

NELSON LEE

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THE MYSTERY MASTER!

... corking extra-long complete school yarn featuring Nipper and the cheery chums of St. Frank's.

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Tell Your Chums About These Extra-Long St. Frank's Yarns—

The MYSTERY



CHAPTER 1.

Something New in Housemasters!

"WHAT is it?" asked Vivian Travers gravely.

"No good asking me, old man," said Jimmy Potts, shaking his head. "It's strangely reminiscent of something I've seen before, but I'm jiggered if I can quite place it. And why it should be dumped in the Triangle is a mystery."

The two Removites had come out of the Ancient House at St. Frank's a minute or so earlier, and their attention had at once been attracted by the object which stood just at the bottom of the steps. Morning lessons were over, and as it was a half-holiday, and the

A fine all-round sportsman; one of the best—that's Mr. Wilkes, the new Housemaster. Yet he has a dark secret . . . known only to Bernard Forrest, rascal of the Remove!

day was hot and sunny, everybody was in the best of spirits.

Travers and Potts went down the steps and took a closer look at the object which had attracted their attention. It was a car; a four-seater tourer, with a drab body, battered wings, and untidy-looking hood.

At one time, no doubt, it had been quite a smart car; but its best days were over. All the polish had gone from the paintwork, and it was now blotchy and dull. The radiator, although bravely showing bright spots here and there, was brassy in places. The side wing was partially secured by wire, and the spare wheel was roped in position. Up the whole, a crock.

"Who the dickens did this?" demanded Edward Oswald Handforth, the famous leader of Study D, as he strode up with Church and McClure. "Who left this chunk of old iron in the Triangle?"

"Must have mistaken it for the dustheap," said Church, grinning. "Nobody seemed to know where the car had come from, or to whom it belonged. While the juniors were collecting round, all of them making disparaging re-

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MASTER!

By
Edwy
Searles Brooks.

marks, a figure appeared in the Ancient House doorway.

"Good gad!" murmured Archie Glenthorne, shuddering.

Whenever he caught sight of Mr. Alington Wilkes, he shuddered. He tried hard to check this tendency, but it was becoming increasingly difficult. There was something about the appearance of Mr. Alington Wilkes which affected Archie's finer feelings. First and foremost, there was Mr. Wilkes' trousers; then there was his Norfolk jacket, and his tweed hat.

Considering that Mr. Wilkes was the Housemaster of the Ancient House, his personal appearance was—in Archie's view—an everlasting disgrace. Those flannel trousers of his were two inches too short, and they were so baggy that they billowed round his knees like half-inflated balloons. His ancient Norfolk jacket was rucky and ink-stained, and—horror of horrors, as Archie now saw—the sleeves were actually frayed. His soft collar clung round his neck like a bandage, and his necktie was at least two points to starboard.

Mr. Wilkes was a newcomer; he had only taken charge of the Ancient House since the re-opening of the school, and he had been appointed because Mr. Nelson Lee had now become the Head.

"It's a pity the rag-and-bone man can't leave his old crock at the back when he comes for the empty bottles!" said Handforth. "Don't touch it, Mac, you ass! It'll fall to pieces if you do!"

Mr. Wilkes coughed slightly, thus advertising his presence. He walked down the steps, Archie Glenthorne watching him with a fascinated stare—quite unable to take his

eyes off the Housemaster's attire.

"Excuse me," said Mr. Wilkes gently. He climbed into the car, and fiddled about with the controls. "If one of you fellows is feeling energetic, he might wind her up," he suggested. "She's

quite safe—she won't kick."

"My only sainted aunt!" gurgled Handforth faintly. "Is—is she yours, sir?"

"I'm afraid so," replied Mr. Wilkes gravely.

He had heard Handforth's reference to the rag-and-bone man, and he had also heard one or two other caustic remarks. The juniors felt very uncomfortable. Never for a moment had they believed that this old crock of a car belonged to their Housemaster, otherwise their attempts at humour would have been less outspoken.

"I say, sir, we're awfully sorry!" said Travers apologetically.

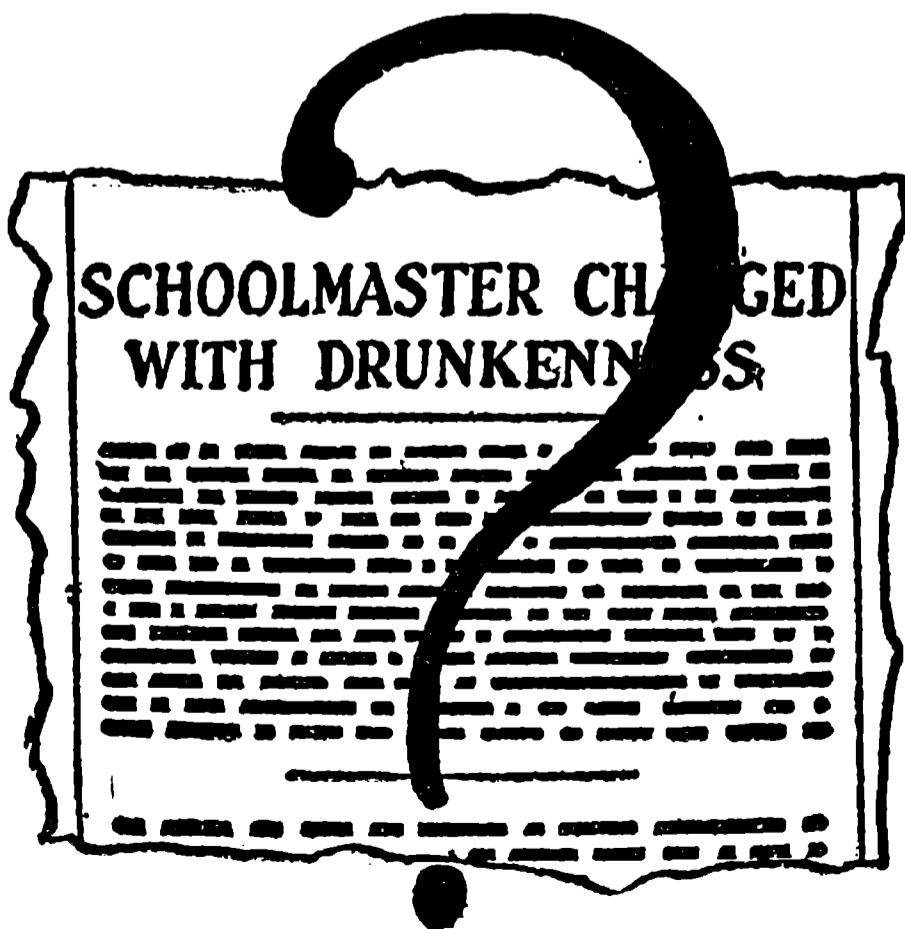
"Indeed? What have you to be sorry about?" asked Mr. Wilkes, turning his glasses upon Travers. "Handforth, you seem to be the nearest. What about turning that handle over? A strong pull and a long pull—you understand?"

"Yes, sir!" said Handforth briskly.

He leapt at the starting-handle and swung it over. The engine fired, spluttered, and settled down into a series of wheezes and clanks, while billows of smoke emerged from the rear.

"Would you believe it?" said Forrest. "It works!"

"And works well, old man," said Mr. Wilkes promptly. "People laugh at my old car, but she's been a faithful servant, and has never



once let me down. She gets there—and that, after all, is the best virtue of all in a car. I'm not saying that I would not like a new one, but new ones cost money."

He smiled amiably to all and sundry, let in the clutch, and the old car wheezed off towards the gates and vanished down the road.

"You rotter!" said Handforth, glaring at Forrest. "What do you mean by making such beastly, sarcastic remarks?"

Bernard Forrest shrugged his shoulders. He regarded Handforth insolently.

"Isn't this a case of the pot calling the kettle black?" he asked, with a sneer. "Didn't I hear you saying something about the rag-and-bone man?"

"Yes, dash it, but I didn't know then that the car belonged to Mr. Wilkes!" retorted Handforth hotly. "You make your caddish comments deliberately in his hearing—and that's a different thing!"

"If the man can't afford a better car than this, he didn't ought to have one," said Forrest sourly. "He's a disgrace to the school."

"A chap with pots of money, and with the finest of clothing, can be an even worse disgrace," remarked Travers pointedly. "As for Mr. Wilkes, he may be something of a freak, but he's one of the best. And if you're feeling inclined to insult him any more, Forrest, I shall have great pleasure in punching you."

"Oh, go and eat coke!" said Forrest.

He walked off, and Nipper and Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West came up at the same moment.

"Irene's coming up the road, Handy," said Nipper carelessly.

"By George! Really?" said Handforth eagerly. "Eh? What if she is?" he added, with assumed indifference. "You don't think I'm going to run out to meet her, do you?"

All the same, he moved off towards the gates with an eager light in his eyes. Irene Manners was his own particular girl chum, and he was always pleased to see her. His disappointment was great, therefore, when he discovered, on looking down the road, that about ten other Moor View girls were with Irene.

"Anything wrong, old son?" asked Nipper, giving Archie a curious look. "What are you star-gazing for? Snap out of it!"

Archibald Winston Derek Glenthorne snapped out of it.

"Frightfully sorry, dear old thing, but I haven't quite got over the shock yet," he confessed. "I mean to say, that blighter of a Wilkes! No offence, of course, because he's really one of the jolly old best. A top-notch, and all that. But he really oughtn't to be allowed to dither all over the school in that frightful get-up!"

"I expect he's comfortable, anyhow," grinned Nipper.

"Odds excuses and pretexts!" protested Archie. "Is that any justification for the chappie's baggy trousers? I mean, they give me a pain down the old spine every time I see them! It wouldn't be half so bad if he

wore a gown, but he sheds the dashed thing before he comes out of doors!"

"It's the man that counts, Archie—not his clothes," growled Handforth. "Take me, for example. I'm not particular about my clobber—"

"I think, dear old cheddar, that we'll drop the subject," said Archie hastily. "When you remind me of your own dashed untidiness I go dithery at the knees. And I'm dashed if Mr. Wilkes doesn't encourage you by setting an example!"

They were all at the gates now, and within a few minutes the girls came up. The St. Frank's fellows were quick to notice that there was a new face amongst them. Irene was there, and Winnie Pitt, Doris Berkeley, Molly Stapleton, Marjorie Temple, and two or three other familiar figures. But there was also a stranger—a slim, graceful, fair-haired girl with blue eyes.

"These are some of the fellows we were telling you about, Vera," Irene was saying. "You needn't be afraid of them. They look pretty awful, I know, but they can't help it. It's their misfortune. They're all right when you get to know them."

"That's awfully decent of you, Irene," said Travers gratefully.

"Well, I thought I'd just put Vera at her ease," laughed Irene. "She's a new girl, you know—only joined Moor View this morning."

Handforth was looking at Vera eagerly. He had a propensity for "falling" for any new pretty face. And Vera was fair. Handforth always fell much more heavily, and much more swiftly, for fair hair and blue eyes.

"I say, this is pretty good!" he exclaimed cheerfully. "Introduce me, Irene! I didn't know you had any new girls at your school."

"Vera wasn't coming until the new term, really, but her father and mother thought that she had better start at once," said Doris. "She's—"

"We can't hear anything while this noise is going on," interrupted Jimmy Potts. "Let's wait until this blessed car goes by."

"My hat! It's old Wilkes!" said Handforth, with a grin. "Look out, you girls! He's turning in here with that giddy box of tricks!"

Mr. Wilkes' car was returning. His journey had been very brief. The old car was coming along splendidly, the only drawback being the accompanying noise. The St. Frank's fellows and the Moor View girls backed away from the gates so that Mr. Wilkes should have free entry.

"You haven't seen our new Housemaster yet, have you?" asked Travers, with a chuckle. "Just you wait, girls! He's a coughdrop!"

"Really?" asked Vera, the new girl.

"The giddy limit in Housemasters," said Handforth, eager to make himself pleasant, "I should describe him as a freak."

"A freak?" repeated Vera, her voice dangerously chilly.

"In fact, a scarecrow," declared Handforth.
"Oh!"

"I don't wonder you're surprised," said Edward Oswald, grinning, and failing to observe the danger signal in her eyes. "If you didn't know who he was, you'd mistake him for the chap who comes round to empty the dustbins. His clothes are the limit, and he needs a hair-cut, and his moustache seems to have run wild. You never saw such a rummy-looking merchant in all your life!"

"Really?" said Vera coldly. "And this man you're talking about is your House-master? Do you think it is quite respectful to—"

"Oh, he's all right himself!" interrupted Handforth generously. "In fact, I believe he's a proper sport. But you can't get away from the fact that he's an absolute freak."

"You wait till you get a close look at him!" grinned Potts.

"You'll have a good laugh," added one of the others.

"I'll have a close look at him now," said Vera, nodding.

Mr. Wilkes' car had slowed down, and instead of turning into the gateway it now came to a stop. To the amazement of the juniors, the new Moor View girl jumped upon the footboard, and, after a flashing glance of indignation at the boys, she smiled cheerily at the man at the wheel.

"Hallo, daddy!" she said, kissing him.

CHAPTER 2.

Forrest Makes a Discovery!

"O H, my only sainted aunt!" breathed Handforth despairingly.

He had turned as red as a beet-root. He experienced that sensation which one gets in a crowded room when one has accidentally "put his foot in it." The other juniors felt that they wanted the ground to open up and swallow them. There was an awful silence.

"You're a nice one!" said Mr. Wilkes reproachfully, although his eyes twinkled with good-humour. "What do you mean by giving me this wasted journey, young lady? I've been to the station to meet you."

"I'm awfully sorry, daddy, but I came by an early train," explained Vera. "I never dreamed that you'd come to meet me, or I would have sent you a wire. I've just been introduced to some of your boys. I'm terribly, terribly sorry for you, daddy," she added sympathetically.

Mr. Wilkes chuckled.

"They're all right," he replied. "I'll admit they're a funny-looking crowd, and when I first saw them I was sorry for myself. But I'm beginning to change my mind—as you'll change yours soon."

He drove on, chuckling.

"I say, you know!" burst out Handforth. "I hope you'll forgive us, Miss Wilkes! We—we didn't know that he was your father!"

"I don't suppose you did," replied Vera coldly. "Otherwise you wouldn't have called him a freak. Lots of people say that I'm exactly like him!"

"Oh, my hat!" said Travers. "There is a resemblance, now that I come to think of it. But I don't mean that you're a freak, Miss Wilkes. I mean—"

"I think," interrupted Vera, "that it'll be a lot better if you don't attempt any explanations. You'll only make it worse. It's shameful of you to run daddy down like that," she went on indignantly. "How dare you criticise his clothes and his hair and his moustache! He's the best man living!"

"He's a brick!" said Nipper stoutly.

"Mummy and I have talked ourselves hoarse, trying to make daddy wear something really decent," went on Vera despairingly. "We're always telling him to have his hair cut, and that he'd look a lot better clean-shaven."

"Then—then you really agree with us?" asked Handforth, staring.

"Of course I do!" said the girl warmly. "I think that daddy looks dreadful—but it doesn't make me feel any better, does it, to hear you boys saying the same thing?"

Irene laughed.

"Life's too short for us to squabble over your dad's clothing," she said briskly. "These chaps are O.K., Vera. You can take our word for it. See you later, Ted; we've got to get on now. I suppose you'll leave us here, Vera?"

"I suppose so," said the new girl reluctantly.

"Leave you?" repeated Nipper.

"She's only a day-girl, you know," explained Mary Summers. "Her people live so close that there's no sense in her boarding in."

"You—you mean that you're going to live in the Ancient House?" asked Handforth, looking at Vera in wonder.

"It's a perfectly horrid prospect, with all you boys about, but I'm hoping to survive," replied Vera sorrowfully. "Well, cheerio, you girls! I'm awfully glad to have met you. I shan't feel so strange when I start to-morrow."

She ran through the gateway and was gone before Nipper and Handforth and the others could stop her—they having mentally decided to provide an escort. Irene & Co went on their own way.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth, taking a deep breath.

"I say, you Old-Timers, what was that vision which just floated past us?" asked Kirby Keeble Parkington, as he approached with Deeks and Goffin, his bosom pals. "Went into our House, too."

"She lives there," said Nipper.

"Lives there?" repeated K. K., staring at the Ancient House in a dreamy way. "Sweet-

hearts, this is good news we hear! And how comes it that such a fair damsel should be thrust amongst so much dross?"

"She's old Wilkes' daughter."

"Better and better!" said K. K. enthusiastically. "I feel like singing. So our worthy Housemaster, in spite of his shortcomings in general appearance, has the good sense to possess a pretty daughter."

"Her mother's here, too, I understand," said Nipper.

"I can already see myself sitting down at the Wilkes' tea-table," declared Parkington. "Ordinarily, such a tea-table would be drab and uninteresting; but with that fair-haired young maid sitting opposite—"

"Don't you flatter yourself, you ass!" interrupted Handforth tartly. "If anybody's going to sit at that table, it's me!"

"My only hat!" groaned Church. "I believe the hulking ass is smitten!"

"Who are you calling a hulking ass?" asked Handforth, staring.

"You!" roared Church. "Every time you see a pretty girl, you fall in love! You're not safe to have about the place! What about Irene? You're always pretending that she's your sweetheart, and yet—"

"My sweetheart?" gasped Handforth, turning red.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, your special chum!" growled Church, exasperated. "You keep your giddy hands off Mr. Wilkes' daughter. You don't suppose she'll look at you now, do you? She won't forget that you called her pater a freak and a scarecrow and a rag-and-bone man!"

"I didn't!" denied Handforth stoutly. "I never said a word about a rag-and-bone man. I only said he's like the chap who empties the dustbins."

"Of course, she'll like that a lot better!" said Church tartly. "You keep your giddy hands off Miss Vera!"

"Hear, hear!" said K. K., with approval. "Miss Vera, eh? The one name of all names that I like the best! Just you watch me make a hit with her!"

He strolled off, and the other fellows dispersed—leaving Church to face the full blast from Edward Oswald Handforth. It wasn't often that either Church or McClure let fly at their burly leader, but when they did they made up for lost time; and in such cases he was generally so flabbergasted that he never took action.

Handforth was particularly exasperated because Kirby Keeble Parkington was displaying an interest in Vera Wilkes; he didn't realise that K. K.'s interest was solely—at the moment—concerned with his desire to "put one over" on his rivals.

Things were rather different at St. Frank's nowadays. The old rivalry still existed between the Remove and the Fourth; but the Remove had a private feud of its own—a feud which was constantly seething and bubbling over and simmering down again.

K. K. was a red-hot live wire, and he and his eleven supporters—known as the Red-Hots—were frankly and openly "up against" Nipper and the Old-Timers in general. There was something very healthy and exhilarating in this rivalry. K. K. was one of the best—a sportsman to his finger-tips.

His quick brain instantly saw an opportunity here of getting one in against the Old-Timers. Apparently they had offended Vera owing to a misunderstanding, and this had given K. K. an idea.

As luck would have it, he encountered Vera in West Square as she was about to enter the Housemaster's private door. He raised his cap politely, and Vera gave the red-headed junior a chilly glance.

"Can I help?" asked K. K. brightly. "I mean, if you're looking for somebody—"

"No, thank you," interrupted the girl. "I'm just going indoors."

"Then it's a good thing I came along," said Parkington promptly. "I've saved you from making a bit of a mistake. You can't go in that way—it's the Housemaster's private door. Visitors, you know, must use the other entrance."

Vera paused. To her it seemed obvious that this boy did not know who she was.

"Would the Housemaster be very angry?" she asked innocently.

"Angry? Bless your heart, no!" replied K. K., overjoyed at this helpful cue, which he had hardly dared to hope for. "Mr. Wilkes is one of the best! He's a new man here, you know."

"Yes, I think I've heard of him," said Vera, nodding. "I believe some of the boys regard him as a freak, don't they?"

"You mustn't take any notice of those silly Old-Timers," replied K. K. "Mr. Wilkes is a gift! You don't know how lucky we are to have such a corker of a Housemaster! A sportsman, a ripper from tip to toe. We haven't seen much of him yet, but what we have seen proves that he's twenty-two carat."

"Doesn't he dress—funnily?"

"Oh, well, as to that—" K. K. paused, sensing that he was on delicate ground. To praise Mr. Wilkes' clothing might be a strategical blunder, for this girl looked highly intelligent, and she would smell a rat. "Well, as to that, what do clothes amount to, anyway?" said K. K. carelessly. "Mr. Wilkes is a bit original with his clobber, but who cares? Good luck to him! He's one of these people who believes in comfort before appearance."

"That's one way of looking at it," admitted Vera. "I'm ever so glad you are so sensible. I'm always telling him about his clothes—"

"You?" interrupted Parkington, staring. "I—I mean—"

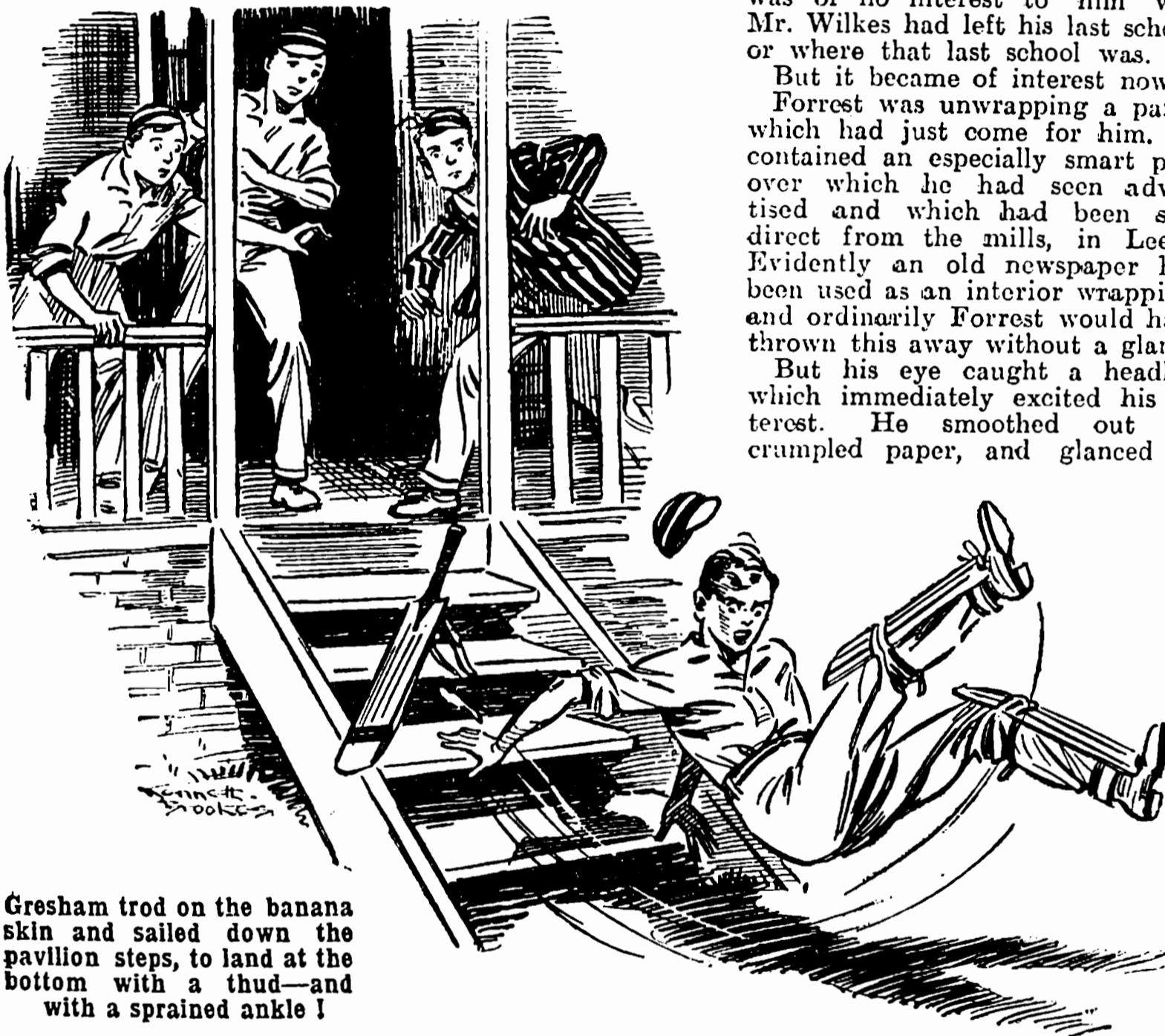
"Mr. Wilkes happens to be my father," explained Vera, smiling.

"Oh, I say! That's jolly good news!" ejaculated K. K. eagerly. "For the last two

minutes I've been wondering who you reminded me of. Of course! You've got the same noble brow, the same fine eyes, the same— Oh, well, it's only to be expected that Mr. Wilkes should have a peach of a daughter, isn't it?"

"Don't be silly," said Vera, laughing.

"I suppose you've only just arrived?" went on K. K. "How about looking round the school? I'd take it as a great honour if you'd let me trot you along."



Gresham trod on the banana skin and sailed down the pavillion steps, to land at the bottom with a thud—and with a sprained ankle!

"I should love to look round, and thank you for offering to escort me," smiled the girl.

A minute later they were out in the Triangle, laughing and chatting together, and strolling about as though they had known one another for years. The Old-Timers opened their eyes wide, and there was something like consternation in the camp when K. K. and Vera disappeared through Big Arch.

"He's done it!" said Nipper, breathing hard. "My only hat! We knew that K. K. was a fast worker, but he's greased lightning this morning! He said he'd make a hit with her, didn't he?"

"He's scored a bull's-eye!" said Handforth, with feeling.

BERNARD FORREST, alone in Study A, chanced upon a discovery at about that time which brought an excited gleam to his crafty eyes.

He was so surprised at the purely accidental nature of his find that he realised the truth of the old saying that "truth is stranger than fiction." Until this moment he hadn't given a single thought to Mr. Alington Wilkes, and he hadn't cared two straws about the new Housemaster. It was of no interest to him why Mr. Wilkes had left his last school, or where that last school was.

But it became of interest now.

Forrest was unwrapping a parcel which had just come for him. It contained an especially smart pull-over which he had seen advertised and which had been sent direct from the mills, in Leeds. Evidently an old newspaper had been used as an interior wrapping, and ordinarily Forrest would have thrown this away without a glance.

But his eye caught a headline which immediately excited his interest. He smoothed out the crumpled paper, and glanced at

the item with curiosity. Then he jumped nearly a foot into the air.

"Good gad!" he ejaculated, staring.

The paragraph was a short one, and it wasn't particularly prominent, but the wording was startling:

"SCHOOLMASTER CHARGED WITH DRUNKENNESS.

"A man who was found lying in the gutter late last night in Rendell has been identified as Mr. Alington Wilkes, a Housemaster at Rendell School. He was found helpless and incapable by a police-constable, and was unable to give

any explanation of his condition. He is to be brought before the magistrates on a charge of drunkenness this morning."

Forrest read that paragraph again and again; he read it until he knew almost every word by heart. What a lever! The only fellow in the school to know of this disgraceful incident in Mr. Wilkes' history!

"Great Scott!" muttered Forrest, sitting down abruptly. "So this is the man we've got as our new Housemaster! What a confounded fool!"

Forrest did not consider Mr. Wilkes a fool for being drunk, but for allowing himself to be found out. He looked at the paper with greater interest than ever, and found that it was six weeks old. It was a local Yorkshire paper.

"Of course, a thing like this wouldn't get into the big dailies," muttered Forrest. "It's of no interest except to local people. Rendell? I've heard of it, of course—and I believe Rendell School is a pretty big place. Phew! Only six weeks ago! Just time for the beggar to clear out and live it down. I'll bet the St. Frank's governors don't know of this!"

But Bernard Forrest did—and he meant to keep it to himself.

CHAPTER 3.

Saints v. River House!

IT was an important afternoon for the St. Frank's Junior Eleven.

Cricket was still reigning at St. Frank's—although King Football was fast approaching. Nipper was enormously keen. Of late, owing to his activities in Nelson Lee's Detective Academy, he had had no opportunities for cricket or football. So he was brimming with enthusiasm.

This afternoon's game was against the River House School—old rivals of the Saints. Hal Brewster and his merry men came over full of confidence. They had had a very successful season, winning practically all their matches. This was mainly due to the fact that Mr. Edwards, their sports master, regularly played in the eleven. Mr. Edwards was quite a young man, fresh from the University, and he was a splendid cricketer.

"If you fellows think I oughtn't to be in the team, just say so," observed Mr. Edwards chattily, as he talked with the St. Frank's cricketers. "But it's as broad as it's long, you know; you're at liberty to include a master in your side if you want to—or if you've got one who can play," he added dryly.

"We're only too pleased that you are playing, sir," replied Nipper. "And may the best team win."

Privately, he expressed his doubts.

"This bird's a hot 'un!" he said to Travers and Gresham. "He's been collecting runs like any other chap collects cigarette cards. He's taken more wickets than any other bowler in the River House Eleven."

"But he hasn't met a team like ours yet, dear old fellow," said Travers optimistically.

The game started with St. Frank's batting, Nipper having won the toss. And it wasn't long before Mr. Edwards proved that he was a real terror with the leather.

With the score standing at 20, Nipper's wicket fell. Both he and Handforth had been in trouble with Mr. Edwards' bowling, and they were obliged to treat it with the utmost respect. Nipper stepped out to hit one to the boundary, missed the ball altogether, and his leg stump went sprawling. Other disasters followed.

Handforth, ever reckless, began to feel that he was set, and his respect for Mr. Edwards' bowling diminished. As for Glynn, who was bowling at the other end, there was no need to respect him at all. And Handforth paid the penalty for this self-confidence. For Glynn's bowling did command respect. Handy, hitting out with boisterous enthusiasm, was staggered to see the ball swoop round his bat and lift off the rails.

"Great Scott!" gasped Handforth. "And I've only scored six! What about my century?"

"Next time, old man," said Ascott, who was wicket-keeper.

Edward Oswald, consoling himself with a banana as he squatted on the pavilion steps, did not improve matters for his side by throwing away the banana skin so carelessly that Gresham trod on it. Gresham sailed down the steps and landed flat on his back at the bottom. When he tried to get to his feet he found that his left ankle was badly ricked.

"Is it really serious?" asked Nipper anxiously. "I'm relying on you, old man. I'm expecting you and Travers to make a stand—"

"Can't be done!" interrupted Gresham ruefully. "I can't play with an ankle like this. You'll have to shove somebody else in. I'd like to know who the dickens left that banana skin on the steps? Of all the idiotic—"

"I must have done it," said Handforth, with concern. "I say, Gresham, I'm awfully sorry! I'd no idea—"

A roar interrupted him. Mr. Edwards had just collared Travers' wicket, and Travers was walking back to the pavilion.

"That's done it!" groaned Nipper. "Travers out—and you can't play. Where's the next man?"

"Sure you can't play, Gresham?" asked Handforth anxiously.

"I can't even walk," replied Gresham, with sorrow. "It'll be a week before I can trot along without limping. Why can't you be more careful, Handy? Twenty-seven for three, and our best men gone!"

Mr. Wilkes, who was sitting near by, rose to his feet and edged up.

"Forgive me for interrupting, old man," he said, placing a hand on Nipper's shoulder. "Do I understand that your next man isn't ready?"

"We'll find him in a minute, sir, thanks," said Nipper. "Buzz round, some of you chaps, and see what's become of Reggie Pitt."

"Splendid," beamed Mr. Wilkes. "If you can find your man, all well and good. But I was only thinking—"

"Pitt's bunked indoors for something," came a hail from Jack Grey.

"You mustn't blame him," continued Mr. Wilkes gently. "It is really Gresham's turn to go in, and he seems to be incapacitated. If you are short of a substitute, I am willing to fill the breach."

"You, sir?" asked Nipper, startled.

"Only a suggestion, of course," said Mr. Wilkes hastily.

Nipper felt hot. Why on earth should the Housemaster offer himself like this? It was most embarrassing. Jolly decent of him, of course—the man in the emergency sort of thing—but it was so frightfully difficult to say "No" to your own Housemaster.

"It's very decent of you, sir," said Nipper awkwardly.

"Not at all," replied Mr. Wilkes. "If you don't want me, say so. I shan't be in the least offended. But it occurred to me that as the opposing team had a master in it, it would help to even matters up if I played—providing, of course, that Brewster is willing."

"Yes, of course, sir," said Nipper feebly.

He lost some of his respect for Mr. Wilkes' intelligence. Couldn't the man understand that there were masters and masters? The simple fact that he was a master didn't make him a cricketer; and instead of helping the game, he would only make a hash of it. He wasn't even sports master, as Mr. Edwards was.

"Of course, I see your point, sir," went on Nipper, feeling that it was up to him to say something. "Thanks very much, sir. Gresham, old man, perhaps you'll lend Mr. Wilkes your pads?"

"Pleasure!" murmured Gresham, unfastening them.

There was an ominous silence as Mr. Wilkes fiddled about with the pads. The other fellows secretly sympathised with Nipper. They realised that he couldn't very well have done anything else in the circumstances.

A MURMUR, rising to a titter of laughter, went round the field as the next man was seen to be coming out of the pavilion. The juniors were both astonished and mortified.

Bad as it was for this freak of a Housemaster to play, his appearance made the whole thing doubly bad. He wasn't even in flannels. His baggy grey trousers looked baggier than ever; he had removed his Norfolk jacket and was actually in his shirt sleeves. Archie Glenthorne, who was taking

his ease in a deck chair, took one look at Mr. Wilkes, turned pale, and promptly collapsed.

The River House fellows were openly grinning. Brewster had raised no objections. He felt matters were evened up now, for both teams had a master in their ranks.

"Give him a scorcher, Glynn, old man," murmured Hal. "With all due respect to his position as Housemaster, I really think we can do without him. It rather seems to me that he spoils the view."

"If I don't get him, Mr. Edwards will," grinned Glynn. "Don't worry—he won't last the over."

Anything more unlike a cricketer than Mr. Wilkes was difficult to imagine. He was lean, long, and loose-jointed, and when he took guard he crouched over his bat in a singularly awkward fashion.

"This isn't a game—it's a joke!" said Travers bitterly. "I don't believe the man's ever played cricket in his life! Why can't he stick to tiddley-winks?"

"Glynn's bowling to him—look!" said Nipper. "I'm feeling frightfully cut up about this, you know. Wilkes is such a good sort. He'll only make himself a laughing stock. Out first ball, I'll bet!"

But Mr. Wilkes wasn't. As the bowler released the leather from his grip, to send it hissing down the pitch, Mr. Wilkes seemed to unwind himself. He rose from his crouching attitude, his bat swung up, and there was a click. The ball, driven with terrific force, went right outside the ground for a 6.

"Ye gods and little fishes!" gurgled Travers. "A fluke, of course!"

"Fool's luck!" nodded Jimmy Potts.

This was the obvious explanation of such a hit. It seemed impossible, of course, that Mr. Wilkes could do it again. Curiously enough, he did—not immediately, but ten minutes later. In the meantime, he carelessly knocked up three boundaries, two 2's, and a single here and there.

The Removites and the Fourth-Formers ceased to rub their eyes. They marvelled just the same, but the conviction was growing upon them that Mr. Alington Wilkes not only knew something about cricket, but more than the whole Junior Eleven put together.

"We owe him an apology, you fellows," said Nipper, his eyes gleaming. "We didn't actually throw doubts on his prowess, but he must have seen that we regarded him as a nuisance. A nuisance, by Jove! That man's a wonder!"

"A giddy surprise packet!" said Handforth. "By George! Did you see that? Oh, well hit, sir!"

"Mr. Wilkes has played cricket for years," said Travers, with conviction.

A roar of applause went up when Mr. Wilkes got his fifty. In the meantime, other fellows came and went. Mr. Edwards took wicket after wicket, but he could make no impression whatsoever on the new Housemaster.

By this time other people had been attracted round the field. A thing like this got talked

about. Fifth-Formers and Sixth-Formers strolled up casually, just to take a look—and they stayed. Watching Mr. Wilkes was an education.

There was nothing remarkable in the fact that Mr. Wilkes should score freely in a Junior match. It wasn't a great feat—except in the sense that he wasn't expected to score at all. But nothing could alter the fact that Mr. Edwards was a brilliant bowler, far above the Junior average, and that Mr. Wilkes treated his bowling just the same as the rest.

He stayed right in till the end, carrying his own total to 87, while the rest of the Junior Eleven collected 96. The total for the innings was 191, including byes. A storm of cheering greeted Mr. Wilkes as he walked back to the pavilion.

"Well done, sir!" said Nipper enthusiastically. "By Jove, sir, you gave us a surprise!"

"We all like to do our best, old man," said Mr. Wilkes.

"Why didn't you tell us that you were so hot at cricket, sir?" asked Handforth, almost indignantly. "I'll bet you have played a lot this summer."

"I've played, certainly," agreed Mr. Wilkes, smiling.

"I'll believe anything now," went on Handforth. "It wouldn't surprise me to hear that Mr. Wilkes has played for his county. Have you, sir?" he added bluntly.

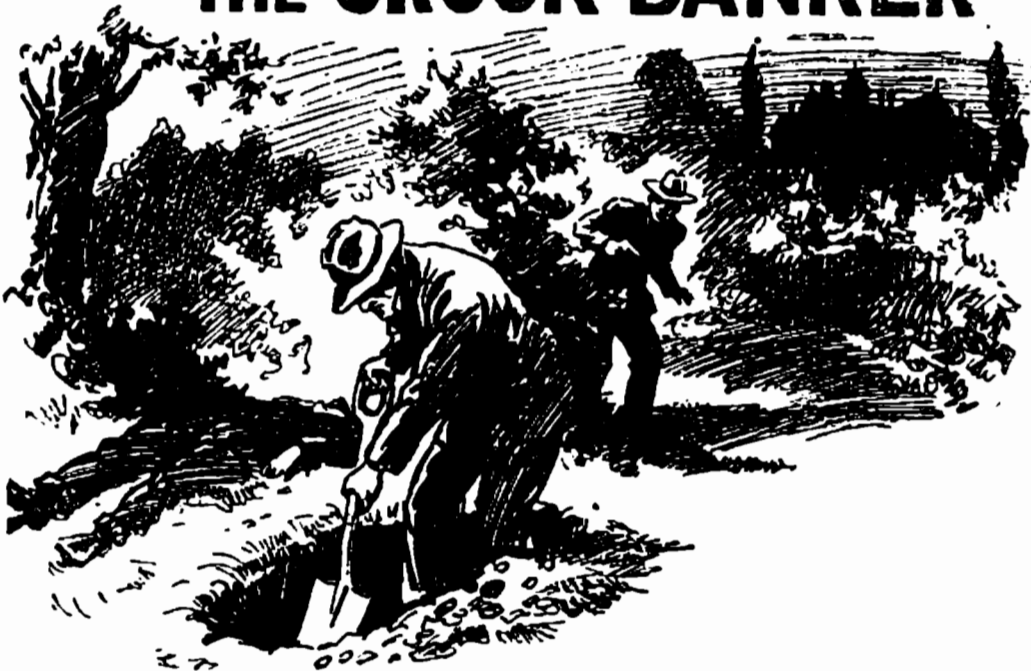
"Why, yes," replied the Housemaster. "I have played once or twice for my county this season, but it is rather difficult for a schoolmaster to get away!"

"What did I tell you?" breathed Handforth, after Mr. Wilkes had gone. "My only hat! A giddy county man—and we laughed at him!"

"Which only proves, dear old fellow, how rash it is to judge by appearances," said Travers, shaking his head.

The River House fellows were not looking so confident now. They had raised no objection to the inclusion of Mr. Wilkes, and they

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were prepared to stand by the result; but it was an undeniable fact that he had thrown a spanner into the works. The visitors needed nearly 200 to win. Not a frightful amount, but formidable enough after your three best men have been dismissed in the first over.

For Mr. Wilkes hadn't finished surprising the Saints yet.

Partly out of politeness, and partly because Nipper wanted to see what Mr. Wilkes could do with the leather, he asked the new master to open the bowling. Mr. Wilkes had admitted that he could bowl a bit. The crowd blessed Nipper for this move. Watching Mr. Wilkes' bowling was a joy. He took a long run with enormous strides, changed feet twice in a series of little hops, and then unleashed the leather like a human catapult.

The first two balls were well off the wicket, and the length was not as good as it might have been. The third ball was a full toss, at which the batsman swiped hard. It looked a certain boundary, but Mr. Wilkes, leaping sideways, fielded it brilliantly at full length amid much applause. He walked back for the next delivery.

It was a beauty. The ball turned and whipped out the middle stump, having completely beaten the batsman. Mr. Wilkes then calmly proceeded to complete the hat-trick with the last two balls of the over.

The next man in feebly spooned the ball into cover's ready hands. A roar went up. Not a run on the board, and two wickets down! There was a tense hush when Mr. Wilkes sent down the last ball of the over. It was another of those stingers, with terrific spin on it. The batsman thought it was going wide, but it snicked in and knocked the off-stump flying.

"Hurrah!"

"Well bowled, sir!"

"The hat-trick, by Jove!"

"A fluke!" protested Mr. Wilkes uncomfortably, as the cricketers swarmed round him. "I've never done the hat-trick in my life before. Really, you asses! I tell you it was a fluke."

"Never mind that, sir—you're a giddy marvel!" said Nipper enthusiastically.

And so great was his delight that he slapped Mr. Wilkes on the back before he could stop himself. It was an unforgivable familiarity. Mr. Wilkes, however, seemed to like it.

CHAPTER 4.

Forrest Makes a Move!

BEFORE long the result of the match was a foregone conclusion. Wickets continued to fall rapidly, and Hal Brewster and his River House cricketers suffered the worst defeat of the season. When the last wicket fell their total was 77.

"You played a great game, sir," said Mr. Edwards, as he shook hands with the new Housemaster.

"I'm afraid my inclusion was hardly fair——" began Mr. Wilkes.

"Cheese it, sir!" interrupted Hal Brewster.

Mr. Wilkes was heartily cheered by his own boys as he walked back to the Ancient House with Vera. She, of course, had been watching eagerly, and there was a very contented look in her eyes.

"My hat! And we 'called this chap a freak!" said Handforth, breathing hard. "Whoever would have thought that he could play cricket like that? The man's a swindlo! He looks so awkward and ungainly—so absolutely useless—and yet he turns out to be a giddy champion!"

"Perhaps he'll turn out to be something else one of these days," remarked Forrest, who was close by.

Handforth halted.

"What the dickens do you mean by that, you rotter?" he asked suspiciously. "There was a beastly sneer in your voice, and you meant something nasty."

"Did I?" retorted Forrest coolly. "Well, perhaps I did. Perhaps there's something nasty about Mr. Wilkes. Who knows?"

He walked off chuckling.

"The miserable cad!" fumed Handforth. "I'll punch his nose——"

"Steady, old man!" said McClure, seizing Handforth's arm. "No need to get excited over that cad. He can't help saying beastly things—it's his nature. Forget it! He isn't worth punching."

Near West Arch Forrest ran into Dicky Jones, of the Third. Although Dicky tried to dodge, he was just too late.

"Hold on!" said Bernard, grabbing the fag's arm. "Trying to escape me, eh? Did you go to the village as I told you?"

"No, I didn't."

"Why not?"

"Because I hadn't time, for one thing," replied Dicky. "We had a match on in the Third, and I was wanted. Besides that, I'm not supposed to run errands for you, Forrest. I don't fag for Remove chaps. You know jolly well it isn't allowed."

"No?" said Forrest ominously. "Well, you'd better understand, my lad, that I'm different. I'm not one of these chaps who sticks to the hidebound rules and regulations. If I say——"

"You'd better be careful!" warned Dicky Jones desperately, as he caught sight of Mr. Crowell striding across the Triangle. "Chuck it, Forrest! You silly ass, there's somebody——"

"Oh, no!" broke in Forrest sourly. "You can't fool me like that. I'm going to make you howl, my son! Next time, perhaps, you'll obey me!"

With a sudden jerk he twisted the fag round, grasping both his arms and placing his knee in the small of Dicky's back. The fag didn't squeal, for, although this was a blatant case of bullying, he had no wish to get Forrest into trouble.

"Stop!" he gasped. "Mr. Crowell's look-

ing at you— Oh! Oh, I say, you rotter! You're breaking my arm!"

"I've hardly started yet!" snapped Forrest.

Mr. Crowell strode up grimly.

"Very nice—very pretty!" he commented.

"What do you think you're doing, Forrest?"

Forrest relaxed his hold on the fag as though he had become red-hot.

"I—I— Hallo, sir!" he said, startled.

"I didn't know you were anywhere about, sir."

"I can quite believe it," said the Form-master, as he shot a swift glance at Dicky Jones' pale face. "Are you hurt much, Jones?"

"No, sir," lied Dicky. "Not hurt at all, sir. He—he was only larking about, sir. I'm all right."

But Mr. Crowell had not been born yesterday.

"You'd better go indoors, Jones," he said—and Dicky cut off. "Now, Forrest, you'll come indoors with me. Ordinarily I should deal with you myself, but this is such a flagrant case of brutality towards a younger boy that I feel impelled to turn you over to your Housemaster."

"I didn't hurt him, sir!" protested Forrest with feigned indignation. "You heard what he said—"

"Young Jones, I take it, knows you very well, Forrest," interrupted Mr. Crowell curtly. "He may have been afraid of what you would do afterwards if he told the truth; but I prefer to believe that he lied because his schoolboy code of honour forbade him to give you away. However, I saw enough. You're nearly twice his size, Forrest, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"But look here, sir—"

"I don't want to hear any more!" snapped the Form-master. "Come with me!"

They found the Housemaster in his own study, and Mr. Crowell explained his mission. Mr. Wilkes listened grimly.

"I'm sorry you couldn't punish this boy yourself, Mr. Crowell," said the Housemaster when he had heard. "You know him better than I do, but I quite see your point. We certainly can't have this sort of thing going on."

"Mr. Crowell's mistaken, sir," said Forrest boldly. "I didn't hurt young Jones at all. He even said so. Mr. Crowell heard him."

"I also heard Jones' gasp of agony," retorted Mr. Crowell. "What I see with my own eyes I believe. It isn't often that we are allowed to catch a glimpse of this sort of thing, Mr. Wilkes, and I am only too glad that I caught the boy red-handed."

"I think you'd better leave him to me, Mr. Crowell," said the Housemaster.

Mr. Crowell bowed, and retired. As soon as the door closed Forrest's manner changed. He seemed to lose his uncasiness. He became cool, and there was an insolent expression on his face. Mr. Crowell's departure suited him perfectly.

"Now we'll have a little talk, Forrest," said Mr. Wilkes, sitting back in his chair. "Does it give you any pleasure to twist the arms of younger boys? Perhaps you don't quite realise what injuries you might inflict by such methods?"

"Mr. Crowell's an old fusser, sir," said Forrest, with a sniff. "I didn't hurt Jones in the least."

"Well, I'm going to punish you all the same, Forrest," said Mr. Wilkes. "I am compelled to accept Mr. Crowell's version, and I believe that you acted brutally. You'll have to write me a thousand lines."

Forrest laughed.

"That's a pretty tall order, sir, and I think you'll change your mind," he said coolly. "I'm going to be very busy this week, one way and another, and I shan't have any time for lines."

"Really?" said Mr. Wilkes, with an ominous note in his voice. "That's very interesting, Forrest."

"Isn't it, sir?" said Forrest insolently. "There's something else interesting, too—and I rather think that it'll be particularly interesting to you. I dare say you've seen this before, sir?"

With exasperating slowness, he took a newspaper cutting from his pocket, unfolded it, and held it on the table so that Mr. Wilkes should have a clear, uninterrupted view.

CHAPTER 5.

Mr. Wilkes' Way!

MR. ALINGTON WILKES leaned forward, adjusted his glasses, and remained perfectly still. But Bernard Forrest, who was watching closely, easily detected the hard glint which suddenly appeared in the Housemaster's eyes. It was a glint of alarm; of consternation. Mr. Wilkes did not move a muscle, but when he looked up some of the colour had gone from his face.

"Yes," he said slowly, "you are right, Forrest. This is very interesting."

"I thought you'd think so, sir," said Forrest, pocketing the cutting again.

"Let me see that more closely."

"If you don't mind, sir, I'll leave it where it is," replied Forrest, with a grin. "It might be difficult to obtain another copy. You see, the newspaper is six weeks old—and it's a Yorkshire newspaper at that."

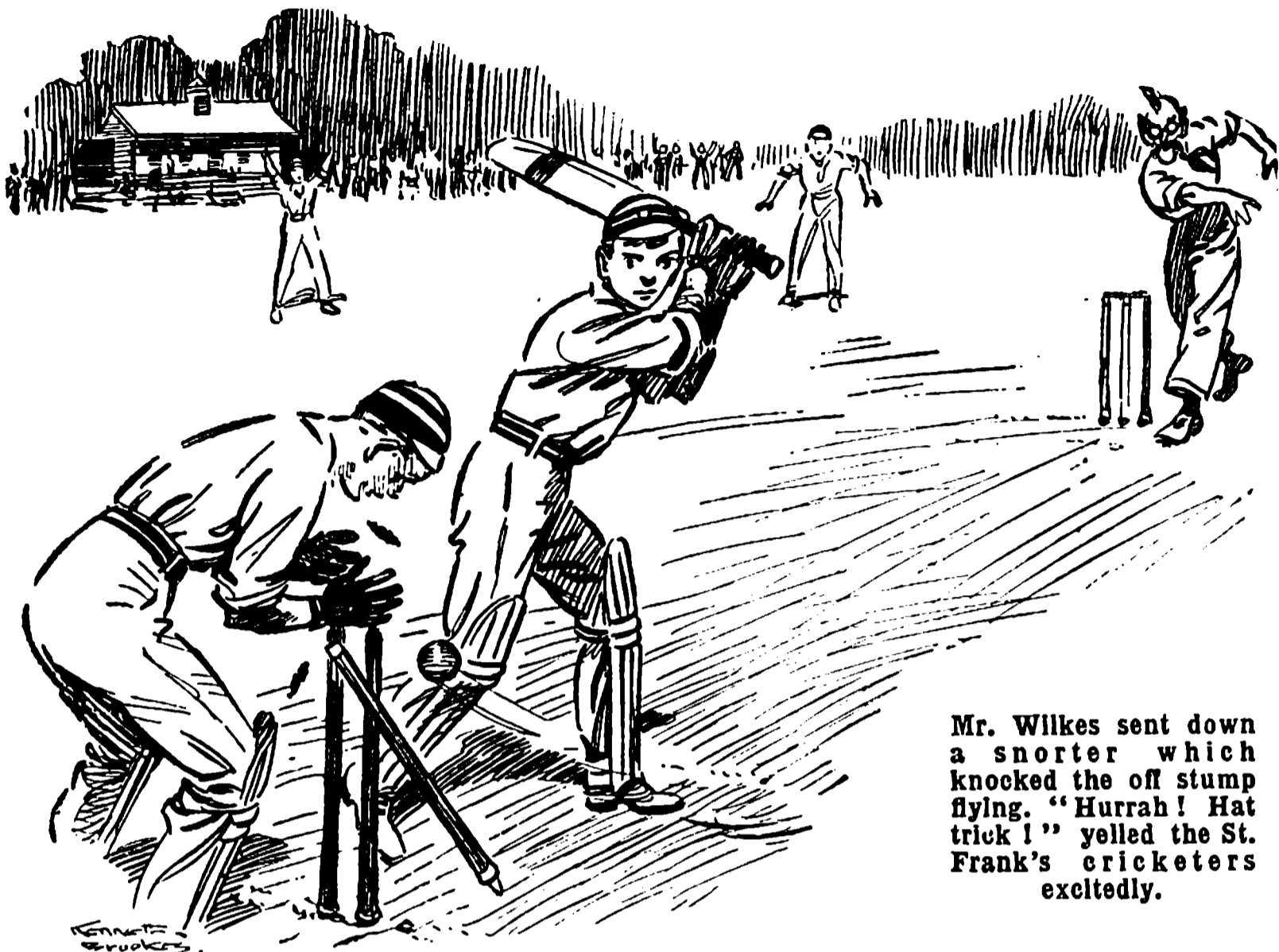
Mr. Wilkes sat back in his chair.

"How did you get it?" he asked anxiously.

"If it's all the same to you, sir, I'd rather not go into any details," said Forrest.

He felt himself master of the situation now. He had got Mr. Wilkes under his thumb. Calmly he flung himself into the nearby arm-chair. Coolly he crossed his legs and made himself comfortable. He took a packet of cigarettes from his pocket, selected one and lit up.

"A most interesting cutting, isn't it, sir?" he went on, blowing out a cloud of blue



Mr. Wilkes sent down a snorter which knocked the off stump flying. "Hurrah! Hat trick!" yelled the St. Frank's cricketers excitedly.

smoke. "I don't think the school would be slow to discuss the subject if I gave it the chance. You wouldn't like this cutting passed round, would you, sir?"

"Just a minute, Forrest," said Mr. Wilkes very deliberately. "I thought it was against the school rules to smoke. And did I invite you to sit down? I don't remember doing so."

"You didn't, sir—but I sat down all the same. As to smoking, well, why shouldn't I when I'm in your study? I think you and I understand each other now—"

"Forrest!" The Housemaster's voice was like the lash of a whip. "You will put that cigarette out immediately, and you will stand up!"

"I don't see why I should—"

"Do as I tell you!" thundered Mr. Wilkes, and he rose angrily to his feet. "Forrest, if I have to tell you again you will regret it!"

There was a fierce gleam in the Housemaster's eyes which Forrest did not quite like. Slowly he put out the cigarette and rose to his feet.

"Oh, well, just to please you," he said insolently.

"That's right!" snapped Mr. Wilkes. "Now get over there, on the other side of this desk. We can talk better like this. I want to know if you have shown this newspaper cutting to anybody else in the school."

"Not a living soul."

"I see," nodded Mr. Wilkes. "You thought you could make a little capital out of it, eh? That cutting is more useful to you kept secret,

isn't it? Upon my word, Forrest, you appear to be a very complete young villain."

"I shouldn't say things like that, sir, if I were you," retorted Forrest coolly. "I might change my mind—and show this cutting to people. You've got a good job at St. Frank's, sir, and I should hate to think—"

"Silence!" commanded Mr. Wilkes, his eyes blazing. "Get out!"

"And those lines are off, sir?"

"Get—out!" ordered Mr. Wilkes harshly.

Bernard Forrest laughed softly to himself, strolled to the door, and walked out. The Housemaster leaned back in his chair, his usually good-humoured lips set in a straight line, his eyes hard and cold. There was no doubt whatever that he had been badly shaken.

FORREST chuckled as he went out into the Triangle. The thing had worked! He had known from the start that it would work—but this initial success gave him much encouragement. He could see that he would be immune from punishment so long as he kept that cutting to himself.

"The beastly fraud!" muttered Forrest contemptuously. "Comes here and pretends to be so pally with everybody—they little realise what he actually is!"

To Forrest it was very significant that Mr. Wilkes had not arrived at St. Frank's until six weeks after that unpleasant incident. And he had taken care to come to a school in the far south of England, two or three hundred

miles away from the scene of his downfall. His present attitude proved that he had been stunned by the fact that somebody in St. Frank's knew of his disgrace. Not a word about that thousand lines! Why, the thing was dead easy!

"Hurt much, old man?" asked a sympathetic voice.

Forrest turned, and found Gulliver walking up. Bell was with him, also Gore-Pearce and two or three others.

"Hurt?" repeated Forrest. "Why should I be hurt?"

"Didn't Crowell lug you off to old Wilkes for a swishing?" asked Gulliver.

"I believe there was something of that sort in the wind," replied Forrest coolly. "But Wilkes and I understand one another. We had a little chat, and everything's squared."

Handforth, who couldn't help overhearing, came nearer.

"Squared?" he repeated. "You silly idiot! Are you trying to tell us that you squared old Wilkey? Why, you miserable cad, Crowell caught you redhanded, twisting young Jones' arm. Some of the chaps saw the whole thing."

"Mr. Wilkes realises that it was a mistake, and we're the best of pals," replied Forrest blandly. "Anyhow, I wasn't swished, and everything's all serene. I must say that Wilkes is a good sort."

He strolled off, leaving the juniors puzzled.

"I don't believe it," said Handforth, with a snort. "He's lying. Wilkes isn't that sort—he wouldn't wink his eye at bullying."

All the same, it looked queer. Forrest certainly hadn't been swished, and he made no attempt during the evening to write any lines. It really seemed that the Housemaster had condoned his offence. And in the eyes of the Remove this was an exhibition of unforgivable weakness.

Later on there was some activity in the gymnasium. This was not unusual, for there was generally something doing in there of an evening. William Napoleon Browne of the Fifth and two or three of his friends were indulging in some boxing practice—in readiness for some bouts which were to come off later in the term.

Mr. Wilkes strolled in in the middle of this, and there was a thoughtful expression on his face as he watched the proceedings. A number of juniors had followed him in and were standing by, rather curious. Forrest was amongst them, and the fact that he did not usually patronise the gymnasium caused the other fellows to watch him curiously. It was noticeable that Forrest kept his eyes upon Mr. Wilkes. There was almost a challenge in his expression. It was also seen that Mr. Wilkes, although obviously aware of Forrest's presence, studiously avoided him. But there came a change.

Lawrence, of the Modern House, had been sparring with Browne, and Browne, incidentally, had been getting the worst of it. Lawrence was only a Fourth-Former, but he was a wonderful boxer.

"Very good—very good indeed!" commented Mr. Wilkes. "I've a mind to put the gloves on myself."

"Can you box, sir?" asked somebody, in surprise.

"Well, I don't profess to be an expert," replied Mr. Wilkes, smiling. "For that reason, I wouldn't like to take on this young champion who has just been giving Browne a few points. I rather fancy he would floor me too quickly."

A laugh went round the gym. Mr. Wilkes hadn't the build of a boxer, and if he went into the ring the results were likely to be comic. But it was sporting of him to offer—and the fellows were eager to see the fun.

"I'll take you on, if you like, sir!" said Handforth eagerly.

"Are you good at this?"

"Me? Good, sir?" asked Handforth in astonishment.

"Evidently you are," nodded Mr. Wilkes. "In that case, I don't think I'll risk it. I'd rather take on one of these others: somebody who isn't too skilful. Then I might be able to get in a punch or two. I think you'll do," he added, suddenly turning upon Bernard Forrest.

"Sorry, sir, but I don't think much of this boxing stunt, anyway," said Forrest. "I shouldn't be able to give you a square deal."

"All the same, Forrest, I strongly fancy you as an opponent," said Mr. Wilkes calmly. "The fact that you are not an expert—and your modesty does you credit—is all to the good. Come along now—on with the gloves."

There was no help for it. Forrest's protests were useless, especially as two or three fellows swarmed round him and ripped off his jacket, waistcoat, collar and tie. He had the gloves on before he knew it, and was literally bundled into the ring.

The word quickly got round, and other fellows were now crowding into the gym to see the fun. Mr. Wilkes was an incongruous figure as he stood in the ring with Nipper making the final adjustments to his gloves. The Housemaster had not bothered to dress for the part. He was wearing his inevitable baggy flannel trousers and crumpled Norfolk coat.

"Go it, sir!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Let's see what you can do, sir!"

"You mustn't expect too much, you people," said Mr. Wilkes, shaking his head. "I dare say I'm a bit rusty. Well, Forrest, are you ready? Let's begin."

"Do we hit out, sir?" asked Forrest grimly. "I mean, is this to be just a little sparring practice, or do we really box?"

"We really box," replied Mr. Wilkes, his voice gentle and silky. "It's up to you, old man, to protect yourself. I tell you candidly, I'm going to hit as hard as I can. Ready? Then let's get at it!"

Forrest was only too willing. He already held Mr. Wilkes in contempt, and he was convinced that he would be able to make

short work of him. Forrest was a good boxer, and he was a plucky fighter, too. He might be a rotter—he was—but nobody had ever accused him of being a funk.

He leapt in to the attack fiercely, but strangely enough Mr. Wilkes wasn't there. That long, lanky figure side-stepped with the greatest of ease, and the titters of laughter which had gone round at first now ceased.

Crash!

Something that felt like a sledgehammer seemed to come out of nowhere, and struck Forrest in the chest. He reeled back with a gasp. But he recovered quickly, leapt in again, and attacked savagely. His whirling fists were easily swept aside, and Mr. Wilkes got past his guard and rammed home a terrific blow on his opponent's nose.

"Yaroooooh!" howled Forrest wildly.

He staggered backwards, tripped over, and sprawled full length.

"Come, come!" said Mr. Wilkes reproachfully. "What's the matter with you? A little tap like that doesn't hurt you, surely? Pull yourself together, my boy!"

Forrest leapt up, his eyes burning savagely. He rushed in like a mad bull, and the spectators were treated to as fine an exhibition of boxing as they had ever witnessed. Mr. Wilkes made rings round his infuriated opponent. He did more. Crash! Thud! Biff! Blows rained upon Forrest with devastating force and speed. He reeled under the onslaught.

"In boxing," said Mr. Wilkes, ramming home a terrific right to Forrest's jaw, "you must always remember that your guard is the most important factor. For instance, you must not allow your opponent to do this"—crash!—"or this"—crash!—"or this!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A yell of laughter went up as Forrest took those blows. There was no stopping Mr. Wilkes. He was like a whirlwind. And that final punch was an absolute snorter. It caught Forrest over the left eye, and the elegant Removite went down for the count.

"H'm! I appear to have been hitting rather too hard," said Mr. Wilkes regretfully. "I always get so excited when I'm boxing."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bravo, sir!"

There was much cheering and laughing. Most of the juniors began to understand. This was Mr. Alington Wilkes' little way! Instead of punishing Forrest by a swishing or by lines, he had knocked him cold in this carefully-engineered boxing bout. It had been no chance selection on Mr. Wilkes' part when he had pointed to Forrest! It was just his novel way of administering punishment.

And Forrest had plenty of punishment! When he sat up his left eye was half-closed, his nose was swelling, and it seemed to him that the upper part of his body was one complete bruise.

CHAPTER 6.

Letting the Cat Out of the Bag!

BERNARD FORREST was in a savage, vindictive mood when he went indoors.

"By gad, I'll make him pay for this!" he muttered venomously. "He did it deliberately—and he'll regret it as long as he lives!"

The cad of Study A was fully aware that the whole of the Junior School was laughing at him. They knew well enough that Mr. Wilkes had boxed him to a standstill with a set purpose. He had crowed that he was immune from punishment, and Mr. Wilkes, in that inimitable way of his, had punished him while pretending to indulge in a friendly boxing bout. In fact, Mr. Wilkes had given him the very medicine that he hated most. Lines were as nothing compared with this; even a swishing would have been much better.

"If he thinks he can get away with it, he's mad!" breathed Forrest. "He can't swish me or give me lines because he knows what would happen, so he thought he could dish me by that boxing stunt."

Forrest was all the more galled when he was compelled to tell himself that he was dished. Nothing could alter the fact that his nose was out of shape, and that his left eye was semi-closed. The other fellows, knowing nothing of that newspaper cutting, merely thought that Mr. Wilkes had adopted this method of chastisement as a novelty. They did not suspect that there was something else behind it.

Entering Study A, Forrest found a visitor sprawling in the easy-chair. It was Claude Gore-Pearce, who, notwithstanding the fact that he was a millionaire's son, was broke to the wide.

"Hallo! Anything wrong?" asked Gore-Pearce, sitting up and taking notice. "What on earth have you been doing, Forrest—fighting?"

"Weren't you in the gym just now?" asked Forrest sourly.

"No."

"It was that beast, Wilkes!" said Bernard savagely. "Pretended to have a boxing bout with me—and this is what he did!"

"The man's a terror!" ejaculated Gore-Pearce, staring. "I say, you know, that's a bit of a wash-out, isn't it? Things are rotten when a Housemaster starts this sort of game!"

"He may start it—but he won't finish it!" said Forrest evilly. "The fool doesn't realise that I've got him on toast! The drunken blighter!"

"Draw it mild!" protested Gore-Pearce. "He couldn't have been drunk when he sloshed you like that. No need to exaggerate—"

"I tell you he's a drunken blighter!" insisted Forrest. "Never mind how I know—I do know. What do you want here, anyway? If it's all the same to you, Gore-Pearce, I'd rather be alone."

Claude coughed. Something told him that this was not the ideal moment to ask for a loan; but he hadn't enough sense to delay making his request.

"Fact is, I'm a bit low," he explained. "I shall be getting a fiver from the pater on Saturday, and I was wondering if you'd spring me a couple of quid till then."

"Not an earthly," said Forrest bluntly.

"It's only till Saturday——"

"I don't care about that!" broke in Forrest impatiently. "I'm not in the mood for lending people money. If you can think of some way of getting my own back on Wilkes, I'll give you two quid. Makes me boil! He must have got into this school under false pretences—the Governors would never have admitted him if they had known the truth—and here he is, lording it about as though he owns the place."

"What do you mean—false pretences?" asked Gore-Pearce, staring.

Forrest acted on impulse. He took out the newspaper cutting and threw it across to his visitor.

"Read that!" he said curtly.

Had he been in a less furious mood he would have hesitated before taking that action. But he was feeling reckless now; and, anyhow, what was the good of keeping the thing secret? Mr. Wilkes evidently had no intention of knuckling under.

"No!" ejaculated Gore-Pearce, aghast. "It's impossible!"

"What do you mean, 'no,' you fool?" snapped Forrest. "It's in black and white, isn't it? What more do you want?"

"But—but it's so frightful!" said Gore-Pearce. "I mean, a St. Frank's Housemaster! Drunk and disorderly, by gad! What newspaper is this? Where did you find it?"

"Never mind that," said Forrest. "As a matter of fact, it was inside a parcel I had from Leeds—otherwise nobody at St. Frank's would ever have known. A local Yorkshire rag of some kind. But that doesn't make any difference. There's the report—and it's true!"

"I can't believe——"

"I faced him with it, you fool, and he didn't deny it!" broke in Forrest sourly.

"How could he deny it? He just sat still and went green. Gave me a whacking great impot and then allowed it to drop. I thought I had him on toast."

Gore-Pearce stared.

"You mean you used this—this information as a lever?" he asked, with a whistle. "I say, that's a bit thick, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, blackmail——"

"You make me tired!" growled Forrest. "I haven't tried to get any money out of him, have I? But if I could use this information to help me whenever I get into a mess, it would be useful. The trouble is, Wilkes got his own back on me just the same."

Gore-Pearce couldn't help grinning.

"Pretty clever, you must admit," he said. "He lets you off the lines and doesn't give you any official punishment—which is what you bargained for—and then he takes you on in the gym and knocks you cold! And in front of the crowd, too! It was clever, Forrest."

"I know it," snarled Forrest. "It was too darned clever! I shall give him one more chance, and if he tries any more of those tricks I'll pin this newspaper cutting on the notice board."

"You'll get him kicked out of the school if you do that."

"That's what I shall do it for," said Forrest, nodding.

"But that won't help," objected Gore-Pearce. "After all, you've got to admit he's the best thing in Housemasters we've ever struck—even better than Mr. Lee used to be, in his way. And don't forget his family. I mean, he's got his wife and daughter here, and all his giddy furniture, and everything else. He's settled here for good."

"Soft-hearted, aren't you?" sneered Forrest.

"Don't be an idiot!" said Gore-Pearce. "But why wreck the man's whole career because he was stewed one night? You ought to have a fellow-feeling for him, if it comes to that! I've seen you a bit squiffy more than once!"

"He's not fit to be a Housemaster in this school!"

"You confounded humbug!" said Gore-Pearce, in disgust. "You know dashed well that you don't care twopence whether the man gets oiled up or not. He's a fool to do it, but it doesn't make him a criminal. And if he's wangled his way into St. Frank's without the Governors knowing about this other affair, good luck to him. I never thought you were such a hypocrite! Pretending to be shocked, by gad!"

Forrest clenched his fists.

"Get out of here!" he snapped. "I've had enough of your rotten sneering."

Gore-Pearce cleared out, for he was no match for Forrest—especially with the latter in this belligerent mood.

There was a big difference between Bernard Forrest and Claude Gore-Pearce in

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other respects, too. Forrest was much the cleverer, and he could have kept that secret without any trouble. Gore-Pearce couldn't. His first remark, when he got into the Junior Common-room was a proof of this.

"Is old Wilkes lit up yet?" he asked, grinning. "I should think he would get well oiled after that affair in the gym. Couldn't help celebrating it, I'll bet."

"What do you mean, you insulting rotter?" asked Handforth, staring. "You're not suggesting that old Wilkes drinks, are you?"

"Not at all," replied Gore-Pearce. "He doesn't drink—he soaks it up like a sponge. Ask Forrest!"

"Just a minute, Handy," said Nipper, as Handforth rolled up his sleeves. "I'll deal with this cad. It's my privilege, as Form skipper. You'll either take that back, Gore-Pearce, or I'll knock you down!"

Gore-Pearce was startled.

"Why should I take it back?" he asked defiantly. "It's true. Wilkes does drink!"

A roar of anger went up from the crowded Common-room. Gore-Pearce was in imminent danger of being bumped on the spot; but Nipper managed to keep the fellows back.

"You seem pretty sure of yourself," he said grimly. "Somebody must have been fooling you, Gore-Pearce. Forrest, I suppose?"

Claude looked at the menacing crowd, and he was frightened. He had only meant to say a few obscure words just to make the chaps curious, but he could now see that he would find himself in trouble unless he shifted the responsibility on to other shoulders.

"Here, wait a minute!" he said hurriedly. "The thing's true! But I'm not against Wilkes, am I? I say give the man a chance! If he's turned over a new leaf, and means to start afresh, good luck to him. You mustn't think I'm running him down."

"Not running him down!" roared Handforth. "When you call him a drunkard?"

"I'm only going by what I saw in the paper."

"In the paper?" said Nipper sharply. "What paper?"

"I don't know what paper it was—but it was a paper," said Claude desperately. "A Yorkshire paper of some kind. Wilkes was at Rendell School before he came here—and Rendell's in Yorkshire. He was found by the police in the gutter one night, and brought up before the beaks."

"You awful liar!" shouted Handforth hotly.

"I'm not!" yelled Gore-Pearce. "Forrest's got this paper—he showed it to me!"

Nipper waved his hands.

"Leave this chap alone until we've seen Forrest!" he said. "He must have mistaken somebody else for Mr. Wilkes—and Forrest fooled him. There are plenty of other people in the world named Wilkes. Let's find Forrest."

A whole crowd of them charged into the Remove passage; and Bernard Forrest was startled when the door of his study opened and the juniors streamed in.

"We shan't keep you a tick," said Nipper. "Gore-Pearce says that you showed him a paper with a paragraph in it about Mr. Wilkes being drunk. We'd like to see that paper, Forrest."

Forrest managed to control himself. He was furious with Gore-Pearce for having blurted the thing out; he was more furious with himself for having shown the cutting to Gore-Pearce. It only took him a second to make up his mind. He was cooler now, and he hadn't yet abandoned the hope of getting Mr. Wilkes under his thumb.

"You don't believe that idiot, do you?" he asked sourly. "I've got no paper. Never seen one. In fact, I don't know what you're talking about."

"By George!" roared Handforth. "Where is he?"

He led the crowd back to the Common-room, and Claude Gore-Pearce was seized before he could make any protestations. He was heavily bumped. He was bumped so hard, in fact, that by the time it was all over he hadn't strength enough to protest that his story was the true one.

Upon the whole he decided that it was far safer to let the whole thing drop.

AN affair of that sort wasn't so easily forgotten, however.

Rumours were set going. A certain amount of fellows were ready enough to believe that there was something in the story. Juniors commented on the fact that nobody seemed to know where Mr. Wilkes had come from. Travers was bold enough to ask a direct question just before bed-time, when he happened to meet Mr. Wilkes in the lobby.

"Good-night, sir," he said casually. "Hope you're beginning to like St. Frank's now, sir."

"I have liked St. Frank's ever since I came," replied Mr. Wilkes.

"Bigger than your last school, isn't it, sir?"

"Well, I suppose it is, although not much," replied Mr. Wilkes. "And St. Frank's is undoubtedly a better school—a school with greater traditions."

"By the way, sir, what was your last school?" asked Travers politely.

"Rendell—in Yorkshire," said Mr. Wilkes. "I'm not saying anything against Rendell—it's a splendid place—but I expect I shall settle down at St. Frank's and be even happier. Well, good-night, old man. Sleep well."

He gave Travers a friendly pat on the back and passed on.

"Well, Gore-Pearce was right about Rendell, anyhow, dear old fellow," murmured Travers, as he went upstairs with

Potts. "And if Gore-Pearce didn't see a newspaper cutting, how did he know that Wilkes had come from Rendell?"

"Oh, dry up," said Potts, yawning. "Let's forget it!"

CHAPTER 7.

Suspicious!

NIPPER, Handforth, K.K. Parkington and a crowd of other Removites streamed out of the Ancient House in the bright sunlight on the following morning with towels round their necks. An early swim was the order of the hour. It was an early hour, too. They had got up long before rising-bell, the scheme being to have their swim and then indulge in some cricket practice at the nets before breakfast. A bathe in the Stowe on this warm August morning was tempting.

"Rot from beginning to end!" Handforth was saying, his voice throbbing with indignation and impatience. "I don't believe Forrest, and I don't believe Gore-Pearce. They're a couple of liars. Why discuss the subject at all?"

"It was you who started it, old man," said Church gently.

"Not likely!" denied Handforth, as they skirted round the Modern House on their way to the river. "I heard one of the chaps talking about Wilkes, and saying that

there might be something in what Gore-Pearce said."

"He did come from Rendell, anyhow," said Jimmy Potts. "Travers found that out last night, and Gore-Pearce said that Rendell was mentioned in the paper."

"That proves nothing."

"Well, it proves that if there is a newspaper paragraph, the Mr. Wilkes mentioned must be our Mr. Wilkes," replied Potts. "There wouldn't be two schoolmasters there of the same name."

Handforth snorted.

"Are you going to tell me that Wilkey is the kind of man to get so tipsy that he's found helpless in the gutter?" he demanded wrathfully. "I've never heard——"

He broke off abruptly. They had just turned the angle of the building, and Vera Wilkes was standing perfectly still, as though startled by some shock. Handforth's voice was never soft, and when he was upset it became positively megaphone-like. It was certain that Vera had heard his words. She stood quite still, all the colour having fled from her face. Then suddenly it came rushing back, and she flushed a deep red.

"Oh!" she said breathlessly.

"Here, I say!" exclaimed Handforth in alarm. "I hope you didn't hear what I was saying, Miss Wilkes. I didn't mean anything. I don't believe for a minute that your pater——"



Jokes from our readers wanted for this feature! If you know of a good rib tickler send it along now—and win a prize! A handsome watch will be awarded each week to the sender of the best joke; all other readers whose efforts are published will receive a pocket wallet or a penknife. Address your jokes to "Smilers," Nelson Lee Library, 5, Carmelite Street, London, E.C.4

TAKING TOLL!

The taxi came to a halt. The fare descended a trifle uncertainly, and proceeded to search his pockets slowly and deliberately, while the driver looked on suspiciously.

"Sorry, old thing," said the fare finally, "but I haven't a bean, and you know you cannot get blood out of a stone, don't you?"

"Sure," agreed the taxi-driver, rolling up his sleeves, "but what makes you think you're a stone?"

(*E. Sparkes, 58, Hexthorpe Road, Hexthorpe, Doncaster, has been awarded a handsome watch.*)

HARDLY APPROPRIATE!

The actor had returned home after the first night of the stupendous new drama.

"Well, dear," said his wife anxiously, "how did the show go?"

The actor groaned and flung himself into a chair.

"Ruined, ruined; absolutely ruined by that fool who conducts the orchestra!" he muttered. "What do you think happened at the murder trial scene when the judge puts on the black cap? The orchestra played 'Where did you get that hat?'"

(*T. Bush, 86, Copenhagen Street, Islington, N.1, has been awarded a pocket wallet.*)

WHAT DID SHE MEAN?

First housewife: "That's a fine shed your husband has made."

Second housewife: "Yes, and he made it all out of his own head, and he's still got enough left to make a dog kennel."

(*B. Mallett Jnr., 2, North Parade, Falmouth, has been awarded a penknife.*)

SAFETY FIRST!

"What are you reading, Browne?"

"It's a very useful book for those who don't know how to swim."

"How so?"

"If you fall in the water all you have to do is to turn to page fifty-seven, read the directions and you are safe."

(*G. Ramm, Warren House, Steventon, nr. Basingstoke, has been awarded a penknife.*)

"It—it doesn't matter," interrupted the girl in a low voice.

She almost ran off, pretending to be calling to Mrs. Wilkes' little pom, which Vera had been evidently taking for a morning frisk. She vanished across the Triangle, and the juniors looked at one another with peculiar expressions.

"I say, that was rummy," said Travers, with a grimace.

"How was it?" asked Handforth.

"Well, dash it, dear old fellow, she must have heard what you were saying about her pater," replied Travers. "I'm beginning to think that we bumped Gore-Pearce unjustly—that he did see a newspaper report."

"What!" gasped Handforth. "You—you believe it?"

"I didn't before, but after Vera's funny behaviour just now it looks pretty bad," said Travers, shaking his head. "What do you think, Nipper? You're the chap with the sleuth reasoning. Expound!"

Nipper was frowning.

"Let's look at it in two ways," he said, as they continued towards the river, much quietened. "Supposing the whole yarn's a fake. What would that girl have done on hearing Handy's words? I don't think she would have gone pale and become so startled that she couldn't think of anything to say."

"What would she have done, then?" asked Watson curiously.

"Well, the chances are she would have flown at Handy like a wild cat and asked him what the dickens he meant," replied Nipper. "She would have been boiling with indignation."

"And supposing the whole yarn wasn't a fake?" asked Travers.

"That's the trouble," said Nipper. "If Mr. Wilkes had left Rendell under a cloud and his daughter had suddenly heard something which told her that the cat was out of the bag, she would naturally have been startled and afraid to answer any questions or give any explanation."

"That's how she did act!" said Handforth blankly.

"I know," growled Nipper. "That's what makes me feel so rotten about it. There's something in this beastly rumour after all, you chaps!"

SUCH a story, of course, inevitably spread—and rapidly. Every fellow who was out of doors heard it within ten minutes. The conviction rapidly grew that Mr. Wilkes was a doubtful character, and that he had "wangled" his appointment at St. Frank's.

"We'd better not discuss him here, anyway," said Nipper, as they approached the river bank. "Look out there."

Mr. Alington Wilkes was an early bird, too. They saw him in the middle of the stream, floating placidly on his back. He

HOT STUFF !

Teacher: "What is a canary?"

Tommy: "A sparrow that's joined the mustard club."

(E. Ball, 53, Buller Street, Ilkeston, Derbyshire, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

NO NEED FOR WORRY !

Film actor: "But look here, if he's going to throw me into the rapids, how am I going to get out?"

Producer: "Oh, that's all right. You don't appear again."

(H. Rathbone, 27, Albert Road, Alexandra Park, Wood Green, N.22, has been awarded a penknife.)

CAUGHT !

Loafer: "Caught anything?"

Angler (after a fruitless day in the rain): "No!"

Loafer: "I thought you wouldn't—that pond wasn't there yesterday."

(F. V. Bleakley, 5, Hargrave Terrace, Rathgar, Dublin, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

THAT DIDDLED HIM !

Business was in full swing at a charity bazaar when a young man strolled in, evidently with no intention of purchasing anything.



As he passed one stall a charming girl detained him.

"Won't you buy a cigarette holder, sir?" she asked.

"No, thank you, I don't smoke."

"Or a pen-wiper which I made myself."

"I don't write."

"Then have this nice box of chocolates."

"I don't eat sweets."

The girl's patience was exhausted.

"Sir," she said grimly, "will you buy this cake of soap?"

He bought it.

(D. Duncan, 71, The Drive, Golders Green, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

SUSPICIOUS !

Very posh gentleman (to boy): "Go and fetch me a taxi, boy."

Urchin: "And when I've gone you nip off wiv me barrow. No fear!"

(G. Wilson, 128, Cambridge Square, Kingston-on-Thames, has been awarded a pocket wallet.)

SEW ITS SEAMS !

Airman (after crashing): "I just happened to get into an air pocket."

Sympathetic old lady: "Ah! And there was a hole in it!"

(D. Pienaar, 1, High Gate Street, Maitland, Cape Town, has been awarded a penknife.)

was supported by a pair of blown-out water-wings, and as he caught sight of the juniors he waved cheerily.

"Morning, you fellows!" he sang out. "Buck up and come in. The water's fine!"

"Aren't you swimming, sir?" shouted somebody.

"Too exerting," replied Mr. Wilkes. "It's much easier to float about like this and drift with the current. If you don't believe me, try it."

Most of the fellows experienced a sense of disappointment. An active, fully-grown man who used water-wings was not entitled to much respect. Such fripperics were designed for the use of children or elderly ladies. There was something almost lamentable in the sight of Mr. Wilkes floating there like that.

"Well, hang it, you can't expect everything of the man," said Nipper. "He can play cricket, and he can box. What more do you want?"

"I'll bet he can't swim a stroke!" growled Handforth. "It wouldn't be a bad idea to take out a pocket-knife and rip open those giddy balloons. It would be rather funny to see him sink!"

They were soon in the water, and several of them proceeded to make rings round Mr. Wilkes—just to show him that if he couldn't swim, they could.

"Why don't you learn, sir?" asked Handforth, as he eased up close by and trod water. "It's easy enough when you get the hang of it."

Mr. Wilkes apparently came out of a dream.

"Eh? Learn?" he said. "Sorry, old chap, but I was trying to think of a word with four letters which means 'the last journey.' The infernal thing's been worrying me ever since last night."

"Oh, cross-words, sir," said Handforth. "Something that means the last journey?"

"How about gutter, sir?" suggested Travers casually.

Mr. Wilkes nearly sank.

"Gutter?" he repeated sharply. "What exactly do you mean?"

"The last journey, sir—fallen by the way-side, so to speak," explained Travers glibly. "But I'd forgotten. It's got to be a word with four letters, hasn't it?"

"I think I can manage this little problem myself," replied Mr. Wilkes. "You boys had better continue your swimming. You're splashing the water into my eyes."

"What about beer, sir?" asked Handforth brilliantly.

Mr. Wilkes gave him a sharp look. But Handforth, unlike Travers, was utterly innocent of any double meaning. There was no suggestive thrust in that shot of his.

"Beer?" repeated Mr. Wilkes. "I don't see how it applies."

"Well, it's got four letters, anyway, sir," replied Handforth defensively.

"Of course it has," agreed Mr. Wilkes. "But where does the last journey come in, you ass?"

"Well, a man has several glasses of beer on his last journey of the day, sir," put in Travers, with his tongue in his cheek. "In fact, he can have too many, unless he's careful."

Mr. Wilkes' eyes were gleaming.

"Upon my word, I believe you boys are right after all—although the word isn't exactly the same," he said in a satisfied tone. "Bier! Not beer, you understand—but bier. The carriage on which a dead body is conveyed to the grave. You see? The last journey. Splendid!"

"Glad to have been of some help, sir," growled Handforth, feeling rather squashed. "It was my suggestion, anyhow, that gave you the clue."

"It certainly was," agreed Mr. Wilkes grimly. "I shan't forget this little chat of ours for some time," he added, with a direct glance at Travers. "Well, what is it you were going to say to me?"

"Oh, about swimming, sir," said Handforth, glad to have the subject changed. "Why don't you learn? I mean, it looks pretty awful, floating about with these giddy kids' bladders round your shoulders."

"I regret, Handforth, that it does not meet with your approval," replied Mr. Wilkes. "These giddy kids' bladders, as you call them, are most useful, since they help me to float with the minimum of exertion. And, curiously enough, I can think very placidly while I am floating in the river. That is, of course, unless I am surrounded by a motley throng of youngsters such as you."

"I'll teach you to swim, if you like, sir," offered Handforth, as he struck off.

"Good man!" sang out Mr. Wilkes. "I'll have my first lesson as soon as you like."

But it proved to be unnecessary, for something happened just then which nobody could have foreseen. Some Fourth-Formers were indulging in a larking-about cricket practice in a neighbouring meadow. Buster Boots, giving a terrific swipe at the ball, sent it hurtling towards the river.

"Look out!" yelled Boots, in sudden alarm.

A solitary swimmer—Gresham, of the Remove—was in mid-stream, seventy or eighty yards away from anybody else. And in all that expanse of clear water, the cricket-ball just had to whizz straight at his head! To make matters worse, Gresham looked up at Boots' shout, and the ball struck him fairly and squarely between the eyes. The "thud" was heard distinctly. The unfortunate junior threw up his arms and sank. He did not utter a cry of any kind, or even struggle. He just slid down into the water and vanished.

"He'll drown!" shouted Bob Christine desperately. "That ball knocked him unconscious, Boots! The water's deep there—it's that treacherous bit, with the bad undercurrent! Hi! Bring that boat along, you chaps!"

Nipper and K. K. and Handforth and the others had witnessed the incident from a distance; but at first sight they had not thought anything of it. When Gresham failed to reappear, however, it became very clear that he was in danger.

"Come on!" said Nipper tensely.

He struck out, but Handforth gave a gasp.

"My only sainted aunt!" he ejaculated. "Look there!"

He was staring at Mr. Wilkes. The House-master, throwing his precious water-wings aside, was streaking through the water like a fish. Tom Burton, who was the champion swimmer of the Junior School, found it impossible to overtake him.

"He can swim!" ejaculated Handforth in amazement.

"Swim?" yelled Nipper. "That's not swimming—it's an exhibition of streaked lightning!"

"And Handy offered to teach him!" gurgled McClure.

The galvanised Mr. Wilkes had reached the spot where Harry Gresham had disappeared. He was there many seconds before anybody else, and never for a moment had he taken his eyes from the fatal spot. He dived straight down. Those who were watching waited anxiously. It seemed that Mr. Wilkes would never come to the surface again. The water had become placid, and only a few bubbles arose—to indicate what was happening underneath.

Mr. Wilkes was finding his task both difficult and dangerous. It was fortunate that he had marked the precise spot, or Gresham would never have come up alive. Diving down, Mr. Wilkes felt the strong under-current pulling at him. His brain worked rapidly. He reasoned this thing out. Gresham must have sunk like a stone, unconscious as he was; but the current had certainly gripped him, and he would not be immediately below that spot, but farther along.

Mr. Wilkes' swift calculations proved correct. For after swimming round and round once or twice he suddenly felt himself clutching at a foot. He pulled himself nearer. The unfortunate Gresham was entangled in a mass of coarse weeds, and the pull of the current was adding to the peril of his position. With one strong heave, Mr. Wilkes freed the junior, and gripped him under the arms. Gresham was still unconscious. Together they rose to the surface. On the way they encountered frantically-diving bodies.

"Hurrah!"

"Mr. Wilkes has got him!"

"Bravo, sir!"

Everybody cheered and yelled when Mr. Wilkes was seen on the surface. Fellows swam round boisterously.

"Can't you chaps get out of my way?" panted Mr. Wilkes, as he swam. "This fellow's hurt, and he needs attention."

"We thought you were never coming up, sir!" said Nipper.

"Weeds—downward current—nasty spot,

this," jerked Mr. Wilkes, as he swam. "If you want to help, pull this fellow ashore. Good! We'll soon have him right."

Harry Gresham was hauled on to the grassy bank, and Mr. Wilkes was beside him within a second or two. Mr. Wilkes knew just what to do. He ordered the boys back, he bent over Gresham, and he fairly exuded efficiency. Nobody dreamed of questioning his methods.

More and more, Mr. Wilkes was proving himself to be a surprise packet.

CHAPTER 8.

A Golfing Story!

"H'ELL do now," said Mr. Wilkes contentedly.

Ten minutes had elapsed, and during this time Harry Gresham had practically recovered. There was a bruise on his head which stood out like an egg, and he had swallowed plenty of water. But Mr. Wilkes' prompt measures had brought most of this up, and his first aid tactics gave the juniors another surprise.

"I suppose you don't happen to be a doctor on the quiet, sir?" asked Travers, in wonder.

"Don't be a young chump," retorted Mr. Wilkes.

"Well, you keep giving us these surprises, sir, and you handled this business so professionally that Dr. Brett himself couldn't have done better," explained Travers. "How are you feeling, Gresham? We'd better carry you to the school."

"Not likely," said Harry stoutly. "I'm a lot better now—thanks to Mr. Wilkes. But I don't know what happened yet. Something seemed to hit me, and then I sank, didn't I? It's awfully decent of you, sir—"

"Come along," interrupted Mr. Wilkes. "Some of you boys must take Gresham back to the school. Wrap him up well, and see that he doesn't catch a chill. It may be necessary for him to go into the sanny, but we'll know better later."

"And that's the man those rotters have been calling a tippler," said Handforth scornfully, as he and a number of other juniors escorted Gresham back to the school. "What priceless rot! As for Vera's rummy behaviour, I'm not taking any notice of it. Mr. Wilkes is all right."

"He's the real goods," agreed Nipper. "And the sooner we can forget those silly rumours, the better."

"They're already forgotten, dear old fellow," said Travers.

That morning a number of fellows had been prepared to believe all sorts of unpleasant things about Mr. Alington Wilkes, but the way in which he had saved Harry Gresham's life sent him soaring up in popular favour. This further proof of his prowess was the best possible answer to the ugly stories which Claude Gore-Pearce had set going.

The difference between Mr. Wilkes and other Housemasters—the difference which made him so popular—was his unconventionality. He cared not a jot for the ordinary ways of the schoolmaster. He believed in associating with his boys as much as possible. And the fact that he could play cricket, box, and swim made him even more popular. He had been regarded as a freak upon his arrival at St. Frank's; but now the Removites realised that he was only a freak in appearance.

Another point they liked about the new Housemaster was his easy-going nature.

Not that Mr. Wilkes was a man to be trifled with. He was a real sportsman, and if he stumbled upon any trifling breach of the rules he revealed an astonishing deafness and his glasses failed in their purpose. But when some of the unruly spirits tried to take advantage of his unconventionality they were gently but firmly pulled up. Mr. Wilkes proved that he was a real friend—that he was easy-going; he also proved that he would stand no nonsense.

Parkington was rather worried this morning, and he was found wandering about like a cat on hot bricks.

"What's the matter with you, K. K.?" asked Handforth, at last.

"I'm worried," said the red-headed leader of the Red-Hots.

"Vera promised to be out early—"

"Well, she was," said Handforth. "My dear chap, you were too slow."

"I met her—and she wouldn't even look at me," grunted K. K. "Now, what the dickens have I done? I've been trying to think how I could have offended her. I was going to show her round the museum, but when I went up to her she simply buzzed off and said that she'd see me later on. Since then she hasn't shown herself."

"Funny," said Handforth, frowning. "She overheard what I was saying about her pater, you know. I wonder if that's got anything to do with it? I hope not."

"Why do you hope not?"

"Well, it almost looks as if she's afraid to show herself—knowing that she might be questioned," replied Edward Oswald uncomfortably. "Oh, rats! Why can't we forget those rotten rumours? Something's always cropping up to bring them back."

"That's generally the way with rumours," said Parkington grimly. "I'm fed-up with this! I'm going to find Vera, and put it to



her point blank. We must get at the truth."

K. K. was obliged to go in to morning lessons unsatisfied. Vera had not shown herself. He even went to the length of going to the Housemaster's private quarters and asking for the girl—only to be told that she had already gone to her own school.

When lessons were over, K. K. sped to Moor View. Here, to his disgust, he learned that

Vera had left early, and was already home. Clearly, she was avoiding him. K. K. didn't like it at all; he worried tremendously.

Spotting Mr. Wilkes on the Ancient House steps, he crossed over, but before he could arrive Mr. Pycraft, of the Fourth, had joined the Housemaster, and K. K. had to wait.

"Well met, Mr. Wilkes!" Mr. Pycraft was saying, trying his hardest to look pleasant. "I was seeking an opportunity of running against you, sir. I understand that you are an expert at games and sports."

"Somebody must have been exaggerating, Mr. Pycraft," said the other, shaking his

"Splendid! Would you care for a game this afternoon?" suggested Mr. Pycraft patronisingly.

Golf was the one subject upon which he could be patronising. Throughout this whole term Mr. Pycraft had had one aim in life—and that was to improve his golf. It was of far more importance than his work. He had paid many secret visits to Bannington, and had taken lessons from the professional there. He was now greatly improved, and he was so bucked about it that he was ready to take on anybody.

"This is very good of you, Mr. Pycraft," said the new Housemaster. "I shall be delighted if you will give me a game this afternoon. I have not yet played on the St. Frank's links, but I understand that it is quite a useful nine-hole course. I haven't played for several weeks, and I'm probably a bit rusty—"

"Don't let that deter you, my dear sir," interrupted Mr. Pycraft kindly. "I am not an exacting man. I can—ah—forgive a few muff shots. We needn't be too strict, need we?"

Nipper, who scented fun, respectfully raised his cap.

"Can I come and caddy for you, sir?" he asked eagerly.

"By all means, if you feel inclined, old man," replied Mr. Wilkes. "But don't come if you have anything more important to do."

"There couldn't be anything more important than this," said Nipper promptly.

"What did you mean by that?" asked Tre-gellis-West, after the two masters had gone.

"Wilkey is a dark house—and if he's as good at golf as he is at cricket, Pieface is in for a shock," replied Nipper cheerfully. "Pieface thinks he's a second Bobby Jones this term—bragging and boasting about his giddy golf until we hear nothing else! Old Browne could knock him sideways any day."



Forrest took the new Housemaster's fist full in the eye.

head.

Somehow, he didn't like Mr. Pycraft's looks. The two were almost strangers, for while Mr. Wilkes presided over the Ancient House, Mr. Pycraft lived in the East House, and there had been no occasion, so far, for them to meet.

"You play golf, of course?" asked Mr. Pycraft briskly.

"Golf? Well, yes."

"I'm going to caddy in that game, too," said Bob Christine, joining them. "It'll be worth watching, my sons. And all I hope is that Pieface gets a licking. The way he brags is sickening. Mind you, he can play a decent game—I'll say that for him—but if he beats Mr. Wilkes there'll be no holding him."

THE game was fixed for four o'clock sharp. Afternoon lessons at St. Frank's were over by three-thirty—an excellent idea, this, as it enabled the fellows to get in games during the remaining hours of daylight. House cricket matches were easily played off without waiting for half-holidays.

Mr. Pycraft turned up with a bag of gleaming clubs, and he gave Mr. Wilkes' "tools" an almost contemptuous glance. Mr. Wilkes was content with a driver, a mid-iron, a mashie, and a putter.

"Only four clubs, Mr. Wilkes?" he asked in surprise.

"Is it necessary to have more than four?" retorted Mr. Wilkes mildly.

"Perhaps not," said the other. "It depends, of course, upon the game you play. I take it that you have never seriously gone in for golf?"

"Well, I'm afraid I haven't made a fetish of it, if that is what you mean," said Mr. Wilkes. "Golf is a good game, and it gives a man plenty of excellent exercise, but it isn't a game I should rave about, Mr. Pycraft. Cricket, in my opinion, is far more—"

"Oh, cricket!" said Mr. Pycraft sourly.

His opinion of cricket was obvious. Any further words on that subject were unnecessary. During the walk across the meadows to the first tee he regaled Mr. Wilkes—and, incidentally, infuriated Bob Christine—by boasting of his triumphs at Stoke Poges, Hoylake, and even St. Andrew's.

"The old fibber!" whispered Christine, as he edged nearer to Nipper. "I'll bet he's never been farther afield than Bannington. St. Andrew's, indeed!"

Other fellows were coming along to follow the game. Handforth & Co., K. K. Parkington and several of his chums, and a few others were on hand. Mr. Horace Pycraft expanded more than ever. In his conceit he imagined that they had come to watch him, and he loved an audience.

But it was Mr. Alington Wilkes whom the juniors were following. Mr. Wilkes had given the boys so many surprises that they were now relying upon him to give Mr. Pycraft one. Nothing else would have caused them to walk all this way to witness a game of golf.

The St. Frank's course was a good one, but it was mostly patronised by masters and seniors. It was open to the juniors, too, but only a few had taken up the great and ancient game. Golf wasn't exciting enough for the taste of the average junior.

"Shall we toss for the honour?" asked Mr. Pycraft, when they reached the first

tee. "I think, perhaps, I had better give you a stroke a hole, Mr. Wilkes."

"Oh, surely not!" said the other. "Let us play even."

"My dear sir, we want to make a game of it," said Mr. Pycraft impatiently. "I would remind you that my handicap is ten—and more often than not I play down to an eight. Certainly, you had better accept a stroke a hole from me."

A little gleam came into Mr. Wilkes' eyes, and he nodded.

"Very well, Mr. Pycraft," he said. "Just as you say. Thank you. I will try to give you a good game."

He won the toss, and drove off. He took an easy stance, gave only a brief preliminary waggle, and his club swung round easily.

Click!

Mr. Pycraft swallowed noisily. The little white ball had sailed away sweetly into the distance—one of the most perfect drives that had yet been seen on the St. Frank's links.

CHAPTER 9.

The Horns of a Dilemma!

WITHIN twenty minutes Mr. Horace Pycraft was a very sick man.

He wasn't sick physically, but at heart. His opponent had won three holes straight off, and he had won them overwhelmingly. Mr. Wilkes had reached the first green in 2, and he was down in 4—bogey. Mr. Pycraft, who had a shaky drive, and whose putting was uncertain, was lucky to get down in 6. At the second he got into trouble in one of the bunkers, and besmirched his card with an 8; whereas Mr. Wilkes, with a perfect mashie shot on to the green, was down for an easy 5. At the third, Mr. Pycraft recovered slightly, and just managed to equal his opponent—but as he had given Mr. Wilkes a stroke a hole, this, too, was a win for the latter.

"Really, my dear sir, you are playing extraordinarily well," said Mr. Pycraft grudgingly, as they walked to the fourth tee. "I understood—ah—that you were a novice?"

"I do not remember having discussed my golf with anybody," replied Mr. Wilkes gently. "I really haven't had time for golf since I came."

"May I ask what your handicap actually is?"

"At Rendell I was playing down to a 4," said Mr. Wilkes sweetly.

Mr. Pycraft uttered a gurgling cry, but could find no adequate words to express his consternation. Nipper and Bob Christine grinned joyously. It served Pieface right!

"By jingo, I'd like the gov'nor to have a game with Mr. Wilkes!" said Nipper, his eyes gleaming. "Mr. Lee is hot stuff, and these two would be just about matched. Pieface is a sheer duffer."

"Ten handicap, eh?" grinned Bob. "The awful fibber! He's never played to a 10

in his life. He won't win a hole in this game."

To make Pycraft's pill the more bitter, crowds of fellows were now watching. They gathered at the tees, and remained deadly silent as the two men drove. They followed down the course, and they crowded round the greens and watched the putting. It was like a championship game.

Mr. Pycraft, who was at his best when he was playing a weak opponent and when nobody was looking on, simply went to pieces under these adverse conditions. In driving he either sliced, pulled, or missed the ball altogether. On the fairway he hacked desperately, and the divots that his caddy had to replace were heart-breaking. On the greens he was completely at sea. Mr. Wilkes won hole after hole with several strokes to spare. In fact, it wasn't a game at all, and before long Mr. Wilkes ceased to regard Mr. Pycraft as an opponent. The new Housemaster was playing against bogey. The spectators, one and all, enjoyed Mr. Pycraft's discomfiture to the full. He had been bragging and boasting for so long that it was a joy to see him taken down a peg.

At the seventh tee a diversion occurred. This tee was just against a lane, and from beyond a small meadow on the other side of the lane, where the ground rose somewhat, a crowd of Moor View girls were watching. They were evidently on their way to or from tennis, for all of them except one were wearing white frocks. This girl wore an ordinary frock, and she was easily recognised as Vera Wilkes. She waved cheerily to her father. "Just a minute, dad," she called, running. And here it was that the diversion developed into something more dramatic. The girl ran across the meadow impulsively. She was aware that a small herd of cows grazed in a corner of the meadow, but she probably

never gave them a thought. There was a young bull, too; and this beast not only resented Vera's invasion of his territory, but he was infuriated by the colour of her dress—which was bright red.

"Wait a minute, Vera!" sang out Mr. Wilkes. "You'd better go back."

Vera hesitated—and was lost. If she had run back, all might have been well. But that pause gave the bull his chance. Lowering his head with a noisy bellow, he charged.

"My only aunt!" gasped Bob Christine.

He dropped Mr. Wilkes' clubs and ran. Many of the other spectators were running, too. Others were yelling. The Moor View girls, beyond the meadow, shouted frantically. Vera started running at the last moment. Fortunately, she swerved sharply, and the bull, charging straight on, just missed her. Infuriated more than ever, the animal swung round and charged again.

Mr. Wilkes had no idea of gaining fresh laurels as he went to the rescue. This was his own daughter—and she was in danger. The Housemaster realised the danger a second or two before anybody else. He was over the hedge in a clean leap, and was crossing the meadow before anybody else moved an inch. He made no attempt to race to Vera's side, but ran diagonally

across the field, endeavouring, it seemed, to head off the bull.

"Look at him!" gasped K.K. "He'll get hurt! If he has an argument with that bull, he'll soon be a hospital case!"

"It's the only thing to do!" ejaculated Deeks breathlessly. "Don't you see? He couldn't possibly reach the girl in time—but there's just a chance that he can head off the bull. By Jove! Look at that!"

Shouts of alarm were going up from all sides. The girls were frantic. Their only

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Poor old Archie Glenthorne! He's up to his neck in trouble. First Marjorie Temple ticks him off for being lazy—and then comes Aunt Cristabel. A dear old soul, but— A kindly old soul, but— Taken all round Archie's properly in the dumps; but you won't be in the dumps when you read this screamingly funny, extra-long yarn. You won't stop laughing from the first chapter! Make a note of the title, chums—

"ARCHIE'S AWFUL AUNT!"

relief was that Vera was out of danger, for her father's prompt action had caused the bull to transfer his unwelcome attentions to this unexpected newcomer.

But Mr. Wilkes was ready, and he did not hesitate. To the amazement of the onlookers, he became the pursuer instead of the pursued. It was clear that Mr. Wilkes believed in attack as the best form of defence. With a clean leap, he jumped at the bull; with unerring hands he grasped the two horns, and then hung on grimly.

"Oh, my only hat!"

"Let go, sir—the brute will gore you!"

"Great Scott!"

The spectators were excited, but Mr. Wilkes wasn't. In fact, now that he had succeeded in distracting the bull's attention, he even seemed to be enjoying himself.

"You're all right now, Vera," he sang out calmly. "Get back over that hedge while you're still safe."

"But, dad——"

"Go on! Don't waste time!" ordered her father.

She ran, and Mr. Wilkes laughed. The bull, surprised and irritated by the unexpected attack, was bellowing madly, stamping his feet and doing his utmost to shake off this human leech. Then suddenly he lowered his head and ran amok. Still Mr. Wilkes clung on. He was dragged along, swung this way and that way, but never for an instant did he lose his hold. He clung on tenaciously.

"Great pip!" gurgled Handforth. "Just like you see in those Wild West films!"

"Bravo, sir!"

"Go it, Tom Mix!"

"Hold him, cowboy!"

It suddenly dawned upon the senses of the startled onlookers that it wasn't Mr. Wilkes who was in need of sympathy, but the bull. Mr. Wilkes was complete master of the situation. An expert cricketer, boxer, swimmer, and golfer—and now he was performing this cowboy stunt with consummate skill and ease. The St. Frank's fellows were amazed.

The bull was still thundering along, but Mr. Wilkes was wearing him down. With a sudden burst of strength the Housemaster swung the animal's horns round, and the bull's head was violently twisted. He stumbled, fell, and a moment later he was down. Mr. Wilkes sat on his head in the approved cowboy fashion.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well done, sir!"

There was a rush of enthusiastic juniors, and even the girls made a move. Mr. Wilkes' exhibition had delighted them all. The most satisfactory feature of the whole affair was Mr. Wilkes' calmness and serenity. He did these things in such a matter-of-fact way that he was obviously not new to them.

When he rose, the bull was completely subdued, and was, indeed, only too glad to walk away with his tail between his legs. Never before had the fellows seen so crest-

fallen a bull. Every atom of fiery arrogance had been taken out of him.

"You know, Vera, you're the most reckless girl," said Mr. Wilkes reprovably, when his daughter reached him. "You might have been badly hurt."

"But I didn't even see the horri'le thing, daddy!" protested Vera. "It was wonderful, the way you mastered him."

"Wonderful isn't the word!" declared Handforth enthusiastically. "By George, sir, what can't you do? Where did you learn to do this Wild West stuff?"

"In Arizona, to be exact," replied Mr. Wilkes, smiling.

"Arizona!" gasped Handforth. "You mean—on a real ranch?"

"On a real ranch," nodded Mr. Wilkes; "I was a real cowboy for two years—but that was some time ago."

"Well I'm jiggered!" roared Handforth. "He's a cowboy, too!"

"You don't know what my daddy can do," said Vera stoutly. "He was one of the biggest terrors of the enemy during the war—a major in the Royal Air Force."

"A giddy airman, too!" said K.K. "Oh, my hat!"

CHAPTER 10.

Good Old Wilkey!

MR. ALINGTON WILKES was not enjoying himself.

All this fuss made him uncomfortable, for he was essentially a modest man. He had thoroughly enjoyed giving Mr. Pycraft a licking—because Mr. Pycraft had asked for it—but he disapproved of all this present commotion. That incident with the bull was, in Mr. Wilkes' opinion, a mere trifle.

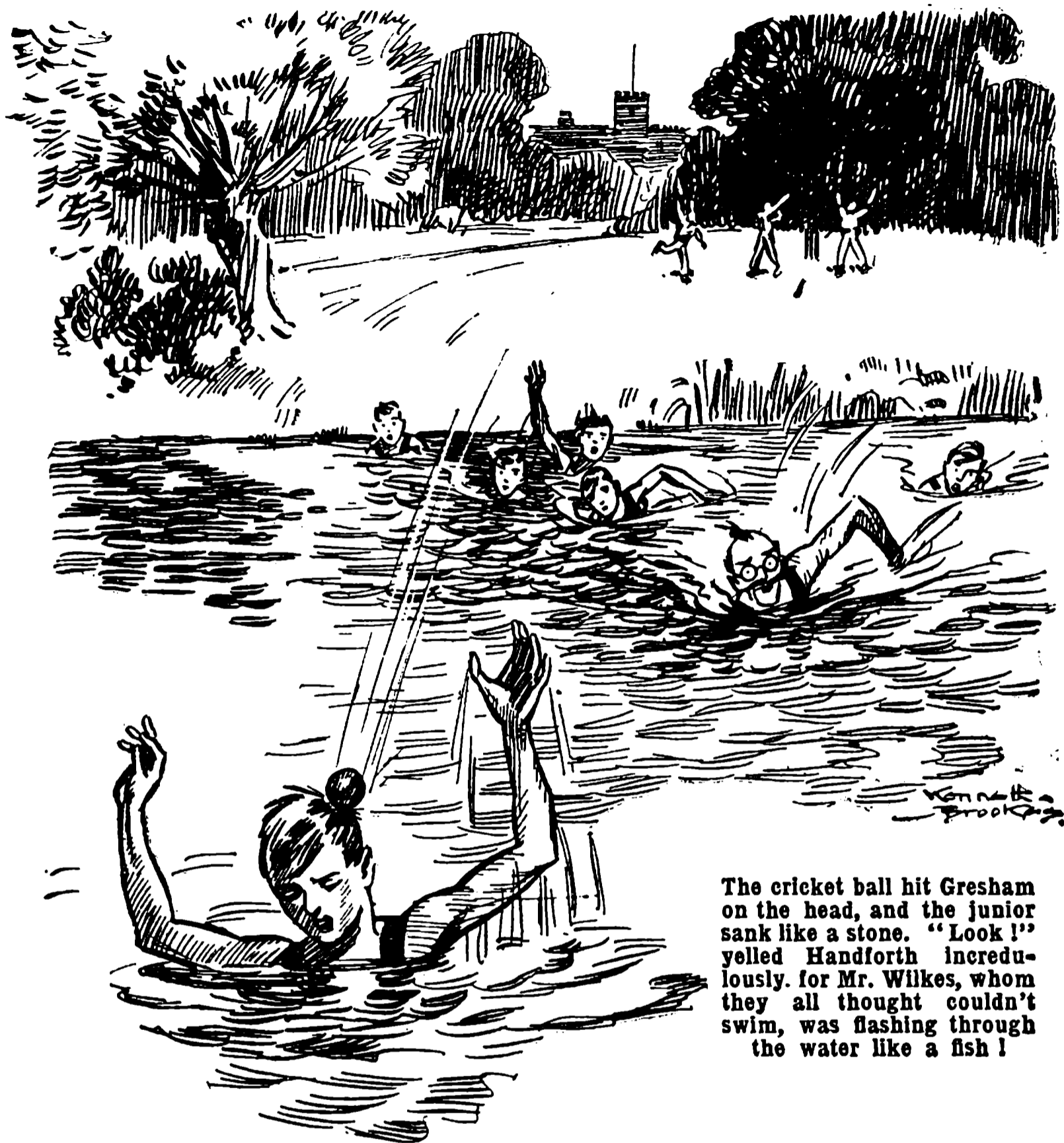
"My dear, good chaps, for the love of Mike, dry up!" he protested. "The bull was only a youngster—and more excited than dangerous. Why can't you all clear off, and allow Mr. Pycraft and me to finish our game?"

"I—er—think that, in the circumstances, it might be better to abandon the game," said Mr. Pycraft hastily. "After this disturbing incident, I am sure that I cannot play."

"He couldn't play before the incident," murmured Bob Christine.

Mr. Wilkes wasn't sorry to have the game called off. He had not expected all this publicity over it. For fifteen years his life had been more or less peaceful. Since his marriage—or, to be more exact, since the war—he had resigned himself to the quiet, humdrum life of a schoolmaster. Prior to his marriage, however, he had done almost everything that a man could do.

In his younger days he had travelled all over the world; he had sailed before the mast; he had hunted big game in India and Central Africa; he had figured in one of the



The cricket ball hit Gresham on the head, and the junior sank like a stone. "Look!" yelled Handforth incredulously, for Mr. Wilkes, whom they all thought couldn't swim, was flashing through the water like a fish!

Mount Everest expeditions; he had dived for pearls in the South Seas; he had endured privation in the Arctic, and he had nearly perished of thirst in the Sahara.

One would never imagine, to look at this man, that he had done so much, had been so far, and had so many accomplishments. In a word, Mr. Wilkes was efficient. And just as he had endured great privations in his earlier years, and had conquered difficulties through sheer grit and determination, so he had conquered boys later.

An abounding good-humour was his chief asset, and a rich understanding of human nature helped him enormously. His marriage had induced him to settle down, and although he no longer went in for dare-devil adventures, the temptation to indulge in them was ever present. The very sight of that bull had been irresistible.

A man so rich in experience was never at

a loss in any emergency, and he was therefore an ideal schoolmaster. All the things he did were done so easily that they had the appearance of trifles. In reality, they were not easy at all; it was only Mr. Wilkes' supreme ability which made them appear so.

Nelson Lee had been sure of what he was doing when he had recommended Mr. Wilkes to the St. Frank's Governors. The new Head had met Mr. Wilkes on several occasions and was, indeed, a friend. But it was not influence which had secured Mr. Wilkes his present appointment. On the contrary, it was Mr. Wilkes' sterling worth and accomplishments which had caused the Governors to appoint him. By introducing him for the post, Nelson Lee had put the first seal upon his supreme fitness to be Head of the great school.

"I wanted to speak to you, daddy," said Vera. "That's why I ran across the meadow.

Did you find that newspaper I asked you about?"

A slight frown crossed Mr. Wilkes' brow.

"I wish you'd let that whole thing drop, Vera," he said uncomfortably. "It really isn't worth——"

"But, daddy, I particularly want it," said the girl firmly.

"Well, I've got the newspaper in my study, and you can have it when we get back to the school," said her father, with a little sigh. "But you must promise me——"

"Yes, daddy, of course," interrupted Vera brightly.

She ran off before her father could say anything further, and Mr. Wilkes chuckled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Thank Heaven I am not in charge of girls!" he said, with a helpless gesture. "It's difficult enough for me to control one! Boys are troublesome enough, in all conscience—— But we won't pursue the subject."

"A bit risky, isn't it, sir?" grinned Nipper.

KIRBY KEEBLE PARKINGTON was crossing West Square about half an hour later, when he found himself face to face with Vera Wilkes. There was a grim little expression in her blue eyes and a determined tilt to her chin.

"I want to speak to you, K.K.," said the girl firmly.

"Go ahead!" invited Parkington. "Better still, what about coming indoors for tea? It's practically ready, and I should be honoured——"

"There's something more important to talk about than tea," interrupted Vera. "There have been rumours going about the school, haven't there?"

K.K. felt suddenly uncomfortable.

"Rumours?" he repeated vaguely. "Have there?"

"You know there have! About my daddy!"

"Oh, well——"

"I don't know who started them, but it was caddish!" said Vera hotly. "You've heard that my daddy was found lying in the gutter, haven't you?"

"Oh, I say——"

"And that he was arrested?"

"But, dash it——"

"And charged with drunkenness?" demanded Vera grimly.

"I didn't believe a word of it," vowed K.K. "Honest, I didn't!"

"I don't think you did," said Vera, her manner softening. "But some of the other boys were only too ready to believe nasty things. I even spoke to daddy about it, but he only laughed. He said it didn't matter. But it does matter. To me, anyhow. I'm not going to have him talked about like that!"

"Your pater is true blue!" said K.K. enthusiastically. "He's gilt-edged—he's a top-holer! Not one of the decent fellows would

dream of believing that idiotic story. Somebody said that there was a paragraph in a newspaper, but it's clear enough that the man wasn't your pater——"

"But he was," said Vera quietly. "Read this."

She showed him a cutting—a duplicate of the one which Bernard Forrest had shown to Claude Gore-Pearce. K.K.'s expression changed as he read it. A startled look leapt into his eyes. He went uncomfortably red.

"Then—then it really is true?" he faltered incredulously.

"True as far as it goes," replied Vera. "Now read this. This was published the next day."

She handed him a whole newspaper this time. Parkington saw that it was called the "Rendell Gazette." It was folded back, and Vera pointed to one particular paragraph. K.K.'s eyes opened wider when he read the headline:

"A SCHOOLMASTER'S VINDICATION."

"Mr. Alington Wilkes, of Rendell School, who was arrested in the early hours of yesterday morning on a charge of drunkenness, was brought before the magistrates to-day. He was able to give a very complete and satisfactory explanation of his dazed condition; and the evidence of Dr. Robert Townrow, of Rendell, completes his vindication.

"It appears that Mr. Wilkes was walking back to the school after attending a local function. He encountered a tramp who attacked him from the rear and brutally struck him down. Dr. Townrow, who was passing in his car, came upon the scene just too late to capture the man. Seeing that Mr. Wilkes was unconscious, he attempted to revive him by forcing some spirits down his throat, but failed to bring him round.

"Dr. Townrow is a small man, and elderly, and the task of lifting Mr. Wilkes into his car was beyond him. He therefore drove home quickly with the intention of returning with his manservant. Unfortunately, a police constable found Mr. Wilkes in the meantime, and as there was a strong smell of spirits and Mr. Wilkes was incapable of giving any account of what had happened, the constable erroneously concluded that he was in a state of intoxication and took him in charge.

"When Mr. Townrow returned to the spot, he naturally found that Mr. Wilkes had gone, and just as naturally believed that Mr. Wilkes had recovered sufficiently to walk home. It was not until this morning that Dr. Townrow rang up the school and was naturally surprised to learn that Mr. Wilkes had not returned. The inquiries which followed led to the startling discovery that the unfortunate gentleman was under arrest.

"It is unnecessary to add that Mr. Wilkes was discharged without a stain on his character, and with complete apologies from the police. We would like to take this opportunity of publicly expressing our own regret that such a damaging and misleading statement regarding Mr. Wilkes should have appeared in our issue of yesterday. It gives us great pleasure to apologise."

There was more of it, but K.K. had read enough.

"I have shown it to you because I want you to know the truth," said Vera quietly.

"Let me keep this for ten minutes, will you?" asked K.K., his eyes gleaming. "Good! Thanks awfully!"

He did not even wait for her to give permission, but raced indoors and burst into the Junior Common-room. Nipper and Handforth and lots of others were there. Forrest and Gore-Pearce were present, too.

"Look at this, you chaps!" sang out K.K. "I've got a local Yorkshire newspaper here, and there's a paragraph in it about Mr. Wilkes."

"What!" went up a yell.

"By gad!" came a drawl from Forrest. "So the murder's out, is it?"

"Murder?" gasped Handforth.

"Ass! That's only a saying," said Nipper. "What about this paragraph, K.K.? It's a bit rotten, you know, to——"

"Before you call it rotten, wait until you hear this," interrupted Parkington. "Silence, sweethearts! Listen to your papa! This is going to surprise you—and make some of you pretty sorry for yourselves, too!"

He read out the report—and there was an uproar.

"I knew it!" burst out Handforth excitedly. "Didn't I tell you, from the first, that there must have been some misunderstanding? Good old Wilkey! We knew he was true blue!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Three cheers for Mr. Wilkes!"

The commotion became louder, and during the height of it Mr. Wilkes himself looked in. He stood in the doorway, holding up his hands for silence.

"You silly young asses!" he protested. "What are you trying to do—turn this room into an imitation of Babel? What's all the din about? Don't forget that I'm answerable for the good conduct of this House, and that——"

"Sorry, sir," said Nipper. "But we've just read this bit about you in the 'Rendell Gazette.' Why didn't you let us know about it before, sir?"

Mr. Wilkes sighed.

"Where did you get this newspaper from?" he asked. "I gave it to my daughter, but I had no idea that she——"

"She showed it to me, sir—and it was I

who brought it here," interrupted K.K. defiantly. "I wanted the chaps to know the truth about you. It's about time all those rotten rumours were killed!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Three cheers for Mr. Wilkes!"

"Dry up!" roared the Housemaster. "Do you think I want you chumps to cheer me for nothing? I didn't take any notice of those rumours because they were beneath contempt. Rumours generally are. And I never believed for a moment that idle slander would cause you boys to turn against me. I've more faith in human nature, thank goodness. If you don't mind, we'll let the whole thing drop. And the next time you hear rumours, let them pass in one ear and out the other. That's all rumours are worth."

He nodded cheerily and walked out. His eyes twinkled as he heard the thunderous cheers which broke out in spite of what he had said.

HALF an hour later Bernard Forrest came to his study.

"I want to apologise, sir, for being such a cad," said Forrest steadily.

"I have been waiting for you to come, young man," said Mr. Wilkes, sitting back in his chair and looking at Forrest with searching eyes. "If you hadn't come, I should have sent for you. I am very glad it wasn't necessary."

"I—I thought you were a humbug, sir—or I wouldn't have tried that rotten dodge on you," said Forrest earnestly. "I thought you'd wangled your way into St. Frank's, and that I had a good chance of pulling the strings. It was a pretty contemptible bit of work—and I hope you'll forgive me, sir."

Mr. Wilkes came round his desk and clapped Forrest on the back.

"I like your frankness, old chap," he said gently. "I'm not the kind of man to keep up a bitter feeling. We'll let this whole thing drop. You understand? Forget it completely."

As Bernard Forrest walked down the passage he grinned to himself.

"Well, it was either apologising or getting a flogging," he muttered. "I rather think I put it over pretty well."

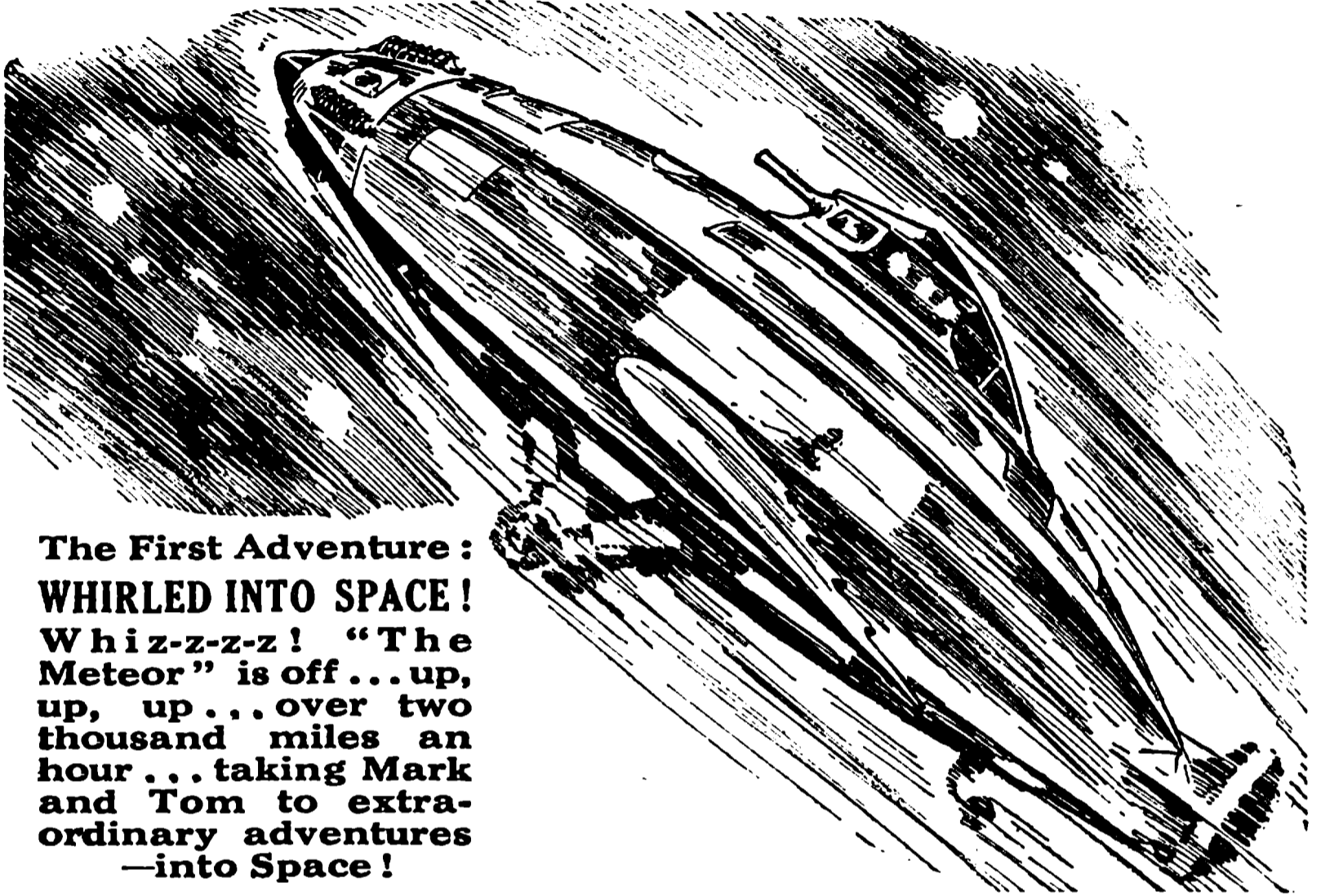
But his words and his grin were not convincing. For about the first time in his life, Bernard Forrest felt heartily ashamed of himself. Mr. Wilkes' forgiveness had affected him more than he would admit. He told himself that he had scored—but it was far more probable that Mr. Alington Wilkes had achieved another little victory.

THE END.

(Another extra long St. Frank's yarn next week—prominently featuring Archie Glenthorne. Archie is always a scream, but in this story he's funnier than ever. Look out for the title; "Archie's Awful Aunt!" and order your copy in advance!)

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**The First Adventure :
WHIRLED INTO SPACE!
Whiz-z-z-z! "The
Meteor" is off... up,
up, up... over two
thousand miles an
hour... taking Mark
and Tom to extra-
ordinary adventures
—into Space!**

A Mad Venture!

THAT'S the scheme, Tom! The greatest pioneering trip ever carried out by man. An exploration of"—he nodded toward the twinkling stars—"space!"

"But—but it's impossible!" I gasped.

Mark Whitaker laughed at me.

"Fathead!" he scoffed. "Nothing's impossible to science. Forty years ago, radio was 'impossible'; so were telephones, airships and submarines. Nowadays they're just ordinary things, aren't they?"

I nodded doubtfully.

"And you're really going to shoot beyond the world's atmosphere and sail into space in—that?" I muttered, staring at the strange vessel that crouched on Mark's lawn, with her nose pointed skywards. In the moonlight she looked like an enormous silver torpedo, fitted with slender wings and rudder.

"I am!" said Mark decisively. "You, too, if you'll come?"

He looked at me with those queer, dark eyes of his, and I knew I was a goner. For I've always followed Mark Whitaker blindly, ever since I fagged for him at school.

It's rather funny that we're such good pals, because we're as different as chalk and

By

JOHN BREARLEY

(Author of the "Night Hawk" Series.)

cheese, and he's much older than I. I'm a pretty burly six-footer, fighting-weight thirteen stone odd; and about all I can do decently is play soccer and push fellows in the face if they get rude and so forth. Whereas old Mark, who is about as high and as wide as a good-sized walking stick, is as clever as they make 'em. He's a perfect wizard at every 'ology and 'ism that I've ever heard of, and a few that I haven't. In addition, thanks to his father's will, he's nearly a millionaire, and so can afford any stunt he sets his mind to.

But this one absolutely took my breath away.

"You'll be smashed to atoms!" I mumbled.

"Or freeze. Or starve!"

He frowned at me grimly.

"Now, listen, chump!" he snapped. "Do I usually talk through my hat? I've been working on this for over a year in secret and I've weighed every chance. You see the shape of the ship—she'll cut the air like a shell. Her hull is the strongest and lightest metal yet known—aluminium mixed

with helloid, a new alloy I've discovered. And she'll stand any strain or pressure. In addition, she carries twin motors that develop 250,000 h.p. between them; and don't need fuel!"

"Eh!" I protested. "Then what feeds them?"

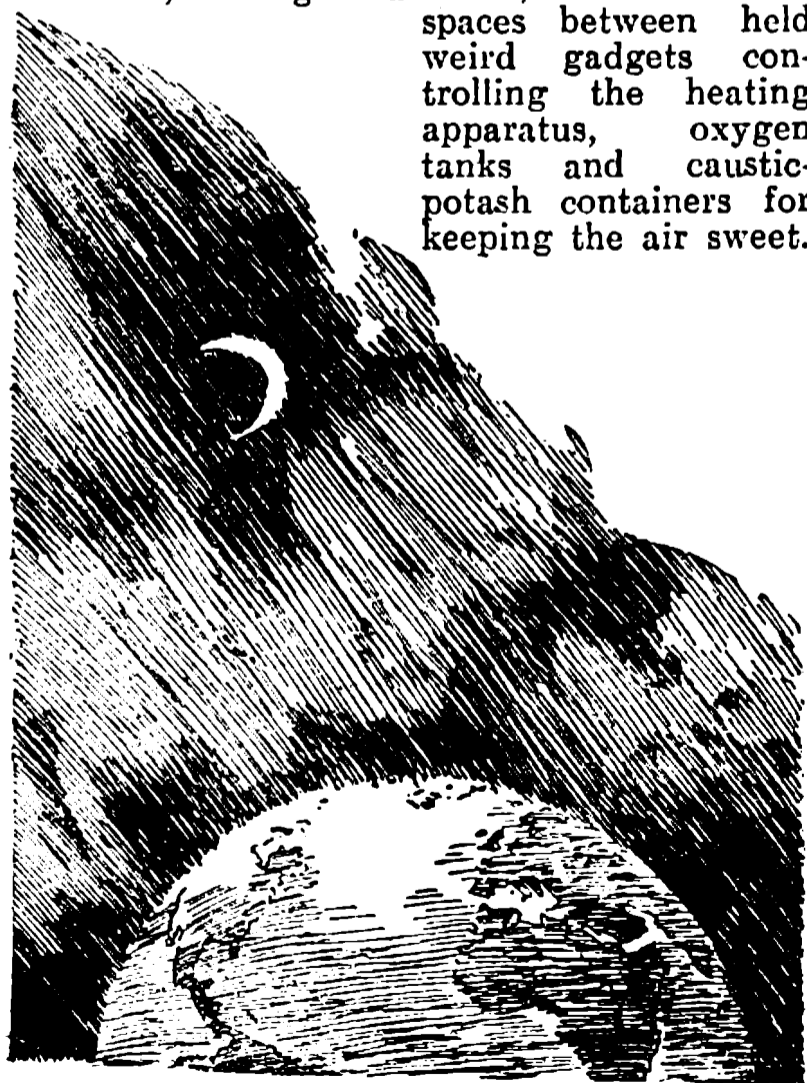
"Light!" answered Mark quietly. "Short-length light-waves directed through those tubes above her rudder, and transformed into dynamic energy. I'll show you. My engines will do away with petrol and steam entirely one of these days!" he finished, with that queer touch of arrogance these science johnnies have.

At his nod, I followed him meekly up a short ladder and into the vessel, where he switched on a bright array of lights.

For some minutes, I could only gaze around dumbly. She was certainly the strangest flying machine I had ever seen. Gradually, as I took it all in, my doubts began to fade; for it was plain that my eccentric friend meant business, and only a man who was an inventive genius to the backbone could have designed this amazing craft.

The one great cabin was divided simply into living-quarters, workshop and engine-room, gleaming with white enamel and polished nickel. Built into the pointed nose of the ship were the wonderful engines, two intricate columns of slender rods and insulated wires, all encased in prismatic glass. In the front of them was the raised control-platform, with a bewildering array of levers, coils and dials within easy reach of the driving-seat.

Each side of the curved hull contained an enormous observation window made of unbreakable glass, with smaller ones let into the floor, ceiling and bows; and the wall spaces between held weird gadgets controlling the heating apparatus, oxygen tanks and caustic-potash containers for keeping the air sweet.



Something else that struck me was a long rack holding half a dozen quaint goggles with coloured lenses.

There was a navigating table beside the driving-seat, and in the stern of the vessel were two wide mahogany bunks, tightly-sealed cupboards, a table and two light chairs. But what made my eyes sparkle most of all was a steel ladder leading to a flat turret on the roof. For in that turret, nestling between shell magazines labelled "gas" and "lyddite," a sturdy wicked-looking gun poked its nose forth truculently.

I whistled softly.

"My sainted aunt!" was all I could say. I was simply flabbergasted.

With a sombre little smile, Mark seated himself on the control-platform and studied me beneath heavy brows.

"Look at these engines, Tom!" he said quietly at length. "I don't know what speed they develop—exactly. But this I do know. When we've climbed to the very edge of the earth's atmosphere—something like fifty miles above sea level—we've got to travel at the rate of two thousand miles per hour for at least two minutes in order to pull clear into space. And—we'll do it!"

He waited for me to say something, but I was just spellbound. So he went on:

"When we're out in the vacuum beyond—between the world and the stars—we shan't need such power because we'll have no resistance. We shall be away from gravity then until we come to—some other world!" he concluded with a queer soft thrill in his voice. "What we'll find, how long we'll be in finding it, I don't know!" He flung out a hand towards the living-quarters. "There's tinned food in those air-tight cupboards, and meat in that refrigerator. We shan't freeze or swelter; nor will we suffocate."

He was speaking rapidly now. A terrific enthusiasm and excitement gripped him. Leaning forward suddenly, he gripped my arm with surprising strength.

"Now, look here, lad. You've just left Clayton, you've no job or folks except your guardian. In other words, you're free. And you're a hefty, hard-hitting giant and a stout fellow besides. Will you come with me"—he glanced once more at the bright stars thousands of miles above—"up there? Otherwise—I go alone!"

"When do you start?" I muttered.

"To-night! Midnight!"

I didn't say anything more. I just held out my fist.

At midnight we were ready to start on our flight beyond the edge of the world.

A Gruelling Voyage!

"ALL ready?"

Mark, with his hand on the starting-lever, turned and surveyed me over his shoulder. I nodded. His hand came over, and the great engines snarled into life beneath their glass cover.

We were off!

The uncanny speed of that lightning get-away was terrific. It shook me clean out of my chair amidships and threw me helplessly against the window, and, as I glanced out dizzily, I saw the garden drop away, saw the lights of London flicker once and disappear; then we were high in the air, shooting upwards towards the heavens.

On hands and knees I crawled along the sloping floor to watch Mark at the controls. A single dazed look at the clock and altimeter told me that already, in five minutes, we had shattered every height record ever made, and we were still going up!

Straight and true we whistled through the air, Mark slipping his control-lever back notch by notch until we hardly seemed to be moving. The soft growl of the engines was the only sound—neither of us spoke a word. Sometimes a dense cloud blotted out the distant stars for a second; the next they were bright and clear again—rushing to meet us!

At fifteen miles up an unseen hand suddenly clutched my throat. I found myself gasping for breath, blood rushed to my head. We were well in the upper regions now where the air was thin and scarce. Mark felt it, too, for he leaned over swiftly and threw the automatic air-feed into gear. A sharp hissing noise followed, and soon our breathing was back again to normal.

Upwards, ever upwards, in a long, steep slant. The altimeter said twenty miles—thirty—thirty-five! We were far above the world. Without warning, through the starboard window came a thin, pale streamer of light from far away. I pointed silently, and Mark nodded.

"We're drawing clear of the earth!" he exulted. "That's the rising sun we can see—six hours earlier than the people in England!"

I started to say something, but he stopped me. His face was growing hard and haggard. The snarl of the engines was rising gradually to a piercing, grinding shriek that made the metal hull quiver, and when I looked at the speedometer my brain reeled.

Mark jerked his head towards the altimeter. Forty-two miles above earth!

"Nearly there!" he snapped tensely, and pulled over the lever again.

We felt the speed then with a vengeance. It was ghastly. The ship seemed to be tearing away from me; I thought it would leave me behind, and I should sink through the stern into emptiness.

The screams of the engines shook her from end to end as, faster and faster, she pierced the thin air until abruptly I collapsed in a heap. Something warm and red splashed on to my hand—my nose was bleeding badly. It had never done that before.

My head was spinning like a top, and I clawed at the smooth floor as though I feared it would slide from under me.

Through the red mist dancing in front of my eyes I watched Mark's face. He was all in, too! Only his iron will-power kept him glued to the driving-seat, while the marvellous child of his brain shook and moaned in agony, as though she would burst into splinters at every second.

Mark's lips were thin and white, and sweat poured down his high forehead in torrents. Yet, with a firm hand, he pulled the lever over to its last notch, and rammed the ship onwards towards the last edge separating the world's atmosphere from the emptiness of inter-stellar space.

After that he drooped in his seat and looked ahead with tired eyes. He could do nothing more. It was a fight now between the last pull of the earth and the power of those wondrous engines.

How long the battle raged I do not know. The machine was smashing ahead like a destroyer against a tidal wave. A great pressing weight was in front and on top of her, but she fought gallantly, higher and higher, shouldering her way up—up—until—

With a tearing, ripping sound we were through. For a moment she stopped; and then, as a cork is forced from a bottle, she was flung clean out and away—into nothingness!

If the speed before had been great, I cannot describe what happened next. We were out in space—emptiness. No air, no wind, no resistance of any kind. A dazzling, white-hot light poured in through the windows; the engines took charge. With nothing against them they raced frenziedly, threatening every instant to kick the ship into powder.

"Throttle down!" I croaked hoarsely; but Mark had fainted. Staggering up somehow I pitched him out of his seat and grasped the lever. I am pretty strong, but the strain was heart-breaking. Slowly, painfully I forced it back notch after notch until, after what seemed an eternity, our headlong flight slackened, fell away and stopped altogether.

We hung there in space as though by a great string. Then I, too, went down like a pole-axed bullock.

Beyond the World!

WHEN I came to Mark was bending over me anxiously. His face was strained, but smiling, and he gripped my shoulder tight.

"We've done it—done it, Tom!" he triumphed. "We've gone over the edge of the world!"

I shook my head to clear it, and looked around vaguely. Nothing was to be seen save the dazzling light, and the ship was rocking sluggishly. All else was silent and still—like a vault.

I watched dully as Mark cautiously started the engines again. One notch was sufficient to send the vessel smoothly ahead; at two she was racing. He smiled with satisfaction.



The two boys cowered on the floor in terror—for framed in the window were hundreds of foul, demoniac faces!

"Shan't waste power up here, Tom."

As we forged ahead he fell to studying his charts and instruments to find how far we had come in that first blind, fantastic rush. The result staggered me. With nothing to hinder us, we had ripped off nine hundred miles in twenty minutes—whistled through space faster than a meteor! I stared through the brilliant windows and thought of the world far below, still wrapped in midnight darkness.

During the next two hours we cruised swiftly. Mark seemed to know where he was. I didn't. When I tried to think of the colossal distances through which we were speeding, and looked at the chart, my mind refused to act.

Mark, on the other hand, was as cool as ice now. I think he had forgotten me—forgotten everything. With one hand on the control, he was studying an enormous roller chart of the stars, moon and sun, and his face was rapt.

As for me, I sat and watched him, wondering what was to happen next. Presently a

little frown appeared on his forehead, and he looked thoughtfully at the engines, and then at me.

"Feel anything?" he jerked.

Coming out of my trance, I gazed around. No; everything seemed as before. I looked through the window but could see nothing on account of the bright, blank light. And then it occurred to me that we were not traveling so fast. Also the ship was swaying uneasily.

"Something's against us!" cried Mark. "I haven't slackened the engines!"

"What is it? Pocket of wind?" I hazarded.

He shook his head.

"No wind up here—nothing to make it. Have another look outside."

I tried, but my eyes could make nothing of the dazzle, and, to be candid, the brilliance hurt them like blazes. I told him so.

"H'm! I forgot we're in the direct glare of the sun unprotected by atmosphere. Try the fourth pair of goggles," he directed, at

the same time pulling the control-lever over another peg.

Certainly something was wrong. We were losing speed badly, and pitching like mad into the bargain. I reached for the goggles, which had thick conical lenses, greenish-yellow in colour, and started to adjust them, when a faint noise caught my ear. It was a nasty sound—a sort of nerve-stretching squeak—as though someone was rubbing greasy fingers down the windows.

"Buck up!" called Mark impatiently.

The moment I had the goggles on the blinding light softened as if by magic. Striding to the window, I looked out.

What I saw then froze my very soul with panic.

"Mark! Mark! For heaven's sake—look!" I roared.

A Fight With Fiends!

THE delirious yell I gave brought Mark out of his chair in a flash, reaching for the goggle-rack. For my part, I cleared the width of the cabin in one mad bound, and cowered down in a corner, almost sobbing with terror. Yes, I admit it; I was scared to the teeth, tough as I usually am.

I saw Mark pull on his goggles clumsily, then reel back as though struck by lightning. A moment later he was huddled down beside me, trembling in every limb, and together we stared at the windows with fear-swollen eyes that refused to close, although we tried hard to shut out that hideous sight.

For there, framed in the window, and filling every inch of it, were hundreds and hundreds of foul, demoniac faces, such faces as no men have ever seen before and lived to describe.

I thought my mind would give way. It was horrifying—enough to curdle one's blood. Their eyes! They were like horrible bulging growths, sightless, yet glowing with fiendish malignancy, and their gaping, slit-like mouths slobbered and grinned at us, while they pawed at the window with long, sucking tentacles.

WHEN YOU'RE AT THE SEASIDE

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FREE!

We could not see their bodies—only their flat reptilian faces and those nauseating eyes goggling at us as the Things fought and writhed to break the glass. Whether they heard me screech or not, I cannot say, but the pressure on the ship redoubled, and we swayed and rolled until every moment I expected the craft to turn turtle.

As in a dream I saw Mark totter to his feet and fling himself into the driving-seat.

"Mark! What are they?" I croaked. The motion of the ship as the fiends grappled with it was making us sick. Mark turned his pale face to me.

"Nebuli!" he muttered thickly. "The creatures that live between the stars. Scientists have guessed at their existence, but—oh, my gosh, look at them! We're surrounded!"

The noise of their suckers had increased at every window until the ship rang with their shrill squeaks. We were going mad with it; our hair stood on end, and icy fingers played a devilish tattoo on our spines.

And still the ghouls attacked us; their yellow faces peeped in at every point like lost souls; it was impossible to forge ahead through their combined weight. There must have been thousands and thousands pushing against us, trying to drag us down to a shocking death.

I could stand it no longer. I remember snorting in sudden anger, roaring to Mark to slam the engines into full speed, regardless of what happened, and the next I knew I was up in the gun turret, wrenching open the magazine of one-pounder gas shells.

What I hoped to do I neither knew nor cared. I was fighting mad. Under the full power of the Light-engines the ship gave a powerful lurch forward, and began to fight and twist against her loathsome opponents, rolling, plunging and heaving. Bracing my legs against the swaying turret, I gave a wild yell and shook my fist defiantly in the faces of the Things pressed to the window above my head, and, reaching for a shell, I threw open the gun-breach.

Next instant I was fighting desperately for life.

The moment I swung back the breach, something poured in through the opening like a wisp of steam, and wrapt itself about me. I saw two dead eyes staring fixedly into mine, felt slimy arms around my neck, and a foul mouth nuzzling at my throat. It was the opening the devils outside had been searching for. One of them had come in through the gun!

By some unbelievable stroke of luck I managed to slam the breach shut even as the ghouls swarmed all over me; and after that we came down the steel ladder together with a crash that shook me out of my stupor.

With a cry of loathing and rage I tried to fling off those revolting, transparent limbs. I punched, kicked and butted with all my strength. But there was nothing to grasp!

It was like fighting a wet, oily ghost, which melted and wilted before my blows, but still clung to me—that dreadful, sucking mouth creeping ever closer towards my throat.

Up and down the cabin I raged, knocking over the table and chairs, bruising myself against the walls, falling, slipping, but always hitting with all my power. Yet I could not win free from the clammy Thing that seemed to change its shape at every second.

Where Mark was I did not know; but the ship was going ahead at top speed. Suddenly I saw him, leaping towards me with eyes that were glazed with horror, and a curious squat pistol in his hand.

“Shut your eyes, Tom!” I heard a voice scream; and with that the cabin, the ghoul, Mark—everything—went out in a hissing, vivid flame that hurt my eyes even through the thick goggles, and burnt my face. The icy limbs around me fell away; I staggered back. When I looked again, the cabin was full of stifling, heavy magnesium smoke, and Mark was chuckling hysterically.

“Got it, Tom! It’s dead. I—I burst it!”

Heedless of his cries, I pointed to the windows.

“Look! We’re escaping!” I bellowed; and Mark tottered back to the driving-seat to nurse the racing engines. Our speed was proving too much for the obscene denizens of space; already half the windows were clear, and the Nebuli had dropped back one by one. Only here and there a repulsive, eager face still peered in with its bulging, blank eyes.

Soon they, too, disappeared. We were free!

The Invisible World!

FOR four days and nights—ninety-six hours rather, for night does not exist in the realms between stars—we sailed at high speed, attacked frequently by bands of Nebuli, but always shaking them off by superior pace.

As the days sped by a great change came over Mark Whitaker. He grew silent and irritable, pored over his charts and instruments for hours, and I fairly had to force grub down his neck at times. I had no idea where we were heading, but once when I asked him, he smiled grimly, tapped the chart, and pointed to—nothing.

I dried up after that, thinking it a hint to mind my own bizney. But it wasn’t.

It was on the fifth day that the great event

occurred. I was reading by a window when—flip!—a flash of brilliant green light slashed past me, the ship gave a sickening dive, and began falling like a stone. Down the tilted deck I skidded, the cabin alight with green fire, which changed in a twinkling to angry orange then to a staring electric blue.

With Mark struggling to right the vessel, I looked out. The whole universe had exploded into flame. In another second we had plunged into a sea of blazing red, like blood, out of which tore dragons’ teeth of blistering sulphur, hot jets of azure, magenta and crimson sparks. A great glowing ball of sapphire burst in the west and raced across the heavens, to be met by sword-strokes of livid emerald and lilac.

It was like sailing through a mighty rainbow. Scarves of purple, crimson, yellow and topaz were torn from the skies as though by a giant hand; we were blinded and stunned by the smashing onslaughts of colour. And at that moment, when the whole world was a single eye-scorching sheet of burnished copper—everything went black!

I thought for one awful second that we had gone blind. But Mark’s cool voice cut the silence:

“We’re approaching another world, Tom. The first and second goggles—for your life!”

I blundered over and grabbed them; gave him one pair; put the others on myself. A simultaneous cry burst from us both:

“Look ahead!”

In place of the blackness the universe had turned to a soft pale violet, and right beneath us was land! We were cruising towards it above a placid sea of violet waves, washing a violet shore.

As far as we could see, the land was flat and covered with dense jungle. But out of the horizon mists presently loomed the most gigantic range of mountains we had ever clapped eyes on—higher far than the greatest peaks in the Himalayas or the Andes.

And somehow they seemed to threaten us—like the bared crimson fangs of some unknown monster.

“What is it?” I whispered in awe.

Mark flung back his head.

“The land I have come to find!” he shouted. “The planet no one believed to exist but me—because no one could see it! It is the Invisible World!”

I watched, with a feeling of vague dread stealing over me. What awaited us there?

THE END.

NEXT WEDNESDAY’S STORY IN THIS SERIES IS ENTITLED;

“THE APE HORDE!”

THRILLING, EXCITING, WEIRD, AMAZING!

A Lively Yarn With Many a Laugh!



Ducking for Two!

BLOOP and Eric had no complaints to make about the new camping-ground, except that the stream was too shallow for a really good swim. The mill-pool, which was not very far away, had been an ideal place, but the Hikers still had vivid—and painful—memories of that clash there with a swarm of angry bees. Hence, the mill-pool was a place to be strictly avoided.

“Your trout were jolly good, Tony,” said Eric Gale, “but these poaching stunts are sure to get us into trouble. Why the dickens couldn’t you have let those beastly bees alone when I told you? It’s all your fault we had to leave the mill-pool.”

“I wasn’t touching ’em,” said Tony Ridgers, the third member of the Hikers, who were on a go-as-you-please walking tour. “One of ’em gave me a stab in the leg when I wasn’t looking, and that’s how I came to bust up their happy home. Slivey and his pal, who tried to pinch our valuables from the tent, were luckier than they know, for if the nest had dropped on ’em they’d have been too glued up with honey to run. And they did leg it a lot faster than you two did.”

Bloop and Eric felt better, for the ammonia had taken some of the pain out of the stings,

THE HIKERS

Mr. Slivey and pal make another Appearance—and the Hikers teach ’em how to Disappear!

and the swellings were going down. The village of Little Firkett had proved to be a better place than they had thought it would be, and, in addition to obtaining a boat and plenty of ice-cream, Bloop had purchased a

basket of strawberries.

“Anything special doing this afternoon?” Tony asked, when the washing-up was finished.

“Not for me,” replied Bloop. “I’m nursing my wounds, and anybody who mentions bees to me for ages will be handed out a thick ear. I’m just going to do nothing at all, Tony, my lad.”

“And I’m helping you,” said Eric Gale. “It’s the sort of job I can do nicely.”

Tony grinned as Eric and Bloop stretched themselves out on the grass and covered their faces with their handkerchiefs.

“And look here, Bloop, if you start snoring and singing in your sleep, you’ll get two or three thick ears!” added Eric.

Bloop moaned dismally.

“I’m not likely to sleep, all full of bee-stings and poison, and less likely to sing,” he sighed. “I was a gigantic ass to come with you at all on this giddy walking tour, and that’s what hurts worse than the stings.”

Doing nothing did not suit the energetic Tony. He collected the eel-line



and got into the boat. He thought that by this time the bees would have glutted themselves with the spilt honey and be too drowsy and heavy to do much harm. He was mistaken; for, upon reaching the mill, the air was still black with bees, so he turned upstream.

Tony liked eels for breakfast, and he looked about for a deep, quiet place in which to set the night-line, but the stream ran fast and was only knee-deep. Then somebody hailed him, and Tony concealed a gleeful grin as he sighted Mr. Slivey and his rascally pal, Slimmy. Nobody else would have recognised them; but, by the bandages on their hands and faces, Tony knew them. He also knew which was which, because a portion of Mr. Slivey's whiskers stood out. And though the knife-grinder and his unlucky friend recognised Tony, they had not the faintest notion that he had heard them plotting to burgle the Hikers' tent just before the bees' nest had collapsed.

"What do you want?" Tony inquired, steadying the boat against the current.

"Please take us acrost, young guv'ner," answered Mr. Slivey in a whining voice. "We've been in a motor-car accident, and it's nearly a mile walk to the bridge."

"Right you are!" said Tony promptly.

Very slowly and painfully Mr. Slivey and his companion got into the boat.

"It must have been a rotten accident, by the look of you," said Tony.

"It was," said Mr. Slivey. "That beastly car came round the corner like a fire-engine gone mad, and laid us out, so we ought to get damages enough to keep us for life. Ain't that your tent we can see along there?"

"It is," nodded Tony.

"Well," went on Mr. Slivey, winking his only visible eye at his friend, "if I was you I should find my other pals and pack up camp. Ole Noakes, the farmer, shoves about fifty cows into that medder most arternoons, and if a few of 'em gets into your tent, there'll be a pretty mess-up. Why don't you go and camp by the mill-pool?"

If Mr. Slivey hadn't said that, Tony would have ferried them over and let them go in peace. This advice showed what a wicked old rogue the knife-grinder was, for he was well aware that the neighbourhood of the mill-pool was alive with savage bees.

"Thanks very much for telling me," said Tony sweetly.

The prow of the boat touched the bank, and Tony got out of the way to let Mr. Slivey and Slimmy pass him. Then he gave the boat a sudden rock that almost swamped it, and shot it backwards into the stream. Overboard to port went Mr. Slivey, overboard to starboard went his unshaven friend.

In the racing current Tony, with great glee, saw them go rolling over and over, till they managed to dig their hands and toes into the gravel. A battered old billycock hat and an ancient tweed cap sailed

merrily away, and then Mr. Slivey and Slimmy came up for air.

Tony did not wait. Glancing over his shoulder as he sped downstream, he saw the two rascals, knee-deep in water, shaking dripping, bandaged hands at him furiously, and heard them howling threats of vengeance.

"Hi!" he yelled. "Nobody will believe your motor-car yarn, so tell 'em the truth. Say you've been shipwrecked. Good-bye-ee! Dry your whiskers properly, Slivey, you old thief, or they'll go mildewed."

At the camp all was fairly peaceful. Occasionally Bloop and Eric, their faces still covered, said "Ouch!" and reached out to rub painful spots on their legs and necks. Tony shinned up a tree, and discovered Mr. Slivey and his friend making their way slowly across a footpath, well clear of the mill-pool.

"Slinking back to where they left the old knife-grinding gadget," he thought with a chuckle. "I think we've seen the last of that brace of thieves."

He climbed down, and carefully inspected the bedclothes to make sure he had not wrapped up a few bees in them in his haste to get away from the other camp.

"Tony, old thing," called the drowsy voice of Bloop.

"Sir?" said Tony, for Bloop, whose real name was Eustace Giles Trevor Radlett Tarrants, was the son of Squire Tarrants, who employed Tony's father as head game-keeper on his vast estate.

"Oh, cut it out! I'm feeling rotten. Shove a match to the primus stove, and let's have a cup of tea. I suppose the water has to come out of the river, so, for the love of Mike, don't get a tadpole or a frog or a tiddler in it! If I found a boiled tadpole in my tea it would just about settle me, clean turn me over."

Poor Bloop was really feeling unwell, for the sting of bees affect some people that way. On Tony, who had had his fair share, they had no effect at all. There were no tadpoles in the tea, and presently Eric and Bloop cheered up. They grinned when Tony told them what had happened to Mr. Slivey and his friend.

"I don't think a wash has done them much harm," said Eric. "What a ripping afternoon! I'm pulling round slowly, and I fancy another swim would just about put me right. Do you think those rotten bees have hopped it yet, Tony? This isn't a bad pitch, but the other one was top-hole, and that's where we ought to be."

Tony went off to explore. The bees seemed to have gone, but they might return, and he did not think it safe to move the camp before dusk. Mr. Slivey had, of course, told a lie about the cows, for there was not a single head of cattle in the field.

Tony set the eel-line, in spite of a notice stating that fishing was forbidden, and then pulled upstream again.

"It's safe enough for a swim," he said; "but keep your eyes open. The bees have

sheered off in search of another happy home, but if they can't find one they may sheer back again. Gee, it was some nest, too! There's a ghastly mess of honey and broken comb inside the doorway—quids' worth!"

"My dear Tony," said Bloop, "it's a sticky subject, and it hurts. Please don't mention bees and honey to me for a long time. As one gentleman to another, I ask you not to do it. If you persist, I shall certainly biff you a beauty!"

At twilight Tony reported that all was clear, and within half an hour they were back on the old site. As they sat outside the tent on camp-stools, the moon rose and shone like silver on the mill-pool.

"Jolly pretty," said Bloop yawning, "and jolly quiet. Your turn to sleep outside, Eric, I think? Hallo, here's a guy with a gun!"

Bloop Meets the Foe!

A FRIENDLY spaniel ran up to them, wagging its tail, and the man with the gun followed it.

"Good-evenin', young gentlemen!" said the gamekeeper, impressed by the trim new tent and varnished cart. "I'm sure it will be all right, but if you haven't got permission to camp, I'd like your names, for I have to report to the squire."

Bloop pencilled the names of his two chums on the back of a visiting-card. The gamekeeper pocketed the card and the half-crown that went with it, and touched his cap.

"I suppose no ass of a farmer will come along and want to shift us off when we're nice and comfortable?" said Eric.

"I'll watch it, sir. I'm sure to meet Farmer Noakes and the constable, who's a bit of a Nosy Parker, and I'll tell 'em you've got the squire's permit. Good-night!"

Tony Ridgers rattled the small stock of money in the pocket of his shorts, and thought about the honey. The lamp had been lighted in the tent, and Bloop and Eric were scrawling letters for home.

The mill reeked of honey when Tony went in and turned the rays of an electric torch on the ruins. Much of the comb had been broken, and the sticky contents had leaked out, but some of it was intact. It was formed in the shape of big slabs, some of them four feet long, fastened to the fallen ceiling-boards.

"Quids' worth," he thought. "Hundred-weights of it."

He took out his knife and started on the sticky task of cutting the undamaged comb away. His idea was to rise before dawn, when the bees might return, and take the comb down to the village, where he was almost sure of finding some bee-keeper or shopkeeper who would buy the stuff at bargain price.

He laid the slabs out in two rows, till he thought he had enough for one journey in

the boat, and by the time he had washed his hands in the river, Eric and Bloop had finished their letters.

"We might have asked that gamekeeper guy where the letter-box hangs out," said Bloop. "Who's going to scout for it?"

Tony and Eric went, and Bloop put on his pyjamas and a pair of slippers. He had an inside pocket in the pyjama-jacket, and in this he buttoned up his wallet of notes. Then he switched off the electric lamp because it attracted the moths.

Eric and Tony must have gone a long way to find a letter-box. It was warm, but a damp mist was rising from the river, and there was a heavy dew on the grass that soaked through his slippers, so Bloop went in and lay down.

His two chums were a long time, because they had met the farmer and his wife, and had been invited into the old farmhouse to taste home-made wine and cake. Bloop slumbered, snored a little, and then suddenly he was wide awake. Raising himself on one elbow, he listened. Somebody had sneezed, and somebody sneezed again.

"A-a-a-atchoo!"

It wasn't Tony, for Tony's bed was empty, and the sneeze was some considerable distance away. Bloop liked to be lazy, but he could be quick enough when it suited him. His hand slipped under the blanket; then, on hands and knees, he crept forward and looked out.

Except for the murmuring of the river, the night was perfectly still. The sneeze seemed to have come from the bank, so he crept round the tent, using his elbows, for he had a flash-lamp in his left hand and a six-shooter in his right.

And then, with a sudden shock, he met Mr. Slivey, who was also on his hands and knees, trailing the ends of his whiskers in the dewy grass. Mr. Slivey had removed the bandages, for he was such a tough-skinned old rascal that a few bee-stings could not damage him for very long. Into Mr. Slivey's watery and dazzled eyes Bloop shot the glare of the lamp.

"What's your game?" asked Bloop.

"My game?" said Mr. Bloop, blinking fiercely. "I dunno. Where am I? I must be walkin' in me sleep. I dunno where I am, blowed if I do! And you needn't blind me, neither, with that rotten thing! Thank you for wakin' me up. I've suffered from this 'ere 'orrible complaint ever since I was a bonny boy and my mother's joy, and it's a wonder I ain't killed myself."

Mr. Slivey shot out a long, sinewy arm and a clutching hand to seize Bloop, but Bloop was expecting something of the kind. The knife-grinder uttered a yell, and his friend Slimmy, who had contracted a cold after the bath Tony had given him and was sneezing in the distance, came at a run.

Bloop had jumped to his feet. He gave Mr. Slivey another helping of flash-lamp to dazzle him afresh, and backed away. He saw



Tony rocked the boat, and Mr. Slivey and his rascally pal both took headers into the stream.

the sneezer approaching with long strides. There was a flash from the six-shooter and a thunderous report that went booming across meadow and river. Slimmy pulled up with a jerk.

Lazy Bloop could run when he did not feel too lazy. He dashed out of the shadow of the tent, losing both his slippers, cutting to the left of Mr. Slivey's accomplice.

"Got you!" he shouted, and fired again.

In the still night the revolver made an uproar like a siege-gun. It was a harmless affair with a plugged muzzle, and could only fire blanks, but Mr. Slivey and his friend did not know it, nor did they wait to find out.

They made for the mill-lane, breaking all the local records, but a third shot made them swerve and dive into the mill for cover. Mr. Slivey, whose whiskers were bristling with terror, being certain that the last bullet had whizzed past his ear.

"Stop where you are till my pals come back and fetch the police!" cried Bloop, grinning. "Show a nose outside, and I'll plug you!"

Bloop had time to reload, and sat down on a camp-stool, certain that he had the two rascals in a panic of fear, and hoping that Eric and Tony would come back and see the fun. Unless Mr. Slivey and his friend swam the mill-pool at the back, he did not think they could leave their cover unnoticed.

Presently, in the dark doorway, a dirty handkerchief fluttered; a flag of truce.

"Look 'ere, young guv'nor," said the whining voice of Mr. Slivey, "shove that thing away. We knows it's only a joke, but them things is too dangerous, and you might easy murder two innercent men."

"Not if I murder you two," chuckled Bloop. "Lie low, you hooligans, or I may do it."

And then, down the mill-lane, rang two boyish voices singing merrily:

*"Give yourself a pat on the back,
Wish yourself a jolly good health,
We've had a good day to-day."*

"Here come my pals, so you'll soon be in the village lock-up. Hi-yi! Get a move on, Tony!" shouted Bloop. "Sprint it, Eric, old man! Help! Help!"

The village lock-up was the very last place in which Mr. Slivey and his friend wished to spend the night. Chancing it, they dashed out. Twice Bloop pulled the trigger, and the knife-grinder and his friend tumbled back over each other into shelter, slipped and fell, and rolled and shrieked. And then Tony's hopes of making pocket-money out of honey went west, for Mr. Slivey and his pal had flattened out the whole issue, and most of it was sticking to them.

Bullets were preferable to that. Like men who had been dipped in glue, they dragged themselves up and staggered into the open. Just before Tony and Eric arrived they tumbled into the shallow water below the mill and drifted downstream, kicking, splashing, snorting and cursing.

"What the thump has happened?" panted Eric Gale.

"This hiking stunt is a frightful bore, old things," said Bloop, yawning, "but it has its amusing moments."

THE END.

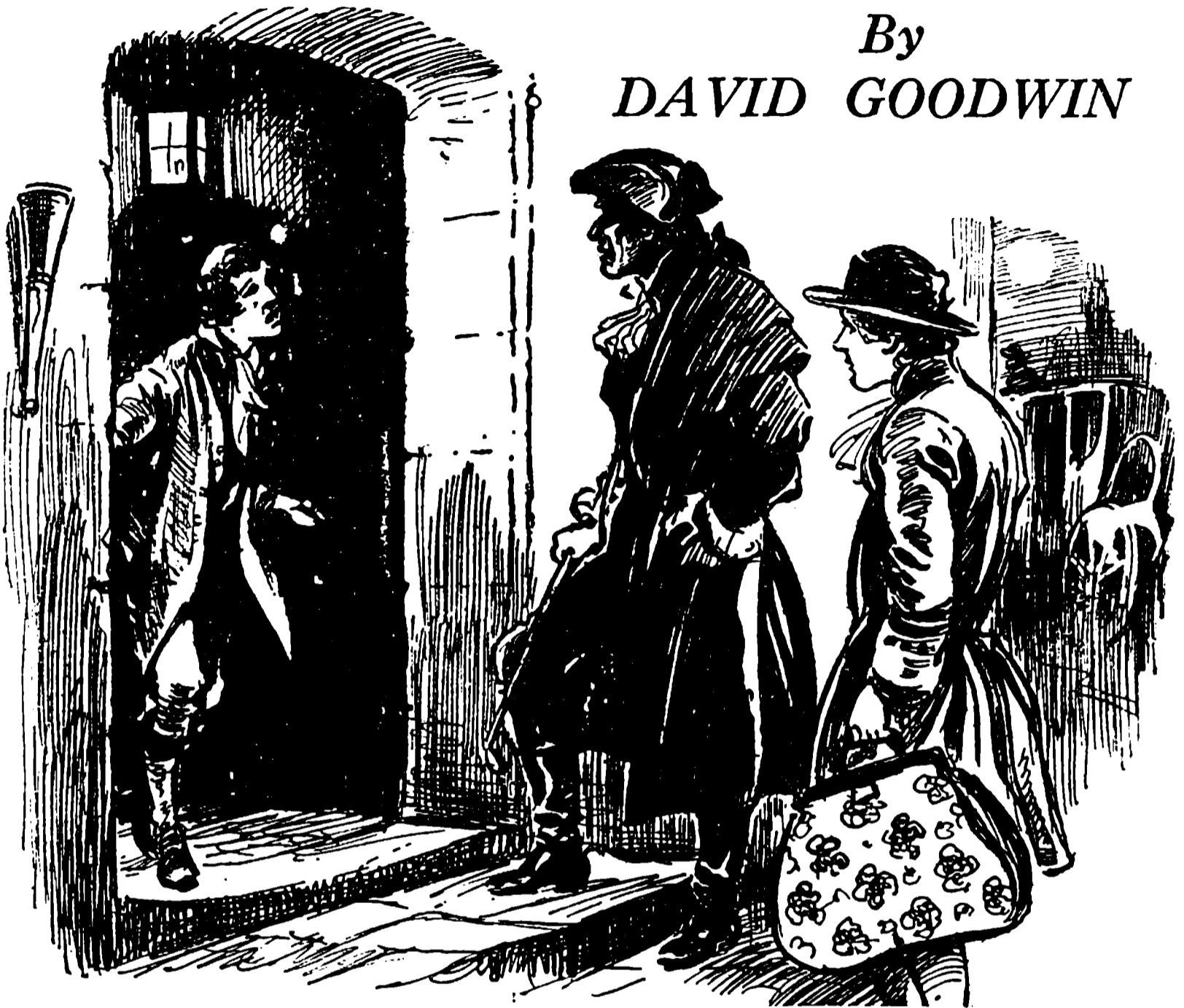
(More about the Hikers in next Wednesday's breezy complete yarn.)

A Rousing Story of the Days when Highwaymen Roamed England!

Knights of the Road!

By

DAVID GOODWIN



A Scoundrel Gets His Reward!

VANE gulped. He fingered the pistol nervously for some seconds, glancing ever and again at Dick. Then, with a cry, he dashed the weapon on the floor. The coward in him was too strong.

"I will not! I will not!" he shrieked. "Why should I fight?"

"What is to be done with such a cur?" cried Dick, in despair. "Why, then, if you will not fight, and I'm to hang for you, I'll have good reason! I'm not a highwayman for nothing! Turn out your purse, you poltroon, and all that you have about you!"

"Good!" cried Turpin, slapping his knees. "This is more like business! Watch him, Dick! See that the knave keeps nothing back."

"Egad, 'tis but my own I take!" said Dick,

Ralph Forrester makes the acquaintance of Duncansby School—which is his misfortune!

grasping the fat purse that Vane hastily handed over. "The rascal holds nothing save what is mine by right. Yet gold that he has fingered is too dirty for me! Here,

take this for your fee, ostler!"

He flung the purse to the stableman, who stood staring in the doorway. The man caught it delightedly, and touched his hat.

"Long live you, sir," he cried, "and send one of your sort to the inn every day!"

"Out with the rest!" said Dick, as Vane Forrester hurriedly emptied his pockets. "What's this? Egad, the seals of the Forresters! These I'll keep, for it is not fitting such a coward as you should hold them."

Dick pouched the big family seal and the smaller ones—treasured family heirlooms that Vane had only just got possession of. The small change from his uncle's fobs the boy,

scattered round with a free hand among the hangers-on outside, who scrambled for them gleefully; and blessed the young highwayman who brought them such a harvest. Stripped of all he had, the villainous schemer stood trembling in the middle of the room with emptied fobs.

"Now, what is to be done with him?" said Dick, with a puzzled look.

"Done with him?" echoed Turpin. "Why, were I in your place, I would put a couple of bullets in his head, and you will be well rid of the knave! For, by the rood, there's no peace for you while he's abroad! He's a tricky schemer, I can see it in the eye of him! Come, boy, don't make two bites of a cherry! Empty your barkers into him, and let's be jogging!"

Vane fell on his knees with a scream of terror, and clasped his hands to beg for mercy.

"He's not fit to live; but I cannot murder the creature," said Dick. "Your ways are not my ways, Turpin. Stay, I have it! We will give him measure for measure, and he shall take my place. Give me that rope, Slink!"

Dick took the rope and knotted it together. Then, taking the flinching Vane by the neck-cloth, he swung him into the wooden chair, and amid gales of laughter from Turpin, lashed him tight into it. Samuel Slink he tied to the back of the chair.

"There, Master Vane," he said at last, "you are served as you served me, and you may sit there to meditate on your sins. Let all take notice that any who unties either of these fellows within an hour shall suffer my heaviest displeasure. Do you hear?"

"We hear!" chorused the bystanders, with guffaws of laughter. All sympathy was with the open-handed highwayman, and not with the skinflint and his servant.

"See to it that he stays there till the King's Riders free him!" said Dick. "We shall be many a mile hence by then. Come, comrade, to horse!"

"And a very pleasant night's work to look back upon," said the highwayman, as they mounted. "You have a pretty wit, Dick."

And amid the cheers of the villagers, the two outlaws set forth at a gallop.

"'Twas well conceived to throw that purse

to the ostler," said Turpin, as they laid the miles behind them. "That is the sort of deed that makes a robber well loved among the poor, and many a good turn comes from it. But all the same, I would have put a bullet through that hawk-faced uncle of yours, and his knavish servant, too. They will do you no good, lad; and such a chance may not occur again."

"Turpin, you are a wicked rogue," said Dick, laughing, "yet I think you paint yourself blacker than the devil made you. I doubt if you would have shot him in cold blood."

"Alas, the absurd scruples of youth!" said Turpin, with a sigh. "'Tis none of my business, but I gave you the best advice. Many a brisk lad who is drying in the wind at the end of a chain would be riding the roads now if they had listened to me."

"Well, I think you are wrong this time," rejoined Dick, "for I am going to strive for the time when I can win back my own again from Vane Forrester, and were I to murder him 'twould put me beyond hope for ever. I have it in my head that he did that to my father which the law may some day unveil, though I cannot prove it now."

"Have it your own way," said Turpin. "Pink me, it would be no gain to me were you to win back your estates! I should lose a merry companion and a brave one. I am fain to own I have a strong liking for you, lad, and very blithe I was to be in time to rescue you to-night."

"'Od's death, it was wonderful!" said Dick. "How did you know what had happened, after we parted in anger?"

"A pure accident," said Turpin. "After I had ridden away, it suddenly came to my mind that I had taken away with me your share of the gold we took from the Norwich mail—your share as well as my own—so I rode after you to divide it."

"'Od's fish!" said Dick, laughing and amazed. "You are the most wonderful fellow ever a man rode with, Turpin! But a few hours ago you told me with great relish how you tricked your partner and stole his booty while he slept. And now, after sparing my life when you had fairly won it, you ride after me to share the spoils I did not even claim!"

HOW THE STORY STARTED.

DICK FORRESTER learns upon the death of his father that all the vast estates and fortune, with the exception of a hundred guineas, have passed into the hands of his rascally uncle,

VANE FORRESTER. The latter refuses to give the boy his money, and, appointing himself guardian, states his intention of sending Dick and his brother,

RALPH FORRESTER, to Duncansby School—a notorious place in the north of England, from which, once they arrive there, they are not likely to leave. Travelling north by coach, Vane and the two boys are held up by

DICK TURPIN, the famous highwayman. Dick joins forces with Turpin, and, after bidding Ralph to be of stout heart and promising to fetch him soon, the two ride away. Vane sets the King's Riders on their track, but they make good their escape. Later, Dick and Turpin have a quarrel, and the two part ways. Dick enters an inn and is drugged by Slink, Vane Forrester's manservant. Vane himself puts in an appearance, and also two bailiffs. Dick is only saved from capture by the timely arrival of Turpin. The tables are now turned. Dick hands Vane a loaded pistol and takes one himself. "Fire when you please," he says coolly, "and we will see who shoots the quicker."

(Now read on.)

"It does look queer, I own," said Turpin; "yet when you know me better, you will find I treat others as they treat me. If a man cheat me I will beat him at his own game, though he were Beelzebub himself. If he seeks to murder me, I will ask him to dinner and cut his throat across my own table. But never in my life have I played false with anyone who played straight with me, and a true comrade finds me true."

"You are the strangest mixture that ever threw his leg over a horse," said Dick; "but, on my life, I was glum enough to see you ride away, though it was myself who bade you go."

"I confess you angered me somewhat, for I am not a patient man," replied Turpin. "But see, we are far enough away now not to fear pursuit by the King's Riders, so let us dismount and divide the gold. 'Tis a thing that should not be delayed, for a highwayman never knows what may befall him. Yonder is a tree stump that will make a fine counting-table, and the dawn already shows us light enough."

The two outlaws dismounted from their horses, and left them to crop the turf while they walked over to the stump. Dick was willing enough to have his share, for little remained of his two guineas.

The Dark House of Duncansbyl

"WHY so pensive, Dick?" said Turpin, after they had ridden a couple of miles in silence. "Are you lamenting your sins?"

"I am troubled, it is true," said Dick. "I feel I have been remiss. You heard me speak of my young brother Ralph? I left him in the coach with Vane Forrester when I first joined you, and I mind that Vane was taking us both to a school in the north country called Duncansby. I have heard vague but evil reports of that school, and it troubles me to think how Ralph may have fared there. I have no doubt he arrived, for by rapid travelling Vane could have reached the place and returned in time to harry me as he has done."

"If that is true," said Turpin, "I think your brother may be in evil straits, and needs your help. I have heard of those schools on the wolds, and I know they are places where many a lad who stands in some man's way has been quietly got rid of. Dick, you have a stout heart, and quick pistols; I would counsel you to ride to this Duncansby School and look into the matter. I have affairs to keep me at Lincoln for a day, but I will follow if I can, and, in any case, if we both live, we will join again soon. That is my counsel, Dick. Ride to the north with a free rein, and do not linger by the way."

"I'll away now," said Dick. "I've lost time enough. Come up, Satan!"

And, with a quick hand-grip from his com-

rade, Dick galloped away down the York road.

For a brief space, if it please you, reader, we must turn back to Vane's rifled coach, when Dick and Turpin, having joined forces, had left it on the Lincoln road.

A more melancholy journey could not be conceived than Ralph Forrester's passage to the north. Never for more than half an hour at a time did Vane cease to grumble at the loss he had suffered, nor to vow vengeance on the head of Dick for his desertion. Vane stopped only at Bury to give information of the robbery, as he termed it, that Dick had committed in riding off on one of his coach horses in Turpin's company, and to set the reward on his head. It was not till later—during the rapid return journey from the north—that Vane found to his delight that his wild nephew had put himself beyond the reach of the law's aid by stopping the Norwich mail.

From Bury Vane changed the coach for a swift post-chaise, and pushed on night and day, barely stopping to snatch a meal. Not once on the journey did he speak to Ralph, and the boy's pride and his dislike for the tortuous schemer who was his uncle kept him in silence also. He was glad enough to be left to himself.

His pride, too, kept him from uttering a word of complaint against the cold and discomfort and weariness of the journey, though Vane snarled and grumbled incessantly. Delicate and frail, without Dick's iron frame and hard thews, but with the same indomitable pluck, Ralph bore the cold and hunger and sleeplessness without a murmur, thinking only of the brother he worshipped.

Dick was his hero. It was a foolhardy thing the boy had done to cut loose the coach horse and ride off in the perilous company of the outlaw, but Ralph loved his wild brother the better for it, and wished he had done the same. He wondered how Dick was faring, and never doubted that he would hold his own wherever he went.

At last the doleful journey drew to an end, the final stage of it passing over wide, purple moorlands where night birds cried above the heather, till the chaise pulled up outside a desolate house standing at the lip of a valley.

As he stepped out upon the sodden gravel, Ralph thought he had never seen a more dreary place. The damp, sombre-coloured building looked as though the sun could never have shone upon it.—Vane rapped at the iron-studded door.

A poorly-clad, starved-looking boy opened it, and showed a gloomy stone hall beyond, lit by a single rush-light.

"Is Mr. Stephen Callard in?" said Vane.

"Yes, sir," said the boy huskily.

"Tell him Mr. Vane Forrester would speak with him."

Vane and his nephew were shown into a dismal, empty room, and there they waited for some minutes. Furtive, pinched-looking faces peered at them from other rooms in the

passage, and strange forms flitted silently about. The place seemed more like a poor-house than a school, with more than a flavour of the mortuary about it, and Ralph shivered. Presently the hungry-looking boy returned, and Vane, leaving Ralph behind, was shown upstairs into another room.

There was nothing bare about this apartment. It was well carpeted and furnished, and a roaring fire blazed in the grate.

It was the apartment of the master of Duncansby School, and Mr. Stephen Callard himself stepped forward and obsequiously welcomed the visitor. The master was a lean, spare man, with narrow, cruel eyes that told of greed and a pleasure in giving pain. The two men took stock of each other.

"Mr. Vane Forrester?" said the cruel-eyed man with a servile smirk.

"The same," said Vane shortly. "I have brought my nephew, as arranged, to join your school. He is downstairs."

"Ah," said Callard, "but the other young gentleman? Did you not say there were two?"

"The other young gentleman," said Vane grimly, "will not join your curriculum. He distinguished himself on the journey by stealing one of my coach horses and riding off with the highwayman Turpin, and by this time is probably in the hands of the King's riders, and awaiting the assizes and the gallows."

"Dear me!" said the schoolmaster, twining his long, damp hands together. "What a misfortune!"

"Misfortune for himself," grunted Vane. "So I have brought you only the younger boy, Ralph. A fine, healthy spot you live in here, Mr. Callard."

"Oh, very," said the schoolmaster—"very!" "A trifle damp, though, by the look of the lower rooms," went on Vane. "I hope you do not overfeed your pupils, Mr. Callard. I have a great objection to seeing boys pampered and spoiled."

"So have I," agreed the schoolmaster.

"I am a believer in wholesome correction, too," added Vane, smiling grimly, "and plenty of it. Spare the rod and spoil the child is my creed. Do you understand me?"

"I do, most certainly," said Mr. Callard. "I see we agree, sir. I am a strong believer in it, and, I may say, a very good performer."

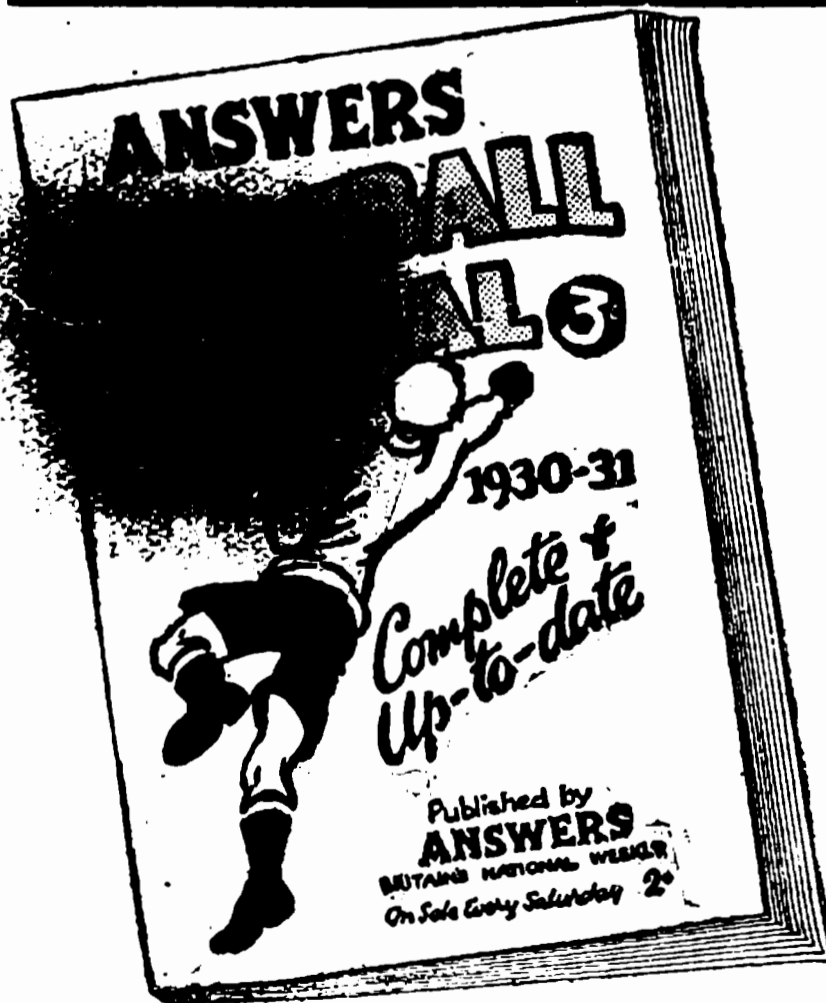
"I have heard good reports of your school, Mr. Callard," said Vane, fixing his eyes on the schoolmaster, and speaking slowly. "I hope you—er—treat your boys well when they fall sick. A boy may, of course, fall ill in a damp house like this, and then, if he gets poor food, and, say, much corporal punishment on the top of that, he might not survive."

The schoolmaster watched his visitor closely with obsequious smile.

"Certainly he might not. And I think I understand what you mean," he replied significantly.

(Watch out for dramatic developments in next week's enthralling chapters of this magnificent serial.)

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