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Another Exciting Story of NELSON LEE and NIPPER at ST. FRANK'S COLLEGE.
Prepared for Publication by the Author of "The Secret Menace," "Lost at Sea," etc.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE.

Nelson Lee and Nipper are at St. Frank's College, to escape the attentions of the murderous Chinese Secret Society, the Fu Chang Tong, whose hatred they have incurred. Although living in the school in the characters of master and pupil, Nelson Lee and Nipper, nevertheless, find many opportunities to utilise their unique detective ability in various mysterious and adventurous cases.

CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH CECIL DE VALERIE RESORTS TO VERY DESPERATE MEASURES.

"WHAT'S wrong with De Valerie?" That question was being asked by a good many fellows of the Remove, in the Ancient House at St. Frank's. The answers given were generally varied and sometimes wild. And they were all guesswork. Nobody knew exactly what was wrong with Cecil De Valerie, of the Remove.

One fact, however, was undoubtedly evident.

Something was very wrong with "The Rotter." Usually he was urbane and supercilious in his manner; he sneered at almost everything, and was a particular pal of the Ancient House "Nuts"—Fullwood & Co.

But just lately De Valerie had become a changed being. He no longer went to Fullwood's study for smokes and cards; he no longer went about with a haughty, disdainful smile upon his dark, almost foreign-looking face; he no longer lounged about dressed with gorgeous elegance.

On the contrary, De Valerie had become careless in his attire, and he appeared to be in a constant state of deep thought. There were lines under his eyes, telling of sleepless nights; yet it was known that he had not broken bounds after lights-out recently. When spoken to by anybody, he generally looked up abstractedly, and only returned snappy answers to questions.

Yes, there was undoubtedly something amiss with the Rotter of the Remove.

Of course, this change didn't affect the general run of fellows. Dick Bennett & Co. and their followers—the decent members of the Remove—took no particular notice of De Valerie at the best of times. Dick Bennett himself—in other words, Nipper—was rather interested, perhaps, but he had many other

things to think about. He hadn't time to worry about De Valerie.

Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell, of Study A, however, were rather concerned. They wanted De Valerie to join in their little "flutters" and card-parties. The Rotter usually possessed a well-filled purse, and Fullwood & Co. saw no reason why they shouldn't help to empty it.

Only just recently there had been exciting events at St. Frank's. An old loft had caught fire, resulting in the tragic death of a Bannington errand-boy, named Harry Binnson. But by this time the affair had lost its grimness. A bare week had passed, it is true, but schoolboys are spirited beings.

Nobody in the Remove connected De Valerie's change of manner with the fire, although the two events practically coincided.

In Study A one evening Ralph Leslie Fullwood laid down the law.

"It's no good goin' on like this," he declared. "There's got to be a change."

"Haven't we asked De Valerie a dozen times what's wrong with him?" demanded Gulliver. "I'm fed up with him, Fully. Rats to him!"

"Well, we'll ask him again, anyhow," said Fullwood, fingering his monocle. "I was thinkin' of touchin' him for a quid or two, as a matter of fact. He's always got plenty of tin, an' I was practically shelled out the other night. Until my pater sends the next dose along I'm well-nigh stony."

Bell grinned.

"So that's why you want to be pally with De Valerie?" he asked. "I wouldn't give much for your chances, old man."

"Why not?"

"Well, it was only a day or two ago that De Valerie was asking us for a loan himself," replied Bell cheerfully. "Unless he's had a remittance in the meantime, I should say your chances were rotten! I'd lend you

a quid myself, only I've only got about three bob!"

"You'd lend a lot, wouldn't you?" sneered Fullwood. "I know all about your three bob! Of all the mean cads in this school——"

"Are you talking about me?" roared Bell.

"My dear chap, I'm not going to have a row with you," interrupted Fullwood. "You're a pal of mine, but I can think what I like of you, I suppose? Come on, let's go along to Study M."

Bell glared, but made no further remark. Perhaps he felt that Fullwood's accusation was somewhat justified, for a couple of pound notes reposed in his pocket at that very moment. It was one of Bell's failings, however, to declare himself stony when he was quite the opposite.

The Nuts left their study and passed along the Remove passage. Cheery voices came from behind most of the closed doors. From one or two—Study D in particular—there were voices which were the opposite of cheery. Handforth, as usual, was leading his poor study-mates a terrible life. The periods when discord was not apparent in Study D were few and far between.

Arriving at a door which was marked "M," Fullwood knocked and tried the handle. The door was locked.

"Silly ass!" muttered Fullwood. "Hi, open this door, De Valerie!"

An impatient exclamation came from within.

"Go away!" came the irritable command.

"Look here, if you can't let a pal in your study, I won't have anything more to do with you!" shouted Fullwood wrathfully. "If you don't open the door, you rotter, I'll bust it down!"

Gulliver and Bell grinned, and the sound of movement came from within the little apartment. The key turned in the lock, and then Cecil De Valerie stood in the doorway. He was attired in a flowing dressing-gown of some rich material, and a curious cap, shaped something like a fez, was upon his head.

"What's the matter?" asked De Valerie impatiently.

Fullwood & Co. pushed past him into the study, and Bell closed the door. The only light within the apartment was the cheerful blaze of the fire. The air was thick with curiously pungent tobacco smoke, which had an Eastern aroma. And piled on the hearth-rug were many cushions. Obviously the Rotter had been taking things easily.

"Blessed if I can understand you!" said Fullwood sourly. "What's the idea of this rot, De Valerie? Why can't you behave like a human being, instead of a mad character from the 'Arabian Nights'?"

De Valerie's dark eyes gleamed.

"If you'll mind your business I'll mind mine!" he snapped.

"All right, keep your hair on!" said Fullwood. "Shove that switch down, Gulliver, for goodness' sake. If this ass likes gloom, I don't!"

Gulliver turned the electric light on, and the study became flooded with brilliant illu-

mination. De Valerie stood by the table, his face clouded over angrily. It was quite clear that he did not like being disturbed. Fullwood & Co., however, were by no means possessed of delicate feelings.

"I'll give you just one minute," said the Rotter icily. "Say what you've got to say, and then clear out!"

"Jolly cheerful, ain't you?" said Gulliver.

"No, I'm not!" snapped De Valerie. "And, if it will interest you, the sight of your face hasn't raised my spirits in the least, Gulliver. I shall be a lot happier after you've taken it away!"

Gulliver, whose face was not exactly his strong point, turned red.

"You let my face alone!" he shouted.

"I haven't the slightest intention of touching it," said De Valerie. "I use my hands for more delicate purposes!"

"Why, you—you——"

"Oh, shut up!" interrupted Fullwood. "Don't start slanging one another now! You know jolly well that your face is enough to make the fire go out, Gully—so what's the good of gettin' ratty?"

Gulliver tried to speak, but nearly choked instead.

"The fact of the matter is," went on Fullwood, "we want to find out what's wrong with you, De Valerie. You've been moonin' about for days. We're your pals, an' it's rotten to be left out in the cold. Can't we do anythin' to help?"

"Thanks all the same," said the Rotter. "I'm quite all right by myself, if you're agreeable. Finished? If so, I'd like to be alone——"

"Hang it all, De Valerie, I'm not goin' to be turned out of your rotten study!" declared Fullwood hotly. "Why the deuce can't you be civil? Don't you know that you're completely changed? Don't you know that all the fellows are jawin' about you?"

"I don't care!" growled De Valerie. "Let them jaw!"

"Well, I agree with you there," remarked Fullwood. "But that's no reason why you should treat us the same. We might be able to help you. You haven't got any secrets from us, I suppose?"

De Valerie looked at his visitors steadily.

"There are some things a chap can't speak about—even to his pals!" he said quietly. "If you had an ounce of good breeding in you, you'd clear out without any further argument. I want to be alone—is that good enough?"

Ralph Leslie Fullwood gritted his teeth.

"Good breeding, eh?" he roared. "If you suggest that——"

"Oh, hang it! Clear out!"

Fullwood banged his fist down upon the table forcibly.

"I'll clear out when I like!" he declared furiously. "We came here to help you, an' to cheer you up. An' all you can do is to slang us, an' tell us to get out! Well, you can go to the dickens!"

It was certainly exasperating. Fullwood & Co. had done their best to remain on amicable terms. But De Valerie had spoken

with brutal frankness, and there is a limit to the best of tempers.

De Valerie walked round the table and opened the door.

"Mind the step!" he said mockingly.

Gulliver kicked the door viciously, and it slammed to with a crash.

"If you think you're going to order us out of your study, you're jolly well mistaken!" he roared. "Look here, Fully, let's roll the cad in his own cinders! You're not goin' to stand this kind of thing, I suppose?"

"I'm waiting for you to go," said De Valerie quietly. "I don't want a row with you chaps, but if you're anxious for one you won't find me unready. I've got a decent pair of fists——"

"You howlin' rotter!" interrupted Fullwood savagely. "I don't care a hang what happens to you now! You can be certain of one thing, though—we don't want anythin' more to do with you!"

"Good!" said De Valerie calmly.

"You can go to the dogs in your own way!"

"Thanks!"

"An' I've done with you for good!" roared Fullwood.

"Splendid!"

De Valerie's calmness was absolutely maddening. Fullwood & Co. simply glared at him as though they would like to kill him on the spot. But somehow, although they were three to one, they made no attempt to touch him. His easy attitude was suggestive of grim determination.

"We've done with you—do you hear?" snarled Fullwood. "If you come crawlin' round Study A, you'll get kicked out! If you speak to us in the common-room, or in the Triangle, we'll cut you dead!"

"Absolutely dead!" reiterated Gulliver and Bell fiercely.

"You'll never have the chance," said De Valerie, speaking with cold deliberation. "It'll be quite a long while before I'll do you the honour of addressing you. I had my doubts all along as to whether you were good enough to be acquainted with me. Now, if you've done, you'd better go!"

Fullwood took a deep breath. In spite of himself, he couldn't help feeling that he and his chums were getting decidedly the worst of the argument. They had been made to look absurdly small—and their own threats and jibes struck them as being hollow and childish.

There was only one thing to be done; their exit from the study was almost imperative. They didn't feel equal to the task of returning as good as they received. So, with furious snorts, they flung out into the passage.

A mocking chuckle from within Study M in no way improved their feelings. Cecil De Valerie locked the door, and his face became grim.

"The interfering cads!" he muttered. "I told them what I thought of them, anyhow! By Jove, they didn't like it a little bit!"

He was quite angry himself, but he didn't show it as the others did. And, as he calmed down, he realised that he had not been alto-

gether wise in breaking with Fullwood & Co. However, the thing was done now, so De Valerie shrugged his shoulders and stretched his hand out towards the electric light switch.

As he did so there came a soft tap upon the window-pane. He frowned, and stood quite still. The blind was down, so the tapper, whoever he was, could not see into the study.

Tap! Tap! The sound was repeated, and it seemed to be stealthy and mysterious. De Valerie switched the light off with an impatient exclamation. He didn't want to be bothered now by anybody. It was probably one of the fellows outside, indulging in a silly joke. But it would be just as well to settle the thing.

So the Rotter crossed over to the window and jerked the blind up. The flickering fire-light was reflected on the window-panes, and he couldn't see anything outside. So he pushed up the sash and looked out. A dim form stood in the darkness. The Remove studies were all on the ground floor, and looked out upon the Triangle.

"Who's that?" said De Valerie impatiently.

"Good evening, young gent!" murmured a husky, beery voice. "I thought you wasn't comin'—and that would 'ave been awkward."

De Valerie caught his breath in with a hiss.

"Bradmore!" he exclaimed tensely.

"The same, at your service, Master De Valerie," murmured the voice. "No need to git startled, you young shaver! I ain't comin' in. I just wanted to 'ave a couple of words with you on the Q.T.!"

"Hang you!" murmured the Rotter. "What did you come here for?"

"No 'arm done, is there? I knowed your winder easy," went on the mysterious Mr. Bradmore. "There ain't a soul about, so you needn't git scared. Come down to the White 'Arp at 'arf-past ten, and bring ten quid with you. I'll be waitin' in the back parlour."

"Look here, I can't do it!" exclaimed De Valerie angrily. "Confound you, Bradmore, you've skinned me of every penny, and I'm broke! Ten quid! Why, I haven't got ten bob! You'll have to wait——"

A growl came in through the window.

"None o' them tricks, my lad," said the dim Mr. Bradmore sharply. "I shall be waitin' for you in the bar parlour—savvy? An' if you don't turn up with ten quid, I'll tell all I know to——"

"Don't speak here!" hissed De Valerie in alarm. "I can't do it, Bradmore—I can't do it! I haven't got the money!"

"That's why I've come along now—to give you fair warnin'," murmured Mr. Bradmore. "Between now and bedtime you can go round borrowin' off your little friends. See? An' if you don't bring the whole ten my conscience will be so unsettled that I shall feel compelled, agin my will, to speak to the police——"

"I'll—I'll try!" gasped De Valerie huskily.

"Ah, that's better! I thought you'd change your tone afore long," murmured Mr.

Bradmore, in an oily, satisfied voice. "Don't forget the time, young 'un—'arf-past ten. I shall be waitin' for you."

The man left the window, and crossed the Triangle quickly and silently. De Valerie watched him until he was swallowed up in the darkness. Then, with a savage exclamation, the Rotter closed the window and pulled the blind down.

He stood in the middle of his study with clenched fists.

"Ten quid—by half-past ten!" he muttered. "Oh, it's impossible—I can't get it! There's nobody I can borrow the money from, anyhow! What a mad idiot I was to quarrel with Fullwood!"

De Valerie paced his study feverishly. And the more he considered the situation, the worse it became. The problem which confronted him bristled with insuperable difficulties.

"This'll be the end—the finish of it all!" the boy muttered to himself bitterly. "I can't find the money, and the whole truth will come out! But it can't—it mustn't! Good heavens, I've got to do something!"

He was nearly mad with worry; he lost all count of time. But at last a desperate idea came into his head—a wild, rascally idea. But there was nothing else for it—nothing but sheer disaster.

It was bedtime almost before he knew it. Supper had been forgotten, and in any case he didn't care a hang about eating. His mind was so full of terrible thoughts that all else was insignificant.

He tried to appear unconcerned when he went up to the dormitory with the rest of the Remove; but his efforts were unsuccessful, and several juniors looked at his pale face and gleaming eyes rather curiously.

Nipper in particular was struck by the change in the Rotter. During the day he had been more himself; at tea-time Nipper had seen De Valerie chatting cheerfully with Merrell and Noys. But now he was very obviously in a greatly disturbed frame of mind.

It was generally known that De Valerie had had a row with Fullwood & Co., but this wasn't sufficient reason for him to be nearly feverish. Nipper nodded his head sagely as he got undressed.

"If I know anything, my sons," he murmured to Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson, "De Valerie's thinking of doing something shady. There's a look of fixed determination in his eyes that can't be mistaken. I shouldn't be surprised if he breaks bounds to-night."

"Dear fellow, I ain't interested in De Valerie," said Sir Montie languidly. "An' breakin' bounds is a favourite hobby of his, begad!"

"Let him rip!" muttered Watson. "Rats to him!"

Nipper grinned, and got into bed. He noticed that De Valerie had placed his clothes in a handy position, and Nipper read the signs easily. It was apparent to him that the Rotter was bent upon a night jaunt somewhere.

Morrow, the prefect, came and saw lights out, and the juniors soon settled down to sleep. Most of them were only too ready to drop off, but Nipper, by reason of his training with Nelson Lee, found it quite easy to remain awake. He often remained awake when he didn't want to. Nine-thirty was an absurdly early hour for him—who had been accustomed to snatching sleep just whenever he could.

And De Valerie kept awake for the simple reason that he couldn't sleep at all. His mind was so full of conflicting thoughts that it was with the greatest difficulty that he restrained himself from tossing uneasily in his bed.

By ten o'clock the dormitory was quite silent except for the regular breathing of the juniors, and the snores of Handforth. Twelve minutes after the hour De Valerie quietly sat up and looked about him.

"Everybody asleep?" he murmured softly.

Everybody wasn't asleep, but there was no reply. Nipper had been dozing, preparatory to going off in earnest. But he was wide-awake in an instant now. And he lay still, gazing down the dormitory out of one eye.

The Rotter slipped from his bed quickly and dressed himself. Nipper, like a mere shadow, wriggled his way out of his own bed, and commenced dressing so silently that De Valerie knew nothing of his movements. Nipper would have awakened his chums if it had been possible, but he couldn't do so without giving De Valerie a warning.

The latter was dressed in a very few moments. And then he crept down the long room until he came to the beds of Fullwood & Co., which were placed together. Nipper remained still; he thought that De Valerie was about to awaken the other juniors. But this was evidently not the plan.

For De Valerie was fumbling with something, and he took fully three minutes over the job. Then, with stealthy footsteps, he left the dormitory. Nipper, who wasn't half dressed, made terrific haste.

De Valerie slipped down to his study silently; here he donned his boots, lacing them only roughly. He was trembling with excitement and dread. In a very short space of time, however, he emerged upon the Triangle, and cut across to the low wall which divided the school property from the road.

The moon was shining rather brightly, and the night was still. Everything seemed to be ghostly and eerie.

CHAPTER II.

THE SPECTRE OF BELLTON LANE—NIPPER'S INTERVENTION IS USEFUL.

DE VALERIE shivered.

He wasn't cold, but his nerves were in a chaotic state, and the stillness of the night affected him strangely.

The school clock chimed out the half-hour, and De Valerie knew that he would be late at the White Harp. He broke into a trot as

he proceeded down Bellon Lane. Bradmore, he knew, would expect him even before the arranged time.

One side of the lane was in deep shadow, owing to the high hedge, and the other lay bathed in moonlight. De Valerie chose the more brilliant side, and maintained a steady trot.

He had covered about half the distance to the village, and was getting nicely warmed up, when a rather startling incident occurred.

The Rotter made very little noise as he ran. He was deep in thought, and kept his eyes cast downwards most of the time. A queer kind of rustle just ahead made him look up. Seemingly out of the very air itself the figure of a boy appeared—a rather smallish boy, with a pale face, which wore an almost scared expression.

The figure stood motionless in the moonlight. It made no sound, and a choking cry arose in De Valerie's throat. He was not merely startled—his terror was appalling. His cry developed into a wild, horrible scream.

And there, on the spot, he fell in a dead faint.

The other boy, completely unnerved, turned on his heel and ran down the lane as though demons were after him. His footsteps sounded for a few seconds, and then came silence.

It had been a very brief incident, but Cecil De Valerie lay upon the road, still and pale.

Why had that sudden terror seized him? Usually he was a strong-willed fellow, not likely to fall a victim to idle fancies. True, the ghostlike figure of the other boy had appeared with astonishing abruptness, but the explanation was really simple.

He had merely broken through a gap in the hedge, being unaware of De Valerie's proximity at the moment. Upon seeing the latter, the strange boy had been somewhat startled, and had paused irresolutely. It so chanced that he came into the full moonlight, and stood there silent and still.

It was only natural, perhaps, that De Valerie should have received a turn, but to faint away in mortal terror was really extraordinary.

It was only a minute later that brisk footfalls sounded upon the hard road. They came from the direction of the school, and this time they were caused by Nipper. He had hurried out after De Valerie, but was a little late.

Nipper instinctively felt that the Rotter's night jaunt was not one of the usual gay visits to the White Harp. There was something deeper behind it—something mysterious. And Nipper, if possible, meant to get at the truth.

He paused in his stride as he saw something dark and shapeless lying still in the moonlight before him. Then, with an intake of breath, he hurried forward. He now saw the form was that of Cecil De Valerie.

"Great Scott!" murmured Nipper breathlessly. "What's happened to him?"

Just for a moment he believed that the Rotter had met with an accident of some

sort. But it soon became evident that the other boy had merely fainted. Why? What could the reason be?

Nipper looked up and down the road, but there was not a sign of any living thing. And it was obviously Nipper's best course to revive De Valerie as soon as possible. He had had a good deal of experience in such matters, and before long he saw signs of returning consciousness.

"At last De Valerie opened his eyes.

"That's better!" said Nipper briskly. "Pull yourself together, man! What the dickens has happened to you?"

"The ghost—the ghost!" whispered the Rotter hoarsely.

"Don't be an ass!" said Nipper. "There's no ghost here—I'm real enough. I didn't think you were a nervy chap, De Valerie. Don't look so scared; there's nothing to be frightened at——"

"Did—did I faint?"

"Something of that sort; but you'll be all right in a minute or two," said Nipper cheerfully. "Buck up, my son! We'd better get back to the school as quickly as possible. You're only fit for bed now."

"I—I saw the ghost——"

"Rot! You didn't see anything," interrupted Nipper. "A bush, I expect, or the branch of a tree. I was just behind you, and I didn't see anything. You needn't be afraid that I shall tell the chaps," he added good-naturedly. "Let's get back to the dormitory."

"Didn't you see anything?" breathed De Valerie huskily.

"Of course I didn't!"

"And—and you were just behind me?"

"Not many yards off, anyhow," replied Nipper, as the Rotter staggered to his feet. "Your nerves must be a bit raw, De Valerie!"

"I saw him—I saw him!" muttered the other. "He stood in the road, staring at me, with an awful expression——" De Valerie shook himself angrily. "Oh, what's the good of talking? You don't believe me. I know. But what were you doing just behind me, Bennett?"

"Rats! We don't want to stand jawing here," said Nipper. "Hold on! You'd better grab my arm, or you'll be over. That's better."

De Valerie was very unsteady, and his face was pale and drawn. He took Nipper's arm gratefully, and they commenced walking slowly back towards the school. Nipper didn't ask any questions, and De Valerie offered no detailed explanation of the incident.

He was confused in his mind, and shaking and trembling almost pitifully. His nerves, already rocky, had been jarred cruelly. For De Valerie positively believed that he had seen a spectre.

But why should he be so terrified? Had the ghost of that particular boy any special significance for the Rotter? It would certainly seem so, judging by his conduct.

His fainting fit had left him weak, and, without Nipper's assistance, he would have been in a sad plight. And De Valerie,

although he said little, was grateful for the help.

He easily guessed that Nipper had followed him, and this caused him a bitter pang. So he had been watched! He felt like giving way to anger, but knew that he had every reason to be grateful to Nipper.

As for Nipper himself, he was frankly puzzled. He could not fully understand his companion's terror. Certainly there was an inkling in his mind as to the true explanation of matters, but much was obscure.

"Feeling better now?"

Nipper asked the question as the two came within sight of the school wall.

De Valerie nodded.

"Yes, just a bit," he said huskily. "This is jolly good of you, Bennett."

"Rot! I couldn't have done much less."

"Why—why did you follow me?"

There was a sudden suspicious note in De Valerie's voice, and Nipper did not miss it. He looked rather grim as he replied:

"Well," he said, "if you want me to be quite frank, I'll tell you the truth. I saw you get out of bed, and I followed you. I thought you might be getting up to some silly game, and I meant to keep an eye on you. That's why I followed. But you were a bit too speedy for me."

"Did you—see anything else?"

"See anything else?"

"Yes—in the dormitory."

"I couldn't see much," returned Nipper, "because the dormy was dark."

"Much? What did you see—exactly?"

Nipper looked at De Valerie rather curiously.

"Blessed if I can understand you," he remarked. "What are you trying to get at? I saw you dress yourself, and then I thought you were going to wait for Fullwood & Co. But you didn't, and then I concluded that you were having a squint at the time. I fancied your own watch had gone wrong, and so you were having a look at somebody else's."

"Then—then you didn't see——"

"Didn't see what?" asked Nipper, as De Valerie paused.

"Oh, nothing."

Nipper thought that there was a little note of relief in the Rotter's tone, but he wasn't sure. In any case, the subject was not pursued, for now they were at the school wall, against the Triangle.

De Valerie seemed altogether better. He recovered his calmness to a certain degree, and walked more steadily. Nipper was more puzzled than ever; he couldn't see how their short conversation had brought about the change.

The trembling Removite was not at all angry with Nipper for having followed him out of the dormitory; on the contrary, he breathed with relief more than once. And there was a curious, cynical smile about his bloodless lips.

The Ancient House was entered by means of the Study M window. And the two juniors succeeded in reaching the Remove dormitory in safety. Once there, they went to their

respective beds and tumbled between the sheets.

De Valerie had taken a drink of water, but nothing more. He declared that he did not want anything else, and would be quite all right in the morning. And Nipper quite believed that the strange junior would show few ill effects after several hours' sleep.

Just as Nipper had slipped into bed, De Valerie came across to him.

"I say, I've forgotten something," he whispered.

"Eh? What have you forgotten?"

"You won't mention this business to the chaps to-morrow, will you?" asked De Valerie. "I've got no right to ask you, really, because you're not a friend of mine, Bennett. I've never given you reason to be friendly."

"Well, hardly," murmured Nipper drily. "But you needn't be afraid, you ass. I sha'n't say anything about it to the other fellows."

"Thanks, Bennett," said the Rotter softly. "You—you don't know what you've done, really. I expect you will one day—before long. And I sha'n't forget this little affair."

"Go to sleep, you fathead!" yawned Nipper, snuggling down. "You'll be as tired as the very dickens in the morning, after what you've been through. And don't get imagining any more ghosts, for goodness' sake."

"I didn't imagine it," said De Valerie quietly.

He crept back to his own bed, and Nipper watched him wonderingly. There was certainly something very different about the Rotter of the Remove lately. And, just now, he had spoken in a curiously resigned tone of voice—almost as though he were expecting some heavy blow to fall upon him.

Nipper didn't worry himself. He was quite certain that De Valerie would stay in bed for the rest of the night. Besides, it wasn't Nipper's job to keep his eye on every fellow who chose to act the fool.

Within ten minutes Nipper was sound asleep.

Much more time passed—until at last midnight boomed out. As the chimes were dying away Cecil De Valerie sat up in bed. He had been awake the whole time, and now he had one fixed idea in his mind.

"Are you awake, Bennett?" he whispered.

There was no reply, and De Valerie was quite convinced that Nipper lay fast asleep. This, indeed, was the actual truth. There were no eyes now to overlook the Rotter's actions.

He slid from between the sheets, and took something from his coat pocket, which lay on the chair beside the bed. The "something" rustled between his fingers. De Valerie's next occupation was a curious one.

As quietly as a mouse he crossed over to the beds of Gulliver and Bell and Merrell. He fumbled with the separate piles of clothing. In Gulliver's purse he placed two pound notes; in Bell's a pound note and a ten-shilling one; in Merrell's four pound notes.

Then, with a sigh of infinite relief, De Valerie crept back to his own bed. He had

not made various gifts to his former chums; he had merely returned the money he had annexed earlier.

For that was the actual truth. De Valerie, in the last stages of desperation, had taken money from other pockets, in order to satisfy the demands of the avaricious Mr. Bradmore.

When he had taken the money the boy had not fully realised the dreadful nature of his action. But afterwards, while Nipper was helping him home, the full villainy of his act dawned upon him.

And it was with untold relief that he learned that Nipper had been unaware of his thievery. The money had been returned now, and in the morning Fullwood's chums would know nothing.

Nipper's intervention had served one good purpose at least; it had saved De Valerie from dire disgrace. But the boy, as he lay in bed, could not sleep a wink. Other thoughts—more terrible thoughts—were crowding into his mind.

But, somehow, they were so appalling that they almost lost their terror. De Valerie was getting into a state of resigned indifference.

At the same time, he dreaded the consequences.

He had failed to obey Bradmore's order! What would the man do? What would be the result of De Valerie's non-arrival at the White Harp?

The boy did not dare to think, and he fell into a troubled sleep at last, with awful visions of prison before him!

What was the explanation of this singular mystery?

CHAPTER III.

MR. TED WALKER IS PERMITTED TO HEAR A STORY WHICH CAUSES HIM VERY CONSIDERABLE ASTONISHMENT.

MR. MIKE BRADMORE emerged from the side door of the White Harp Inn with a companion, a man of his own stamp—a somewhat beery individual, with strong proclivities for horse-racing and card-playing.

"You don't seem yourself, Mike," remarked this gentleman cheerily. "Had a bit o' bad luck, or what?"

"There ain't nothin' wrong with me, Ted," replied Mr. Bradmore irritably. "Don't you ask no questions—I ain't in the mood for replyin' to 'em."

Mr. Ted Walker grinned.

"Nothin' like speakin' out plain," he said, removing a cigar from between his lips. "I'll walk along with you, Mike, if you're agreeable."

Mr. Bradmore didn't reply, satisfying himself with a non-committal grunt. And the two men walked along the moonlit road slowly. It was just after ten-thirty—twenty minutes to eleven, to be exact.

Bradmore was rather ill-tempered. He had fully expected De Valerie to arrive promptly at the appointed time—or even a few minutes earlier. But the boy had failed

to turn up. To add to Mr. Bradmore's irritability, his friend, Ted Walker, had persisted in forcing his company upon him.

Bradmore had given De Valerie ten minutes' grace. It wasn't much, certainly, but the bookmaker had a feeling that, as the St. Frank's junior hadn't turned up by now, he wouldn't turn up at all.

And so the bookmaker had come out with the intention of strolling up towards the school. He thought it possible that he would meet De Valerie, provided the latter had decided to keep the appointment. To his disgust, Mr. Walker had accompanied him. If Bradmore had considered a meeting with De Valerie likely, he would have dismissed the amiable Ted on the spot.

The pair walked up the road leisurely, towards the bridge. The village was very quiet, for most of the worthy inhabitants were in their beds, the Belltonians being early risers.

"What about the races to-morrow—" began Mr. Walker.

"Don't jaw about them now," growled Bradmore. "I ain't in a humour to discuss business to-night, Ted. As a matter of fact, I'd rather be alone—if that ain't too plain."

"You want me to clear off?"

"Well, if you put it like that—I do!"

"There ain't a more obligin' chap than me!" remarked Mr. Walker stiffly. "I ain't the one to force myself on people—Hallo! Who's this young shaver a-comin' along?"

"By ginger!" muttered Mr. Bradmore.

Both men stopped in the middle of the road. A slight figure was running towards them from the direction of the school. For the first moment Bradmore believed that it was De Valerie, and he ground his teeth with annoyance. However, Walker was just on the point of going, so it wouldn't matter.

The boy came closer, the moonlight shining fully upon him.

Then suddenly Bradmore uttered a harsh curse. He ran forward clumsily, and seized the boy's arms with vicious fury.

"Wot's the meanin' of this 'ere?" he snarled between his teeth. "You infernal young 'ound—"

"Please, Mr. Bradmore, I—I—"

A sudden choking gasp came from Mr. Walker.

"Great thunder!" he ejaculated, in sheer amazement. "Well, I'm busted! It's—it's young 'Arry Binnson, or 'is ghost!"

"Shut up, you fool!" snapped Bradmore harshly. "Don't let the whole village know! Yes, it is young Binnson, hang you!"

"But—but the kid was burnt up—fried to a cinder in that there fire at St. Frank's!" said Mr. Walker, in sheer astonishment.

"His—his photygraph was in the paper an' all! I'm blowed if I can get the 'ang of it!"

Mike Bradmore swore under his breath. One thing was absolutely obvious—now that Walker had seen the boy, he would have to be told the whole story; otherwise he would undoubtedly let the whole neighbourhood know the truth before the morning.

"Look 'ere, Ted," said Mr. Bradmore quickly, "you're a chap I can trust, an'

that's just as well, schein' as I'm forced to let you into a little secret. This kid's alive, but he's supposed to be dead—see?"

"No, I'm blowed if I do!" said Ted Walker frankly.

"Well, we can't stand an' talk 'ere, or there'll be other people gettin' to know of it," exclaimed the bookmaker. "The brat was up at the old Elm Farm, but 'e must have broke loose. I don't fancy takin' 'im back. What about your place, Ted? Could we keep the boy there secretly?"

"Not likely!" replied the other promptly. "Why, my missus would——"

"I forgot your missus!" interrupted Bradmore. "It wouldn't take 'er more than an hour to spread the story through 'arf England! By ginger! Wot about the old mill, on the other side of the wood? That'll do fine!"

"I—I want to go home, Mr. Bradmore!" faltered the boy.

"Well, you ain't goin' 'ome—not until I let you!" snapped Bradmore.

He dragged the boy along, and they were soon walking across a footpath which led into Belton Wood. Here they were quite free from observation. Mr. Walker was in a state of considerable wonder, but he didn't ask any questions.

It had been taken for granted by everybody that young Harry Binnson had perished in a fire which had occurred at an old loft adjoining the school buildings—adjoining the school property, to be more exact, for the loft had been placed well apart from any other structure.

According to the report, Binnson had brought a couple of films to the school. He had ventured to the loft alone, which had been converted into a rough-and-ready picture theatre by the juniors. The fire had started immediately afterwards, so it was concluded that Binnson had met with an accident, and had lost his life in consequence. Owing to the fierce nature of the fire, it was not wondered at when no remains were found.

Naturally there had been an inquest, and the jury's verdict had been of the usual type—that the lad had met his death by misadventure. Nobody was blamed, and the affair had almost blown over by this time.

"No, I can't make 'ead or tail of it," said Mr. Walker, as though speaking his thoughts aloud, as he and the others plunged into the wood. "Fair shook up, I am! Just fancy the kid bein' alive arter all?"

"Yes—thanks to me!" grunted Bradmore. "But I want to know wot 'e was doin' out in the road just now. I'd left 'im up at the farm with that old couple. They ain't extra particular, an' didn't ask no awkward questions. Now, 'Arry, my lad, you've got to tell me the truth!"

The boy looked defiant.

"I don't like being kept cooped up, Mr. Bradmore," he said sullenly. "I want to go home to Bannington. So to-night I got out, an' meant to walk home."

"Then wot were you doin' in the lane?"

"Why, I was cuttin' across to the main

road," replied the boy. "I didn't fancy goin' across the moor by myself. A little while before I met you I saw that young gent—that blighter who punched me just before the fire."

"Wot!" roared Mr. Bradmore furiously. "He saw you?"

"I couldn't 'elp it," muttered Binnson. "He was runnin' down the road when I broke through a gap in the 'edge."

"Comin' to meet me, of course. Well, an' wot then?"

"Why, I was scared no end," said Binnson. "He just stood stock still, an' uttered a horrible cry. Then 'e fell down in the road in a kind o' fit, an' lay still. I was that scared I ran away for all I was worth!"

"Leavin' 'im in the road?"

"Yes, Mr. Bradmore."

"Oh, well, it don't matter so much, as it 'appens," said the bookmaker, with relief. "The young cub must 'ave mistook you for a ghost—that's why 'e yelled out an' fainted. 'E didn't 'ave time to discover you was real. P'raps it'll be all the better, reely."

Mr. Walker scratched his head.

"But what's this 'ere St. Frank's boy got to do with it?" he asked.

"Everythin'!" replied Bradmore. "I'll tell you all about it when we git to the mill. I'll see that this brat don't git loose agin—not until I've finished my little piece o' business."

The bookmaker's tone was grim, and the little party proceeded in silence until they found themselves on the other side of the wood. The bleak expanse of Bannington Moor lay before them in the moonlight, with the gaunt outline of an old ruined mill quite near by.

The structure was reached presently, and the trio entered. They made their way up the rickety old stairs, from floor to floor—until at last they arrived at the topmost apartment.

Bradmore struck a match and looked round him.

"Dry as a bone," he remarked. "There's a pile o' straw over in that corner. That'll make you a fine bed, 'Arry, my boy. You needn't look so scared—I'll stop with you durin' the night."

The match went out, and Binnson went over to the pile of straw and lay down upon it. It was musty with age, but dry enough, and the youngster fell asleep almost as soon as he lay down. Bradmore and his companion seated themselves upon an old box, and lit fresh cigars.

"Now let's 'ear all about it," said Mr. Walker expectantly.

"It's a blamed nuisance, you seein' the kid," said Bradmore. "I meant to keep the thing to meself, Ted."

"You can trust me, can't you?"

"I've got to—there's no 'elp for it," replied Bradmore. "Well, the affair reely started just before the fire 'appened. You see, Ted, I went up to the school to meet a young feller named De Valerie—a real young spark, an' one o' my best customers, so to speak."

"No need to tell me that, Mike. I've seen the kid, ain't I?"

"Well, I arranged to meet 'im at eight o'clock that night, but 'e mistook the time, thinkin' 'e wasn't to meet me until nine. While 'angin' about, De Valerie met young Binnson, who was bringin' a couple o' films over from Bannington. 'E took Binnson to the old loft, an' they 'ad words. Got slangin' one another, an' De Valerie knocked young 'Arry down a fair smash. Then 'e come down from the loft, boltin' the door arter 'im—just for a bit o' spite, I reckon. 'E lit a fag at the bottom o' the stairs, an' chucked 'is match down, careless like. Then 'e went outside, not noticin' that a pile o' straw 'ad caught alight."

"My heye!" murmured Mr. Walker. "An' wot then?"

"Why, as you know, the buildin' caught alight—fair went up like a bonfire," said Mr. Bradmore. "Now it struck me that De Valerie would think young Binnson was trapped up in the loft, an' when nothin' was 'eard of 'im, the young gent would believe that 'e 'ad been burnt up to nothin' in the fire. See? There was a nice little chance o' makin' a bit. Any'ow, it was worth tryin'. It didn't take me twenty seconds to git 'Arry out by the big doors at the back. I closed 'em agin, an' took 'im away. The old place simply flared up terrible. This was due to the films, o' course. An' everybody believed that Binnson 'ad been caught in the fire."

"An' didn't De Valerie say nothin'?"

"Not a word! 'E was too thunderin' frightened—just as I'd reckoned," said Mr. Bradmore, with a cunning chuckle. "'E thought that this young nipper was as dead as a doornall—an' 'e thought that 'e was mainly responsible, havin' locked 'im up in the loft. Knowin' that, 'e kept as mum as an oyster. Thought that the coppers would 'ave 'im if the truth came out."

"My! It was a cunnin' scheme o' yours, Mike," said Mr. Walker admiringly.

"Well, a bit fly, mebbe," agreed Bradmore. "You see, I 'ad my eye open; De Valerie's got a bit o' money, an' there wasn't any reason why I shouldn't touch it. I've skinned 'im for eight or ten quid already—an' I 'aven't done with 'im by long chalks."

"But don't 'e smell a rat?"

The bookmaker laughed.

"The kid's fair crazy with terror," he replied. "Just you imagine it, Ted. Wot would you do if you thought that you'd caused a bloke's death? Why, you'd be so scared that you'd go right off your 'ead. That's just 'ow De Valerie is—'e's like putty between my fingers. I can twist 'im about just as I like. 'E's in my power, an' is in mortal terror o' me tellin' the police all I know."

"You always was a sly old fox, Mike," remarked the other.

"De Valerie was comin' down to-night, bringin' me ten quid," went on Mr. Bradmore. "Meetin' young Binnson upset 'is plans. But I shall see 'im to-morrow, an' then we'll talk business. You've got to keep

quiet, too. If you don't, you'll 'ave to reckon with me."

"That's unkind!" declared Mr. Walker. "I'm in with you right through, Mike. It's a splendid idea, to my thinkin'."

The bookmaker puffed at his cigar thoughtfully.

"I was wonderin' if we couldn't do somethin' bigger," he remarked. "Now I've got my chance, there's no reason why I shouldn't lay my hands on a nice bit o' the ready. Mebbe I could force De Valerie to do somethin'. It wouldn't matter what 'appens to 'im afterwards—'e wouldn't dare to peach on me, for his own sake. The kid daren't say a word, whatever 'appens."

"What was you thinkin' of?"

"Before I tell you anything more, I want to come to an understandin' with you, Ted," said Bradmore. "This affair ain't anythin' to do with you, strictly speakin', and you 'aven't any right to expect a brass farthing. But, because we're friends, an' because I want to keep your mouth shut—that's plain—I'll give you a sixth share of all I receive from now. So, if we get twelve quid, I'll 'and you a couple."

"That's mighty fine," declared Mr. Walker enthusiastically. "Money for nothin', as you might say!"

Bradmore nodded. But he didn't quite agree with the other's words. It wasn't money for nothing, by any means. Now that Mr. Walker knew everything, it was highly necessary to keep his mouth shut. And the best way to do that was to take him into the plot on a business basis.

"You remember that affair over at Cais-towe three days back?"

"What affair, Mike?"

"Why, over at that old colonel's 'ouse."

"Oh, yes, I remember," said the other.

"Well, what about it?"

"Thinkin' o' that 'as put an idea into my 'ead," said Bradmore. "I don't see any reason why we shouldn't make for somethin' big. If the thing's done properly, we can touch somethin' like a hundred quid—that'll mean sixteen or seventeen shiners for you, old pal."

Mr. Walker simply held his breath.

And then Bradmore detailed his scheme. Ten minutes later the two rascals were gloating triumphantly over it.

CHAPTER IV.

(Recorded by Nelson Lee.)

IN WHICH I INVESTIGATE A SINGULAR ROBBERY, AND EXPLAIN A FEW SIMPLE DEDUCTIONS FOR THE HEADMASTER'S BENEFIT.

S EVEN o'clock had just struck. It was early morning, two days after the interesting conversation between Mr. Mike Bradmore and Mr. Ted Walker. At that time, of course, I knew nothing of the affair, but it makes matters clearer to set down the plain facts at once. I had been urgently summoned from my

bedroom an hour earlier than my usual time for arising. Tubbs, the Ancient House page-boy, had brought a very urgent message from the Headmaster, requesting my presence in his study at once.

And seven o'clock boomed out as I entered Dr. Stafford's private sanctum. I found him pacing the hearthrug before a crackling log fire. There was certainly something considerably amiss, for the Head was pale and agitated.

"Ah, Mr. Alvington, I am glad you have come," he exclaimed warmly. "I have told nobody yet—not a soul. To be frank, my agitation has been so great that I hesitated to act before consulting you. It is still quite early, and the other masters are not stirring so far. Perhaps we can come to some decision before the hour for breakfast."

"Really, Dr. Stafford, I don't follow you," I said quietly. "Has anything unusual happened?"

"Good gracious! The school has been burgled, my dear sir—my bureau has been smashed open and rifled!" exclaimed the Head. "I am extremely fortunate in having a gentleman of your renowned capabilities upon the premises. For the present you must become your own self—Mr. Lee!"

I smiled.

"I have never ceased to be myself," I replied. "My name may be altered at St. Frank's, perhaps, but I assure you I am Nelson Lee, and nobody else. 'Mr. Alvington' is merely an assumed character, who can be thrust aside at any moment."

I looked at Dr. Stafford keenly. He was nodding, and I saw him glance over towards the heavy oaken bureau which stood in the recess by the fireplace. It was open, and the lock had been obviously forced.

"If you will just tell me exactly what has occurred——" I began.

"I know very little, Mr. Lee," interrupted the Head. "Half an hour ago Tubbs knocked heavily upon my bedroom door, with the news that my bureau was smashed open, and that the window sash was partially up. The boy acted promptly and commendably. I instructed him to call you, and have only been down a few minutes myself."

"Then you have not made an examination?"

"Yes, a brief one."

"Have you ascertained the extent of your loss?"

"I believe that seventy-five to eighty pounds, roughly speaking, has been removed from the bureau," replied the Head. "Oh, it may seem quite a small amount to you, Mr. Lee—an insignificant sum—but, I assure you, it is a very serious matter from my point of view."

I shook my head.

"It is of little consequence whether the stolen amount is seventy-five pounds or seventy-five thousand," I said quietly. "The fact remains that there has been a robbery, and the tracking of the culprit is precisely the same in either case. I am glad that you have kept your own counsel so far, Dr. Stafford."

"I did not ring up the police because you were here, Mr. Lee," said the Head simply. "I place the matter in your hands entirely, and shall rely upon your judgment to the last degree."

"That is very good of you, Dr. Stafford," I exclaimed briskly. "Now suppose we have a look into things? You have touched nothing?"

"I merely looked over the bureau."

"The window?"

"Is exactly as I found it."

I nodded, and passed over to the big, old-fashioned window. I was receiving full compensation for the loss of an hour in bed. I had certainly not imagined that I should be called upon to investigate a robbery within the school itself.

And, naturally, I was keen, my instincts were all aroused, and I entered into the inquiry with whole-hearted enthusiasm. My only regret was that Nipper could not be there to give me his invaluable assistance.

The window-sill proved of interest; the catch, too, provided quite a little problem of itself. It had been forced by some heavy, clumsy instrument, and was bent and scratched considerably.

My next move was to go over the carpet very carefully, searching it foot by foot.

The Head had taken a seat in a big arm-chair before the fire. He was greatly worried, but he watched me with intent interest. I appreciated his attitude for its full worth. Only too often had I been pestered and bothered continuously by anxious clients while pursuing an investigation. Dr. Stafford, however, had the great good sense to let me go entirely my own way.

Very shortly, indeed, I quite overlooked the fact that he was in the room; I had become absorbed in my task.

In turn I carefully and searchingly examined the window, the carpet, the desk, and the bureau. I also took more than a casual glance at the fender and fireirons—and was duly rewarded.

As I proceeded I became keener, until, at last, I breathed a sigh of intense satisfaction. The affair was proving quite simple, but of great interest nevertheless.

Finally I stood upon the hearthrug and lit a cigarette. I then found that the Head was watching me closely.

"May—may I venture to speak, Mr. Lee?" he asked hesitatingly.

"My dear sir, you are a model client," I chuckled. "Certainly, you may speak as freely as you wish—now. To tell you the truth, I was about to make several observations myself."

"You have discovered something?"

"Quite a considerable amount," I replied easily. "To begin with, Dr. Stafford, there has been a pretty piece of fakery in connection with this theft. It would appear, from the signs, that the burglar entered the study, and made his exit by means of the window. In actual truth, he did nothing of the kind."

The Head stared.

"But the window was open—the catch was forced!" he protested.

"Exactly!" I nodded. "The local police would perhaps have been quite satisfied with the obvious evidence. But it is always a mistake to place one's faith in the obvious. I searched deeper, and I am not merely voicing a guess when I tell you that the trail has been purposely faked."

"Good gracious me!"

"Moreover, this was no ordinary burglary. From the evidence at hand I judge that the thief was merely a boy—a junior boy——"

"You—you aren't serious, Mr. Lee!" gasped the Head, starting to his feet. "A boy! It is too terrible!"

"It is always my object to arrive at the truth," I said quietly. "However distasteful the result, Dr. Stafford, I must speak frankly. The burglar, I repeat, was a boy."

"I am inexpressibly shocked!" declared the Head. "I do not doubt your word for a moment, Mr. Lee. But—but can you not give me a few further details?"

"Certainly," I replied smoothly. "The boy was dark, and in the habit of using violet-scented hair cream. He was wearing a silk garment—probably a dressing-gown—and slippers."

The Headmaster stared at Lee in amazement.

"I—I am at a total loss, Mr. Lee!" he declared. "How can you possibly know these things? You speak as though you actually saw the boy committing the deed! How can you be aware of the fact that the boy was dark, that he wore slippers and a dressing-gown, and that he uses hair cream? Frankly, I am perfectly bewildered!"

I could not refrain from smiling.

"My deductions, after all, are quite simple," I exclaimed. "There is quite sufficient data before my very eyes at this moment to fully warrant my conclusions. We will begin at the commencement—if you would care to hear how I arrived at my results."

"I am intensely eager, Mr. Lee!"

"Then please come to the window," I said. "Now, Doctor Stafford, you will observe these marks upon the catch. What do you gather from them?"

"The window's been forced open by some heavy implement."

"Exactly. But it was forced from inside," I explained. "A small quantity of brass was scratched off during the process, and there are distinct traces of these minute particles of brass upon the steel poker. Now, no burglar with an ounce of common-sense would commit a blunder of that sort. There is obviously no rhyme or reason in smashing a window-catch from the inside—unless it be to manufacture a false trail. These traces of mud upon the carpet, too, were placed there deliberately, to make it appear that the intruder's feet were muddy. The job, however, was only indifferently performed, and I am not deceived."

The Head nodded.

"I think I can follow you, Mr. Lee," he said. "But even now I cannot see how you

know the age of the burglar—how you can tell he was a boy?"

"You must remember that I am theorising at present," I reminded the Head. "I am explaining to you the line of reasoning which I have followed. There may be one or two flaws, but I do not think they are important. In your desk, doctor, there are some examination papers, giving the correct replies to certain questions. They relate to an examination for the Fourth Form—the Remove."

"Exactly," agreed the Head. "I placed them there."

"Those papers have been disturbed and looked through," I said quietly. "Who but a boy—a junior boy—would take interest in such a matter? Upon seeing the papers, the thief was sorely tempted, and he had seized his chance to look over them. Even at such an intense moment he had sufficient presence of mind to have his eye open to gain an advantage—a mean advantage—and it proves, furthermore, that the lad possesses a singularly clear head."

"You are making everything perfectly clear, Mr. Lee."

"With regard to the hair, you will see several traces upon the edge of the bureau, Dr. Stafford," I went on. "Naturally, I have the advantage over you, since I have been accustomed to this work for years past. Upon this rough edge," I continued, pointing, "there are one or two hairs adhering to the woodwork. The surface in that spot is a trifle greasy, and there is a very faint odour of violet scent."

The Head looked at the spot carefully, and gingerly sniffed it.

"Really, Mr. Lee, I fail to follow you," he exclaimed. "Perhaps my sense of smell is not so keen as yours, neither is my eyesight so good."

I laughed.

"It is obvious that the boy caught his head upon this spot," I said smoothly. "A very natural mishap. There is a splinter of wood upon the window-ledge, and sticking to it are a few red silk fibres. The thief caught his garment upon the splinter while leaning out of the window. Now, Doctor Stafford, does a burglar wear a red silk garment?"

"I should hardly think so."

"Is it not more probable that the article was a dressing-gown, and that the shreds of silk were plucked from the silk collar facings?" I asked. "Thus we arrive at a positive conclusion. The boy entered the study in the usual way, opened the bureau, and then prepared the evidence to make it appear as though a commonplace burglary had occurred."

"You mentioned slippers, Mr. Lee——"

"Ah, yes, the slippers," I smiled. "The garden is distinctly muddy, doctor, and there is no mat just inside this window. The carpet shows no traces of boot-marks whatever, and, knowing that the intruder came from within the school itself, it is surely reasonable to deduce that he was wearing noiseless slippers. It is against all probability to think otherwise."

The Headmaster passed a hand over his brow.

"It is a terrible affair, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed anxiously. "The burglary itself is serious enough, but to know that one of my own boys has committed the crime is simply appalling. Have you any inkling as to the wretched lad's identity?"

I stroked my chin thoughtfully.

"It ought to be a simple matter to arrive at the truth," I remarked. "With so many clues at my disposal, I can promise you, Doctor Stafford, that the culprit will be singled out very shortly after breakfast."

"I am thankful I did not ring up the police," said the Head fervently. "This business must be hushed up, Mr. Lee—not a word of it must be breathed abroad. The papers would be simply full of the affair, and St. Frank's would come into disastrous notoriety."

I nodded.

"For the present, at least, it will be better to say as little as possible," I agreed. "Now, Doctor Stafford, about the actual loss. In what form was the money?"

"Mostly in Treasury notes," replied the Head. "There were two bags of silver, each containing five pounds, however. Fifty pound currency notes are missing, and thirty ten-shilling. In addition, one or two odd notes, which I usually keep in a handy drawer, have gone."

"Then the total loss is a trifle over seventy-five pounds?"

"That is so."

"You did not take the numbers of the notes, of course?"

"Yes, I did, Mr. Lee."

I raised my eyebrows.

"I hardly expected it," I said. "Some people, I know, do not bother about currency notes. I presume the cash came from the bank new, with the numbers running consecutively, and that you merely took the first and the last numbers?"

"That is the case exactly," replied Dr. Stafford. "Otherwise I don't suppose I should have troubled. But will it make much difference?"

"If the notes are passed quickly there will be little hope of recovering them," I replied. "Treasury notes, as you are aware, are legal tender—cash—and they can be changed anywhere in the United Kingdom. Bank of England notes, on the other hand, are much more difficult to dispose of, and thieves do not usually take them—they are dangerous customers to handle."

"What is your immediate intention, Mr. Lee?"

I glanced at the clock.

"Well, in less than five minutes' time the breakfast-gong will sound," I answered. "I think it would be an act of wisdom on our part, Doctor Stafford, if we performed our duties as usual. I shall take my place at the head of the Sixth Form table in the dining-hall. After breakfast, while the boys are in their class-rooms, I will pursue my little investigation."

And we left the matter at that for the time being.

I retired to my own study thoughtfully, and was only allowed a few minutes' grace before the gong sounded. I was quite convinced that my theory was not at fault. The robbery had been committed by a boy within the school—and the chances were that he belonged to the Remove.

I went over all the boys in my mind, and it was a comparatively simple matter to single out one or two possible suspects—one in particular. It would have been foolish, however, to suspect any individual boy without positive evidence. So I kept my mind open, and went in to breakfast.

The school, of course, knew nothing of the robbery. Tubbs, the page-boy, had been instructed to say nothing regarding the affair, and he was quite a trustworthy little fellow.

I smiled at Nipper as I passed down to my place at the Sixth Form table. Nipper, the young rascal, merely winked in reply. Fortunately, this action on his part was unobserved except by myself.

I was quite interested in Master Cecil De Valerie. For some days past he had been looking far from well. His eyes had an unnatural glint in them; his face was of an unhealthy pallor. Whilst being aware of this change, I had not questioned the lad. There might have been many reasons—ordinary, commonplace reasons—to account for his run-down look.

This morning however, there was a striking change for the worse. The boy was positively ill. His face had not an atom of colour, and his dark eyes burned feverishly.

His fellow-Removites eyed him with open curiosity; they, too, had noted the change. Personally, I did not think I should have to search far for the author of the robbery. The evidence was very apparent.

As soon as breakfast was over, De Valerie was almost the first boy out of the dining-hall. He was anxious to be alone. I did not doubt. I managed to get hold of Nipper, and I hurried him off to my study.

"What's the matter, guv'nor?" asked my young assistant, when the door had been closed. "You're looking pretty severe. What have I been doing now? I can't see a cane anywhere about!"

"Now, Nipper, no pleasantries," I said sternly. "And, let me tell you, you must refrain from winking at me—"

"Oh, lor'!" groaned Nipper. "A giddy lecture!"

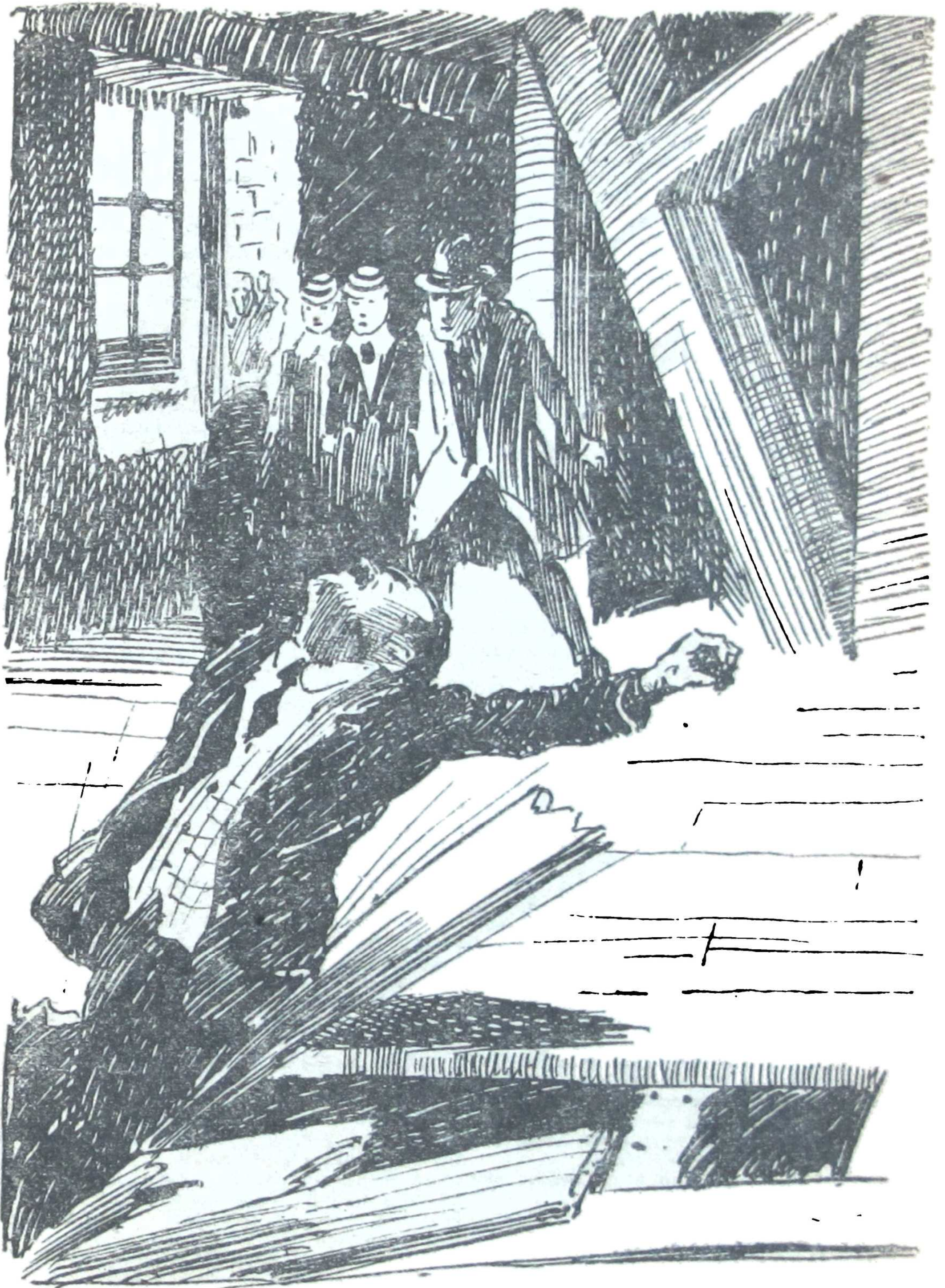
I couldn't help smiling.

"No, young 'un, not a lecture," I said. "I merely wish to ask you some questions regarding De Valerie. Have you noticed a change in him?"

"I should think I have," said Nipper. "There's something wrong, guv'nor—something jolly wrong! He looked just like a ghost this morning. Which reminds me, I was going to tell you—"

"Well, go on," I said, as Nipper paused.

"Well, something happened the other night," remarked Nipper slowly. "I promised De Valerie I wouldn't say anything to



The next second Bradmore plunged through the flooring. We were left marooned, with a gaping hole before us, unable to move without causing a general collapse.—(See page 20.)

the other fellows. But you're not included in them, are you? Besides, 't's only right that you should know."

And Nipper related to me the incident of De Valerie's meeting with the "ghost" of Harry Binnson, the boy who had supposedly died in the recent fire.

"It was very queer, sir," said Nipper. "De Valerie swore that he saw Binnson's ghost. But that was rot, of course—he had the same idea once before. I didn't think he was such a nervous chap. That poor kid died——"

"On the contrary, Nipper, Binnson is very much alive, and I have no doubt that De Valerie actually saw the boy——"

"Alive!" roared Nipper. "Why—why——"

"You needn't shout, my boy," I interrupted. "I meant to tell you about this before, but did not have the chance. Moreover, it was not necessary to let you into the secret until there was a real necessity."

"But—but I can't believe it!" gasped Nipper.

I briefly told the lad of an experience which I had encountered not so many days before. While walking up from the village to the school I had met Binnson, and had been considerably astonished—for I, in common with everybody else, had fully believed that the boy was dead. I followed him, and saw him meet a low scoundrel named Bradmore, who generally haunted the White Harp. The pair had entered an old farm, and certain words of Bradmore's led me to believe that a cunning plot of some sort was afoot.

I had kept my own counsel, and was glad now that I had done so. For the whole scheme was gradually taking shape in my mind, and I began to see things fairly clearly. There was no doubt that De Valerie was in some way entangled in the affair.

There were many loose ends, which persisted in eluding me, but I had no doubt they could be collected together very shortly. The chief characters in the plot were Bradmore and Binnson and De Valerie. As to their exact relation, I was, of course, in the dark. But I should have been blind if I had missed the apparent fact that De Valerie had committed the burglary.

"From what you have told me, Nipper, one thing is certain," I said slowly. "De Valerie is quite unaware of the fact that Binnson is alive. Furthermore, I am becoming convinced that the boy was largely connected with the outbreak of fire at the old loft. Exactly what that connection was I shall discover later. I have an idea, however, that De Valerie is merely a tool—he is being victimised by the rascally Bradmore."

I quickly told Nipper of the robbery, and he listened with wide-open eyes.

"And do you think De Valerie took that money, sir?" he asked blankly.

"There is no room for doubt, my lad."

"But it's a terrible thing," exclaimed Nipper. "He'll be sacked, surely?"

"It all depends, young 'un—it all depends," I said thoughtfully. "The circumstances under which De Valerie committed the act may prove to be so exceptional that there will be a loophole for mercy. I knew only

too well how honest people will take the wrong path when driven into a hopeless corner."

Nipper left me a few minutes later, promising to say nothing about the robbery to anybody.

Morning lessons started, and my first task was to pay a visit to Study M in the Remove passage.

CHAPTER V.

(Nelson Lee continues.)

IN WHICH I AM MADE AWARE OF A PARTICULARLY CRUEL PLOT.

STUDY M proved of particular interest to me.

In the cupboard I found a pair of boots, the soles of which were partially covered with half-dried mud. They had been used during the night, and there was not the slightest doubt that De Valerie had broken bounds in the hours of darkness. There was no trace whatever of the stolen money. But the window, and the ground immediately beneath it, told the same story as the boots.

A red dressing-gown, with silk facings, hung behind the door. There was a distinct pluck upon the left side of the collar. Upon the mantelpiece stood a bottle of some patent hair-cream—violet-scented.

And, to clinch matters, I found, tucked between the leaves of a book, a scrap of paper containing a rough copy of the answers contained in the Head's examination paper. This was a contemptible action on De Valerie's part, and I sternly decided that he should receive severe punishment. He had no excuse whatever for that particular act.

There was no longer any necessity for delay, and I left the study and made my way to the Remove Form-room. Mr. Crowell was presiding over his boys, and work was proceeding quietly.

"I wish to take De Valerie out with me," I said to Mr. Crowell, in a low voice.

"Indeed, I was thinking of sending him to the matron myself," said Mr. Crowell, rather concernedly. "The boy is positively ill—and yet, when I question him, he assures me that he is perfectly all right. And I must admit that he is doing his work steadily and admirably."

I nodded.

"There is something distinctly wrong with the boy," I said. "Later on, Mr. Crowell, you will know more about it." I looked up and raised my voice. "De Valerie!"

He raised his head quickly.

"Did you call me, sir?" he asked, in a steady voice.

"Yes. I wish to speak to you, my boy."

He rose in his seat—he had, indeed, risen at my first question—and now he came to the front of the class with a steady footstep. The other boys were all looking on with interest.

"You will follow me, De Valerie," I said quietly.

"Very good, sir."

We passed out of the Form-room, and I could not help admiring the nerve of the boy as he fell into pace by my side. He must have guessed what was coming, but maintained an attitude of calm indifference.

I led him straight to my study, and bade him take a seat before the fire. I sat down opposite, and regarded him steadily. He returned my gaze without flinching.

"Is it anything important, sir?" he asked calmly.

"Very important, De Valerie," I replied. "I am going to speak to you seriously, my boy, and I want you to tell me the absolute truth. Why did you take seventy-five pounds, in notes and silver, from the Headmaster's bureau during the night?"

I saw De Valerie go even a shade paler, if that was possible. But he compressed his lips firmly, and gripped the arms of his chair. Then he attempted to assume an air of surprise.

"I don't know what you mean, sir," he said. "Has there been a burglary?"

"That question, De Valerie, needs no answering," I said grimly. "You will be very foolish if you deny—"

"But I don't understand you, sir."

"What have you done with the money?"

"I haven't seen any money, or touched any," declared the boy, rising up with sudden passion. "It's—it's disgraceful, sir! I don't think it's fair to pick me out like this, and accuse me! I haven't touched a farthing—and I want to be taken to the Head. I won't stand it—I won't stand it!"

He had worked himself into a fury, and his eyes blazed, and his cheeks had become flushed. But I knew well enough that his was the fury of despair. He stood facing me, breathing hard.

"Sit down, De Valerie," I said quietly.

"I won't! I want to be taken to the Head—"

"Sit down, De Valerie!" I repeated.

Just for a moment he hesitated, and then he fell back into his chair sullenly, and with his lips tightly compressed.

"I am sorry you have taken this attitude, my boy," I told him. "You have done yourself no good by adding falsehoods to your other misdeeds. But I will give you one more chance to confess."

"There's nothing for me to confess, sir," he said steadily. "You've got no evidence against me—not an atom of proof. And it's a rotten game to accuse a fellow of something which can't be proved. I'll declare my innocence to the last, sir."

I eyed him grimly.

"You say that you have been accused wrongfully, De Valerie?" I asked. "You say that there is no proof against you—not a shred of evidence?"

"There isn't, sir—and you know there isn't!"

"Listen to me, De Valerie," I said gravely. "Some time during the hours of the night you rose from your bed and came downstairs in your slippers. You went to your study, and donned a dressing-gown. Then

you stealthily made your way to the Headmaster's private sanctum—"

"But—how did—I didn't, sir!" faltered the boy.

"Don't interrupt me, De Valerie!" I exclaimed. "Having reached the Headmaster's study, you smashed open the bureau, and took out the sum of money I mentioned. Your next act was to manufacture a false trail. With that object in view you seized the poker and demolished the window-catch. Afterwards you made certain marks upon the sill, and scraped a slight quantity of mud up from the flower-bed and placed it upon the floor. Your efforts, however, were crude and clumsy. Thinking that you had performed your task well, you left the study and went to your own. There you removed your dressing-gown and donned a pair of boots. You passed out by the window, and were absent for some little time."

De Valerie was staring at me with wild eyes.

"Were—were you watching me all the time, sir?" he asked hoarsely.

"You admit, then—"

"You know, sir!" groaned the boy. "What's the good of denyin' it any more? An' you must have been watching me."

"No, De Valerie; I merely put two and two together from the evidence available," I replied grimly. "Come, my boy, let me hear the whole truth. I cannot believe that you are wholly responsible. Be perfectly frank, and—"

"I can't, sir—I can't say anything!" muttered De Valerie.

"What have you done with the money?"

"It's—it's gone, sir!"

"Who took it from you?"

"I can't say—oh, please don't ask me—"

"No, I won't ask you; I will tell you instead," I said quietly. "The man who has you in his power, and who forced you to commit this crime, is that rascally book-maker, Bradmore."

"Good heavens!" panted De Valerie. "How—how did you know, sir?"

"Never mind that now—I do know!" I replied. "That man is wickedly deceiving you, my boy. I don't know how, but you may be sure that you will receive full mercy if you tell me the absolute truth. Otherwise I cannot be answerable for what may happen."

"I—I can't say anything!" muttered De Valerie huskily.

"Why can't you?"

He didn't answer, but seemed to break down completely. He buried his face in his hands, and I saw that he was sobbing convulsively. The lad was almost distracted, and I could not possibly be harsh with him.

"Why can't you speak, De Valerie?" I repeated gently. "Don't you see that it is your best course? The truth is bound to come out in any case—and I should prefer to hear it from your own lips. I am willing to trust you, De Valerie—in spite of the fact that you have lied to me within the last five minutes."

"Oh, I—I—— It's too awful, sir," groaned the wretched boy.

"It may not be so awful as you imagine," I said. "If you refuse to speak to me, there is but one course left open. I shall take immediate steps to have Bradmore placed under arrest. He, you may be sure, will not be so reluctant to speak. The truth will be revealed through his lips—and, as you will doubtless realise—Bradmore will say the best for his own cause. He will care nothing what happens to you. Speak to me frankly now, and——"

De Valerie looked up at me with feverish eyes.

"I—I will, sir," he exclaimed between his teeth, and in a tone of utter resignation. "I'll tell you the whole truth—every word of it! Oh, it'll mean prison for me, but it's got to come!"

I could see that De Valerie's brain had been at work. He knew that my words were true enough, and he had the good sense to realise that he had now the advantage of having the first "say." Refusal to speak would only make his position worse.

Quite four minutes elapsed before he plucked up the courage to commence his story. And then, with a sudden shiver, he sat forward in his chair.

"I took the money because I was forced to, sir," he said in a mere whisper. "Oh, I shouldn't have dreamed of such a thing otherwise! I'm not a thief really—I've been a brute and a cad sometimes, but I've never touched a thing that wasn't my own until last night—not to keep, anyhow. It was Bradmore who forced me. I couldn't refuse—I daren't. I was terrified—I'm terrified now!"

"Why are you terrified, De Valerie?"

He seemed to gulp.

"Because—because the police will have me for—for murder!" he panted despairingly. "Oh, I can't stand it, sir!"

"Good gracious! For murder!" I repeated, in real amazement.

He looked at me with his eyes filling with tears.

"It's the truth, sir!" he breathed. "It was all my fault—it was my doing that that fire happened! It was I who caused Binnson's death! I didn't do it on purpose, I'll swear; but he died because of my mad action!"

I breathed a little sigh of relief.

"So you caused Binnson's death, De Valerie?" I said drily. "Well, go on."

In a flash the whole plot, except for the details, was as clear as crystal. But at present I did not inform De Valerie of the actual truth; I decided to wait until he had finished his story.

"You—you don't seem very surprised, sir," he said, gazing at me fearfully.

"Perhaps it is you who will be surprised, my boy," I replied. "Go on with your story."

And then, in husky, disjointed sentences, he related all the facts of the fire to me; he told me how he had bolted Binnson in the loft; how he had accidentally set the building

on fire; and how Bradmore had witnessed the whole incident.

"Bradmore heard the poor kid's yells, sir," said De Valerie brokenly. "He heard him fall back into the fire, and he knows that I'm guilty. He'll tell the whole story to the police, and—and I shall be arrested for murder!"

"Is that what Bradmore told you?" I asked quietly.

De Valerie nodded mutely.

"It was nonsense, my boy," I said. "At the very worst, you could be merely punished for gross carelessness. Bradmore worked upon your conscience, and forced you to believe things which were without a shred of truth."

Sudden hope sprang into the boy's eyes.

"Can't—can't they arrest me, sir?" he asked hoarsely.

"I will relieve your mind on that point presently, De Valerie," I replied. "Tell me why you took the money from the Headmaster's study last night, and what you did with it."

"Bradmore forced me, sir—he threatened to go to the police straight away if I didn't do as he ordered," replied the boy weakly. "Oh, I refused again and again, but he absolutely forced me to do it. I was afraid. Even—even burglary seemed better than being arrested for murder!"

Somehow I could only sympathise with this wretched boy.

"I do not altogether blame you for your action, De Valerie," I said. "You were literally compelled to obey Bradmore's will; terror took command of you, and I am well aware that common-sense and reason desert one under those conditions. But you should have confessed to me at once, without making your case worse by telling lies——"

"I was afraid to tell you, sir!" gasped De Valerie. "I—I thought—— Oh, I don't know what I thought. But I daren't speak the truth. Will—will they do anything to me, sir?"

I did not answer for a few moments. Upon the main charge De Valerie was not so much to be blamed as pitied. Bradmore's threats had driven him to mad desperation; he had been forced into the thing against his own will, and against his own judgment. And I couldn't help feeling that the experience had taught the boy a stern, bitter lesson.

"You may be sure, De Valerie, that this matter will not reach the ears of the police—at least, so far as you are concerned," I said. "The guilt is solely Bradmore's, and, in regard to the actual robbery itself, I do not hold you responsible. You were merely the tool by which Bradmore worked."

"Shall I be sacked, sir?" asked the boy in a whisper. "Oh, that's a mad thing to ask!—of course I shall be sacked! I haven't any right to remain at St. Frank's after this!"

I shook my head.

"The Headmaster, I am sure, will understand the extenuating circumstances, De Valerie," I said quietly. "I don't think it will be necessary for you to be expelled from the school. You will, however, receive certain punishment."

"But—but—" De Valerie paused in amazement, as though he could hardly believe his ears. "But I caused Binnson's death, sir!"

"That is just the whole root of the matter, De Valerie," I said. "As I told you before, you have been cruelly and basely victimised—you have been blackmailed in the most outrageous manner. And blackmail is, I think, the most unutterably contemptible of all crimes. Bradmore tricked you into believing that Binnson was killed. In reality, the boy is as healthy as you are yourself!"

De Valerie rose from his chair, with his eyes nearly starting from his head. His expressions changed rapidly, as though his brain was working too swiftly for him to fully grasp his thoughts.

"Alive!" he shouted hoarsely. "Oh—oh—"

He collapsed into his chair, completely overcome.

"Yes, De Valerie, Binnson is alive," I replied. "I have not the slightest doubt that Bradmore got the boy out of the loft during the first few minutes of the fire. He knew well enough that he would have a firm hold upon you, and he has used that hold to such an extent that he forced you to commit a criminal offence. The infernal hound! Really, my boy, I pity you!"

The tears welled into De Valerie's eyes.

"I—I can't believe it, sir!" he muttered brokenly. "Oh, it's too good to be true! Then—then I didn't—"

"Of course you didn't, De Valerie," I said, interrupting him, knowing what he was going to say. "Your chief offences are not exactly serious. I shall punish you for smoking, and for being acquainted with such a man as Bradmore—"

"There's—there's something else I'd like to say, sir," interrupted the boy. "While I was in the Head's study I did something rotten—something contemptible. I copied out those examination papers. Oh, I realised afterwards that it was a mean, caddish thing. And I want you to punish me, sir! I—I don't mind being flogged, even if I'm half skinned!"

He broke down completely after that, and sobbed convulsively.

"Come, come, De Valerie," I said gently. "You mustn't carry on in this way. I think you have had a terrible amount of punishment during this last week—a far greater punishment than a mere flogging. You have acted honourably in asking for punishment for your offence, and I am half inclined to let the matter rest as it is, and put you upon trust."

He looked up at me with red, tear-stained eyes.

"Oh, sir!" he muttered huskily.

"Since you have been at St. Frank's, De Valerie," I went on, "you have not always shown the spirit I should like. You have earned for yourself a nickname which is, of itself, an index of your general conduct. Do you think it is a pleasant thing to be known as 'the Rotter'?"

He didn't answer me, but hung his head.

"I believe, De Valerie, that there is some

good in you—quite a considerable amount," I went on. "Your actions of this last week I leave out altogether, since they were not your own actions. But I have had my eye upon you, and I have seen many little things which displease me. I don't want to lecture you, my boy, but you will be earning my respect if you change your habits, and—"

"Oh, sir, I've had a terrible lesson," he broke in passionately. "I—I didn't think you'd be so kind to me. I don't know what to say, sir! I—I'm not worth any consideration—I deserve to be expelled!"

He sat before me with his eyes shining with a new happiness. I had not thought him capable of such contrition, and I realised more than ever how bitter his lesson had been.

"But if Binnson's alive, sir, I didn't see a ghost at all!" he exclaimed suddenly. "It was all a trick. I've been a fool all along! And—and I've taken the Head's money—I've acted like a common thief—"

"Which reminds me, De Valerie," I interrupted. "What did you do with the money?"

"I did as Bradmore told me, sir—I took it to an old tree in a hollow—that hollow just against Bellton Wood," he replied. "You know it, sir—the tree stands in the middle, quite by itself. I put the notes and the silver in a bag, and left it there."

"You didn't meet Bradmore?"

"No, sir."

"The cunning rascal!" I exclaimed grimly. "Bradmore is a pretty complete rogue. The shrewdness of his plan is obvious. There is no proof that Bradmore actually took the money—you merely placed it in that tree, and, unless Bradmore is caught red-handed with the money upon him, he stands a chance of getting free."

"Suppose—suppose the money can't be returned, sir?" asked De Valerie. "My pater might refund it if he knew everything—"

"We won't go into that now, my boy," I said, rising to my feet, and laying a hand upon his shoulder. "I hope this has taught you not to mix with such utter rascals as Bradmore," I went on gently. "And you must realise the fire was caused solely because you were smoking. Just consider what your action brought about. That building was totally destroyed; Bennett and his chums lost their cinematograph apparatus and films; and you were plunged into a hopeless morass of terror. All that came about because of your—"

"I know, sir—I know!" said De Valerie, in a low voice. "Oh, I wish you'd have me flogged, sir—I should feel more comfortable—I shouldn't feel so utterly rotten!"

"A flogging would do you no good, De Valerie," I said quietly. "You can atone for your misdeeds in quite another way. I shall say no more to you, but you may be quite assured that I shall keep my eyes open. That does not imply that I shall spy upon you—such a thing would be hateful; but your everyday actions will tell their own story. Go, De Valerie, and forget this incident altogether. I will give you another chance to 'make good,' as the Americans say."

De Valerie was too full of emotion to speak; I knew well enough that a considerable lump had risen in his throat. And he left my study looking a better boy than he had ever looked before.

I had the conviction within me that quite a large amount of good had been done. I had taken the matter into my own hands, simply because I understood the matter as it actually was. Dr. Stafford, I knew, would uphold my decision.

Looked at coldly, it seemed preposterous that a boy who had committed a serious theft should go unpunished. But the circumstances were altogether extraordinary. De Valerie had been to blame in some small degree; he had behaved wrongly in many ways. But lack of punishment would put him upon his honour—it would make him strive to do his very best in the future.

And, as I uttered a little sigh, I felt quite satisfied. Then my expression changed. My thoughts had taken a different turn.

"Now," I muttered grimly, "for Mr. Mike Bradmore!"

CHAPTER VI.

(Told by Nipper.)

IN WHICH THE GUV'NOR GETS ON THE TRACK, AND THERE IS QUITE A LOT OF EXCITEMENT AT THE OLD RUINED MILL.

"**B**EGAD! It's simply amazin', dear fellows!"

Sir Lancelot Montgomery Tregellis-West adjusted his pince-nez, and gazed at Tommy Watson and I with mild astonishment. We had just come out of the Form-room, after morning lessons.

"It's simply amazin', old boys," repeated Sir Montie. "I can't imagine what's happened to him, you know. I can't, really!"

"Seems to be another chap altogether," declared Tommy.

"It's old Alvy," I said confidently. "He's been jawing at De Valerie, and that's made all the difference. There's something you don't know, my sons—but you'll know it before long. I dare say."

We were all rather astounded. De Valerie had been on his way back to the Form-room when the Remove received its dismissal. We practically met him at the door, and the change in him was almost startling.

The deathly pallor had gone out of his cheeks, and his eyes were shining with absolute joy. I'd never seen him look like that before—and I almost felt like slapping him on the back. He didn't look half such a cad as he had done before. I wondered how long it would last.

I was curious to have a jaw with the guv'nor, to find out what had actually happened. It was queer. I had been expecting De Valerie to get the kick-out—hard. But there he was, as cheerful as a sand-boy.

Sir Montie and Tommy and I strolled out into the Triangle. The sun was shining, and the day comparatively warm. The first person I saw was my esteemed guv'nor, striding

towards the gates with his usual swinging gait—that pun was quite unintentional, let me add.

"By jingo!" I exclaimed. "Come on, ye cripples!"

I ran like the dickens, and my chums followed me. We caught up with Nelson Lee just after he had passed through the gates, and he looked at us with a slight frown.

"Hallo, sir!" I said breathlessly. "Off out?"

"Yes, young 'un, I am—and I can't stop to exchange compliments with you," he replied briskly. "I may possibly be able to talk with you later on—"

"Oh, I say, can't we come along with you, sir?" I asked eagerly.

Nelson Lee smiled good-naturedly.

"You young rascal," he said, falling into a walk again. "Come along, then. You may possibly be useful. Yes, your chums may come as well."

"Good egg!" murmured Tommy Watson gleefully.

We were soon striding along the path towards Bellton Wood. And, once completely to ourselves, the guv'nor was decent enough to explain what had occurred. Tommy and Montie, of course, didn't know as much as I did, and they were all the more surprised.

But Nelson Lee had trusted us before, and he knew that he could trust us this time. Naturally he took me into the "know"—that was a matter of course. And Tommy Watson and Montie, knowing our real identities, were permitted to share our secrets. They had proved their qualities long ago.

"It's simply amazin', Mr. Alvin'ton," said Sir Montie. "Begad! I've got an idea that De Valerie will buck up tremendously after this. I've always suspected that there was somethin' good in him, lyin' underneath the surface. Perhaps it'll come out now—you never know."

"I have decided to give him a chance, Montie," said Nelson Lee. "The boys, fortunately, know nothing, and I rely upon you to keep the matter very quiet. If Bradmore is arrested, I shall take care that no facts are published. The rascal may speak freely to the police, but the matter will go no further. It is owing to his villainy that the whole matter arose."

We walked on, and came within sight of the hollow.

"But you don't expect to find the money in that tree, do you, sir?" I asked.

"I should be considerably astonished if I did find it there," replied the guv'nor drily.

"I have come here, Nipper, in the hope of picking up a clue or two. Our time may be wasted—but it won't do us any harm. You see, I am anxious that Bradmore shall have no warning. I don't want to give him the chance of slipping away. Inquiries would probably reach him in advance, and my object would be defeated."

"Clues, eh?" murmured Tommy Watson.

"My hat! We're going to get on the track!"

Nelson Lee smiled, and came to a halt about a hundred yards from the big tree. The ground before us was soft and spongy,

with patches of grass growing here and there.

"Now, boys, I want you to remain here," said the gov'nor crisply. "There may be some tracks, and I don't want your big boots to trample them all out. Just stay here until I have finished."

He went off by himself, leaving us jawing alone. We had quite a lot to talk about, for I explained a few details to my chums which had been left out previously. While we were talking Nelson Lee waved to us.

We ran to him, and found that he was close against the tree.

"There is quite an interesting story to be read here—upon the ground," he said pleasantly. "Here, as you will observe, are De Valerie's footprints—the double track of his coming and going. And, beside them, you will see the footprints of a man—Bradmore, without a doubt. He approached from the direction of the wood, and went back the same way."

Sir Montie fixed his pince-nez on securely, and gazed upon the spongy ground.

"Really, sir, I'm in a shockin' state of bewilderment," he said. "How can you see all that in this frightful mud? There's nothin' to see except a lot of marks that don't mean anythin'."

I grinned.

"Can't you see those footprints?" I said, pointing. "They're as clear as crystal, Montie. Bradmore was wearing rubber heels—and the left one, I can see, was a bit defective—a chunk of the rubber was missing. Can't you see it?"

"I am really ashamed of myself, Benny," apologised Sir Montie. "I can't see it at all, begad! It must be your trained eye, you know!"

"That is undoubtedly the explanation," smiled the gov'nor. "Your eyes are keen, Nipper. Come, we will follow these tracks, and see where they lead us."

It was easy enough to follow them until we came to the wood itself. But here they were lost completely in the grass and among the fallen leaves, now sodden and decaying.

"This is where we come to a stop, I suppose?" murmured Tommy.

"Rats!" I said. "The gov'nor will follow the trail right enough!"

And he did, too! Through the wood Nelson Lee's task was comparatively simple. He was an expert in woodcraft, and had the skill of an Australian tracker. Bellton Wood was an open book to him, and he didn't falter once.

And, sure enough, when we broke out upon the other side, a soft patch of ground revealed Bradmore's footprints at once. Tommy and Montie were lost in astonishment—but I wasn't. Right before us stood the old ruined mill, and it was apparent that this building was our objective.

We reached it, and entered the lower apartment, long since allowed to decay. Muddy marks upon the hollow-worn wooden steps told us that Bradmore had gone aloft. The gov'nor went upstairs first, and we followed closely behind him.

From one floor to another we passed up, mounting the rickety stairs until our legs ached. And, when we were near the top, the gov'nor paused, and held up his hand for silence. The sound of somebody moving came from the topmost floor of all.

"Bradmore!" breathed Tommy.

But he was wrong, as we soon found out.

"Is that you, Mr. Bradmore?" came a voice from above. "Ain't you going to let me out yet?"

Nelson Lee smiled down at us, and quickly mounted the remaining stairs. Above him a trapdoor was securely bolted. He shot the bolt back, and passed up into the small circular apartment beneath the roof of the mill.

We followed him quickly—rather too quickly, in fact, for we felt the rotten old floor shaking dangerously beneath our weight. We knew at once that the occupant of the little room was Harry Binnson.

He stared at us in surprise and alarm.

"I—I say!" he exclaimed. "I thought you was Mr. Bradmore——"

"It is all right, my boy," said Nelson Lee. "You needn't have any fear. Why were you locked up in this place? Has Mr. Bradmore been keeping you here long?"

The boy scowled.

"Yes, the rotter!" he muttered. "Been keepin' me 'ere a dashed lot longer than I like! But 'ow did you know I was alive? I thought everybody believed that I'd been wiped out in that there fire."

"Not everybody, Binnson," said the gov'nor. "We, at least, knew otherwise. We did not come here to rescue you, but to look for Mr. Bradmore himself."

"You won't 'ave long to wait, sir," said Binnson. "Mr. Bradmore said 'e was comin' at 'arf-past one. It ain't fur off that now, is it?"

Nelson Lee's eyes gleamed.

"Twenty-past exactly," he exclaimed. "By James, we shall be able to catch the rascal red-handed if we play our cards properly. I don't think you like Mr. Bradmore, do you, Binnson?"

"I 'ate him!" said Binnson sullenly. "A proper beast—that's what 'e is!"

"When was he here last?"

"Why, in the middle of the blssed night—came an' slep' 'ere till this mornin'," replied Binnson. "Wouldn't let me go, neither. Said 'e'd set me free at 'arf-past one. An' I can't do nothin', 'cos my dad's agreeable to it all."

"Ah, now we are getting to the bottom of it," said Nelson Lee. "So your father was in the plot, too, Binnson? Oh, you needn't be afraid that anything will happen to your esteemed parent—Bradmore is the man I'm after."

"An' what about Mr. Walker, sir—'e's just as bad."

"Walker!" I put in. "He's that rotten village loafer, isn't he?"

"I say!" called out Tommy Watson abruptly, "I can hear somebody whistling!"

We all stood perfectly still, and a whistle came clearly to our ears.

"That's Mr. Bradmore!" said Harry Binn-

son. "'E's always whistlin' that blessed tune—fair gets on my nerves, it does!'"

The guv'nor snapped his fingers.

"We have just got a minute's grace!" he said quickly. "Look here, Binnson, you mustn't tell Bradmore that we are here."

"But 'e'll see you, sir!"

"There are some boxes here, and we can conceal ourselves for the time being," went on Nelson Lee. "I want to give the man a complete surprise. Whatever happens, you will come to no harm."

Binnson looked rather bewildered.

"But 'e'll know there's bin somebody 'ere, sir!" he exclaimed. "'E'll find the trap-door unbolted."

"Yes, I had remembered that," interjected the guv'nor, going across and lowering the flap. "Bradmore will possibly suspect that he forgot to bolt it when he left. At all events, do not fabricate—evade his questions."

There was no time for any more, for we heard Mike Bradmore's heavy tread below. In a few seconds we had all concealed ourselves behind a pile of old boxes and wood-work in a dark portion of the apartment.

The trap-door was thrust back with a thud, and Bradmore entered the room.

"Ho, you're still 'ere, then?" he exclaimed roughly. "Who unbolted this 'ere trap-door? Who's bin 'ere, you young brat?"

Binnson gave a cry.

"The trap-door was unbolted?" he exclaimed. "Lummy! An' I've bin in this rotten old place all the mornin' when I might have got away! 'Ow was I to know that the door was unbolted? I never thought of tryin' it!"

"Ain't anybody been here?" demanded Bradmore.

"You don't 'arf ask sensible questions!" sneered the boy. "I'd like to know who would come to this 'ere mouldy old place? P'raps you forgot to bolt it yerself, when you left."

Bradmore grunted.

"I might ha' done," he admitted. "I'd swear I bolted you in, though. It don't matter much, anyway. You can clear off now, kid, 'ome to Bannington."

"Ain't you goin' to give me anything?" asked Binnson indignantly.

"Ho, yes!" said Mr. Bradmore, with a genial chuckle. "I was forgettin'. I promised you ten bob, didn't I, young shaver?"

"Yes, you did!"

"Well, I'm feeling very generous this mornin'," said Mr. Bradmore pleasantly. "I'll make it a quid, 'Arry. A quid all for yourself!"

"Coo! That's all right!" exclaimed the boy eagerly.

"It'll send you home nice an' 'appy," chuckled Mr. Bradmore. "You know the yarn you've got to tell, don't you? There'll be a mighty big surprise when you show up, but that won't matter a 'ang."

I guessed that Bradmore was quite confident. Even if the boy told the whole truth people wouldn't believe him, and even if they

did, there would be no actual proof against Bradmore. The man considered himself quite safe.

I saw that the guv'nor was cautiously peeping over the edge of the box, and I followed his example. Bradmore was just in the act of pulling out a thick bundle of pound currency notes. They were all new, and there must have been thirty or forty of them.

"Where'd you get all that there money?" asked Binnson, round-eyed. "No wonder you said you'd gimme a quid!"

"If you ain't careful you'll get a thick car instead!" said Bradmore tartly. "No, you ask no questions, my boy, an' you won't get no lies told you. I've 'ad a bit o' luck on a 'orse—a fine bit o' luck," he added, with a chuckle.

The man had practically given himself away by producing those notes. They were undoubtedly those which had been taken from the Head's study by De Valerie. He handed one of them across to Binnson.

The lad, without a second's hesitation, skipped to the opening, and tumbled down the ladder. He probably thought that trouble was coming, and he didn't want to be mixed up in it. I didn't blame him. We heard him descending rapidly to the ground.

Bradmore stuffed his notes away with a satisfied sigh.

"I clicked proper that time!" he muttered complacently. "Clicked proper, I did! Well, I'm safe enough——"

"I don't think you are, Mr. Bradmore!" exclaimed Nelson Lee calmly.

It was a terrific surprise for the rascal. He spun round with a gasp, and saw the guv'nor and we three boys emerging from behind the boxes. I didn't envy Bradmore his feelings at that moment.

But he recovered his presence of mind in a flash.

"Hang you!" he snarled thickly.

A heavy piece of wood was lying near the opening, and Bradmore made a quick jump for it. That action on his part altered the situation completely. His capture was an absolute certainty—or would have been if fate hadn't taken a hand in the game. For, as Bradmore landed upon the old flooring with a thud, there was an alarming rending of rotten timbers.

The next second, with a wild cry, Bradmore plunged through the flooring, carrying with him practically half the floor of the whole apartment! We were left absolutely marooned, with a gaping hole before us, unable to move without causing a general collapse!

CHAPTER VII.

(Nipper concludes.)

A RACE ACROSS THE MOOR—WE MAKE OUR CAPTURE, AND EVERYTHING IS O.K.

NELSON LEE uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Keep your backs to the wall, boys!" he exclaimed warningly. "This floor is in a terribly rocky state!"

"Bradmore ain't hurt, sir!" roared Tommy Watson suddenly.

We all craned our heads forward. And there, on the floor below, which seemed to be in a perfectly sound condition, Bradmore was picking himself up and swearing volubly. He seemed to be suffering from nothing worse than a few scratches—and, I suppose, a large-sized bruise or two.

He was surrounded by pieces of rotten wood, and was simply smothered with fine dust. For some minutes he coughed and swore alternately, and then commenced sneezing for a change.

The distance between the two floors was not very far, but it was rather surprising that Bradmore hadn't been hurt.

"Hang you!" he snarled, shaking his fist up at us. "You ain't got me, 'ave you? An', what's more, you won't get me!"

He stumbled across to the big trap-door, which was exactly similar to the one in the wrecked flooring. He passed down the steps, and we heard a heavy bolt being shot home into its slot.

"That's done it!" I exclaimed in dismay. "Even if we get down from this place we shall still be cooped up. I—I say, guv'nor, we ought to have jumped down while Bradmore was still there——"

"That would have been impossible, Nipper," said Lee grimly. "Bradmore was standing upon the only available space, and we couldn't have leapt upon him without doing very serious injury. Moreover, the other floor might be unequal to the task of withstanding another severe shock. We shall get down all right before long! Let me think a moment or two!"

"Begad! Ain't it shockin'?" murmured Sir Montie. "We had the boulder completely, you know. It's frightfully hard lines!"

"There he goes!" I grunted wrathfully.

We were quite near to the window, and, by edging my way along, I was able to look out. Sir Montie and Tommy followed my example. The remains of the floor, upon which we were standing, was sagging perilously, and as we moved an ominous creak or two sounded.

Far below us we saw Bradmore, pelting away towards the moor road. A small lane led right past the mill, but it was very seldom used. Bradmore was obviously making for the road which led to Bannington. And luck, having favoured him so far, came to his rescue again.

We saw him stop on the top of a grass hillock. He was gazing at a lonely cyclist, who was pedalling along at a leisurely pace. There was a deep gully in front of Bradmore, almost like a long ditch.

"What's he up to?" asked Tommy Watson curiously.

Bradmore had suddenly commenced to wave his arms wildly. We distinctly heard some alarming cries coming along on the stiff breeze. The cyclist heard them too, for he turned his head.

Then Bradmore threw up his arms and fell

headlong into the gully like a log until he disappeared from our view.

"Begad! He's havin' a fit!" gasped Sir Montie.

"Looks like it," I replied.

We watched. The cyclist had left his machine, and was running over the grass to the spot. He, of course, couldn't see Bradmore; he only knew that the man had fallen into the hollow.

At last he arrived, and stood on the brink, staring down. And then I uttered a sharp, furious exclamation.

"The cunning fox!" I roared. "Don't you see, you chaps? It was a trick—a wheeze to get hold of the bike!"

"Oh, my goodness!" gasped Tommy Watson blankly.

For we could see Bradmore running like mad along the road. He had emerged from the gully at the far end; the rotter had been creeping along, unseen, while the cyclist was hurrying to his rescue! This, of course, worked out splendidly from Bradmore's point of view.

He reached the deserted bicycle while the unfortunate cyclist was still gazing into the gully. And it wasn't until Bradmore was speeding away on the jigger that the owner became aware of the ruse. Then he started rushing towards the road at full speed. His efforts were hopeless.

Sir Montie and Tommy and I had been yelling like the dickens, but we couldn't attract the fellow's attention. The wind was blowing towards us, and our voices did not carry.

"What is all the noise about, boys?" asked Nelson Lee, who couldn't see out of the window. "I presume you——"

Tommy Watson, greatly excited, turned round from the window. But the silly ass had forgotten all about the floor, and he took a step forward.

"Oh, crumbs!" he gasped faintly.

Both Nelson Lee and I made a grab at him—and that did it!

The old timbers gave way simultaneously. We were all shot down like ninepins, and landed in a tangled heap on the floor below, surrounded by splinters of wood. But, if luck had favoured Bradmore, it favoured us, too.

The remains of the floor had not broken away; it had simply sagged down, shooting us below. If the flooring had followed we should certainly have been badly injured. As it was, we picked ourselves up almost unscratched.

"Well, that's one way of doin' it, begad!" gasped Sir Montie, groping for his pince-nez among a pile of rubbish. "Dear fellows, we've got down!"

"Are you hurt, boys?" asked Lee anxiously.

"We should have been if that floor had fallen with us, guv'nor," I replied. "I'm not hurt, anyhow, and these two chaps don't look particularly knocked out. But our position isn't any better even now."

"Oh, yes, it is, Nipper," replied Lee. "This ladder was not smashed when Bradmore fell through the flooring—and it will come in useful. Help me to drag it to the window."

I stared.

"But that fatheaded little thing won't reach to the ground, sir!" I roared.

"You evidently credit me with having sheep's brains, Nipper!" said the guv'nor smoothly. "My own common-sense, I believe, told me that a nine-foot ladder would have difficulty in stretching itself to forty or fifty——"

"I'm sorry, guv'nor," I interrupted with a grin. "But what's your idea, anyhow?"

"Well, so far as my wits tell me, there is another window just below this one," replied Nelson Lee drily. "My plan is simple. Your chums and I will hold the ladder in position, Nipper, and you will climb down it and enter the lower window. It will then be quite a simple matter for you to mount the stairs and unbolt the door. Bradmore did not waste time in securing any other doors."

"Oh, it's a ripping wheeze," I declared.

"But won't it be risky, Benny?" asked Sir Montie anxiously. "Supposin' the ladder breaks while you're climbin' down?"

"Cheerful old stick, ain't you?" I grinned. "Supposin' the ladder breaks? Why, I shouldn't float to the ground, Montie—I should hit it with more force than comfort. But the ladder won't break, you ass."

We soon dragged the thing across the floor, and got it out of the window. It was old and heavy. But we found that the lower end of it just rested upon the next window-ledge. Having tested it to his satisfaction, Nelson Lee declared that it was safe for me to go down.

He would have gone himself, of course, but it was far better that he should hang on to the top of it, in case of accidents. I scrambled out of the window, and hopped down the ladder without any trouble.

It was a bit of a job making an entry by the lower window. There wasn't much space to squeeze past the ladder, and the window was glued up. At least, it seemed to be. I had to kick it to pieces with my heel before I could get through.

Having done so, however, I pelted up the steps, and unbolted the trap-door. Nelson Lee and my chums had already dragged the ladder up, and we made our way down to the ground.

"We're diddled, anyhow," I said breathlessly. "Bradmore's in Bannington by this time, sir."

"Hardly," said Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "Now, boys, we must use our wits. We must try and place ourselves in Bradmore's position. Under those circumstances, what would our first move be?"

"Why, we should hide somewhere, sir," said Tommy vaguely.

"Rats!" I exclaimed. "We should leave Bannington by the first available train."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"That is exactly what I was thinking, Nipper," he said, much to my satisfaction. "Bradmore knows that there will soon be a hue-and-cry after him, and he is well known in Bannington. It would be rather a difficult matter for him to find concealment

there. His probable course would be to make for London."

"Just for the sake of seventy-five quid, sir?" asked Tommy.

"No, Watson, not for the sake of the sum you mentioned, but because he fears arrest," replied the guv'nor. "Bradmore's villainy has led him into a trap, and he doesn't fancy being sent to prison. His one aim, therefore, is to get right away from this part of the country. Upon these conclusions, therefore, I think we may take it fairly for granted that Bradmore will make a bee-line on the bicycle for Bannington Station. We must not overlook the added fact that the man is in further fear of punishment for stealing the cycle."

"Then we're diddled, sir?" I asked.

"It all depends, my lad," said Nelson Lee. "What is the time now? Twelve minutes to two exactly. We must now look up the trains."

He took a small time-table from his pocket and turned over the pages.

"Ah, as I anticipated," he exclaimed. "Bradmore apparently knew of this train. There is an express for London which leaves Bannington at one-fifty-five. That is to say, it is due out of the station in seven minutes from now."

"Begad! We can't get to Bannin'ton in seven minutes, sir," said Sir Montie mildly. "It's over three miles from here, ain't it?"

"A trifle over to the station, I think, Tre-gellis-West," said Nelson Lee. "But although we cannot reach the station in time, Bradmore will be able to do so. He is probably there by now."

"Then he'll get away," I put in quickly.

"You must remember that there is no certainty of Bradmore going to the station at all," the guv'nor reminded us. "That is merely the most likely supposition. And we shall be wise to lay our plans accordingly."

"But it's no good layin' plans, is it, sir?" asked Montie.

"Well, Montie, I believe that the main railway line runs across the edge of the moor, about half a mile from this spot," said the guv'nor. "The train will reach that spot in, roughly, fifteen minutes. I propose to hurry to the line, and to dispatch an urgent telegram from the signal-box, instructing the police officials, at the train's first stopping-point, to place Bradmore under arrest."

"By jingo! That's not bad!" I exclaimed. "Jolly good, in fact, guv'nor! But we'd better buck up, hadn't we?"

"Yes, Nipper, we must lose no time."

And without any further ado, we set off across the moor at the double. Of course, it was possible that we were going on a fool's errand, but it would have been foolish to remain inactive. This was, indeed, our only course now; and, although we shouldn't have the chance of capturing Bradmore personally, we might have the satisfaction of learning that he had been arrested.

It wasn't long before the railway came into view—at least, the telegraph poles were visible to us. The track itself ran through a

shallow cutting. And, just in this vicinity, a lonely signal-box was situated.

At last we stood at the top of the cutting. The line curved in the direction of London; but the Bannington stretch was quite clear. The signal-box was near by, and a solitary semaphore was not in a lowered position.

"She ain't signalled yet!" panted Tommy.

"And, by Jove, she's coming along, too!" exclaimed Nelson Lee tensely. "The train will be forced to stop!"

"My hat!" I gasped. "Then we shall be able to collar Bradmore!"

"Possibly, Nipper, possibly!"

We were excited in a moment—Watson and Tregellis-West and I, at least—and we pelted down the grassy bank of the cutting. We heard a shout from the signal-box, but we didn't take any notice.

The express was just drawing up, with a grinding of brakes. Why she had been stopped was a mystery to us, and it seemed an extraordinary stroke of luck. As we afterwards found, however, trains were often pulled up on this stretch, owing to military traffic at the next station.

What the gov'nor's plans were I didn't know—and I didn't have time to ask, either. For, as the train stopped, I heard a shout—and there, at the window of a first-class compartment, was Mike Bradmore!

He was staring at us in alarm and fury, and, even as we dashed forward, he opened the carriage-door and leapt upon the down-rails. He had lost his head in his anger, or he would never have attempted the jump.

For the train had just re-started. When Bradmore jumped, the carriage gave a sudden jerk. He was sent forward on his face. His fall was severe, for he landed on all fours, and his head struck one of the gleaming metals with a crack which was audible to us.

The train had only stopped for a few seconds, but Bradmore had probably thought that it would remain stationary for some minutes. And, as we rushed to the spot, I realised that the gov'nor's calculations had been absolutely accurate.

Bradmore groaned, and rolled over; but he made no attempt to rise. He was partially stunned, to tell the truth.

"Stand back, boys!" roared Nelson Lee.

We were just at his heels, and we paused obediently. Somehow, it was impossible to ignore a command of the gov'nor's. And I knew why he had warned us a second later. A thundering roar sounded—and there, rushing towards us, was a down-express.

And Bradmore lay across the metals!

"Good heavens!" panted Tommy Watson.

"Dear boys, it's all over!" said Sir Montie. "He'll be killed!"

"Don't do it, sir—don't do it!" I roared.

Nelson Lee had stepped upon the metals, and he was lifting Bradmore clear. The express was appallingly near, and the engine's whistle was blowing frantically. The brakes were all applied, and the sparks flew in thousands.

I stood stock still, rooted to the spot. The gov'nor gave a great heave, and stepped clear. Bradmore's helpless body swung round, his coat flying—

The train thundered past.

And Nelson Lee and Bradmore lay upon the ground, knocked over by the terrific rush of air. Bradmore's coat was in shreds, for it had been caught by the engine. But both he and his rescuer were unharmed—the gov'nor had been in time!

Bradmore wasn't hurt much; only an ugly bruise on his head.

He gave in completely. In fact, he actually displayed a spark of decency. He thanked Nelson Lee with real fervour for saving his life, and agreed to go with us quietly to the nearest village.

Here he was handed over to the policeman, and Nelson Lee rang up Bannington. The bulk of the stolen money was recovered, the remainder—so Bradmore declared—would be found upon Mr. Ted Walker, of Bellton.

With great cunning, Bradmore confessed that he had burgled the Head's study! He didn't even mention De Valerie. He knew well enough that his sentence, for burglary, would be much lighter than a sentence for criminal blackmail and burglary combined.

And the gov'nor, of course, was satisfied. He didn't want the actual facts to be published. So everybody was satisfied. Ultimately, of course, Bradmore received a nice little stretch of imprisonment—accompanied by Mr. Walker, who had been found in the bar at the White Harp. The latter gentleman naturally received the lighter sentence.

As for Cecil De Valerie—well, I'm pretty sure that the experience had done him a world of good. The school never knew the truth, and De Valerie was grateful to the Head and Nelson Lee for keeping matters quiet.

He was changed; the dreadful episode had altered his nature in some subtle manner. His break with Fullwood & Co. looked as though it would be lasting, and I had high hopes that the Rotter would soon be worthy of a different name.

Only time, of course, would show.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK'S MAGNIFICENT STORY, Entitled:

"A MYSTERY OF THE NIGHT!"

Will deal with the further Adventures of
NELSON LEE and NIPPER AT ST. FRANK'S.

OUT ON WEDNESDAY.

PRICE ONE PENNY.

BEGIN OUR NEW SERIAL TO-DAY!

In the Grip of the Huns.

A Magnificent Tale of Thrilling Experiences in Germany.

By CLEMENT HALE.

NOTE.—As the title "In the Hands of the Huns" has already been used, we have altered the name of our Serial to the above.

The Chief Characters in this Story are:

GEORGE GRAY and his brother **JACK**, who are the English Staff of the Berlin Rovers, a football club in Germany.

OTTO BRACK is a scoundrelly German member of the team. But another German, named

CARL HOFFMAN, is friendly, and advises the Englishmen to leave Germany, which they refuse to do. They are arrested and sent to a camp at Oberhemmel. One of the guards ill-treats Jack, and George goes to his rescue, knocking out a gaoler named Kutz. He and his brother are then put in separate cells. Another gaoler is more friendly, and informs George that his brother has recovered from his ill-usage. George is subsequently had up before a military tribunal, and is sentenced to be flogged at daybreak. They march him out into the yard and George looks about him—a prey to bitter reflections.

(Now read on).

AT THE FLOGGING BASE.

GEORGE saw the well-trained German troops, of which there seemed to be far too many, drawn up in a square.

The non-commissioned officers and the officers were given their appointed positions. A group of the staff officers stood apart. Most of these men wore decorations.

Not a head was turned as they swung by. Not a sound was heard.

In the middle of the yard George saw that a triangle was set, with straps to secure the wrists and ankles of the hapless prisoner who was to undergo the punishment of flogging.

His eyes dilated as he saw it. Near by stood a man with a cat-o'-nine tails in his hand, and the fellow was running the

thongs through his fingers in gleeful anticipation as the prisoner was marched towards him.

Then George became conscious of a low and sustained murmur, something between a growl and a hoot. It came from the lips of his fellow-prisoners, and, glancing in their direction, George saw them lined up under an armed guard.

His face flushed, and he glanced eagerly at them.

Would his brother be there?

Yes; a hand was waved at him, and he saw Jack.

His brother uttered a hoarse cry, and would have leapt towards him had not the man Wilson, who stood behind him, gripped him by the arm.

"Steady, my boy!" he cried.

"Let me go to him—let me go!" George heard his brother cry. "They sha'n't touch him—they sha'n't! I'd rather they killed me first!"

But Wilson held him, and it was as well, for one of the guards shortened his bayonet, as if he would drive it through the English boy.

"Cheerio, mate!" sang out Wilson.

And George waved his hand at him.

The next moment he was impelled roughly forward, and, stumbling, found himself beside the cruel triangle.

"Tie up the prisoner!" ordered the officer in command of the escort.

Then George Gray found himself seized, and forced up to the flogging base.

He struggled then, for he felt he must.

"You brutes! You cowards!" he cried. "I protest against this punishment! It is inhuman! I've done nothing to deserve it!"

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

His protests were useless. In spite of his protests, he was flung against the triangle and tied up there.

The cruel leather bands cut into the flesh. First one wrist, then the other was secured. Next his right ankle, then his left, were tied home, the legs being kept wide apart.

His arms were stretched above his head. The cramped position in itself was bad enough, without the flogging.

The warm air touched his naked back, and he quivered before a blow had been struck.

Holding his breath, he anticipated the cruel cut of the thongs, until, in imagination, he almost felt them bite home.

Never had he known such bitterness of heart. What had he done to deserve such a fate? And if this was what he was called upon to endure thus early in his captivity, what sufferings would he and his unfortunate comrades endure before they were through with it all?

He tried to move, but could not, and half hung, half leant, against the triangle in helpless misery.

Then his brain cleared, and he heard someone—an officer, he supposed—reading his crime aloud to the assembled prisoners and troops.

The guttural, German voice penetrated to the remotest parts of the big exercise-yard, and every word went home.

He knew sufficient of the hated German language to be able to follow the ramifications of the official jargon, and a laugh burst from his lips.

"And such punishment shall be meted out until justice has been done. It is absolutely imperative that discipline shall be maintained in all internment camps and prisons of the Fatherland to which prisoners of war are confined. The prisoner, George Gray, having—etc., etc.—"

George listened to it all with a mocking smile on his lips, and when the officer finished reading his voice rang clear as a clarion.

"A fig for your German justice!" he shouted defiantly. "A curse upon your Kaiser and your German Junkers! Hurrah for old England, and a cheer for the Union Jack!"

To his amazement, the prisoners took up the cry

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!" they roared.

And the guards were powerless to prevent them.

Then a sharp command rang out. "Proceed—"

An officer stood by to count the lashes. The executioner stepped within the range of George's vision, and the intended victim saw him for the first time.

It was Kutz—Kutz, with a devilish smile on his face—Kutz, who, in spite of the severe reprimand administered to him by the commandant of the prisoner, had been selected to administer the flogging.

"And now," sneered the rascal, in English, as he swung the thongs until they whistled through the air, "George Gray, it is my turn!"

THE "CAT!"

IF only they had spared him that—if only Kutz had not been chosen as the instrument of German justice—George felt that he might have borne with things more philosophically.

But to see the villain standing there, with the "cat" in his hand, to listen to his fiendish laugh of triumph, and watch the vindictive gleam of his cunning eyes, was too much to bear.

George tore at his bonds, but could not weaken them. He was helpless, in spite of his strength.

"I will pay off old scores!" said Kutz.

"Wait till I get a chance of paying off mine!" said the prisoner.

"The thongs will cut deep. My arm is strong!"

Kutz was sternly ordered to get on with the work, and stood back. He stood with feet set firmly on the gravel and arm swung back. The handle of the "cat" was short; the thongs trailed free of one another.

A pause. Not a sound, save the sucking of breath, for it was impossible for anyone to stand by and view what was happening without emotion, was heard.

Then the word was given, the "cat" was swung, and the thongs whistled cruelly through the air.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Once, twice, thrice the cruel thongs came down on the naked flesh, biting deep.

At the first blow George Gray started.

(Continued overleaf.)

He set his teeth hard, and vowed that he would not utter a sound.

Again the thong bit home, again—and, in spite of himself, a groan burst from his trembling lips. At the fourth stroke, while the prisoners groaned aloud, and tried shame upon the inhuman monsters who had ordered this punishment, Gray's whole body shuddered in agony.

He knew that the skin had been broken, and that the blood was running, and the punishment had barely begun.

It was in his mind to hurl curses upon his tormentors, but he forebore. Apart from that one exclamation of dire agony, which was forced from him, he made no sound, and determined that he would suffer whatever they dared to inflict without another murmur.

He knew that mercy would not be extended to him. He knew that no help could come to him. He prayed that none of his fellow-prisoners would be tempted to leave the ranks, and attempt a rescue, since it would be worse than useless.

"Oh, Lord," he prayed his stiffening lips moving ever so slightly, "make me brave to bear—"

And then something happened.

Had he been able to see, he would have known that his brother Jack, who had been wrestling with Wilson, who kept on telling him that it was hopeless for him to interfere, suddenly wrested himself free.

The moment he felt the restraining hand leave his arm, the boy dashed forward.

He did not care a rap for the German guard, or the brutal officers who commanded them. He did not pause to think that by his rash act he might be called upon to suffer the same martyrdom. All he knew was that his brother George, the brother he loved, was being inhumanly dealt with by these monsters, and he cleared the space that separated him from the flogging base in a series of bounds.

The nervous force within him urged him on.

And as Kutz swung the cruel "cat" back he pounced upon the fellow's wrist, and fiercely wrenched the weapon away.

Then, with flashing eyes, he confronted the executioner.

"You white-livered cur!" he blazed. "You shall taste some of your own physic!"

Kutz had turned with a roar of angry surprise, not knowing what had happened.

As he saw the pale faced, but resolute boy about to strike, he drew back, and his face blanched.

With a howl of terror he leapt away.

But Jack followed him.

He was as nimble as a cat. Long experience of the athletic-field, the boxing ring, and the football-ground had made him a perfect master of distance, and the studded thongs cut home, biting through the heavy cloth tunic the villain wore, and stinging his ribs until he uttered a yell of pain that echoed through the prison, and was beaten back by the granite walls.

Jack looked like a madman.

"Seize the Englishman! If he resists, strike or shoot him down!" roared the commandant.

A dozen Huns darted from the ranks, and made for Jack with their bayonets pointed.

Did the boy care? Not one jot!

What matter if they killed him, he would have his revenge in this his hour.

And so he darted this way and that, advancing, retreating, and always keeping the triangle with George tried to it at his back, so that they could not get behind him there.

He swung the cruel "cat" about his head, striking savagely at the heads of the soldiers, until they hesitated, and backed away, amid the frenzied cheers of the prisoners.

"Stand by and bayonet the first man who attempts to move!" came in a ringing order, and the guards closed upon the prisoners.

(To be continued.)

When you have read this week's number of the "Nelson Lee Library," hand it in at the nearest Post Office for a Soldier or Sailor. He will enjoy it as much as you.