

The BOYS' FRIEND 2d

SIXTEEN BIG PAGES!

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THE BEST BOYS' PAPER IN THE WORLD!

[Week Ending Ap. 14th, 1923.]

The Rancher at Rookwood!

By Owen Conquest.



AN UNEQUAL COMBAT!

The juniors, though utterly outmatched, struggled gamely with the burly footpads. Jimmy Silver's cousin from Canada sat up in the grass, quietly watching the wild and whirling combat around him—but he made no motion to join in!

The 1st Chapter. Rotten Luck!

"I wonder——" murmured Jimmy Silver.
"Same here!" whispered Lovell. Raby and Newcome nodded. They also wondered.
The Fistical Four, of the Rookwood Fourth, were, in fact, very much exercised in their minds. They had food for thought.
The food for thought was not supplied by Mr. Dalton, their Form master; though, at that hour, all their attention ought to have been fixed upon Mr. Dalton and his valuable instruction. The Fourth Form of Rookwood were in class; and Mr. Dalton was taking them upon a personally-conducted tour, as it were, into the history of Imperial Rome. But never had Jimmy Silver & Co. been so slightly interested in the Twelve Caesars. In fact, two dozen Caesars would not have interested them just then.
On the previous day Jimmy Silver's cousin from Canada had arrived at Rookwood. Mr. Hudson Smedley was staying for a few days as the guest of the Head.

The big bronzed Canadian made quite a conspicuous figure at Rookwood, and Jimmy Silver was immensely proud of him. Jimmy felt that the Head might very well have given him a special holiday, while Mr. Smedley was there—but the Head did not seem to have thought of it.
But what interested Jimmy chiefly was the fact that the Canadian gentleman's visit had something to do with the coming vacation. There was an appointment in the end study, fixed to follow morning classes. Mr. Smedley had some proposition to make regarding the holidays; and Jimmy was very anxious to hear it. So were his chums. Never had morning classes seemed so long—never had the Fistical Four been so willing to let the Twelve Caesars rest undisturbed in the dim past. Every other minute they glanced at the Form-room clock. And every time Mr. Dalton's eye was not upon them, they discussed in whispers that appointment in the end study, and wondered what Mr. Smedley had to suggest about the holidays.
"I wonder——" murmured Jimmy.

Mr. Dalton being just then busy with Tubby Muffin. "I wonder——"
"Canada isn't so jolly far off in these days!" whispered Lovell, with quite an ecstatic look. "Suppose he asks you on a visit to his ranch, Jimmy——"
"Oh, my hat!"
"Of course, you'll mention that you can't possibly go without your pals."
"Of course," murmured Raby. "I say, Jimmy——"
"If he doesn't think of it, you might mention it in a careless sort of casual way," remarked Newcome.
"After all, we might be useful on a ranch," breathed Lovell. "We can ride—— You fellows know how I ride, at least."
"Like a sack of coke!" came from Cyril Peele, who was on the form behind the Fistical Four.
Lovell glared round at the humorous Peele.
"You cheeky ass——" he began.
"Shush!" murmured Jimmy Silver.
"Dicky Dalton's looking this way."
Mr. Dalton was indeed looking that way. He came along to the form, and fixed his eyes on Silver & Co.

grimly. Mr. Dalton was a kind man, and a popular master. But he laboured under the delusion, so common among Form masters, that a Form-room was a place for work, and not for light and genial conversation.
"Silver, Lovell, Raby, Newcome! You four juniors have been talking incessantly!" said Mr. Dalton, in his grimmest voice. "I am sorry to interrupt what is no doubt a very interesting conversation."
"Oh, sir!" murmured the four.
The rest of the Fourth grinned. Their Form master was being sarcastically humorous; so it was, of course, the duty of the juniors to grin.
"I am really sorry," continued Mr. Dalton, in the same vein. "May I inquire whether you have, by any chance, finished your conversation yet?"
"Oh, sir! Yes, sir!"
"Very good! No doubt you will now give some attention to the lesson."
"Oh! Certainly, sir!"
"And in order to make up for lost time," went on Mr. Dalton genially,

"you will remain in the Form-room for half an hour after the Form is dismissed, and study your Roman history."
"Oh!" gasped the Fistical Four. Blank dismay settled upon them.
They had an appointment in the end study with Mr. Smedley, to follow class; at least, Jimmy Silver had that appointment to keep, and his chums meant to help him keep it. Detention dropped on them like a bolt from the blue. The cousin from Canada would be kicking his heels in the deserted study, waiting for them—waiting for Jimmy, anyhow. It was utterly dismaying. It might even give the Canadian gentleman a bad impression of them—fellows who got detained by their Form master!
The dismay in the faces of the Fistical Four might have touched Mr. Dalton's heart; but he turned away, and did not even notice it.
The lesson went on—Jimmy Silver & Co. giving it their very best attention now. There was not a murmur or a whisper among them from that moment.
(Continued overleaf.)

He strode off, his tall hat swaying at a perilous angle, and started to climb into the boat.

"Hi, there, I say—stop!" yelled Joe, hobbling after him. "I didn't mean it, Pie. By the ghost of Vanderdecken, my hancestor, I didn't!"

Pie, from his flower-embowered seat in the boat, looked down sternly on the old man.

"Joe, you am a wickedum ole man!" he said, frowning heavily. "But I gib yo' one more chance, and only one. Will yo', on your biggest oathum, swear for eber and eber to lub, honours, and obey dis li'l baby elephants, and to be nice, kind ole genelmans to dis child ob sin and darkness. Promisum, and I'll let yo' ride in my state coach."

Tremorne hesitated a moment, and a good-humoured twinkle began to creep back into his blue eyes.

"All right, Pie, you've won!" he said. "You've won a charter of freedom for Bunjie."

Joe Plans a Campaign.

"Joe's Juggernaut" was the disrespectful term thereafter applied by the boys to the conveyance which the quick-witted brains of Pieface had provided, and Joe's Juggernaut came as a godsend at a most critical time. For of one thing there could be no question. If the pirates holding the galleon, the ancient Spanish town, and one of the forts, were to be dealt with, it followed that constant communication must be established between the camp and the steamer lying at anchor on the lake.

To do this in his present condition would have been a practical impossibility so far as Tremorne was concerned; but seated comfortably in his state carriage, as Joe termed it, the said carriage being drawn by Bunjie, with Pieface acting as mahout, the old sailor was enabled to travel in comfort down to the original landing-place and back again.

There was much to be done, for, following on the grave news brought back by Frank, Joe had decided on nothing less than a bold and determined attack on the pirate stronghold.

"We can't be sure of their numbers, or how strongly they are armed," he said to Frank on the first journey down to the lake; "but one thing is quite certain, we oughter strike a blow before the yacht returns. Mebbe, with luck, we may be in possession of the city before that ugly-looking craft shows up with her crew of bloodthirsty ruffians."

In none of their minds was there a shadow of doubt that the same hands which had pillaged and murdered on the Octoroon also manned the fast-steaming vessel that had put to sea early the previous morning.

"We're handicapped by reason of our own vessel being land-locked," Tremorne went on. "All the same, that's no excuse for standing by with folded arms. We can bring off as much gear as will be usable for land warfare, establish ourselves in one of the forts, provided we find one empty, and then, without a moment's warning, launch an attack on them."

"One thing we've got to be mighty careful about, and that is not to betray our presence by kicking up a row," said Frank. "There's only the range of hills and about four miles of forest between the lake and the lagoon, and an accidental rifle-shot would turn the trick against us."

Joe quite appreciated the point.

"To tell the truth," he answered, "if it weren't so jolly important to make a move against those fellows in the galleon before the yacht's crew reinforces them, I should prefer to get this work done by night. As it is, when the time comes to establish ourselves among the old fortifications, everything will have to be done in the dark. However, I haven't got out all my plans yet, and the only thing that matters just now is to get guns and ammunition ashore."

It was lucky for at least one of the ship's company, Grimwade to wit, that Joe's hurt prevented him coming aboard the Defiance. Otherwise the skipper would have found this worthy, as did Dick and Frank when they clambered on to the deck, curled up in the shadow of the charthouse with a half-burned Flor de Naves projecting at an angle from his capacious mouth, and half a dozen stubs scattered around him.

"Crikey!" gasped Dick, staring down at the slumbering form. "Old Ballyhooly Grim has been boning the Old Man's cabagios! Here, Pie, do you know anything about this?"

Pieface looked at his questioner.

"Dar am some times, Massa Dick, when de wise man am him who asks no foolish questium. Dis am a time of de sort, and if yo' doan mind, we throw dese ends oberboard to feed de sharks. You savvy?"

Dick laughed and passed on, exchanging meaning glances with Frank. They worked the afternoon through, taking the Maxims and Nordenfeldts to pieces, stowing them in the whaler and the longboat, and loading the cutter to the gunwales with cases of ammunition.

With Harry Rawson in charge of one boat, and Dawe skipping another, in all eight trips were made to the landing-place, where the arms and munitions were put ashore.

It was now that Pieface, whom Dick had sent back with the first return party, proved to Joe, in a most practical fashion, the worth of his pet. It would have taken half a dozen able-bodied men a whole week to carry parts of machine-guns and cases of shells, weighing in all close upon a hundredweight, to the top of the ridge; but Bunjie performed the entire journey without the slightest show of fatigue inside two hours. Leaving Joe comfortably seated on the shore, Pie stacked the dinghy up with arms and ammunition, and, mounting the elephant's back, set gaily off.

This work went on till sundown,

disturbed tranquility. So far as they knew, there had been no communication between the men on board the galleon and those occupying the fort near the entrance of the narrows.

Towards seven o'clock Frank and his companions struck into the plantation, following the route he had taken with Dick nearly four days earlier, but, instead of entering the town, he bore away to the left until the old fortress wall barred further progress.

The Return of "Bulldog" Holdfast!
Read his breathless adventures
NEXT MONDAY in
"The Men of Vengeance!"
and tell ALL your pals to read it too!

The boys, however, were prepared for this eventuality. Frank drew from beneath his coat a thin rope-ladder, fitted with stout iron hooks at one end. These he cast over the top of the wall, drawing them over the rough blocks of masonry until they held. Then, while Harry drew the ladder taut, he mounted, pistol in hand. Rawson followed after him. The ladder was dropped with its free end into the moat, and in this way they passed the outer bastions.

Their position was now a novel, if

explosive they had as yet no means of telling.

The night being very still, and dark clouds gathering in the west, which somewhat obscured the light of the moon, Frank decided on a quick return to acquaint Joe with their discovery. This was a good strategic move, for the instant Tremorne heard of it he ordered every man to load himself with a gun or ammunition, and to take it, under Frank's direction, to the castle.

Obvious, such a dangerous task could be carried out only very slowly and with much caution. In all it occupied four nights to arm and provision the fort, the daytime being spent resting under cover of the forest. By the time the last bag of flour and water-keg had been carried in, Joe was well enough to dispense with his chariot, and, though somewhat lame, to make the rendezvous on foot.

He had left behind on the top of the hill, a small observation-party, in charge of Pengelley, whose duty it would be to come to the rescue if a signal for assistance should be sent out. Two other men were left at the bivouac near the original landing-stage to keep guard over the boats in case it should be necessary to evacuate the castle, take to the forest, and fight a rearguard action till the lake was reached.

And all this while the adventurers,

young fisherman passed out of the castle door, dropped into the ditch, and, clambering up the steep side of the moat, struck across the flat ground which lay between them and their objective.

Cover there was in plenty—ruins of fallen masonry, disused sheds, and heaps of modern junk very similar to that which littered the quayside. Everything seemed in their favour, for when they came at length to the fortress, which bore, engraved in old Roman letters over its central portal, the cryptic title of *Plattaforma de los Artilleros*, they found the door unguarded, and a flight of steps leading into the grim interior.

At the top of the steps tiny pencils of light streamed into the darkness. These rather puzzled Dick at first, until he realised that they came through an old wooden door, cracked and eaten away in places by worm.

Leaving Rogers on guard at the bottom, he went forward on hands and knees, and, applying his eye to a hole, looked through. This is what he saw. A long room of four stone walls, high and vaulted, with grained arches supported by magnificently carved pillars of pale green marble. About the floor wonderful pieces of old-fashioned mahogany and teak furniture, clearly loot taken from the house of a rich merchant in the old Spanish town.

A heavy wooden table occupied the centre of the stone floor, and above this were grouped some eighteen or twenty men, all in seafaring garb, three of them wearing the distinctive gold braid and gilt buttons of officers of the Merchant Service.

An open armoire at the far end of the room showed a number of short-barrelled rifles, a pile of heavy Service revolvers, and boxes of cartridges.

At the moment of Dick's arrival so close to the scene, a heated argument was going on. It was not possible to gather all that was said, but very little escaped the watcher.

Said an elderly man whose distinctive features were a long grey beard and deep-sunk, piercing eyes on either side of an immense hooked nose:

"I favour the use of picric acid because it produces an easily graduated explosion. The chief has asked for bombs, and it is my work to supply them. This one here, now"—he picked up a shiny black box—"contains the new explosive. By means of the mechanism it can be set to go off at one hour, two hours, ten or twenty, according to the position of the pointer on the clock face. I guarantee that one of those, placed in a good position, will blow the biggest ship out of the water."

"But don't you see, professor," insisted one of the men in officer's uniform, "the very thing which the chief wants is not to blow a vessel out of the water. In your enthusiasm you are producing too-high-powered explosives. We need, and must have, the small machines such as you have previously made—machines which will explode on time, but do little more than blow a hole through an ordinary steel plate. So long as we make sufficient opening in a ship's side for water to get in, the vessel will soon fill and go down without leaving masses of wreckage floating round. Now do you see what I am driving at?"

If the professor "saw," he certainly did not fail to show his disappointment.

"I have wasted much time and much labour," he said testily. "Here in the room below, I have been working for nearly a fortnight making these immensely powerful infernal-machines, and now you tell me they are no good. It is—"

Dick waited to hear no more, but drew silently back, and joined Rogers, waiting in the darkness by the door.

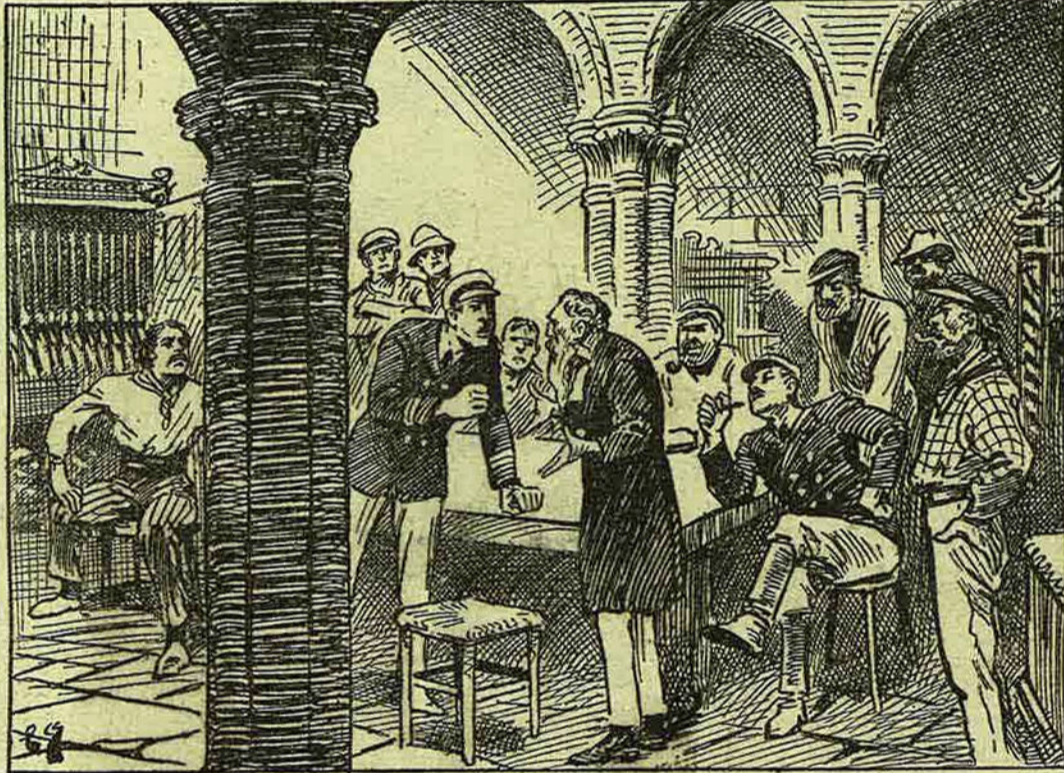
"I say, old chap," he said in an excited whisper, "I've just discovered something. Somewhere below that room upstairs is another, filled with high-explosive infernal-machines. If we can only lay our hands on them, we can take this place and every man inside it without any fighting. What do you say? Will you take the risk?"

Rogers laughed, and nodded briskly.

"Risk! I'll risk anything. Just you lead the way, Master Richard. Show me what to do, and I'll follow you anywhere!"

"Right!" said Dick, whipping an automatic from his pocket. "I can see the door just along there. We'll either capture the whole bag of tricks, or blow the fort to smithereens!"

(Will Dick Polruan and his companion succeed in capturing the pirates' stronghold? On no account must you miss next Monday's long instalment of this ripping tale. And don't forget to introduce the BOYS' FRIEND to all your pals.)



THE PIRATES' STRONGHOLD! At the moment when Dick Polruan peered through the crack in the door into the fortress room, a heated argument was going on among the pirates!

and right through the following day, by which time the clearing on the lake side of the range strongly resembled an armed camp. They had brought up altogether three Maxims, two Nordenfeldts, a three-pounder quick-firer, over forty rifles, and close on forty thousand rounds of ammunition—truly, as Joe afterwards confessed, an achievement due almost entirely to Pieface and the young elephant.

The third day was passed in denuding the Defiance of stores and barrels of water, although large quantities of the latter were hardly essential, as Joe felt certain that every fort would be provided with its own water supply.

Each took a long rest throughout that night, and the whole of the next day, until sundown. Then, dividing his forces into two, Joe topped the ridge, still keeping his men well in the shelter of the forest, and leaving one section to keep the way clear for a possible retreat, led the other in the direction of the town. A halt was called within three hundred yards of the deserted plantations, and from this point as a base, as soon as the moon came up, Frank and Harry were sent forward to reconnoitre.

It irked Joe dreadful to have to stay behind when desperate measures were afoot, but it was a matter of striking swiftly, in the hope of achieving victory before the odds strengthened against them.

So far, it was plain their presence on the island was unsuspected, for the whole place was in a state of un-

a precarious one. They were enclosed by a massive, encircling bulwark of stone some twenty feet high, extending in all for a distance of nearly a mile and a half.

Within the wall were four other forts, beside the one guarding the narrows and the castle which they had noted on their first survey. It was towards this latter building that Frank and Harry directed their steps, being halted temporarily by the twenty-foot-deep moat, which, though dry, was difficult to get over. There was but one means of entry, a single door set in the middle of a stout wall and leading to the castle proper.

To their surprise, this door gave without the necessity for force, and, mounting between thirty and forty steps, they came to a platform of solid masonry, on which were mounted eleven old-fashioned pieces of cannon, each of which could be turned on to the town below.

"Here's something the silly beggars haven't allowed for," whispered Frank, drawing his chum to one of the embrasures from which they commanded a view of the city, the quayside, and the lagoon where the galleon rode. "We've only got to get our shooters up here to command the whole blessed show!"

From the top of the artificial mound they descended to a storehouse built between solid walls, and here they discovered immense barrels of gunpowder; although whether serviceable or not it was impossible to tell. One or two of the casks had been broken, and the black grains were scattered about the floor, but of what quality as an

securely hidden within a mile of the fort at the entrance to the narrows, had seen scarcely anything of their enemies. Once or twice there had been signs of life in the neighbourhood of the large sheds, with their flamboyant hoarding title to fame as a film company, and on three occasions a small party had put off in the launch to visit the galleon.

Through long hours of each day, while preparations went steadily on below him, Joe would be stretched full length in the shelter of the embowered wall, watching through his glass the entrance to the lagoon and the vast stretch of sparkling ocean beyond. His one fear always was lest the armed yacht should return before the time was ripe to fall on their enemies.

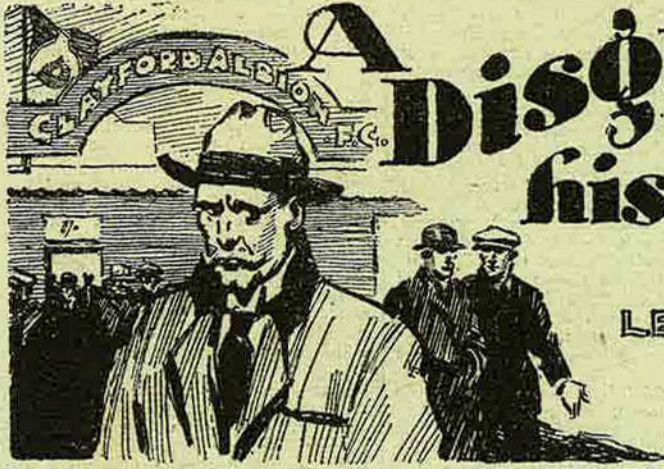
At last Hawke announced that everything had been done in readiness for an attack. The news came at nightfall on the twelfth day after landing on the island.

"Now," said Joe, seated in one of the old stone vaults beneath the powder-store, "I call for volunteers to go with me to discover the strength of the garrison on the Narrows Fort."

Instantly there was a universal show of hands, and a good deal of argument and disagreement. To settle the matter amicably, lots were drawn. To his chagrin, Joe found himself out of the running altogether, the winning numbers falling to Dick Polruan and young Rogers.

Precisely at ten o'clock, with an hour to spare before moonrise, and only faint streamers of ghostly light in the southern sky, Dick and the

A RIPPING COMPLETE FOOTBALL STORY—CRAMMED
WITH EXCITEMENT!



A Disgrace to his Club!

BY
LESLIE WILLIAMS

To make certain that his club win their matches, Daniel Gill, a director of Clayford Albion F.C., "plays it low," but when the Barchester Rovers match comes off the tables are turned on him with a vengeance!

The 1st Chapter. Trouble Brewing.

"I'll be even with them yet!" Fred Reid, the ex-centre-forward of the Barchester Rovers Football Club, growled out the words as he left the board-room. He had been dismissed altogether from his employment with the club, after an assault on young Jack Kerr, who had taken his place as leader of the attack.

"You were suspended for foul play a few days ago," the chairman had told him sternly. "You have disregarded that warning, and you have aggravated your offence by this unprovoked assault. The club has no further use for your services."

Reid, furious with anger, went out of the ground and directed his steps towards the lowest part of the town. Here he turned down an alley and knocked at the door of a tumble-down house.

A tall man, with a scar across the cheek, and a very surly, forbidding countenance, opened the door. Reid went in, and the two worthies were soon deep in conversation.

"So you're thrown out," said Robert James, with something like a chuckle. "What are you going to do now?"

"Get my own back!" retorted Reid angrily. "That's my first job, and you must help me!"

"That's all very well. But what do I get out of it?" objected his companion.

"You help me in this business, and I'll stand in with you in future. There are plenty of jobs in your line where you want two," replied Reid.

"Look here, though," said Robert James. "Your revenge can wait for a day or two. I've a little affair of my own to-morrow night."

"What's that?" inquired Reid curiously.

"You know old Dan Gill, the Clayford Albion director, I suppose?"

"I've seen him," admitted the ex-centre-forward, grinning.

For Mr. Daniel Gill had not the best of reputations in the football world. He was supposed to bet on the results of games, and was even rumoured to have been concerned in cases of bribing players to arrange matches. But his shady transactions were so cunningly managed that nothing had ever been brought home to him.

"Well," continued James, "old Gill has a big house on the outskirts of Clayford, and he's got a fine service of plate."

"And you are after the plate, no doubt," muttered Reid.

"Just so, old chap. I know exactly where he keeps it, and if you come along with me to-morrow evening, when the old boy is due at a dinner, the silver is ours!"

Fred Reid hesitated. Rascal as he was—as he had proved himself to be on the football field and off it—he did not much relish the idea of burglary. But he saw no way of earning his living by honest means. No football club would employ him after the scandal he had caused at Barchester, even if the Football Association did not debar him permanently from the game, a course which would probably be taken very soon. So finally he agreed to the proposal of his crackman friend.

The next day saw the two men at Barchester station, en route for Clayford, a large manufacturing town some fifty miles away. The afternoon was dark and foggy, much to

the delight of Robert James, who rejoiced in conditions so favourable to his nefarious schemes.

In the gloom of the evening the two fellows from Barchester were outside the splendid house in which lived Daniel Gill, stockbroker, director of the Clayford Albion Football Club, president of various societies in the town, and—over and above all—rogue!

They reconnoitred the mansion on all sides, and, lurking up a side street, they saw Mr. Gill drive off in his car early in the evening.

At eleven o'clock they were in the garden, ready to start operations, and Robert James, as the old hand, took command.

He set to work very carefully on a window, and in a few minutes the two burglars stood inside the house, apparently without raising the slightest alarm. They were in the library, and James, who knew all about the interior of the building, led the way across the room.

"Here we are," he whispered. "The safe's here, behind the bookcase. We'll just take out this row of books, and then we can get to work on the job," he continued, producing a dark lantern from his pocket. "Just see that the door's locked, Fred," he concluded.

Reid tiptoed across the room to the door, found the key, and turned it softly in the lock. Now that they felt safe from interruption the two fellows began to work.

The row of books was soon removed, and they saw that a piece of the woodwork had been cut out of the back of the bookcase, and in the wall behind appeared the door of the safe.

"Good idea, that!" muttered Fred Reid admiringly.

"Yes, a very good idea! Very smart indeed, gentlemen!" said a voice sarcastically, and the library was suddenly flooded with light.

James and Reid turned in utter astonishment. There, by the door, stood Mr. Daniel Gill himself, in his hand a revolver.

"Hands up, my friends," he remarked suggestively.

The two rascals, with great reluctance, complied with the request.

"Sit down," said Mr. Gill. "I want a few words with you. Oh, no, keep your hands up," he chuckled, "or you will get hurt!"

Very gingerly, holding their hands above their heads, the two crestfallen burglars sat down, wondering what the director meant to do with them.

Mr. Daniel Gill had returned early, and, hearing a slight sound in the library, he had determined to investigate it. He tried the door cautiously, and, finding it locked, had gone quietly round to the window, which James had left ajar lest a hurried retreat should become necessary.

Entering by the window, the Clayford director had stolen across the room unheeded, and switched on the light.

"Mr. Reid, I think?" he remarked inquiringly. "Late centre-forward of Barchester Rovers. Now, as I perceive, a burglar!"

Reid nodded sullenly.

"And Mr. James, also of Barchester, whose presence would be very welcome to the police of Clayford, if they knew of a little bit of business he did here the other day," he went on, smiling wickedly at the unhappy pair before him.

Robert James stared open-mouthed at the last words. Fred Reid, in spite of himself, could not help grinning.

"You've got us, Mr. Gill," said James at length. "Send for the cops, and have done with it!"

"Not so fast! Not so fast, my friend," replied this director. "You

see, of course, that there is a bell handy, if you should prove obstinate in your views concerning a little scheme I am about to put before you. But you will find it best to assist me, I think."

"What do you mean, gur'nor?" asked James, for Reid was too much overcome by the collapse of his first attempt at burglary to be able to say a word.

"I require your assistance in a little idea I have decided to carry out—an idea which will considerably improve the position of the Albion in the League," continued Mr. Gill.

At the director's last words, Fred Reid had sat up suddenly.

"If your plan means doing any harm to the Rovers, I'm on!" he exclaimed eagerly.

"Not so loud, my dear fellow!" suggested Mr. Gill. "Yes, the scheme does involve certain misfortunes to the Rovers, and to various other teams," he continued.

And he outlined a plan for the following Saturday, when the Albion were to play Selsdon Athletic. The faces of the listeners brightened, and presently they departed, as they had come, by the window, chuckling to themselves as they thought of the consternation there would be in the camp of the Albion's opponents on the afternoon of the match!

companion. "I thought you meant the fellows had simply missed their train."

"Not a bit of it! Some chap offered them a lift in his motor-car, and, like fools, they accepted. The car broke down miles from anywhere, and the boys think it was a deliberate plot to keep them away. But I suppose they can't prove it."

"My hat!" exclaimed Jack.

"Yes, and there's more yet. When the Albion played Selsdon Athletic three weeks ago, two of the Athletic chaps were run down by a car—the same car, I dare say—and injured just before the game," went on Jim.

"I remember that. It seems very queer. Have they traced the car?"

"I haven't heard, and I expect the number was faked, anyhow," said Jim.

"Sure thing!" replied Jack Kerr. "Do you think the Albion are in this?"

"Shouldn't think so. They have always had a good reputation for sportsmanship. But I suppose the F. A. will investigate the matter."

"Well," laughed young Kerr, "we must look out this afternoon. They might get us next."

Jim Brown chuckled at the idea.

"Nonsense!" he cried. "We are half-way to the station already, and

we're meeting all the other fellows there!"

But Jim Brown would not have been so cocksure if he had noticed that he and Jack were being watched by Robert James on the other side of the street. Unfortunately, neither of the professionals knew the crackman by sight, nor were they aware of his connection with Fred Reid. James went on ahead of them, turned down Symond's Lane, which, as he well knew, was their usual way to the station, and by the time the two footballers had reached the corner he had disappeared from view.

Symond's Lane was a narrow turning, with high walls on either side, except at one spot where there was an old house, long empty and in bad repair. The two Rovers took their accustomed short cut, and as they neared the house their conversation was interrupted in unexpected fashion.

"Help, help!" called a voice.

They stopped short, and looked up and down. There was no one in sight.

"Hear that, Jim?" cried Jack excitedly.

"Sounds like a child's voice somewhere. But where on earth is it?" replied Jim, glancing round again.

"Help, help!"

Once more came the pitiful cry.

"Must be in that house!" exclaimed Jack Kerr. "Come on, Jim!"

And Jack rushed off towards the door.

The two fellows found the house apparently empty. They searched it in vain from top to bottom, and were about to go out when the cry sounded again, seemingly beneath their feet as they stood in the passage.

"That's down below!" shouted Jack. "There must be a cellar somewhere. Look! Here's a door we missed!"

He rushed forward as he spoke, and opened a door concealed in a dark corner. Sure enough, a flight of steps appeared to lead downwards.

"I'm going down, Jim!" cried Jack, in great excitement. "Coming?" And he began to descend the steps.

The cellars under the old house were very extensive. Jack produced an electric torch, for there was no light away from the foot of the steps. They looked carefully through the cellars, but found no one, and little did they guess that two men were watching them closely from a secret hiding-place in the first cellar.

"Funny, this!" muttered Jack, as they looked round the last cellar and found it empty.

"Come on, old chap, or we'll lose our train!" urged Jim.

And they turned back to climb the stairs.

The cellars were in three divisions. They passed through the opening into the middle one, and Jack turned his torch to light Jim past the gap into the first. Jim went forward, and then suddenly stopped.

"Where the dickens is the opening?" he shouted. "Look, Jack! There's a door here!"

Jack Kerr looked, and there, much to his surprise, he saw a door—a massive wooden one, which blocked their way!

"What on earth is this?" he exclaimed. "There wasn't any door there when we came in!"

"It's a trap, Jack, and we've walked into it!" growled Jim angrily.

"Well, we'll soon walk out," replied Jack coolly, examining the mysterious door as he spoke.

"We can't open it from this side, I'm sure," he went on. "It's a sliding door, you see, inside the first cellar, and someone must have pushed it along while we were in there at the back."

"I didn't hear a sound all the time," objected Jim, in a puzzled tone.

"Nor did I. The wheels and grooves have been well oiled, no doubt. What fools we were not to notice the blessed door as we came in!"

"Someone must have known we always come down Symond's Lane to the station," remarked Jim thoughtfully.

"Yes. Some fellow was hiding in the house of course, and we didn't spot him. Smart chaps, these Clayford plotters!"

"We shall not play for the Rovers to-day, that's evident," said Jim dolefully.

"Don't be so beastly pessimistic, old son!" retorted the young centre-forward cheerfully. "If we lose the first train, there's a special for supporters at twelve-forty, so we'll just

The 2nd Chapter.

Trapped!

"Well, old chap, I think I'll get ready."

It was some three weeks after the attempt of Robert James and Fred Reid to steal Mr. Daniel Gill's plate, and Jack Kerr, the young centre-forward of Barchester Rovers, was standing in the front room of the house in which he lodged with his friend, Jim Brown, the burly centre-half of the team.

Jim looked up from the letter he was writing.

"Right, Jack. I'll just finish this letter, and then I'll come along," he replied.

The two professionals were due at the station at twelve o'clock to meet the rest of the team, for the League game with the Albion was to be played that afternoon at Clayford.

"By the way, Jack, have you heard that strange yarn about Clayford Albion?" asked Jim as they made their way along the street.

"No—nothing special. I see they have started to win lately, that's all," replied Jack, without much interest.

"Well, when they beat Canford United last week, three of the United's team didn't turn up until half-time," remarked Jim.

"Great Scott! I noticed by the reports that the United had a weak team out," replied Jack surprisedly.

"They have kept it very dark," continued Jim, "but there's a rumour flying about to the effect that there was foul play."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed his



QUESTIONING THE REFEREE'S DECISION! The referee was surrounded by a gesticulating mob of players, the Rovers claiming that the ball had crossed the goal-line, the Albion protesting furiously that it had not. But the official, who had been close up with the play, pointed without a moment's hesitation to the middle of the pitch. It was a goal!

get out and catch that. Come on! Let's try to break the thing down!"

The two footballers, both sturdy, well-built fellows, hurled themselves several times against the door, but in vain, for it did not move an inch.

"It's barred on the other side, I suppose," said Jack Kerr at last. "Let's prospect a bit. I'll switch off, and we might see a gleam of light somewhere!"

Jack switched off his torch, and when their eyes had become used to the darkness, the two friends looked eagerly around. But not a ray of light was visible anywhere. They tried the further cellar with the same result.

"How about a shout?" suggested Jim Brown. "Somebody in the lane might hear us."

"I doubt it," said Jack. "We'll try, if you like, but you know how few people come this way."

They shouted loudly several times, but there was no sound in reply.

"No good, I'm afraid," said Jack at last, glancing round the cellar as he spoke. Suddenly he rushed over to a corner, where he had caught sight of a heap of old tools.

"Here's a pickaxe!" he exclaimed joyfully. "Now we can break down that door or make a hole in the wall near it!"

And they returned hastily to the mysterious door, where they decided, after some discussion, to break a hole in the brickwork. They set to work manfully to win their freedom, in spite of the bits of brick and mortar which were soon flying round them, and the clouds of choking dust in which they were enveloped. They soon succeeded in making a small hole right through the wall, but a considerable time had elapsed before they had enlarged it sufficiently for Jack Kerr to crawl out. But at last, grimed with dirt and dust, he forced his way through, ran to the foot of the stairs, and listened. Everything was still. Their captor had evidently gone away as soon as the two fellows were safely entrapped, and Jack called to his friend to follow him.

"It's nearly one o'clock!" exclaimed Jim Brown; "and there's no train now till three-fifteen!"

"Go round to Harry Wilson, in the High Street, and ask him to take us over in his car. Come back here with him to pick me up!" replied Jack. "I'm going to see if I can find any clues to this business in this house."

Jim hesitated a moment, but guessing that Jack was safe enough now, he dashed up the stairs and set off at a run. He saw nobody in Symond's Lane, but when he reached the High Street, he caused quite a sensation, for his appearance, like Jack's, was most disreputable. He took no notice, however, even when someone called him by name, but rushed in frantic haste to Harry Wilson's house.

The young engineer had gone out in his car five minutes before! Jim Brown did not know what to do. He went back, however, to Symond's Lane, where he saw Jack Kerr coming along, carrying the two bags.

"Where's the car, Jim?" shouted Jack, as he came up.

"Harry's out. I just missed him. He has gone over to Standerton this afternoon, so they told me at the house," was the reply. "What's to be done now?"

"Let's try the station—" began Jack, but Jim cut him short.

"There's no train—unless they make up a special for us."

The idea was worth trying, and the two fellows were soon at Barchester Station, where they saw Mr. Herbert, the genial stationmaster, and put the matter to him.

"I'm very sorry," said the official, "but I can't give you a special, though, as you say, the club would pay for it. But I have no spare engine here, and by the time I could get one sent down it would be half-past two. Can't you get a car somewhere?" he asked.

"We have tried one friend of mine, but he was out," replied Jack. "We must go and hire one, I suppose. Come along, Jim!"

"Wait a minute!" suddenly exclaimed the stationmaster. "Why not take the one-fifteen express to Standerton—it's due in five minutes—and then take a car from there?"

He drew a map towards him, and went on:

"You see, Standerton is on a different line, but it's only twenty miles across country from there to Clayford, and the express is timed to reach Standerton at two, so you would have plenty of time."

"Jolly good idea, Mr. Herbert!" said the two professionals. "Thanks very much! That will be just the thing!"

"Oh, there's one thing you will be good enough to do for us, perhaps?" remarked Jack Kerr. "Will you send a telegram to our manager, Mr. Pain, to say we are on the way, and will be there before the kick-off? He'll be on the Clayford ground now, I expect, and he must be worried about us."

"Certainly!" said Mr. Herbert. "I'll see to that for you!"

"Express for Standerton and Birmingham! Standerton first stop!" The porters were shouting the words as the two Rovers ran down the stairs to the platform, and in another moment the train steamed in.

Finding an empty carriage, the two fellows entered and sat down. Punctually to the minute the train was off and flying along at a good pace.

"Well, Jack, did you find any clues?" asked Jim, after a while.

Jack Kerr grinned. "See this!" he exclaimed, taking a small object from his pocket. "I found this in the back room. There was nothing else anywhere in the house, and our bags were just where we left them in the front room."

Jim Brown took the small knife which Jack handed to him, and examined it attentively.

"I have it!" he exclaimed suddenly. "This is Fred Reid's knife! I've seen him with it once or twice."

at Clayford this afternoon for the league match."

"Well, we're trying to get there," replied Jim. And he explained how it was that they had made such an unexpected appearance on the Birmingham express.

"But what's up here?" he went on. "We are in a hurry to get to Standerton, so as to get a car from there."

"Here comes my mate!" exclaimed the driver, as the guard, who had been up to the next signal-box for news, came along. "What's wrong, Alf?"

"Goods train ahead broken down. That's the smoke of it we can see. Three trucks off the line. Break-down gang coming from Standerton," said the guard.

Jim Brown and Jack Kerr gasped.

"That means we'll be here for an hour or more, I expect," remarked the driver.

Jim Brown glanced around. Some way off he noticed a church spire through the trees at the side of the line.

"Village over there, I see," he said hopefully. "Let's go and try to get a motor, Jack."

The two professionals climbed the fence and made their way across some fields to the little village of Ebbesford. Here they looked about. There were a few small cottages, a church,

In a mile or two they came out of the lane into a main road, and the driver turned to the impatient Rovers.

"This be the road to Standerton," he remarked. "It be only eight miles from here."

"This won't do at all, Jim!" muttered Jack Kerr. "I'm going to stop the first motor I see," he continued, addressing the farmer, "so pull up."

"Here comes one! Now for it!" he shouted, after a minute or two. And he ran out into the middle of the road, in the path of the oncoming car, waving his arms frantically in the air. The motorist slackened his speed a trifle, but made no attempt to stop. Instead, a furious voice yelled from the car for Jack to get out of the way. Just in time, and only just, he jumped aside, and the motor passed on and vanished round a corner.

"Surly brutes!" growled Jack angrily. "I'll try again, though, and perhaps the next one will stop!"

In a few minutes a big grey car hove in sight. Jack repeated his frantic signals, and this time with success. The car pulled up, and the driver leaned forward to ask what was the matter.

"What's wrong?" he began; but he was interrupted by a wild howl of joy from the two friends.

They had reached the top of the slope, and were going again downhill. In turning a sharp corner they suddenly saw a big farm-wagon travelling in the direction of Clayford. It seemed to occupy the middle of the road, and Harry sounded his hooter repeatedly; but the driver was apparently either deaf or obstinate, for he made no effort to pull his clumsy vehicle in to the side of the road. Harry calculated the distance with his eye, and swept out to the right in an endeavour to pass the obstruction.

There was barely room, and the off-wheels of the car were on the edge of a deep ditch on the side of the road as they came alongside the wagon. There was a rasping sound as the car scraped by, for a projecting bit of wood had left a deep scratch all along the body of the motor. But Harry Wilson took no notice. All he cared for was that they had got past without accident, and he drove on down the hill harder than ever, while the stolid yokel, who had deliberately tried to block the way of "that there dratted motor," gaped with astonishment after the flying car.

"Narrow shave, that!" exclaimed Jack. "Harry's done his car a bit of damage, too! Lucky there was nothing coming the other way!"

"Let me see, we cross the railway somewhere, don't we?" asked Jim presently.

"Yes, at Norton Junction—a mile or two on. It's a level-crossing at the foot of a hill, and a very awkward place, too. I only hope the gates will be open, or we shall lose several precious minutes there," rejoined Jack, in a thoughtful tone.

The car breasted another long hill, and as they reached the top a grand view opened before their eyes. Far away over the plain were the tall chimneys and spires of their goal—the big town of Clayford—while just beneath them, at the foot of a steep descent, was Norton Junction, with its level-crossing.

Jack Kerr held his breath as they gathered speed on the downward slope. Harry, crouching over the wheel, with his eyes glued on the road ahead, made no sign as the car plunged into the valley.

"Look—look!" screamed Jim Brown frantically, leaning forward to attract the driver's attention. "Look, Harry, there's a train over on the right, just coming in to Norton!"

The young engineer glanced at the trail of smoke which marked the oncoming train, but he did not slacken speed in the least. He turned the last corner on the hill, and the level-crossing gates came into sight a couple of hundred yards away, still open.

"Stop—stop! It's too late to get through!" cried Jim, in horror; for he heard the warning bell beginning to ring.

"We'll just do it!" muttered Harry Wilson; and they seemed to leap forwards faster than ever towards the gates.

The gates were on the move as the car swept down on them. The two footballers were paralysed with terror, but Harry seemed to have no doubts. On they went, and the signalman in his cabin was horrified to see, as he pulled the lever to close the gates of the crossing, a big grey motor-car racing furiously down the road towards him. He shouted a frantic warning, and as he reversed the lever to check the gates the car was through the first pair and on the rails. Just in time the further gates stopped swinging, and the reckless motorists were past, and had vanished in a cloud of dust.

"What fools!" muttered the railwayman, wiping the perspiration from his brow as he allowed the gates to close. "Narrowest shave I've ever seen!"

And, indeed, the car had passed the gates with barely an inch to spare!

The 4th Chapter. Unmasked!

Mr. Daniel Gill, the rascally director of the Clayford Albion Football Club, sat in the stand that afternoon in a very pleasant frame of mind. His fellow-directors, with whom he was chatting quite calmly, had no suspicion of his cunning plots, for they were all good fellows and true sportsmen, who were as much worried as anyone about the recent untoward happenings to the Albion's opponents. They put the affairs down to pure chance.

"Nice day, Mr. Gill!" remarked the chairman, Sir Richard Elvington. "Good gate, too, I see," he continued, gazing at the banking on the other side of the ground.

(Continued overleaf.)



CAUGHT! Suddenly the library was flooded with light and James and Reid turned in utter astonishment to find Daniel Gill, revolver in hand, standing by the door.

It's got a bit chipped out of the blade, see?"

"Then we've something really definite to go on now," said Jack, "and Reid is our man."

The train was rattling along merrily, and Jim drew out his watch.

"Quarter to two," he remarked. "Soon be there, old chap!"

"Did you say Harry had gone to Standerton, Jim?" inquired Jack.

"Yes. We might find him there and get him to take us on, if we have any luck," answered Jim.

But any luck—luck of the good variety—which was to come the way of the two Rovers that day was not due to meet them yet! They were by no means at the end of their troubles, though the next misfortune which befell them was a pure accident, in no way connected with the Clayford mystery.

"My word, we are going!" said Jack Kerr, looking out of the carriage window at the countryside, which seemed to fly past them at a tremendous pace.

And, indeed, the speed of the train, now on a down gradient, was terrific! Soon they reached the level, and the train slowed down a trifle. Suddenly the brakes began to grind, the pace slackened, the express crawled along for a little way, the whistle going furiously, and finally stopped.

"Dash it!" exclaimed Jim Brown. "What's up now?"

He poked his head out of the window, and saw that the signals were at danger. A long way ahead he could see some smoke. The two fellows waited for a minute or so, fidgeting and dancing about with impatience, and at last they got out and walked up to the engine.

The driver happened to be a Barchester man, and a keen supporter of the Rovers. He knew them at once.

"Why, great Scott!" he exclaimed, in amazement. "What on earth are you doing here? Thought you were

and one tiny general shop, and that seemed to be all.

It looked as though the eventful journey of Jack Kerr and Jim Brown had at last come to an end, for there was apparently no prospect of obtaining a conveyance in this remote village, and their hopes of donning the familiar shirts of the Rovers in the afternoon's game at Clayford seemed to have vanished finally into thin air.

The 3rd Chapter. Not an Inch to Spare.

"Lively spot, this, Jim!" said Jack, grinning in spite of their awkward predicament.

"Never seen a motor-car in their lives, from the look of it!" growled Jim, in great disgust.

They went into the little shop and asked where they could hire a car.

"A moty-car you wanted, was it, master? There bain't one in the village, and we never do see one of they nasty-smelling things in Ebbesford, that we doesn't!" answered the old dame who kept the village store.

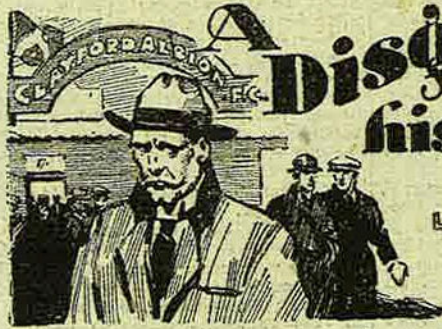
"Well, we want to get to Standerton as soon as we can—" began Jack impatiently, when a shrill voice broke in upon his words.

"You be a-wanting to go to Standerton, gov'nor? My father, he have got a pony and trap, and he'll take you, I spects."

They turned, and saw a small urchin of ten, who ran off forthwith to fetch his father. In a few minutes they had made a bargain, and were rolling along the country lanes behind what seemed the most ancient animal that ever walked on four legs.

"Hardly a Derby winner, this horse of yours, is he?" said Jack, turning to the farmer who drove. "Can't you get him to put on the steam a bit?"

"He won't go any faster than he be a-going now, that he won't!" was the reply. "He ain't so young as he was, mister!"



A Disgrace to his Club!

BY LESLIE WILLIAMS

(Continued from previous page.)

Daniel Gill had backed his team to win, and he leant back in his seat, scanning the huge crowd opposite. He was looking for a signal, and presently it came. Someone hoisted high over the heads of the spectators a big umbrella, painted in the Albion's colours, lowered it, and then put it up again.

"The job is safely done, then," muttered the director to himself, "and I stand to win again!"

He grinned as he thought of the dismay and consternation there would be in the dressing-room of the Rovers down below; but he was too wary to make any inquiries, lest he should arouse suspicion.

Sure enough the Rovers were extremely worried. Mr. Pain, their manager, had arrived from Barchester by the second train. He had stayed behind to find Kerr and Brown when they failed to turn up at midday, but he had in vain scoured the town.

"It's no good, lads!" he exclaimed, as he came into the dressing-room. "I can't hear anything of them. We'll have to play the reserves."

The boys looked grim. The reserves, though capable footballers, were not up to the standard of the two missing men, and the team felt that their chances of victory were now remote.

"The Clayford mystery again!" cried Charlie Randall, the Rovers' skipper. "This business is getting a bit too thick!"

"Telegram for Mr. Pain!" announced a messenger at that moment.

The manager seized the envelope eagerly, and tore it open. He read the contents and breathed a sigh of relief.

"On the way. Shall he with you in time—Kerr?" He read it out. "Good!"

But at five minutes to three the missing men had not turned up.

The reserves were ready, and Charlie Randall was about to lead out his men, when the door opened and two very disreputable figures appeared on the threshold.

"Just done it," said Jack Kerr calmly. "Lead 'em out, Charlie, and we'll be there in a minute! Some good folks on this ground will have the surprise of their lives this afternoon!"

"Don't stare at us like that," laughed Jim Brown, for the fellows were gazing open-mouthed at their two colleagues. "We're not hurt, only a bit dirty. Where's that soap?"

And he made a frantic dash across the room to the wash-basins, and began hastily to remove the dirt with which he was grimed.

Charlie Randall, astounded as he was, led out the other men, and a moment later a great roar went up as the Rovers took the field.

Mr. Daniel Gill was puzzled. He had expected to see the board, announcing two alterations in the Rovers' team, go round the ground. But it did not appear, for the manager, hoping against hope after he had received the telegram, had not notified any changes.

As the visitors ran out Gill bent forward eagerly, scanning the face of each man. Jack Kerr and Jim Brown were not there.

"Very queer!" muttered the director, as he counted the Rovers. "Only nine of 'em! I can't understand it at all!"

Another roar, far louder, from the crowd, heralded the coming of the Albion. And a very hefty-looking lot they were.

Then the referee blew his whistle, and the rival captains advanced for the toss. Suddenly two figures in the Rovers' colours strolled calmly out to the field.

The rascally director nearly fell off his seat in his amazement.

"Kerr and Brown!" he growled angrily, under his breath. "That fellow James has let me down, after all!"

On the bank opposite James and Reid could hardly believe their eyes as the men they had left securely barred in the collar fifty miles away walked on to the field just as the game was about to begin.

The Albion won the toss, and set the Rovers to face the sun and a light breeze. Jack Kerr kicked off, and in a second Tommy Brailton, the speedy outside-right of the Rovers, was flying along the touch-line with the ball at his toe. Tommy was a little fellow, but his control of the ball was perfect, and only the very best of half-backs could check him once he was well away. He made rings round the Albion's left-half, and put over a beautiful centre.

duel in mid-field. The goalkeepers were rarely troubled, and an exhilarating first half ended with no more goals scored.

Jack Kerr and Jim Brown were heartily glad when the interval arrived. Their morning's experiences had tired them more than they had realised, and though they said nothing to the other fellows, they felt that a strenuous second half would be almost more than they could stand. And so it proved. They could not keep up the pace for very long when the game was resumed, and the Albion's centre-forward soon found his task much easier. He began to outpace Jim Brown, and the Rovers' custodian was speedily having the time of his life. Cheered on by the vast crowd, the homesters swept down the field again and again. Three corners in succession they forced, but the visitors' goal seemed to bear a charmed life. Try as they would, the Albion's forwards could not manage to get the ball into the net.

Charlie Randall at right-back, was playing a great game in stemming the fierce rushes of the home forwards; but at last he made a bad mistake. He handled the ball near the corner flag, and the referee at once awarded a free kick. The Albion's centre-half took the kick

skies as the sphere crashed into the net. Robert James and Fred Reid slapped each other on the back, and hoisted their umbrella on high once more. Mr. Gill heaved a sigh of heartfelt relief.

"They are going to pull it off, after all," he exclaimed joyfully, "if only the fools can keep it up!"

And, indeed, it seemed that the issue was now settled beyond all doubt. The game slackened down, for both sides had been playing at a rousing pace, which they could not maintain until the finish. And, with but five minutes to go, the score was still 2-1 in favour of the Albion.

Suddenly the Rovers' forwards, of whom very little had been seen in the second half, broke away, raced up the field, and neared the home goal. The backs checked them, but the ball went out to Jim Brown, who chanced his luck with a long shot. The Albion's goalkeeper caught the leather; but then, making one of those mistakes which the best of goalies do at times, he dropped it, let it roll behind him, and then, turning frantically, scooped it out, just too late.

The referee was instantly surrounded by a gesticulating mob of players, the Rovers claiming that the ball had crossed the line, the Albion protesting furiously that it had not. The official, who was close up,

his carefully arranged plot to secure the victory of the Albion.

Throughout the game Jack's friend, young Harry Wilson, had been prowling amidst the crowd looking for Fred Reid. He felt sure that the ex-Rover had something to do with the events of the morning, and he had asked Mr. Pain, the Rover's manager, to borrow Sir Richard Elvington's car after the match.

"I feel sure Reid is on the ground somewhere," said Harry, "and I'll do my best to spot him, though it seems a hopeless task. If I see him, I'll follow him out, signal to you, and you can come along behind slowly. We might find out where he goes, and whom he sees, for I bet he is not alone in this affair. If we fail to-day, I'll make it my business to haunt his footsteps until I unmask the plot!"

Harry wandered round the ground during the first half, but failed to see anything of the ex-centre-forward, and he almost gave up the quest in despair.

"It's hopeless!" he muttered, when the teams went in at half-time.

But Harry did not give up. He continued to move about here and there, and at the moment, when five minutes from the end of the game the Rovers equalised, he was on the top of the bank opposite the stand, and quite close to the man he sought, though he did not know it.

As the referee pointed to the middle for the disputed goal, pandemonium broke loose.

"No goal—no goal!" roared a thousand voices.

And a storm of hooting was directed at the referee.

Harry glanced around. Near by was a specially vociferous knot of spectators, and above them was waving a big coloured umbrella. Harry edged nearer.

"Got him!" he exclaimed joyfully, as he caught sight of Fred Reid, who was shouting angrily. "And that's Robert James with him! I saw them together on Barchester Station once."

Harry Wilson, having spotted the man he was in search of, was afraid that he might miss him as the crowd went out; but his anxiety was unnecessary, for the two fellows remained on the terrace until nearly all the spectators had gone. And then Harry had an easy task in following them into the street.

Sir Richard Elvington's car was there, and in it were the chairman of the Albion and Mr. Pain, as well as Jack Kerr and Jim Brown. Reid and James, luckily, did not notice the car, but Harry's friends saw him at once. Harry followed the two men down the street, and saw them board a bus bound for the outskirts of the town. After a desperate struggle in a mob of would-be passengers, the young engineer managed to get on, too.

The chairman's car came slowly on behind. At the terminus Reid and James got off, and walked down the road towards the open country. Harry following a good way in the rear. After about a mile the two rogues turned down a lane, where their pursuer, on coming up, noticed the track of motor-tyres, for the lane was hardly ever used by cars, and the marks showed plainly in the dust.

"My luck's in!" murmured Harry Wilson. "They are evidently going to meet someone down here!"

He looked back, saw Sir Richard's car, and signed to its occupants. Then he walked cautiously along the lane. About half a mile down was a lonely cottage. Here the two men paused, looked keenly about on all sides, and, fancying that the coast was clear, knocked cautiously at the door. Someone within opened it, and they went in. They little thought that Harry Wilson, behind a hedge, had seen all their movements.

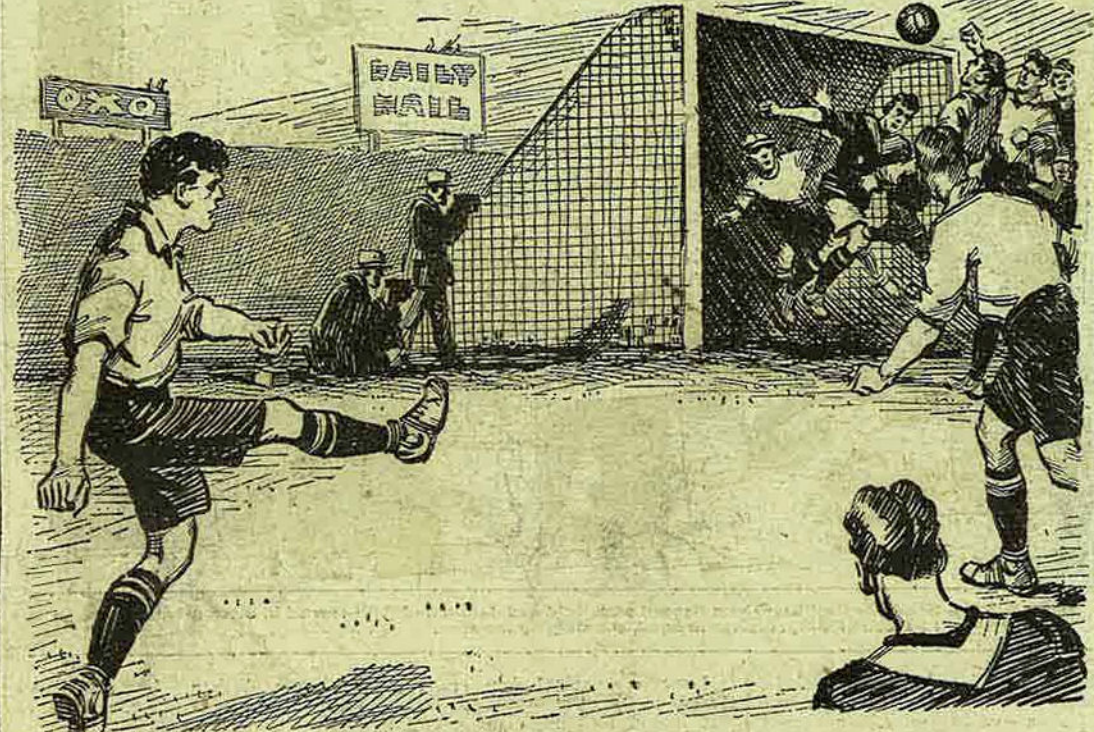
The young engineer went a few yards back, and soon met Sir Richard and the others coming up. They had left the car in charge of the chauffeur, and were walking along in quest of Harry.

"Now, then—quick!" whispered Harry. "Over that hedge and across this field! They are in that cottage, and we can get round behind and into the garden. There's no window on this side, luckily!"

In a minute or two more five men were crouching beneath a window of the cottage, listening eagerly to the voices which sounded from within.

"Well," said someone in a sarcastic tone, "you've explained how carefully you trapped our Barchester friends! But what you haven't explained is how they got to Clayford and played for the Rovers!"

(Continued on page 555.)



THE EQUALISER! The Albion's centre-half took the kick, and planted the ball well into the goal-mouth. Four or five players jumped high into the air to head the leather as it came hurtling towards them, but the centre-forward got there first, and a moment later the scores were level!

Jack Kerr trapped the ball, and just as the opposing back tackled him he touched the leather deftly to Stan Pool, the inside-left. Stan took a first-time shot with his left foot, and the Albion's goalie made a despairing leap into the air as the ball swerved past him at a terrific pace. He touched it, but that was all, and a second later he was ruefully picking it out of the net.

The Rovers were one up in the first minute. And the crowd was stupefied with astonishment as the teams once again lined up in the middle.

In the stand Dan Gill's face was a study. He vented his wrath in muttered maledictions on Robert James, Jack Kerr, the Albion's goalie, and the world in general. And when Sir Richard Elvington, good sportsman as he was, turned to him and remarked that he had rarely seen a smarter piece of work, Gill could hardly bring himself to growl some sort of a reply.

The game went on, and for a time the Rovers attacked fiercely. But the Albion gradually recovered from the shock of that early goal, and soon began to have a fair share of the exchanges. Lucky, indeed, was it then for the Rovers that their big centre-half was on the field! Time after time he checked the Albion's inside forwards. His tackling was superb, and he was continually sending out passes to his wings. His fine play drew round after round of applause even from the supporters of the home team.

The sides were splendidly matched, and the game settled down into a

and planted the ball well into the goal-mouth. Four or five players jumped high into the air to head the leather as it came hurtling towards them, but the centre-forward got there first, and a moment later the scores were level.

A mighty roar of triumph told the whole town of Clayford that the home team had scored. Having equalised, the Albion went all out to get the lead, and for the next ten minutes they were all over the Rovers. But for some brilliant goalkeeping, they would have scored on several occasions. No goalie, however, can survive a continuous bombardment, and at last Ted Milton, the Rovers' custodian, succumbed again, this time to a smashing shot from the inside-right.

The previous shout was as nothing to the tremendous howl that rent the

pointed without a moment's hesitation to the middle, amidst howls of wrath from the crowd. But the referee would not alter his decision, which was a perfectly correct one, and the game was resumed by the Albion with a very bad grace.

No more goals were obtained before the call of time, and the game thus ended in a draw—two goals all.

As the final whistle went, Mr. Gill, his face black with anger, made his way out of the ground to where his car was waiting.

"I'll have an explanation from James and Reid," he muttered; "and if they have sold me, the rascals shall smart for it! You can go home, James!" he added to his chauffeur. "I'll drive the car myself!"

And he swung himself into his seat and drove off, still boiling over with rage as he thought of the failure of

RESULT OF NOTTS COUNTY F.C. COMPETITION.

Another £10 awarded to Readers.

In this competition one competitor sent in a correct solution of the pictures. The first prize of £5 has therefore been awarded to:

J. BOARD,
Dowell Street,
Honiton,
Devon.

The second prize of £2 10s. has been divided among the following five competitors, whose solutions contained one error each:

Mrs. J. Board, Dowell Street, Honiton, Devon; T. Jobson, 2, Charlotte Street, Tidal Basin, E. 10; Tom Loynd, 17, Clementina Terrace, Carlisle; Robert Scott, 424, Parliamentary Road, Glasgow;

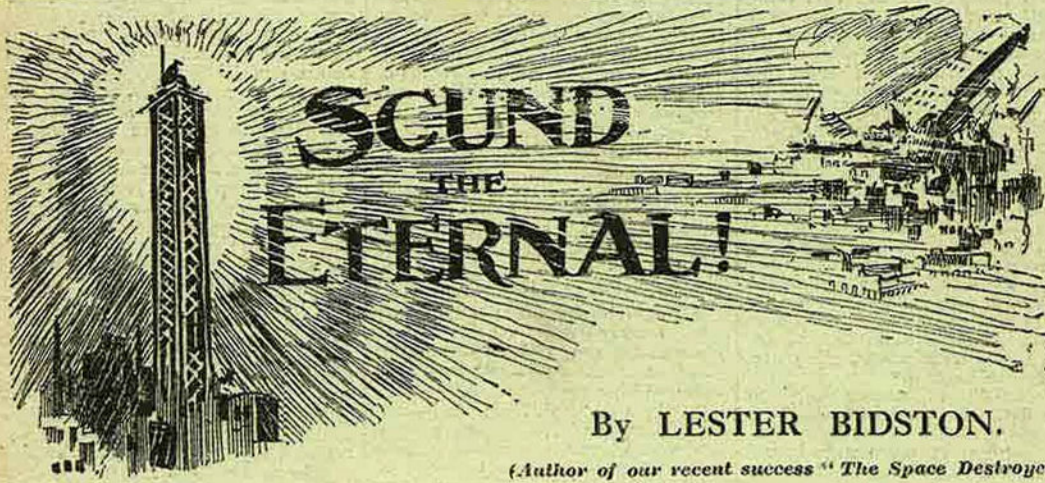
Fred Brooks, 16, Nichols Square, Hackney Road, E. 2.

Fifty-one competitors with two errors each divide the ten prizes of 5s. each—one shilling being added to the prize list to make up a round sum. The names and addresses of these prize-winners can be seen on application at this office.

SOLUTION.

There are few older football teams in the country than Notts County. It goes back practically to the commencement of the game. The club made swift headway, and reached a magnificent position in the First League table. Since then, fortune has ebbed and flowed.

A SENSATIONAL STORY OF MODERN ADVENTURE!



By LESTER BIDSTON.

(Author of our recent success "The Space Destroyer!")

The City of Nayr is destroyed by a terrible death ray,

The 1st Chapter.

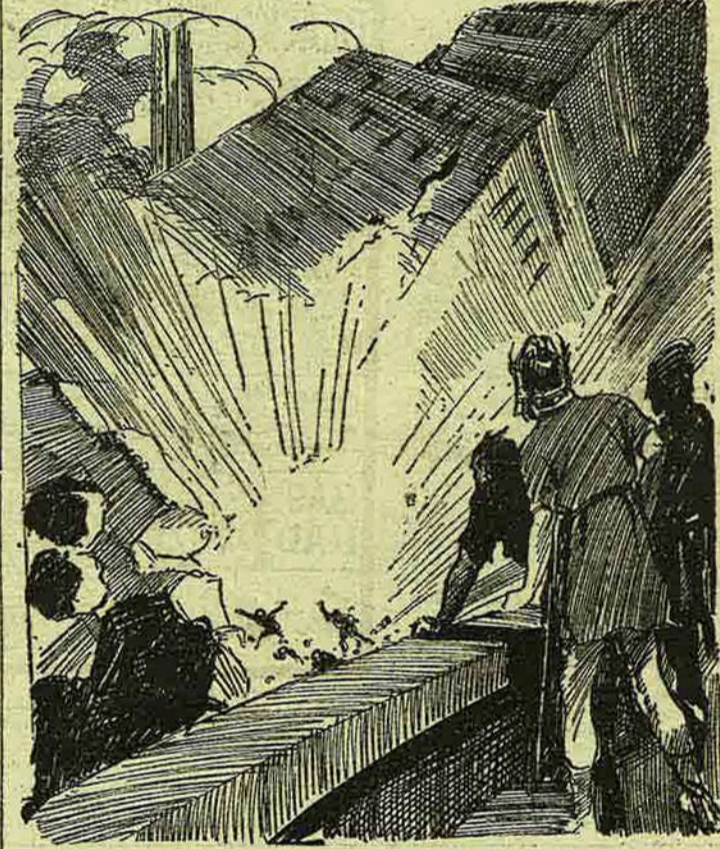
Britain is in a panic because a large part of Lincolnshire has disappeared in a night, leaving behind a blackened and charred coastline. Similar reports are received from China, South America, and South Africa. It is the opinion of Miles Belmain, an American scientist, that the calamities are caused by projectiles from another planet. To test the American's theory, Ken Thornton, Sid Kennedy, and Tim Baynes, three adventurous youths, set out for Venus in Pearl II, a space-ship, which they have constructed from a gravity-defying metal of their own invention. In a similar space-ship they have already visited Mars and Vulcan. They reach the planet Venus, but fall into the hands of some gigantic ants, or Spays, in whose stronghold they discover Thensia, a beautiful young Venusian girl, who is also being held prisoner by the terrible insects. After many narrow escapes from death, the three youths and Thensia succeed in escaping from the Spays, though they are compelled to abandon the Pearl. They reach Nayr, capital of Apadocia, over which rules Uensl, Thensia's father, a king without power. The real ruler of Apadocia, the only inhabitable part of Venus, is Scund the Eternal, who, from his citadel, Tarp, controls all that goes on in the country. Though their arrival is kept from the people, Sid explains to Uensl the reason why they have come to Venus, at the same time urging him to throw off Scund's yoke. This the king agrees to do. Disguised as a Venusian, Sid Kennedy enters the city of Tarp in search of the secret of Scund's mysterious weapon. He descends the Pit of Tarp as a slave, hoping thus to gain his object. Later, the workers rebel, and Sid climbs a lift shaft, hoping that when he reaches the top he will be able to release the slaves. During his perilous journey the lad unfortunately encounters one of Scund's soldiers who is descending by means of a rope to discover what is taking place in the pit. Sid draws his sword and prepares to fight for his life. Meanwhile, in Nayr, Iram, Scund's chief officer, interviews Uensl, informing him that his master demands that he and his two nephews—as Ken and Tim are known in Nayr—should accompany him back to Tarp. This Uensl refuses to do immediately he learns that the Eternal suspects that his "nephews" have journeyed from Earth. "Dare you persist in this defiance, O lord," says Iram, "when I tell you that the Lady Thensia has vanished?" "The well-being of my people takes prior place even to the well-being of my child," answers Uensl. "That is my answer."

The 2nd Chapter. The Fight!

"Then, lord," said Iram, "our journey ends where it began, and I repeat that your presence—and that of the youths beside you—is demanded in Tarp." "Plain speaking, soldier," Uensl replied. "And to be equally plain, I pray you tell the Lord Scund that we enter Tarp when we will, and how we will. In short, the time has come when Nayr claims to work out its own destiny, and when Apadocia declines to be ruled by a clique whose mouth-piece is Scund. Return with those words, soldier, and the message that if my daughter suffers ill-usage, Tarp, and those who rule there, will pay a bitter price." "My orders are to bring you back

—dead or alive!" Iram answered doggedly. He turned impatiently to his troop. "Men, do your duty!" Nothing loath, Iram's soldiers sprang forward, their swords bared, the expectation of easy victory reflected in their faces. But swift as lightning Ken and Tim sprang in front of Uensl, their hands snatching strange-looking weapons from their tunics—six-inch tubes of steel which terminated in flexible rubber bulbs. The tiny weapons looked ridiculously inadequate; so much so that the foremost line of charging men laughed openly—until a stinging pain crashed into their faces, blinding them and sending them to the floor. "Good old Chlorine!" grinned Tim. "Who'd have thought of finding it here and putting it to such good use? And that's for you, Iram, old lad!" But Iram was quick to pull a subordinate in front of himself and so escape the evil-smelling liquid that Tim shot at him. Then, from a safe position in the rear, he urged his men to sweep the youths aside and seize the king. Of course, the unequal clash would quickly have ended in the soldiers' victory, for the crudely made liquid squirts—whose manufacture had served to pass an idle hour—were already empty, and the pause in the onslaught had been more from surprise than actual harm. But that momentary set-back had been sufficient to warn Uensl's many friends of the great danger in which he stood, and without more ado hidden daggers were produced and a dour struggle ensued. Whilst it lasted the fight was bitter and bloodthirsty; but Iram's soldiers, though better armed, were outnumbered three to one, and soon it became evident that they would never reach within striking distance of Uensl. That Iram was quick to see and understand, and, bitterly as the fact rankled, he ordered a retreat. "A dash for the exit, men!" he suddenly cried, and himself led the way—an exhibition of cowardice that was not followed by all his men. But those who fought until overwhelmed by numbers delayed pursuit whilst Iram and a scant half-dozen of his kidney crossed the hall and vanished through the door. And whilst Uensl's angry friends would have taken up pursuit, the king wisely stayed them. "Of what use to hunt him?" he said contemptuously. "His fliers wait at the entrance, and by now are doubtless taking the air. Let him go. He's but the servant, and it's the master to whom our debt is owing. Rather let us recognise that this treacherous attack means war between Nayr and Tarp—war to the death between Scund and myself." He stilled the cheer that began with uplifted hand. "For too long has the so-called Eternal made slaves of us. We carry out his orders without question; go to death if so he bids, not daring to murmur. He claims omnipotence—he would even murder me in my own palace. But for the shrewd wit of these youths he would have succeeded, and so forged the last rivet that makes you slaves to his will." "But can we fight him with any hope of success?" an elderly, anxious-looking man asked. "Fight we must, and I hope not altogether unprepared. Iram has told you that Scund's most trusted commanders have disappeared, but he has not told you that much strength has passed into my hands during the past period. I also have not advertised

that truth, but the time has now come to tell you all." And in the hour that followed Ken and Tim learned much that surprised them of Uensl's secret activities. It appeared that his men had quietly gained control, not only of the various power-stations, but also of the great factory wherein the wonders of atomic energy were subjected to man's will. That much had been done before the whispers began to filter through to Tarp.



THE BOMBARDMENT! One great building split into two distinct halves as a shell burst near it, and the debris thundered down on the petrified slaves below!

Uensl's encouraging words would have made Ken and Tim entirely happy had they known how Thensia and Sid fared. That these two were in Tarp was a fact that caused them much uneasiness, for they felt that in the clash that was coming either Nayr or Tarp would be horribly punished. They guessed that both cities controlled forces of awful power, and Ken had an uneasy feeling that Tarp hid many grim secrets that might yet work the undoing of Nayr. Graciously enough, after publicly thanking them for so promptly coming to his assistance, Uensl asked them to choose their own place in the war that was imminent. They decided on the possession of two of Uensl's swiftest fliers—machines which they were given leave to have altered and re-conditioned to their own ideas. By this means they had the hope of helping their chum and the girl who had become a close friend to them all.

The Screaming Terror!

It will be remembered that we left Sid clinging precariously to an insecure

perch three hundred feet above the pit and two hundred below level ground—a hair-raising position, made ten times more unenviable by the fact that a soldier of Tarp was swinging towards him with vicious sword-point aiming at his throat.

Nearer and nearer the soldier approached as the curve of his swing increased, and at last he stabbed viciously at the being who, to his eyes, clung helplessly to the wall.

That time the sword point was three inches short of Sid's throat, and it was a nerve-shattering, uncanny experience. Sid listened to his disappointed mutterings, and watched the man swing away to the opposite side of the shaft.

But he knew that the next drive would bring a decision, and perhaps his own speedy end. His muscles grew taut. He saw the swinging body reach and almost touch the far wall, and begin its return.

Then Sid did the most hair-brained, suicidal deed that ever fell to his lot, for, whilst the soldier was still six feet away, he drew his sword, loosed his hold, and flung himself straight down on the body that hurtled towards him.

The tiniest miscalculation, and he would have hit the opposite wall, and, rebounding, have dropped into the pit, shattered and lifeless before ever he touched bottom.

But the very madness of his act took the Venusian by surprise and threw him into a flurry—a fact on which Sid had counted. Too late, the soldier kicked sideways, but the force of the drive held him in an unswerving line, and his wild stab at the

fact that within a minute he began to rise with a steady movement.

From the soldier he had no further trouble, and in a surprisingly short time they reached the guard-room of the upper level.

Ejaculations of amazement broke out at the sight of two soldiers rising from the depths where one had descended, and for the second time Sid thanked his lucky stars that he had donned the uniform of Tarp.

"How come you here?" an officer demanded suspiciously. "And how comes it that Weil returns in this injured state?"

Sid took care to cross the bridge and reach solid ground before answering, leaving the guard to attend the unconscious scout.

"Climbing from the pit I met he you name Weil," Sid answered, facing the officer and saluting with assured bearing. "In attempting to—er—take me from the wall he was injured. I it was who gave the signal for return."

"You had not the right!" the officer snapped. "Did not Weil tell you he was on duty of importance?"

"He did. He told me that you had sent him to spy on those confined within the pit. But I can tell you their state more truly than ever he would have seen."

"Humph! Then you had better do so, for the Lord Scund orders a report without delay!"

Closely watching the efforts to restore Weil, Sid saw that worthy's eyes flutter open, and stare stupidly about him. Then they fastened on Sid and, springing to his feet, he pointed accusingly at the false soldier.

"Believe him not!" Weil cried. "He is a traitor, a spy! Seize him, sir, before he works us harm!"

With the first word every eye in the room fastened on Weil. Sid seized the opportunity to unfasten his pouch and take therefrom the two tiny globes it held. And, as the meaning of Weil's denunciation became clear, the officer rounded on Sid—to find that youth with arms aloft.

"Back!" cried Sid. "Let none advance a single pace, or I swear that all will die!"

Well those soldiers knew that the bursting of one tiny bomb would devastate the room and kill everyone within it. He smiled grimly as he saw the panicky manner with which those men of war crowded away from his dangerous vicinity.

"No, officer, away from that door! and you, soldier, cast your spear down the shaft to appraise my friends that I have reached my journey's end."

"Who are you, man?" the leader asked. "And what think you to gain by this madness?"

"Something better than the fate your master has awarded those below. Hark to my words, soldiers! Not for nothing have I risked life and limb in this shaft, fought with friend Weil, and ventured to defy you all. First, let every man throw down his weapons." A pause, a moment of silence, then the clatter of steel on stone. "Now, officer, your sword—by the handle, please."

Scowling black as thunder, muttering disjointed threats beneath his breath, the Venusian leader sullenly obeyed. And Sid, holding the two dread explosives in his left hand, accepted the token of submission with a quiet smile.

"Now, my lad, gather those weapons and pile them beside me." He turned to one whose eyes, fixed immovably on his left hand, showed such open fear that the prick of Sid's sword was hardly needed to accelerate his movements. "And you, officer, are going to descend the pit, where you will tell my friends to fix an ore-bucket to the rope and come up in batches of four. Then, soldiers, if you act faithfully, you can have your freedom and go—wherever you like. For now, get busy!"

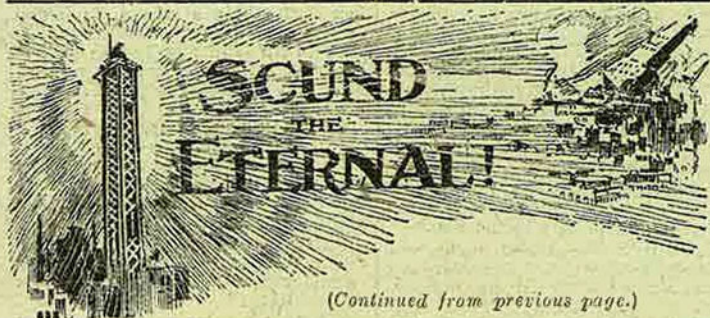
"I'll not do it!" the officer suddenly shouted, his eyes glittering balefully. "Not though you kill me with my own sword will I betray my trust!"

"I think you will," Sid answered. He dropped the sword, and again each hand held aloft a bomb for all to see. "Seize that man and lower him to the pit, or I swear that we die together!"

And, despite that plucky officer's struggles and protests, his men forced him to Sid's will, for they saw not the need for an heroic defiance that would most certainly bring them to a speedy and painful end.

It was a long and monotonous job that followed, and until the bucket that presently appeared had made

(Continued overleaf.)



(Continued from previous page.)

five journeys and a score of Sid's adherents had safely reached the surface, a time of anxious strain. Then Sid relaxed, knowing that the handful of soldiers were outnumbered, and that, from them, nothing more need be feared.

With the last load came Osen, an astonished and overjoyed man. He clasped Sid to his arms, and, to that undemonstrative youth's disgust, kissed him effusively on the forehead. "Yosa, surely Valda breeds heroes, if all are as you," he cried. "You have done the impossible, and brought eighty men from despair to freedom!"

"Have I, Osen?" Sid answered dubiously. "I doubt it, when I remember that Scound still holds all of Tarp, and we hold but this one little guard-house. By the way, what have you done with our prisoners below there?"

"Walled them in a tunnel where it will take them long to break out."

"Before which time all Tarp will know what has happened, for the changing of guards will reveal our secret. But come, Osen, let us leave these fellows for a moment whilst we study the possibilities of defence."

Investigation proved that the stone building was two-storied, the upper room containing stores for the pit and weapons for its guardians. From this store-room a ladder opened the way to the flat roof that was common to all Apadocian buildings.

"A poor place to fight in," said Sid.

"I can end that doubt by telling you a secret known to few, and only known to me by overhearing a remark between Scound and Ixed, to the effect that a great store of explosive is buried in the pit, and can be fired from Scound's palace at his chosen moment."

Sid looked questioningly at his companion.

"Then why didn't he end our rebellion by touching it off ere this?"

"And wreck the place wherein all his hopes are centred? No; that is a last resource. But come, Yosa, let us to the roof to see how it fares in Tarp."

The first thing they noticed was that the roof of every building was crowded. In the streets and squares below, the workers—for once idle—stood in groups arguing. It was sufficiently remarkable that the soldiers, themselves in chattering clusters, ignored this open defiance of authority; but when Sid perceived that every face was turned in the direction of Nayr he began to get a suspicion of the truth.

"Osen, how comes it that these two great towns—whose ideals seem so wide apart—have been built so that each overlooks the other?"

"That is a natural outcome of Scound's policy," Osen answered. "Nayr is the older city, and was once the most important in all Apadocia. But Scound—long before I was born—suddenly ordered this grim place to be built. The tale is told that half the people of the land were forced to help in the building, and that Tarp, as you see it, sprang up like magic."

"But why was it built?" Sid asked. "It's an ugly place, and it cannot compare with the beautiful city facing us."

"That is Scound's secret. We only know that some great work goes on, and that the Closed Gates can alone reveal that secret."

"Hmph! And I'll wager that its secret is the gun we of Valda came to find. But, Osen, suppose that Nayr and the surrounding country decides to try and break Scound's overlordship and free itself from his abominable slavery, as we of the pit have tried to do. What form would the fighting take? Have you standing armies, great quantities of explosives like we war with on Valda?"

"That no man can tell, for Scound has long ruled in Apadocia, and no one knows the extent of his power. Matter that bursts we have in plenty, both here and in Nayr, but no actual fighting in mass has taken place for generations past. Should it do so now, as you appear to think, I fear that few would live through it, for Scound is ruthless in breaking any who dare oppose his will."

Before Sid could answer a deep hum broke out, the sound of a thousand aeroplane propellers suddenly and violently rotating. Not a puff of wind stirred, but sight was dazzled, the buildings of Tarp became shimmering unreal, and the distant beauty of Nayr alone stood out, clearcut and solid.

Then Osen's pointing finger drew Sid's attention to a hundred-foot steel tower that glistened in lonely majesty over Scound's stronghold. Even as

Sid's eyes stared upwards, a lurid green glare broke from its apex, and the ear-bursting note took on a thinner, shriller sound.

"Ye gods!" Sid suddenly cried. "Look, Osen, the Spire of the Sun, Nayr's sacred building, shivers and collapses!"

That was the beginning of an inhuman, nightmare business.

Scound Strikes Home!

Two days after Uensl's sensational defiance of Scound, the ruler of Nayr stood on the roof of his palace, surrounded by his principal adherents.

All eyes turned towards the west. There, dimly visible on the distant horizon, the grey city of Tarp—grin guardian of all Apadocia—reared its sombre head.

In the streets of Nayr, and from every flat roof of its buildings, a scene of feverish activity unfolded. Batteries of guns—strange weapons of thirty-foot barrel and three inch bore—were taking up positions on the outskirts of the city, whilst thousands of labourers were throwing up protective mounds of earth. On every roof and aerial platform flying machines of all shapes and sizes clustered, ranging

from single-seater scouts to the giant air-trains that had first brought the voyagers from Avath to Nayr.

"We cannot tell," Uensl was answering one of his people. "Scound boasts that he is omnipotent. That may or may not be, but he keeps his secrets well. We can only wait his challenge, then answer by striking with all our might."

"Tim, you hear the king's words, and from them you'll judge that if a fight does come between the cities, it's going to be very much on the knees of the gods who wins," remarked Ken.

"Well, it looks like blindman's buff to me," Tim admitted. "There's no signs of movement from Tarp."

"Yes; because Uensl is reluctant to strike first. He respects Scound because he knows him. That the king's got the blues is evident, and, from that, I argue a pretty hefty time ahead." Kenn patted a machine beneath whose shadow they stood. "That's why I had this chap altered to suit my own ideas."

Tim regarded the flier with mild amusement. It owned the torpedo body of the usual Apadocian machine, but where they were driven by borrowed power and almost invisible propeller, this invention of Ken's had a great spread of bamboo and canvas wing, huge twin propellers, and a self-contained engine.

Tim's grin broadened. "Ken, I've only got one little body, but I think rather a lot of it. D'you seriously expect me to risk it in this antiquated old bus?"

"Oh, I think it'll fly!"

"For goodness' sake, listen to him! He thinks it'll fly!" Tim's brows arched in anguished amazement. "I raked part of it out of Nayr's historical museum," Ken answered, surprisingly. "This model was in use on Venus a century ago. Then Scound found that he could control a gigantic force such as we on Earth cannot even conceive. One of the first results was that ordinary flying machines became as dead as our Dodo, and in their place came these Apadocian air fleets, who draw their power by wireless from the towers that are dotted at regular intervals all over the land. You already know that Nayr alone has over fifty of these power towers."

"That's so," conceded Tim. "But why your return to the prehistoric, Kenny boy?"

"Because I don't trust old mystery yonder," Ken replied. "Anyway, I'll feel a bit safer having a machine under me that has its own engine, because I've always had an uncanny feeling that these deliver-by-wireless towers might let us down some day. I've tried to make Uensl see my meaning; he says an air accident has not happened during his lifetime."

But Tim was no longer listening. He was staring towards distant Tarp with a puzzled expression. Then Ken also became aware of something unusual.

They stood staring, not as yet realising that cries of anger and surprise were breaking out all over the city. All they knew was that strange little pains were shooting through their bodies, and that their eyes were playing queer tricks, or else the very air of Nayr was beginning to quiver and dance. They noticed a tiny flash of

(Continued on the next page.)

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This competition is run in conjunction with the "Gem," the "Magnet," and the "Popular," and readers of those journals are invited to compete.



I enter "BLACKPOOL" Competition and agree to accept the Editor's decision as final. Name: Address: B.F.

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light coming: so going from Tarp's highest tower, and a quantity of luminous green smoke that drove up in distinct puffs over the distant city.

Quite suddenly Tim gripped his chum's arm. "Look, Ken! The Spire of the Sun is dropping to ruin!"

Almost the youths doubted the evidence of their sight. The building, a model of architecture, its marble spire tapering a hundred and fifty feet into the sky, was collapsing before their startled eyes. First a ten-foot pinnacle snapped and dropped into the square fronting the magnificent building, and the wail of agony that broke out attested to the damage it had done to those below.

Then, as if invisible lightning impinged upon it, a jagged tear zigzagged from summit to base of the spire, and, to the horror of the thousands who watched, the whole structure shivered and dropped with a thunderous crash.

To the voyagers from Earth it was all fantastically unreal. They had an extraordinary persuasion that they were dreaming, that presently they would wake up, shake off the nightmare that shackled reason and laugh at the trick that sleep had played on them.

But it they were unable to credit that on which their eyes looked, the consuming anger of Uensl and those surrounding him, quickly proved that there was no doubt as to the agency responsible for this terrible disaster.

"This is Scund's challenge!" Uensl cried. "He seeks to smash Nayr with rays of vibration. Let our guns answer him. Signal the fleet to prepare for action!"

"Come on, Tim!" Ken cried. "Into the old bus! Let's see if we can do anything for Thensla and Sid, poor beggars!"

Hurriedly they scrambled into the well of the flier, the machine ran half the length of the roof, lifted, and took the air as smoothly as a bird takes wing. Acting on an organized plan, the whole flying strength of Nayr was ascending in sections. For the moment no attempt was made to turn towards Tarp, for it was Uensl's scheme to fling his whole force forward in one irresistible mass.

High in the blue, the chums looked down on a scene that wrought high excitement in their breasts.

The knowledge came to them with sickening certainty that the fate which had overtaken the Spire of the Sun was fast gripping the whole beautiful city in its malignant clutch. Building after building was breaking and falling in ruins. The shrill screams of the harassed, terrified population rose even above the crash of splintering stone, and fires burst out here and there that soon obscured half the flooded city from the gaze of those above.

Then Nayr replied. An answer ridiculously inadequate—or so, in their ignorance, the chums thought. It was just the noise of bursting crackers that ascended from Nayr's twelve, long-nosed guns—considerably less sound than an earthly twelve-pounder would have made. But these sinister weapons had flung shells of titanic destructiveness into Tarp; a fact that was partly evident when the chums turned their eyes from stricken Nayr to the grey city.

It was as if a wet sponge had been drawn over a chalked picture. Half the town simply vanished! A veritable volcano of stones, even whole sections of buildings, were flung to the four winds of heaven. And as these fell to earth a black pall of smoke spread over the place, and an ear-splitting series of detonations floated back to them.

But Scund's answer was swift and yet more terrible. To now, the fleet of Nayr had been lifting in orderly array, each unit taking its appointed place in the higher, lower, or middle level. Now more than a hundred fliers circled over the city, the signal for the departure of the advance scouts was being made from Uensl's roof, and Ken had actually turned his machine in the direction of Tarp when he felt the wheel kick obstinately against his touch.

At first he thought that the mechanism played him false. He exerted pressure, and in response the nose of the machine dipped and threatened to drive him down on those below. Putting forth his full strength, Ken somehow managed to

tilt his flier and rise above those who surrounded him. But the machine rose sluggishly and jerkily, as though bravely straining against a heavy weight that had become attached to it.

Then Tim called his attention to the behaviour of their fleet. Looking down, they were confounded by a sight that was probably unique in the experience of mankind.

The three tiers of fliers were still separate and distinct—a height of about five hundred feet between each tier, and a like distance between the lowest and the domes of Nayr. But though hardly a breath of wind stirred the atmosphere—except that caused by their own movements—the fleet struggled as if labouring in a cyclone.

They lifted, rolled, righted, darted forward as if released from a leash, then staggered, whirled round in spinning circles, drove through the air stern first—dangerous, mad things, despite all the efforts of their bewildered pilots.

"By the bones of Biafra!" gasped Tim. "What's got hold of them, Ken?"

"The invisible hand of Scund," Ken replied. "A terrible fight's going on between the power towers of Nayr and those of Tarp. And because Scund operates that awful ray of vibration, I fear he'll win." He tilted the nose of their machine. "I'm rising another couple of thousand."

spread death and destruction broadcast. And almost before the fear-inspiring noise had rumbled to silence a blinding flash struck upwards from a tower facing Tarp.

"My hat!" cried Ken. "Scund's burst one of the atomic towers with his awful vibrating rays!"

"And every one he smashes," Tim added, "means a further handicap against keeping the fleet in the air. Why in goodness don't they try and land, Ken?"

"Impossible! You've read of ships being unable to berth alongside piers through stress of weather, and that's just what is happening below us. They're absolutely helpless, tossed up and down as the electric battle ebbs and flows. And their fate, unfortunately, is outside their own keeping."

"And but for your idea of pushing an old engine into this contraption we'd be amongst them!"

But Ken was staring intently towards the outskirts of the city. Following his glance, Tim saw a second tower disappear in a sheet of rushing flame, and heard an awe-inspiring roar that made his flesh pringle and turn cold.

That was the beginning of the end. With ruthless persistency the ray of vibration searched and rooted out tower after tower and directed its uncanny influence on each located victim, until it was vanquished by

ample cause for their emotion. The city that had been a delight to the eye was now a desolating heap of smoking rubble. In one short hour it had been crushed out of being, its inhabitants swept to death. It was indeed a truly appalling defeat.

But if complete disaster had overtaken Nayr, Tarp had not escaped scatheless.

For a time the attention of Sid and Osen was divided between distant Nayr and the steel tower that glistened over Scund's stronghold. Very quickly they understood the connection between the lurid green glare that shot from the tower and the falling buildings of the city of marble.

"The inhuman monster!" cried Sid. "D'you see what Scund's doing—actually splitting the buildings of Nayr as if they were made of cardboard?"

"Already I have told you that the Eternal controls the atmosphere itself, and from it extracts a tremendous strength that performs half the work in Apadocia."

"That I know," Sid answered impatiently. "It's what we call atomic force. Well, unless Uensl has some card up his sleeve, it looks as if Scund can wipe Nayr out at his leisure."

"But why?" asked Osen. "Nayr serves him well, in that much of his

A Disgrace to His Club!

By LESLIE WILLIAMS.

(Continued from page 552.)

As he heard the voice Sir Richard Elvington started as if he had been shot. Mr. Pain laid a warning hand on his arm, and the chairman of the Albion set himself to listen once more.

"Your methods are too crude," the same voice went on. "When you ran down those fellows the other day you were much too careless. You nearly killed one of them. Quite unnecessary—quite! I don't want violence, or not more than is essential."

Robert James laughed, and at the same time Sir Richard, outside the window, whispered to his companions. "That's enough," he said. "Now follow me."

And he jumped up, thrust open the window, and burst into the presence of the astonished plotters, followed instantly by the others. Reid and James made for the door, but Jack Kerr and Jim Brown collared them.

Meanwhile, Sir Richard and Mr. Pain had secured Mr. Daniel Gill, and when the struggle was over the chairman of the Albion expressed himself in no uncertain fashion.

"I've heard you discussing your dastardly plots with your rascally accomplices, you scoundrel!" thundered Sir Richard furiously. "But I'll deal lightly with you for the sake of the club. Either you resign your directorship at once, leave Clayford for good, and promise to keep your mouth shut about the whole affair, or I'll inform the police, and you will be tried for conspiracy."

Gill groaned in despair.

"As for you, you villains," roared the chairman, turning to James and Reid, "you may think yourselves lucky not to be charged with manslaughter over the Canford business. Get out of this part of the country at once. If I hear of either of you in Clayford or Barchester again, I'll see you safely in gaol!"

"But—" began Gill in a whining tone.

"Silence!" stormed Sir Richard. "You have heard my terms. Write your resignation here and now, or it will be the worse for you!"

Gill was a coward at heart, and he knew Sir Richard to be a man of his word. He found pen and paper, and wrote a formal resignation of his position as director of the Clayford club. Sir Richard took up the paper, and then, sternly repeating his warning, he walked out, leaving the three conspirators in a very unenviable state of mind.

The chairman of the Albion informed the directors of Selsdon and Canford that the accidents to their men had been the result of a deliberate plot by the ex-director, and added that Gill, James, and Reid had all left Clayford. The officials of the other clubs were at first inclined to put the whole of the facts before the Football Association; but, after a long discussion, they agreed to save the fair name of football by taking no action, for they were convinced that the other directors of the Albion were quite innocent of all participation in the affair, and the mystery of Clayford was thenceforth buried in the oblivion which it deserved.

THE END.

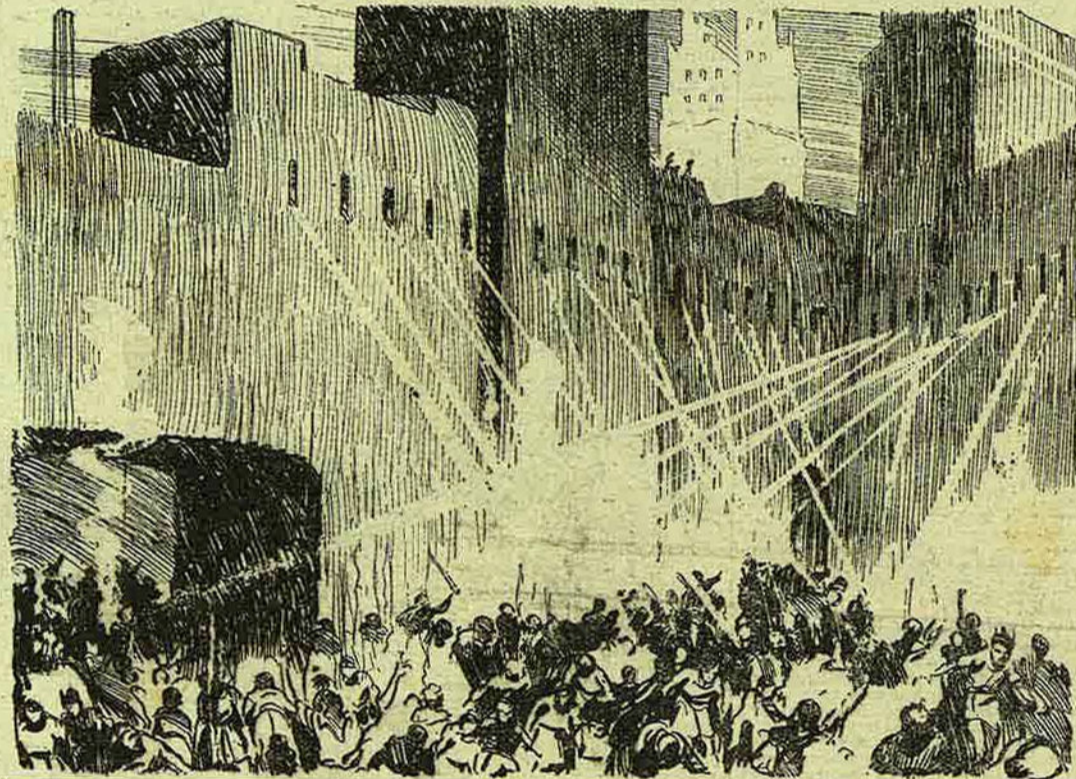
"Bulldog" Holdfast reappears in a rattling fine story, entitled "The Men of Vengeance!" next Monday. On no account miss it. Order your copy of BOYS' FRIEND to-day.



Do you like a yarn with a thrill in every line—a story that grips and keeps you breathless with excitement from first word to last? If you do, you'll like this new thriller of the racing track, which commences in this week's BOYS' REALM (out on Wednesday, April 11th). "Behind the Wheel" is the finest motor racing story ever written—don't miss a line of it!

BOYS' REALM 2

Every Wednesday.



THE DESTRUCTION OF SID'S ARMY! From the black muzzles which suddenly protruded from tiny loopholes in the grey walls of Scund's palace, there flickered white beams of light, and wherever they touched came shouts and shrieks from the panic-stricken crowd! (A startling incident from next Monday's long instalment of this amazing story.)

Then Tim understood, and felt the icy grip of fear clutch at his heart—not for himself, but for the helpless beings below, as he remembered that these Venusian vessels depended on an uninterrupted supply of wireless power to keep them suspended in air.

And Scund, with every particle of strength that could emanate from the towers of Tarp, was fighting a sinister, silent battle, with all the odds in his favour.

The fifty great towers of Nayr, which, by the magic of controlled atomic force, could have supplied ample power to the great fleet that floated overhead, were now forced to divide their strength. As the waves of Scund's cosmic energy beat on their apparatus—producing what a "broadcaster" would name "static"—the towers of Nayr were compelled to match half their force against their opponents, thereby starving the fleet which floated over them, and placing it in helpless, dire peril.

And in this supercharged atmosphere the fleet of Nayr rolled and tossed impotently, and helplessly strove to avoid disastrous collision. But at last the inevitable happened. The chums, peering downwards in speechless dismay, watched two of the heaviest air-trains lurch helplessly towards each other, make agonising efforts to avoid touching, only to crash broadside on and fall like stones.

The noise of their collision was drowned by the roar of the bursting bombs as their cargoes exploded, to

the shattering of its stored-up energy. And with each explosion the resisting power of Nayr lessened and the gyrations of the air fleet grew more and more wild.

Striving valiantly to the last, the end came with dramatic abruptness. Just as a feather's weight turns the scale, so did the collapse of the eighteenth Nayr tower cause the resistance of the survivors to be instantly overborne, and result in the instantaneous cutting-off of the fleet's indispensable fuel.

In that awful second the whole mighty force plunged to the earth! The voyagers—only survivors of the force that had so proudly soared aloft—closed their eyes, and longed to stop their hearing against the horror which arose as the ten score machines, heavily burdened with explosive, crashed down on Nayr.

In an instant the air was full of sound, a deafening and confusing conflict of noises—the clangorous din of metals, the crash of falling houses, and the crackling and roaring of newly awakened fire. Even at the great height at which Ken's quaint machine flew a whirlwind of heat surged up and round them, and they were tossed and buffeted about in imminent peril of having their fier's wings ripped clean away.

But it was a relief to battle against that rushing wind, for it saved the good purpose of distracting their minds from the annihilating disaster below.

And without doubt there was

material made in that city. Why break a place that is so useful to him?"

"Oh, I forgot. You've been trapped in Tarp for years, and know nothing of outside events. Well, I can tell you that shortly before I came here Uensl had decided to challenge Scund's autocratic power for the sake of his enslaved people." Sid frowned as another great building of Nayr collapsed. "The brute! Surely Uensl has some means of replying."

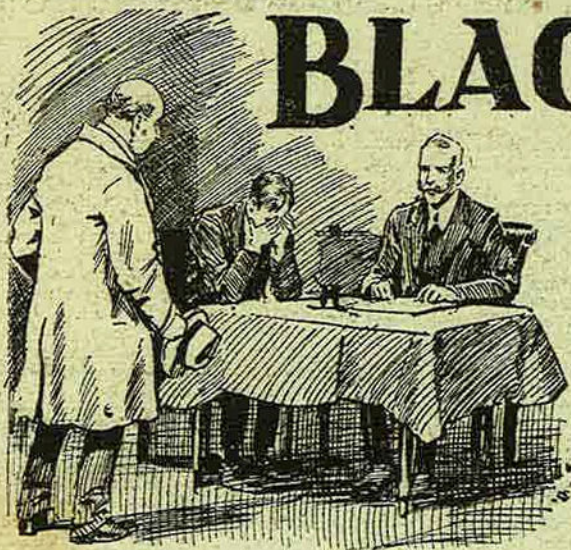
As if to answer Sid's plaint, twelve smashing blows hit Tarp—twelve shells burst with a devastating effect that was beyond earthly conception.

Sid stared in round-eyed amazement at the awful upheaval that suddenly surrounded him, a sight so fascinatingly gruesome that he was hardly conscious of personal danger.

He saw huge stones flung high into the air, as if the ground beneath Tarp had become actively volcanic. Directly facing them one great building split into two distinct halves, one side sagging to a heap of ruins, the other lifting bodily and grotesquely into space. For fully fifty feet it rose in one swift rush, then tilted and broke into a hundred fragments that thundered down on the petrified slaves below.

(How will the dread battle end? Order your copy of the BOYS' FRIEND in advance and make sure you read next Monday's startling instalment.)

ANOTHER TOPPING TALE OF THE BOYS OF DANESBURY SCHOOL.



BLACKMAIL!

By PETER FOY.

By a clever ruse Pargiter and Payne of the Fifth Form at Danesbury save Jones Minor from the hands of

a rascal.

The 1st Chapter. Blackmail!

Jones minor seems to have a hundred-horse-power hump, I notice," observed Harold Payne, one morning. "I rather like that chap. Wonder what's up with him?"

The 2nd Chapter. Nothing Doing!

Pargiter and Payne did not believe in letting the grass grow under their feet. That very afternoon, when tea was ended, the two chums set out for the office of Mr. Jonas Bevis.

"Can't imagine," replied Frank Pargiter, as he proceeded to toast a sausage with considerable interest. "But if he is in any bother, why doesn't he get his brother to help him out?"

"Here, what's up?" he asked nervously. His face went white as paper. "You—you haven't heard anything?" he jerked out, after an instant's pause.

"I'll tell you everything," began Jones. "You may be able to help me out, or you may not. In any case, it'll do me no end of good to get the beastly thing off my chest!"

"Then go ahead!" suggested Payne. "And, of course, whatever you tell us, young Jones, we shall regard as quite confidential."

"Well, that's no business of yours!" snapped Bevis. "Perhaps not; but we are going to make it our business! Now, you must know that in lending money to a chap under age you are breaking the law."

"Now go back to the school and tell your friend what I've told you. And you can say to him also that if the money isn't forthcoming by the end of the week, I shall write to his father in London and tell him everything!"

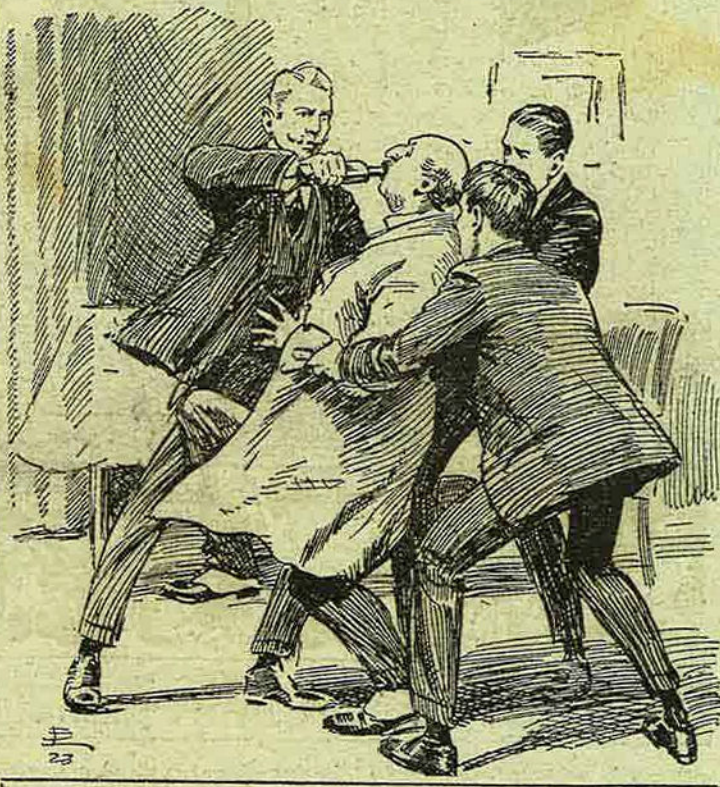
"So that's that!" observed Frank Pargiter somewhat gloomily, as they strolled back to Danesbury in the gathering dusk. "Well, we've done about as much good as if we'd never gone near that old hunk!"

"Your governor hasn't tumbled, has he?" asked the Fifth Form fellow. "No, not yet; but he will before the week is out. Read that note."

They stood under a lamp-post, and read these words:

"27x, Lennox Gardens, Kensington, W., May 7th. "My Dear Boy,—As I have business in Guildford to-morrow, I shall take advantage of the journey to pop over and see you. You may expect me during the afternoon. However, as I hate coming up to the school, you might call at the Dragon Hotel, where I shall be having lunch, and I will stay there till you come along, Your affectionate dad, "CLAUDE JONES."

"Well, what's the trouble?" asked Payne, as he handed back the letter. "After all, Colonel Jones is not bound to find out about Bevis simply because he pays a flying visit to Guildford."



TAKING HIS MEDICINE! Bevis spluttered and gurgled as the oil was poured down his throat. "Ugh! Ugh! Ugh!" he gasped, half-choking. "You're killing me, you beasts!"

Jones minor shook his head gloomily. "Bevis gets to know everything that goes on in the town," he said, "and one of his clerks is always hanging about the Dragon. The chances are about ten to one against me. And I feel in an awful funk!"

"In that case," said Harold Payne, "we must try and think out a scheme, Jones."

On the following afternoon whilst Mr. Bevis was seated in his office, a clerk entered and told him he was wanted on the phone. "Who is it—what is it?" snapped Bevis. "Colonel Somebody, sir. I think the name was Jones, but it might have been Stokes or Tones."

Mr. Bevis went pale. If the colonel had discovered his dealings with young Jones, then his power over that youth was, of course, ended, and he could blackmail him no longer. However, the moneylender determined to put a bold front on the business.

"Well, what if I have?" he replied in a voice which he tried to render blustering. "Come to this hotel—the Dragon—where I am staying for the day, and I will go into the matter with you," said the voice very sternly.

Bevis felt more anxious than ever. He knew that he had put himself in a very dangerous position by blackmailing the young fellow, and if Colonel Jones chose to be disagreeable, he might find himself at the Guildford assizes in less than no time. So, thrusting on his faded hat, and seizing his greasy gloves, the little man departed very hastily for the hotel.

As he approached the entrance, he saw a youth standing by the door. "Oh, there you are," said Frank Pargiter quietly. "I was asked to look out for you. Come this way, and I'll show you up to the room."

Feeling in a highly nervous condition, Bevis followed Pargiter up the old-fashioned staircase of the quaint hotel. At the door of No. 27, Pargiter knocked. "Come in!" said a very irate voice.

"Oh, I hope he won't be in a bad temper," thought Bevis, as Pargiter turned the handle.

Seated at a table in the centre of the room was the white-haired, white-moustached old gentleman. Seated opposite, with his head in his hands, was Jones minor.

"Afternoon, colonel!" said Bevis respectfully. He was about to sit down when the white-haired man stopped him. "Stand up, sir! Don't you dare to sit till I give you leave! By Jove! I wish I had you on parade. I'd make short work of you!"

In an instant the wretched moneylender was crouching over the paper. "Now write these words!" cried the other sternly. "I—whatever your Christian name is—Bevis, hereby withdraw all claims of every kind against William Claude Jones, of Danesbury School, and I admit that I have been blackmailing him for moneys not due to me."

"Here, hold on—hold on!" gasped Bevis, white to the lips. "You don't want me to write all that, surely?"

"The bell is quite handy, Mr. Bevis, and Pargiter is quite ready to ring it!" With a stifled groan, Bevis wrote the incriminating words.

A minute later the document was signed and witnessed. Bevis rose and eyed the door eagerly.

"Well, now that all this business is got over so nicely," he said, in his oily voice. "I think I'll go. Your son, colonel, won't hear anything more from me, and I rely on you not to use that paper against me."

"Quite so. But wait a moment! Pargiter, kindly lock that door and give me the key!"

The moneylender, with a little cry darted towards the door, but a vigorous shove from the hefty Pargiter sent him spinning against the wall.

"Here is the key, colonel!" "Thank you! Now, Mr. Bevis, just attend to me for a moment!"

"Well, what is it?" asked Bevis, in a voice made sullen by fear.

"Years ago, when I was on a hill-station in India, we had a case something like yours. A skunk of a moneylender had been blackmailing one of our regiment. We couldn't soil our hands by giving him a good thrashing, but we hit upon another method which answered our purpose. We propose to apply that method to you this afternoon."

"Here, no violence—no violence!" cried Bevis, shaking rather energetically. "There's such a thing as the law, you know!"

"Yes, but you are not likely to appeal to it. Here, Mr. Pargiter, catch hold of the fellow whilst I uncork the bottle!" "Help! Help!" yelled Bevis.

But before he could get a third cry past his lips he found himself caught in a firm grip, whilst the huge, hefty hand of Frank Pargiter was firmly pressed over his mouth.

"You little skunk," said Pargiter. "We're not going to hurt you! We're only going to give you some medicine!"

Meantime, the fierce old gentleman had taken from a cupboard an enormous bottle. He drew out the cork, and smiled.

"Cod-liver oil," he observed. "And I prescribe a full tumbler, Mr. Bevis."

Jones minor, who throughout the recent interview had not spoken a word, now joined the fray. Darting from his chair, he helped to hold the moneylender whilst the oil was poured down his throat.

"Ugh, ugh, ugh!" gasped Bevis, spluttering, half-choking. "You're killing me!"

"Oh, it won't do you any harm," said Pargiter, with a grin. "It's quite an excellent drug, really. Only most people don't like it in quite such big doses. Now, Mr. Bevis, have you had enough? If not, there's plenty left in the bottle!"

"Let me go! Let me go!" groaned Bevis. "I'll take care never to interfere with any of your infernal boys again! But how the mischief was I to know that the colonel was going to be brought into the business?"

With another groan, and with his face a sickly green, he shambled from the room, and as the door closed on him Jones minor realised that he was safe from the attentions of Mr. Bevis for the remainder of his natural life.

"H'm! There's only one little bit of consolation in this horrible business," thought Bevis. "That young devil has had to tell his dad, and I know he hated the idea of it. The colonel will take it out of him, I'll be bound!"

But Mr. Bevis was wrong, quite wrong in his prediction. For hardly had that unhappy gentleman reached the street when a somewhat queer incident happened.

Jones minor gave a wild whoop, and sprang about two feet into the air. Then he sat down, buried his face in his hands, and laughed.

Pargiter was grinning from ear to ear. "Splendid!" he muttered. "A great notion!"

"Glad you think so!" observed Harold Payne quietly, as he removed a cropped white wig from his head, and a fierce moustache from his upper lip. "Rather lucky, wasn't it, that we had these props left over from last term's show? Lucky also that the genuine colonel sent a wire last night saying he couldn't get down, after all. In fact, luck has favoured us all the time."

On the way back to Danesbury Jones minor said, rather huskily: "I don't know how to thank you chaps. You've saved me from that brute. I sha'n't forget! Wish I could do something to show you what I'm feeling!"

Payne grinned, and gave him a mighty thump on the shoulder. "So you can," he replied. "Come and help Parge and me toast some sausages for ten, and give those moneylending blighters a wide miss in future!"

THE END.

(Look out for another great story of the boys of Danesbury School. Make sure you obtain next Monday's Boys' Friend by ordering it in advance from your newsagent.)