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GOES UP THE POLE.**



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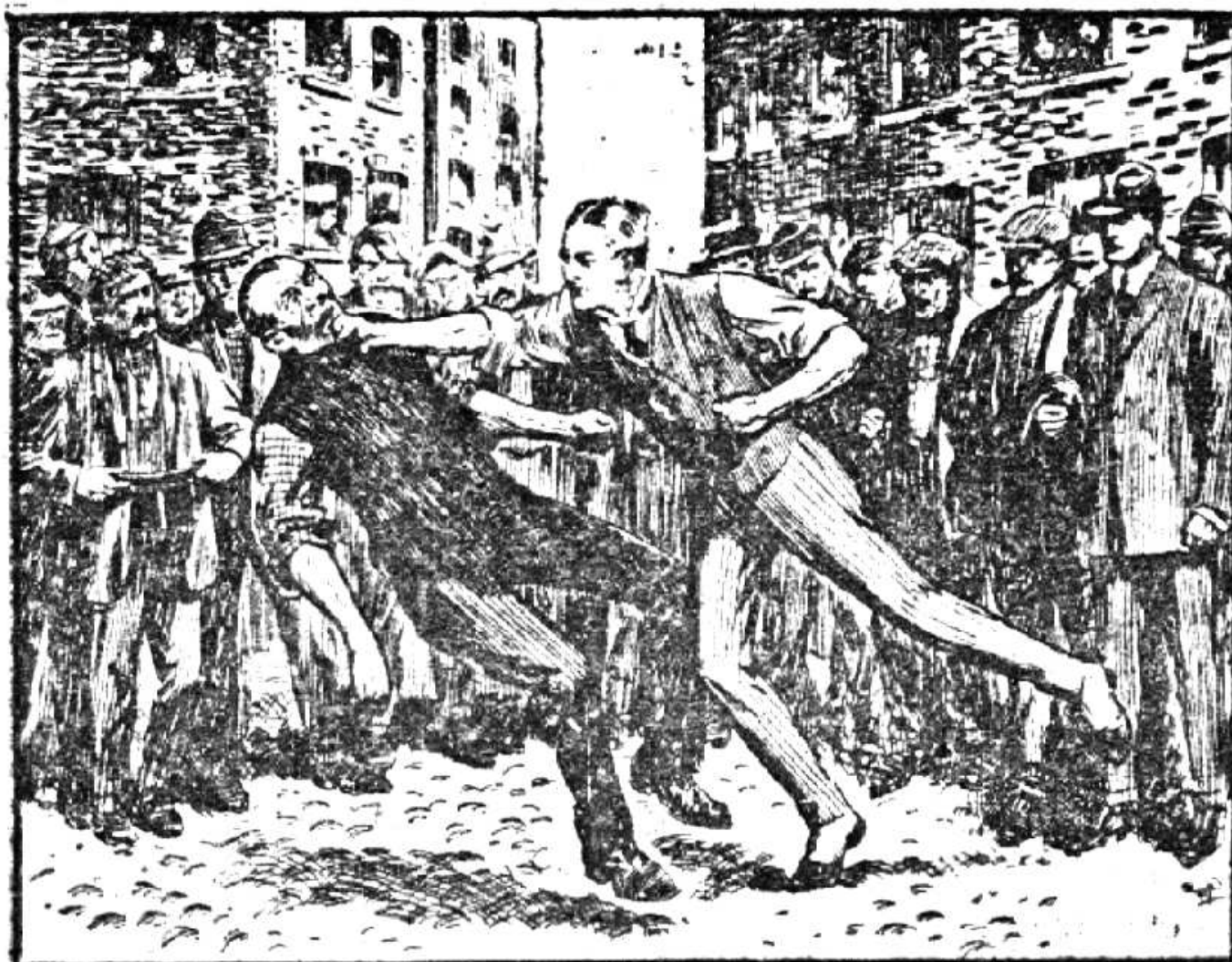
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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

FATTY LITTLE GOES UP THE POLE.

"**H**URRY up, Fatty! Put your back into it!" I delivered that advice free of all charge, and Fatty Little turned a perspiring red face towards me, and grinned.

"I've got more to carry than you have," he protested. "Great pancakes! This hill is a corker! I shall need a terrific feed after this, to get my strength together again! Perhaps we can drop into the tuck-shop in the village——"

"And perhaps we can't!" interrupted Nicodemus Trotwood firmly. "We shall only just get back in time for locking-up as it is, and we can't afford to waste three hours while you fill your bunkers!"

"Yes, Fatty—don't be a fuel!" grinned Tommy Watson.

Sir Montie Tregellis-West, straining hard to surmount the brow of the hill, gave a sudden gasp and collapsed on his bicycle.

"Begad!" he panted. "What a frightful joke!"

We all dismounted.

"Joke!" exclaimed Trotwood.

"Where? I don't see it!"

"You said something about bunkers, and I said something about fuel," explained Tommy Watson laboriously.

"You generally fill bunkers with fuel

—— Hi! Look out, you ass! Mind what you're doing——"

Watson dodged, for Nicodemus charged at him. It certainly was an appalling pun, and we all glared at Watson severely. Not that this had much effect upon Tommy, who was usually very stolid, and very seldom made jokes of any character.

There were five of us—all cycling home from Bannington in the cool of the May evening. It was a half-holiday that day, and we had been over to the local town to witness a professional cricket match, and were now returning to St. Frank's with the firm impression that the Remove Eleven could knock spots off the professionals any day of the week.

Having reached the top of the hill, the Removites remounted their machines—and I, of course, did the same. The evening was delightfully calm and mild, and the setting sun filled the western sky with a glorious mellow light. It was extremely pleasant, pedalling back to the school along the quiet roads.

"Cycling's all right, but there's too much blessed fag about it," declared Fatty Little, as he pedalled away. "I shouldn't mind if I had an engine under me. These push bikes are too much like hard work——"

"Lazy beggar!" interrupted Trotwood. "Push cycling is just what you require to get your weight down. It's a wonder to me how that bike stands the

strain! I'm expecting to see it fall to pieces any minute!"

We chuckled.

"There's not much chance of Fatty getting his weight down," I observed. "It's no good taking cycling exercise if he keeps gorging grub the way he does. Judging by what we've seen this afternoon, I should think he'll last until this time next week."

"Oh, go easy!" protested Fatty, grinning. "I'm frightfully hungry! Great sausages! I sha'n't be able to get back to St. Frank's if we don't stop in the village for a feed—I shall never be able to finish the last lap! This kind of exercise gives a chap a keen appetite."

"Appetite!" gasped Watson. "After what you've had?"

"Well, I haven't eaten much——"

"Oh, no!" interrupted Trotwood grimly. "Only about two dozen sandwiches, pork pies galore, beef patties, dozens of doughnuts, tarts by the score, cream puffs until I lost count—to say nothing of endless bottles of pop!"

"He was eating all the giddy afternoon!" said Watson.

Fatty Little grinned.

"Well, it makes a chap hungry, watching cricket," he said calmly.

"Anything makes you hungry," I remarked. "Somehow or other, Fatty, you always find an excuse for eating. If you're exercising yourself, you say that it gives you an appetite. If you're sitting still, you declare that the inactivity makes you hungry. If you go to sleep, you say that it makes you want to eat. The fact is, you're like a chicken—you always want to be pecking at something."

"Begad! Peckin'?" repeated Montie. "That's hardly the word, dear old boy. I really think the poor chap has got some frightful disease; in fact, I'm sure of it. One of these days you'll start eating, Fatty, and you won't leave off until you choke yourself!"

Fatty Little took this chaff in good part. Considering that he was chipped about his appetite fifty times a day, he found it better to keep his temper. But he was an amiable youth always, and he knew his own weakness.

He only lived for grub. He could think of nothing else but eatable articles. He never uttered a sentence without it containing some reference to food. Even in the most serious moments, grub came first with him.

"The fact is, you're all jealous," he remarked cheerfully. "You don't know what it is to have a decent appetite. You've never experienced the wonderful joys of sitting down to a huge feed, and gloating over every mouthful. There's nothing in the world more inspiring than grub! It makes a chap work harder, it makes him more good-tempered, it makes him strong and healthy——"

Crack!

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Watson. "That's done it!"

"That's the worst of having wonky tyres," said Trotwood, as we all dismounted. "I noticed a corn on that front cover of yours——"

"Of course you noticed it!" growled Watson irritably. "I knew the giddy tyre was squiffy—there's no need to ram it down my blessed neck! What are we going to do now, I should like to know?"

"Mend it!" I said briskly.

"But it'll make us late for calling over——"

"Besides, we shall lose every chance of stopping a few minutes in the village," complained Fatty. "Old Binns has got a fresh supply of beef pies——"

"Oh, rats to you, and the beef pies as well!" snapped Watson. "My front tyre's busted, and we haven't got time to repair it——"

"Yes, we have," I interrupted. "Repairing a cycle tyre is only a five minutes' job. I've taken three-inch motor-bike tyres off many a time, and completed the repair within ten minutes—so this oughtn't to worry us much. Unfasten your giddy tool-bag, and let's get busy. It won't repair itself while we look at it."

The bicycle was soon placed in an inverted position on the grass, and it was only a matter of minutes before the cover was off. The damage was not severe. The "corn" had only been a small one, and the resultant burst in the inner-tube was not at all formidable.

We had a good supply of patches and canvas, and well within the five minutes a patch had been applied, and the cover was roughly strengthened. Then we proceeded to put the tyre on again, and this was soon accomplished.

"Now you chaps can pump her up," I said. "I've done my bit."

"Let Fatty do it," grinned Trotwood.

"Eh?" said Little. "Why should I? It's Watson's jigger."

"The exercise will give you an appetite," explained Nicodemus.

"You—you ass! I've got a terrific appetite already," said Fatty, holding his ample waistcoat forlornly. "If I make it any sharper, I shall be too faint to complete the journey home. It's surprising how soon I get hungry!"

"Begad! It is!" agreed Tregellis-West, nodding.

Watson pumped his tyre up, and we all prepared to remount our machines. But just at that moment something happened of a rather extraordinary nature—something which nobody was expecting.

In fact, the incident was so remarkable that it was about the very last thing we could possibly have anticipated. It seemed all the more astounding because the peaceful Sussex countryside was so calm and still in the quiet of the evening.

Not a soul was within sight. The meadows were fresh and green, the trees were waving their branches idly in the faint breeze which came from the southward. Over in the distance the River Stowe could be seen, clear and cool, with the graceful willow trees lining its banks.

And then Trotwood noticed the object.

"I say, you chaps," exclaimed Nicodemus, in a curious, strained voice. "What—what do you make of that thing over there?"

He was gazing over a low part of the hedge, and seemed to have his attention fixed upon the far side of the meadow.

"Which thing?" asked Watson, turning.

"It—it's not a cow; and I'm jolly certain it's not a donkey!" went on Trotwood, staring fixedly. "I must be dreaming; but the thing looks like a—a— Hang it all! It can't be! We're in England!"

Sir Montie adjusted his pince-nez.

"Dear old boy," he inquired, "what on earth are you talking about?"

"Look!" said Nicodemus. "Look for yourself!"

We all jumped up on the bank, and gazed across the meadow, rather puzzled by Trotwood's obvious excitement. He had evidently seen something which was a most uncommon object, and he could hardly believe his own eyes.

Neither could we, for that matter.

For a few moments nobody spoke. I felt my heart beating slightly faster as I fixed my attention upon something

which was moving across the meadow. It was an animal—a shaggy brown thing, which crossed the grass with lumbering, clumsy movements. And I knew in a moment what the object was. I recognised its character at the first glance, and I was amazed.

"Great Scott!" I exclaimed softly.

"It's—it's a bear!" gasped Watson.

"A bear?" said Sir Montie, startled out of his usual sangfroid. "Impossible, dear old boy—absolutely impossible! We don't have bears in this country! We ain't in the Rocky Mountains——"

"It is a bear, Montie!" I put in.

"Can't you see it?" demanded Watson excitedly.

"These glasses ain't suitable for long range, old fellow, an' the thing is rather hazy," explained Montie. "I believe you are pullin' my leg, knowin' that I am somewhat short-sighted!"

"We're not, old son," I exclaimed. "It's a bear, right enough—and a big one, too—a most formidable-looking customer! By Jove! He's coming over this way!"

"But—but where the dickens did it come from?" gasped Watson breathlessly.

"Goodness knows!" I said. "It might have escaped from a circus or a menagerie. Anyhow, it oughtn't to be wandering about the open countryside like this. Bears are dangerous beggars very often——"

"Good gracious! This one looks dangerous!" ejaculated Trotwood abruptly.

"My hat! Rather!"

Just for a moment or two we stared at the strange animal in a kind of fascinated way. It had evidently seen us, and was by no means scared. For, without warning, it broke into a run and came lumbering across the meadow right towards us at a rapid speed. It was rather disconcerting.

"Look here—we'd better shift!" I said sharply. "We're no match for a bear—even the five of us. If it happens to be a ferocious beast, we shall be half-killed—or perhaps worse! Get a move on—quick!"

"Ride like the deuce!" panted Trotwood.

The situation seemed likely to be dangerous, and we suddenly awoke into brisk activity; in fact, the other fellows were rather inclined to be a bit panicky. The bear was only a few yards off now, and our only hope of getting away from

it was to jump on our bikes and speed away.

We simply flung ourselves upon our machines, and shot down the road, leaving a cloud of dust behind us. I wasn't at all scared, but I realised that it was far better to put as large a distance as possible between ourselves and the brown bear. I have had experience of bears in North America—and I know that close acquaintanceship with such gentlemen is by no means desirable.

But, in the momentary confusion—to say nothing of the dust—we failed to notice something of a rather awful character.

Fatty Little was the last to jump on his machine. He was active enough, but not quite as agile as ourselves. He employed the same means of getting into the saddle as we had employed.

And then the disaster occurred.

Fatty was heavy enough at the best of times, and his bicycle was not a specially built one. When the stout junior took a flying leap on to the machine it not unnaturally protested—and protested in the most outspoken manner.

Snap!

Fatty Little alighted fairly and squarely in the saddle; but the next second he was on the ground, mixed up with the ruins of his machine. The front forks had snapped off clean at the head, owing to the terrific strain to which they had been subjected.

It was by no means surprising; in fact, if I had thought of the matter I should have told Fatty to be careful. His terrific weight was more than any ordinary self-respecting bicycle could stand.

"Oh, great cocoanuts!" gasped Little, panting hard.

He sat up dazedly, and gazed down the road at the cloud of dust which marked our progress. That dust hid him from our view, and we knew nothing of his predicament at the moment.

Fatty was alone—helpless—and the bear was practically upon him.

His right knee was grazed, his arm was bruised, and he was smothered with dust; but he did not think of these things. He jumped to his feet with remarkable agility, and gazed round nervously.

Plucky enough on all normal occasions, Fatty was, nevertheless, scared now. He knew well enough that he was not equal to doing battle with a bear. And it

would be a single-handed battle, for there was nobody near at hand to help him.

And there, breaking through the hedge at that very moment, was the bear! Its eyes were fixed upon him, and he fairly gave a gasp of fright. The bear lumbered through the gap—which was situated about fifteen yards down the road—and came straight towards Fatty, rearing himself on his hind legs as he did so.

This was the final straw. Fatty knew well enough that bears frequently assumed an upright position when they are about to attack, and he now saw that this creature was an enormous size—at least, it seemed extra large to his heated imagination.

And there was no escape—even if he ran, the bear would overtake him in less than ten yards. Poor Fatty thought that his last minute had come.

And then, in a flash, hope came to him.

His gaze, wandering round wildly, became suddenly fixed on one of the black telegraph poles which lined the road. It was right next to him—practically within arm's reach—and his heart gave a leap as he saw that footrests were fitted to it.

"By chutney!" he panted. "It's a chance!"

Not a fraction of a second did he waste. He simply hurled himself at the telegraph pole like a madman. The footrests did not begin within easy reach, but Fatty swarmed up the pole with amazing skill until he reached the first foot-rest. He grasped it, and, after that, it was an easy matter to climb higher.

But he did not pause. He went up and up, and only came to a stop when the wires were just above his head. Then, breathing hard, he gazed down upon the road. The bear was nowhere to be seen!

"Thank goodness!" gasped Fatty.

He gave vent to a huge sigh of relief—which suddenly changed to a fresh gasp of dismay, for he caught sight of something which his own bulk had hid until that second. The bear had not vanished, but was immediately beneath him! It was, in fact, climbing the pole with slow and horribly deliberate movements.

Fatty Little gave one yell of terror, and then he commenced holloaing at the top of his voice.

"Help! Help!" he bawled. "Rescue St. Frank's!"

But no reply came—and the bear continued climbing!

CHAPTER II.

THE HEAD'S ORDER.

NICODEMUS TROTWOOD ceased pedalling abruptly.

"I say!" he exclaimed in alarm. "Where's Fatty?"

"Grinding along in the rear, I suppose," panted Watson. "He's always slow on a bike. But he'll overtake us on the next dip; he generally gathers speed downhill. It's his weight, you know."

"Hold on!" I said. "Fatty doesn't seem to be with us at all. He might have had a mishap or something. Confound all this dust! I can't see—"

"Is the bear coming?" asked Watson anxiously.

"Oh, don't be an ass! It hasn't had time to get anywhere near us," I declared. "I can't understand why Fatty isn't here. Didn't he jump on his bike when we did?"

"Blessed if I know," said Trotwood. "I lost my head for a tick—that bear gave me a bit of a scare, and I don't mind admitting it. I saw Fatty running along with his jigger, and I naturally thought he was getting on. But he doesn't seem to be here."

We were now standing in the road, gazing back anxiously. By this time the dust had drifted into the hedges with the breeze, and we could see down the lane fairly distinctly.

But there was not a soul in view. The spot which we had just left was hidden by a slight bend, but Fatty ought to have been close behind us. Instead of this, he was nowhere to be seen—at least, on the road.

Then, suddenly, I gave a little gasp. "Great Scott!" I shouted. "Look there!"

I stared down the road in alarm and amazement.

"Look where?" demanded Watson. "I can't see anything!"

"Up that telegraph pole!" I ex-

claimed, pointing. "Can't you see

"Good heavens!"

"Begad!"

"Oh, my only aunt!"

The juniors simply stood stock still and stared. For, now that I had brought their attention to the spectacle, they saw only too distinctly what had become of the unfortunate Fatty Little.

The telegraph poles which lined the road were in clear view—and, right at the top of one of them, some distance away, was perched a tubby figure, clinging for dear life to the cross-pieces.

And, only a few feet beneath him a large brown object was perched—and we needed no telling that it was the bear!

"What—what shall we do?" gasped Trotwood. "Poor old Fatty will be killed! We—we can't go away and leave him in that horrible fix! Oh, what on earth can we do? Poor old Fatty!"

Trotwood and Fatty Little were study chums, and Nicodemus was naturally extremely anxious. But he was no more concerned than we were. And it was, of course, impossible for us to leave the spot knowing what a predicament the fat junior was in. Certainly something had to be done.

"Come on!" I said grimly. "We've got to move ourselves!"

"What are we going to do?" asked Watson quickly.

"Scare that bear away," I declared. "I don't suppose we shall stand much risk, and it might have some effect if we chuck stones at the beastly thing."

"He'll come down and attack us, if we do that."

I nodded.

"That's just my idea," I said.

"Begad!"

"You—you want the bear to attack us?" demanded Tommy.

"Exactly," I said. "Anything, in fact, to get him down from the pole, and to make Fatty safe. We sha'n't be in any danger, even if the bear does attack us—we've got our bikes, and it'll be quite easy to buzz away— But we can't waste time like this," I added briskly. "Get a move on!"

I set the example by leaping on to my machine, and pedalling back as quickly as possible towards the scene of Fatty's peril. The other juniors quickly fol-

lowed me, and within a few minutes we reached the spot.

Fatty saw us coming, and yelled lustily. "Help—help!" he roared. "Rescue, St. Frank's!"

"Keep your hair on, old son!" I shouted. "We'll save you!"

"Rescue, Remove!" shouted Fatty desperately.

The bear had got well over half way up the telegraph pole, but had come to a halt there, and was staring up at Fatty with hungry eyes. His jaws looked awful, and the stout junior was in a terrible way.

The bear, a big, shaggy brute, hardly knew which way to turn. It seemed afraid to mount higher, and it did not like to descend. However, we soon caused it to make up its mind.

A pile of stones stood by the roadside, and within a few seconds we were hurling good-sized pebbles at the bear.

Nearly all our shots were true, and the stones thudded upon his back and legs in quick succession. This treatment did not seem to please him at all, for he turned his head round and gazed down at us in a reproachful kind of manner.

"Keep it up!" I said briskly.

We did keep it up, and the bear soon had enough. He suddenly commenced slithering down the pole, and as he landed on the ground, we took the precaution to jump on to our machines.

But this move, we found, was quite unnecessary.

The bear evidently did not like the stones we had been pelting him with, and he thought it advisable to make off. He lumbered over the ground, broke clean through the hedge, and went across the field with rapid, clumsy movements. He burst through the further hedge, and then vanished from view altogether.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Watson. "He's gone!"

"Yes, but he may come back," said Trotwood. "There's no telling, you know. I vote we get to the school as quickly as we can."

"Hear, hear."

I gazed up at the telegraph pole.

"It's all right, Fatty," I shouted. "You can come down now."

"I—I'm looking at the bear!" said Fatty. "I can see him from up here. He's going across the second field, and now he's disappeared into the trees."

Great dumplings! I—I thought I was going to be done for that time! All this giddy excitement has made me hungrier than ever!"

"I'm blessed if he can leave food alone even in a time like this!" grunted Trotwood. "Come down, you fat bounder! What on earth made you get up there?"

"Look at my bike!" said Fatty crossly. We noticed his machine for the first time, and it was certainly a wreck.

"This is what comes of being so jolly weighty," remarked Trotwood. "I'll bet you jumped on the bike and smashed it up."

"That's right," said Little, as he landed in the grass with a thud. "I found the bear right upon me, and all I could do was to climb the telegraph post."

"In fact," I said, "you went up the pole!"

"By chutney! I should think I did!" agreed Fatty. "I nearly went up the pole mentally, too! I thought that rotten bear was going to have a chunk out of my leg. There's no telling what a bear can do when he is hungry. I often get hungry, and I know how desperate it makes anybody feel."

"Well, thank goodness, you're all right," I said. "We'd better not hang about here too long, my sons. Let's get to St. Frank's as soon as we can, and when we pass through the village we'll tell the police——"

"But how can I go with you?" demanded Fatty, in alarm. "My bike's busted."

"Never mind," I said. "We can manage somehow——"

"Fatty can't ride on somebody's step!" protested Trotwood. "There's no reason why we should have two bikes busted!"

I grinned.

"He can have my jigger," I said. "I'll ride on your step, Tommy. We can get home in fine style like that. As for your bike, Fatty, we'll leave it behind the hedge for the time being."

This plan was decided upon, but just as we were preparing to mount we became aware of the fact that a motor-car was speeding along the road towards us. And we were tremendously pleased to find that it contained three men in uniform.

One was a policeman, another a rail-

way official, and a third a man I couldn't quite place. The latter was driving.

I stepped into the middle of the road, and waved my hand.

"Looking for a bear?" I asked calmly.

"Yes, we are, my lad!" replied the man at the wheel. "Have you seen anything of him?"

"Yes."

"Splendid—splendid!" said the railway officials, whom I recognised as the stationmaster at Caistowe. "Our search will probably be successful after all, Roberts. We shall have to question these boys closely."

They jumped out of the car.

"I shouldn't waste much time, if I were you," I advised. "The bear was here only five minutes ago, and he's disappeared over among those trees. If you hustle you might be able to recapture him."

"The brute nearly got me!" growled Fatty. "It climbed up this telegraph pole, and I was at the top!"

The car-driver—evidently a keeper—grinned.

"So he's been up to his tricks, eh?" he said. "We'll soon have him under lock and key again, my lad. I never thought he'd have enough sense to wander about like this, and give us all this trouble, too."

"How did he escape?" asked Watson.

"Accident at the station," said the constable. "One or two coaches were derailed, and this bear's cage broke open. The brute slipped out before anybody knew anything about it. I never did hold with taking menageries on a railway!"

We gave the men precise directions, and they lost no time in hurrying across the fields in pursuit of the escaped bear. We waited for some little time, but there was no sign of the trio returning.

"Well, what shall we do?" I asked.

"Wait here until they come back—with or without the bear—or shall we buzz off to St. Frank's?"

"I'd like to see the result of the chase," said Trotwood. "But if we stay here we shall be late for locking up."

"You needn't worry about that," I interrupted. "We're late already—and, in any case, we've got a first-class excuse. We sha'n't get lines. Perhaps we'd better stop here for another five minutes."

We decided upon this course, and I was rather sorry I hadn't accompanied the bear trackers. They had vanished across the fields, and were evidently searching a little wood which was visible over the rise.

After ten minutes had elapsed—during which time we kept a sharp look-out for any sign of the runaway—the three men re-appeared. They came from another direction, so it was clear they had been making a wide search.

They were empty-handed. The bear was still at large.

"Infernal nuisance!" snapped the keeper, who was red in the face with his exertions. "Not a sign of the blamed animal!"

They came down into the road.

"We shall have to do something, Mr. Hammond," said the constable. "It'll be gettin' dark pretty soon, an' there won't be much chance o' finding that bear after sunset! The folk'll be scared stiff if that monster is allowed to roam about all night!"

"A good many people seem to be scared stiff already," grunted the keeper. "The village is in a panic. Pity these country boobies can't keep their heads! Hindenburg wouldn't do 'em no harm!"

"Hindenburg!" echoed Tommy Watson, staring.

"Yes, sonny—the bear," explained Hammond. "That's his pet name!"

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie.

The constable turned to us.

"I suppose you really saw the bear, young gents?" he inquired suspiciously. "You ain't trying to pull our legs?"

"The beastly thing tried to pull my leg!" said Fatty, with indignation. "It chased me up the telegraph pole, and was practically making a meal off my left foot when these other chaps came up, and chucked stones at it! But for them I should have been eaten! Great macaroons! It was a near shave!"

The keeper grinned.

"Hindenburg wouldn't have eaten you, Tubby," he said.

"Don't you call me Tubby!" exclaimed Little warmly. "It's like your cheek—"

"Now, young gentlemen, I should advise you to get home as quickly as possible," put in the station-master, evidently anxious to avoid a delay. "There's nothing that you can do, and you'll be safer indoors."

"We wanted to see the end of the chase," said Watson.

"I'm afraid you can't do that, young gent," put in the keeper. "There's no telling when we shall lay fingers on Hindenburg. He's out now, and he'll probably remain out all night. He's an elusive old beggar!"

So, without wasting further time, we mounted our bicycles, and continued the journey to St. Frank's. Fatty Little had my machine, and I rode on the step of Tommy Watson's—until Tommy grew tired. Then we changed places.

We arrived long after locking-up, and Warren, the porter, regretfully announced that it would be his duty to report us. We didn't care, for we had an excellent excuse. We put our jiggers in the shed, and strolled over to the Ancient House.

In the lobby an excited crowd of juniors had gathered.

We knew that the news about the bear would be at the school—for the village was seething with the terrible story. As we passed through Bellton we had noticed many signs of activity.

Cottage windows were shuttered—in spite of the warm weather, children were conspicuous by their absence, and only a few groups of men were about the old High Street.

And every man held a heavy stick, or a sapling, in his hands. The village, it seemed, was prepared.

"Here they are!" shouted somebody, as we came in. "I say, you chaps, heard the latest?"

"About the bear?" I inquired.

"Yes, of course," said Reginald Pitt. "There's a regular panic in Bellton. It may be a yarn, but the people are saying that a grizzly bear has escaped from a menagerie at Caistowe, and it's over in this district, running wild."

"A huge bear, capable of eating a dozen chaps at one meal," added Hubbard excitedly. "Some of the Sixth Formers are talking about going out on the hunt, but I don't suppose the Head will allow it. Too jolly dangerous!"

"It's been exaggerated," I said. "The bear isn't as dangerous as the villagers make out. They naturally got scared out of their wits. The bear is a big brute, but I don't think he'd make a meal off anybody."

"Oh, wouldn't he?" said Fatty. "He tried to eat me, anyhow!"

"What!"

The juniors stared at the fat junior.

"Have—have you seen the bear?" said Owen major excitedly.

"Yes."

"Where?" asked everybody, in one voice.

The crowd settled round us, yelling for information.

"Steady on, you asses!" I grinned. "Give us breathing space? We'll tell you all about it—"

"Just a minute, kids," interrupted the voice of Morrow, the prefect. "I want a word with some of you. Warren reports that four of you have only just come in—Nipper, Watson, Tregellis-West, and Little."

"I'm included," said Trotwood. "Did Warren forget me?"

"You'd have been more sensible if you'd kept quiet, kid," said Morrow. "I shall have to punish you with the rest now—"

"Not likely," I interrupted. "We've got a perfect excuse, Morrow. You can't give us lines. Under ordinary circumstances, we should have been back in nice time for calling-over, but we happened to meet the bear."

"Eh?" said Morrow sharply. "You did what?"

"The bear tried to eat me!" declared Fatty Little.

"You young idiot—"

"It's true!" roared Fatty. "Watson's front tyre punctured, and we had just repaired it when Trotty spotted the bear coming across a meadow! All the chaps hopped on their bikes and I hopped on mine. We thought it would be better to slide off the giddy landscape!"

"Well?" asked Morrow. "What then?"

"The other chaps got off all right," explained Fatty. "But when I jumped on to my bike the front forks collapsed, and I came a terrible cropper—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors yelled.

"It's no laughing matter, you unfeeling asses!" said Fatty, indignantly.

"I've been expecting your bike to fall to pieces for weeks," grinned Pitt. "I suppose the catastrophe happened because you jumped on with extra force. It's asking too much of any bike, you know."

"Rats!" said Fatty. "The rotten thing must have been weak. Anyhow, it let me down, and when I got up there was the bear, staring at me! Great bloaters! I was tremendously scared! I shinned up a telegraph pole, and the bear came after me!"

"My only hat!"

"What did you do?"

"Let's have the yarn, Fatty!"

The juniors were soon satisfied. I told the remainder of the story, and Morrow listened with serious attention. He nodded when I had done, and unrolled a stiff piece of paper he had been holding in his hand.

"You're excused, of course," he said. "Under the circumstances, you can't be punished. It's a good thing Little wasn't hurt—and this notice of the Head's is fully justified—and necessary."

"Which notice?" asked De Valerie.

"You'll see in a minute."

He pushed his way through the crowd until he reached the notice-board. Then he fixed the sheet of paper with four drawing-pins, and everybody crowded round to read the announcement.

I was one of the first to get there, and this is what I saw:

"NOTICE.

"It has come to my knowledge that a large bear has escaped from a menagerie, and is at present roaming loose about the neighbourhood. Under these circumstances, every boy in the school is forbidden to leave the premises. Until the bear is recaptured, every boy—senior and junior—is confined to gates. Should this order be disregarded, the punishment will be severe.

"(Signed) MALCOLM STAFFORD,
"Headmaster."

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Pitt.
"We're all gated!"

"Oh, my only aunt!"

"Until the bear's captured we're prisoners!" ejaculated Watson. "That's a nice thing, I must say! I call it rotten

"It's—it's beastly unfair!" roared Hubbard. "Why should we be made to suffer because this confounded bear escaped from a menagerie? 'Tain't our fault, and I don't see why we should stand it!"

"It's unjust!"

"Yes, rather!"

"The Head ought to have more sense

"Hold on, you thoughtless asses!" I interrupted. "This notice is just what I expected. In fact, it's the only thing the Head could do. He's responsible for all of us, and it's only natural that he should forbid us to go out of gates. He doesn't want anybody to get injured."

"Yes, I suppose he's quite right," agreed De Valerie. "It doesn't matter much, of course—"

"Doesn't matter!" echoed Armstrong warmly. "Why, we might be kept for days on end. We sha'n't even be able to go out on Little Side—"

"Rats!" I said. "It's pretty nearly certain that the bear will be captured to-night, and it's only natural that we should be gated while there's any danger—"

"Hallo! What's that?" demanded the voice of Edward Oswald Handforth. "Who's gated? Who's been getting into trouble?"

"We're all gated, Handy," said Pitt.

"All of us?" echoed the leader of Study D. "What utter rot! I've done nothing to get myself gated—"

"The whole school is forbidden to move outdoors, practically speaking," I put in. "It's only a temporary measure—until the bear is recaptured. But while there's any danger, we've got to stick indoors."

Handforth snorted.

"Well, I call it piffle," he declared warmly. "What's more, I'm not going to stand it. I'm not afraid of a beastly bear, and I shouldn't be at all surprised if the whole thing's an advertising gag. Who's seen the bear? Nobody! It might be a myth—a yarn spread about to advertise—"

"Great pancakes!" exclaimed Fatty. "You don't know what you're talking about, you ass! The bear tried to bite chunks out of my feet—when I was up the pole!"

Handforth nodded grimly.

"I think you're up the pole now!" he remarked.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you funny ass!" howled Fatty. "I meant the telegraph pole!"

"What telegraph pole?"

"The one I climbed up, of course." It was necessary to explain everything to Handforth. He had only just come down from Study C with his inseparable chums, Church and McClure. And, as

usual, he wanted to know all about things.

"Personally, I don't see where the sense of it comes in," he declared. "We ain't a lot of infant-school kids! If a crowd of us happen to meet the bear we could easily deal with him!"

But Handforth's voice was almost alone. When the juniors fully realised that danger did exist, they were only too willing to remain within gates. There was no telling where the bear would get to—especially after dark.

But Handforth, as usual, was obstinate. When he got back to Study D he paced up and down with a frown on his brow. Church and McClure knew well enough that their leader was in an irritable mood.

"It's all piffle!" snapped Handforth. "What's more, I'm not going to take any notice of it! I've made my plans for to-night, and I'm going to carry them out—just the same! I'm going to get on Heath's track!"

His chums looked startled.

"Look here, Handy, don't be an ass," urged McClure. "You know jolly well you can't break bounds at a time like this. You'll get into a terrific row if you're collared——"

"If we're collared, you mean!" said Handforth. "You chaps are coming with me, don't forget! I'm not going to let you shirk your duties! I'm engaged on important detective work, and I can't be expected to carry on without the help of my assistants. We're all in this affair!"

"I'm not going to break bounds to-night!" declared Church.

Handforth glared.

"You're not?" he demanded.

"No!"

"Afraid of the bear?" sneered Handforth bitterly.

"No, I'm not afraid!" roared Church. "But there's a risk, and I don't see the fun of running risks for nothing! This potty detective idea of yours—— Look out! Mind what you're doing, you prize ass—— Yaroo!"

"Potty detective idea—eh?" thundered Handforth, preparing to deliver another punch. "I'll show you something you won't forget in a hurry——"

"We'll come with you!" groaned Church.

Handforth paused, and rolled down his sleeves.

"Both of you?" he asked.

"Oh, I suppose there's no getting out of it," grumbled McClure. "We shall have to come—to look after you!"

They considered it perfectly mad to venture out after lights-out on any night; but to do so on this particular occasion was simply asking for trouble in the biggest possible voice.

And Handforth and Co. were certainly destined to find trouble!

CHAPTER III.

THE MYSTERIOUS COMTE AGAIN.

MR. CLEMENT HEATH, M.A., master of the Remove, quietly slipped out of the small doorway in the Ancient House. He walked out into the Triangle, and paused in the deep shadow cast by the silent building.

The moon was shining fairly distinctly, and the May night was wonderfully mild and delightful. The school clock chimed out the time, and Mr. Heath nodded.

"Quarter-to-eleven," he murmured. "Just gives me nice time."

Mr. Heath was a smallish man, and he walked with a slight limp. He was young, comparatively, and by no means unhandsome. Upon the whole, the juniors liked him well enough, but he was by far from being simple, as the Remove had first believed him to be.

Handforth was very keen upon investigating Mr. Heath's movements—for the Remove master had certainly performed some extraordinary manœuvres since his arrival at St. Frank's.

For some reason best known to himself he frequently visited a dark-looking cottage in the tiny hamlet of Edgemore, which lay just over a mile from the school, and at the back of Bellton Wood.

Handforth had followed Mr. Heath on one or two of these occasions, and had been astonished to find that the new master adopted a slight disguise before venturing into Edgemore.

This, in itself, was certainly suspicious. Handforth nursed a delusion that he was cut out for detective work, and he had made up his mind to probe Mr. Heath's

secret to its uttermost depths—for Handforth was quite convinced that the Remove master was a crook, and that his position in the school was a mere blind.

However, Handforth's investigations had not carried him far. Only a few nights earlier, Handforth had trailed Mr. Heath into Bellton Wood, only to get on to the track of a stranger—whom he had first believed to be Mr. Heath in disguise.

This stranger proved to be the Comte de Plessigny, a somewhat eccentric nobleman of foreign extraction, who was at present residing on the outskirts of Bannington. The count had obligingly fallen in with Handforth's game, and he had pulled the junior's leg unmercifully.

He appeared to be a very harmless old gentleman, and was courtesy itself. Nothing on earth seemed to upset him, and he had apparently enjoyed his encounter with Handforth very completely.

The leader of Study D, not to be done, was determined to follow up Mr. Heath's trail again—and this time he would make no blunder.

On that particular night, when Handforth had followed the count in mistake for Mr. Heath—my chums and I had been outside the cottage at Edgemore. But we had seen nothing suspicious, and, personally I did not think it was necessary for us to interfere. There was nothing whatever to convince me that Mr. Heath was a wrong 'un.

But, once an idea became fixed in Handforth's mind, sledge hammers were incapable of shifting it. And he was grimly determined to press forward his investigations—although they would probably lead him to further disasters.

Mr. Heath may or may not have been aware of the unwelcome attentions which were bestowed upon him. At all events, he gave no sign, and he certainly did not act like a criminal while he was performing his duties in the school.

It was an undoubted fact, however, that Mr. Heath did act in a curious fashion. Instead of crossing the Triangle boldly, and going to the private gate, he edged his way along in the shadow of the building.

Why was this? Was the master afraid of being seen leaving the school? But this seemed to be strange, for any of the masters were permitted to take late strolls if they wished to.

Somewhat, Mr. Heath appeared anxious

to maintain secrecy. He apparently wanted to leave the school at night without anybody else being aware of the fact. It would have been far better, perhaps, if he had gone to work boldly—for there is nothing which attracts attention more than mysterious movements.

Mr. Heath reached the corner of the Triangle, and then turned, and made for the school wall. It was quite unnecessary for him to go by the roundabout route, and the only explanation of his action was that he wanted to get into the road without being seen.

But this was not to be.

Mr. Heath had only moved a few steps when he suddenly became aware of the fact that another form had emerged from beneath the great chestnut trees on his left. The glowing end of a cigar gleamed for a second, and the fragrant smoke was carried to Mr. Heath's nostrils on the light breeze.

He came to a halt, and compressed his lips.

"A delightful night, Mr. Heath," came a pleasant voice.

"Er—yes, beautiful!" said Mr. Heath awkwardly. "I didn't see you, Mr. Lee."

"Apparently not," smiled Nelson Lee, in evenly modulated tones, as he strolled up to the Form-master. "Taking a stroll before turning in?"

"I—thought about doing so—yes," admitted Mr. Heath, pulling himself together quickly. "I didn't know that you were also in the habit of having a final smoke in the open, Mr. Lee."

"I occasionally indulge in the pastime," smiled Nelson Lee, taking out his cigar-case. "Try one of these, Heath—I think you'll like it."

"Thank you," said the Remove master. "Thank you very much, Mr. Lee."

He took the cigar, and snipped off the end, and as Lee held out a light, the detective took full notice of Mr. Heath's face as it was revealed for a brief period in the glare of the match.

And Nelson Lee had no difficulty in seeing that Heath was somewhat confused.

"I don't blame you for coming out on a night like this, Heath," went on Nelson Lee pleasantly. "It appears to be quite a nightly business with you. I have frequently noticed you leave the school at about this hour."

The Remove master took in a deep breath.

"I—I didn't know that you were so interested in my movements, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed. "I have made it a practice to take late walks in different directions, and—and the exercise does me a world of good. Yes, this cigar is delightful. I can always appreciate a good cigar when I taste one."

Nelson Lee was quite aware of the fact that Mr. Heath was anxious to change the subject, and a few moments later the Remove master slipped quietly away—making his exit from the Triangle by passing through the small gateway.

Nelson Lee looked after him thoughtfully. His brow was puckered, and he was deep in thought.

"Curious!" he murmured. "Yes, decidedly curious."

He made no attempt to follow Mr. Heath, but the latter apparently considered such a movement was not impossible.

For, after Mr. Heath had walked a distance of two hundred yards down the lane he looked quickly behind him, and dodged into the hedge. He crouched there for at least ten minutes, silent and perfectly still. But there was no movement on the road, and the night continued to be still and calm.

"Thank goodness!" murmured Mr. Heath.

He was quite satisfied that he was not followed, and he cautiously emerged from his hiding place and continued his journey down the lane with quick, noiseless footsteps, taking care to walk on the grass border.

When he arrived at the stile which led into Bellton Wood he halted, and remained for a few moments, sitting on the cross-bar.

"I'm not sure whether I've done right," he muttered anxiously. "Perhaps I ought to have taken a stroll with Lee, and gone back into the Ancient House. Confound him for being there!"

He did not pause for long, but made up his mind almost at once. It was clear that he decided to continue his journey. Throwing the half-smoked cigar down, he plunged into the wood, and walked swiftly along the narrow footpath which led almost directly to Edgemore.

Under the thick trees, the silence was quite heavy. Hardly a leaf moved, and no ray of moonlight penetrated to the

footpath. The place was intensely dark, and Mr. Heath was rather glad of this.

But, a little further on, the nature of the wood changed, and it became more open. Here and there along the path open patches were encountered, where the moonlight shone down in clear, cold brilliance.

Now and again a slight sound would come from amongst the thick trees on either side—but Heath took no notice of these. A squirrel, perhaps, or a rabbit—there were all manner of small animals abounding in the woods.

Mr. Heath always took the path because it was a short cut, and because it was the only way of reaching Edgemore from St. Frank's unless he choose to go two or three miles round by road.

The Remove master strode on without slackening his pace. But, quite abruptly, he came to a stop. Then, instinctively, he moved slightly sideways, and he was off the path and concealed in the undergrowth. But he could still see along the path with a fair amount of distinctness.

What had caused him to pause in this way?

A sound had come to his ears—a sound different from the ordinary slight noises of the wood. A decidedly human cough, and then the sharp cracking of a rotten twig. There was no mistaking the signs.

Another man was close at hand.

But Mr. Heath could see nothing of him, although he stared down the path intently, waiting for him to appear. The moonlight was shining fairly clearly into this space.

"A poacher, possibly," thought Mr. Heath. "Hang the fellow!"

He continued to watch the path, but still there was no sign of any human being. This was rather curious, for the man was somewhere close at hand. Further cracklings sounded, and now and then a swishing noise.

Mr. Heath jumped to the truth.

The other man was obviously in a tree, and not on the ground at all. The difficulty now was to determine which tree, and Mr. Heath ventured to step slightly out into the path.

He soon satisfied himself; and this was not difficult, after all. For the branches of one big and noble oak were shaking in a decided manner. By looking at the

branches intently, Mr. Heath was able to see that the climber was descending.

The Remove-master ventured to approach closer, and he was able to do this in perfect safety. There was cover near at hand, and it would be possible for him to get within ten yards of the tree without being seen, and to remain there.

Edging his way silently and slowly, Mr. Heath managed to get into this position. And just then something happened which completely upset his plan. He had no intention of revealing his presence.

There was a sudden slithering noise, however, a gasp, and then Mr. Heath saw a form falling out of the tree. Instinctively, before he could stop himself, Mr. Heath dashed forward, in a vain attempt to break the other's fall.

But he was a shade too late.

The man hit the ground with a thud, and would probably have been quite unhurt, but for the fact that he stumbled over backwards. He fell heavily, his head striking a stone-hard root with a distinct bang.

He lay there, perfectly still.

"Good heavens!" murmured Mr. Heath.

The stranger had almost fallen upon him, and now he went down upon his knees quickly, and looked at the other with great concern. Either he was dead or stunned, Mr. Heath was not quite certain which, at the moment.

He lay so still that the Remove-master had a dreadful fear that the man had killed himself. But a second later Mr. Heath found that this was not the case. He placed his hand over the man's chest, and felt distinct heart-beats.

"Whew!" murmured Mr. Heath. "Thank goodness!"

He had gone quite hot, but now that he knew the stranger was alive, and not seriously hurt, he wondered what his best move would be. All his original thoughts had vanished; he was no longer anxious to get to Edgemore.

He considered it his duty to help this unfortunate man who had injured himself. And Mr. Heath was curious—not without cause.

For he could see, at a glance, that the stranger was no poacher. Neither was he an ordinary villager. There was a riddle here which required a solution, and Mr. Heath was naturally curious.

He looked down upon the still form rather wonderingly. The light overcoat

was open, revealing a perfectly cut grey suit, with a massive gold watch-chain covering the waistcoat. The stranger's boots were of patent leather, and were undoubtedly exceedingly expensive articles.

A further item for wonder was the fact that this man was by no means young. His hair was grey, and a neatly pointed beard adorned his chin, to say nothing of a perfectly waxed moustache on his upper lip.

"A foreigner, by the look of him," murmured Mr. Heath; "and a pretty wealthy gentleman too. Now, what in the world possessed him to wander about the wood at this time of night? Not only that, but why the deuce was he climbing trees?"

The riddle of the wood was certainly a poser, but this was hardly the time to attempt getting at an explanation. Mr. Heath confined himself to the task of assisting the injured man.

He had no brandy flask on him, and he knew that the next best remedy was cold water. And here there was a difficulty. There was not a drop of water near the footpath, and Mr. Heath knew well enough that he could not carry this stranger to the river.

The only way, therefore, was to hurry away, get some water, and bring it back. But this would be a tedious and lengthy task, and Mr. Heath had no vessel in which to carry the water when he found it.

Then a brilliant idea struck him.

One night he had left the footpath, thinking it would be quicker to cut across and get rid of a corner. But he had found, before long, that this plan was unsatisfactory. For he had stumbled down a steep gully into a wide clearing. And through this clearing ran a sparkling, rippling brook—difficult to cross, unless one was anxious to get nearly wet through. So Mr. Heath had turned back, and had reached the trodden path again.

He remembered that gully now.

It was quite near this spot. In fact, as the Form-master glanced round he could see that the ground sloped steeply away a few yards into the wood. And now and then a slight gurgling murmur came to his ears—the sound of the water, as it flowed swiftly on its course to join the River Stowe.

Mr. Heath lost no time, having come to a decision.

He seized the stranger under the armpits, and commenced dragging him through the trees, into the dark recesses of the wood. It was a somewhat difficult task, for the man was by no means light.

However, after the first few yards had been traversed the job was easier. For the ground sloped down, and Mr. Heath had no difficulty whatever in pulling his burden down the gully. In fact, there was a danger once or twice of the unconscious man overtaking his companion.

At last, hot and perspiring, Mr. Heath dragged his charge into the clearing, and a few moments later he had him on the bank of the brook, with a willow tree just near by. Mr. Heath took out his handkerchief, washed it well in the running water, soaked it, and then dabbed the wet material over the stranger's forehead.

He now had the man's head propped up on his knee, and it was not long before there were signs of returning consciousness. Mr. Heath discovered that an ugly bruise lay beneath the hair at the back of the man's head, and he knew that there had been slight concussion of the brain.

He dabbed the bruise carefully and gently, and fairly swamped the stranger's face with water, allowing a good quantity to enter his mouth. Ten minutes of this treatment was quite sufficient.

The man opened his eyes, after stirring restlessly, and gazed about him with a perfectly blank expression.

"It's all right; you needn't worry," said Mr. Heath. "You'll be quite all right presently, my dear sir. That bruise at the back of your head is pretty bad, but not particularly serious."

"So?" murmured the stranger. "I must remark that I am feeling decidedly uncomfortable. I beg of you to let me know what has been happening."

"I'll tell you all about it when you feel a bit better," said Mr. Heath. "What you've got to do now is to keep quiet until you get some of your strength back. This water will do you a world of good."

Mr. Heath continued dabbing, and he was somewhat surprised to hear the impeccable English which the stranger spoke. It was really too good to be voiced by an Englishman; it was the ultra-perfect pronunciation of a highly educated foreigner.

The stranger stirred again, attempting to sit up.

"Steady, sir—steady!" exclaimed Mr. Heath. "You mustn't be impatient!"

"My dear sir, please allow me to know best," exclaimed the other, in perfectly modulated tones, and with a smoothness of manner which was peculiarly charming. "You must allow me to thank you exceedingly for your excellent services. You are a stranger to me, and I am a stranger to you; and that fact makes my debt all the more burdensome. Furthermore, I feel the necessity to take something slightly stronger than water. My head is throbbing abominably, and I am in doubt as to whether I am indebted to one good Samaritan, or to several!"

Mr. Heath smiled.

"You feel dizzy, I dare say?" he inquired. "I'm awfully sorry, but I don't happen to carry any spirit—"

"Ah! But you will probably find a certain small quantity in a flask which I carry in my hip-pocket," interrupted the stranger. "If you will be good enough—"

"Certainly," said Mr. Heath quickly. "It was rather absurd of me not to think of that possibility myself."

The other shook his head.

"I can see that you are an honest man, my dear friend," he observed. "You did not care to go through my pockets—so? Well, well! I respect you highly for it, and before long I shall be upon my feet."

Mr. Heath turned his charge over, and soon obtained a small brandy-flask, a solid silver article with a screw stopper. The stranger brightened up considerably after he had taken one or two mouthfuls of the spirit.

In fact, the effect of the brandy was remarkable. The injured man insisted upon getting to his feet, but Mr. Heath was just as insistent upon his remaining in a sitting posture.

At last the stranger smilingly agreed to remain on the grass for a few minutes, while Mr. Heath explained what had occurred.

"There's very little to tell you," said the Form-master. "I happened to be coming along the path, and I arrived at that spot just in time to see you fall out of the tree. I did my best to break your fall, but was a second too late. You tumbled backwards, and caught your head against a root."

The other nodded.

"So I imagined—precisely," he said. "It was most ridiculous of me, to be sure. I made an absurd mistake when descending. I was foolish enough to trust my weight upon the remains of a rotten branch. Before I could recover my hold, I fell, and I remember nothing more until I found myself lying here. It seems to me that I fell out of the tree hours ago——"

"Barely twenty minutes," said Mr. Heath smilingly. "I am exceedingly glad that I have been of some service to you. It was fortunate that I came along at that moment. If there is any further task that you would like me to perform, I am only too willing to comply."

"I can see that you are a true friend," said the other smoothly. "My gratitude is hardly capable of being expressed in mere words. I am afraid that a few poor phrases will but meagrely express my feelings. And, doubtless, you are curious to know why I should be climbing trees at such an unearthly hour?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I was certainly wondering——"

"Quite so, quite so," said the stranger. "Perfectly natural, too. I feel that it is incumbent upon me to give you some explanation of my unusual behaviour. My name is Plessigny, and at present I am residing in Bannington——"

"The Count de Plessigny?" inquired Mr. Heath abruptly.

"I fear that I must plead guilty to the title," smiled the other. "I am the Comte de Plessigny, and it is obvious that my name is familiar to you. I can observe that you are more surprised than ever."

"I really cannot understand the affair at all," admitted Mr. Heath.

"Of course not—of course not!" said the count, taking a monocle from his waistcoat-pocket, and placing it carefully in his eye. "But a few words will be ample to make the whole position brilliantly clear. I am guilty of a hobby, and that hobby is to collect strange specimens of insect life, and it is generally my habit to prowl through the countryside when honest folk are in bed."

"Oh, I see!" said Mr. Heath. "You are a naturalist?"

"In a way," admitted the count. "It is my particular delight to collect all manner of quaint insect specimens, and to preserve them. A somewhat cruel hobby, you will say? My dear friend, I

always treat my little victims with extreme tenderness. I went up that tree in search of a particularly interesting moth. But the little beggar eluded me, and I was made quite a fool."

"Moths are frequently very difficult to catch," smiled Mr. Heath.

The Comte de Plessigny nodded.

"I have reason to agree with you, my dear friend. By the way, I have not the extreme pleasure of being acquainted with your name."

"Oh, I must apologise!" Mr. Heath hastened to exclaim. "My name is Heath; I am a Form-master at St. Frank's College. I was just taking a late stroll through the wood, as the night was so glorious."

"I quite understand," said the count. "You, too, have fallen under the magic influence of the charms of nature. There is one incident I deplore, concerning this ridiculous accident of mine. I was unfortunate enough to drop a most valuable specimen when I fell out of the tree."

"It was in your hand at the time?"

"Precisely."

"I saw nothing when you fell," said Mr. Heath. "What was the specimen?"

The count looked at the other man closely.

"A little object which I really cannot afford to lose," he replied. "I need it urgently for my collection, and if it is not recovered I shall be extremely disheartened."

"Perhaps it has run away by this time," said Mr. Heath—"unless it was dead."

"Oh, yes, it was quite dead," said the count drily. "There is not the slightest fear of the little specimen running away. Come! We will leave this spot, my dear friend. I am deeply grateful to you for what you have done——"

"Please don't mention it," interrupted Mr. Heath. "I will come with you now, and help you in your search for that specimen."

The count shook his head.

"No, no! I cannot allow that, Mr. Heath!" he declared. "I have made sufficient inroads into your time already. You must not allow a harmless old fellow like myself to worry you unduly. This meeting has delighted me exceedingly, for I have been quite anxious to make the acquaintance of a St. Frank's master. I could not have met with a more charming gentleman than yourself."

Mr. Heath smiled.

"I am afraid you are using flattery," he exclaimed. "I have done nothing at all. It was merely the act of a decent man to render you the slight assistance which has been my privilege. I should consider it a great favour if you allowed me to help you further, sir."

"I cannot order you to leave me, of course," said the count pleasantly. "If you insist upon helping me to search for the specimen, I must accept your generous aid. At the same time, I can assure you I shall be far more comfortable if you leave me to myself. I am quite myself again— Dear me! I must not speak too soon, my dear friend! So! I am steadier now."

For a moment he had staggered, as he stood upon his feet. Mr. Heath allowed him to lean upon his arm, and the Form-master was determined to continue his good services until the count was quite steady.

After the latter had walked a few paces he found his feet, so to speak, and very shortly after that he was practically himself again. He admitted that his head was throbbing very painfully, and that the bruise was exceedingly tender. But he dismissed them as mere trifles.

When the pair reached the footpath again they came out at a different spot, and found it necessary to walk a hundred yards along the path before they arrived at the great old oak tree.

The moon had shifted, of course, and the light was different. Under the tree everything was extremely dark, except for one or two bright patches here and there. The count turned to Mr. Heath, and took his hand.

"Allow me to thank you once again for your very generous services, Mr. Heath," he said courteously. "I really could not think of detaining you for one moment longer. You have wasted quite sufficient valuable time. I am perfectly all right now, and I beg of you to leave me to my own devices."

Mr. Heath laughed.

"It's no trouble at all—not the slightest," he said.

The count shrugged his shoulders, and flashed the light of an electric torch upon the ground. It almost seemed as though he were particularly anxious for Mr. Heath to go away; but he didn't like to say so in blunt words. And the Remove master—quite an innocent, gentlemanly fellow—was not the kind of man to

suspect any ulterior motive on the count's part.

While De Plessigny was searching on one side of the tree, Mr. Heath walked round the other, his gaze fixed on the ground.

"What kind of a specimen is it?" he inquired.

"Oh, something of quite an unusual nature. I don't suppose you will understand even if I fully explain," replied the count.

This was quite vague, and it somehow gave Mr. Heath the impression that his companion would be more comfortable if he were left alone. However, he did not wish to leave on the instant, but pretended to continue his search.

While he was doing this his eye caught a glimpse of something in the grass, almost concealed beneath a leaf. It seemed to glitter in a dull kind of way—or, to be more exact, to shiver.

Mr. Heath had forgotten the specimen search for a moment, and he lifted the leaf, revealing the object underneath. The leaf was fixed to a little twig which had fallen during the count's mishap.

The Remove master picked up a hard, round object. It seemed to be round at first, but as he moved it in his fingers he found that it was of irregular shape, and it appeared to be a curious little piece of stone.

He slipped it into his waistcoat pocket quite naturally, intending to examine it during a more leisure moment. Never for an instant did it strike him that the thing was in any way connected with the count's search, for the quaint old fellow was, to the best of Mr. Heath's belief, looking for some forest insect.

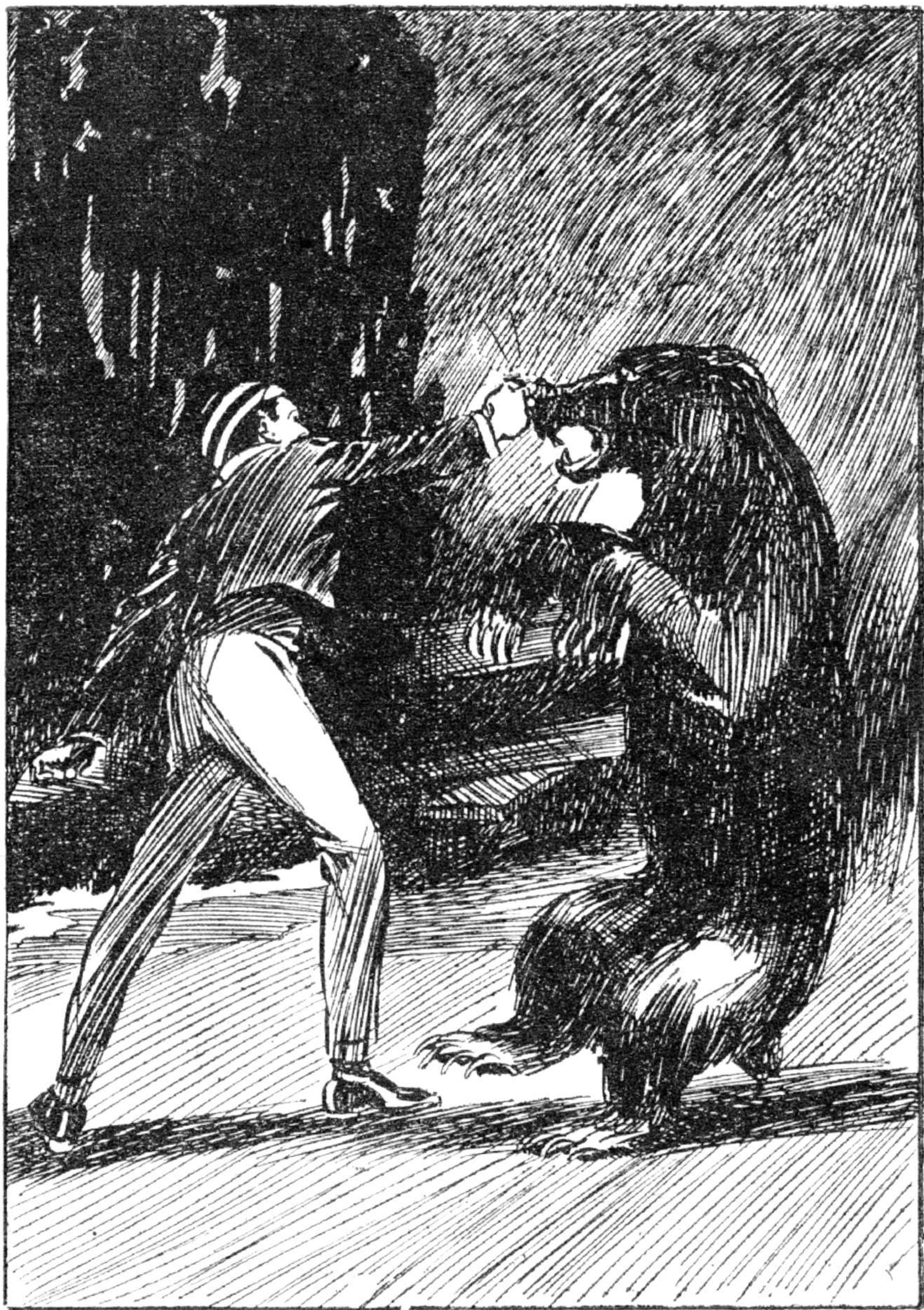
Realising how hopeless the task was without some more definite description, Mr. Heath decided that it would be better for him to go, so he straightened up, and strolled round the other side of the tree. The count was still searching.

"Any luck?" inquired Mr. Heath.

"I'm afraid not, my dear sir—I am afraid not," said the Comte de Plessigny, shaking his head. "But I must have patience. I presume you have found nothing?"

"No; nothing at all," said Mr. Heath, shaking his head. "That is—well, that is— No, I have found nothing in connection with your search."

The count looked at Mr. Heath curiously.



Crash ! Handforth's fist struck the bear fairly and squarely upon the nose.

"You have found—nothing?" he repeated in slow, deliberate tones.

For a second Mr. Heath was confused.

"I have already told you," he replied, somewhat awkwardly. "I am afraid I can't be of much assistance to you in this, sir. I don't exactly know what you're looking for, so it will be just as well, perhaps, if I bid you good-night!"

"So! Perhaps it will!" said the count quietly; "perhaps it will, my dear Mr. Heath. I wish you good-night, and I once more thank you in heartiest terms for your very generous assistance. I shall not quickly forget. Good-night, my dear friend!"

"Good-night, sir!"

Mr. Heath bowed slightly and turned, and walked rapidly away down the path.

And the Comte de Plessigny stood there in the moonlight, gazing after the Form-master, and slowly stroking his soft, neatly cut beard. And there was a curious expression in his eyes—an expression very difficult to define. But it was quite clear that the count was not quite satisfied.

He turned back for a moment, looked about under the tree, and then snapped out his electric torch and put it in his pocket. He had given up the search for his specimen—a rather significant fact.

What had the old fellow been really looking for?

CHAPTER IV.

PROWLERS OF THE NIGHT.

EDGEMORE lay just ahead, bathed in the soft, silvery moonlight. It seemed to be a place of the dead, for everything was quiet and still, and not even the bark of a dog, or the crowing of a cock, disturbed the peaceful night.

Mr. Heath was walking down the dusty lane a few hundred yards from the little hamlet. He was almost an hour later than he had reckoned upon being, but this did not seem to worry him exceedingly.

He had been thinking over the incidents in the wood as he walked along, and now, for the first time, he remembered the little object he had picked up under the oak tree. Never for a moment

did he believe that it was anything of importance, or likely to affect him in the slightest degree.

He had forgotten it until now because it was such an insignificant matter, and he had only been reminded of it because his thoughts had reached the point where he recalled the count's curiously close questioning.

Mr. Heath halted in the centre of the lane, and pulled the piece of stone out of his pocket. He fully expected that he would throw it in the hedge a moment later, for he had only glanced at it in the deep gloom. Now, in the bright moonlight, he would be able to see what it actually was.

"A piece of flint, I expect," he murmured softly.

He felt as a man feels who has picked up in the street what appears to be a sovereign, only to find that it is merely a brass card-counter, or something of that nature—not that there are many sovereigns to be seen nowadays!

The stone was rather bigger than he had thought, and of quite considerable weight. He regarded it curiously in the moonlight, and became suddenly aware of the fact that his heart was beating at a much more rapid speed.

"Good heavens!" he muttered huskily.

He turned the object over again and again, examining it intently and closely. He took his pocket-knife out, and attempted to scratch the stone, but found that it only deprived the keen blade of its edge.

"It's impossible—absolutely impossible!" he muttered. "At the same time, I seem to remember having seen an uncut stone—Oh, but this thing is too big—it must weigh an enormous amount!"

He glanced up and down the road, as though expecting people to be within view; but the whole countryside was deserted. Mr. Heath took out some matches, and struck one. In the flickering glare of light he gazed at the stone more closely.

"By Jove, I believe I'm right! I believe the thing is a diamond, after all!" he murmured feverishly. "A diamond! Why, Heaven above, it must be bigger than the Koh-i-Noor itself!"

His hand was unsteady as he held that big, curiously transparent stone. Some years before he had been shown a few small uncut diamonds by a friend; but

they were mere fragments compared to this. This thing was an enormous size.

"I must be going mad, or something," Heath muttered grimly. "It's not a diamond—it can't be a diamond! Why, there haven't been four stones of this size discovered in the world's history! I'm simply making a fool of myself!"

Nevertheless, he continued to stare in a fascinated way at the object in his fingers. It was undoubtedly a most remarkable-looking stone, and anybody connected with diamond mining would have declared that it was a magnificent diamond of the very finest quality; but, of course, it was rough and uncut.

"Yes, I'm making a fool of myself," went on Mr. Heath. "My own common-sense tells me that this isn't a real diamond. And yet—and yet—— Good gracious! What if it should turn out to be a real——"

He did not allow his thoughts to continue in that strain.

"I expect it's only a piece of curious mineral," he told himself. "But why it should have been under that tree is more than I can imagine. It's a pity I didn't show the count—he might have told me."

Mr. Heath did not seem to consider the possibility that the Comte de Plessigny himself might have been searching for that rough stone! The Remove-master was under the firm impression that the count had been searching for a dead insect; therefore, he dismissed all other possibilities.

Stowing the thing away again, he strode down the lane, and entered the silent little hamlet. He went straight to Greyhurst Cottage, and tapped in a peculiar manner upon the door.

It was opened within a minute, and closed securely again. What was the meaning of these secret, mysterious visits of Mr. Heath's to the Edgemore cottage? Who was the old, miser-like man Handforth had once seen?

The thing was something of a puzzle, and, as it happened, Edward Oswald Handforth was hot on the scent that very night—at least, he considered that he was on the scent.

Actually, he was too late for anything.

He had had some difficulty in getting Church and McClure to accompany him; they could not see the sense of this

expedition. Any other night would have done just as well, in their opinion.

"I call it a mad idea," grumbled Church, when they reached the stile. "Even supposing we see Heath, what can we do?"

"Follow him," said Handforth.

"Yes—to the cottage at Edgemore," said Church. "What's the good of that?"

"There's no telling where our investigations will lead us to," said Handforth, shaking his head wisely. "I'm pretty certain that Heath is a coiner—or, to be more exact, a chap who makes counterfeit currency notes. That cottage is his giddy factory."

"There's nothing to prove——"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "What about the machinery we saw?"

"Machinery?"

"Yes!"

"I don't remember it," said McClure gruffly.

"Not that afternoon when we spotted a wheel whizzing round?" demanded Handforth. "We distinctly saw——"

"Oh, that!" said Church. "We only caught a glimpse of something turning. It might have been a coffee-mill, or—or a chaff-cutter, or a mangle——"

"You burbling idiot!" snapped Handforth witheringly.

"Well, anyhow, I don't see the sense of coming out to-night," said McClure, looking round him anxiously. "What about that bear? It's still roaming about the neighbourhood——"

"Somebody said it had been captured," declared Handforth.

"That was a yarn," said Church. "Several chaps believed that it had been collared, but it only turned out to be a whopper set going by one of the Fifth Form asses. The bear is roaming about."

"It might be in this very wood," declared McClure.

"Within twenty yards of us!" added Church nervously.

Handforth regarded his chums pityingly.

"And you call yourselves Removites!" he exclaimed. "You call yourselves decent chaps! Ye gods, and little kippers! You haven't got half an ounce of pluck between the pair of you!"

"Oh, go easy, Handy!" protested Church. "We don't mind anything,

ordinary—but a bear, you know! Especially at night! We—we might get hugged to death, or scratched to bits, or—or——”

“Or you might get a couple of black eyes!” said Handforth grimly. “You will get ‘em if you don’t stop this beastly snivelling! We’re going to lie concealed in the wood, just as I outlined in the dormitory.”

“You—you mean conceal ourselves just here—against this stile?” asked Church.

“Yes!”

“Well, that ain’t so bad,” said McClure. “But what’s the idea?”

“We can wait here until Heath comes along——”

“But supposing he’s gone?”

“Eh?”

“What if Mr. Heath has already passed through the wood, on his way to Edgemore?” asked Church. “It’s pretty late, you know; and if he’s gone, there’s no sense in us stopping here. We might as well buzz back to bed.”

“Of course!” echoed McClure.

“You—you miserable rotters!” said Handforth sourly. “All you want to do is to get back to bed! You don’t care tuppence about my ambitions, and about the success of the case!”

“But it isn’t a proper case,” protested Church.

“What?”

“I—I mean, it doesn’t matter much whether we keep on the watch to-night or to-morrow night,” went on Church hastily. “Nobody can accuse me of being a funk. When it comes to it, I’m as keen as anybody on a scrap.”

“Well, perhaps you are,” admitted Handforth grudgingly.

“And Clurey’s just as good,” said Church loyally.

“You ain’t a bad pair, on the whole,” Handforth remarked, with an air of great patronage. “On the whole, you’re jolly decent, so what’s the good of spoiling everything by all these grumbles——”

“They’re not grumbles,” said Church. “There are times when pluck is simply foolhardiness and swank. I reckon it’s foolhardy for us to be out here to-night—while we know jolly well that there’s a bear knocking about loose.”

“Oh, my hat!” groaned Handforth. “You’ve got on the bear subject again!

Don’t I keep telling you that there’s not one chance in a million of us meeting the thing? It may have been lurking about in the district during the evening, but it’s probably miles away by this time.”

Church and McClure were not feeling exactly comfortable, in spite of Handforth’s reassurances. They felt that there was a considerable amount of danger in the wood.

Within two or three minutes they were settled comfortably in their places of concealment. From the stile they were invisible; in fact, it was impossible to see them at all unless close investigations were made.

“Why, even if the bear passed right along this path, it wouldn’t spot us!” said Handforth complacently.

“Perhaps not,” said Church; “but it would smell us!”

“Smell us?”

“Yes!”

“If you’re saying that I smell——”

“You silly ass!” snapped Church. “Bears can smell men miles off, and if that bear’s anywhere near us, we shall receive a visit before ten minutes has gone by. It’s a pity we didn’t bring some heavy sticks.”

Handforth grunted, and the three settled down to watch, and wait. Not that there was much hope of their encountering Mr. Clement Heath, for by this time the Remove master was in Greyhurst Cottage, Edgemore.

However, the night was not to pass without excitement. Handforth and Co. had not left their dormitory for nothing.

Church was the first to notice anything strange.

A slight rustling in the trees first attracted his attention, and this was followed by the distinct sound of a snapping twig.

“What’s that?” he whispered abruptly.

“Oh, nothing! A rabbit, perhaps——”

“Rabbits don’t break twigs!” said Church keenly. “It was something bigger, Handy—something which seemed to come over from the stile——”

“Heath!”

“Oh, rats!” said McClure. “Heath wouldn’t crawl about in that way. There’s no reason for him to fear anybody here. I—I believe—— Well, I can’t help thinking about that bear——”

"What utter rot!" said Handforth curtly. "Put the bear out of your head, and don't be such a silly ass! A fine thing, when we come out on important detective work, for you chaps to be scared out of your wits by a bear that might be twenty miles away. It's absolutely——"

"Gr-r-r-r-rrrh!"

Handforth was interrupted by a very peculiar sound, which came from the other side of the bushes.

"What—what's that?" he asked abruptly.

"Goodness knows!" muttered Church.

"It—it sounded like——"

But McClure did not trust himself to speak further.

"Oh, rot!" said Handy. "There's nothing——"

Sniff—sniff—sniff!

Handforth and Co. stood rooted to the spot. There was something horribly deliberate about that sniffing noise, and the absence of any other sound, save those one or two snapping twigs, made the whole adventure more uncanny and mysterious. Even Handforth was impressed.

"It—it can't be the bear!" he muttered shakily.

"We—we'd better bunk!" gasped Church.

"Rather not! It's the worst thing we can do if it happens to be about," said Handforth. "He'd collar us at once. No; we'd better wait until he moves off. Then we might be able to slip away——"

"Oh, my goodness!" gasped McClure suddenly.

Swish—crackle—swish!

The trees and bushes were parted and trampled down just behind the spot where the juniors were crouching. Something dim loomed up in the gloom, and for a moment Church and McClure were on the point of bolting. Handforth, if the truth must be told, was in a precisely similar condition.

But he just managed to keep his nerve.

With one swift movement he took out his electric torch, and he pressed the button sharply and rather unsteadily. The light flickered in and out twice—and then finally it became extinguished altogether—for the simple reason that Handforth's fingers had suddenly become almost nerveless.

For there, staring through the parted bushes at them, was the head of a huge bear! The light had gleamed for a brief space on its glassy, baleful eyes. It was the bear that Fatty Little had encountered during the afternoon!

"Good heavens!" panted Church.

One thought filled the minds of them all—flight!

But they realised, at the same time, that flight was practically out of the question. What could they do? How could they hope to outdistance a bear? Two of them would probably escape—would almost certainly escape—but the third would fall a victim to the bear's savagery.

Which was this one to be?

Strictly speaking, it was Handforth's duty to sacrifice himself while his chums made their escape—for he had insisted upon this expedition. However, all three were so excited that they hardly knew what they were doing.

Handforth was the first to act.

He made a sudden leap upwards, just where he stood, and caught hold of the bough of a big tree. The next second he had hauled himself up on to the stout limb, and he stood there, filled with anxiety.

"Jump, you asses—jump!" he gasped. "It's easy enough! I'll give you a hand—and it's the only chance!"

Church and McClure did not need telling twice. Somehow or other they scrambled up into the tree, and Handforth lent them a hand. For a moment they were safe. But what of the bear?

The juniors did not wait to see whether Mr. Bruin was following. They were determined to climb higher and higher into the tree, and succeeded in mounting several further feet. But then a hitch occurred.

Owing to the curious formation of the tree, it was not possible to find the top, or anywhere near the top.

The juniors were compelled to stop on that branch. And they waited there, their hearts filled with anxiety and worry. Would the bear follow them into the tree, or would it mooch away into the wood?

The question soon answered itself.

For, looking down, the three juniors saw a dim, uncertain figure standing at the bottom of the tree. And then, with slow and deliberate movements it commenced to climb.

The bear was coming after them!

The position was really serious. There was no avenue of escape, for the bear was climbing the trunk, and there was no means of getting out of harm's way. The juniors, by mounting the tree, had placed themselves in a trap.

The dark bulk of the bear, unshapely and clumsy, mounted higher and higher. Handforth and Co. had no weapons, and they could do nothing but sit astride the branch and wait for the worst to happen.

It was not long in coming.

The bear mounted higher and higher, at length drew level with the three fugitives. It was grunting and gasping a bit, as though the effort had been a serious labour. But it was there, and it seemed to be a terribly dangerous customer.

To make matters worse, the bear had halted against the big bough, and was now actually moving along to the big limb.

"Oh, goodness!" muttered Church. "We're done!"

And this certainly seemed to be the case. Foot by foot, the three juniors edged their way back along the branch. The bear was there, and they had nothing better to do. It was impossible for them to remain where they were, and to allow the bear to attack them, as it was evidently intent upon doing. Inch by inch it moved on the bough, and inch by inch Handforth and Co. edged away.

Creak—creak!

The bough began to complain in no uncertain terms. It was a fairly stout one, but it was certainly not accustomed to such treatment. It was quite capable of bearing the weight of Handforth and Co., if they had kept near the parent trunk. But as they edged further and further out, the bough commenced to sag, and to show signs of collapsing. The position was rather appalling.

"We—we can't go any further! This beastly bough will break!" panted McClure, who was on the outside position. "If you chaps press back any more, I shall tumble off, and then the bear will have me for certain!"

"Can't—can't we do anything at all?" asked Church anxiously.

Handforth didn't answer. He was far too engaged for the moment. Being

nearest the trunk, he was naturally nearer to the bear; and the latter was creeping on to the branch with deliberate movements. There was something strangely human about its actions.

Then, with a sudden growling sound, the bear flung itself at Handforth. The leader of Study D pushed his way back by sheer force, and just got out of reach of the deadly claws.

Then creak—creak—crack!

The bough cracked in the most terrifying manner, being quite unable to stand the extra strain which had been put upon it. It smashed off at the junction with the tree—or, to be more exact, it half smashed, and sagged down, through the other branches, at a sharp angle.

Handforth and Co. were pitched down with considerable force. They didn't know what was happening for the moment. Church and McClure yelled with alarm, and Handforth gave vent to a terrific bellow.

Crash! Crash!

The juniors smashed through the tangle of branches, and found themselves on the ground. By some extraordinary trick of Fate, they were unhurt—practically unscratched. But they were in a tangle of broken branches, and it was almost impossible for them to extricate themselves at the moment.

The bear, meanwhile, was descending the tree hurriedly by the more usual route. It dropped to the ground, and came crashing through the branches towards the three unfortunate juniors.

"Run!" panted Church.

But it was advice which could not be carried out. The juniors were so tangled that it was impossible to run—unless they chose to walk right into the arms of the bear. There was only one clear space, and that clear space was occupied by Mr. Bruin.

Hindenburg's offensive had certainly been satisfactory, for it had routed Handforth and Co. very completely. And now they were unable to retreat. They were compelled to wait for the worst to happen.

But the bear acted in a curious manner. It rushed up, possibly believing that its victims were stunned or half killed. But it soon discovered that the three Removites were hardly touched.

Then it commenced to retreat.

But it was too late!

The bear had given himself away by venturing so close, and by acting so strangely. Handforth gave vent to a terrific bellow of fury, crashed through the branches, and grasped the bear firmly from behind.

Church and McClure watched, horror-struck.

"He'll—he'll get killed!" gasped Church. "Oh, the reckless ass!"

But Handforth seemed quite safe.

"You swindling rotter!" he roared, shaking the bear fiercely. "You confounded spoofer! By George! I'll punch you until you don't know—Well, I'm hanged! Fullwood!"

Church and McClure could hardly believe their ears. Was it possible that the bear was a fake?

It was possible—for it was the truth. The bear was none other than Ralph Leslie Fullwood!

CHAPTER V.

GETTING BUSY.

FULLWOOD gave vent to a somewhat nervous little laugh.

"Oh, come off it, Handforth!"

he exclaimed, attempting to shake Edward Oswald's hands from his shoulders. "I spoofed you properly, an' there's no need for you to get ratty about it! It was only a jape—"

"A—a jape!" roared Handforth fiercely. "You—you beastly cad! You might have half killed us! It was only by a piece of pure luck that we weren't hurt when that branch broke!"

Church and McClure broke their way through, both of them amazed.

"Fullwood!" they echoed. "It's—it's impossible!"

"Look at him!" said Handforth grimly.

He flashed on his electric torch, and revealed the "bear." The head had now been pushed back, revealing the face of Ralph Leslie underneath. He was wearing the huge skin over his ordinary clothing, and his legs and arms were packed out and tied round carefully and cunningly.

In dense gloom it was quite easy to

imagine that he was really a bear, but in the full light of the electric torch, no such mistake could be made.

When Handforth had first flashed on the light, only the head had been visible through the trees—and that part of the make-up was lifelike.

"It was a jolly good joke, anyhow," said Fullwood, in a satisfied tone. "You'll be chipped to death over this, my sons! I'll make the school ring with the bally yarn! You'll be the laughing-stock of St. Frank's!"

Handforth snorted.

"You miserable rotter!" he said. "Before I start getting busy with you, I want to know how you managed it—and I want to know how you knew that we should be in the wood to-night?"

Fullwood grinned.

"Your voice doesn't happen to be very faint, Handy," he said. "You were jawing to these other chaps in the dormitory, and I heard you."

"Oh!"

"I knew you were goin' to hide yourselves in the wood, against the stile," proceeded Fullwood. "As soon as you'd slipped out, I did the same, and Gulliver an' Bell lent me a hand with the disguise. Pretty smart, wasn't it?"

"You—you beastly spoofer!"

"You cad!"

"You rotter!"

"I thought you were sportsmen!" sneered Fullwood. "We got this bear-skin out of the library, an' I reckon it was a pretty good jape; but all you can do is to make a dashed fuss!"

"I'm going to do more than that in a minute!" said Handforth grimly. "You needn't think that you've triumphed! This affair ain't over!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you might have injured us with a rotten practical joke of this sort," said Handforth angrily. "We naturally thought you were the real bear, and our first move was to climb a tree. That branch broke, and it was only by sheer luck that we weren't smashed up!"

Fullwood snorted.

"That's sheer rot!" he declared. "You know as well as I do that the bear was recaptured before we went to bed. If you'd had any sense at all you'd have known that it was a joke

"You silly ass! Who told you the bear was captured?"

Fullwood started.

"Isn't— isn't it captured?" he asked sharply.

"No!"

"But—but——"

"Some of the chaps spread a yarn that it was, but that was only a rumour," said Handforth. "That's bear's still at large, and we naturally thought——"

"Still at large!" gasped Fullwood. "Why—why it might be near us! It might attack us at any moment. You—you fool! Why didn't you tell me before! Let me go! I don't want to be killed by that bear!"

Fullwood struggled fiercely, and yelled for help.

The knowledge that the bear was still at liberty—after he had thought it had been recaptured—came as a considerable shock to him.

"You're not getting away just yet, my son!" said Handforth grimly. "Jokes of this kind ain't the thing. It was a contemptible business—but just what I should expect from a chap like you!"

"Look here, I'm not going to stop——"

He paused, as some twigs crackled in the rear.

"What's that?" he panted nervously. "It's—it's the bear——"

"Rot! It's Gulliver and Bell!" said Handforth witheringly.

Fullwood's chums had been lurking near by all the time, but now they came into view, attracted by the argument. Somehow, the jape wasn't panning out quite so funnily as the Nuts had anticipated.

"Is—is the bear anywhere about?" asked Fullwood nervously. "These—these idiots say that the bear hasn't been recaptured!"

"What!" exclaimed Bell. "Not—not recaptured?"

"Rot!" said Gulliver.

"You can call it what you like," said Handforth, "but the bear hadn't been recaptured when the Remove went to bed—so the chances are that it's still roaming about."

"Then—then why did you come out?"

"Do you think I was going to be kept indoors by the fact that a blessed bear was loose?" asked Handforth witheringly.

ingly. "Not likely! But I don't feel inclined to have any arguments, and I'm going to give you chaps a jolly good hiding on the spot!"

"Don't be a fool, Handy!" urged Fullwood. "We—we didn't know the bear was still at large, or we shouldn't have ventured out ourselves!"

"I quite believe that!"

"We ought to get back into the school while we're safe," went on Fullwood. "There's no sense in asking for trouble! It's simply acting the goat, and you can rely upon us to keep this mum!"

Handforth grinned.

"That won't work!" he said pleasantly. "Even if I could take your word, it wouldn't make any difference. I'll bet you'll keep mum, in any case! You won't feel like saying anything to anybody to-morrow!"

"Look here, don't act the giddy ox——"

"It's better to act the giddy ox than the bear!" said Handforth. "Keep hold of those other rotters, you asses—don't let them escape. You can give them a hiding each while I'm dealing with Fully!"

"Good idea!" said Church.

Gulliver and Bell were seized. They struggled fiercely, and a tremendous battle commenced, then and there. The chums of Study D were angry at the trick which had been played upon them.

It had been a contemptible affair—and a dangerous one at that. It was only by pure luck that the three juniors had fallen with the broken bough, and had landed practically unhurt.

The affair might have had a very different ending—and Fullwood would have been entirely to blame. It was just like the cad of the Remove to plan out a dangerous practical joke of this sort.

But he paid for it.

Handforth dealt with him unmercifully, and Church and McClure got tremendously busy with Gulliver and Bell. By the time the scrap was over, the Study A trio was feeling decidedly worn out.

They certainly deserved their punishment.

An ordinary jape would have aroused nothing but amusement in Handforth's breast, even if the jape had gone against himself. But this was not an ordinary

jape, for that bearskin was very lifelike, and was calculated to scare anybody. However, the Nuts had been punished, so it was all right.

They crawled away painfully, and made a bee-line for the school.

"I'll bet they won't jaw much to-morrow!" said Handforth grimly. "They'll be too busy explaining where they got those black eyes from! They won't dare to spread this yarn about the bear."

"There's no telling what they'll do; but I don't care," said Church. "The best thing we can do is to get to the school at once, and get into bed. I'm not feeling particularly bright myself!"

"Same here!" said McClure.

Handforth hesitated.

"Well, I don't know," he said slowly. "It's quite likely that Heath has gone by this time; we've missed him. I dare say you chaps are right. After that scrap I feel a bit grubby. Perhaps we'd better get back."

"Good!"

Church and McClure shook hands in the darkness, and a moment later they and Handforth emerged into the lane, and set off towards the school. It was still moonlight, and the bulk of Bellton Wood caused the lane to be in deep shadow.

"I'm blessed if I can understand how we escaped being hurt when that branch broke," remarked Church. "I've got a couple of little scratches, and I believe there's a splinter about two inches long in my left knee—but they're only trifles. It's a wonder we weren't smashed up."

Handforth nodded.

"Well, for one thing, that branch was lower than we really thought," he said. "The distance to the ground wasn't particularly great, and the branch didn't break off clean, either. It simply snapped, and then sagged down, carrying us with it. So, instead of being sent to the ground at express speed, we sort of floated down."

"Well, I don't want to do any more floating of that sort," said Church. "Once is enough for me, thanks! I thought I was going to be picked up with broken legs, concussion of the brain, and a choice assortment of fractured ribs."

They continued their way to the school, discussing the affair, and saying

choice things about Fullwood and Co. However, no harm had come to anybody, so it was decided that nothing would be said to any of the other fellows. There was no need to spread the yarn about the school.

Naturally enough, Handforth and Co. had a somewhat selfish motive for this decision of silence. If they related how they had wiped up Fullwood and Co., the story would get about. Prefects would hear about it. Inquiries would be made—awkward inquiries.

And, as a natural result, Handforth and Co. would be hauled up before the Head for breaking out of bounds after lights-out. Fullwood and Co. would be hauled up, too; but that would be little satisfaction to the chums of Study D.

It was therefore decided to keep mum.

"Talking's never any good, anyhow," said Handforth. "Some chaps believe in jawing about everything, but I'm not that sort. If I've got anything important to keep—anything private—I never say a word."

Church and McClure gravely agreed, merely for the sake of peace. Of course, they knew well enough that the actual truth was just the opposite. It was a terribly difficult task for Handforth to keep a secret, and he generally succeeded in letting it out to somebody before many hours had passed.

The three juniors were not far from the school when a slight sound came from the ditch on the left. At the same moment the juniors caught sight of a dim form moving out into the road.

"What's that?" asked Church.

"Those fatheaded Nuts, perhaps," said Handforth grimly. "If they're trying any more of their tricks——"

"Better get your torch ready," whispered McClure.

Handforth was already prepared, and when he and the other two juniors had walked a few more paces, Handforth came to a halt and flashed on his torch.

"Great guns!" muttered Church faintly.

There, standing just on the grass near the ditch, was the strange figure of a bear—raised on its hind legs, and standing ready to attack.

Handforth sent out a terrific bellow.

"Well, of all the giddy nerve!" he roared. "They're trying it a second time!"

"Oh!" breathed Church. "It's Fully!"

"Of course, it's Fully!" snapped Handforth. "By George! I'll teach him not to play the fool like this!"

He rushed forward like a whirlwind, and the dim figure stood quite still. Handforth went into the attack with his fists clenched.

Crash!

His fist struck the bear fairly and squarely upon the nose, and there was a violent sneezing noise, and then a fierce, throaty snarl—a snarl which could not be mistaken.

Handforth staggered back, almost petrified.

For, in that second, he knew the truth. He had made a bloomer! This object was not Fullwood dressed up, but the real escaped bear, Hindenburg!

The discovery was positively appalling!

CHAPTER VI.

THE CAPTURE—AND THE REWARD.

HANDFORTH wanted to fly for his life.

A mad impulse seized him to dash away blindly—to pelt down the road as fast as his legs would carry him, careless of direction, careless of everything save that he had to get away from the bear.

But, although he wanted to move on, he stood absolutely still. Somehow, he found it impossible to move, and he just remained there, helpless and scared. Yes, he was certainly scared, and he was not ashamed to admit it.

Church and McClure were equally scared, and they stood there, waiting—waiting for that monster to stride forward and to kill them all as they stood. For it was quite capable of such a deed.

They could see that the bear was a very big fellow, and he stood there, reared upon his hind legs, snuffing fiercely—the effects of the terrific punch which Handforth had delivered.

It was the knowledge of this incident which caused Handforth to be so tremendously nervous. After treating Bruin in that way, it was hardly likely that the bear would remain inactive.

The whole thing was appalling!

Handforth had actually punched the bear on the nose, an insult which he could not possibly overlook. Handforth was absolutely staggered when he thought about it, and his wits refused to work.

But he dimly realised that the bear was remaining quiet probably because the juniors made no attempt to run away. They couldn't. They didn't possess the strength. They were frozen with fright and horror.

And then the bear acted.

He lumbered forward two or three paces, until he towered above Handforth. Not until it was too late did the junior recover the use of his limbs. He attempted to slip away—to dodge—to get free.

But that awful embrace was upon him!

The bear's great forelegs enclosed him, and Handforth was pressed tightly against Bruin's chest. He was, in fact, being hugged!

"Help, help!" gasped Handforth faintly.

Church and McClure did not even reply.

Their tongues refused to act—their brains were in a mad whirl. They expected to see Handforth crushed to death before their eyes.

For they knew well enough that the bear was capable of killing all three of them with one hug.

And then Mr. Bruin acted in a rather strange way.

Still keeping Handforth tightly clasped, he sniffed the air, and shoved his nose down towards Handforth's side-pocket, when he sniffed again. The junior, meanwhile, was becoming dimly conscious of the fact that his captor was not hurting him in the least. The bear was hugging him, but not viciously.

Then—r-r-r-r-rip!

Handforth's side pocket was torn out bodily. A small package lay revealed, and the bear seized this in his mouth, and a moment later he was contentedly munching a ham sandwich! Handforth had placed it there before setting out, in case he got peckish.

The impudence of the bear was quite amusing—if the affair had not been so full of grim and terrible menace. The bear had scented the sandwich, and had

deliberately set about obtaining it for his own benefit.

Having demolished the morsel, he sniffed about for more—but in vain. He kept Handforth imprisoned all the time. But, when he found that there was nothing doing in the grub line he relaxed his hold, and allowed Handforth to slip away. But, just before doing so, a wet tongue licked itself over the back of the junior's hand.

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Handforth faintly.

"Run—run for your life!" panted Church.

But Handforth was recovering his composure.

"Wait a tick," he said, calming himself with an effort. "A minute ago Hindenburg could have crushed me to atoms, but he didn't. Then he licked my hand, just like a giddy dog. It's my belief he's as tame as a kitten!"

"Tame!" gasped McClure.

"Well, doesn't it look like it," said Handforth. "He's had enough time to kill all three of us, and he hasn't done us the slightest harm—and there he stands now, quite interested in our talk."

"We—we'd better bunk!"

"No, I don't see it," said Handforth, shaking his head. "The keeper said the bear wasn't fierce, and he was easy to handle. At the same time, it will need a masterful hand to subdue him."

There was certainly every indication that the bear was perfectly tame. He stood there, while the juniors had been speaking, still on his hind legs. But now, without any warning, he dropped down, lumbered round the juniors, and sniffed about, as though in search of food.

Then he sat up again, and looked alert.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth. "He's asking for grub. I'm blessed if I know what we ought to do. I'm not a bit scared now, anyhow. He's a nice old chap, and it's a beastly insult to call him Hindenburg."

"An insult to the bear, you mean?" asked Church.

"Of course!" said Handforth. "Sorry, Hindy, old son, there's nothing doing!"

"I've got a sandwich!" put in McClure.

"Good! Let him have it."

McClure took out the sandwich gingerly, unwrapped it, and threw it on the ground. Hindenburg lost no time demolishing the morsel. Then he sat down again, and waited for more.

By this time Handforth and Co. were feeling almost comfortable. The terror which had gone over the neighbourhood was quite unnecessary, it seemed. The bear, even when hungry, was quite harmless, and as tame as a puppy.

All Handforth's confidence returned.

"I—I say!" he exclaimed eagerly. "There's no reason why we shouldn't get some glory over this business."

"Glory!"

"Rather!" said Handforth. "We can capture this bear, and hand him over to the keepers. Just think of the name we shall make for ourselves! We shall be heroes in the eyes of everybody!"

"And there's ten quid, too!" said Church.

"Eh?"

"There's ten quid reward——"

"Great guns!" said Handforth. "I'd forgotten all about that! Ten quid reward for the capture of the bear! Why, it's ours—— It'll be as easy as winking to lock old Hindy up."

"I'm not so sure about that," said Church. "He may seem peaceful enough now, but there's no telling with bears. I think the best thing we can do is to scoot away while we're safe, and never mind about the ten quid."

"Rot! He's harmless enough."

A moment or two later, Church and McClure were quite ready to share Handforth's opinion, for Mr. Bruin proved to be singularly docile. There was a short length of rope attached to his collar, and Handforth boldly seized this and pulled upon it.

The bear was ready.

He walked up the lane meekly and obediently, following Handforth as though he had known the junior all his trained life.

The affair certainly had a ludicrous side. After all the excitement which had disturbed the neighbourhood, it was really humorous to see a junior of St. Frank's leading the bear by a thin piece of cord.

And Bruin did not get up to any tricks. He followed the juniors right to the school, and readily entered the Tri-

angle by the masters' side gate, the big main gates being locked.

The juniors, now filled with wild excitement and exuberation, were not the slightest bit nervous. Hindenburg had proved himself to be a perfectly willing prisoner. Probably he had had enough roaming, and was tired and hungry.

At all events, he allowed himself to be placed in the woodshed, and the stout door was closed upon him and bolted. Then Handforth and Co. gazed at one another, their faces flushed, and their hearts beating rapidly.

"We've done it!" said Handforth exultantly. "We've captured him!"

"I—I can't believe it!"

"It seems too impossible!"

But it was a fact, and Handforth gave instructions briskly.

"You two chaps stop here, on guard," he said. "There's just a chance that he'll try to get out. If he does, yell at the top of your voices."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going indoors."

"What for?"

"To tell Mr. Lee, of course," said Handforth. "He's our House-master, and, besides, he's a sport, and won't punish us severely for being out of bounds. He oughtn't to punish us at all, considering that we captured the bear."

Handforth lost no time in hurrying into the Ancient House. He got in by means of the study window, and then rushed up through the dark passages and staircases until he arrived outside the door of Nelson Lee's bedroom.

He rapped loudly upon the panels.

"Well?" came a prompt inquiry. "Who's that?"

"Me, sir!"

The door opened, and Nelson Lee stood there, fully dressed. Handforth was too excited to wonder why Nelson Lee should be fully attired at that hour of the night.

"Handforth!" exclaimed Lee. "What is the meaning of this, my boy? Why are you not in bed—"

"We—that is, Church and McClure and I—we've captured the bear, sir!" blurted out Handforth excitedly.

Nelson Lee looked hard at the junior. "You have done what, Handforth?" he asked sharply.

"We've captured the bear, sir!"

"Dear me! Surely you are attempting to joke with me, Handforth," said Nelson Lee severely. "Let me tell you that I do not approve—"

"But it's true, sir—absolutely true!" shouted Handforth. "We captured the bear in the lane, and brought him along to the woodshed. He's locked in there now, and I thought perhaps you'd ring up the police, or somebody."

"I shall certainly do so after I have satisfied myself that you have made no mistake, and that there has been no hoax."

"But—but it's true, sir!" declared Handforth earnestly. "Can't you take my word? The bear's in the woodshed now!"

Nelson Lee nodded. He judged by the junior's tone.

"Very well, Handforth. I will take your word. There is a telephone in my room here, so I will get into communication with Caistowe at once. The search has been abandoned until daylight, but this news of yours will just arrive in time to prevent a big search party being sent out."

Handforth was extremely pleased, and he was even more pleased when he heard from Lee, a few minutes later, that a motor-car was speeding from Caistowe, and the school would be reached in a very short time.

"That's fine, sir," said Handforth. "I'll buzz downstairs, sir, and help the other chaps keep guard. I reckon you're going to report us to the Headmaster, sir?"

"I shall find it necessary to do that, Handforth," replied Nelson Lee. "You see, the Headmaster must know about it, and it is just as well that the story should come from my lips. I will do the best I can."

"Thank you, sir!"

Nelson Lee went off, and Handforth hurried down into the Triangle. There was no need for secrecy now, for before long there would be quite a sensation at the school. And Handforth's part in the affair would come out, in any case.

"It's all serene, you chaps," he shouted. "Car's on the way from Caistowe."

"Don't yell like that, you idiot!" said Church, in alarm.

Handforth laughed.

"It doesn't matter—everybody will know soon!" he shouted louder than ever.

His voice was by no means quiet, and it easily penetrated through the open windows of the Remove dormitory. I sat up in bed fully awake, dimly conscious of the fact that something unusual had disturbed my slumbers.

And then I heard Handforth's voice outside.

"That's queer!" I muttered. "What on earth is the fathead doing out in the Triangle—and making all that shindy, too?"

I got up from my bed, hopped across the floor, and was soon leaning out of the dormitory window, staring down into the quiet moonlight of the Triangle.

Handforth and Co. were distinctly visible over by the woodshed.

"Hist!" I exclaimed softly. "What's the matter down there?"

Handforth looked up.

"Nothing's the matter," he replied calmly. "We've captured the bear—that's all."

"You've—done—what?" I yelled.

"We've captured the bear——"

"I suppose you're trying to pull my leg?" I exclaimed grimly.

"You can believe it, or you can do the other thing, it doesn't matter to me," said Handforth carelessly. "A car's coming over from Caistowe now, and it'll soon be here. We've had quite a bit of excitement down the lane."

"Rather!" said Church.

Several other juniors had heard my voice, and they, too, came to the window and looked out. After five minutes had elapsed, practically the whole Remove was awake, and shouts went on continuously.

Handforth and Co. found themselves bombarded with questions, and they also had to deal with sundry prefects and one or two masters, who sallied out to know what on earth was the matter.

"Of course, I expect personality had a great deal to do with it!" shouted Handforth, addressing the fellows at the dormitory windows. "Any of you chaps wouldn't have been able to capture the bear at all. But he was quelled when he saw me——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You mean he fainted at the sight of your face!" grinned Pitt.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It was my eagle eye!" roared Handforth warmly. "You know as well as I do that it's possible to tame a savago tiger if you can only fix it with a steady eye. As soon as this bear came up I punched it on the nose, and showed it quite plainly that I was master."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Rats!" yelled Hubbard. "We don't believe that yarn."

"It's true enough!" roared Church. "Handy gave the bear a terrific swipec."

Neither of the juniors thought it necessary to add that Handforth had been under a mistaken impression when he landed out so forcibly at the bear. That part of the story might just as well be left out.

"He got that punch on the nose, and it kind of staggered him a bit," said Handforth, glad of the opportunity of reaping the glory. "He seemed quite dazed, and when I spoke to him sharply he was as obedient as a dog. We gave the old chap a couple of sandwiches, and then he followed us home. But it was only because of my powerful eyes that the bear didn't maul us to pieces."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Somehow, the juniors didn't take Handforth seriously.

"You needn't believe me unless you like. I don't care!" roared the leader of Study D. "But I can tell you the bear fairly took our breaths away for a minute, and if we hadn't been possessed of nerves of steel, it would have been all up. He might have killed all three of us. It was a terrible ordeal!"

"Don't you believe it, young gents!" said a pleasant voice.

Handforth turned round, and found Hammond, the keeper, had come up and he was leading his charge on a stout cord. In the excitement of telling the yarn, Handforth had not been aware of the arrival of the motor-car.

"Oh, so you've got the bear, then," exclaimed Handy.

"Yes, young gent, and I understand it's because of your sharpness he's here," said the keeper. "It needed a bit of nerve, too, to bring old Hindy up to the school in the middle of the night."

"It was a terribly risky business!" said Handforth.

Hammond grinned.

"Not on your life!" he said. "Hindy never hurt a fly, and I don't suppose he ever will. He's the most harmless old chap that ever lived. You could put your hand in his mouth, and he wouldn't bite you. Meek ain't the word!"

Everybody roared with laughter.

After all Handforth's remarks about the terrible danger and the frightful risks, it was certainly humorous to hear that the bear was quite harmless. True enough, the keepers had circulated the news broadcast that the bear was not dangerous. But the country people did not believe this story. A bear was a bear, and therefore a peril.

"There's a little matter about a reward, young gent," went on the keeper. "I haven't got it with me now, of course, but it'll be sent on as soon as the boss hears particulars. If you'll just give me your name and address, I'll see that the gov'nor deals with the matter the first thing to-morrow."

Handforth gave the necessary details, and shortly afterwards Mr. Hammond and the bear took their departure, with one or two other people. Hindenburg had not been at liberty for long, but he had caused a great scare in the neighbourhood.

As Handforth and Co. went in they found Doctor Stafford in the lobby, and the Head was looking rather severe.

"Why were you boys in the lane at such an hour?" he demanded.

"We—we—well, the fact is, sir, we—we were there!" said Handforth weakly.

"We went out—to—to—why, to capture the bear!"

"Of course, sir!" echoed Church and McClure.

The Head frowned.

"It was not your business to capture the bear, Handforth. And, in any case, you were distinctly forbidden to leave the school premises. Seeing that you have been so successful I will not punish you as I would have done. But you will write me five hundred lines each for insubordination and disobedience."

"Yes, sir," said Handforth and Co. meekly.

They went to bed, feeling that they had got off pretty lightly, considering. Five hundred lines was a pretty stiff amput., but they were to receive ten

pounds to act as a kind of balm. It was decidedly worth all the trouble they had taken.

"Ten quid," said Handforth, as he went upstairs. "That would just come in handy if I knew where my sister was. I expect she's on the rocks, somewhere in London. Ten quid would act as a nice present. But I don't know her address."

"It's a good thing you don't!" said Church.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we don't want you to send all that ten quid to your sister—we're entitled to our share of it," declared Church firmly. "I reckon it ought to be split up evenly, if you ask me."

"I've got a better idea than that," put in McClure. "We can reckon that we've gained the honour for the Remove, and I think it would be pretty decent if we used the tenner to stand the Form a terrific feed. Do you agree?"

"I'm game," said Church.

"Oh, well, of course it's up to me to fall into line," said Handforth. "I suppose it's the best way to spend the money—there can't be any jealousy, anyhow. At the same time, I wish I knew where my sister was. Since she ran away and got married against the pater's wish I haven't seen a sign of her."

"Oh, you'll see her one day," said Church. "Come on in."

They had reached the Remove dormitory, and the juniors gave them a terrific reception—particularly when they heard that the whole Form was to be treated to a feed. Handforth was not chipped any longer, but praised in the most generous terms.

"I reckon you did the trick wonderfully, Handy—absolutely wonderfully," declared Hubbard enthusiastically.

"Where do you reckon you'll hold the feed to-morrow—in the Common-room or in the lecture hall?"

"Oh, anywhere," said Handforth. "I think it would be a pretty good idea to have a picnic on the river—at tea-time. It'll be a bit of a novelty, and we shall all enjoy ourselves just the same."

"Yes, rather! Good wheeze!"

The juniors quite agreed upon the suggestion. But discussion was soon put to an end by the arrival of the prefects.

And once more the Remove went to its slumbers.

Meanwhile, Mr. Clement Heath was sitting in his bedroom.

The Remove master was fully dressed, and he was seated under the electric light, gazing intently and earnestly at the peculiar stone he had found under the tree in Bellton Wood.

The more he looked at it, the more certain he was that the stone was a diamond. It was a diamond, too, of singularly fine purity and colour. Mr. Heath was not entirely ignorant of such matters, and he was feverish with excitement as he went to bed that night—or, rather, in the early morning.

He considered that the diamond—if such it actually was—was worth at least ten or fifteen thousand pounds, even allowing for flaws! And such a sum to a mere undermaster was positively staggering.

Mr. Heath had not said a word to anybody in the school—he had no intention of saying a word. For, to tell the truth, he was almost afraid to ask advice. He decided to wait till the morrow before he took any action—and perhaps longer.

It was quite certain, however, that fresh developments were soon to occur—developments in which the mysterious Comte de Plessigny would be deeply involved!

THE END.


TO MY READERS.

MR. CLEMENT HEATH'S feelings must have been considerably elated when he discovered that the curious piece of crystal he had picked up in Bellton Wood was actually a diamond. Such a large and magnificent specimen of the most coveted of precious stones would be worth a fabulous sum. Fortune could not have favoured him at a more opportune time, as we shall see very soon. To most of us, the sudden acquisition of wealth comes as a great shock. We are at first childish in our paroxysms of joy; then overcome with an exaggerated ideal of our importance, both of which states of mind are extremely dangerous to our mental well-being. In the sanctity of his bedroom, poor Mr. Heath was thus afflicted during the first few days subsequent to his amazing discovery. He did not sleep at nights, for the wretched diamond became a source of acute anxiety to him. He came back to earth, however, when he realised the problem he had to face in disposing of the precious stone. He was utterly ignorant of such matters. Then it occurred to him that perhaps the diamond belonged to that strange individual, the Comte de Plessigny. But why should a naturalist carry about with him a diamond as big as a plover's egg? It seemed preposterous. Yet Heath was convinced that the comte was in some way connected with the diamond. So he decided to approach this gentleman on the matter, all about which you will read in *Next Week's story*: "**THE DIAMOND OF FATE!**"

THE EDITOR.

YOU CAN BEGIN READING THIS SPLENDID SERIAL TO-DAY!

Three Boys in Canada



by S.S. Gordon.

A Tale of Life and Adventure in the North-West.

INTRODUCTION.

JACK ROYCE, returned from Canada, has called to see his brother,

TEDDY ROYCE, a clerk in London. While the brothers are together, they are aroused by a loud summons at the door.

GERALD TELFORD has been set upon by roughs, and seeks assistance of the Royces. The roughs are driven off. Later, Gerald is informed by his guardian, Mr. Cardone, that the money which the lad was to inherit is lost, with the exception of £50. The three lads agree to try their luck in Canada. They set sail for Montreal, and eventually reach Winnipeg. Throughout the journey they are shadowed by a man named Obed Snaith, one of the ruffians who had attacked Gerald in London, and who is believed to be in the pay of Mr. Cardone. While in Winnipeg, the chums rescue a man, nicknamed the Mad Prospector, from ruffians. The man, however, dies of his injuries, but gives the lads a secret chart of a rich gold discovery. The three lads proceed to Medicine Hat, south of Alberta, and after some exciting times at St. Pierre, 150 miles further N.W., they are offered work in connection with the opening up of a new line from Edmonton, N.W. of the Rockies, through the Grand Cougar Pass, and touching Dead Breed Lake, which latter place, being in the vicinity of the Mad Prospector's gold mine, the three young adventurer's were in luck's way. The chart is stolen by Connell, a rascally cook and confederate of Snaith, and a scoundrel named Olesen. While shadowing the rogues, Teddy and Gerald are captured.

(Now read on.)

Connell Intervenes.

BUT he said nothing. He was trying to think of a way to get out of this predicament. Here they were, two ungrown lads, in the hands of three as choice ruffians as anyone could wish to meet in a lifetime. But neither was bound. Their captors had, they considered, rendered the lads sufficiently

helpless without requiring to tie them up. Gerald's hands and legs were free; so were Teddy's. But it did not look as though freedom of limb were going to be of much use to them.

Snaith aimed another kick at Gerald. Gerald was half able to avoid it. He writhed to one side, and the man's heavy boot missed his ribs this time and caught him instead on the shoulder.

"You cur!" shouted Gerald. "Look here, Johnson, or whatever your name is, if there's any sportsmanship in you, let me stand up to you, man to man, and tell your pals to keep away. If you want to put me out of the way, why not give me the chance to fight for my life on fair terms?"

Snaith laughed. But Teddy, who heard him, clapped his hands in approval. Gerald was plainly proving himself to be very much of a man out here in Canada. Jack Royce, too, had he been present, would have glowed with pride in his protegee. But Jack Royce was not there; and things did not look as though either Gerald Telford or Teddy Royce would ever see the big fellow again.

"Guess ye're askin' too much," said Snaith. "We want to make sure o' you, young man, and ye're a bit inclined to be slippery."

"Connell," shouted Gerald, addressing the cook to the survey party. "Perhaps you're not so bad as the others. Will you give me a chance for this youngster's life, anyhow? Just you keep the big Swede off, and I'll fight this fellow—to the death, if you like!"

Obed Snaith let out a wild roar of laughter.

"Snivelling now, are ye?" he said.

(Continued on page iii of cover.) D

"Whinin'! Your wonderful British pluck, I suppose! Why don't ye take your medicine like a man—eh?"

He pulled an ugly sheath-knife from his belt, and tried the point of it with his thumb. Then he reached down, and seized Gerald by the throat. Gerald shut his eyes, and Teddy gave out a loud yell of dread on his friend's behalf. The knife was raised.

But it did not fall. A surprising thing happened. Gerald, in begging the cook to give him a chance for his and Teddy's life, had asked the favour without much hope of its being granted. But, plainly, Connell was not quite the deep-dyed ruffian the other two were, for, before the knife could find its way into Gerald's throat, the cook gave a shout, jumped over the fire, and seized Obed Snaith by the wrist. He literally tore the knife out of Snaith's hand, and threw it away.

Then he gave Snaith a twist that sent the man to the ground in a shouting heap.

"Quit that!" Connell said sharply. "Say, I'm not a murderer, though I ain't particular in most things. I'm wanted, maybe, for some things, but I've never stood by an' seen cold-blooded killin' done, and I guess I ain't goin' to do it now!"

Snaith sat up, resting on his hands. He looked in amazement at the cook for a moment.

"Talkin' about lettin' 'em go back, then," he demanded, "after all they know?"

"Wal, they don't know a heap about me, except that I took that map from Jack Royce," said the cook. "You ain't goin' to kill 'em, anyhow. Say, try to again, and—wal, try, that's all!"

Snaith got to his feet. The knife the cook had torn out of his hand was lying not six feet away from him. He stooped quickly, picked the weapon up, then turned again on the cook. The expression in his face was venomous. His teeth were bared, and his eyebrows came down over his eyes savagely.

"Drop that knife, man!" said the cook.

"Goin' back on us, are ye?" snarled Snaith. "Wal, we got that chart from ye, so——"

He rushed at Connell, who dropped to one knee quickly. The knife flashed over the cook's shoulder, and did no damage. The next moment the two men were closed together in a fierce embrace.

"By Yumpiter!" roared the big Swede, and rushed forward towards the two combatants.

But he did not go far.

Teddy Royce had watched this unexpected intervention on the part of the cook—first with surprise, then with a hope dawning in his breast. He guessed instinctively now that the Swede was about to assist Snaith.

The boy was lying so that, by thrusting out his legs suddenly, he got them mixed up with Hank Olesen's. The Swede, always a slow-moving, clumsy giant of a man, was not quick enough to see Teddy's intention. He stumbled, gave a howl, and fell right into the blazing camp-fire. The leaping flames singed his yellow whiskers, they burned his hands, for his palms went down straight into the heart of the fire. He gave a wild yell, rolled clear, then pressed his hands under his armpits, writhing in pain, bawling like a branded bull.

And Teddy, always quick in the uptake, came to his feet, and, while Olesen lay there on his back, roaring in his pain, he sat down plump on the big man's stomach. And so heavily did he drop that the Swede's yells ended in a gurgling shriek.

The Swede struggled, and almost unseated Teddy in his effort.

"Gerald!" Teddy yelled. "Quick, man!"

Gerald scrambled to his feet, and crossed over to the assistance of his young chum. He also found a seat on the huge body of the Swede, and their combined weight served to keep the man prone.

They watched the fight that was in progress between Snaith and the cook. They saw the two men closed together in a bear-like grapple. Each man had his chin on the other's shoulder. Snaith had the knife; Connell had hold of the wrist of Snaith's knife hand. So they rocked and swayed together, while the Swede jerked himself spasmodically, to rid himself of the weight of the two lads.

It certainly was a very weird scene—those two men fighting in the heart of the wilds, by the flickering light of the camp-fire, while two boys sat on the chest of a big, wriggling man close by the same fire.

"Good chance to bunk now," said Teddy. "What about making a bolt for it?"

(To be continued.)

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