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No. 2

THE SCHOOLBOY HOME GUARD





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THE SCHOOLBOY HOME GUARD

By Reginald Browne

CHAPTER I

VERY MYSTERIOUS!

FREDDY WEAVER, the tousled-haired leader of the Third Form at Whitelands College, near the Dorset coast, looked round impatiently at his two chums, Bobby Cole and Sammy Holt, who were lagging behind.

"Put a jerk in it, Dopey and Sleepy," he said tartly.

"Wait a tick," said Bobby Cole. "Look at Dick Sylvester and that big ass, Goodman, and these other giddy Fourth Form fatheads!"

"The Whitelands Home Guard," grinned Sammy Holt.

The three fags watched Dick Sylvester and Co., the heroes of the Fourth, as the latter marched off to the playing fields in the sunshine. It was not yet rising-bell, and there appeared to be quite a number of early birds this morning. Dick Sylvester and his chums were in their scouts' kit, and they looked very business-like.

"They only call themselves the Home Guard to be abreast of the times," said Freddy Weaver. "Not a bad idea at that. I've got a dashed good mind to start a Home Guard of our own in the Third. It might put some pep into you slackers. But we got up early this morning to go for a row on the river—and that's what we're going to do."

"You mean," said Bobby Cole, "that Sammy and I will do all the rowing while you steer! Why not go and watch the Fourth Formers doing their stuff——"

"We're going on the river."

"Oh, rather! Only I was thinking——"

"Then don't!" said Freddy. "Thinking isn't your strong point, Bobby, old man. Leave all the thinking to me. In this cruel world there are those with brains, and those without. I needn't say which class you belong to."

Bobby Cole opened his mouth to make some retort, but he thought better of it. Perhaps it was the expression in Freddy's eye; Freddy was jolly quick with his fists when he liked. Anyhow, Bobby decided to let the thing go. It was as clear as daylight that Freddy had made up his mind to go on the river.

The fags certainly had the Tunn to themselves this morning. There wasn't a soul in sight when they arrived in the neighbourhood of the school boat-house. Up and down the river the sun was gleaming on the crystal waters. Seldom had the stream looked as lovely as it looked now. The green meadows on either hand were gay with wild flowers, and the graceful willows were curtsying in the breeze. Birds were twittering and chirping like the dickens, and all Nature was smiling.

Very soon the fags were in a roomy old rowing boat, with Sammy and

Bobby at the oars, pulling up-stream. All proceeded well until a bend was turned and a quiet reach was entered. Then Freddy gave all his attention to the surface of the stream

"Ease up, you two," he said sharply. "There's something queer—— Well, I'm dashed! This is rummy!"

"What's rummy?" asked Bobby, looking round.

"Can't see anything," remarked Sammy Holt.

They looked about them curiously. They were in a particularly quiet part of the river. The picturesque old buildings of Whitelands were out of sight, hidden by trees. On both sides of the river stretched the meadows; in the distance the village of Greendale St. Mary looked sleepy and quaint. Not a soul was in sight, and not even a cottage could be seen from this particular reach of the stream. The water was wide here and the current sluggish.

"What's the idea of stopping?" asked Bobby, looking at Freddy Weaver in surprise.

But the young captain of the Third took no notice. He was leaning over the side of the boat, staring down at the water. His face was full of wonder and concern.

"What's the mystery about?" demanded Bobby impatiently.

"Mystery is right!" said Freddy, in a strange voice. "You've hit on the right word, my cherub! There's a mystery here that's got me beaten. I've never seen anything so rummy in all my life. It's positively uncanny!"

Once again the other two fags stared about them, but they saw nothing to warrant Bobby Weaver's surprising statement.

"Scatty!" said Sammy, giving his forehead a significant tap. "Clean off his rocker."

"Batty as a coot!" agreed Bobby.

"Look down there, you fatheads!" said their leader. "No, not at the fields! Not at the trees, either! Look into the water—or, rather on the surface of the water. Can't you see anything funny?"

"These fish?" asked Bobby, after a long stare.

"Yes, these fish!"

"What about 'em?"

"Poor little blighters," muttered Freddy Weaver. "Just look at 'em!"

Exchanging another surprised glance, his chums gave their whole attention to the surface of the river. And, sure enough, an unusually large number of fish was visible on the surface. Many of them had their mouths out of the water, and they were gasping painfully. But Bobby Cole and Sammy Holt saw nothing very remarkable in all this.

"Stick me up a gum tree!" said Bobby, scratching his head. "Everybody knows that the Tunn is full of fish. Tiddlers and stickleback and minnows and roach——"

"Have you ever seen them gasping like this before?" interrupted Freddy grimly.

"Can't say that I have," admitted Bobby. "But what of it? I've often seen goldfish gasping in that way, at the top of a bowl of water."

"Yes—and why? Because the water hasn't been changed!" said Freddy. "Because some careless owner has been neglectful. Goldfish can't live unless the water is constantly aerated. All fish are the same, if it comes to that. Haven't you poor boobs ever been in an aquarium? Haven't you seen the air pipes in the tanks, shoving bubbles of air constantly into the water?"

"Yes, but I don't see——"

"This isn't a tank," continued Freddy, indicating the river. "It's an open stream, aerated naturally. Then why are the fish on the surface, gasping like old Disney's Cleo? I say, look at this one—— And this one here!"

Freddy leaned far over, and the boat tipped ominously to starboard. When

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Freddy assumed an ordinary position he was holding a small reach in his hand, and it was quite dead.

"Well, this reminds me of the Old Town Hall—it beats the band!" he said blankly. "Look at it, you chaps—as dead as mutton! And lots of these other fish are dying. What the dickens can it mean?"

CHAPTER II

DISASTER!

FREDDY WEAVER'S young brow was furrowed. He could not take his gaze from the surface of the river.

"I don't see why you should look so jolly startled, Freddy," said Bobby Cole, after a while. "After all, they're only fish."

"Only fish!" snorted Freddy. "How would you like to be at your last gasp? How would you like to be floating on the surface of the water with your eyes all glazed?"

"I'm not a fish!" protested Bobby, hotly.

"How can you tell?" asked Freddy, with sarcasm. "Dash it, there must be some reason for all this," he went on, leaning over the side again, and taking a palmful of water in his cupped hand. "It looks all right." He sniffed at the water, and then sipped it. "Tastes all right, too."

"What did you expect to find?" asked Sammy Holt, with a grin. "Think the river's got arsenic in it, or something?"

Freddy Weaver started.

"My hat!" he muttered. "I wonder!"

"Come off it!" said Sammy. "How the dickens can the river have arsenic in it? I expect the fish are dying of old age, or something!"

"Including the baby ones?" said Freddy, pointing to several of the gasping fish. "No, Sammy, there's something squiffy about this business. Fish are dying by the dozen—and apparently nothing wrong with the river."

By this time the boat had drifted broadside across the stream, and had slowly dropped down towards the bend, where the river narrowed somewhat. The next reach was not visible owing to a screen of leafy willow. An important point, this, as events were soon to prove.

"The only explanation is that the river is poisoned in some way," said Freddy Weaver, after a brief silence. "And the affected part must be quite local."

"How do you figure that out?"

"Half a mile down stream there's not a sign of this trouble," replied Freddy. "The water there must be normal. The fish, coming down the river hit the poisoned zone, and if they're lucky they get through it alive—and then recover. Let's go further up-stream——"

"Hi!" shouted Bobby Cole suddenly.

"What the dickens——"

"Look out!" yelled Bobby.

Freddy swung round, and was just in time to see a long narrow boat shoot round the curve. It contained four Whitelands Sixth Formers and a steersman, and they were going all out.

"Hey!" yelled the steersman. "Get that tub out of the way!"

Something had to be done quickly. The river was fairly narrow here and the racing craft, with its extended oars, required all the available space. The lordly members of the Sixth were apt to get ratty if hindered by a bunch of mere fags.

Bobby Cole, in scrambling back to his seat, rocked the boat dangerously.

"Mind what you're doing!" roared Freddy.

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Sammy, startled by the shout, went to the wrong side—and his weight, combined with Bobby's, brought instant disaster. The boat heeled clean over, and Freddy Weaver was pitched out, followed by his chums. A shout of laughter went up from the seniors as they swung by, missing the overturned boat by a few inches.

"Carry on!" sang out the steersman. "These kids can look after themselves. The water's shallow enough here."

And the rakish-looking racing boat sped by, and no attempt was made to help the fags. Indeed, Freddy and Co. were practically standing on the river bed, and all they had received was a ducking— Or so it seemed at the moment.

"You—you goofy fatheads!" spluttered Freddy angrily. "It was all your fault! Why the dickens did you both lean over the same side?"

"It's no good blaming me," gasped Bobby, shaking the water out of his ears. "It was Sammy's fault. I told him not to— Hey! Where the dickens is Sammy?"

"Eh?" said Freddy Weaver, looking round with sudden anxiety. "Hi, Sammy! Where are you, you thundering ass?"

"Sammy!" howled Bobby Cole, wildly.

Until that moment they had believed that Sammy was splashing about the water with them. But there was no sign of him!

"Sammy!" yelled Freddy at the top of his voice.

There was no reply. The boat lay half submerged, keel uppermost, and Freddy and Bobby plunged round, searching. But the other Third Former had gone. Apparently he had been struck by the boat and stunned—and was now lying at the bottom of the river, perhaps trapped by the boat itself.

"He's gone!" gasped Bobby Cole, in panic.

"Keep your hair on!" said Freddy. "No sense in getting the wind up—"

"Help—help!" screamed Bobby frantically.

"No good doing that, either," snapped Freddy. "Those seniors are beyond earshot, and there's nobody else about. Lend me a hand with the boat—and look lively."

"Look!" breathed Bobby, fascinated.

He pointed, and Freddy Weaver caught his breath in. A few bubbles were appearing on the surface of the water—curling upwards from beneath the overturned boat.

"Come on!" panted Freddy.

Somehow or other they managed to get the boat over. Pulling at it frantically, half swimming, half wading, they succeeded. The next moment their attention was concentrated on the figure which came into view—the still, silent figure of Sammy Holt, floating head downwards in the water. He was in a kind of doubled-up position, with his head completely submerged.

"He's dead—he's dead!" blubbered Bobby, white as a sheet.

"Don't be an ass! It'll take more than this to kill a chap like Sammy Holt! Let's get him to the bank!"

Freddy's coolness was like a tonic to the other fag. Between them they dragged their unconscious companion to the bank, and in a couple of minutes Sammy was stretched out on the grass.

"Artificial respiration," said Freddy quickly. "That's the only thing. It's a good job we're Boy Scouts. We'll soon put some life into him. Come on—lend a hand. You know what to do."

"I believe he's dead!" said Bobby hysterically.

But Freddy knew differently. He had made no close examination, but he was quite sure that Sammy Holt was still very much alive. The poor chap had probably swallowed a good deal of water, but this would not do him much harm. The main thing was to bring him round.

There was nothing gentle in Freddy Weaver's treatment. He and Bobby commenced pumping for all they were worth, and the unfortunate Sammy

Holt was mauled about in the most drastic fashion. However, this treatment seemed to have an excellent effect, for in less than five minutes Sammy was beginning to show signs of recovery.

"We'll soon have him round," panted Freddy. "Good egg! Keep it up, old son. Don't rest for a minute."

"He's brought up about half the river!" said Bobby breathlessly. "My only hat! He must have swallowed an awful lot!"

"We've got most of it up, anyway," said Freddy, in a satisfied voice. "But, my aunt, we only dragged him out in the nick of time! Another two or three minutes, and he would have been a goner!"

Sammy Holt suddenly made a convulsive movement, and now he managed to sit up. He was a healthy young animal, and the rough-and-ready treatment had had rapid effect. There was a bleary look in his eyes, and he stared about him dazedly.

"Hullo! What's—what's happened?" he muttered. "Oh, corks! I feel as sick as a dog! Here, I'm all wet! I'm absolutely drenched——"

"Take it easy, old son," interrupted Freddy. "We all fell in the river. You got trapped under the boat——"

"Did I? I—I don't seem to remember." Sammy struggled with his thoughts. "Half a tick. I seem to remember something now. Something hit me a whack, and I was forced under the water. Then I biffed my head on something—I don't seem to remember any more. Crumbs! I feel awful!"

"We'd better carry on with him a bit longer," said Freddy, with a glance at Bobby. "He doesn't seem to be quite right yet——"

"You keep your beastly paws off me!" said Sammy hurriedly. "I've had enough of it! What's all the fuss about, anyhow? I couldn't have swallowed much—only about a gallon!"

"That's all right, then," nodded Freddy. "We must have recovered at least seven pints, so there's only about a pint left in your tummy. We'll soon get that up!"

"You, and who else?" mumbled Sammy defiantly.

He struggled to his feet and shivered. The sunshine was warm, but there was a breeze, and he was feeling chilly. His chums, on the other hand, were quite warm after their energetic first-aid operations.

"The best thing you can do, Sammy, is to run up and down on the grass," advised Freddy. "Never mind if you feel a bit dizzy. You'll soon get over that."

"Yes, I think you're right," muttered Sammy Cole.

But before he could take a single step his knees folded up like a concertina, his jaw dropped, and he collapsed in an untidy heap on the grass.

CHAPTER III

THE MYSTERY OF THE RIVER

"**HOLD HIM!**" yelled Bobby Cole.

It was too late. Sammy Holt had fallen, and the next moment his chums were kneeling by his side in the grass. There was a curious change in Sammy now. He had gone as pale as a ghost, and somehow he looked different. His skin had an unhealthy colour, and his eyes were still half open.

"I say, Sammy! Sammy, old man!" said Freddy quickly. "Pull yourself together! You'll be all right in a minute."

But there was no response. Freddy shook him, but it made no difference.

"What's the matter with him?" asked Bobby, frightened. "He was all right a minute ago! He came round toppingly, and I thought he was himself again. Is—is he dead?"

"I hope not!" said Freddy anxiously. "I believe he's only fainted."

"But why should he faint?"

"How should I know?"

"People don't faint after drinking a few gallons of water," said Bobby. "Besides, we got most of it up."

Freddy Weaver frowned.

"There's something mighty unusual about all this," he said. "The chap hasn't merely fainted. He's lost consciousness. He's dead to the world."

"Dead!" gasped Bobby.

"Not really dead, you chump!" frowned Freddy. "He's just temporarily senseless. And I'm blowed if I can understand it. He recovered from the effects of the ducking all right, and then something else seemed to hit him."

"What do you mean—something else?"

"I don't know. It's a mystery. We'd better do something, hadn't we? Supposing we carry him to the school——"

"Wait a minute! There's somebody coming," said Bobby, with relief.

"Hi, you fellows! Help! Come here, quick! We're in trouble!"

Freddy glanced round, and saw that Bobby Cole was waving his hands frantically. Some figures, appearing in the distance, approached at the double in response to Bobby's call. They turned out to be Dick Sylvester and Stan Goodman and Bob Davis and Charlie Hunt and Bart Chignall—all of the Fourth.

"What's wrong here?" asked Dick Sylvester.

"Bit of an accident," said Freddy briefly.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated the Fourth Form captain, falling on his knees beside Sammy Holt. "What happened?"

Freddy gave a few details of the mishap.

"Well, it's very rummy," said Dick, at length, as he frowned down upon the unconscious fag. "You say you got most of the water up?"

"Practically all of it," replied Freddy. "We thought he was all right, and then he suddenly collapsed again."

"It beats me," said Dick Sylvester, still staring at Sammy. "The kid almost looks as though he's been drugged."

"Drugged?" said Stan Goodman, staring.

"My only aunt!" exclaimed Freddy, a gleam coming into his eyes. "Drugged! You—you mean—poisoned?" He turned and looked at the river. "What an idiot I was not to think of it before! Poor old Sammy has been poisoned, just like the fish!"

"The fish?"

"If you don't believe me—take a look!"

All eyes were turned towards the river. And now, for the first time, the Fourth Formers understood what Freddy was getting at. There was nothing unusual to be seen at first, but when the boys concentrated their attention upon the surface of the river little bubbles could be seen here and there. Fish, large and small, were at the surface, gasping and gurgling. In one or two odd places fish were floating down-stream, dead.

"Well, of all the rummy things!" said Dick Sylvester, with a startled look at the others. "The kid's right, you chaps! There's certainly something wrong with the river. The fish are dying in hundreds."

For a few tense moments there was silence. All the juniors were thunder-struck by the discovery. They transferred their attention from the river, and stared down at the unconscious form of Sammy Holt. If this mysterious poisoning could kill the fish, what was it doing to Sammy? He had been trapped under the overturned boat for a considerable time, and he had swallowed an enormous amount of water. Owing to the prompt and praiseworthy efforts of the other two fags most of this water had been brought up—but perhaps the poison had remained in Sammy's system!"

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"Look here, we'd better rush him to the school," said Dick Sylvester suddenly. "No good standing about here, and wondering what's wrong with the river. The poor kid may be dying. We'll get him into the sanny, and then Old Pills had better have a look at him."

"Just what I was thinking," said Stan Goodman. "Weaver, you your fathead, why didn't you call us before? It'll be an awful thing if your Holt dies——"

"How the dickens could I call you when you weren't anywhere near?" interrupted Freddy defensively. "Besides, I had no idea he was so bad. It all rot to start blaming me——"

"Ease up, lads," put in Bart Chignall. "Have a look at the patient. Seems to me that there's something doing. The poor young blighter is coming round."

"Thank goodness!" said Freddy fervently.

They concentrated their attention on the patient. There was no mistake about it. His eyelids were moving, and a little colour had returned to his cheeks.

"It's all right, Sammy, old man," said Freddy gently, as he took his chum's head and waggled it about. "You'll soon be yourself again. Buck up, Sammy."

"What—what's happened?" muttered Sammy Cole, for the second time. "Hullo! Where did these chaps spring from? I didn't see them—— They weren't here a minute or two ago——"

"That's all right, Holt," said Dick Sylvester. "You're not quite well. You'll soon be better——"

"Rats," said the fag. "I—I'm only feeling a bit sick. It must be that rotten water I swallowed. Oh, my hat! I—I feel as sick as a hog! Lemme get away!"

Rather to their relief, he struggled to his feet and ran off rapidly. Apparently there was not much the matter with him now. He vanished behind a clump of bushes and ominous sounds disturbed the peace of the morning.

"The sicker he is, the better," said Freddy, with satisfaction. "Now that he has recovered, I don't think it'll be long before he pulls right round."

"Yes, we'd better leave him alone for a few minutes," agreed Dick Sylvester, eyeing Freddy and Bobby very narrowly. "You two kids don't look particularly bright, either. You're both a bit shaky."

"That's nothing. We had a wetting, and we're chilly."

But both Freddy and Bobby knew differently. They were feeling shaky—and trembly. An ordinary ducking in the river would not have produced such effects. In a very slight degree they had the same symptoms as Sammie Holt. But, of course, they had swallowed hardly any water, and perhaps this was the explanation of their comparative immunity.

While the Fourth Formers were standing in a group, discussing the surprising affair, a boat came into sight round the bend of the stream. It contained the Sixth Formers—returning to the boathouse after their practice spin. And as the slender craft came nearer, the watchers on the bank could see that the seniors were looking strangely exhausted. Only two of them were making any attempt to row. The others were leaning forward with bent backs, their heads drooping.

"You fellows have been overdoing it, haven't you?" sang out Dick, as the boat came gliding past.

"Can't make it out," said Carstairs, of the Sixth. "Something funny in the air this morning."

"In the air?" repeated Goodman.

"Seems like it," said Carstairs. "We're all pretty well exhausted, although we've gone over the same course dozens of times without feeling the strain. This morning we feel as ill as dogs."

"Ill!" whispered Freddy. "Phew! Did you hear that, you chaps?"

"Have you been drinking the river water?" shouted Goodman.

"Don't be a young ass!" sang out one of the Sixth Formers. "Of course we haven't. And it wouldn't make us ill, even if we had. The air seemed all right, but there's something enervating about it."

A moment later the seniors were out of sight round the bend. The Fourth Formers and the fags exchanged significant glances.

"Those blokes don't suspect a thing," said Freddy. "They put it all down to something in the air. But it's as clear as daylight that the river had affected them."

"How can it be the river?" asked Bobby Cole. "They said they didn't drink any of the water."

"Neither did we" retorted Freddy. "Very little, anyhow. The river's polluted in some way. Poor old Sammy has copped out most because he swallowed a lot of water. We're feeling shaky because we had a ducking. The seniors are weak because they've been well up the river—where the pollution seems to be coming from. What the dickens can it mean?"

Nobody answered for nobody had an explanation. And at that moment Sammy Holt reappeared, looking so much better that everybody was relieved. He came up to the group rather sheepishly.

"Awfully sorry you chaps," he apologised. "Hope I didn't make too much noise—I'm feeling heaps better."

"Did you bring up any more water?" asked Freddy pointedly.

"About a pint," said Sammy, with a shudder. "And, at a rough guess, about half my insides. But I'm a lot better, and I'm not going to make a fuss over a ducking. Let's get back to the school."

CHAPTER IV

SENSATION IN THE THIRD.

SAMMY COLE'S plucky determination to carry on, in spite of his still groggy condition was all very well—but Dick Sylvester was not willing to let the matter rest like that, and he said so.

"Like what?" asked Stan Goodman.

"We shall have to make a report," replied Dick. "We shall have to tell old Mortimer—or the Head—that there's something wrong with the river. If we don't other chaps might be getting ill."

Freddy Weaver shook his head.

"Better say nothing," he advised.

"But, my dear kid——"

"Take a tip from me, and keep mum," urged Freddy. "We're the only chaps who know about the river, and the sensible thing will be to say nothing. Those Sixth Form duffers don't suspect the truth, and they haven't the faintest idea that the river is responsible for their exhaustion. I don't suppose they even noticed the dying fish."

"They couldn't have done," said Dick. "But I'm not so sure about keeping mum, Weaver."

"All right, have it your own way," said Freddy, with a shrug. "But you'll jolly well regret it if you say anything about this business to the Housemaster. All masters are funny beggars. They haven't any consideration for us chaps. Before you know where you are the river will be out of bounds."

"By crackers!" said Goodman, with a start. "There's something in that, you chaps!"

"There's a lot in it," agreed Davis, nodding. "Weaver's right. The river

will be placed out of bounds in no time if the Head gets to know about this affair."

"He can't help knowing, sooner or later," argued Dick.

"Sooner or later—yes," said Freddy. "But you know what masters are. It'll probably be days before they get wind of this rummy affair. It may blow over altogether. Perhaps the pollution is only temporary. If it comes to that, why shouldn't we investigate on our own? Just us chaps, I mean?"

"That's a pretty brainy idea—coming from a fag!" said Goodman. "By crackers! An investigation, eh? We'll probe the mystery ourselves! A real job for the Whitelands Home Guard!"

"It's all very well to talk about making an investigation," said Dick Sylvester. "and it's all very well talking about keeping the thing dark. But what about young Holt?"

"He's all right," replied Freddy promptly. "Aren't you, Sammy?"

Sammy Holt, who was looking far from "all right"—indeed, he was pale and shaky—gave a feeble grin.

"Well, not exactly. I feel shaky——"

"But you're all right—aren't you?" insisted Freddy.

"Oh, rather!"

"You don't want to be taken to the sanny, do you?"

"No jolly fear!" said Sammy hastily.

"You wouldn't like to have Old Pills going over you, eh?" continued Freddy. "You wouldn't like to be kept in the sanny for a week, my son? To put it bluntly, you haven't the faintest desire to see a doctor, have you?"

"Not the faintest!" said Sammy, in a weak voice. "I—I'm feeling as fit as a fiddle!"

Sammy had seen that Freddy Weaver's eye was fixed on him; and there was something in Freddy's expression that made any other answer highly risky. To tell the truth, the unhappy Sammy was feeling extremely "rotten." His legs were unsteady, his head ached abominably, and his eyes were shooting with pain. But he pulled himself together, and almost succeeded in deceiving himself as well as the others.

And so it was settled.

These boys were the only ones who knew anything about the unusual condition of the river—and they had decided to keep mum about it. Freddy Weaver had been quite right in saying that the Tunn would be placed out of bounds if the authorities got to know anything of the mysterious "poisoning." And for the river to be out of bounds at this time of year would be tragic.

Indeed, the juniors felt that they owed it to the rest of the school to keep quiet. Why should they make everybody suffer, just because Sammy Holt had swallowed a gallon of water?

"Yes, it's better, on the whole, to keep quiet," said Dick Sylvester later when they had reached the school. "We'll form a little party directly after lessons this afternoon. We'll take a boat and get up the river. We'll try to track the thing to its source."

During lessons in the Third Form class-room that morning, however, there was an unexpected and even sensational development. Freddy Weaver was first aware of it when he noticed that several fags were looking searchingly at Sammy Holt. A few of them were whispering excitedly together. And in less than a minute the whole Form was staring in the one direction. Everybody was looking at the discomfited Sammy. And they certainly had every reason to look!

"Well, I'm dashed!"

"What the merry dickens is the matter with him?"

"Oh, my aunt!"

Mr. Mottram, the Form master, rapped upon his desk as he heard sundry whispers and ejaculations.

"Silence!" he commanded. "Boys! How dare you? What are you staring at?"

"Look at Holt, sir," said Bobby Cole excitedly.

"I see no reason for this alarm and agitation," said Mr. Mottram angrily. "It is merely an attempt to delay lessons." Mr. Mottram was a fussy, excitable little man and he hated any interruption of routine. "Attention, everybody!"

"I think you'd better have a look at Holt, sir——," began Freddy Weaver.

"Weaver!" snapped Mr. Mottram. "Silence!"

"Yes, sir, but——"

"I said, silence!" fumed the Form master. "I can see that I shall have to cane some of you. I will attend to Holt after you have got over this ridiculous excitement. I cannot bear people who get excited."

The Third sat still and fumed. The boys had their own opinion on the subject of excitement. Mr. Mottram himself was one of the worst offenders.

"That's better," said the Form master. "Now, Holt, stand out here."

"Please, sir, I'd rather not," said Sammy awkwardly. "There's nothing the matter with me, sir."

"So I thought!" retorted Mr. Mottram. "We will therefore return to our books——"

"But there is something the matter with him, sir," said Freddy Weaver grimly. "He's just trying to spoof you."

"Must I tell you again to be quiet?" roared Mr. Mottram. "Good gracious me! I am getting very tired of these interruptions. Holt, come here!"

"Please, sir, if you don't mind——"

"Come *here*!" thundered the Form master.

Sammy Holt, with a glare at the rest of the Form, left his place and took his stand in front of the desk.

"I see nothing wrong with you," said Mr. Mottram, peering forward. "What's all this about? Don't you feel well, Holt?"

"Yes, sir"

"What does that mean?"

"I'm quite all right, sir."

"Nothing the matter with you?"

"Nothing, sir."

"So I thought!" said Mr. Mottram triumphantly. "Go back to your place, Holt."

"Thank you, sir."

But before Sammy could dodge back to his desk, Freddy Weaver had grabbed him, and was dragging him back towards Mr. Mottram.

"I'm sorry, sir, but you'd better have a closer look at Holt," said Freddy firmly. "You're a bit short-sighted, you know——"

"Weaver!"

"Well, it's a fact, sir," said Freddy defiantly. "You can't see Holt at this distance. Give him a closer look."

"Of all the impertinence!" fumed Mr. Mottram, adjusting his glasses and unconsciously taking a nearer look at Sammy Holt. "Weaver, I shall punish you—— Good heavens! Holt! What on earth—— Good gracious me!"

Quite suddenly, as Mr. Mottram bent nearer to Sammy Holt, the junior ceased to be a mere blur and became a definite object. And at the first clear glance at Sammy's face, Mr. Mottram experienced a shock. Freddy returned to his desk, satisfied.

"This—this is amazing!" said Mr. Mottram, adjusting his glasses again and peering even more closely. "Holt! What is the matter with your eyes? Extraordinary! I have never seen anything like it!"

"I—I don't know what you mean, sir," said Sammy miserably.

"Holt, your eyes are positively frightening. You'll have to see the doctor at once." The Form master was agitated. "They're green, Holt. Your eyes are a positive and startling green!"

Sammy, who was unaware of the fact, gave a start of surprise. He felt all right. He could see quite well. There was a little ache at the back of his eyeballs, yes— The other fags found it impossible to tear their fascinated gaze away from the unfortunate Sammy. It was a fact that the whites of his eyes, during the last hour, had gradually turned to an aggressive and glaring green! The effect was most alarming.

Freddy Weaver and Bobby Cole had their own private thoughts, but the rest of the Form had no knowledge of that strange episode of the River Tunn. Freddy thought it advisable to appear just as surprised as the others. Bobby Cole had taken the tip, and was doing the same.

"Your eyes are horribly unnatural, Holt," continued Mr. Mottram. "I've never seen anything so peculiar in all my life. You must have some awful disease! Or have you been doing something to yourself? How dare you come into the Form in this condition?"

"I—I didn't do it, sir," protested Sammy indignantly.

"Nonsense!" said the Form master. "This is some trick. Have you been putting green ink into your eyes? Some of you boys are capable of any folly——"

"I wouldn't do a thing like that, sir," said Sammy. "I've done nothing. I—I've gone like this!"

"Gone like it?"

"During the last half-hour, sir. But it's only my eyes. There's nothing the matter with me, really. I feel as fit as a fiddle."

Mr. Mottram, convinced at last that this was a very unusual case, took Sammy over to the window and gave his eyes another careful inspection.

"Amazing," he muttered. "What in the world can be the matter with the boy?"

Sammy could have given him a hint, but Sammy had caught Freddy Weaver's eye—and that eye contained a warning. Not a word about the episode on the river! Sammy, loyal to his young leader, kept mum.

CHAPTER V

SAMMY FOR THE SANNY!

ALL THE same, Freddy Weaver and Bobby Cole were very uneasy. They had not anticipated any such development as this. During breakfast Sammy Cole had appeared to recover with remarkable speed. He had even eaten well, declaring that his sick feeling had gone. Just before lessons he had told Freddy that he was as fit as a fiddle. And at that time Freddy had seen nothing the matter with Sammy's eyes.

Now, however, the situation was very different.

Sammy himself was frightened. He was badly frightened. He thought it highly necessary to give an account of what happened on the river that morning. But after that warning look from Freddy Weaver he dutifully held his tongue.

Mr. Mottram was more excited than ever.

"Do you give me your assurance, Holt, that this extraordinary change in your eyes is natural?"

"Of course it's not natural, sir," protested Sammy.

"Ah! Then you have been playing some trick——"

I haven't, sir! When I say it isn't natural, I mean that I didn't do it myself. It's not a rag, sir. If there's something wrong with my eyes, I don't know——"

"There is something alarmingly wrong with your eyes, Holt," interrupted Mr. Mottram. "Weaver, stand out here. You will take Holt to the sanitorium at once. Lose no time in informing Dr. Applejohn. I fear that the poor boy has developed some distressing disease." He started. "Good gracious! For all we know it may be contagious." He backed away hastily. "Weaver, take the boy to the sanitorium this instant!"

"Oh, crikey!" moaned Sammy Holt.

"This way, patient!" said Freddy Weaver briskly.

In a matter of ten seconds he had yanked Sammy out of the Form room, and Freddy was extremely glad that he had been chosen as escort. Nothing could have been better.

"I say, what rot," said Sammy breathlessly. "You're not going to take me to the sanny, are you?"

"You bet I am!" said Freddy, as they went along the passage. "We've got to obey old Motty's orders."

"But I'm all right! I feel fit——"

"Oh yes? Take a look!"

Freddy produced a grubby square of mirror from his pocket and held it in front of Sammy's face. Sammy took one look at his reflection, and automatically opened his eyes wider. He jumped about four feet straight into the air.

"Satisfied?" asked Freddy grimly.

"My eyes! I hadn't any idea——Oh corks!" Sammy Holt was quivering all over. "They'll come right again, won't they? I look like something out of a Walt Disney cartoon!"

"More like something out of a Boris Karloff technicolour horror film!" said Freddy. "It's that stuff in the river. Must be. It's got right into your system, and it's working its way out through your peepers."

"I—I can't show myself anywhere," wailed Sammy. "Crumbs! What are my people going to say? I shan't always be like this, shall I? Let me have another look in that glass!"

"One look is enough for you!" retorted Freddy. "Come on! I'm going to take you to Old Pills. And don't forget, my son—not a word about the river."

"Cheese it!" protested Sammy. "I shall have to say something. I shall have to give some explanation."

"And get the whole school gated, or something?" said Freddy ominously. "Don't be so selfish! Do you want to have us all quarantined? If you don't keep mum——"

"But I've got to explain something!" wailed Sammy. "Perhaps I'm dangerously poisoned. Perhaps I've got a horrid disease. And they won't be able to cure me unless I tell them how I caught it!"

"What's the good of a doctor if he can't find out what's the matter with his patients?" asked Freddy, with a sniff. "Nearly all doctors are the same. They don't know their own giddy business. A fellow goes to a doctor, and the doctor asks him what's the matter with him, and when the fellow explains the doctor knows. But until the fellow tells him he's just as much in the dark as anybody else!"

"That's what I mean," said Sammy, in alarm. "Unless I explain to old Applejohn what happened this morning, how the dickens can he tell what's up with me?"

"That's his worry—not yours. You feel all right, don't you?"

"Well, yes——"

"No headache, or anything?"

"Nothing to speak of."

"Well, there you are! Why should the river be put out of bounds for days, perhaps weeks, just because your eyes have turned green, ilke a cat's? Be reasonable!"

"That's all very well——"

"Your eyes may turn back to their natural colour within a few hours," added Freddy optimistically.

"Yes, but supposing they don't?"

"In that case, it may be necessary for us to come across with the truth," admitted Freddy grudgingly. "But we'll give you a chance to get right—a few hours, anyway. Say, until this evening. If you're no better by this evening, Sammy, I'll have a word with Dick Sylvester, and we'll tell the Housemaster. How's that?"

"I—I suppose it's all right."

And Sammy, against his better judgment, made no further protest. As the whole school was busy with morning lessons, nobody was encountered on the way to the sanatorium, much to Sammy's relief. Sammy was not looking forward to his ordeal with the doctor—particularly as he would be unable to give any explanation of his condition. Perhaps, if he wore smoked glasses, people would not notice the rummy colour of his eyes—— He was already taking the pessimistic view that he would remain in this ghastly condition for the rest of his life.

Dr. Applejohn was exceedingly startled when he took a good look at his new patient. He was an elderly, kindly man, stoutish, and very popular with the boys. Nobody liked going into the sanny, but at least "Old Pills" always did his best to make a fellow feel comfortable and at home.

"Well, upon my word, this is a most peculiar condition," said the doctor, after he had given Sammy a careful examination. "I don't think I have ever seen a case quite like yours, my boy."

"He seemed all right when lessons began, sir," said Freddy. "He turned like this all of a sudden. At least, during the past hour."

"Most remarkable. Well, Weaver, you can get back to your class-room. I will attend to Holt now."

"Keep your pecker up, Sammy," said Freddy, giving the unfortunate fag a meaning look as he went out.

Dr. Applejohn went over Sammy again. He was baffled. He could make nothing whatever of the case. He examined Sammy from top to toe, and was more puzzled than ever. But there was nothing in the doctor's appearance to give Sammy any clue, and the long silence began to get on the fag's nerves.

"Is—is it serious, sir?" he asked timidly, at last.

"Frankly, my boy, I cannot tell you," replied Dr. Applejohn, frowning. "It is undoubtedly serious in the sense that your appearance is utterly grotesque. We can only hope that your eyes will eventually return to their normal colour."

"Corks, I hope so, sir," said Sammy fervently.

"When did this strange colouration first make its appearance? In the Form room, I understand? Can't you give me any clue as to its cause?"

Sammy Holt felt that he could, but he decided not to.

"I—I sort of got like this, sir."

"H'm! That's not very informative. What have you been eating?"

"Well, I had breakfast, sir——"

"Anything besides breakfast?"

"I had a bit of a snack first thing—I got down early this morning, sir, to go on—on—— To go for a walk, or something," said Sammy hastily. "Weaver and Cole and me."

"Never mind the walk. What about this snack?"

"It was nothing, sir. Just a few old sardines, and some biscuits——"

Oh, yes, and there was a bit of cheese that didn't smell too good." Sammy thought hard. "That's all, sir, except for some pieces of caramel, and a couple of marshmallows, and a few old pickles that I wiped out of a bottle with a sponge cake——"

Dr. Applejohn held up a hand, shuddering.

"I think that will be enough, Holt," he said hastily. "I don't think any of these—er—delicacies can have caused the extraordinary phenomenon that has manifested itself in the whites of your eyes. You didn't, by any chance, swallow some chemicals with this astonishing early morning snack? I know that you younger boys are apt to make alarming experiments——"

"No chemicals, sir," said Sammy. "Dash it, I wouldn't eat chemicals! That fathead 'Stinks' Ryder once swallowed a teaspoonful of the muck he had been concocting, and he had pains in his tummy for a week. But everybody knows that Stinks is a reckless chump with his silly chemicals——"

"Yes, I have dealt with young Master Ryder more than once," said the doctor drily. "But you positively assure me, Holt, that you have not been experimenting with chemicals?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right. Wait here for a short time."

Dr. Applejohn went out, and if Sammy had had any idea of escaping, this was soon knocked on the head. For a nurse came in to look after Sammy during the doctor's absence.

Dr. Applejohn went straight to Mr. Horace Mortimer, the Housemaster, and gave him an account of the case.

"I would like you to come and have a look at the boy, Mr. Mortimer," said the doctor. "I am sure I don't know what we can do about him, and before I call in a specialist for consultation I would like to have your opinion. I cannot help feeling that the boy has been chemically poisoned."

"But surely, in that case the boy would show other symptoms?" argued Mr. Mortimer. "You tell me that he is quite normal in every other respect."

"That's the queer part of it," said the doctor. "His heart is beating strongly, his pulse is normal, and he assures me that he feels no pain. He has no temperature, either."

"In that case his condition cannot be particularly serious," said the Housemaster, with some relief. "I'm not sure that you ought to call in a specialist without the consent of the boy's parents." He looked at the kindly old doctor thoughtfully. "Are you quite certain that it isn't a trick? Some of the boys are past masters in the art of spoofing, you know. They think it a great joke to rag a master, or a doctor, and——"

"And they take a particular delight in ragging me, eh?" chuckled Old Pills. "Yes, I know all about that, Mr. Mortimer. But this isn't a case of that kind. Young Weaver brought Holt to me, and he assured me on his honour that none of the boys had been playing tricks. And Weaver is a truthful boy, and I accept his word."

A few minutes later Mr. Mortimer was examining Sammy with a rather startled expression on his face. In spite of the doctor's statement, he had been unprepared for the truly startling grotesqueness of Sammy's eyes.

"The doctor tells me that you feel no pain, Holt," said the Housemaster. "Your pulse is normal, and there are no recognisable indications of poisoning. Try and think hard. There must be some explanation."

Sammy badly wanted to explain about the river, but he loyally kept mum. Of course, one word from him on that subject would have put the Housemaster and the doctor on the track, and an immediate investigation of the river would have followed. But as the Housemaster and the doctor knew nothing whatever of the Tunn's strange condition, they naturally felt completely fogged over Sammy's condition.

Sammy himself was feeling better. True, he had no pain, and all the

effects of his ducking in the river had passed away—except for the peculiar state of his eyes. But it was awfully nice to hear the doctor saying that his pulse was normal, that his heart was beating correctly, and that he displayed no symptoms of fever or disease. Perhaps, Sammy thought, Freddy Weaver had been right all along.

"Well, Holt, you'll have to stay here in the sanatorium for a period," said Mr. Mortimer. "Don't be too alarmed. This condition may pass. You need not get into bed, as you are quite fit in all ordinary respects. But until the cause of your discoloured eyes is discovered, the doctor will have to keep you under observation."

"Yes, sir," said Sammy resignedly.

After all, it would not be so bad. He wouldn't be in bed, and there would be no lessons to do. He could just slack about, reading and having a good time generally.

Meanwhile, during break, Freddy Weaver made a point of seeking out Dick Sylvester and Stan Goodman and the other Fourth Formers who were "in the know." He reported on the sensational development.

"My only nat!" said Dick, scratching his head. "So poor old Sammy is in the sanny! And you say his eyes turned green? Have you heard what happened in the sanny?"

"Yes, I nipped across a couple of minutes ago, and had a word with the nurse," replied Freddy. "Sammy's as right as rain, and he's having a good time. But his eyes are still as green as a dragons, and Old Pills and Mortimer are completely floored. They can't understand what's the matter with the chap."

"But didn't you explain about the river, you young fathead?" asked Goodman, in surprise.

"Of course not. We're going to investigate the river ourselves, aren't we? Do you think we want masters messing about?"

"By crackers! I'd forgotten!"

"If we had explained everything, the river would have been out of bounds by this time," continued Freddy. "And then we shouldn't have been able to do a thing."

"All the same, I'm not so sure that we're justified in keeping quiet in view of what's happened to Holt," said Dick Sylvester dubiously. "I think perhaps we ought to go and explain——"

"Yes, like fun!" interrupted Freddy tartly. "We'll go and explain if we can't find anything wrong with the river. An hour or two can't make any difference, can it? It would be another matter if Sammy was writhing in pain, or putting up a high temperature. It's only his eyes."

"For a fag, you're pretty smart," admitted Dick Sylvester, giving Freddy a pat on the back. "Yes, under the circs, we'll keep the facts under our hats, and we'll buzz down to the river directly after lessons. If necessary, we'll cut dinner."

And the others were so eager to probe the mystery that even the prospect of missing dinner caused them no alarm.

CHAPTER VI

THE HOME GUARD INVESTIGATES

"LOOK!"

"The river's just the same!"

"My hat! Look at the fish gasping on the surface!"

The Whitelands Home Guard was on the job. Lessons had been over for just five minutes, and the investigators were all ready for their self-

imposed task. They had pushed a couple of boats out on to the Tunn, and were slowly rowing up-stream. And, as before, the surface of the water was dotted here and there with gasping fish. This strange phenomenon was not noticeable unless one was actually looking for it.

The day was gloriously sunny, and it seemed incongruous that there could be any danger in the river. The clear water was as sparkling as ever, and on every hand there was the green of the fair countryside. No hint of anything wrong—except that one clue in the gasping condition of the fish. Now and again a little body, glinting all colours in the sunshine, would drift past the boats.

On every hand, peace and sunshine—but in the river, death!

None of the juniors worried about the loss of dinner. They were gladly missing the meal. Something had to be done about Sammy Holt, and it could not be done too quickly. If the schoolboy Home Guards could not solve the mystery themselves, they would have to make an early report. The alarming condition of Sammy's eyes necessitated this. But they badly wanted to have a look up-river on their own account before taking "the beaks" into their confidence.

In the upper reaches of the river all was quiet and peaceful. The Tunn meandered along between grassy meadows, with patches of woodland on either hand. Once, through a break in the trees on the edge of Greendale Wood, the juniors caught a glimpse of the red roofs of Greendale School, where their friendly rivals, Roddy Mitchell and Co., hung out. Now and again there would be a bridge, where some little bye-lane crossed the stream. But there was hardly a house or a cottage near at hand. It was a very peaceful stretch of country.

Tim Charters noticed the change first. After a while he complained of feeling strangely relaxed, and even weak. Then, one by one, the others became aware of the same symptoms. They were quite fit in the ordinary sense, but they were listless. The very effort of wielding the oars became tiresome. They felt dull and heavy.

"It's the river, of course," said Dick Sylvester. "There must be something rottenly poisonous about it. By Jove, I wonder if the sun is causing the stuff to evaporate? In that case, we might be getting it in the form of gas."

"It's an idea," said Freddy Weaver.

"Then—then we shall all have green eyes, like Sammy Holt?" said Will Osborne, in dismay.

"Not necessarily," replied Dick. "We're not getting enough of it for that. Don't forget that young Holt swallowed about half the giddy river!"

A hail came from the other boat, which was a little in advance.

"Hey, you fellows!" sang out Stan Goodman. "Take a look at the water. Things are worse here. Lots of dead fish floating down. Half a mile back they're only gasping, but here they're dying."

"Perhaps they'll recover when they drift lower down the stream," said Dick. "That's how it seems to me. The pollution isn't so bad farther down, and when the fish get there they recover. Later on, I daresay, they become normal—except the weaker ones, who peg out."

Freddy Weaver and Bobby Cole, who were in the boat with Dick Sylvester and his chums of Study No. 3, were watching the river keenly. As this strange business affected them so closely, because of Sammy Holt, Dick had raised no objection when they had suggested coming along.

"The trouble must be somewhere along this quiet reach," said Freddy eagerly. "But where the dickens can the poison come from? There's nothing here."

"It's rummy," agreed Dick. "Very rummy. I might understand it if there was a dye works, or a chemical factory, or something like that near

the river. Chemical factories often pollute streams and kill the fish. But there isn't a chemical factory for miles in this rural district."

"There's only old Rusty Rufus," remarked Tim Charters, as a slight bend revealed a queer-looking edifice on the left bank of the stream, some distance farther up. "The trouble can't be coming from there. The place has been abandoned and derelict for as long as I can remember."

"Rusty Rufus" was a familiar landmark to the Whitelands fellows. Years ago, there had been gravel pits in this neighbourhood, and "Rusty Rufus" itself was a tall, irregular-shaped building of brick and corrugated iron, now red with rust, and mercifully half covered with wild creepers. In this building the gravel had been graded by the usual process—coarse gravel, fine gravel, sand and so on. When the pits had become exhausted the machinery had been removed, and apparently the shell of the building was not worth taking down—and there it had remained, a blot on the landscape, ever since.

It was not such a blot nowadays. The old gravel pits themselves had become either ponds or lakes, and "Rusty Rufus" was partially concealed by tangled bushes and creepers.

Slowly, the two boats rowed past, and went along to the next reach of the river, where the stream widened out into a stretch of placid water. This was the local paradise for anglers—although at this time of the day not a soul was in sight.

"Wonder why it's called Rusty Rufus?" asked Bobby Cole.

"Because it's rusty, fathead, and because the bloke who used to own the old gravel pit was named Rufus something-or-other," replied Freddy. "At least, that's what I was told by somebody in my first term——"

"Here, hold everything!" ejaculated Will Osborne abruptly. "Stop rowing, Dick!"

"What's wrong?"

Dick Sylvester ceased rowing, and Stan Goodman and Co., in the other boat, drew alongside. Osborne was staring into the crystal depths of the river.

"Not so many fish here," said Bob Davis.

"There aren't any fish at all, on the surface," replied Osborne keenly. "Don't you get it? If you look right down into the river you'll see the fish darting about, as lively as the dickens."

"So what?" asked Goodman impatiently.

"So, you chump, it proves that the fish can't be affected up here!"

"By Jove, you've got something there, Will!" said Dick Sylvester. "It proves that the pollution is only *below* Rusty Rufus. Unless you're as dense as a turnip, Goodman, you ought to be able to see what it means."

Stanley Horatio Goodman started.

"By crackers! You—you mean the pollution, or whatever it is, is coming from Rusty Rufus?"

"Looks like it," said Dick.

The boats were turned and allowed to drift downstream again towards the quaint old stone and corrugated iron derelict. It was only a couple of hundred yards downstream, and it was fantastic to suppose that the poisoning of the river could emanate from that old place.

"Anyhow, we've located the source of the trouble," said Freddy Weaver. "And that's what we came out for, isn't it? Up here, above the old building, the water is perfectly pure and normal. But below Rusty Rufus the fish are in all sorts of trouble. Which proves that the poison is flowing into the river from about this point."

"Well, it won't take us long to get at the root of the mystery now," said Goodman eagerly. "Come on! We'll go ashore and do some real investigating."

"I'll bet the river water is flowing through an old cellar, or something," said Freddy. "There must be some rotten vegetation, or fungus, or something. My hat! What if old Sammy has caught a frightful disease?"

"Don't be a young fathead," growled Dick Sylvester. "His temperature is normal, his pulse is all right, so he can't have caught any disease. All the same, the sooner we find out what's wrong with the river, the better."

Very soon the boats were pushing through the thick rushes which grew near the neglected left bank. The schoolboy investigators landed, and then, forcing their way through the tangled grass and undergrowth, they approached the abandoned building.

They were silent as they drew near, and nothing could be heard except the rustling of the breeze in the treetops. A dark cloud had come over the sky, and somehow old Rusty Rufus looked very sinister at close quarters. Several of the juniors remembered that some of the local rustics were deadly afraid to go near the place at night, believing it to be haunted.

"Anybody ever explored the place?" asked Osborne, unconsciously speaking in a low voice.

"Not that I know of," said Dick. "How the dickens do we get in? There doesn't seem to be any door. Windows, either, for that matter."

They pressed on. They were all affected by that queer foreboding of something evil. In all probability it was only the working of their imaginations. They knew what had happened to Sammy Holt, and they knew what was happening at this very minute to the fish in the river. At any other time this spot of exploration would have hardly appealed to them at all.

There was a little bye-lane quite near the building, and the schoolboys came upon it unexpectedly, after passing round an angle. The lane was neglected and ratty, with grass growing in the centre.

"Isn't this the track that leads out into the Market Tunley main road?" asked Dick.

"Yes," said Freddy Weaver, nodding. "Sammy and Bobby and I came this way last month, when we were the hares in the Third Form paper chase. It's a rotten sort of lane. Hardly ever used by anybody. In the winter it's flooded, and in the summer it's overgrown with brambles. Since the gravel pits stopped working, I don't suppose the lane was wanted for anything."

"Blow the lane!" said Stan Goodman impatiently. "Look! There's a door just along the wall, here."

They were all speaking in hushed voices—without quite knowing why. The door proved to be so ramshackle that it fell to pieces when Goodman heaved his hefty shoulder against it. Inside, there was a dark and dank-smelling passage, the floor of which was littered with old stones, many of them covered with damp and ugly-looking fungus. From between the cracks sprang feeble-looking weeds.

"Well, it's a certainty that nobody has opened this door for years," said Dick critically, as he hesitated in the entrance. "We'd better go easy. It's as black as the dickens in here, and we don't know how safe it is."

They entered, and it was not long before their eyes grew accustomed to the gloom. Everything was quiet and still. And everywhere they looked the walls were mouldering and rotten, and covered with mildew. There was a dank, unpleasant smell in the air.

"Seems to me we must have been wrong," murmured Charters. "What a frost! There's nothing here. Nobody has been in the place for years."

"We've only examined a part of the ground floor, so far," said Dick. "There's a kind of ladder here, and it seems in fairly good condition. Let's see where it leads to." He hesitated. "Won't it be a waste of time, though? If the cause of the river pollution is here, it'll be somewhere below ground level—perhaps in a cellar."

"Okay," said Goodman promptly. "Let's find the cellars."

"Listen!" said Charlie Hunt, suddenly grabbing at Goodman's sleeve.

"Eh? Cheese it——"

"Didn't you hear something just then?" breathed Hunt. "Listen, everybody! Footsteps!"

"Footsteps!"

"Yes, from somewhere up—up there!"

Hunt pointed into the mysterious upper regions, and the other juniors stood stock still, listening. None of them could see very well, and they only knew that this lower floor of the old building was littered with rubbish and old scraps of rusty and discarded metal. But in one corner there was an irregular opening in the ceiling, with a crazy ladder leaning against it.

"I can't hear——" began Osborne.

Then he stopped. For, from somewhere above, came a stealthy footstep, followed by an unmistakable creak. Or were the schoolboys allowing their imaginations to run away with them? Perhaps the creak had been caused by something that they themselves had done; perhaps they had disturbed the old building by their moving about.

"Did you hear?" whispered Osborne.

"I heard something," said Dick Sylvester cautiously. "But we'd better not get any potty ideas——"

"There!" hissed Davis. "I heard it again!"

Creak—creak!

CHAPTER VII

THE MYSTERY OF OLD RUFUS

THERE was something up there, in the gloom! Dick Sylvester was the first to make a move. He crept cautiously forward towards the rickety ladder.

"We can't leave things like this, you fellows," he murmured. "If there's somebody up there, I'm going to find out who he is, and what he's doing! Who's with me?"

"I am!" said the others, in one voice.

"Good men! But we can't all go," said Dick. "You'd better come, Weaver—you being Holt's chum."

"What rot!" snorted Goodman. "If you think I'm going to mess about down here while this silly fag——"

"But you're needed down here. Goody—in case there's an attack from the rear!" interrupted Dick Sylvester solemnly. "There's no telling in a spot like this. There's probably danger everywhere. Peril lurking in every corner!"

"By crackers!" said Goodman, with a start. "I'll bet you're right at that! Still, if there's any trouble up there, don't forget to yell."

Dick cautiously ascended the old ladder, with Freddy Weaver just behind him. Stan Goodman, with his aggressive jaw set squarely, moved to the bottom of the ladder—to stand on guard. He had only just reached this position when a yell came from young Freddy.

"Look out!"

Dick ducked instinctively, and something came whizzing down from the opening in the floor above. By a miracle it missed the two boys on the ladder and crashed to the floor at Goodman's feet. Dick and Freddy tumbled down—and stared at the great chunk of rusty iron which lay on the floor.

"Anybody hurt?" asked Dick quickly.

"No!" gasped Goodman. "But I felt it whistle past my ear! Crackers! I might have been brained!"

"That, of course, is a moot point," said Charters. "All the same, it was a pretty narrow squeak. The murderous blighter!"

"Eh?" gasped Goodman. "Who?"

"The rotter who chucked this chunk of iron down, of course," retorted

Charters. "It couldn't have chucked itself down, could it? Somebody threw it—with the deliberate intention of killing one of us!"

"Go easy, old son," said Dick, as he stared upwards. "I'm not so sure of that. When I touched the ladder it shifted a bit. It's loose and old. Perhaps the piece of iron fell by accident."

"Like fun, it fell by accident!" said Goodman, who refused to accept such an uninteresting explanation. "What about those footsteps? There's somebody lurking up there—some sinister crook! A spy, probably! He tried to murder one of us because he's the chap who's been poisoning the river!"

Nobody took much notice of Goodman. He was always inclined to exaggerate, and jump to melodramatic conclusions.

"Well?" said Freddy Weaver, at length. "What are we going to do? Shall we chance it?"

"Better not," advised Davis. "I'm not scared, but this business doesn't look too healthy. One man, up there, could kill the lot of us."

Dick grasped the ladder and shook it.

"Hey, you, up there!" he shouted. "What's the big idea? You nearly brained one of us just now!"

They waited, holding their breath. But there was no reply. Nothing but a mysterious creak or two—sounds which might have been caused by the age of the structure.

"I'm going up!" said Dick grimly.

He shook the ladder again, as though in the act of mounting. But after the first moment or two he dodged quickly back and stood clear. It was a good ruse. If there was really an enemy lurking overhead he would be fooled. But the result was disappointing. Nothing happened.

"Either he's canny, or that chunk of iron must have been dislodged by accident," murmured Dick, holding up a warning finger and then raising his voice loudly. "We won't risk it, you chaps. Let's clear out of here!"

Before he had finished speaking he had made a quick rush at the ladder and streaked up it like a monkey. In less than five seconds he was at the top, and the others just stood gaping. And before they could find words, Dick's voice came down to them.

"It's all right, chaps. Nobody up here. Come on up."

They all scrambled up the ladder, and it was rather a wonder that the crazy old contrivance did not fall to pieces under their combined weight. But they reached the top in safety, and found themselves in a gloomy space, with daylight trickling through one or two cracks in the rusty iron walls.

"How do you know it's all right?" panted Stan Goodman, as he tried to pierce the gloom. "This is a pretty big place, and there might be half a dozen crooks lurking about for all we know."

"Go easy, Goodman, you fathead!" warned Dick. "Mind where you're walking! There may not be any floor beyond this dusty old platform. I can see some twisted old girders over to the left, here. We don't want any accidents."

It was a timely warning. This upper part of the old structure was a labyrinth of mystery. Beyond the platform at the top of the ladder all was dim and mysterious. But Dick's eyes, already accustomed to the gloom, had detected one or two ugly gaps in the floor.

The juniors hesitated, wondering what they should do next. In spite of themselves, they found it difficult to accept the commonplace explanation that the chunk of iron had been dislodged by accident. Their hearts were beating rapidly, and they felt that there was more in this old building than the eye could see.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" asked Goodman, at length. "We haven't started looking over the place yet."

"No good doing anything in a hurry, Goody," replied Dick. "We shall have to go easy. There's a lot of space to explore, here—and if there is somebody lurking about, he's got all the advantage."

"I say, what about these old wooden staves?" suggested Tim Charters. "There's a whole pile here. They might be handy in case there's any trouble."

"What's the matter with our fists?" demanded Goodman.

"We haven't all got fists like you, old man," said Tim.

It was a good idea, and the juniors soon armed themselves with formidable chunks of wood. They felt more comfortable with these weapons in their hands. If an attack came, they would be ready.

They spread out in various directions, taking care to avoid the pitfalls in the flooring. They went over every inch of the upper floor, but met with no success. Everywhere—nothing but dust and decay and neglect. No sign of life at all. Nothing to indicate that other human beings had recently occupied Rusty Rufus. Now and again birds would flutter and scurry out through holes in the roof, which was clear enough evidence that they had been undisturbed for months.

"Well, that's good enough for me," said Dick. "These birds wouldn't be here if the place had been used as a hide-out by crooks, or anything like that. We're a fine lot of Home Guards! This place is nothing but a deserted ruin, and we're wasting our time."

"Just as I thought!" said Goodman, with a sniff. "We ought to have gone down to the cellars first, instead of messing about up here. Now, where the dickens is that giddy ladder?"

"It doesn't matter," came a hail from Freddy Weaver. "I've found a staircase up this corner. I'll bet it leads right down to the back part of the place."

They gingerly descended the stairs, Dick Sylvester, as captain of the Fourth, insisting on leading the way. The stairs had not been tested, and it was necessary to go with caution. When, at length, the explorers found themselves at the bottom they were on a lower level than they had been originally. In other words, they had descended to a basement, for the staircase went right down below the ground floor. In front of them loomed a dim brick tunnel, and they could faintly hear the gurgling of water from somewhere near at hand. The river was apparently quite close. The walls reeked with moisture, and daylight filtered in through little gratings, most of them half-choked with weeds and creepers, so that what little light there was, was greenish and eerie.

"Well, this is the basement," said Dick, in a low voice. "Look how high the gratings are. We must be well below ground level. I expect, in the old days, that this place was a storage chamber."

The temperature was low. Compared with the comparative warmth of the sunny day, outside, the cellar was chilly. The schoolboy explorers felt uneasy and creepy. There was something sinister about the mysterious old cellar.

Stan Goodman was frankly exasperated.

"All this trouble, and we find nothing!" he grumbled. "Not a giddy clue of any kind! And there's probably a gang of crooks hiding somewhere——. I say, I wonder if there are any secret doors in these walls?"

A chuckle came from Dick Sylvester.

"Go easy, Goody," he said. "The trouble is, we were all put off the track by that falling chunk of iron."

"What do you mean—put off the track?"

"My dear chap, ever since then we've been looking for lurking enemies!" exclaimed Dick. "The chances are, the piece of iron fell by accident, and there's nobody inside Rusty Rufus at all—except ourselves. It's about time we got back to our original plan."

"What plan is that?"

"To explore the place, fathead, and see if we can't find out how the river is getting polluted," explained Dick. "I've thought, all along, that there's probably some simple and natural explanation. I wonder if you chaps have noticed a rummy niff down here? Significant, eh?"

They all started sniffing keenly.

"By jingo yes!" said Will Osborne. "It seems to be worse along here, where the passage opens out. It's not the ordinary kind of dank smell of a cellar."

"Just what I was thinking," said Freddy Weaver eagerly. "It catches you in the throat, doesn't it? A bit like ammonia—only it doesn't smell like ammonia."

"Probably due to rotting vegetation, or fungus," said Dick Sylvester. "It's a well-known fact that there's ammonia in things that decay and go rotten."

"But this isn't ammonia," argued Stan Goodman, with another sniff at the air. "Well, it won't take us long to explore the place. There's only this passage, and a wide space beyond—"

"That's all you know," interrupted Freddy Weaver, who had ventured on ahead. "There's a second passage leading off to the left, here—and it's as black as ink. Didn't anybody bring an electric torch?"

There were no electric torches.

"A fine lot of Home Guards!" sniffed the leader of the Third. "Well, I'm going in here—"

He broke off abruptly as a peculiarly loud hiss sounded from the depths of the dark passage. It was so near to Freddy that he felt the sudden rush of something cold against his head, although the sound itself was like an escape of steam. He clapped his hands to his face with sudden alarm.

"Hey, you chaps— I— I—I can't see any more—I'm blinded!" gurgled Freddy, his voice half strangled. "Something's got me—"

He broke off for further words were choked in his throat, and his very brain was reeling. He sagged against the wall and somehow managed to slide out of the passage, where he fell in a limp heap in full view of the others. Bobby Cole dropped on his knees, trembling with fright. He grabbed Freddy's head and was horrified to find that Freddy was as limp and lifeless as a rat.

"Oh, quick! He isn't dead, is he?" sobbed Bobby, in terror. "He's—he's gone all funny! Here, lend a hand, you Fourth Form chaps! What's the matter with him?"

Dick Sylvester and Stan Goodman grabbed Freddy between them and dragged him away. They blundered into the big open space beyond the main passage, and somebody spotted a door with streaks of sunshine coming through the warped timbers. The door was dragged open, and Freddy Weaver was carried out into the open air.

For some moments the schoolboys blinked in the bright sunshine. Freddy Weaver was lying in the grass, and he was quite unconscious.

The schoolboy explorers were no longer in any doubt as to the lurking dangers of Rusty Rufus! In some mysterious way Freddy Weaver had been struck down, just as Sammy Holt had been struck. But in Weaver's case the effect was much more dramatic.

"What happened?" gurgled Goodman. "Did somebody bop him on the head? I can't see any injury—"

"It was gas, or something," interrupted Dick, in a worried voice. "We'd better try artificial respiration. Didn't you hear that loud hiss just before the kid folded up? And yet I'll swear there was nobody there—except us."

"I'm going back to look!" said Goodman grimly.

"Not yet, ass! Weaver comes first."

They fell to work on the unconscious fag. It seemed so fantastic—all the bright sunshine out here, with the placidly flowing river near at hand, with insects humming amongst the wild flowers and birds twittering in the trees. The ugly menace of Rusty Rufus seemed far away.

"That wasn't such a bad idea of yours, Goody, after all," said Dick Sylvester suddenly. "You other chaps can look after Weaver. I'm going to

dash back into the cellar and have a look round while the trail is hot."

"Well, I like that!" said Goodman indignantly. "Bagging my idea——"

"You can come along, too, Goody"

"Well, that's better!" said Goodman, with a snort.

They hurried off, and were soon plunging down some moss-grown and creeper-covered steps into a kind of area at the back of the building. Down there, below ground level, was the rotten old door that led into the cellar.

There was a strange reek in the place, an exaggeration of the peculiar smell which had first attracted Dick's attention. They felt a catchiness in their throats, and before long their eyes were watering and breathing was not too easy. Yet Dick grimly set his teeth and plunged into the dark side passage where the unaccountable hiss had originated.

He had no electric torch, but he had matches, and he struck several of these while he stared about him. And he was rather startled to find that the supposed passage was no passage at all, but merely a deep recess, with brick walls and a solid stone barrier at the back of it. The floor was composed of stone slabs, and quite dry.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Dick blankly. "What do you make of it, Goody? Think somebody was hiding at the back of this recess? Perhaps he felt that he was trapped, and he gave Weaver a dose of knock-out stuff——" He paused. "Oh, but that's rot! Like something out of a gangster picture!"

Stan Goodman, for once, was not talking. He was clutching at his throat and making queer gurgling sounds.

"Yes, we'd better get out of here," muttered Dick. "I'm beginning to feel the same—only it seems to be worse just where you've been standing. Unless we're jolly careful, Goody, it'll get us next!"

They stumbled out and were glad to get in the open air again.

"The only reason it *didn't* get us was because we left the door open, and the stuff, whatever it is, was able to escape," said Dick. "But I still don't get it! Even if there had been somebody hiding in that recess, how did he get out without us seeing him?" He broke off. "Unless, of course, he went back into the other part of the old building, up those wonky stairs."

They were glad to find that Freddy Weaver was showing signs of coming round. Charters and Osborne were taking it in turn with Davis and Hunt to thump the fag, roll him over, and generally manhandle him. The treatment, although drastic, was producing some first-class results. In a very short time Freddy was sitting up, gazing about him blearily.

"Cheese it!" he protested. "Lemme alone! What's the time? I didn't hear the rising bell—— Crikey! What am I doing out here?"

His recovery was fairly rapid after that, and he was soon looking about him with increasing understanding.

"It's all right, kid," said Dick Sylvester—who was only a couple of years older than Freddy at the most. "Thank goodness you've come round! As soon as you're feeling well enough, we want you to tell us what happened."

Freddy blinked.

"I've been waiting for you to tell me what happened," he said dizzily.

"Didn't you see anything?"

"No."

"No sinister figure lurking at the back of that recess?" asked Goodman, in a disappointed voice.

"What recess?"

"What you thought to be a passage was only a recess," explained Dick Sylvester. "Goody and I have been back there, and we're flummoxed."

"That makes us even, then," said Freddy. "I'm jiggered if I know what happened. I heard a kind of hiss and felt something surging all round my face—and it must have been gas. It caught me in the throat, blinding me and choking me."

"And you didn't see anything at all?"

"Nothing."

"Not even the gas?"

"Don't be a fathead, Goody!" protested Weaver. "Gas is invisible, isn't it? The stuff just hit me in the face, and I don't seem to remember much more."

There was very little satisfaction in this explanation, and the schoolboy investigators were as much in the dark as ever.

"There's just a chance that we're still on the wrong track when we suspect human agency," said Dick, who was striving to take the sensible view. "After all, we haven't seen anybody, have we? We haven't seen a trace——"

"I suppose the gas just released itself?" asked Goodman sarcastically.

"It might have been a natural gas," argued Dick. "Perhaps it's the result of years of neglect. It may gather somewhere under the old building and release itself periodically—just like geysers spout at certain intervals."

"And that explains the poisoning of the river?"

"Why not?" said Dick. "How do we know that the gas doesn't condense, and then trickle into the river, somehow, in the form of liquid? There are all sorts of rummy things happening all the time——"

"But nothing so rummy as this!" snorted Goodman. "Natural gases, my foot! There's a gang of crooks in this place, and I'm jolly well going to get to the bottom of the mystery. There's dirty work afoot. Somebody was hiding in that recess, and he didn't want us to see him—so he tried to murder young Weaver!"

Dick Sylvester glanced at his watch.

"If you're feeling fit, Weaver, we'd better be moving," he said crisply. "We'll call it a day, and get back to the school. Even as it is, we shall only just make it in time for afternoon lessons. If we put on some speed we might manage a snack in the tuck shop before the bell goes."

They all suddenly realised that they were ravenously hungry, having missed dinner, and the very thought of the tuck shop made their brains reel. Their keenness for further exploring faded away, and even Stanley Horatio Goodman was secretly glad to get away from the vicinity of Rusty Rufus.

They tumbled back into the boats, and were soon falling down-stream at a good speed. Freddy Weaver was feeling almost normal again before they came within sight of the Whitelands boathouses. A feeling of sickness was passing.

"I'm all right," he said, in reply to Dick's inquiry. "But I don't like being dished like this. Knocked out for over a quarter of an hour, and I still don't know how it was done!"

They turned a bend of the river, and became aware of unusual activity at the Whitelands landing stage. There was quite a commotion on the bank and a crowd of Fourth Formers, with Kenneth Pyne and Pat Warren prominent amongst them, was in a highly excited state.

"What's the trouble here?" asked the Fourth Form skipper, as his boat bumped against the landing stage.

"No good asking me," said Tom Pettitt, with a shrug. "Robinson and Kennedy went in to have a bathe——"

"They did what?" yelled Dick.

"No need to jump down my throat!" protested Pettitt. "Why shouldn't they have a bathe? They seemed all right for a bit, but suddenly Robinson started yelling for help, and he's one of the best swimmers in the Fourth. Said he felt dizzy and weak—and then Kennedy started the same stunt."

"My only sainted aunt!" said Goodman blankly.

"You chaps seem to know something!" said Tom Pettitt, looking at them closely. "What's the gag?"

CHAPTER VIII.

GETTING SERIOUS!

KENNETH PYNE and Pat Warren came along and explained what had happened. They had got a boat out in time to rescue the two juniors, who had complained of such strange symptoms.

"They're in the dressing sheds now, changing," explained Kenneth Pyne. "Frightfully difficult to understand what happened to the two mugwumps. Larking about, I suppose——"

"I don't believe it," interrupted Warren. "They're both jolly good swimmers, and larking about wouldn't hurt them. I've heard some queer rumours this morning, too."

"Rumours?" asked Dick.

"The seniors have been complaining. Some of them were out on the river this morning and they came back as groggy as the dickens."

Before Warren could say anything further the familiar figure of Mr. Horace Mortimer appeared from the direction of the school. The popular Housemaster was looking worried and anxious.

"What's all this about, you fellows?" he asked, rather breathlessly. "I've been told that two of my boys were nearly drowned——"

"Somebody's been pulling your leg, sir," drawled Kenneth Pyne. "Robinson and Kennedy had a bit of a scarce, but they're all right now. They're dressing"

Pyne went into details, and the Housemaster looked relieved when he heard the full story.

"Well, I'm glad to find that the tale was grossly exaggerated," he said. "Thanks, Pyne. I'll have a word with Kennedy and Robinson as soon as they come out."

He turned to Dick Sylvester and the others.

"What happened to you fellows?" he asked pointedly. "Why weren't you in your places for dinner?"

"We cut dinner, sir," said Stan Goodman, in a careless voice. "Went up the river——just for a row."

"Oh, I see! You went up the river——just for a row?" said the Housemaster mildly. "This is news! Cutting dinner in favour of a row up the river! Surely, Sylvester, you can think of a better explanation than Goodman's?"

"How's Sammy Holt, sir?" asked Weaver abruptly.

Mr. Mortimer gave Freddy a hard look.

"So there is some connection between young Holt and the river, eh?" he said. "Many thanks for the clue, Weaver. Two Fourth Form boys suddenly get ill in the middle of a bathe—— Did Holt bathe this morning?"

"No, sir," replied Freddy promptly.

"Did he fall into the river?"

It was a leading question, and had to be answered.

"You're too smart for us, sir," said Dick Sylvester, grinning. "We'd better tell you everything. Young Holt *did* fall into the river this morning, and he was nearly drowned, too——got caught under an overturned boat. He swallowed about a gallon of water, but brought most of it up. Weaver was there, and he'll tell you——"

"Hold on a minute," said Mr. Mortimer, who had given Freddy Weaver a glance. "Let me have a look at you, my lad!" He swung the fag round and stared into his face. "Well, upon my soul! This is very remarkable! Have you been falling into the river, too? It seems to be an epidemic——"

"Great jumping crackers!" yelled Goodman. "Look at young Weaver! His eyes are going just the same as Holt's!"

"Oh, crumbs!"

"That—that gas!"

"What gas?" demanded the Housemaster sharply.

After that it was impossible to keep the secret any longer. Everybody wanted to speak at once, but Mr. Mortimer silenced them all except Dick Sylvester, who explained all the details clearly and briefly.

"Well, you're a fine lot!" said Mr. Mortimer, at length. "Why on earth didn't you tell me about this at once? Holt might have been seriously affected. Thank goodness the green is going out of his eyes, and he is already much better."

"I'm glad to hear that, sir!" said Freddy Weaver, with relief. "Perhaps my eyes won't be so bad."

"The river is dangerous, boys—or, if it isn't dangerous, it must be avoided until this mystery is cleared up. From this minute the river is out of bounds."

"Didn't I say so?" groaned Freddy, turning to the Fourth Formers. "Before you can say 'knife,' the giddy river is put out of bounds!"

Mr. Mortimer concealed a smile.

"So that's why you tried to keep the thing to yourselves, eh?" he said drily. "Well, it's no good. In any case, you couldn't have kept a secret like this for long."

"We didn't mean to, sir," explained Dick Sylvester. "We knew the river would be put out of bounds, and we wanted to do a bit of exploring for ourselves. We've done it, too, and the source of the trouble is in Old Rusty Rufus."

Mr. Mortimer listened carefully and interestedly while he was given an account of the strange events at the derelict old building. He questioned the boys closely. Had they actually seen anybody? No, they had to admit that they hadn't. Even when Freddy had received the strange dose of gas, no direct human agency could be held responsible. It *might* have been caused by some natural phenomenon.

"But that's all rot, sir," said Stan Goodman. "There must have been somebody there besides us. It's my opinion that the place is the headquarters of a gang of crooks."

"A somewhat far-fetched theory, don't you think, Goodman?" suggested the Housemaster mildly. "However, we will see."

He was very thoughtful when he returned to the school, and decided to visit Rusty Rufus personally before making any report to Dr. Chesterton, the Head of Whitelands. After all, there might be nothing in this story. The river, meanwhile, was officially out of bounds—and Whitelands in general was highly indignant about it.

Mr. Mortimer's visit to Rusty Rufus was not particularly successful. He potted about the old place for a full hour, armed with a powerful electric torch. Nothing happened, and he saw nothing suspicious. One or two features did impress him, all the same, and he bore them in mind. Before leaving the vicinity of the river he recovered one or two dead fish and took a sample of the water.

He took these to Mr. Gosling, who was in charge of the lab. Mr. Gosling made elaborate tests, but although he found direct evidence of chemical impurity in the water, he could not identify the poison. Much more elaborate tests would be necessary—and with apparatus which the Whitelands laboratory did not possess.

Towards the end of the afternoon Mr. Mortimer got into his little car and went to Market Tunley police station.

CHAPTER IX

● A STARTLING TURN

ALTHOUGH HE would never have admitted it, Mr. Horace Mortimer was as keen on solving the mystery as any of the Fourth Formers—and he had a grim idea at the back of his head that the affair was not so simple as it looked. He was concerned about the affected boys, too, and on his return to Whitelands his first task was to inquire about their condition. He was glad to learn that Sammy Holt was almost normal again, and Freddy Weaver had not developed the same alarming symptoms to any serious degree.

So the pollution, whatever it was, could not be dangerous to human life, as it was to the fish. Moreover, it was something of quite recent origin, for yesterday there had been no sign of any trouble at all.

Mr. Mortimer was a bachelor, and he was sitting down to a solitary tea when genial old Dr. Applejohn looked in.

"I hear you've been dodging about this afternoon, Mortimer," said the doctor, as he invited himself to a chair. "What do you make of things? I'm completely baffled. Holt's eyes are nearly normal, and there's very little wrong with young Weaver. As for the other Fourth Form boys, there is nothing wrong with them at all."

"Cup of tea?" suggested Mr. Mortimer.

"Thanks. I will," said the doctor. "Care to have a look at the evening paper? Or did you buy one while you were in Market Tunley?" He laid the newspaper on the table. "Any idea what's wrong with the river?"

"I don't think there's any doubt that the origin of the poison—for it must be some kind of poison—is to be found in the derelict old gravel pit building up the river," replied Mr. Mortimer thoughtfully.

"The Head's in a rare stew about it," said Dr. Applejohn, as he sipped his tea. "I was having a word with him about half an hour ago, and he's talking about making a report to the Governors, and writing to the sanitary authorities, and raising Cain generally."

"I went to that old building this afternoon, doctor," said the Housemaster thoughtfully. "Although nothing actually happened, I'm very suspicious. There's something going on in that old place—or there has been something going on very recently. What puzzles me is this—how can there be chemicals, in the ordinary way, in such a disused and derelict ruin?"

"It's no good asking me."

"I was particularly struck by the fact that there are some motorcar tracks along the little lane that leads into the Market Tunley high road," continued Mr. Mortimer. "They are quite recent tracks, Applejohn, and the lane leads to Rusty Rufus—but nowhere else. It proves, to my mind, that a motorcar has been in the habit of coming and going quite frequently of late. The impressions are beaten down, one on top of the other."

"Quite the sleuth, aren't you?" laughed the doctor. "And is that all you discovered?"

"That's all."

"You'd better take me with you next time," chuckled Dr. Applejohn as he rose to his feet. "I suppose you'll be seeing the Head presently? Tell him not to worry."

"Yes. I shall be seeing him soon," replied the Housemaster, with a glance at the clock. "Inspector Rhodes, of the Market Tunley police, has an appointment with me in half an hour, and I shall take him to the Head——"

Dr. Applejohn, who had just reached the door, interrupted with a surprised ejaculation.

"The police!"

"I'm afraid so, doctor."

"But, good gracious, man, what on earth did you call the police in for?"

"Because I think it's a police job," replied Mr. Mortimer. "Furthermore, I think it is advisable that one or two constables should be stationed near the old building after dark this evening. Such precautions may not be necessary——"

"Well I'm hanged!" shouted the doctor abruptly.

He seized the newspaper from the desk, and stared at it as though he could not believe the evidence of his eyes.

"What is it?"

"Well, of all the amazing coincidences," said the doctor. "Listen to this, Mortimer! I hadn't looked at the paper before—at least, nothing beyond the racing results. But look at this: 'Daring Raid By Saboteurs'——'Extraordinary Condition of Victims'——'The Men With The Green Eyes.'"

"What!" exclaimed Mr. Mortimer.

"Hold on—I'll tell you," said the doctor, as Mr. Mortimer tried to secure the paper. "It happened at the big radio factory at Sidswell Heath, just beyond Bromley. Armed and masked men broke into the executive office of the company in the middle of the morning while a conference was taking place in the managing director's private office. The latest instrument in the development of radiolocation was being demonstrated to some Air Ministry officials, and the bandits succeeded in getting away with it."

"But I don't see——"

"The managing director, the factory officials, and the Air Ministry nobs were all rendered unconscious by a new kind of knock-out gas," continued the doctor. "The bandits themselves were wearing gas masks, and were not affected. They obviously chose their time deliberately—knowing that the instrument would be easy to snatch. But here's the point, Mortimer. Soon after the victims had recovered, feeling very little the worse, their eyes turned vividly green!"

"Remarkable, indeed," said the Housemaster.

He secured the newspaper at last, and read the report for himself. Both he and the doctor were considerably excited by now. This was a sensation of the first order. The theft of such a vital secret weapon was grave, and there was no doubt that enemy agents were at the back of the crime.

"Do you think there is any connection, Mortimer?"

"Think! My dear fellow, there's no question whatever," replied the Housemaster. "Of course there's a connection. A thing like this cannot be a coincidence."

"Yes, but I don't see——"

"These people were rendered unconscious by a knock-out gas which was discharged from weapons that looked like ordinary pistols," continued Mr. Mortimer. "Later, the eyes of the victims turned green. My dear Applejohn, the very same thing happened here at Whitelands. The river is polluted by the same chemical. A Third Form boy swallows a good deal of it, after nearly being drowned, and his eyes turn a vivid green. Young Weaver gets a direct dose of the gas, and his eyes, in a lesser degree, turn green, too. I am very glad—now—that I went to the police."

"You took a bit of a chance, going to that old place by yourself this afternoon," remarked the doctor. "These criminals are not likely to be gentle in their methods with an intruder——"

"I'm thinking more of the boys who went there," said the Housemaster, frowning. "I think I told you of the motor-car tracks along that deserted lane? I doubt if these people would use it in daylight—— Yet there must have been somebody there when the boys made their exploration. That dangerous piece of iron did not fall by accident."

"The boys were lucky to get away safely."

"Very lucky," agreed the Housemaster. "Possibly there was only one man there—somebody who had been left on guard. He did not dare to make an open attack, since he probably thought that the boys were just amusing themselves idly. As soon as they had gone, I imagine, he went into Market Tunley, to telephone to his associates. That was why the place was empty when I went over it."

"And what do you think will happen now?"

"Well, if these people have taken alarm it is most unlikely that they will abandon the place as it stands. It is their secret hideout. You must remember that only schoolboys, to their knowledge, have invaded their headquarters—and they may take it that the schoolboys are not likely to come again. I think it very probable that they will turn up after dark this evening."

"Well, let me in on it when you're ready to start," said the doctor cheerfully. "We don't get much excitement in this corner of Dorset, and I'll never forgive you if you leave me out."

When he took his departure, a minute or so later, he had a feeling that the evening would provide some unusual excitement.

CHAPTER X.

THE HOME GUARD IS NOT WANTED!

THE DOOR of Study No. 3, in Mortimer's House, burst open violently and Stan Goodman came barging in.

"Don't knock!" said Dick Sylvester politely.

He and Tim Charters and Will Osborne were having tea, and they were busily discussing the recent events of the river.

"Take a look at this!" roared Goodman, slapping a newspaper down on the table in the midst of the bread and butter and cakes.

"Dash it, no need to be so excited!" protested Osborne. "Look what you've done to the marmalade, you silly ass! And you've tipped the salmon into the sponge cakes——"

"Blow the salmon and the sponge cakes!" shouted Goodman. "Have you seen this report in the paper, Sylvester? Spies! Saboteurs! Secret enemies pinching things! And it's the same gang that we're after—the rotters who poisoned the river! A bunch of giddy crooks——"

"Hold on!" said Dick Sylvester tolerantly. "Let's have a look. Forgive us, Goody, if we don't jump out of our seats in wild excitement. We've heard your tales before."

"You've never heard one like this!" panted Goodman.

Dick read the report—and he actually did jump out of his seat a minute later.

"My giddy aunt! he said breathlessly. "Goody, old son, you're dead right!"

"You bet I'm right!" said Goodman. "The point is——what are we going to do about it?"

"Do about what, fathead?" asked Charters, bewildered. "What's all this about? You come dashing into the study like a hurricane, you upset the salmon and the sponge cakes, and then ask what we're going to do about it!"

"For once, chaps, we'll excuse Goody," said Dick Sylvester. "Read this, and you'll understand."

But before Charters and Osborne could read the report a number of other Fourth Formers came barging in, led by Kenneth Pyne and Davis and Hunt. Freddy Weaver and Bobby Cole, of the Third, were in evidence, too.

"Excitement reigns supreme, what?" drawled Kenneth Pyne. "Sorry to barge in like this, old chaps, but we've been told that it's important."

"And so it is," said Dick. "No reason why we should tell everybody else in the House, though. Let's keep it to ourselves as much as we can. I don't suppose there are many newspapers in the school, and the other chaps are not likely to have seen the report"

"What report?" howled Charters.

It was not long before everybody knew, and then the excitement became even more hectic.

"It's a case of two and two making four, you fellows," said Dick keenly. "Here are these saboteurs, in Bromley, pinching something from a big radio works, and they made their victims helpless by gassing them. These people recovered except for a peculiarity in their eyes——"

"I get it," said Kenneth Pyne, nodding. "And young Sammy Holt showed the same symptoms this morning after sampling a considerable quantity of the river."

"The same chemical in both cases. Obvious."

"Not absolutely obvious," disagreed Pyne. "It might be only a coincidence. There's no direct evidence."

"What rot!" snorted Goodman

"No, he's quite right, Goody," said Dick. "There certainly is no direct evidence. But this thing is so startling that there *must* be a connection. It would be pretty good, wouldn't it, if we bagged the saboteurs and recovered the stolen radiolocation instrument on the same day as the robbery?"

"By crackers! What a thought!" said Goodman breathlessly.

"I'm going straight to old Mortimer——" began Dick.

"Don't be a chump!" interrupted Goodman. "Why tell the Beaks anything about it? Why shouldn't we do the thing on our own? The Whitelands Home Guard, eh? As soon as it's dark we'll sneak off to Rusty Rufus and make a mass attack!"

"Too risky," replied the Fourth Form skipper, shaking his head. "Old Mortimer was jolly sporting when we told him everything, and it wouldn't be fair to let him down. Besides, this is a job for the police."

"Yes, a job for the police to muck up!" said Goodman. "What are you afraid of—getting sacked?"

"Don't be a fathead," frowned Dick. "Nobody's afraid. But you seem to forget that these criminals are pretty desperate men. What chance should we have—a party of schoolboys—against them? We'd like to be important, and call ourselves the Whitelands Home Guard, but that's only a figure of speech, after all. We should probably mess the whole thing up, and then the crooks would escape. Fine chumps we should look afterwards, shouldn't we?"

And without any further argument Dick Sylvester took the newspaper and went off to the Housemaster's study. As he went he thought of the strange chance that had led to this direct connection between the saboteurs and old Rusty Rufus. But for the seeping of that chemical into the River Tunn nobody in the district would have had the slightest cause to suspect the derelict old building; nobody would have imagined that the saboteurs were associated with this particular neighbourhood. There would have been no investigation at all.

Dick Sylvester arrived in Mr. Mortimer's study in a condition of considerable tension, and he was relieved to find the Housemaster alone. He laid the newspaper flat on the desk.

"Do you mind reading that, sir?"

"I have already read it, Sylvester."

"Oh!" said Dick, his face dropping. "I thought I was going to surprise you, sir. So you know all about it?"

"I know as much about it as you do, at least. And I am rather alarmed to find that you boys are acquainted with this latest development. Exactly how many boys do know?"

"Not very many, sir—Pyne and Goodman and Charters and young Weaver and a few others."

"And, naturally, you all want to help in rounding up the criminals?" said the Housemaster drily. "I'm sorry, Sylvester, but I cannot possibly give you permission——"

"But we're the Home Guard, sir."

"The what?"

"Some of us have formed a sort of company, and we call ourselves the Whitelands Home Guard, sir," explained Dick, rather lamely. "Of course, we're only scouts, really, but it sounds better, and more up-to-date——"

"Yes, I think I understand—but this is no task for schoolboys, whether you call yourselves the Home Guard, or not," interrupted the Housemaster. "In a very few moments I am anticipating the arrival of Inspector Rhodes of Market Tunley. And in view of this newspaper report, I have no doubt that the police will take strong action to-night."

"We're pretty hot on strong action, too, sir," urged Dick eagerly.

"I don't doubt it, young man—but it can't be done," said Mr. Mortimer. "For one thing, the police would not allow it. Inspector Rhodes would not agree to the co-operation of a bunch of junior schoolboys."

"Then all I can say, sir, is that Inspector Rhodes doesn't know when he's well off."

The Housemaster could not help smiling.

"Don't look so crestfallen, Sylvester," he chuckled. "I don't think you'll be missing much. If I'm any judge, it will be a weary job, keeping watch on that old building. There is no guarantee that the criminals will come anywhere near the place."

"Yes, but they must have been using Rusty Rufus as a kind of rendezvous, sir. That's pretty clear, isn't it?"

"Yes, I think we can take that much for granted," replied the Housemaster. "As a matter of fact, I have just been talking to Inspector Rhodes on the telephone. The saboteurs used a stolen car, and this car has been found, abandoned, on a lonely heath not twenty miles from this spot. All trace of the guilty men, however, has been lost."

"They're hiding somewhere—waiting until darkness!" said Dick excitedly. "And as soon as darkness comes, they'll make for Rusty Rufus—and I'll bet they'll have that radio-location instrument with them."

"That is a possibility which Inspector Rhodes has not overlooked," said Mr. Mortimer, with an air of dismissal. "And an additional reason why he would not welcome the suggestion of schoolboy assistance."

Dick accepted his dismissal without further protest, and made his unsavoury report to the other fellows.

"What a frost!" said Goodman disgustedly. "I call it absolute rot! Do you mean to say that we're not going to be allowed to help?"

"That my poor old Goody, is the edict."

"But didn't you tell Mortimer that we're Home Guards?"

"If I had told him that we're the Royal Marines it wouldn't have made any difference," growled Dick. "That fat chump, Inspector Rhodes, is in charge of the case. It's a bitter pill to swallow, but there's nothing we can do about it."

Stanley Horatio Goodman snorted.

"That's what you think!" he said darkly.

But the others set this down as his usual "gas." Only Davis and Hunt, his own study chums, took him at his word—and they were considerably alarmed. They knew how utterly reckless their volcanic leader could be

at times, and they wondered how they were going to keep him in check during the evening. Nothing short of chains and padlocks would be of much use.

It was not long afterwards that a general order circulated throughout Whitelands. Everybody, seniors included, was confined to gates. Very little explanation was given. There were certain police activities afoot, and no Whitelands boys were to be allowed out of the school grounds.

This order came very much as a bombshell. It put an end to all hopes of joining in the fun. It also led to a lot of excited talk—particularly amongst those fellows who were not in the know. All sorts of rumours were launched, the majority of them without foundation.

Very seldom, indeed, had the school been confined to gates in this dramatic way, and the feeling that something sensational was happening only exasperated the boys the more. Fellows hung about in quad, talking in clumps, and when the portly figure of Inspector Rhodes appeared from Mr. Mortimer's private door soon after seven o'clock there was a further spate of wild conjecture. To make things even more exciting, Mr. Mortimer himself accompanied the police officer.

Dick Sylvester took his courage in both hands and ran up. Mr. Mortimer was a sportsman, and one could take liberties with him that would be fatal in some other masters. Dick boldly caught him by the arm as he was about to step into the inspector's car.

"Anything fresh, sir?" he asked breathlessly.

"I can only tell you, Sylvester, that—er—Rusty Rufus is under constant observation," replied Mr. Mortimer. "I need hardly say that the men on watch are completely hidden— Oh, yes, there is something else—" He broke off, as though pondering whether he should say anything more. "Yes, there has been an arrest."

Inspector Rhodes frowned as he listened to this brief conversation, but as yet he made no comment.

"An arrest, sir—already?" asked Dick eagerly.

"A man who was approaching the old building at about five-thirty was detained, and the police believe that this man was in the building when you boys explored it."

"Then that chunk of iron was deliberately thrown down at us, sir! The murderous brute tried to kill us."

"Nonsense," put in the inspector gruffly. "I don't think this man has anything to do with the case. He is a gentleman—more like a college professor than anything else. He was probably wandering about quite innocently."

Dick did not fail to see the slight wink which Mr. Mortimer gave him as the latter climbed into the car. So Inspector Rhodes had been deliberately putting Dick off! The arrested man was not so innocent as he would have Dick believe.

This piece of news was encouraging. Presumably, the arrested man had been on his way back to the hideout after communicating with the rest of the gang. Which more than hinted that the other men would turn up later.

The dusk grew into darkness, and a good deal of the excitement died down. Most of the Whitelands boys went indoors to get on with their prep, or to congregate in the common rooms. There was not likely to be any further news until the next day.

One Fourth Former, at least, had not yet given up hope. In Study No. 4 Stan Goodman was making active preparations. On the table in front of him lay a powerful electric torch, a bloated-looking water pistol, and a pair of black plimsolls.

"That's about all, I think," he said, with satisfaction. "As soon as it's dark, I'm off."

"You hopeless chump, you'll only get the sack!" said Davis frantically. "How many more times have Hunt and I got to tell you that it's sheer madness to——"

"Yes, I know, and it's about time you put on a new record," growled Goodman. "I'm going to risk it. I'm not going to be left out of this prize slice of excitement." He glowered on his two anxious chums. "What's more, you two are coming with me! Better get your things ready!"

"Like fun, we're going with you," said Hunt.

"We can nip across the playing fields and then take to the meadows," said Goodman. "In that way, we shan't run the risk of butting into anybody. We can watch the whole scene from the top of that little hill near Rusty Rufus. Then, if anything hectic turns up, we can join in the fray at the crucial moment."

"I'm going to tell Sylvester——" began Davis.

"You do, and I'll wipe up the floor with you!" threatened Goodman. "Think I'm made of soft soap, like those frightened fatheads?"

It was useless to argue. Stan Goodman had made up his mind. When darkness came, soon afterwards, he made his final preparations. And when he was just about ready the door opened, and Dick Sylvester and Freddy Weaver came marching in.

"My hat, just in time!" gasped Davis, ignoring Goodman's threat. "Listen, Sylvester! This fathead is going off to Rusty Rufus! Lend a hand, will you? Help us to hold him here by force."

Dick Sylvester grinned.

"But why?" he asked blandly. "You might just as well hold the rest of us here by force. Goody's scheme is first rate, and I'm all for it."

"What!" gasped Davis.

"We're all going," explained Freddy Weaver.

"About fifteen of us," added Dick. "We just came to collect you fellows. Why should the Whitelands Home Guard be left out in the cold?"

Goodman's jaw dropped.

"Are you trying to pull my leg?" he asked blankly.

"Of course not," replied Dick. "We're all going to creep out and have a look at the activities. Don't forget there's safety in numbers. If you went alone, Goody, you might get the sack—but the Head can hardly sack a whole bunch of us. It'll only mean a swishing, at the worst. And it's worth it!"

"You're telling me!" said Goodman heartily.

CHAPTER XI

THE CAPTURE

NIGHT HAD fallen upon the River Tunn, and the neighbouring meadows and spinneys were enshrouded in gloom. Low in the sky, just over Greendale Wood, the moon was rising. But as yet the moonlight was weak and feeble, and only served to change the darkness into a dim, mysterious radiance.

On the bank of the river stood the old derelict building known as Rusty Rufus. Nothing moved near it, and not a light was showing anywhere. Faintly and indistinctly, from the distance, came the low purr of a car.

"I wonder!" murmured Dick Sylvester.

He shifted his position slightly, in order to get some ease. He and the others had been crouching in the shadow of the low bushes for almost two

hours, and they were cramped and chilled—and, it must be admitted, rather fed up. As Mr. Mortimer had said, the vigil was wearisome.

"You mean, that car," whispered a voice, near at hand. "It may be only a car along the Market Tunley road."

"We've heard other cars going along the road," said Dick. "They were much more distant. This sound is getting nearer all the time."

And it certainly was. Somewhere down there, in the Tunn Valley, a car was approaching. The throb of the engine was becoming more and more pronounced. From where the boys crouched, they could see the river and the indistinct outlines of Rusty Rufus.

"Can't see any lights," came a murmur from Goodman. "By crackers it must be the crooks' car! They wouldn't use lights, would they?"

"Not so loud, fathead!" yarned Bob Davis.

They remained silent, listening intently. A minute earlier they had been regretting their hotheadness, and even Goodman had told himself that the game was hardly worth the candle. The police *had* to do this kind of work—it was their job. If necessary they would wait all night.

The Whitelands fellows, if only they had realised it, were remarkably lucky. For after a comparatively short wait the high spot arrived. The sound of the approaching car grew nearer and nearer. Then, at length, it jolted over the bridge near the empty building, and the juniors could see a faint blur.

"It may be only a police car," murmured Charters.

"Rats, the police wouldn't come up openly like this," said Dick. "We haven't seen so much as a twig bending ever since we've been here. Their game is to lie doggo until the last minute——"

"Look!" gurgled Goodman.

A blazing searchlight had suddenly snapped out into the darkness. It was immediately followed by others. They were evidently the headlamps of concealed cars—so placed that when the lights were switched on, they focussed themselves on the spot where the old doorway stood. And this was the spot where the car had come to a standstill.

Every one of the Whitelands boys sprang up. They could see police officers running into the radius of light, and the quiet night air became filled with shouts. Figures were pouring out of the stationary motorcar, attempting to escape. Before they could get away into the darkness, they were seized. Men were struggling in half a dozen different places.

"Come on!" yelled Goodman.

He went tearing down the slope towards the river.

"Oh, the hopeless chump!" groaned Dick Sylvester. "We only came here to get a grandstand view! But we can't hang back now—we've got to support Goody."

"Yes, rather!"

They went rushing down, and any chance of being severely punished for disregard of orders was overlooked by an incident which occurred within a single minute. For as the so-called Home Guards were nearing Rusty Rufus Dick Sylvester caught sight of a fleeing figure over to his left. One of the criminals had escaped from the cordon, and was getting away!

"Hey, fellows!" yelled Dick. "This way!"

With one accord the Fourth Formers followed him, and cut off the fugitive's retreat. He attempted to dodge, but only succeeded in running into the arms of Stan Goodman. The leader of Study No. 4 was ready, and his famous right came crashing round.

Wham!

The man reeled over, completely shaken by that terrific swipe. But he was on his feet again in a moment, snarling and cursing in a foreign tongue.

Before he could do any real damage Dick and the rest were piling on him and holding him down.

"Nice work!" chuckled Goodman. "So it wasn't worth coming, eh? This blighter would have got away but for us!"

Triumphantly, they frog-marched their prisoner to Inspector Rhodes. Three well-dressed men, dishevelled and savage-looking, were standing handcuffed. The fourth prisoner was added to the bag. They were all foreigners, although they did not look it—and their English was perfect.

"We thought we'd come along to give a hand, sir," said Dick, with a nervous glance at Mr. Mortimer. "We did get this man as he was trying to escape, didn't we?"

"Yes, but if you think you're going to escape punishment, I'm afraid you've made a mistake, boys," replied the Housemaster. "We shall have to see what the Headmaster has to say. Rhodes, it's a lucky thing these boys were near at hand."

"Well, yes," admitted the inspector grudgingly. "I can't understand how the fellow got through the cordon."

The juniors received no severe punishment. The Head was inclined to be severe at first, but in the peculiar circumstances he granted a pardon. For it was proved that the man who had escaped the cordon was the ring-leader—the most dangerous man in the spy ring. Incidentally, the vitally important radiolocation instrument was recovered.

Later, it was learned that an examination of Rusty Rufus revealed a hidden cellar, with its entrance door at the back of the recess where Freddy Weaver had met with such a curious adventure. In this hidden cellar there was not only accommodation for living and sleeping, but also a complete chemical laboratory. This place had been used for the manufacture of a harmless knock-out gas. The professor-like man who had been arrested earlier in the evening proved to be a clever chemist who had been wanted by the police for some years. The gas was his own invention. He admitted that he had had an accident with a big retort of the gas in its liquid state. This had seeped through the cellar flooring, and had apparently made its way into the river, thus causing the unlooked-for pollution.

It was ironic that the gang had selected Rusty Rufus as a hideout because they had thought it to be safe—but the mere spilling of that retort of chemical had proved their undoing.

Thanks, in the main, to the Whitelands Home Guard!

THE END



THE MAROONED SCHOOLBOYS

CHAPTER I

SIX BOYS IN A BOAT

"It's a beauty!" said Willy Martin admiringly.

"Pity your uncle couldn't have sent you a whacking great tuck hamper, instead," remarked Fatty Bradshaw, with disdain. "What's the good of a camera, anyway?"

Bob Horton laughed.

"All you think about, Fatty, is your beastly tummy," he said. "Don't you realise that this camera must have cost my Uncle Fred about ten quid? He's rolling in tin, and he always whacks out marvellous presents on my birthday."

"Think of all the tuck you could have bought for ten quid!" murmured Fatty dreamily. "It's a sin and a shame to spend such a lot of money on a silly camera!"

It was a half-holiday at Clivedale School, and Bob Horton and his two chums of Study Sixteen in the Fourth were outside the School House admiring the new camera. At least, Bob and Willy were admiring it; Fatty had nothing but regrets.

"She's all loaded and ready," said Bob, as he handled the beautiful instrument. "What about some snapshots?"

"Too dull," said Willy, glancing at the overcast sky. "The wind's rising, and there'll probably be rain later."

"Too dull, my foot!" scoffed Bob. "This, my lad, is a camera! Not one of your ten-bob cardboard boxes covered with leather cloth! It'll take marvellous snaps on a day twice as dull as this."

"You needn't be so snooty about your posh camera," said Willy. "I suppose you were referring to my Blackie? Well, I took some pretty good snaps of you and Fatty with that in the summer. We went up into the Tower——"

"Everybody goes up into the Tower to take snaps," interrupted Bob. "Or else the bridge at Clivedale Chine. Why can't we think of something different? Something unusual?"

At this point the conversation was interrupted by the arrival of three other Fourth Formers—Wilkins and Langford and Trotter. The latter, being the unfortunate possessor of a long face and a permanent scowl, to say nothing of bushy eyebrows, was known in the Fourth as "Boris Karloff." A ridiculous nickname, because Trotter was as mild as a church mouse and inclined to be of a nervous disposition.

"You chaps doing anything this afternoon?" asked Wilkins boisterously.

Wilkins was a big, brawny, loud-voiced fellow who always broke up any party at his first moment of entry. But he was generous with his pocket money, and so the chaps put up with his rot.

"We thought about taking some snaps with my new camera," said Len. "You fellows can come along, if you like. We can't think of any novel place to go, though."

"What about Clivedale Chine?"

"We've just turned down Clivedale Chine. Everybody in the giddy school has been snapped in that alleged beauty spot."

"What about the old windmill?", suggested Langford.

"Or the Priory ruins?" said Willy Martin.

There were all sorts of suggestions, but Bob Horton turned them down. He wanted to do his new camera full justice, and every Clivedale fellow owning a camera had taken snaps, at one time or another, at the places mentioned.

"You want a jolly lot of pleasing," said Wilkins, with a sniff. "I'm not sure that I'll go with you, anyhow. There's nothing exciting in taking snapshots——"

"There's the old hulk," said Trotter apologetically, as though afraid of butting in.

"The old which?"

"You know—the old wreck on Curlew Shoal, in the middle of the river," said Trotter. "I should think you could take some really good snaps out there, using the old tub as a background. It's only an idea, of course——"

"Good old Boris Karloff!" chuckled Bob. "That's the very place! It'll be a bit of fun, too, rowing out to the hulk and climbing aboard."

"Funny thing," said Wilkins, "I was just going to suggest the old hulk, myself! We'll all go."

"And take sandwiches and cakes, eh?" said Fatty Bradshaw eagerly.

"That's an idea, too," said Wilkins. "I've got three-and-six to blue in. Anybody else got any contributions? We'll make a picnic of it!"

By the time they had raided the tuck shop and had obtained several parcels of eatables, they were not quite so enthusiastic. The wind had got up, and the sky was more threatening than ever. However, having made up their minds, they went ahead with the programme. Perhaps it wouldn't rain, after all.

Clivedale was not far from the coast, although essentially rural, and the River Chard was very wide, even five miles from its mouth—and, indeed, was quite an estuary at the spot where the Curlew Shoal divided the deep-water channel into two. Years ago, the river had been fairly important, with sailing barges plying up and down; but nowadays there was hardly ever a barge to be seen, for the former river traffic was carried by road, and the estuary, with its flat and empty marshes, was one of the loneliest spots imaginable.

The Clivedale boathouse was actually situated on the charming bank of the River Gell, a beautiful and placid stream which emptied itself into the Chard a mile or two from the school. The upper reaches of the river were used for the school regatta, and the school boats seldom ventured downstream into the Chard itself. For there was nothing picturesque in the estuary, even on a bright, sunny day, and the currents were tricky.

This afternoon, when the six Clivedale Fourth Formers dropped downstream in their roomy boat, the estuary was positively forbidding when it came into sight round a bend of the Gell. The flat marshes on the farther side of the wide stretch of water were hardly visible in the lowering mist. And the old hulk on Curlew Shoal looked like some ghost ship, vague and unreal.

"I don't know, you chaps," said Bob Horton. "I'm not sure it's a good idea, after all. Ugh! It looks mighty cold and unfriendly out there! And you know what the estuary is like when the tide starts coming in—it gets pretty rough."

"I'm awfully sorry——" began Trotter.

"Don't be an ass, Boris!" interrupted Wilkins, as he pulled hard at his oar. "If it was a good idea when you first thought of it, it's still a good idea. It'll be a bit of fun if the water gets up. It's my opinion that the clouds are going to break soon, and then we shall have sunshine."

Well out into the main river, the boys felt more confident. The water was comparatively calm, and when, at last, they shipped their oars under the lee of the old hulk, they experienced no difficulty in climbing aboard.

The wreck, a once-proud coasting schooner, had been lying on the shoal for years, and was so battered about by wind and tide and weather that a great deal of her hull had disintegrated, leaving her stout ribs exposed. She was listing to starboard, and well down by the stern. The active youngsters hauled themselves over the barnacle-smothered stern rail and cautiously ventured up the sloping deck.

"Better go easy, my sons," warned Bob. "I'm not sure that these planks are safe. Don't forget to make the boat fast, either. I'd better see to it myself——"

"No need," interrupted Wilkins. "I've tied her up."

They found that the planks were in surprisingly good condition, and the main part of the deck was perfectly sound, and safe to walk upon. There was an open hatchway amidships, and Bob looked down into the gloomy depths. The wreckage of a companion stairway was still there, and daylight was filtering through the broken gaps of the hull. The water swirled in and out of the gaps incessantly, making a monotonous gurgling and sucking noise.

"They say that when the old tub first went aground on the mud, here, you could go down into the cabins," remarked Bob. "But that was years ago—long before our time. Somebody once told me that six people were drowned——"

"They say the wreck's haunted, too," added Willy Martin, with a shiver. "I'm not surprised. I wouldn't like to be out here after dark. It's enough to give you the creeps, even now."

"Rats! That's only your imagination," said Wilkins. "Well, what about those snapshots?"

"Wouldn't it be a good idea," suggested Fatty, "to have the grub first? I mean, we should all look a lot happier!"

Bob took several excellent snaps, and after that sandwiches were passed round, much to Fatty Bradshaw's satisfaction. Cakes and pastries followed, and the feed was disposed of in record time. It was while Wilkins was enjoying his last cake as he leaned carelessly over the weather-beaten rail that he pointed scornfully down the river.

"Look at that!"

"Look at what?" asked Bob.

"Some careless chump is going to be sorry!" said Wilkins, with a snort. "It beats me how people can be so careless. A perfectly good boat, drifting out to sea!"

"By jingo, he's right, you chaps!"

They all looked at the surprising sight. A minute ago they would have sworn that the estuary was deserted. And now a smart-looking dinghy, with its oars shipped, was drifting leisurely down the river towards the sea. It was about two hundred yards from the old hulk.

"Funny we didn't see it before," said Bob, frowning. "I mean, it must have drifted right past the hulk. It couldn't have come from anywhere else, unless——"

He checked as a startling thought occurred to him.

"Unless what?" asked Wilkins.

"Unless it's our boat!" yelled Bob.

"Our boat!"

"Don't be an idiot——" began Wilkins.

But he was pushed aside as the other boys rushed helter skelter towards the stern. They arrived. They stared blankly at the grey water. And there was no boat.

"It is our boat!" said Willy Martin bleakly.

CHAPTER II

TRAPPED!

"MY ONLY sainted aunt!"

"Our boat!"

"And it's drifting out to the river mouth!"

"We're stranded!"

There were many ejaculations of dismay as the six Clivedale boys gazed mournfully at the dinghy as it continued on its way down the estuary. After the first few moments of consternation, however, five pairs of eyes swivelled like machine guns on Wilkins. He started guiltily.

"Here, I say——"

"You—you careless fathead!" said Bob Horton angrily.

"But, dash it——"

"I warned you to make the boat fast, and said I was going to see to it myself," continued Bob. "And you airily told me that it was all right—that you'd made it fast."

"I did make it fast!" roared Wilkins.

"It looks like it, doesn't it?"

"Somebody must have been monkeying with it," blustered the burly junior, very red in the face. "I—I mean—— Oh, rats! It's my fault, I suppose," he added lamely. "I thought I'd made it fast, but——"

"Well, it's no good grabbing you and giving you a ducking," growled Bob. "That wouldn't help matters."

"It would relieve our feelings," said Langford pointedly.

As yet they were only indignant. It was not until they had had time to review the position that many dire possibilities began to present themselves.

"This," said Bob Horton, "is a mess."

"You're telling us?" moaned Fatty. "What about tea? We've only had a snack, and we're bound to be late for tea. It might be hours before we can get back ashore!"

"You're an optimist," said Bob.

"Eh?"

"How many people have we seen since we got here?" asked Bob. "The river's deserted, and there's nothing but marshes on either side—and they're half hidden in the murk."

"There are some houses over there!" said Langford, pointing. "Behind that clump of trees——"

"Yes, I know, but is anybody likely to be looking in this direction for signals of distress?" said Bob. "No, our only chance is to attract the attention of a barge, or some other boat. And I don't believe there are any barges or boats on the river. I tell you, we're in a mess."

"Too far to swim, I suppose?" suggested Trotter mildly.

"Don't be a bigger ass than you can help, Boris!" growled Wilkins. "We're

all pretty good swimmers—except you—but we could never make it. Besides, everybody knows that the currents out here in the estuary are dangerous. So, we're marooned—and it's all my fatheaded fault for not securing the boat!"

"Oh, well, we shall just have to stick here until they miss us at the school, and send out search parties," said Willy Martin resignedly.

Bob Horton started.

"Did any of you chaps tell anybody else where we were going?" he asked. "I didn't——"

"Neither did we!" chorussed the others.

"Then we needn't expect help from the school," said Bob. "There wouldn't be any organised search until after dark, anyhow, and who the dickens would think of looking for us out here in the middle of the estuary?"

It was a grim thought.

"They might miss the boat," suggested somebody.

"What if they do? They'll think we went for a row down the river," said Bob. "Anybody got any matches?"

Nobody had any matches.

"Then we can't even break up some of this old wood and make a smoke signal," growled Bob. "We shall just have to wait until we spot somebody on the shore—— Oh, crumbs! This has come just to make everything perfect!"

Without warning a heavy rain squall had swept down from the lowering clouds. With it came a fierce wind which whipped up the surface of the water, and sent the waves chugging noisily against the old hulk's ribs. The boys turned their backs to the blast and turned up their coat collars.

"Aren't we having fun?" mumbled Langford. "You and your giddy camera, Horton!"

"Well, that's a bit thick, blaming my camera!" protested Bob. "We should have been on our way back to the Gell by now if we'd had the boat."

"No need to rub it in," growled Wilkins.

The squall increased in violence until it became a veritable gale. The weather had deteriorated much more rapidly than the boys had realised. The wind was roaring up the estuary from the sea, and the rain beat down in torrents. Both banks of the river, far distant, were now completely obscured. Any chance of signalling for help was doomed. To make matters worse, the temperature had fallen considerably, and the marooned schoolboys were soon cold and shivering.

"Can't we get out of this rain somehow?" asked Wilkins.

"We might crouch down behind the bulwarks, but it's not much protection," said Bob, shouting to make himself heard against the confused roar of the wind and sea. "What about the tide in this river? It might be coming in soon, and then the water will rise—— I say, it doesn't rise right over the hulk, does it?"

"Of course not, ass," said Wilkins. "I've often seen it at high tide, and it's still well above the water—although, of course, the shoal itself is covered."

"Well, that's a comfort."

After a while they gave up searching the bleak river and concentrated on finding shelter. Somebody suggested the old hatchway, and soon they were testing the strength of the companion stairway.

Many of the treads were rotted through, but by carefully picking their way they descended without mishap. Down here they found themselves in a gloomy cavern of strange noises and tricky draughts. The wind came surging through the many gaps in the hull, and the water was now swirling up and down in a most menacing way, its surface covered with foam and froth.

There was practically no floor, but there were plenty of old timbers to which the boys were able to cling. Each one secured a firm hold, and at least they were out of the rain. They could feel the hulk quivering and shaking from stem to stern as the choppy water swept round it.

"Well, we can stay here until the rain's over, anyhow," said Bob Horton. "As soon as it shows any sign of letting up, one of us, at least, ought to go up and keep watch. Not that there's much chance of anybody being on the river on an afternoon like this."

"We can take it in turns," said Wilkins.

They fell silent, listening to the drumming beat of the rain on the rotten decks, and the howling of the wind in and out of the many holes in the hull. It was "Boris Karloff" who broke the silence.

"I'm afraid," he said gently, "that this is all my fault."

"Don't be a mug——"

"But it is!" insisted Trotter miserably. "It was I who suggested the hulk. But I didn't realise that the weather was likely to get so bad——"

"If it was anybody's fault, it was mine," interrupted Bob Horton. "It's my camera, and I wanted to take some snaps—— Crumbs! I hope nothing happens to the camera!"

"I hope nothing happens to us!" said Fatty, with a groan. "If only Wilkins had tied the boat properly——"

It was no good starting that argument over again, and Fatty was promptly silenced. Wilkins was admittedly careless, but he was a good chap, and he was thoroughly miserable over the result of his negligence.

Strangely enough, not one of the boys remembered a certain peculiarity of the River Chard—and this peculiarity was the bore which came with the flood. The tide, instead of turning unobtrusively, manifested itself in the form of a wave which came rolling up the estuary, sweeping along from bank to bank.

As a matter of fact, the Clivedale chaps were a bit disgusted with the Chard's famous bore. In their opinion, it was a swindle. Every new kid at Clivedale was solemnly told about the bore, and advised to go and see it—only to find, as a general rule, that it was a mere insignificant ripple passing up the river almost unnoticed.

To-day the conditions were very different.

The wind, which was still high, was sweeping directly in from the sea, and the tide, when it turned, was likely to do so in a spectacular way. It was one of the rare occasions when wind and tide were in unison, and the bore, in consequence, would be quite formidable.

As though fate itself conspired against the Fourth Formers, they were all sheltering in the interior of the hulk at the very moment when they should have been on the lookout. Even a minute's warning of the bore's coming would have been sufficient. But they heard nothing—saw nothing—and they had completely forgotten the bore.

It was coming up the estuary now—and it was a sinister, forbidding sight. A veritable tidal wave, many feet high, its crest white with foam, and lashed by the wind, with spume and spray tearing itself away from the main bulk.

Nearer and nearer it came, rolling along relentlessly and with terrifying speed.

The boys received a warning, but it was too late.

"I say, what on earth's that rummy noise?" said Bob Horton suddenly, as he cocked his head on one side.

"You mean the wind?" asked Willy.

"No, something else—a kind of confused roar," said Bob. "Listen! It's getting louder! Like a train going through a tunnel——"

"It's only the rain on the deck," said Wilkins.

And then, at that moment, the bore reached the hulk and struck it with terrific violence. Exactly what happened in the minute following was an utter confusion of startling events.

The old wreck heeled right over to port, her timbers groaning and straining, and many of her planks cracking with noises like pistol shots. Willy Martin was torn from his hold and he plunged with a startled yell into the foaming water below. A tremendous cascade of sea came crashing down the hatchway, smothering everybody.

Gasping and spluttering, terrified by the unexpectedness of the event, the boys just clung to anything they could grasp. Willy Martin, in fact, was the only one who had been torn away from his hold. And the disaster which happened to him was utterly appalling. Plunging about in the foaming water, he felt himself being swept out of the hulk between two of the exposed ribs—and some instinct told him that if he was once carried through, he would be as good as dead. The tide would carry him with it, and he would be swept along on the very crest of the bore. The strongest swimmer in the world could not hope to survive.

Willy clutched with all his strength at one of the timber ribs. He secured a hold, but the surging water carried him outside the hull. All this happened, it must be remembered, in a fraction of a minute. And as Willy clung there the hulk heeled over to port—

He was trapped!

He gave a smothered yell of pain and surprise as he felt his legs being crushed. At least, so he thought in that first dreadful second. Actually, the mud was soft, and the full dead weight of the wreck pressed him deeper and deeper into the mud, from his waist downwards. The water was surging all over him in a flood, until he could hardly breathe.

The bore passed—

Curiously enough, with the turn of the tide the weather improved. The strength of the wind dropped abruptly, and the rain ceased. As the last splashes of spray descended down the hatchway, a feeble gleam of watery sunshine trickled in. The roar of the bore decreased until it was a mere murmur, and a strange kind of peace settled over the old hulk—which, however, was now in quite a different position.

“What was it?” gurgled Wilkins. “An earthquake?”

“Everybody all right?” asked Bob Horton anxiously.

“Think so!” said Fatty, blinking. “I don’t think I’ve swallowed more than a gallon of salt water— What happened, anyhow?”

“It was the bore,” said Bob. “We’d forgotten all about it—”

“The bore,” yelled Wilkins. “Don’t make me laugh! The bore’s only a feeble little wave that wouldn’t upset a paper boat! I’ve seen it dozens of times—”

“But not when there was a gale roaring up the estuary,” said Bob. “That made all the difference.” He looked about him after brushing the water out of his eyes. “We’d better get up on deck. The rain seems to have stopped.” He started. “I say, where’s Willy Martin? I can’t see him— Hey, Willy!”

They all looked about them in consternation.

“Willy!” they yelled.

A faint answering hail came from somewhere apparently beneath them and outside the hull. And then, as Bob shifted his position he saw his chum. Willy Martin was outside the wreck, clinging to an exposed rib. The water had now subsided, and was fairly quiet; he was immersed up to his waist.

“What happened to you?” asked Bob, in relief. “My hat! Do you mean to say you were swept right out there? You were jolly lucky to catch hold of something, my son! It’s all right now. You can get back—”

"I can't!" came a gasp from Willy Martin. "My—my legs——"

"Your legs!" repeated Bob sharply.

"I'm pinned down," groaned Willy. "My legs are completely embedded in the mud, and I'm held here by this rotten timber. I can't shift an inch."

There was fresh consternation. Bob Horton plunged into the water and struggled to his chum's side. But in that confined space it was impossible to help him. In any case, Willy was *outside*. The only way in which he could be dragged free from the mud would be by hauling on him from the *outside*—and without a boat the boys were helpless.

It was a relief to learn that Willy was in no actual pain. His legs felt numb, he said, but he didn't think they were crushed. He was just held there, and all his efforts to drag himself free were in vain.

"If you chaps could heel the wreck over to starboard again, I might manage it," he said. "But how the dickens can you do an impossible thing like that?"

"We'll get you out," promised Bob but without much conviction.

He gave the others a look, and they managed to scramble up the old companion-way to the deck. Bob cast an anxious glance over the river, and swept his eyes in all directions. There was not a living thing in sight, except a few seagulls. And dusk was beginning to fall.

They went to the wreck's side, and looked over. Owing to the list, however, they could not see their unfortunate chum. Bob Horton and Wilkins exchanged a glance, and then they both peeled off their wet clothes until they were stripped to their shorts. Then they plunged into the cold water.

Swimming round, they soon located Willy Martin. Using all their efforts, they attempted to drag him through, but after only a few minutes Bob realised that the endeavour was hopeless. They could gain no sustained pull, and the tide was running so strongly that they were compelled to spend more than half their time keeping their own positions. Finally they got back on to the wreck, and Bob was now haggard with anxiety. A dreadful conviction was hammering itself into his tortured mind.

"It's no good," he muttered hoarsely. "We can't do anything without help—and the tide's rising all the time!"

"But Willy's not in danger——" began Langford.

"Don't you *understand*?" groaned Bob. "He's pinned—and the tide's rising! In less than an hour it will be up to his neck, and he can't move! It will rise right over his head, and he'll be drowned before our eyes."

CHAPTER III

TOUCH AND GO

The FIVE Clivedale boys looked at one another in horror. Until that moment the horrible acuteness of Willy Martin's predicament had not impressed itself upon them.

"And there's not a chance in a thousand of anybody using the river on a filthy evening like this," said Wilkins, his voice more than shaky. "We've got to do something ourselves, you chaps. We can't rely on chance. Martin's going to get drowned unless we act promptly."

"Not so loud, you ass," muttered Bob. "He might hear us—and we want to keep the truth from him for as long as possible. I don't believe he's thought of the tide yet."

He turned towards the rail with a sudden determined light in his eyes.

"See you fellows later," he said briefly.

"Here, what are you going to do?" asked Wilkins sharply.

"I'm going to swim ashore—or try to!"

"You're mad! It's impossible!"

"Anyhow, we shall have done our best," retorted Bob.

"Is there any sense in two of us being drowned instead of one?" demanded Wilkins excitedly. "Besides, if anybody's going to swim ashore, it's going to be me!"

"Don't be an ass——"

"I'm a better swimmer than you are!" roared Wilkins. "Didn't I beat you at the sports?"

"Only by an inch!"

"Well, that inch may make all the difference," said Wilkins stubbornly. "Besides, it was my fault that the boat got adrift, and this is my job! Try and stop me!"

With a clean plunge he dived into the water, and was soon swimming strongly away from the hulk. He turned once and waved a cheery hand. Bob Horton was helpless.

"The silly, impulsive chump!" he said fiercely. "It was my idea to swim ashore. Why couldn't some of you chaps have stopped him?"

"Ever tried to stop a cyclone?" retorted Langford. "He was overboard before we could blink."

Bob's eyes grew warm.

"He's a good chap, old Wilkins," he said softly.

They watched the lone swimmer as he struggled on, and it was soon obvious that Wilkins was having a strenuous fight against the tide. At first he seemed to be progressing quite well on his way to the shore; but then, although he was swimming as strongly as ever, he apparently made no further headway, although he was being swept gradually up-stream.

"I say, you chaps!" came a faint voice.

Bob and the others had nearly forgotten the unfortunate Willy Martin, and they now crowded inside and shouted encouragement to him; telling him that Wilkins had gone off to get help.

"The tide's coming in!" came Willy's voice.

"Yes, we know," shouted Bob. "But Wilkins will get back here in time. Don't worry."

"The water's halfway up my chest already——"

"Keep your pecker up, old man," called Bob, with an anguished glance at the others. "Wilkins is swimming like a champion, and we'll soon have you out of this mess."

He wondered if he was justified in giving the trapped junior false hopes. For he could not choke down a conviction that they were false hopes. Even if Wilkins succeeded—and there was no certainty of it—how could he bring help in time? A boat would take half an hour to get back, and there was no telling how long it would take Wilkins to find somebody with a boat! Bob Horton began to sweat from sheer fear.

Meanwhile, Wilkins was battling gamely against the tide. It was quite true that he was the best swimmer in the Fourth, and at the sports he had run away with practically every prize. Bob, perhaps, was better in the shorter events, but when it came to dogged endurance, Wilkins's big frame and strong muscles stood him in good stead.

But he had never attempted anything like this before! The currents were tricky and dangerous, and although he was swimming with all the strength of his young limbs he had an ominous fear that he was getting no nearer to the shore. He was only holding his own against the current. And how long could that last?

Another squall came sweeping in from the sea, just to make things a bit harder. For, from the very level of the water, the rain blotted out everything, and Wilkins was unable to see the shore.

He lost his bearings!

Looking about him, as he took a brief rest, he could see nothing but the choppy river water and the rainy mist in the distance; and it was the same in every direction. Even the old hulk had disappeared in the murk. His heart sank. He swam on with clenched teeth, and automatically allowed himself to drift with the tide.

Little did Wilkins realise that that rain squall had not only saved his own life, but had made it possible for him to obtain help for Willy Martin!

For, instead of continuing his fight against the current, in order to reach the shore, he subconsciously swam with the current. And this took him a considerable way up-stream. When the squall passed, and he looked about him, he was startled to see the hulk more than a mile down river.

"Crumbs! How did I get here?" gurgled Wilkins.

It seemed to him that the going was easier.

The current did not tug at him so strongly. The shore looked considerably nearer, too. In fact, the drift had carried him right back on his tracks, and instead of approaching the north shore, he was now making for the south shore. Which was one reason why he was so surprised.

He was now beginning to feel the strain.

He was far from exhausted yet, but he knew, in his heart, that he could not carry on much longer. His limbs were becoming feelingless from the cold, and they were stiff and awkward. In spite of the urgency—in spite of his great desire to get to the shore as soon as possible—he was compelled to turn over on his back and rest for a while, floating.

When he resumed swimming again, however, his limbs were stiffer than ever, and the gradual fear took possession of him that he had bitten off more than he could chew. Nearer though the shore looked, it was still a long way off. He just plugged on doggedly, and was now getting desperate.

Suddenly he blinked, and stared feverishly at a jutting breakwater which stood out from the lonely shore. He thought he saw a figure on the breakwater. He stopped swimming, and trod water.

Yes, it was a man in oilskins and sou'wester!

"Hi!" yelled Wilkins.

At least, he meant it to be a yell; but it was only a feeble croak, which could not have been heard ten yards away. He waved frantically. The figure in oilskins—evidently a man fishing—took no notice.

Wilkins swam on again, splashing considerably, and making as much commotion as possible. When he paused, and looked at the breakwater again, he thought that he must have been dreaming.

For the breakwater was empty!

There was no man in oilskins and sou'wester—nothing but the wet, deserted breakwater itself! And along the shore on either hand, there were nothing but barren marshes. Not a living thing in sight. Wilkins came to the conclusion that his eyes must have deceived him.

He felt hopeless then, indeed.

How could a trick of the light and shadows have so deceived him? It was more than he could understand. And now he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that he would never be able to reach the shore. He had swum into another cross-current, and all his efforts to get out of it were in vain. He knew that he was being carried relentlessly away from the shore, back towards the centre of the estuary.

Despair had him in its grip as he took a last look at the breakwater—something black shot out from beyond the wooden piles at the end, and in the same moment Wilkins became aware of a throbbing chug-chug-chug on the air.

"A motor-boat!" he gurgled thankfully.

And then, of course, he understood. The man in the oilskins and sou'-

wester must have seen him—and hidden from the swimmer's view behind the lee of the breakwater was the stranger's motor-boat, safe from the storm. Now the boat was coming out powerfully towards him: and it seemed only a matter of seconds before it was near at hand, its engine throttled down. Strong hands reached out to grasp him as the boat glided past.

"You're all right, young 'un," said a gruff voice. "Just take it easy."

Almost before Wilkins knew it, he was dragged into the boat over the stern, and he was grateful for the warmth of the cockpit, especially as his rescuer had wrapped a blanket round him. The plucky schoolboy was so numb and so exhausted that at first he could not get his jaw to operate, and when he tried to speak he made a hash of it.

"Didn't I tell you to take it easy?" said the stranger, who was a middle-aged man with a kindly, bronzed face. "As soon as you're feeling better I shall want you to tell me what you were doing swimming the estuary in your singlet and shorts—and at this time of the year!"

"The hulk!" muttered Wilkins hoarsely, at last getting his speech back. "Please—please make for the old hulk on Curlew Shoal, sir! One of my pals—drowning——"

"What's that?" said his rescuer sharply.

And then Wilkins told him. Long before he had finished his story the motor-boat's engine was racing all out, and the craft was churning through the water on its way to Curlew Shoal.

All the same, it was touch and go——

Poor Willy Martin was in desperate straits. With the rising tide, he was already nearly submerged. Bob Horton was with him in an agony of hopeless suspense.

Bob knew that he could do no good by doing what he was doing, but he felt that his presence was some little comfort to his chum. When Willy had shouted that the water was nearly up to his neck, Bob had plunged overboard. And now, clinging to one of the hulk's old ribs, he was close at hand.

Willy, trapped by the mud, and unable to shift, was facing a terrible death. The water was not only up to his neck, but every big wave surged right over him. And these waves were getting more and more frequent. It was only occasionally, now, that his mouth and nostrils were free of water for more than a minute at a time.

"I'll have one more shot!" said Bob desperately.

He got his hands under Willy's armpits, and struggled desperately. But there was no result. Then another wave came, and they were both half-smothered, and Bob was sent lurching against the hulk's side, grazing his shoulder.

"It's no good, old son," whispered Willy, trying his hardest to force a smile. "Get back on the deck while you're safe. It's all up with me, I'm afraid. I—I'll try and take it on the chin."

"What do you mean—all up with you?" shouted Bob, his voice cracking with excitement. "Here's old Wilkins! In a motor-boat! And it's coming right along! Good old Wilkins!"

And then Bob nearly choked. For the life of him he could not understand how Wilkins could have got back so quickly. He had given up in despair long ago—— He felt the boat scrape past him. He heard frantic cheers from the deck.

"Hurrah!"

"Wilkins has done the trick!"

"Martin's saved!"

Bob took no notice of the shouts. With Wilkins' help, he scrambled into the boat.

"We'll soon have Martin safe now," said Wilkins eagerly. "This is Mr.

Finch—owns the big house along the Clivedale Dene road—you know, that one called The Firs. He was out fishing, and happened to see me——”

“Stop chattering, you two, and lend me a hand,” interrupted Mr. Finch sharply. “Your friend is in a nasty fix. The only possible chance of saving him is to fasten a strong rope under his armpits and haul him out by sheer force. I think the motor-boat is going to save the situation.”

This programme was adopted. The boat was held alongside the hulk by Bob Horton and Wilkins while Mr. Finch, bending overside, secured the strong rope round Willy Martin's chest. Then, very gradually at first, the boat was edged away until the rope was taut. Then Mr. Finch increased the power of the engine, and they all watched anxiously.

“If it's hurting you, shout!” called Mr. Finch.

“It's not hurting me, sir,” panted Willy. “I—I can feel my legs slipping. Go ahead, sir!”

He was interrupted by a smother of water which surged over his head. And then, suddenly, as a cork is drawn from a bottle, the imprisoned junior came free. The mud, although holding him tightly against any of his own efforts, was not proof against the steady pull of the motor-boat. Willy was now flopping about in the water like a freshly-landed fish.

He was quickly dragged to the boat's side, and by this time a good deal of the mud had been washed from his clothing. When he was dragged aboard he was blue with cold, and he was unable to speak, but there was a smile on his face.

“We mustn't waste any time, boys,” said Mr. Finch gravely. “The sooner this youngster is put to bed the better. Get aboard, all of you!”

They needed no second bidding. Hurriedly, they tumbled into the motor-boat, and soon it was speeding up-stream towards the mouth of the Gell and the Clivedale boathouse.

Luckily, Willy Martin and Wilkins were both sturdy fellows, and a night of complete rest in warm beds brought complete recovery—except for aching limbs. Wilkins felt as though he had been through a mangle, and Willy's legs were black and blue with sundry bruises. Otherwise, the pair was unharmed. Thanks to Mr. Finch, an adventure which might have ended in disaster was—just an adventure.

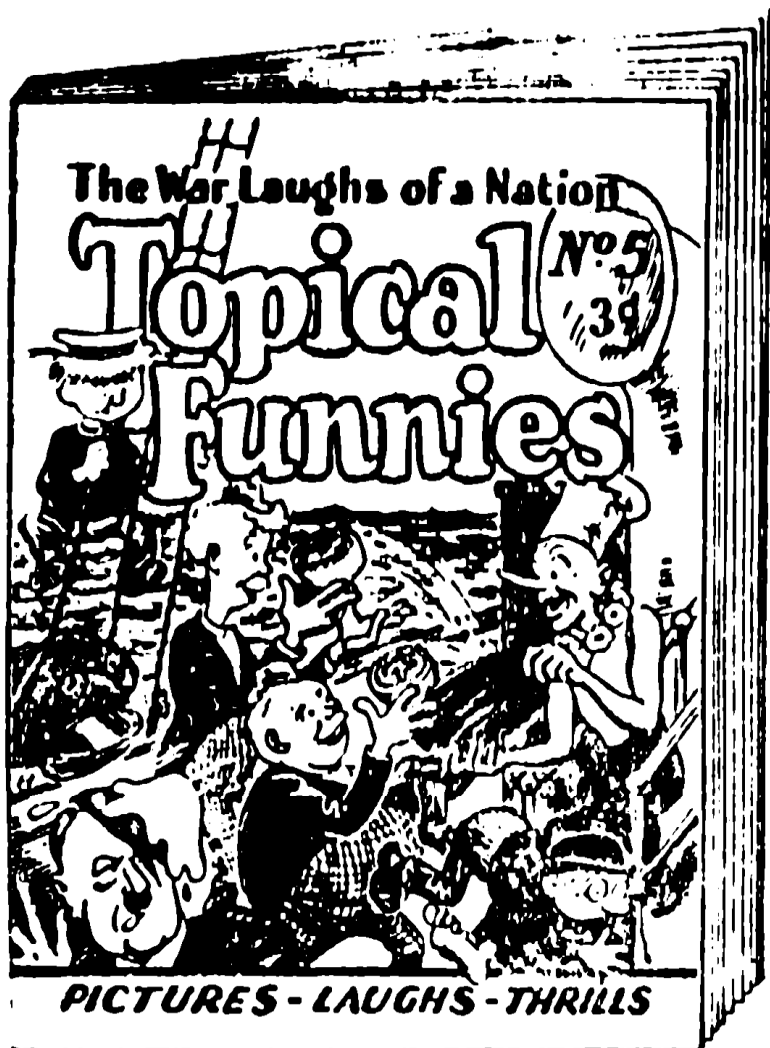
Bob Horton's snapshots came out splendidly. Incidentally, he had saved his precious camera. And every one of those six boys prized the snaps tremendously, for they were in the nature of a memento of the most exciting afternoon they had ever spent!

THE END

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