there, you know. Sawkins and his crowd were coming down the river in a boat—and they were making straight for the barges!”

“Oh, my hat!”

“Good gad!”

“They’ve—they’ve stolen a march on us!” exclaimed Nipper sharply. “Come on—don’t stop to talk! Run—run like lightning—or those beggars will beat us on the last lap!”

“But are you sure?” shouted Handforth, staring at Boots.

“I knew them in a tick!” replied Boots. “The cunning rotters! They must have followed us down the river. And those barges are lying there, helpless, without anybody in charge of them.”

Captain Pepper came bustling up, full of concern.

“It’s my fault, young gents!” he said miserably. “I oughter ’ave thought o’ this! But it seemed to me that old Sawkins was beat. After all this time——”

“You come along at your leisure, cap’n!” panted Nipper. “We’ll run for it! Come on, St. Frank’s! Those barges aren’t motor-boats, and they can’t have got far. We’ll get ’em back!”

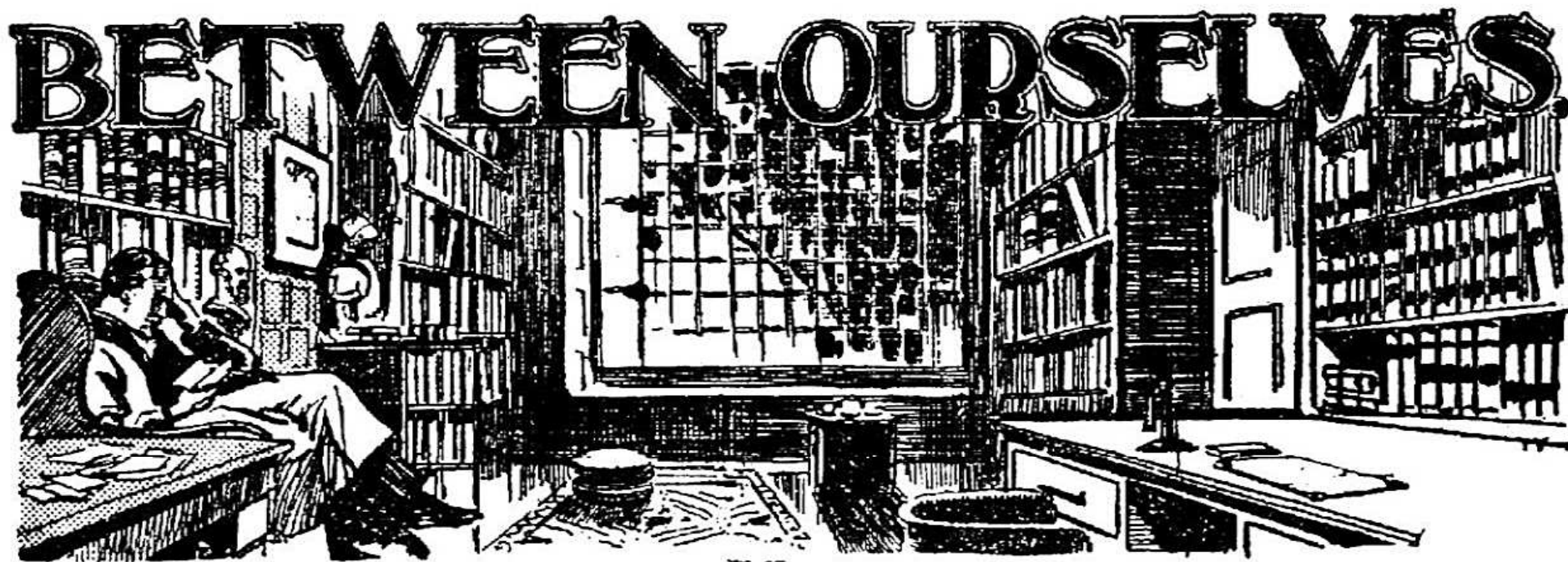
“Hurrah!”

“Down with Sawkins!”

They raced off, excited, alarmed, and filled with acute consternation. After all the trouble they had had with those two vessels, it would be little short of disastrous to lose them during the last lap of the journey. It would be a real calamity, and all owing to carelessness! Nipper felt bitter. In their excitement and eagerness to see St. Frank’s, they had been grossly neglectful.

They had crossed the playing-fields and meadows pretty quickly on the way to the school, but they went back like hares. They were all there, the whole party. Captain Pepper was somewhere in the rear, as anxious as any of the boys.

(Continued on page 34.)



Edwy Searles Brooks chats with his readers.

NOTE.—If any reader writes to me, I shall be pleased to comment upon such remarks as are likely to interest the majority. All letters should be addressed to EDWY SEARLES BROOKS, c/o The Editor, THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, LONDON, E.C.4. Every letter will have my personal attention, and all will be acknowledged in these columns. Letters of very special merit will be distinguished by a star, thus*, against the sender's name. Communications which indicate writer's age are naturally easier for me to answer.—E.S.B.

YOU ought to think yourselves jolly lucky—or unlucky, according to the point of view—for getting any chat from me this week. In fact, I came perilously near to breaking that New Year resolution of mine. You know, that one about never missing this weekly page. Why? Because I've been up to my eyes answering letters and sending out my autographed photo to those readers who have sent me theirs.

Since I made that offer a few weeks ago I've had an easy time of it, because it was over a month before it went into print. But now the deluge has commenced, and I'm beginning to wonder how I shall find time to write the stories. Still, I'm game, and the offer still holds good. Any readers who want my autographed photo have only to send me their own portraits, and I'll post mine along in return. There's no catch in this. I shan't send a printed imitation, but a genuine photograph, with my genuine autograph, each one individually signed. It's a rash offer, I know, and I shall probably have to cut out going to the pictures, lose half my sleep, and sacrifice my bath, in order to get through.

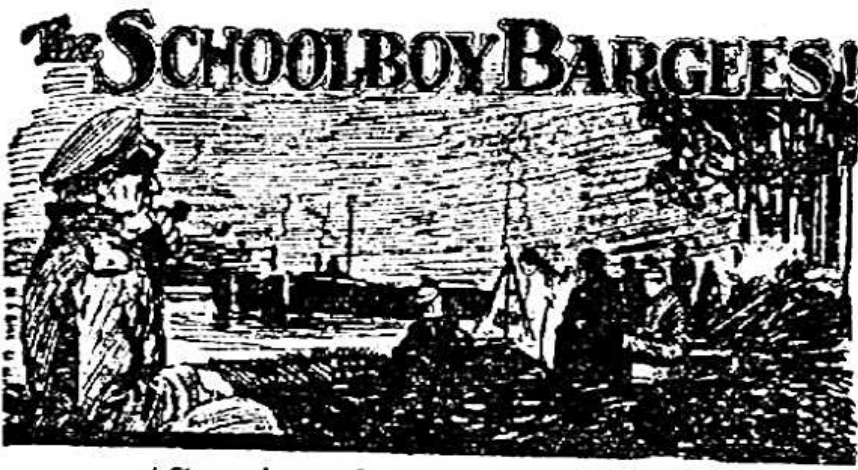
Remember, you've brought this on yourselves—and now I'm biting off about as much as I can chew. For months—years—lots of you have been asking me for my photo. And when you have it in your hands I expect you'll say: "So that's the chap! What a sell, after waiting all this time!" But I don't accept the slightest responsibility. If you want the blessed thing, you can have it. So there you are.

And now to acknowledge this week's letters: "A South African Reader" (Johannesburg), Leonard Angus (Plumstead), Jack Sanders (Kentish Town), F. Cobbett (Camberley), S. R. R. Ellis* (Birmingham), F. H. (Holloway), G. A. R. Purchase* (Chichester), Frank Addy (Sheffield), F. A. Jiggins (Braintree), Leonard Smith (Ipswich), Roy Freeman* (Cheltenham), "Kassker the Grim" (Isleworth), Patrick McSweeney (Paddington), Ernest R. Hoath (Worthing), Frank Voce, Jr.* (Seaforth), John McKay (North Shields), "White Horse" (Ramsgate), "A Loyal Supporter" (Folkestone), W. S. B and 7 others (Oldham), "A Leagueite"* (Nottingham), Charles Scott (Margate), Norman C. Moss (Guildford), F. M. Ambler (Dulwich), Robert Diamond (Lachine, Quebec).

Sorry to disturb your opinion, "South African Reader," but I have written all the St. Frank's stories that have ever appeared in the Old Paper. I am not at all offended because you refer to my Northestrian series as "tosh"—because I know they weren't tosh. They may have been piffle, but not tosh. They may even have been drivel, or tripe, but distinctly not tosh. And I'll tell you why. If they had been tosh the Editor would jolly soon have sent them back to me. You see, when you condemn my stories like that you don't cast any slur on me, but on the poor old Editor. He pays for the stuff, and you can take it from me that I'd have to be up very early to palm off tosh on him. If I ever get maudlin in my writings, you can bet the Editor will come down with the chopper—and then you'll see another name on the front page.

Our South African reader is a fair example of a certain type. If you don't like any particular series, it is hardly the thing to write to me and crudely accuse me of writing tosh. I welcome criticism heartily, and I like you to tell me where I displease you. But when a chap makes a bald statement of censure without saying why he is displeased, I find it difficult to understand him. I rather fancy our South African friend has got his knife into me because the Northestrian stories were somewhat imaginative, and by using my imagination I have offended him. I would just like to remind him that my imagination is my stock-in-trade as an author.

Although I am fully appreciative of the splendid, chatty, complimentary letters of the bulk of my correspondents, there is practically nothing in them that I can comment upon to the general interest of everybody. I want you to include in your letters one or two subjects that I can answer on this page with the certainty that the majority of you will be interested.



(Continued from page 32.)

At last they burst upon the river bank and came to a halt, staring. They were exhausted after their long run, particularly as a great deal of the going had been very difficult.

"Too late!" shouted Handforth hoarsely.

"They've gone!"

The Araminta and the Penelope were in mid-stream, two or three hundred yards farther down the river. And on the decks, navigating them, were their original captains and crews.

"They've done us!" muttered Pitt disgustedly. "Of all the beastly, rotten tricks! I never dreamed they'd follow us down like this."

"Well, they brought us to St. Frank's, anyway," said De Valerie, trying to take the disaster in a philosophical spirit. "And, after all, we had a good time."

Nipper looked round at the crowd.

"We're not going to let these brutes gain the benefit of our work!" he said fiercely.

"Hear, hear!"

"It's a rotten shame that they should get the barges back!" went on Nipper. "Who's game to have another scrap?"

The crowd hesitated, remembering what had happened the last time.

"If we don't get those barges back, there'll be no salvage money for the Belton Distress Fund," went on Nipper tensely.

"By George, no! We'll chance it!"

"Yes! Let's smash 'em!"

"Hurrah!"

"Look—there are only three men on each!" went on Nipper, pointing. "They haven't got those added helpers with them now—and old Clamp isn't any good, anyhow. It's only five, really!"

"Four to one!" roared Handforth. "Come on, you idiots!"

Everybody decided to make a fight, but Nipper called a halt as some of the fellows started hurrying off down the towing-path. A new idea had suddenly occurred to him.

"Wait a minute!" he said sharply. "These beggars have been tricky with us, so let's be tricky with them. Follow me—and walk slowly, looking downcast and dejected. Come on, don't ask any questions. Time's precious."

Nipper walked across the towing-path and vanished behind one of the hedges. The others, after a last look at the departing barges, followed, trying to obey his instruc-

tions. And the ruse succeeded. For Captain Sawkins, watching, uttered a contemptuous laugh.

"Thought so!" he said. "Them kids 'ave 'ad one taste of us, an' they don't want no more! They ain't got no men with 'em this time."

"We've beat 'em!" grinned one of the crew. "My, but you ain't 'arf a brainy bloke, cap'n!"

Sawkins grinned as he looked back. The schoolboys had obviously given up all idea of making a fight, for they were going back from whence they had come, bowed down and miserable. The burly skipper might have thought differently if he could have seen behind that hedge.

"Now, you ass! What's the idea?" demanded Handforth.

"We're wasting time, Nipper," urged Watson.

"Yes, but we've fooled those rotters into believing that we've given up the fight!" replied Nipper quickly. "Look here! The river bears right round lower down. If we cut across the meadows, behind this belt of trees, we can get in front of the barges without Sawkins knowing anything about it."

"My hat! So we can!"

"My scheme is to prepare an ambush!" continued Nipper. "We'll half-strip this time—no need to get ourselves drenched. Then we'll dive in as the barges come down, and make a scrap of it!"

"Hurrah!"

"Come on!"

"Trust Nipper to think of something tricky!"

And the schoolboy barges, not to be so easily deprived of their spoils, rushed off across the meadows.



CHAPTER 20.

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL!
CAPTAIN SAMUEL SAWKINS lit his pipe and looked up and down the river contentedly.

"Yes, we've beat 'em!" he said for about the tenth time. "I reckon that was a smart idea of mine, to follow the young varmint down the river in a boat. They wasn't lookin' for that move, was they?"

"It took 'em all of a 'eap!" said one of the crew. "Why, it was just like pickin' up pebbles off the beach! There they was, lyin' in the river, just waitin' for us to pinch!"

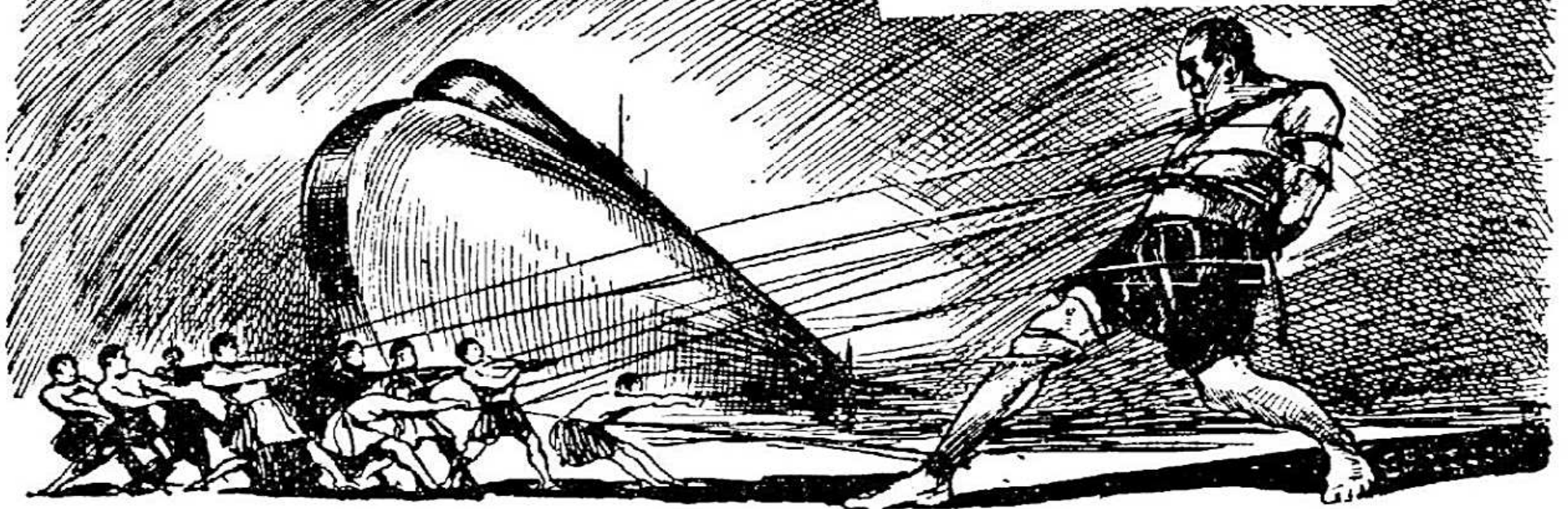
"Never knew anythink so blamed easy in the 'ole o' my life!" agreed Captain Sawkins. "Arter all that trouble we took last night, too! Lumme! I might 'ave saved three or four quid!"

The thought gave him a pain for a moment, particularly as it was accompanied

(Continued on page 40.)

*Dwarfs v. Giants!**Our Amazing Adventure Serial!***The BURIED WORLD!**

By LIONEL DAY



INTRODUCTION.

Jim Maitland lives in a small shop in Stagmore. A mysterious man named Stanislaus Cripps owes money to the shop, and Jim determines to collect it. He climbs over the wall of Widgery Dene--Cripps' estate--and drops into the grounds. There he finds an amazing machine which is something between a submarine and an airship. Mr. Cripps is on board and Jim asks him for the money. The man refuses to pay, and before Jim realises it he finds the machine in the air! It travels half over the world, then dives into the ocean. It reaches the bottom, and then, instead of resting on the bed continues going downwards! It is then floating on the surface of an underground river, and Mr. Cripps explains that there must be a sort of leak in the ocean bed and they are being sucked down to the centre of the earth. They

stop the machine and come on deck. But as they appear they are captured by several amazing giants who fall on them from the shore. Jim escapes and later saves the life of a little man called Masra. In return Masra and his daughter Tinta let him live with them. Jim finds himself among a colony of dwarf men who are called the Kru people. They live in a vast cavern and are at enmity with the Giants—a race that is dying out. Jim determines to find the submarine and rescue Mr. Cripps, who is still a prisoner. Masra and Tinta decided to accompany him. To do this Masra has to desert from the Kru people. After many adventures they manage to rescue the inventor. Suddenly all four are startled by a fall of scalding rain, and at the same time the Flying Submarine again escapes!

(Now read on.)

Scalding Rain!

THE Flying Submarine had escaped. In order to make the anchor rope taut, Stanislaus Cripps had given the vessel a buoyancy sufficient to keep it floating fifty feet above the ground. It hung suspended that height above their heads now.

The coils of ropes that Stanislaus Cripps had joined together measured exactly three hundred and fifty feet. Fastened to the rail that hedged in the deck, its end with the anchor was just nine feet above the ground—so tantalisingly near and yet out of reach.

For a few seconds Stanislaus Cripps stood immediately under the anchor, making grotesque little springs in his attempt to catch hold of it. And all the while there poured down upon the Buried World that pitiless torrent of scalding rain. Stanislaus Cripps appeared to awake abruptly to the futility of his efforts and to the existence of that downpour, for he turned and shouted to Jim:

"The stores, boy. Come and help to get the stores under cover."

In answer to that appeal, Jim and his two companions rushed out from their shelter to the spot where the stores had been disembarked. They were a curious mixed collection, for

Stanislaus Cripps' views on the subject of rationing the party were peculiarly his own.

There was a barrel of American apples, and a large box of South African oranges. There were also tinned foods in great profusion. By the side of these there lay a pile of glittering objects, made out of the same mysterious metal as that of which the Flying Submarine was constructed.

"The food, boy! Never mind the rest."

It was like working in a very hot shower bath, but despite the difficulties under which they had to labour, they managed at last to get the supplies under shelter. Stanislaus Cripps himself, the water pouring from his shaggy beard, and his new plus-fours suit steaming, flung himself on that big pile of glittering metal, and taking one huge armful of it, dived for the little cave in which they were sheltering. He was only just in time.

Scarcely had he joined the rest of the party, and, breathing heavily with his exertions, had placed that pile of metal with a clatter on the ground, than pandemonium broke loose in the Buried World. With a shriek, like the letting off of a thousand steam sirens, a great wind swept down upon them.

It was not like an ordinary wind sweeping across the country horizontally, such as Jim had

experienced in the upper world; it bore down upon them vertically and then swept upwards. He had just made this observation when his attention was attracted by a cry for help from Stanislaus Cripps.

"Sit on them—fall on them! Hold them, for the love of Mike! We can't afford to lose one of them!"

Jim saw that the various articles, which composed that shimmering heap of metal, were being whirled about in every direction by the great wind. What looked like a full sized figure—he recognised it as one of the diving suits—came careering through the air towards him. He caught at it just in time and brought it to the ground.

Acting under the urgency of Stanislaus Cripps' appeal, Tinta and Masra added their efforts to keeping that pile intact. Eventually, by covering it with stones, they were able to anchor it safely to the ground. Stanislaus Cripps wiped his perspiring steaming forehead.

"Phew, worse than a Turkish bath, boy! Just the thing I wanted. Get down my fat!"

He appeared serenely indifferent to the violent and terrifying atmospheric disturbance that was going on about him. Though the vast Outer Cavern was filled with a turmoil that was absolutely deafening, though the fury of the strange wind seemed at times as if it were about to tear those towering, rocky walls apart, though the scalding rain fell in torrents, drumming on the ground a veritable devil's tattoo—Stanislaus Cripps was as cool and detached as if he had been seated under a tree on a pleasant summer afternoon.

"What's happened?" Jim gasped.

"Ordinary atmospheric disturbance, boy, following the well-known laws that make hot air rise and colder air take its place."

Cripps jabbed a finger into the murk outside. It was so dark now that it was almost impossible to see anything.

"The Flying Submarine has gone, boy. Where she is now, Heaven alone knows! Probably she has struck one of these ascending draughts of air, and is careering about the exit to this Buried World. There is a chance, of course, that she may escape altogether, but the mathematical laws of possibility and probability are all against such a thing happening. She will very likely strike a descending current of air, and be beaten back to the ground. If only we could find her in such a predicament we might manage to get on board."

"But what was that explosion just before the rain began to fall?" Jim inquired.

"Some volcanic outburst higher up the shaft," explained Cripps. "Fortunately not an explosion of lava, but merely of steam. Hence this combination of a Turkish and a Russian bath. The air has been violently heated in the upper regions and is therefore ascending. The cold air from outside has rushed in to take its place. That is the simple explanation, boy. When the hot air has been all expelled, we shall be at peace again."

"But the Flying Submarine, sir. How are we going to get back to it?"

"Don't know, boy. She will probably sink back to the level in which we left her and float aimlessly about until the anchor catches, or we might be able to secure her by some other means."

Tinta's Fantastic Story!

A FEELING of despair swept over Jim. He wished with all his heart and soul that Stanislaus Cripps had not possessed such an inquiring mind. After much pain and toil they had regained possession of the Flying Submarine, and instead of using her

to escape from this dreary world, they had started off on further explorations. And now they had lost their only means of ever getting out into the sunlight again.

For nearly an hour he sat crouched there, a very dismal, despondent boy. Presently that great wind began to abate. The rain ceased, and Stanislaus Cripps rose and shook himself.

"Now I think we can begin our investigations. The first question is one of transport. I have here a miniature tractor."

He began to dive among the pile of glittering metal, and produced what at first looked like a whippet tank, which he held between his finger and thumb.

"When the factor of weight is eliminated, boy, it is surprising how simple life becomes. Constructed in steel, this machine would weigh something like twenty tons. As it is, its weight is entirely negligible."

The machine was narrow enough to allow it, Jim surmised, to be passed through the port-hole of the Flying Submarine, but in length it was nearly twelve feet. Stanislaus Cripps held it up before his face and examined it, and then placing it on the ground, held it lightly with one finger while he stepped on to the driver's seat.

"Load her up with the supplies, boy, and we'll be off. There's plenty of room for all of us."

Following his directions, they filled the interior of the tractor with stores. Only when they began to place what remained of that pile of glittering metal on board, did Stanislaus Cripps intervene.

"There's one or two things there that you and your friends had better learn the use of, boy."

He picked up four objects that looked like exaggerated revolvers and presented one each to Jim, Tinta, and Masra; he thrust the remaining one in his own pocket.

"You'd better explain to your friends, boy. These lethal weapons fire an oxygen charge, which will kill at any distance. They are manipulated in exactly the same way as a revolver. You press the trigger and the bullet does the rest."

Masra nodded gravely, as Jim, with some difficulty, explained, and then thrust the weapon into the belt he wore about his waist. Tinta followed his example, then they took their seats in the tractor. Stanislaus Cripps touched a button and the engines began to purr.

"I use the same motive power as we employ in the Flying Submarine, boy. It has the advantage over petrol that you can get a thousand times more energy out of it per cubic inch. One gallon of my explosive mixture will do as much work as one thousand gallons of petrol. Now, boy, we will start. As you know the way, I shall want you to direct me."

Jim stared at him in amazement.

"Where do you want to go, sir?"

"To the Inner Cavern, of course. It would appear that the Kru, among whom you have lived, are a much more highly developed and intelligent people than the Falta."

"But we can't go there!" Jim gasped, and began to explain again how they had broken the Kru law, and that to return would mean death.

Stanislaus Cripps laughed.

"I am not to be deterred by such foolish prejudices, boy. At any rate, there is no ban against me. I have broken no law, and it is most important that I should investigate the Inner Cavern."

As if dismissing the subject, he pulled a lever. The wheels, with their caterpillar, endless bands, began to revolve and the machine moved forward at a good twenty miles an hour. Tinta, who was seated next to Jim, gripped his hand. For the first time since he had known her, she showed signs of fear. She who had faced the

Falta giants unflinchingly, who had proved herself daring and resolute, was terrified at this unfamiliar form of locomotion.

"It is magic, Krim, and I am afraid. It is greater magic even than that of Him-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken!"

Jim patted her hand reassuringly.

"There are thousands of these things in the world from which I come, Tinta. It is just a machine like the Flying Submarine. When next we stop, I will show you how it works. But who is this person you mentioned just now—Him-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken."

After hesitating a moment, Tinta turned to her father and said a few words to him in an undertone. Masra shrugged his shoulders as he replied.

"What does it matter, daughter? The laws of the Kru no longer bind us. We have left the homes of our fathers, never to return."

"My father says I may tell you," Tinta exclaimed, looking up at Jim, "seeing that we no longer belong to the Kru people."

And then, as the tractor carried them swiftly over the ground, twisting its way through the boulders where possible, or climbing over them when there was no way round, Jim listened to a story so fantastic that it was difficult to believe in its reality.

While he had lived in the Inner Cavern he had often wondered at the social arrangements of the Little People, their system of government, their orderliness, the manner in which they all acted together as if under some common impulse, though there were no leaders among them, no laws by which they were governed, and nothing that corresponded even remotely to a representative body that met like Parliament to pass legislation. With the exception of the promulgation of the Ban, before the coming of The Great Light, the Kru never acted together as a community; and yet order was maintained among them, and there was a clearly defined Social System. He was now to learn the secret.

"We are forbidden to speak of him, Krim," said Tinta. "That is why I did not tell you. There were pictures of Him-Whose-Name-May-Not-Be-Spoken, but, by his orders, they were removed. He dwells in the Cave of the Fires. No one has ever seen him. From time to time he tells us what we may do, and what we may not do."

"How old is he, Tinta?"

The girl shook her head.

"No one knows, Krim. He has been there always."

She spoke with such sincerity that it was obvious that she believed the statement.

"And this Cave of the Fires? Where is it?"

She pointed her finger downwards.

"The food would be gathered and renewed many times, Krim, before one could reach it. Only those that he sends for ever make the journey."

"But how does he communicate with you, Tinta?"

"He speaks to us with his voice. When you came, Krim, was the last time he spoke to the Kru. After they had made you Masra's blood brother, the people were frightened that they might have done wrong. They sent some to consult with him, taking with them the slate on which you drew those pictures, and he sent word that you were to be well-treated."

The Fall of the Idol!

SO engrossed had Jim become in the story Tinta was telling him, that he had paid no attention to their progress. Now, as the tractor stopped abruptly, he saw that they were below the great sacrificial stone that was placed at the base of the idol. The figure of

the Falta high priest still lay there. Stanislaus Cripps flung himself out of his seat at the wheel.

"I'm going to perform a little petty act of spite," he exclaimed. "I lived for four or five months alongside that absurd grayen image, and I came to hate it as I never hated anything before. I'm going to put a finish to it now. You can come and help me, boy."

Jim followed him round the base of the statue, wondering what was on foot. Here Stanislaus Cripps paused and examined the stone work with the aid of his electric torch. The foundations of that great image were made of two massive blocks of stone placed close together. Between them there was a space into which a man could slip his hand.

"Whoever built this statue must have had some considerable knowledge of mechanics," Cripps said. "These slabs could not have been placed in position merely by human man-handling. I am going to be guilty of an act of vandalism. I propose to destroy this image, partly because I dislike it so heartily, and partly because I propose at some date to bring the Tinta into subjection. It is absurd that these hypertrophied idiots should be masters of this world. By striking at their superstition, which unites them I shall have taken a big step towards reducing them to their proper status."

Taking a tin canister out of his pocket, Cripps poured some powder into the gap between the great stones. Then he produced a piece of tinder, which had obviously formed part of a pipe-lighter. Placing one end in the powder, he lighted the other end with a match.

"A rough-and-ready time-fuse, boy, but as we don't know exactly how long it will take for the tinder to burn to the end, we'd better be hurrying. That explosive of mine is very powerful!"

They raced back to the tractor, and, having jumped into their seats, began to speed away from the neighbourhood of the idol. They had covered nearly a mile when, out of the azure gloom, there loomed up six of the giant Falta. Stanislaus Cripps gave a little chuckle.

"See the fellow with the wart on his nose, boy? That's the only one of the Falta with any glimmering of sense. He is at least capable of some rudimentary thinking. I used to make him teach me their language, and, had I had time, I believe I could have persuaded him to connive at my escape."

Jim gazed at the giant whom Stanislaus Cripps had indicated. He was, the boy noticed, several inches shorter than his comrades, and his vast face was not so entirely blank and expressionless as those of his companions. The Falta were evidently amazed at this crawling, glistening thing rushing so swiftly towards them across the floor of the Cavern. As they approached nearer, however, one of them stooped down as if intending to pick up this curious insect. Stanislaus Cripps accelerated the engine at the same moment, and, twisting the wheel, passed over the giant's foot and zig-zagged cleverly between his legs. There was a little squeal of pain.

"Thought he wouldn't like it!" Stanislaus Cripps exclaimed grimly.

The giant whose foot the tractor had passed over, hobbled painfully to a pile of boulders and began to examine them with an intention that was perfectly obvious. Stanislaus Cripps shouted out something in the Falta language, which bore the same relation to the Kru tongue as old English does to modern English.

"Tell him I shall have to kill him if he attacks us, Gra! Call him off!"

The giant with the wart on his nose turned and said some words to his companions. Their only reply was to glower at him, and, following the example of the other giant, to arm themselves with huge rocks. Stanislaus Cripps, zig-zagging the tractor backwards and forwards, in

vain tried persuasion, evidently not anxious to resort to extreme measures.

"Gra tell them not to make fools of themselves! And you must not stay here. Any moment now your ridiculous god may be blown to smithereens, and you stand a good chance of being hit by one of the falling fragments. You'd better follow us as quickly as those big legs of yours will let you."

Gra shouted something at the top of his voice. Catching a word here and there, Jim, with his knowledge of the Kru tongue, was able to make out that he was exhorting his comrades not to resort to violence.

"The Kru with the red beard, who is Lord of the Flying Kock, declares that he is about to destroy our god as he destroyed our High Priest," said Gra. "Let us hasten away, before worse evil befalls us!"

Several of the giants had already raised the great rocks in their hands. Gra's statement seemed to paralyse them for a moment. Putting his foot on the accelerator, Stanislaus Cripps took full advantage of that respite. Shouting out to Gra to follow him, he sent the tractor careering over the ground at a speed of forty miles an hour, zig-zagging as he did so.

The next instant a storm of huge rocks began to fall about them, one of them narrowly missing Masra, who was sitting in the rear seat. Presently, however, they had drawn out of range, and, slowing down the engines, Stanislaus Cripps allowed Gra, who had raced after them, to come alongside.

"Trot along Gra," he said in a friendly voice. "Another mile and you will be quite safe."

The giant grinned at him and began loping over the ground by the side of the tractor as it continued on its course.

"If you can manage it, Gra," Stanislaus Cripps shouted, "tell those fool Falta to follow you."

Gra shook his head.

"They will not come. They go to bury the High Priest. The Falta are angry. They will sing and shout at the burying, and rouse themselves to fierce deeds. Woe to any Kru who comes their way!"

"Well, I've told you what will happen," Stanislaus Cripps remarked. "There won't be any High Priest to bury in a few minutes—you take it from me!"

Even as he uttered the words there was an ear-splitting report, which filled the cavernous world with thunderous echoes. Stanislaus Cripps stopped the tractor, and, turning in his seat, looked back. Jim, following his example, saw for a moment the great cruel face of the graven idol, looking down at him out of the shadows; then abruptly it disappeared.

There was a moment's silence, followed by a renewed uproar. It seemed as if the air were raining stones. One great mass of rock, weighing several tons, struck the little group of Falta, who, regardless of the warning they had received, had advanced further into the danger zone. Jim felt a shudder of horror as he saw those great figures reel and fall.

He put his hands before his face as if to shut out that scene of massacre. When he drew them away again, he was aware of ten great fingers clutching at the side of the tractor. Looking up, he saw that Gra had dropped on his knees, and with his huge head bowed in reverence before Stanislaus Cripps, was uttering a string of words in his high falsetto voice. Stanislaus Cripps, stretching out a hand that seemed absurdly small, patted him on top of the head.

"He's telling me that he is my slave, boy. We have tamed the first of the Falta, and, curiously enough, he is the most intelligent."

He pulled the giant's hair

"Rise, Gra, and follow. From now on my enemies are your enemies, and my friends your friends."

He turned to Jim with a grin, as if making an aside.

"Just as well to make that point quite clear, boy. We're now going to inspect the Inner Cavern, and I don't want him to get into trouble with the Kru!"

Captured by the Kru

REALISING that to argue with Stanislaus Cripps would be absolutely useless—that if he wanted to go into the Inner Cavern, he would go—Jim remained silent, mentally determining, however, that he, Tinta and Masra would remain outside while the other was carrying out his investigations. As they neared the opening to the Inner Cavern, Tinta showed signs of alarm.

"Oh, Krim, if we go much nearer we shall meet the Kru and they will kill us," she said, alarm in her voice. "The ban is lifted after the passing of the Great Light, and they will come out to hunt the Falta."

"We shall always be able to get away, Tinta," Jim remarked reassuringly. "You've seen how fast we can travel. Look, this journey that took us four days, we have almost accomplished in as many hours."

They had passed the Falta houses now and were dashing onwards when Gra, who was running by their side, held up his hand warningly.

"What's the matter, Gra?" Stanislaus Cripps inquired, stopping the tractor.

The giant pointed into the distance.

"The Falta attack the Kru. After the passing of the Great Light, they met together and decided that the Kru must be killed. They are breaking into their cave. Look!"

Now visible in the azure murk, some sixty of the giants could be seen collected about the entrance of that narrow tunnel. With stolid persistence they were tearing at the solid rock with roughly made weapons.

"We must go and see what they're doing," remarked Stanislaus Cripps.

Gra stared at him in astonishment.

"They will kill you, master. You are so small."

"Strength, Gra, does not necessarily lie in the body alone. It is more important to have strength up here." He tapped his head as he spoke. "We shall come to no harm. You will see, Gra."

He set the tractor in motion again. In a few minutes it had drawn close to the gigantic figures that were working with frenzied rage to break into the fastnesses of the Inner Cavern. They were stabbing at the rock with spears that sometimes bent in their hands with the force of their blows. Their efforts had not been entirely unavailing, however, for already the entrance to the tunnel had been enlarged to a height of fifteen feet.

So occupied were the giants in their task that they never noticed the strange machine that was hovering in their rear. The air resounded with the clamour of metal on stone, and the heavy breathing of the labouring giants.

At that moment Masra gave a cry and pointed upwards. Following the direction of his gaze, Jim and his companions saw floating above their heads the Flying Submarine! Instantly Stanislaus Cripps sprang out of the tractor to the ground.

"Gra," he called, "Gra—seize it!"

Carried away by the infection of his excitement, the other occupants of the tractor jumped

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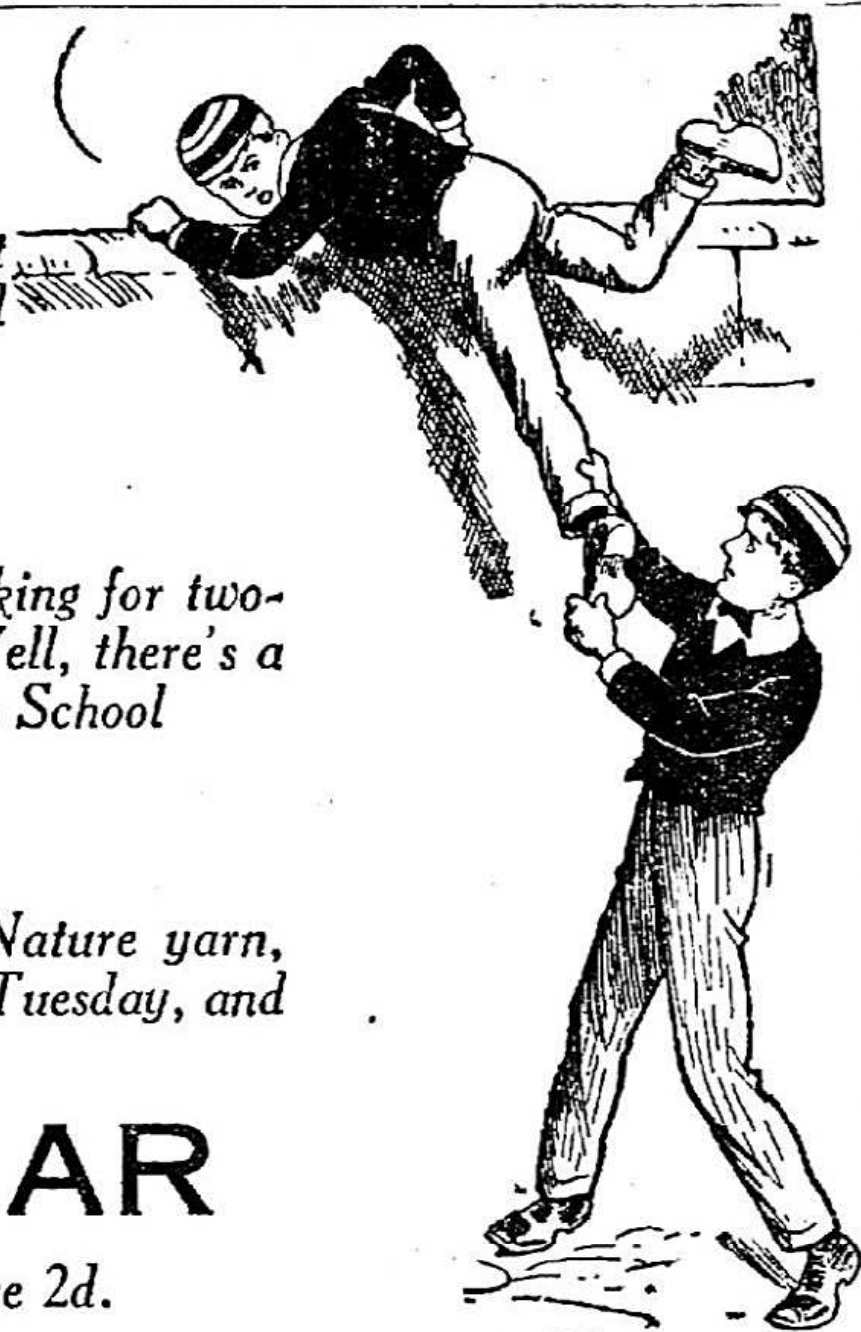
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to the ground. The Flying Submarine was following an erratic course, influenced by the currents of air that passed up and down the shaft. As it neared the spot where the giants were labouring, it swerved suddenly and darted outwards from the cavern walls towards the lake.

Gra, urged on by Stanislaus Cripps, pursued it, very much as an entomologist pursues a butterfly. Now he had almost caught the anchor—now it evaded his grasp as the Flying Submarine swiftly changed its direction, and went off at an angle to its original course. And the little party of four followed Gra, encouraging him with shouts.

Forgetful of everything else, they continued the pursuit for nearly half a mile, by which time Gra and the Flying Submarine were almost out of sight. Then a sudden disturbance behind them made them halt.

"Hallo, What's up here?" Stanislaus Cripps exclaimed.

He might well ask, for that serried mass of giant figures had fallen back from the entrance to the Outer Cavern. Streaks of yellow flame were issuing from the mouth of the tunnel. It was Tinta who first realised what had happened.

"The Kru are attacking the Falta with the liquid fire! They will drive them back and then pursue them. We shall be caught!"

"Back to the tractor!" Stanislaus Cripps shouted.

He set the example by setting off at a round pace towards the spot where they had left the tractor. They had got to within a hundred yards of it, when panic seemed to seize upon the Falta. Suddenly they turned and came rushing in a thunderous mass towards them.

Jim remembered what he had read about the destruction caused by the stampeding of cattle. But the stampede of the Falta, he realised, was something even more terrible.

There were sixty of them, and their feet alone were nearly four foot long, and none of them could have weighed less than half a ton. A runaway steam roller would have been a safer thing to face than that mad, panic-stricken charge of the giants! The only thing to be done was to take cover.

As if acting on some common impulse, the whole four of them flung themselves down behind the first boulder. They were only just in time. The next instant that giant wave had broken upon them. From their hiding-place they saw a maze of vast limbs flashing past them; the ground shook beneath the thunder of their charge, and the air was filled with their whimpering cry of terror that was like the screaming of myriad seagulls.

Another moment and the Falta had passed. Stanislaus Cripps instantly sprang to his feet, and, without more ado, rushed for the tractor, which fortunately had not been left in the track of that giant stampede. Masra followed him, and Jim, calling to Tinta, raced at his heels. Stanislaus Cripps had swung himself into the driving seat and had already set the engines in motion, when out of the azure murk there appeared a small regiment of the Kru.

They were armed with the liquid fire apparatus and were pursuing the giants, uttering thunderous shouts as they ran. Masra, at the sight of them, flung himself trembling at the bottom of the tractor. Jim, who had taken a seat, sprang to his feet and looked back. For the first time he realised that Tinta was not with them!

"Tinta!" he called. "Tinta!"

At that moment he saw the girl twenty yards away. He held out his hands to her in a very panic of anxiety. The Kru were closing down upon her now. They, too, had seen her, and had raised a shout that chilled the blood in the boy's veins. It was a cry of hate—the cry of an

outraged people who saw before them one who had committed treason!

"Mr. Cripps—Mr. Cripps!" Jim cried. "They will catch her and kill her. Oh, Mr. Cripps, save her!"

"Stay where you are, boy!" Stanislaus Cripps voice boomed. "Don't commit suicide!"

As he spoke he set the tractor in motion. Turning beautifully, the glittering machine raced towards Tinta. But they were too late. When still a few yards from her, the leading ranks of the Kru broke about her. Jim saw dozens of pairs of hands seize her by the arms and drag her backwards. The tractor plunged into the mass, Stanislaus Cripps steering it towards the spot where the girl's struggling figure could be seen.

And now the Kru seemed to become conscious for the first time of the strange machine that had invaded their world. Jim heard an old man—whom he remembered for his kindness to him—hold up his hand and shout something in a tone of command. Instantly eight of the Kru lined up in front of the tractor, unslinging from their shoulders the deadly liquid fire apparatus. The next second eight jets of flame were directed at the tractor. With great presence of mind, Stanislaus Cripps swung it round and dashed out of range.

"You must fire, boy," he shouted.

Jim, clenching his teeth, drew the weapon Stanislaus Cripps had given him from his pocket. Taking aim he pulled the trigger. Something almost like a cry of horror broke from his lips.

It was the first time he had witnessed the deadly effects of the explosive Stanislaus Cripps had invented. The man he had hit seemed to dissolve and disappear! He saw the Kru turn panic-stricken and rush for the entrance to the tunnel.

"Fire again!" Stanislaus Cripps voice boomed as he drove the tractor in pursuit.

But the horror of what he had done was still heavy on the boy's mind.

"I can't!" he sobbed. "I can't!"

Even as those broken words came from his lips, he caught a vision of Tinta, a prisoner in the hands of some dozen men. Flinging down the strange revolver Stanislaus Cripps had given him, he swung himself over the side of the tractor, and, though it was still moving, managed to keep his feet on the ground. The next moment, with his head down as if he were diving into a Rugby scrum, he had flung himself among the Kru, battling at them with his fists, tearing them aside in his mad frenzy to make a path for himself to Tinta.

"Tinta," he called, "Tinta!"

Arms clutched at his legs. Somebody jumped on his back, causing him to stumble. He tottered, striking out fiercely, still calling her name.

"Tinta—Tinta——"

From amidst that babel of confusion, a voice seemed to reach him.

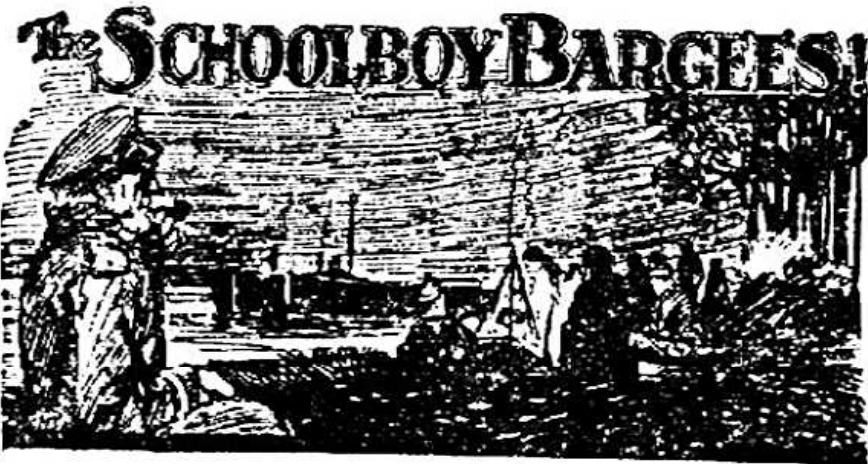
"Farewell, Krim!"

For a moment the sound of her voice gave Jim renewed energy. He managed to free himself from his captors—but only for a moment. The next instant half a dozen Kru had flung themselves on him. He received a violent blow on the head. The azure world swung and swayed about him.

Then, at that moment, something struck him neatly behind the knees. Jim reeled backwards, his clutching hands touching something cold and familiar. A very podgy hand gripped him by the collar of his coat. He heard Stanislaus Cripps' booming voice in his ear. He was once more aboard the tractor, which had been driven adroitly into the crowd of struggling figures only just in time to rescue him.

"It's no good boy. She's gone——!"

(But has she? You may be sure that Jim will do his utmost to rescue Tinta from the avenging Kru. Next week's instalment is a real thriller—you must not miss it!)



(Continued from page 34.)

by a vivid recollection of the night's fight. But, after all, the game was won—the boys were bested.

The Stowe was astonishingly docile now.

With the rapid dropping of the floods, the raging torrent had dwindled to a normal stream. Certainly, it was faster than usual, and the bargees were compelled to give a lot of attention to their craft. They were comparatively near Caistowe, and they intended going straight down, and reporting to their owners. They would probably be highly complimented for bringing the barges safely through.

A stretch of river lay ahead, after a bend had been turned—a stretch that was quite bare for nearly half a mile, except for a

clump of trees, which grew on the right bank. Bellton was beyond.

Just as the barges were getting out of the bend, a figure came smashing through the bushes near the towing-path—the fat, excited figure of Fatty Little. He shook his fist at the barges.

"Yah! Rotters!" he roared.

All the bargees stared back, and Captain Sawkins gave a bellow of taunting laughter.

"Git back to your kennel!" he shouted.

"We've 'ad enough o' you young puppies!"

"They ain't tryin' on no more games, are they?" shouted Captain Clamp anxiously, from the other barge.

"Not likely!" sneered Sawkins. "They ain't got innards enough!"

Fatty's roaring ceased, and the bargees gave their attention to the navigating again. One man, with an oar in his hand, gave a sudden yelp. A face was coming up over the edge of the deck. Then another—two more and still others.

"Hi!" howled the fellow. "They're on us, cap'n!"

"Hurrah!"

"Come on! Sweep 'em overboard—quick!" yelled Handforth.

Captain Sawkins uttered a loud oath. He

had never been more surprised. Just while he had been looking back at Fatty Little, this amazing thing had happened! His barge was swarming with boys!

It had been very cleverly worked.

Fatty had been purposely sent to that spot, in order to distract the attention of the barges, and take their gaze away from the view immediately ahead. Nipper had only needed a couple of minutes—and this diversion had supplied it.

Nineteen fellows had slipped straight into the water from behind the trees, and had swam with swift, powerful strokes into mid-stream. The barges had floated down upon them. Ten juniors had grabbed for the first one, and the other nine boarded the second. They were all swarming on the decks before the enemy could be aware of their presence.

It was uncanny—like creatures of the deep rising from the very bed of the stream. These men had seen no sign until it was too late.

"Half a minute!" shouted Nipper, as the other juniors were about to hurl themselves at the barges. "Captain Sawkins, we've got you whacked! Are you going to surrender, or shall we chuck you overboard?"

"Go to blazes!" snarled Sawkins.

"Right-ho—overboard!" shouted Nipper.

And the juniors swept joyously on their victims, and Captain Sawkins found himself flying through the air backwards. He landed in the water, and the two members of his crew went heaving in after him. On the Penelope, a similar scene was being enacted. Captain Clamp, and his precious pair, were flung into the Stowe with the same force.

Six soaked, beaten men dragged themselves out, and slunk away. They had believed themselves to be the masters of the situation, but again they had reckoned without their hosts!

Within an hour, old Captain Joshua Pepper was on board again, the boys were fully dressed, and the trip down stream was being continued.

And, later on, the Caistowe Water Haulage Co. Ltd. offices were invaded by Nipper and his fellow barges. The whole facts were placed before the owners, and the barges were formally handed over.

Nipper was looking delighted after the interview.

"The owners are pretty pleased with things in general," he said. "We don't want to take anything for granted, but I shouldn't be surprised if we get four or five hundred pounds.

"And they're going to hand out the money as soon as ever the formalities can be dealt with added Nipper contentedly. "It's going straight to the Flood Distress Fund, Bellton section. And as these barge owners are big people about here, they'll probably add a good bit to the money themselves. It's all for charity, you know. On the whole, I think we can congratulate ourselves, you chaps!"

"Well, it's been jolly exciting, and now

we shall be glad to get home," said Tommy Watson, with relief. "I suppose we'd better get on the first train, and——"

"I've got an idea, you chaps," interrupted Handforth. "We're all together now, aren't we? Well, why not go back to St. Frank's and do some spring cleaning?"

To Edward Oswald Handforth's disgust, the crowd only laughed at him. They were paying more attention to Captain Joshua Pepper. That breezy individual, with twinkling eyes, was apparently reluctant to take his leave of the schoolboys.

"We've 'ad some 'appy days together, young gents," he said. "The 'appiest days since I was on the Nare with old Billy Small. Now 'e was a fine bloke, was Billy! 'Im an' me, on the barge Caroline, was two of the 'appiest men wot ever swung a tiller."

And the old bargee proceeded to dip into another reminiscence. Not that anybody listened. Most of them were thinking about the approaching Easter holidays. And Handforth was thinking of highly-coloured wallpaper, brilliant enamel paint, and sundry other ideas in the decorating line.

(There's no doubt ab it it—Edwy Searles Brooks can't be beaten when it comes to writing corking school stories. He has written another magnificent yarn for next Wednesday's NELSON LEE LIBRARY—*"SPRING-CLEANING AT ST. FRANK'S!"* Don't miss it!)

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HOW TO JOIN THE LEAGUE

ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE APPLICATION FORM No. 70.

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| SECTION A | READER'S APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP. I desire to become enrolled as a Member of THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE, and to qualify for all such benefits and privileges as are offered to Members of the League. I hereby declare that I have introduced "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY" and THE ST. FRANK'S LEAGUE to one new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. Will you, therefore, kindly forward me Certificate of Enrolment with the Membership Number assigned to me, and Membership Badge. |
| SECTION B | MEMBER'S APPLICATION FOR MEDAL AWARDS. I, Member No..... (give Membership No.), hereby declare that I have introduced one more new reader, whose signature to certify this appears on second form attached hereto. This makes me (state number of introductions up to date) introductions to my credit. |
| SECTION C | NEW READER'S DECLARATION. I hereby declare that I have been introduced by (give name of introducer) to this issue of "THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY." |
| (FULL NAME)..... | |
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INSTRUCTIONS.

INSTRUCTIONS.—Reader Applying for Membership. Cut out TWO complete Application Forms from Two copies of this week's issue of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY. On one of the forms fill in Section A, crossing out Sections B and C. Then write clearly your full name and address at bottom of form. The second form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at bottom of form. Both forms are then pinned together, and sent to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4. **Member Applying for Bronze Medal:** It will be necessary for you to obtain six new readers for this award. For each new reader TWO complete forms, bearing the same number, are needed. On one of the forms fill in Section B, crossing out Sections A and C, and write your name and address at bottom of form. The other form is for your new reader, who fills in Section C, crosses out Sections A and B, and writes his name and address at the bottom of

the form. Now pin both forms together and send them to the Chief Officer, as above. One new reader will then be registered against your name, and when six new readers have been registered, you will be sent the St. Frank's League bronze medal. There is nothing to prevent you from sending in forms for two or more new readers at once, provided that each pair of forms bears the same date and number.

Bronze medallists wishing to qualify for the silver or gold medals can apply in the same way as for the bronze medal, filling in Section B. Every introduction they make will be credited to them, so that when the League reaches the required number of members, they can exchange their bronze medal for a silver or gold one, according to the number of introductions with which they are credited.

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You can qualify for the various awards by promoting the growth of the League.

If you want help or information on any subject, you will find the Chief Officer ever ready to assist you.



All LETTERS in reference to the League should be addressed to the Chief Officer, The St. Frank's League, c/o THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, The Fleetway House, Farringdon St., London, E.C.4. Enquiries which need an immediate answer should be accompanied by a stamped and addressed envelope.

All O.K.

I AM glad to be able to report that the League has made steady progress this last week. Silver Badges are going like one o'clock; you fellows who haven't yet got yours should not delay in qualifying for one.

Not Much Time for Exercise.

A Barrow-in-Furness chum, who is a regular reader of the "N.L.L.", says he needs more time for keeping fit for football. He works till five, and then goes to evening classes. He wants to know of some indoor exercises in addition to dumb-bells and skipping. He should get an elastic exerciser when he has an opportunity. That will give him all the training he needs, in addition to skipping, etc.

Deserted!

A Midland correspondent asks me what he is to do about two young pigeons which have been deserted by their parents. The only course is to secure another pigeon to mother the unfortunate youngsters, which cannot fend for themselves.

Keenly Interested.

A Hendon reader sends me a fine sketch map of the country round St. Frank's. Here we have Edgemore, Bannington, Caistowe, and Bellton. My chum has quite got the hang of things. Congratulations! As there is no chance of publishing a map at present, I advise the numerous supporters who ask for a chart to be their own map-makers. Mr. Searles Brooks has made the details very clear.

The Heart of the Country.

A pal in Sussex says he is fed-up with the slowness of the place where he lives. It's a funny thing that people in towns sigh for the country, and *vice versa*. The Sussex grouser is quartered at a fine old farm in a pretty district, and it seems to me he might find lots of interest instead of complaining that there is "nothing doing." That applies to many places; there never is much doing unless you go and do it.

East Ham to Natal.

A London correspondent is worried because he sent a letter to a friend in Natal three or four weeks since and has not had an answer yet. Think of that now! I know these are hustling times, but the splendid mail service cannot perform miracles. I think my chum might practise patience for another fortnight. It is a long way to South Africa, and special

trains and boats are not waiting for every missive which is dropped into the letter box.

When He Has a Beard!

A Glamorgan enthusiast sends me a topping letter. He would rather miss his dinner than an edition of the "N.L.L." "I am positive that when I have a beard I will still be eagerly awaiting next Wednesday. I could fill many volumes with my praises of the good old paper." This is the sort of tribute that makes "Edwy" put on a special spurt.

CORRESPONDENTS WANTED.

Charles T. Browne, 74, Victoria Road, Lr. Edmonton, London, N.9, wishes to secure in good condition the "Monster" No. 4, also Nos. 2, 3, 11, 16, 17, 18, 21, 23, 28 of the N.L.L. new series. Will pay full price and postage.

L. Lambourne, 159, Cranbury Road, Reading, Berkshire, wishes to correspond with readers.

J. Hans, Acres Goodwood, Cape, South Africa, would like to hear from readers who require back numbers.

N. D. McLean, 16, 8th Avenue, Bez Valley, Johannesburg, Transvaal, South Africa, wishes to correspond with readers.

B. Coward, 271, Wandsworth Road, London, S.W.8, has room for more members in his cycling, stamp and hobby club.

L. Robbins, 55, Church Road, Mitcham, Surrey, wishes to obtain the back numbers of the "N.L.L." dealing with the adventures of St. Frank's in America and the East Anglia series; also the "Monster Lib." from No. 7.

Geo. C. Pearson, 63, Newbridge Road, Hull, wishes to correspond with readers anywhere, especially in Hull district; interested in clubs, stamps, sports, poetry, etc.

Robert William Pearce, 6, Mount Durand, St. Peter Port, Guernsey, Channel Islands, wishes to correspond with readers anywhere.

HOW TO GET YOUR SILVER MEDAL.

All holders of BRONZE MEDALS who have qualified for SILVER MEDALS (see instructions on Application Form opposite) and wish to exchange their medals for the higher award, should send their bronze medals, accompanied by a stamped addressed envelope, to the Chief Officer, the St. Frank's League, c/o the NELSON LEE LIBRARY, Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4. The SILVER MEDALS will then be sent to them.

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