No. 275—Begins a Splendid New Series at St. Frank's!

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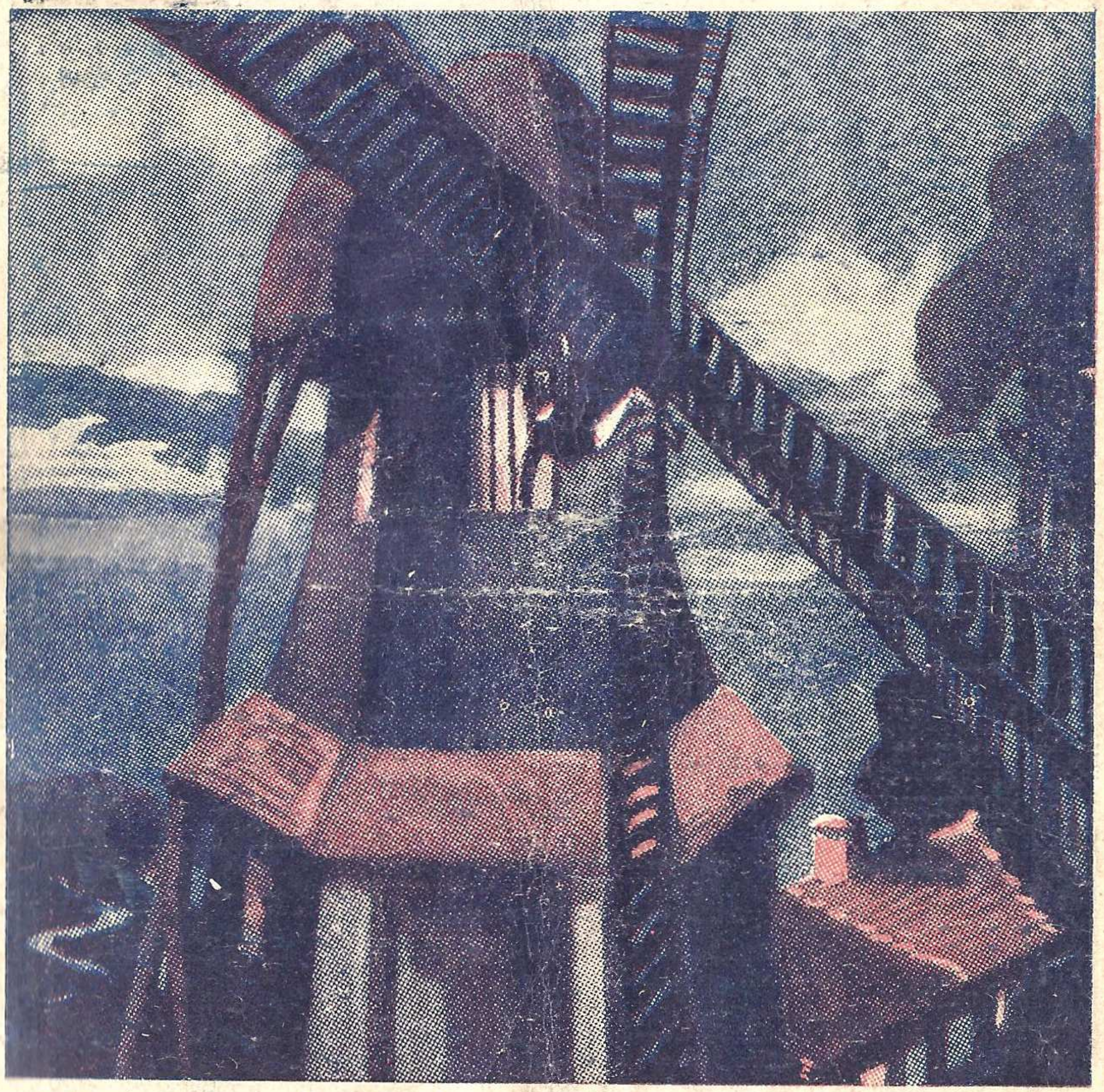

Nipper Investigates the Strange Room in the Old Mill.

THE STUDY OF MYSTERY.

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "The Battle of the Giants," "The Lake of Gold," "The Return of the Wanderers," etc.

September 11, 1920.

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

THE BOY FROM THE NORTH.

"WHY?" said Handforth fiercely.

"That's the question: why?"

"Eh?"

"Why what, you silly ass?"

Church and McClure stared across the tea-table at their famous leader, and they found that Edward Oswald Handforth was leaning forward, and he was looking at them in a very intent manner. It was quite obvious that Handforth had something important on his mind.

"That's the question: why?" he repeated. "If you can give me an answer to it, my sons, I shall be obliged."

"Oh, certainly!" said Church. "We'll give you any old answer you like, Handy. But, before we begin, don't you think it would be just as well if you told us what the question is?"

Handforth glared.

"You want to know what the question is?" he snapped. "Don't you know? Isn't it the question that's being talked about up and down the whole Remove? You know as well as I do that Goodwin is acting the goat, and, what's more, he's a jolly mysterious fellow. We're not going to stand it in the Remove—at least, I'm not!"

"Oh! So that's the trouble!" said McClure, stirring his tea. "My dear old Handy, there's no sense in making a fuss about Goodwin. He's a new chap, and he's got some peculiar ways, but there's no reason why we should get excited about him. You might pass me the tea-cakes, please."

Handforth jerked the dish of tea-cakes across the table with such violence that they were upset upon the tablecloth. When Handy was very busy thinking about something he cared very little about eating or drinking. And, at the present moment, his own meal was quite neglected.

Study D, in the Remove passage at St. Frank's, was looking very much as usual. Handforth and Co. had only been back for a couple of days. They had, of course, been out to the Amazon with Lord Dorrimore's party, and they had returned to the old school several days after the term had commenced; but now they were getting settled down into their usual rut, and things were going along smoothly.

"Tea-cakes!" exclaimed Handforth tartly. "All you chaps can think about is feeding! You don't seem to realise that there is an important matter to be settled here, and it must be settled at once. It's all very well to let Goodwin go on as he's going on, but what does it mean? Why is he locked up in his own study, and why does he refuse to allow anybody to enter?"

"Goodness knows!" said Church.

"I should think the best thing would be to ask Goodwin," remarked McClure.

"You—you silly ass!" roared Hand-

forth. "What on earth's the good of asking Goodwin? We've all asked him. We've been asking him until we're fed-up with him. He won't say a thing. He won't open his giddy mouth. And there he is in the end study, bottled up there, with a yale lock on the door, and with frosted windows and heavy shutters! His study is just like Bluebeard's chamber!"

Church nodded.

"I'll admit it's a bit of a mystery," he said. "Personally, I can't make out what it means at all. For a junior to have a study like that is a bit steep, you know. And the best part of it is, the Head has sanctioned it. In fact, Dr. Stafford gave Goodwin permission to lock himself in his study, and everybody else in the Remove is forbidden to enter. Some of the chaps are getting quite ratty about it—you, for example!"

"Yes, I am ratty—jolly ratty!" said Handforth. "In fact, I'm not going to stand it! I don't see any reason why the Remove should stand it, if it comes to that. We don't have secrets here, and we're not going to allow Dick Goodwin to bottle himself up in this way; and to act the giddy ox generally. Directly after tea I'm going along to his study, and I'm going to force my way in."

Church shook his head.

"I shouldn't do it if I were you, Handy," he said, looking grave.

"Why not?"

"Because you'll only get yourself into trouble," said Church. "You know as well as I do that the Head has given Goodwin permission to lock himself in his own study, and everybody else has been forbidden to go into that study. Therefore, if you go charging along, and force your way into Goodwin's room, you'll simply be defying the Head's orders, and you'll get it in the neck."

Handforth glared.

"You—you silly ass!" he said pityingly. "Do you think I care anything about orders? Do you think I care a rap about rules? When I decide upon a certain course of action, I carry out that action, and I say rats to everybody. I know what I'm going to do, and I mean to do it!"

"Yes; but look here——"

"I don't want any arguments from you, Walter Church!" snapped Handforth. "I maintain that we, as members of the Remove, ought not to stand this behaviour on Goodwin's part. It's not the thing. I'm against it all along the line, and I'm going to show my disapproval this evening."

"And I suppose the Head will show his disapproval by hauling you off to his study and lamming into you with a birch!" said McClure. "Still, it's your lookout, and if you get it in the neck—or elsewhere—it will be your own fault. Don't blame us!"

Handforth laid down a slice of bread-and-butter as he was conveying it to his mouth.

"What's that?" he said sharply. "I shall get it in the neck? I shall be lammed by a birch?"

"Most probably."

"And what about you?" demanded Handforth. "Am I going to be lammed, and are you going to get off scot-free? If I'm hauled over the coals, my sons, you'll be hauled over them with me. Don't forget that!"

McClure looked surprised.

"But why should we be hauled over the coals?" he asked. "Simply because you force your way into Goodwin's study it doesn't mean to say that we shall be punished. We sha'n't be there! We shall be——"

"You—you won't be there!" bellowed Handforth. "Oh, so that's the game! You intend to let me do this thing on my own! You mean to let me do the dirty work!"

"Well, it's your own choice."

"That doesn't make any difference—not a ha'-porth of difference!" declared Handforth. "If I go to Goodwin's study, you'll come with me. We're in this thing together. I'm not going to allow you rotters to desert your leader in his hour of need. Study D always sticks together, and it will stick together on this occasion!"

Church and McClure exchanged glances.

"Yes, but look here, Handy! I don't see the sense of this!" protested Church. "I don't see that we should be dragged into this when we don't want to be! We're not your slaves! We're not supposed to take orders!"

"And you're not supposed to take this, but you've got it!" retorted Handforth grimly.

Biff!

His huge fist reached across the table, and it landed squarely upon Church's nose.

"Yarroooh!" howled Church wildly. "Ouch! Ow—wow!"

Church disappeared backwards, his chair toppling over with a crash, and the unfortunate junior sprawled on the floor, with his cup of tea overturned in his lap. He sat up, looking dazed and bewildered.

"You—you dangerous lunatic!" he gasped.

"Eh? What's that?" said Handforth curtly.

"Nun-nothing!" said Church, staggering to his feet. "At the same time, I think you might be a little more careful with your fists, Handy. What was the idea of landing out like that?"

"It was just to prove to you that you sometimes get something that you don't want," said Handforth calmly. "And if I have any more of your nonsense, I'll give you another biff. It's all arranged that we shall go to Goodwin's study together, and if he won't let us walk in, we're going to force our way in! Is that understood?"

"Oh, quite!" said McClure promptly.

He thought it was just as well to agree. With Handforth in his present mood, he was capable of landing out without warning, and McClure had no desire to share the fate of his chum. Getting into a row with the Head was not quite so bad as accepting promiscuous punches from Handforth. So Church and McClure decided to choose the lesser of two evils, and they elected to go with Handforth on his mission of inquisitiveness.

For that is what it really amounted to. There was really no reason why the chums of Study D should be so curious concerning Dick Goodwin, the new boy. But Handforth had made up his mind, and there was nothing more to be said. Handforth was not usually an inquisitive youth. But when he got a fixed idea into his head, sledgehammers would not be able to drive it out, and in this present case he was particularly determined to find out why Goodwin was acting so mysteriously.

But Handforth was not alone in that wish. The majority of the fellows in the Remove, to tell the truth, were very keen upon having a look inside that study. But Dr. Stafford himself had given orders that nobody was to bother Goodwin, and that he was to be left entirely to himself during his leisure hours. Any attempt to interfere with him would be at once reported, and the culprits would be severely punished.

But why was this?

Personally, I was decidedly puzzled. I had not been long at St. Frank's for the new term, for I had returned with all the others after our trip from Brazil. A good many of us had been on that holiday adventure, which I have already set down in full detail, and the fellows at St. Frank's were just beginning to give us a little rest.

At first, they had plied us with hundreds of questions regarding our adventures in the unknown regions beyond the Amazon. But now, after we had supplied practically all the information we could, we were being left alone.

And we were thankful for it, for we were all fed-up with giving repeated descriptions of our trials and troubles and excitements.

The only fellow who was still as keen as ever upon recounting the tale was Timothy Tucker, of the Remove. And that peculiar youth was delivering a series of lectures, one every other evening, and these lectures were quite well attended, for T. T., when it came to speech-making, was the real goods.

With regard to Dick Goodwin, we were all very puzzled. We had found the new boy already installed when we arrived. He came from the North—Lancashire, I believe—and he had the end study in the Remove passage completely to himself.

This was not particularly surprising in its own way, for there were two or three juniors in the Remove who had studies to themselves. But Goodwin was different. As two or three of the fellows had declared, he had converted his study into a kind of Bluebeard's chamber, and nobody was permitted to enter. Nobody could take a glimpse into that mysterious apartment. What lay within, we did not know, and Goodwin himself was absolutely reticent.

I had seen very little of him, but I judged him to be quite a good fellow, although quiet and reserved in his manner. He spent nearly all his spare time in his study. As soon as lessons were over, he would disappear, and then he would only come out at meal times. Practically all the evening, when he was not doing his preparation, he was busy in that study.

Busy at what?

This was the question which interested

us all, and to which we required an answer. Not that we were likely to get one. Dick Goodwin appeared to keep his secret well, and he would not allow anybody to question him. At least, he would give them no satisfaction if they did question him.

His study was fitted with a patent lock, and just inside the door a strong screen was placed. Thus, even when the door was opened, it was impossible for curious juniors to see into the apartment itself. The window was extra strong, and the ordinary glass had been taken out and frosted glass substituted, and at night there were thick shutters which entirely enclosed the new boy in his apartment of mystery.

At first many of the juniors had been indignant, and they had attempted to storm the study, with the result that they were surprised by Fenton of the Sixth, and they were all reported to the Housemaster. Liberal impositions were distributed, and after that the fellows were not quite so keen.

The majority, in fact, had half given it up, and they were content to let Dick Goodwin go his own way unmolested. But Edward Oswald Handforth was not one of these. He was grimly determined to find out the truth, and he did not worry himself about any possible punishment that would follow. After he had been in Goodwin's study his curosity would be satisfied, but he would probably not be satisfied in another respect, for he would certainly be hauled before the Head.

And Church and McClure, with inward alarm, realised that they would probably share Handforth's fate. It was quite useless to argue with him. It was far better to agree, and to leave the matter to chance. Possibly they would be able to get out of the affair when the actual time came. But Church, who was anxious to put off the evil hour, had a suggestion to make, and he made it.

"Look here, Handy!" he said, as he stirred his tea thoughtfully. "This idea of yours is not so bad. I think we ought to know what Dick Goodwin is doing in his study. But we might be able to improve upon it."

"Oh indeed!" said Handforth grimly. "You have the nerve to suggest that you can improve on my wheeze?"

"Well, not exactly improve on it," said Church diplomatically. "My idea is this, Handy: why not wait until we've been down in the common-room after tea. Then we'll have a talk to the other chaps——"

"What's the good of talking to them?"

"I'll explain," went on Church. "It's this way: there's rather a feeling in the Remove that Goodwin has got a tremendous nerve to have a study to himself, and to lock himself in it as he does. If we can only put it to the chaps in the right way we shall probably get a good many followers. Then, instead of three of us charging into the study, we can have a whole crowd, and then success will be absolutely assured. If there are ten or twelve of us butting into Goodwin's study, we shall be almost certain of victory; and when it comes to punishment, it won't be so heavy. The Head can't punish twelve of us as he would three. Don't you see the idea?"

Handforth nodded slowly.

"Well, it's not so bad!" he admitted grudgingly. "As a matter of fact, I was going to suggest something of the sort myself, only you took the words out of my mouth."

"Then it's a decent scheme?"

"Yes; I think we'll adopt it," said Handforth. "That idea of getting a dozen fellows is rather good, you know. If Goodwin won't let us in, we'll jolly well force our way in. He won't be able to hold back a dozen of us, will he?"

"Hardly!" said McClure, who was freezing on to Church's idea. "We'll wait until all the chaps are in the common-room, and then we'll put it to them. After that, we'll go along the passage, and we'll get busy on the job."

"Exactly!" said Handforth, rubbing his hands. "We'll teach this silly ass to lock himself in his own study—we'll teach him to have secrets from us!"

He was quite satisfied, and so were Church and McClure, for they now saw quite clearly that it would be possible for them to escape out of the consequences. By remaining on the outskirts of the crowd, it would be just possible for them to vanish if a prefect or a master appeared on the scene. The other juniors would vanish also, leaving Handforth with full possession of the field. That was just the wheeze, and it was gratifying to Church to find that Handforth had agreed to it so promptly.

As soon as tea was over, Handforth wanted to hurry away to the common

room, in order to get the thing in train. But Church and McClure declared that it would be far better to get their preparation done, for they considered that any delay was favourable. They pointed out that hardly anybody would be in the common room so early, and Handforth at last agreed.

And so, for the next hour, the chums of Study D were busy at their prep. And at last it was finished, and then Handforth rose with a sigh of satisfaction. It was good to feel that all work was done for the evening, and that the rest of the time was his own.

"You chaps ready?" he asked briskly.

"Just done," said Church.

"Ready for what?" asked McClure, putting his books away.

"For what?" repeated Handforth. "Why, you ass, you know jolly well that we're going into the common room ——"

"Oh, yes!" said McClure. "About Goodwin, you mean? The common room ought to be well filled by this time."

The trio left their study shortly afterwards, went down the Remove passage, and then entered the common room. As McClure had said, that apartment was well filled. At least half the Remove was present, standing in groups, chatting about the football, discussing the recent Amazon trip, and all manner of other things. I was there with Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson. And the very instant Handforth entered the room, I knew he had something on his mighty brain.

"Hush!" I exclaimed, holding up my hand. "Hush, you chaps!"

"What have we got to hush for?" asked Reginald Pitt.

"Can't you see Handforth's face?" I inquired. "Can't you see those lines on his forehead? Can't you see the deep, thoughtful expression in his eyes? I can detect that the one and only Handforth has been thinking deeply, and he has come to a momentous decision. There is something on the board, and we must give Handforth our full attention."

"Blow Handforth!" said De Valerie. "We don't want to hear any of his rot ——"

"Any of his what?" interrupted Handforth grimly.

"I didn't say 'what'—I said 'rot'!" said De Valerie.

"You'd better say it again—that's all!" declared Handforth grimly. "I'm not going to stand any of your nonsense, my son—and I'm not going to stand any of anybody's nonsense! I've come here to talk about Goodwin."

"Oh, give him a rest!" said Augustus Hart. "We've all been talking about Goodwin during this last two or three days. He's a bit of a mystery, and his study is an even greater mystery. But there's no reason why we should worry our heads about him——"

"Isn't there?" said Handforth. "I think there's every reason. There's not another fellow in the Remove who has secrets like this chap Goodwin. It's not right—it's not to be expected that we shall stand it. We're not going to stand it—and, what's more, we're going to act. I'm going to put my foot down!"

Hart looked at Handforth's extremities with a thoughtful expression on his face.

"Then somebody is going to get hurt!" he remarked, shaking his head.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I shouldn't put your foot down all in one go, if I were you, Handy!" went on Hart. "They're rather large, you know, and you might do some damage ——"

"If I have any more of your rot, I'll do some damage to your nose!" roared Handforth. "Now, about Goodwin ——"

"Well, what about him?" inquired a voice from the door.

The juniors turned, and then they saw that Dick Goodwin himself had just entered the common room. An immediate hush fell over the juniors, and Handforth stared at the new-comer with genuine pleasure. He was feeling just in the right mood to deal with the new boy. Goodwin was a well-built young fellow, and he had auburn hair, which several unkind juniors called ginger, and his face was rather freckled.

It was somewhat astonishing for him to visit the common room. This was the very first occasion he had been here, for, hitherto, he had always remained locked in his own room, safe from prying eyes, and everybody regarded him with curiosity.

"Just the chap I wanted to see!" said Handforth, moving forward, with his hands stuck deeply into his trousers pockets. "Your name's Goodwin, I think—Dick Goodwin?"

"Ah!" said the new boy, nodding.

"What?" exclaimed Handforth. "What do you mean by that?"

"I was just agreeing—that's all!" said Goodwin calmly.

"He meant 'Yes,' Handy!" I grinned. "A lot of people in Lancashire say 'Ah' instead of 'Yes.' You ought to know that!"

"Well, I don't know it. And I don't see any reason why this chap can't use proper English," said Handforth. "But we'll let that pass. Now, look here, Goodwin, I want to ask you some questions."

"I'm not preventing thee," said Goodwin. "What is it you want to ask? I'll try to oblige you all I can, but I may not be able to answer——"

"You've got to answer—so there's a settlement to that!" interrupted Handforth firmly. "To begin with, what's the idea of having a patent lock fitted on your study door?"

"The idea?"

"Yes!"

"Well, the chief idea in fitting a lock to a door is to make the door secure!" said Goodwin smoothly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You funny ass!" snorted Handforth. "When you came to St. Frank's, did you think you'd be able to do as you liked?"

"Ah, I did that!" said Goodwin, nodding.

"Well, you can't!" snapped Handforth. "So you'd better get that idea out of your head at once. And you've got to open your study door, and let all the Remove fellows——"

"Ay, that's good!" interrupted Goodwin. "By gum! That's really good! I've got to let you in?"

"Yes, you have!"

"And whose orders are these?"

"My orders—the Remove's orders!" said Handforth. "We're just about fed up with this secrecy of yours, and we're not going to stand it any longer. You've got to lead the way out of this common room, and you've got to——"

"Ay, lad, but there seems to be a lot of 'got' about it!" interrupted Goodwin calmly. "I thought, maybe, that I should have something to say in the matter. That study is mine, tha' knows!"

"Whether it's your study, or whether it isn't—it doesn't make any difference," said Handforth. "Tell me this—do you like St. Frank's?"

"Ah, I do that!" replied Goodwin promptly.

"Then you'd better understand that if you want to continue to like St. Frank's, you'll have to conform to the rules of the Remove."

"Ay, but I didn't know I was doing anything else," said Goodwin. "I haven't broken any rules——"

"Not the written rules, you ass! Not the rules made by the Head, and by other masters!" put in Handforth. "I mean the unwritten rules—the rules which we set out. And it isn't considered the thing for a fellow to lock himself in his own study, and to refuse admittance to anybody else. You mustn't do those things at St. Frank's. Are you going to admit us to your study willingly, or shall we force our way in?"

Dick Goodwin shook his head.

"Ay, lad, but you're really funny!" he remarked, smiling. "I'm quite satisfied with St. Frank's—it's a gradely place enough, and I'm content and happy here."

"You won't be content and happy for long, if you don't do what I tell you!" said Handforth grimly.

"Oh, leave him alone, Handy!" put in Pitt.

"Rats! I'm going to have my own way!" declared Handforth. "Now, look here, Goodwin, what have you got in that study?"

"I've got all sorts of things!" said Goodwin.

"Chairs and furniture, I suppose?"

"Ah!"

"Bookcases and lesson books?"

"Ah, I have that!"

"But what else have you got?" demanded Handforth pointedly. "There's no reason why you should prevent us from seeing books, and furniture, and all that sort of thing. What is there in there that you won't let us see?"

Dick Goodwin looked somewhat amused.

"I have got a patent lock on my door, and there is a screen just inside the study," he exclaimed. "And, maybe you have seen that the windows are of frosted glass. Have you noticed these things?"

"Of course we have noticed them, you ass!" said Handforth impatiently. "Well?"

"Is it necessary for me to say any more?" asked Goodwin. "When a fellow puts a lock on his door, and has

his windows frosted, it stands to reason that he wants to be private. I want to be private—that's why I have taken these precautions. Perhaps there are things in my study that I don't want you to see. In any case I am afraid I cannot allow you to enter—so there is no sense in continuing the discussion, is there?"

And Goodwin, amid the chuckles of the other juniors, calmly walked to the door, and disappeared out of the common room. Handforth glared after him, and then, with a roar of wrath, raced across the room on Goodwin's trail. But at this very moment Morrow of the Sixth appeared in the doorway, and Handforth blundered right into the prefect's arms.

CHAPTER II.

NOT QUITE A SUCCESS.

MORROW gave a little gasp as Handforth charged into him.

"You clumsy young ass!" exclaimed the prefect. "What is the idea of rushing about like that? Just a moment—hold still!"

"Look here, Morrow, I'm in a hurry!" protested Handforth, as Morrow grasped his collar. "Lemme go!"

"Not yet!" said the prefect grimly. "Goodwin's just left this room, and I have every reason to believe that you have been asking him questions concerning his study. Now, look here, Handforth, it won't do. The Head has given orders that nobody is to pry into Goodwin's affairs, and if you intend to bother the new fellow, you will get yourself into trouble."

"But I don't see that it is right——"

"It doesn't matter whether you see it or not, my son," interrupted Morrow. "When Dr. Stafford gives orders, they must be complied with. I've given you a warning, and you had better heed it!"

Morrow retired from the common room, and Handforth glared at the door as it was closed. Then he turned round, his eyes gleaming and his face flushed.

"Well, are we going to stand it?" he demanded heatedly.

"It seems to me that we are compelled to, my son!" I grinned. "Why can't you leave Goodwin alone? He's a peaceable fellow, and there is no reason why we should bother him like this. Let him bottle himself in his own study if he wants to. It's no concern of ours, after all!"

"Dear old boy, that is exactly what I think," put in Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "I have a perfect horror of buttin' my nose into somethin' which does not concern me. It isn't good form—it isn't, really. It would be simply appallin' if we——"

"That's all rot!" interrupted Handforth. "In a matter of this kind the Remove ought to stick together. Here is this new chap—a new kid, mark you!—here he is, occupying a study all to himself, and locking himself in. A fine state of affairs! I intend to go along to his study now, and I mean to demand admittance. How many of you fellows will back me up?"

Nobody answered.

"You—you miserable set of rotters!" said Handforth sourly. "Well, I know I've got Church and McClure on my side, at least. If any of you other chaps won't come along, we'll go by ourselves."

"Oh, we'll come along, Handy," said Pitt obligingly. "There's no reason why we shouldn't be in this little affair. We'll come along, and see you force your way into Goodwin's study. And I dare say a good many other fellows will accompany us."

About twenty juniors stated their willingness, and Handforth looked pleased. He did not quite realise that his leg was being pulled—that most of the juniors had every intention of remaining well in the background—merely spectators. Then, if a master happened to come along at the wrong moment, they could easily slip away from the scene of danger.

"Good!" said Handforth. "I thought you wouldn't turn out to be such weak-kneed bounders. Come on—follow me!"

The fellows grinned, and they followed Handforth out of the common room in a body. Handforth was quite determined. If Goodwin refused to admit the party into his study, Handforth was quite prepared to force his way in—even to go to the length of breaking down the door, if necessary. When Handforth really started on the track, there was no stopping him.

"Do you agree with this, old boy?" asked Sir Montie, looking at me.

I grinned.

"My dear Montie, it's not much good disagreeing," I remarked. "Handforth seems to be looking for trouble—and it is quite certain that he will find more than he wants. We might just as well go along and see the fun, although we shall remain well in the background. I don't quite believe in this business. I don't see why we should be curious concerning Goodwin. If he likes to lock himself in his own study, it is his own business, and not ours."

"Exactly!" said Tommy Watson.

The other fellows had gone on, and we could hear them marching along the passage ahead of us. We were just about to turn out of the lobby, and to follow the crowd, when we observed a somewhat curious figure entering from the Triangle. The figure was that of a man, attired in a long overcoat, and a bowler hat. The gentleman in question possessed round shoulders, and his legs were not exactly straight; they were, in fact, bowed to a considerable extent, and the man had other peculiarities. His face was clean-shaven, and it was long and wore a look of forlorn dejection. It was an extremely gloomy countenance, and not a soul at St. Frank's had ever seen it in any other condition.

We had seen the man several times before, for he was employed at the school—in the Ancient House. He had come with the beginning of the new term, and his job was somewhere down in the domestic quarters.

"Hallo! Here's old Cuttle!" murmured Tommy Watson. "I wonder if we can make him smile? Timothy Tucker was talking to Cuttle for about ten minutes yesterday, and he didn't smile once—and that's about a record, I think. Tucker makes everybody grin; but Mr. Josh Cuttle was born gloomy, I believe."

We strolled over to the bow-legged man, and he paused in front of us, giving us a look of absolute misery.

"Good evening, Cuttle!" I exclaimed cheerily.

Mr. Cuttle shook his head, and rolled his eyes.

"There was clouds in the sky!" he said in a deep, rumbling voice. "There was clouds in the sky, and there was a wind. Why was there clouds in the sky? Ask me! Because there was going to be rain. There was going to be storms!"

"That's cheerful!" I exclaimed. "I was hoping that we should have fine weather to-morrow."

"There was fine weather in the Pacific Islands," said Mr. Cuttle solemnly. "But there was no fine weather in England. This was not the country for fine weather. Ask me? My rheumatiz was bad, it will get worse."

"I hope not, Mr. Cuttle," I said. "It's always better to look on the bright side, you know. Your rheumatism may improve——"

"There was them as look on the bright side, and there was them as look on the dark side," said Mr. Cuttle. "The bright side was never no good to a soul. Why wasn't it good? Ask me! Because it was always better to be prepared for the worst!"

Mr. Cuttle eyed us with gloomy disapproval.

"You boys was looking healthy," he remarked. "You was looking in the best of spirits. That's bad. Why was it bad? Ask me! Because it ain't good for boys to look healthy and in good spirits. Boys was allus up to mischief when they was healthy. And mischief was no good to other folks. Boys was better in bed!"

I chuckled.

"I'm sorry I can't share your opinion, Mr. Cuttle," I grinned. "I'd much prefer to be healthy, thank you. I don't think there's a single inhabitant in the sanitorium—and that means that we're starting the term well."

Mr. Josh Cuttle almost groaned.

"There was not a soul in the sanatorium!" he exclaimed dolefully. "That was bad, young gent. There was no doctor coming to St. Frank's. Why was there no doctor coming? Ask me! Because no doctor wasn't necessary—seeing that all the boys was well. It was bad—very bad!"

"I must remark that you are frightfully cheerful!" said Sir Montie Tregellis-West, adjusting his pince-nez, and eyeing Mr. Cuttle curiously. "Don't you ever feel cheerful, dear old fellow? Don't you ever feel that you would like to smile?"

Mr. Cuttle turned his melancholy eyes upon Sir Montie.

"And what was there to make a man cheerful?" he demanded, in his deep voice. "Was there anything in the newspapers to make a man cheerful?

Ask me! There was not! There was no murders in the papers—there was no scandals. There was no railway disasters, and there was no ships sunk at sea. Can a man feel cheerful when there was no cheerful news to read?"

"My only hat!" grinned Watson. "Do you call reading about murders and wrecks at sea, cheerful?"

"Times was changed!" said Mr. Cuttle reminiscently. "I was happy during the war, but I was not happy since. Ask me! There was air raids, and there was battles at sea, and there was battles over in Flanders, and there was explosions."

Just for a moment a little gleam came into Mr. Cuttle's eyes—a gleam which almost denoted pleasure, and he came very nearly to the point of smiling. But then his solemn expression became more pronounced than ever, and he entirely surrounded himself with an air of gloom.

"Them times was gone!" he exclaimed. "I don't suppose I shall see such times agin in my life. But this winter will be a hard one—food was dear," he added, brightening up slightly. "Clothes was dear, boots was dear, and there was a great deal of unemployment. The outlook was bad. Why was it bad? Ask me! Because men without no employment was forced to go without food, and without good clothing. Kids was bound to starve. Yes, young gents, the outlook for the winter was awful! Mark my words, there was big trouble coming!"

And Mr. Cuttle, rubbing his hands together with an expression which denoted a kind of ghoulish satisfaction, passed out of the lobby, and along the passage. We looked after him, and then we grinned.

"Queer old bird!" exclaimed Tommy Watson.

"He's what one might call the super pessimist!" I grinned. "He only seems happy when everything is going wrong. If the school was burnt down to-night, I believe he'd stand out in the Triangle and rub his hands and grin! He might even do a dance!"

"Well, let's get along to Goodwin's study," said Watson. "Handy must be there by this time, and I don't want to miss the fun. There you are! Listen to that! I believe he's hammering on the door!"

Some unusual sounds had certainly come to our ears, and we lost no time in hastening along the Remove passage until we came to the far end, where the corridor was filled up with juniors, the majority of whom were standing by, watching.

Edward Oswald Handforth himself was at the door of Dick Goodwin's study, and he was hammering with a heavy fist upon the panels. Apparently he could get no reply.

"The silly ass!" grinned Reginald Pitt. "He'll only bring prefects on the scene by bashing away like that. Well, it's his own look-out. He seems to be scouting round for trouble, and it's pretty certain that he'll get some!"

"Yes, and he'll drag us into it if we're not careful!" said De Valerie. "We'd better be prepared to make a scoot for it, if necessary. The Head gave very strict orders about Goodwin, and he won't like it if we ignore him."

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Handforth hammered harder than ever.

"Open this door, you secretive rotter!" he shouted wrathfully. "If you think you're going to shut me out, you'll jolly well mistaken! I'll give you ten seconds to open the door!"

"And what's going to happen if the door isn't opened, Handy?" inquired Hart.

"What's going to happen?" roared Handforth. "Why, we're going to smash the door down?"

"Are we?" murmured Pitt. "It's the first I've known about it!"

"Four seconds lost!" shouted Handforth. "If this door isn't opened at once, you silly bounder, we're going to do some damage. No fellow is allowed to have secrets in the Remove, so you'd better——"

The door opened suddenly, and Dick Goodwin stood in the opening. He was looking quite calm, and he gazed at the crowd of juniors without emotion.

"I thought you would be sensible!" said Handforth triumphantly. "Stand aside, you ass! We're coming into this study, and we're going to have a look round. And if we find anything we don't approve of—well, we shall jolly soon do something!"

"Steady on, lad!" exclaimed Dick Goodwin quietly. "This study is private, and the headmaster has given orders that nobody is to force his way in, or to bother me."

"Have you any reason why we shouldn't see into your study?" demanded Handforth.

"Ay, I have that!" replied Goodwin.

"Well, it can't be an honest reason!" said Handforth. "No chap with a clear conscience would lock himself in his study, and would bar the window. We don't believe in that sort of thing in the Remove, and we're going to show you that it won't do, Goodwin. Stand aside, and let us pass in!"

"I'm afraid I can't——"

"Do you refuse?" bellowed Handforth.

"Ah, I do that!"

"Oh! So that's your giddy nerve, is it?" demanded Handforth. "All right, my son! I'll soon show you that I'm not going to be messed about with! Take that!"

Biff!

Handforth's fist shot out, and before Dick Goodwin could dodge, he received a somewhat violent blow upon the nose. He staggered back a couple of steps, and then sat down violently upon the floor. He had not been at St. Frank's quite long enough to learn to be very wary of Handforth's fists. Edward Oswald had a disconcerting habit of landing out without the slightest warning.

"Now's our chance!" roared Handy. "Come on, you fellows!"

Before Dick Gordon could get to his feet again, Handforth charged into the study, round the screen. Many of the other juniors gave a shout, and followed suit. They crowded into the study excitedly, their curiosity getting the better of their caution.

The majority of the fellows had previously decided that they would on no account follow Handforth into Dick Goodwin's study—for the consequences would be serious if they were discovered by a master. The Head had given very strict orders regarding the new boy's study, and the juniors did not feel inclined to take any unnecessary risks.

But now that the door was open, and Handforth had entered, the fellows forgot all their caution, and they swarmed in like so many flies.

Goodwin, seeing that it was quite impossible to stem the tide, stood well back, and allowed the fellows to enter. There was nothing else for him to do—and he accepted the situation with a good grace.

What the juniors expected to see they hardly knew; but, in any case, they were quite certain that they would find something of very unusual interest in the secret study—the study of mystery, as it was already called.

As soon as Handforth got into the room, he came to a standstill, and stared about. His eyes grew round, and an expression of positive disgust came into his face.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he exclaimed blankly.

He looked round, but he could see nothing whatever to arouse any suspicion. There was nothing to be seen which would account for the study been blocked, and the window being barred. It was, in fact, quite an ordinary study, although it was certainly rather well furnished.

In the very centre of the room stood a big table, covered completely with a rich tablecloth, its folds reaching to the floor on all sides. Upon this table were several books, a blotting-pad, an ink stand, pens, pencils, and so forth. Upon the blotting-pad stood an exercise-book—open, which clearly indicated that Dick Goodwin had been interrupted in the middle of his preparation.

On one side of the wall stood a well-built bookcase, nicely filled with volumes. On another side stood a cupboard, one door of which was partially open, revealing some crockery, and a portion of a cake. A large travelling trunk stood in one corner, and on the other side of the room there was rather a massive oak bureau.

But this was nothing; there was not a single thing here to arouse any curiosity or interest!

This furniture might have been in any study—in fact, there were quite a number of juniors who really had better furniture than Goodwin's. The Hon. Douglas Singleton, for example, lived in a state of positive luxury, and so did the Duke of Somerton.

The juniors stood there, staring round, and looking rather amazed. After expecting so see all sorts of curious things, they were staggered to find that there was nothing whatever out of the ordinary in Goodwin's study.

"Satisfied?" inquired a voice from the doorway.

It was Dick Goodwin's voice, and he spoke in rather an amused tone. Handforth glared across at him.

"You—you giddy spoofer!" he exclaimed wrathfully.

"Ay, lad, I don't quite see——"

"You awful fraud!" went on Handforth. "We thought you'd got all sorts of queer things in this study, and there's nothing in it at all—nothing but some bits of furniture just as we might see in any giddy study!"

"What did you expect to find?" asked the new fellow.

"We didn't know what to expect, to tell the truth," said Owen major. "But we thought there was something queer about the place, and we find that we're mistaken. Personally, I apologise, Goodwin, and I hope you'll forgive the intrusion. Come on, you chaps! We'll get outside!"

"Half a minute!" exclaimed Handforth. "I want an explanation of this. I want to know why Goodwin has locked himself up in a replica of Bluebeard's chamber, and why there's nothing interesting to be seen. I call it a swindle!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's a fraud!" declared Handforth warmly. "There's nothing mysterious in this study at all!"

"I'm awfully sorry!" exclaimed Goodwin. "If you would like it, Handforth, I will have things all ready for you on another occasion. I'll fake up some dark corners, and possibly a few skeletons, and——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, let's get out!" said Hubbard. "We shall only find ourselves in trouble if we're spotted——"

"Cave!" came a husky whisper from the doorway.

There was a rush, and the juniors charged out into the passage, helter-skelter, Handforth being last, and moving more sedately. He did not see any reason why he should forsake his dignity by running.

"Stop—stop at once!" exclaimed a sharp voice. "I command you to stop, boys! What is the meaning of this disturbance?"

The juniors came to a halt, rather dismayed, for the voice was that of Mr. Crowell, the Remove master, and Mr. Crowell stood there, looking grim and rather angry. He had certainly caught the intruders red-handed.

"Oh, indeed!" exclaimed the Remove master. "It is quite obvious to me that you have been forcing your presence upon Goodwin. You have, in fact, invaded his study against his own desires. Who is responsible for this gross disregard of the headmaster's orders?"

Nobody answered, and then Mr. Crowell's eyes fell upon Handforth.

"Oh, I think I am beginning to understand!" said the Remove master grimly. "Handforth, I presume that you are the leader of this escapade? I take it that you are the ringleader?"

Handforth shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, I don't want to get the other chaps into trouble, sir," he said. "It was my doing all along. I hammered on Goodwin's door and demanded to be admitted——"

"One moment!" interrupted the master. "Why did you make the demand?"

"Because I wanted to see inside the room, sir."

"In order to satisfy your curiosity, I presume?"

"Well, it wasn't so much curiosity," argued Handforth. "I don't believe in a fellow locking himself in his own study——"

"It is hardly a question of what you believe in, Handforth," interrupted Mr. Crowell tartly. "The headmaster gave certain instructions, and every boy in the Remove knew what those instructions were. Yet, in spite of that fact, you think it necessary to come to Goodwin's door and demand admittance!"

"Well, you see, sir——"

"I do not see!" interrupted the Remove master. "I have no doubt that you used violence upon Goodwin, for I can discern distinct signs that the boy's face has been battered. Did you punch Goodwin on the nose, Handforth?"

Handforth sighed.

"I believe I gave him a tap, sir," he replied. "But, you see, the silly ass was obstinate—he wouldn't get out of the way when I told him to. So the only thing for me to do was to give him a biff, and that bowled him over!"

"I think I have heard quite sufficient, Handforth," said Mr. Crowell. "Your light tap, as you call it, was apparently sufficient to bowl Goodwin over. It is quite obvious to me, therefore, that you used considerable violence. Perhaps you will gain some satisfaction in writing me five hundred lines!"

"But—but——"

"I do not wish to argue, Handforth," said Mr. Crowell. "I shall require those

lines by to-morrow evening, and you will please see that they are written carefully and without your customary number of blots. The other boys will disperse at once."

"Ain't they going to get any lines, sir?" asked Handforth warmly.

"Since you have accepted all the blame, Handforth, it would not be just to punish the other boys," said Mr. Crowell. "Furthermore, it is extremely difficult for me to determine which boys entered Goodwin's study, and which did not. I know well enough that you are the chief culprit, and therefore you are punished. I hope this will be a lesson to you."

And Mr. Crowell walked down the passage, his gown rustling in the wind which he caused. Handforth glared after him, and then he glared at the grinning juniors.

"Not quite a success, eh?" chuckled Reginald Pitt. "Poor old Handy! Everything he touches—everything he attempts to do—goes wrong! Still, his curiosity is satisfied, and that's one thing!"

But if Handforth's curiosity was satisfied, Handforth was not!

CHAPTER III.

AFTER LIGHTS OUT.

FOR some reason or other, I awoke just as the school clock was chiming midnight.

I don't know what caused me to become aroused, but I lay in bed, fully awake, listening to the last chimes of the old clock. When they had died away everything was still, except for a faint breeze blowing against the window panes. The Remove dormitory was in total darkness, and everything was still.

I was just about to turn over, and to compose myself to sleep again, when I heard a light sound. It came from my left, and I lifted my head again, and stared into the gloom.

And now I discovered that it was not absolutely dark, but nearly so. There was a moon somewhere, hidden by clouds, but it sent out a dim, diffused light. And when my eyes grew accustomed to it, I found that I could look right down the dormitory, and just make out the forms of the various beds.

And then I gave a little start.

For there was someone on his feet—somebody getting dressed, in fact! I immediately thought of Fullwood and Co., guessing that they were perhaps intent upon going on a midnight visit to the White Harp, down in Bellton—for the Nuts of the Remove were sometimes in the habit of breaking bounds after lights out, in order to indulge in a little gambling.

But I knew that this boy could not be Fullwood or either of his two companions—for the rascals of Study A occupied beds in the very far corner of the dormitory—in quite the opposite direction to this bed.

I counted the beds, and then I discovered, with absolute certainty, that the boy who was quietly attiring himself was—Dick Goodwin!

This caused me to think. What was Dick Goodwin doing? Why was he getting dressed—and what could his reason be? For a new fellow to break bounds in the dead of night was almost unheard of—it was only the old hands who dared to go to such risks.

And yet here was Goodwin, the new boy in the Remove, calmly dressing himself with the obvious intention of venturing abroad—after midnight.

"This is strange!" I told myself. "There's something queer about it, and I mean to have a look into the affair. It's not really my business, but if Goodwin is acting the giddy goat, and if he is in danger of getting into trouble, I'll make it my business to give him a friendly word of advice."

However, I did not act immediately. I was rather curious to see what Goodwin intended doing. And, a moment later, he walked softly down the dormitory, and opened the door. Then he vanished out into the passage—closing the door behind him.

I was out of bed in about one second, and in the next second I was shaking the shoulder of Tregellis-West. He turned over in bed, half sat up, and blinked at me.

"Begad! What—what on earth——"

"It's only me, Montie," I whispered. "Rouse yourself, old man."

"Nipper, dear old boy!" exclaimed Montie. "Is anything the matter? You have quite startled me, begad!"

"No, there's nothing the matter, Montie!" I exclaimed. "But Dick Goodwin has just dressed himself and gone out of the dormitory——"

"By gad! That looks frightfully suspicious it does, really!" said Montie, in a concerned voice. "For a new fellow to go breakin' bounds after lights out is shockin'ly serious!"

"That's what I think—but he may not be breaking bounds, after all, Montie," I said. "I just want to see what he is doing, and so I'm going to follow him. If you like to slip something on, you can come down after me—and then we shall be together. I expect you'll find me downstairs, or, if you like, you can come at once—in your pyjamas!"

"Really, dear old boy, how frightfully absurd!" protested Montie, shocked at the very thought. "I really could not agree to venture out in the passages attired only in my pyjamas—I could not, really!"

"All right, then—buck up!"

I passed out of the room before Sir Montie could say any more, and I quickly made my way down the corridor to the head of the stairs. For some few moments I stood there, listening. But I could hear nothing suspicious—Dick Goodwin had completely vanished, and it was fairly obvious to me that he was not on the upper landing. He had gone downstairs for some reason, and he was downstairs now. Had he gone out of the house?

I crept downstairs cautiously.

And, when I arrived at the bottom, I paused again, and listened. But the lobby was quite deserted, and everything was dark and still. I moved forward, until I came to the opening of the Remove passage. Here I paused, and peered cautiously down.

It was a long, straight passage, with doors on either side—and Goodwin's study was situated right at the very end. In the gloom I could not see very distinctly, but there was a window down at the end, too, and a faint gleam of diffused moonlight was coming in through the glass. And then I stood stock still, all attention.

For I could see something.

I distinctly saw the figure of a boy—Goodwin, of course. He was outlined clearly against the window, and he stood there until another figure joined him—a taller figure, and apparently the figure of a man. And then faint voices came to my ears—whispers, but altogether too soft for me to distinguish. I only knew that the pair at the end of the passage were talking.

They did not remain in that position for long, but after two minutes they moved slightly aside, and then I heard a key inserted in a lock. After that there was a very faint sound of a closing door, and a faint gleam of light appeared near the flooring.

"Well, I'm blessed!" I murmured.

I knew the truth. Goodwin and his mysterious companion had entered the study, and they had switched the light on as soon as the door had been closed. The window, of course, was provided with shutters, which enclosed all light. Not a single gleam was allowed to escape to the Triangle.

I don't mind admitting I was very curious—that I wanted to find out more of this affair. I found myself asking all kinds of questions. Why had Goodwin come down, and what was he doing in his own study after midnight?

Who was the man he had met, and who had entered the study with him? What possible reason could they have for being down here at this hour, when all the others in the school were asleep?

It was certainly very mysterious, and it did not strike me as being exactly above board. Yet I could hardly think that Goodwin was the kind of fellow to do anything wrong. He had always struck me as being particularly upright and honest—and quite a decent fellow all round.

In any case, I moved cautiously forward—slipping along the passage until I arrived almost outside the door of Goodwin's study. I paused here, hardly liking to go further. I did not want to listen at the door. I did not want to play the part of an eavesdropper. This could hardly be called a piece of detective work, and I did not think that I should be justified in listening.

And so I stood there, rather undecided. And then a sound came to my ears—a kind of metallic tapping. It continued for a moment or two, ceased, and then went on again. These sounds came from within Goodwin's study, and I pursed my lips, decidedly puzzled.

According to what Handforth and the other juniors had seen, there was nothing whatever in that study to arouse

suspicions—there was nothing beyond the ordinary furniture which one would suppose to be in a study. How, therefore, did it come about that there was this tapping sound? What was it caused by, and what was Goodwin doing?

I suppose I remained quite still in this position for three or four minutes, and then I came to the conclusion that it would be better for me to go up to the dormitory at once, and get into bed again. This was none of my business, after all, and if Goodwin preferred to act in a strange way, it was is own concern. It was certainly not my duty to make any inquiries.

And so, at length, I moved forward, with the intention of returning straight to the dormitory. I reached the end of the passage all right, and was about to turn into the lobby when a most remarkable thing happened.

Two figures appeared out of the shadows—two big, powerful figures.

They pounced upon me before I could dodge back—before I could even be aware of their presence. And, the next second, I was on the floor, face downwards.

"The sack!" one of the shadows exclaimed, in a rough voice.

I knew then that the mysterious figures were men—and not merely juniors intent upon a jape. And, even while I was struggling, a hand was clapped over my mouth, to be almost immediately substituted for a thick scarf—which effectually gagged me. And then, while I attempted to fight, a thick sack was drawn over my head, and pulled tight at the waist, pinioning my hands to my sides, and making it almost impossible for me to struggle.

This was certainly an extraordinary development, and I was too amazed to think clearly—too choked with the dust which came up into my eyes and nose in clouds from the old sack. I was bewildered and rather alarmed. For I did not know what this could mean.

Why had these men captured me? Who were they, and how had they gained admittance into the school?

I knew well enough that there was something grim about it all. The very way in which I had been captured suggested that this had been a premeditated scheme—and that those men had been there waiting for me. Possibly they had intended coming up into the dormitory, but had seized the chance when I appeared in the lobby. It seemed that I had walked right into their arms very conveniently.

And I was not only alarmed, but I was angry. I was furious with myself for having been captured so easily—because I had made practically no attempts at struggling. I had been unable to do so. Both the men were big and strong, and I had had practically no chance of defending myself. The situation was most disconcerting—to say nothing of being mysterious in the extreme.

Coming on the top of Goodwin's queer movements, it seemed even more remarkable than it would have done. It appeared to me that a regular wave of mystery was passing over the school—over the Ancient House. I had come downstairs just to see what Goodwin was doing—and I had only succeeded in getting myself captured by two desperadoes.

And, with the sack tightly wrapped round me, I could do nothing. I could not even call for assistance, owing to the scarf which was bound round my mouth.

I felt myself being carried along—and then I recognised that I was pushed through an open window. Then, after that, I was taken across the Triangle—at least, I judged this to be the case, although I could see nothing.

I was quite sure that my surmise was correct a few moments later. For I felt myself being hoisted up, obviously over the school wall, in the road. I was allowed to drop, and I fell in a heap, among many weeds and clumps of thick grass.

Once in the road I was carried along for about two hundred yards, and then taken on to the grass which bordered the lane. Here, almost in the ditch, I was laid upon my back, and I heard the two men whispering together.

Meanwhile, Sir Montie Tregellis-West had not been idle.

His very first task was to awaken Tommy Watson, and this required some little doing, for Tommy was a sound sleeper, and he did not like being disturbed when he was right in the middle of a particularly interesting dream—as he appeared to be on this occasion. But he sat up at last in bed, blinked at Sir Montie in a somewhat irritable mood, and asked what the dickens was the matter.

"Dear old boy, Nipper has gone out of the dormitory, and we must follow him!" explained Sir Montie. "You see——"

"No, I don't see," growled Watson. "Lemme go to sleep, you ass!"

"But, Tommy boy, please listen——"

"If Nipper likes to go prowling about in the middle of the night—let him," said Watson, lying back on his pillow. "I don't see any reason why we should bother ourselves——"

"But pray let me finish, dear boy!" put in Sir Montie, grasping Tommy Watson by the shoulder. "You see, Goodwin went out first, and Nipper is very curious about Goodwin."

"Nipper shouldn't be curious," said Watson. "Curiosity isn't good for anybody. If Goodwin wants to break bounds, let him break bounds! There's no reason why we should get ourselves into trouble, or lose any of our sleep. We don't get any too much of it, as it is! The rising bell always goes about an hour too soon!"

Sir Montie sighed.

"I was thinkin' that it would be a rather good idea if we went out as soon as possible," he said patiently. "We shall probably find Nipper down below—and then he can tell us what he's seen, and all the rest of it. He particularly asked me to go, old boy, or I wouldn't bother. An' I thought you would like to be with us—seein' that we always stick together. What do you say?"

"I say that you get back into bed like a sensible chap!" said Tommy Watson promptly. "Then we can both get to sleep!"

"I'm seriously afraid that I cannot entertain that proposal, dear old fellow!" said Sir Montie. "I know well enough that it's shockin'ly bad form to be out of the dormitory after midnight. But in this case it is exceptional, and I fancy we are justified. Are you coming willin'ly or not?"

Tommy Watson grunted again.

"What do you mean—willingly?" he demanded.

"Well, dear old boy, if you do not feel inclined to get up of your own free will, I shall be compelled to use other methods," said Sir Montie firmly. "I intend that you shall come with me."

"You're not afraid of going alone, I suppose?" demanded Watson tartly.

Tregellis-West smiled.

"I shall not say anythin' regardin' that remark," he said. "I know that you cannot mean it, dear old boy!"

"No, I don't think you're afraid, Montie," said Watson. "At the same time, I'd rather stay in bed, thanks all the same!"

"I will give you exactly ten seconds, Tommy," said Sir Montie. "If you do not show any signs of showin' a leg by that time, I shall be forced to try other measures. I shall, in fact, produce a sponge filled with water—and I shall proceed to splash you!"

Tommy Watson groaned.

"You won't give me any rest!" he complained. "I suppose I shall have to get up—just to please you!"

"It will be by far the wiser course, Tommy boy," said Sir Montie.

Once out of bed, Watson was all right, and he was soon dressing himself with great rapidity—at least, he slipped on his trousers over his pyjamas, and then pulled on a jacket, finally enclosing his feet in a pair of slippers.

"That'll be enough," he said. "You ready, Montie?"

"I'm waitin' for you, dear boy!"

"Good! We'll get off at once, then," said Tommy. "Goodness knows what we're going for—or where we're going to! It's a dotty idea altogether, if you ask me—but it's no good arguing with a gatepost. Come on."

Tommy Watson walked down the dormitory, and he happened to glance out of one of the windows before he reached the door. And he suddenly came to a halt, and stared out into the Triangle intently. The moon had just come out from behind a bank of clouds, and the old Triangle was, for a few moments, quite brilliantly illuminated by the moonlight. And Tommy Watson stood there, staring; then he pointed.

"My only hat!" he exclaimed. "Look—look down there!"

"Dear old boy——"

Sir Montie paused, as he saw what had caused Watson to draw his attention. There, down in the Triangle, three figures were visible.

Two of them were big—they were men, and between them they were carrying a smaller figure. Montie and Tommy were now at the window, and they looked down intently. The moonlight was not very strong, after all, and they did not find it possible to distinguish

what it was the two men were carrying—except for the one single fact that the object was a human form.

"Dear old fellow, I can't make it out at all!" murmured Sir Montie. "They are carrying somebody—I know they are carryin' somebody, because I can see his feet."

"And those feet are kicking about, too!" said Watson. "My goodness! I—I wonder if it can be Nipper? Perhaps he's fallen into the hands of some silly, fatheaded japers——"

"That's not likely, dear old boy," said Tregellis-West. "Who would be playin' a jape after midnight? An' those figures are men—not boys, begad! The best thing we can do is to go downstairs as quickly as possible, creep out, and make investigations—as Nipper would say. We can't do any good up here, and I don't think it would be advisable to raise the alarm until we know something more definite."

"Good wheeze!" said Tommy Watson. "Come on!"

Not another moment was wasted. The two juniors crept out of the dormitory, and then they sped down the stairs with great speed. Reaching the lobby, they were just about to enter the Remove passage, in order to creep out by the window of Study C, when Sir Montie came to a halt.

"Begad!" he muttered.

"What's wrong?" demanded Watson.

"The window is standin' wide open, dear old boy!"

Watson stared, and he saw that Montie's words were true. The tall lobby window, set rather high in the wall, was fully open, although, as a rule, this window was kept tightly closed, even during the day. The two juniors lost no time in examining the window, and they saw almost at once that it had been forced—and forced roughly. The catch was smashed, and the woodwork splintered badly.

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Tommy Watson. "This—this looks serious, you know. "Those chaps were burglars, Montie!"

"How frightfully alarmin'!" breathed Sir Montie, without looking at all alarmed. "Burglars, begad! But burglars generally make off with money and diamonds, and all that sort of thing—they don't carry people away with them, you know!"

"This is a case of kidnapping!" said Tommy Watson grimly. "That's about the truth of it, my son. Nipper has been kidnapped, and it's up to us to get on his track. We must rush out this instant, without losing a second. We might not be able to find him at all, if we don't move at once."

"Dear old fellow, we will simply fly!" declared Tregellis-West.

They scrambled helter-skelter through the window, and then, when they were out in the Triangle, they paused for a moment to look about them and to listen. The moon was still shining, although a little filmy cloud had come across its face now.

The Triangle was quite deserted and empty, and no unusual sound came to the boys' ears as they stood there—only the faint breeze rustling the ivy on the old walls.

"Ugh! It's rather chilly!" murmured Tommy Watson. "These September nights ain't very warm, Montie. Well, come on—let's get across the Triangle and into the road. We might be able to see something of them from there."

The two juniors crept across the Triangle quickly but silently. They reached the wall, and then climbed up, and dropped lightly into the grass on the other side. They were now in the road—or, at least, on the borders of the road, near the ditch, and they were just in time to see the two figures of the mysterious men bending over their victim—which, of course, was no less a person than myself.

I was on the other side of the road, about a hundred yards further down, and I had that confounded sack right over me. Both the men were holding me down, and one was attempting to pull the sack off. I did not understand his intentions at first, and I struggled vigorously. Then I realised that the sack was about to be removed, so I suddenly became limp.

Meanwhile, Tregellis-West and Watson were watching from the other side of the road, near the school wall. They did not approach, but they crouched there, waiting and watching.

And they saw the sack removed from my body—and then came several rather startled exclamations. These exclamations were uttered by the two men who had captured me. They stared right into my face, looked bewildered for a moment, and then proceeded to curse in low tones.

They pounced upon me before I could dodge back.—(*See page* 14.)

"What's the game" I gasped. "You—you confounded idiots! What's the idea of treating me like this? I'll—I'll ——"

I paused, partly in great surprise, and the two men, without another look at me, rose to their feet, ran down the road as though demons were after them, and disappeared into the dense undergrowth of Bellton Wood!

CHAPTER IV.

THE MYSTERY OF THE MILL.

"BEGAD!"

Sir Montie Tregellis-West uttered that exclamation in a tone of great surprise, for he was really startled to see the two men rushing off in that abrupt way, without any apparent cause.

"How positively amazin', Tommy boy!" he exclaimed. "I wonder if the fellows caught sight of us, an' took alarm?"

"I don't suppose we should cause them much alarm, Montie," said Watson. "It seems to me that they were startled by their prisoner—anyhow, they let him drop back into the grass as though he were poisoned, or something. Let's rush and have a look."

The pair hurried down the road, and they reached the spot where I was sitting in the grass, just as I was commencing an extra large sneeze. They grabbed hold of me, and shook my shoulders.

"Are you all right, Nipper?" demanded Watson quickly.

"A-tish-coo!" I replied.

"Dear old boy, we were frightfully anxious about you!" said Sir Montie. "We saw you bein' carried across the Triangle, so we came out at once, with the intention of rescuin' you on the spot. But those two awful scoundrels took fright, or somethin', and they scooted off!"

I struggled to my feet, blew my nose, and then looked at my two chums. I was considerably dusty, and I was not feeling very comfortable.

"You—you saw them, then?" I asked.

"Yes, rather!" said Watson. "But who were they, and why did they shove that sack over your shoulders——"

"How on earth should I know?" I interrupted. "It's most mysterious altogether, Tommy. Those men were masked, you know! They were wearing thick, heavy masks which entirely concealed portions of their faces."

"Begad!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!"

"There was no joke about it," I went on. "It was a really serious business—and there's something very queer about it. Those rotters sprang out on me when I was coming down the Remove passage. They were hidden in a kind of recess, and I expect they had broken in through the lobby window."

"Yes, that's how they got in," said Tommy Watson. "We found the window wide open, with the catch broken, and the woodwork all splintered up. My only hat! Those men were masked? Then—then you don't know who they are?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," I replied.

"Dear old fellow, it is significant—frightfully significant!" said Sir Montie, shaking his head. "It seems to me that these two men are two of your old enemies, you know, and they came to St. Frank's with the intention of kidnapping you——"

"I don't think you've got hold of it right, Montie," I interrupted. "If those men had wanted to kidnap me, they would have taken me off with them—right into the wood. But, instead of that, they removed the sack, saw my face, and then proceeded to say a few choice things!"

"Yes, we heard them," said Tommy.

"Why did they say those choice things?" I asked shrewdly. "Can't you understand, my dear chaps? Now that I have had a moment to think it over, I can understand the whole thing clearly. When those men saw my face, they were disappointed—they discovered that they had made a bloomer!"

"A bloomer?"

"Yes," I said. "I wasn't the chap they had wanted to kidnap."

My chums stared at me.

"Then, if you weren't the chap, why did they kidnap you?" asked Watson. "That's all rot!"

"They really intended to kidnap Dick Goodwin," I said quietly.

"Eh?"

"Really dear old fellow——"

"It's the truth—absolutely the truth," I interrupted. "I was coming down the

Hemove passage from Goodwin's study, and these two men sprang out on me in the dark, and shoved the sack over my head before they could possibly recognise my features. It's as clear as daylight that they took me for Goodwin, and they collared me. Then, when they reached the road here, they discovered that they had made a mistake, and the only thing they could do was to rush off, without stopping to make any explanations."

"Quite possibly you are right, dear boy; in fact, I think you are certainly right," said Sir Montie. "So the mystery is cleared up?"

"I don't think it is," I said. "How can it be cleared up when we don't know why these men were intent upon kidnapping Goodwin? That's what we've got to find out, Montie. Why should these two strangers come to St. Frank's masked, break into the school, and attempt to carry this new fellow off with them? It strikes me as being very sinister!"

"Yes, rather!" said Tommy Watson. "That's a good word, anyhow!"

"If you chaps are game, we'll go straight away into Bellton Wood, and have a look round," I said briskly. "I'm really keen upon finding out what all this means, and I want to lose no time. If we go into the wood, we may possibly get on the track—we may find something that will give us a clue!"

"Oh, we're game!" said Watson.

"Yes, rather, dear old boy," agreed Sir Montie.

And so, without any delay, we hurried down the lane, broke through the hedge, and entered the deep recesses of Bellton Wood. And then, quietly and cautiously, we picked our way through the trees, looking about us keenly, and listening every now and again for any sound of a strange movement.

But we heard nothing and we saw nothing.

"It's no good, my sons," I said. "We might spend all night going about like this, and we shall find nothing at all. The best thing we can do is to go back, and make investigations at the school. It was a mistake to come into the wood, after all—but it's impossible to tell beforehand. Let's get back."

"That's a rippin' idea, dear old boy," said Sir Montie. "It certainly seems useless for us to remain here!"

We found our way back to the lane, and then walked quietly up towards the school. The moon was not shining, but its radiance was diffused through the thin filmy clouds which covered the sky. And we could see everything fairly distinctly—we could see the outline of the old school buildings black against the sky on the horizon, and, as we grew nearer, we could distinguish other details.

Quite suddenly I came to a halt.

"Crouch down—into the ditch!" I whispered. "It's quite dry—we sha'n't come to any harm."

We all three dodged down into the dry ditch, and then we were concealed. Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West were quite puzzled as to the meaning of this move—but I was not.

"What on earth's the matter?" breathed Tommy.

"Those two men—they are against the wall," I whispered keenly. "Didn't you see them?"

"Begad, no!"

"Then look again—about twenty yards from the main gateway," I said. "Fortunately, we were walking quietly, and we were not talking, and so the rotters did not hear us approaching."

My chums raised their heads through the tangle of weeds and grass, and they gazed over towards the school wall. I did the same, and within a minute I knew that I had made no mistake.

Yes, there were two men there, and they were looking over the wall into the Triangle. And they were talking in low tones, and one of them appeared to be making notes in a little book.

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Watson. "They're the men right enough, and they're writing, or something. Of all the awful nerve! Fancy coming back, after kidnapping you, Nipper!"

"I suppose they found everything quiet, and so they thought it would be safe," I said. "But don't jaw—they might hear a slight sound, and that would spoil everything. If they go into the Triangle, we'll soon follow, and pounce on them at the right moment."

We watched, and we saw that the men were making notes and talking still. I noticed that a sheet of paper was torn out of the notebook, screwed up and thrown into the ditch. I mentally decided that I should recover that scrap of paper later on, when I got the opportunity. It might contain an important clue.

Then, to our surprise, the two strangers did not climb over the wall and go into the Triangle. They came out into the road, stood for a few moments talking, and then they walked down the lane briskly, right past the spot where we were crouching. They went on until they had almost disappeared in the gloom, for the lane was very dim, with high trees on either side.

"Ain't we going to do anything?" asked Watson.

"We're going to follow!" I said grimly. "But it's no good being in too much of a hurry, my son. Look here! We'll dodge through this gap in the hedge, and get into the meadow. Then we can slip down, parallel with the lane, without being heard or seen, and we can keep those men in sight all the time."

"Good wheeze!" said Sir Montie approvingly.

It did not take us long to get into the meadow, and then we hurried down on the soft grass, making no sounds whatever. And at length we arrived almost opposite the old stile which led on to the footpath through Bellton Wood. And here we came to a halt, for the two men were just crossing the stile, and it was their evident intention to pass through the wood.

"Go easy now, you chaps!" I breathed. "The chaps are evidently going along the footpath, and if they keep on it all the time it will lead out on to the edge of Bannington Moor. We're going to follow them until they arrive at their destination—we're on the track now, and we're not going to get off it!"

"Rather not!" said Watson. "We'll stick to 'em if we have to go right into Bannington itself!"

"Any old thing you like, dear boys!" said Sir Montie, with a sigh. "But I'm not dressed, you know—I haven't got any collar on, an' I'm in a frightful state. But, for the sake of assistin' justice, I will allow those things to pass!"

The precious pair entered the wood, and vanished from sight. There was no need for us to be so very careful now, for it was practically certain that the men would stick to the footpath, and would not branch off into the wood itself.

Of course there was just a possibility of this, and, in order to be on the safe side, we crept along only about two hundred yards in the rear of our quarry. We could hear them quite distinctly talking together as they went along.

It was only necessary for us to pause now and again, and we could tell at once whether we were still on the trail, or whether we had lost the scent. And we had no difficulty whatever. We went through the wood without any adventures overtaking us, and without anything of a startling nature occurring.

And then we found ourselves on the edge of Bannington Moor.

Coming out of the wood, the moor stretched out before us, far in the distance—a bleak, bare expanse of country without a tree, and with hardly any roads. It was a bare spot, indeed! With no houses in sight, and with not even a cottage within three or four miles.

"I expect those chaps have got bicycles, or a motor-car!" I whispered. "They left it here, possibly, and then walked through the wood, so that no attention would be attracted. That's about the size of it, I believe. So we shall probably meet with a reverse very soon, because we can't chase a motor-car on foot!"

"No, that would be rather too much of a task, old boy," agreed Sir Montie.

But I was wrong.

The men did not make for the little moor road which ran across to Bannington. Instead, they cut across the moor itself, and I could see at once that they were making straight for the old mill.

This old building was practically a ruin, and it had been standing there for many, many years—probably over a hundred years. It was deserted now, and had been deserted for ten or fifteen years past.

The old mill was a ramshackle place, and it was not visited once in a blue moon by anybody. I clearly remembered a rather exciting adventure which had occurred months and months earlier, when some rascals had taken refuge in the mill.

It seemed now that the mill was again being used by people of questionable habits.

Both the men made for the mill, reached it, and entered by means of the rotting, ramshackle door. They passed inside, leaving the door wide open. And Sir Montie and Tommy and I crouched down behind a bush, and waited.

We distinctly saw a gleam of light

inside proving that a match had been struck. This light became brighter, and then I faintly saw a flickering candle held in the hands of one of the men. They did not remain there for long, but went up an old ladder into the upper portion of the mill. And then everything became dark.

"Come on!" I whispered. "We can go on a bit quicker now. I'd give anything to know what these rotters are doing here!"

"Perhaps we shall be able to find out!" said Tommy Watson eagerly.

"My hat! This is an adventure, if you like!"

Slowly and cautiously we made our way to the mill, and, at length, we stood in the doorway, listening intently, and ready to dodge out at the least sign of an alarm.

But we heard nothing, and we stood there, with no sound reaching our ears except the soft rustle of the wind outside, in the heather and the gorse.

"They've gone upstairs—right into the mill itself," I whispered. "It's quite possible that they are at the top, and, to all appearances, we can't follow. We're dished, my sons!"

"Dished!" echoed Watson.

"Yes," I said. "There's a trapdoor in the ceiling up there, and there is a ladder on the other side. The trapdoor is closed, and we can't go any further. I'll just creep up and make sure, though!"

It was exactly as I had anticipated. The trapdoor was secured, and it was impossible for us to pass through. Those two men were up in the mill, and we could do nothing. I felt as though I had been swindled, for it was quite clear that there was something very strange going on.

Why were these men here—in this old building? Why had they come to St. Frank's, and why had they made an attempt to kidnap Dick Goodwin? For I was quite certain that a mistake had been made, and that I had been collared instead of the boy from the north.

"Well, it's no good!" I whispered. "We can't get any further, so we had better go outside, and watch."

This was the only thing to be done, and we crept out of the doorway, and then went a little way back from the mill, turned round, and looked up.

"Hallo!" whispered Tommy Watson. "There's a light there, right at the top!"

"By jingo!" I breathed. "So there is!"

We stared up. Right at the top of the mill, in the very uppermost window, a gleam of light could be seen. It was only a tiny window—just a little square, sunk deeply into the woodwork.

"So that's where they are!" said Watson. "Well, we're diddled nicely. There's no hope of us getting up there, my sons. We can't see a thing from here, and we might just as well get back to St. Frank's as soon as we can."

"Hold on!" I put in. "I'm not so sure about not being able to get up there and see. I'm going to have a shot at it, anyhow!"

"Dear old boy, what on earth is the use——"

"Every use!" I interrupted. "Don't you see these sails?"

"Sails?"

"Yes!"

"But—but you can't climb up them ——"

"I can climb up one of them," I said quickly. "They may be old, but they are pretty strong, and they make a jolly fine ladder. All I've got to do is to slip right up, and I think I shall be able to squint through the window by overhanging a bit. Everything depends upon this, you know. If only I can look into that room, and see what those rotters are up to, it may mean everything. At all events, I'm going to try."

Sir Montie and Tommy looked at me in rather a startled way.

"But—but you'll kill yourself, you ass!" said Watson, in alarm.

"Dear old boy, please don't do anything so rash!" pleaded Montie.

I shook my head.

"No; I've made up my mind, and I'm going to do it," I said. "There's hardly any risk in it, as you chaps seem to think. It'll be quite easy, and all I've got to do is to be a bit cautious. You chaps stay down here, and be on the alert."

I did not wait any longer. I did not allow my chums to say anything further to me. I hurried forward, reached the mill, and then, by reaching, I was just able to grasp the lower woodwork of the sail which hung down. They had been idle for many years, and they were rotten and broken.

However, once on the sail, I found that it was a fairly easy task to climb

upwards—providing I made sure of my foothold at every step. Foot by foot I went upwards, until, at last, I had completely climbed the sail to the very axle.

But I found that I could not see in even now. The window was right away to my left, and the only means of looking in was to climb along the next sail, almost horizontally, and then bend over, head downwards, and look into the opening of the window. For this second sail stretched right across the top of the window, and I decided to make the attempt.

It would be risky—for my position would be much more precarious than it had been. But I did not care. I had come up the sail, and I was not going down again without having accomplished anything.

And so I crept along inch by inch, and feeling that, at any moment I might lose my hold and crash to the ground below.

But I did nothing of the sort. I arrived, at last, right over the window. And then I performed a somewhat rash manœuvre. I hung down, so that I was only held by my feet, and at that very moment the sail gave a movement, descending slightly lower.

My heart leapt into my mouth, and I clung there, rather scared. My weight had caused the sail to swing downwards.

But it was only a slight movement, and hardly made any sound. And it was all the better for me, for I was then able to look into the window in a decent, upright position, instead of hanging head downwards.

Clinging there, I found it possible to look right into the room.

I saw the two men sitting there, smoking cigarettes. They were big, strong fellows, and both determined-looking. They were quite well dressed, and were certainly not ruffians. And they were talking together intently.

But I did not give them very much attention. I was more interested in the apartment itself. It was only a small place—a kind of store room. But it had been considerably altered of late. I had been in that room myself, on two or three occasions, and I knew that it was a tumbledown place, without any door, and with the window all cracked, and with the frame rotted through.

But it was different now.

A heavy, strong door had been fitted, and this door, I saw, was also supplied with a tremendously powerful lock. The window, too, had a new frame, and thick plate glass, with bars beyond—heavy iron bars, set together so that not even a monkey could crawl through.

There was some furniture in the place—a deal table, and a kitchen chair, and over in one corner, some shelves had been fitted. These shelves were simply filled up with tinned foods—corned beef, salmon, sardines, fruit, and goodness knows what else. Then there were tins of biscuits and cakes, and all manner of things like that—eatables which would keep without deteriorating.

At first I was puzzled. I could not make out what it meant. And then, all in a second, I knew the truth.

This old room at the top of the mill was being prepared for somebody—it was being converted into a prison.

There was not the slightest doubt about this. The heavy wooden door, the barred window, the stock of food all pointed to the fact that this place was made ready for the reception of somebody who was to be kept in prison. But who was that somebody? Obviously, Dick Goodwin!

I was surprised and startled. Why were all these preparations being made for the capture of Goodwin? Why was he to be held here, a prisoner? It was all very mysterious, and I was exceedingly delighted with myself for having found out so much.

For I realised at once, that if Goodwin ever disappeared, and was nowhere to be found, it would only be necessary to look here, and we should be able to locate him. The night's investigations had panned out exceedingly well, and I was quite delighted, as I said before.

And then something rather startling happened.

The sail moved again—sluggishly at first, and then with a quick rush, causing a large amount of noise.

Creak! Creak!

The sail swung down, carrying me with it!

CHAPTER V.

VERY STRANGE.

QUICK as a flash, I commenced climbing down the sail, even though it was in motion. I knew that everything depended upon my speed. If I was caught here

by these men, it would be serious. And, even if I had escaped after they had spun me, it would be a disaster. For the rascals would know that all their plans were given away, and they would, of course, abandon the mill, and find another spot. So it was up to me to get quickly and to conceal myself.

I jumped when I was still ten feet from the ground. I landed in a heap, rolled over, and my two chums came rushing up to me.

"Dear old boy——"

"Don't waste a second!" I gasped. "I'm not hurt! Get behind those bushes—hurry!"

We simply rushed to the bushes, crouched down, and lay there panting hard. We were completely unseen, and concealed. And we were only just in the nick of time.

For, within three seconds, the trap-door was banged back, both the men came charging down, and they rushed out into the open. They were obviously alarmed, and they looked about them with quick, keen glances.

"There's nobody here!" exclaimed one of them.

"There might be—we don't know!" said the other. "I was practically certain that somebody was clinging to one of the sails, and it commenced moving——"

"It might have been the wind!" said the other man.

Just at that moment quite a heavy gust came along, and it whistled against the sails shrilly. It was the first real gust that we had heard during the night, and it had come at a very opportune moment.

"Yes, I suppose you're right," said the first man. "It must have been the wind, after all. That gust just now moved the sail a trifle."

The men searched about for some little time, coming perilously near to us on two occasions. But they did not think it necessary to search the bushes very carefully, and we escaped detection.

At length the two men returned to the doorway, quite satisfied.

"Those sails ought to be fixed in some way," remarked one of them. "It gave me quite a fright, I can tell you!"

"Why, I thought they were fixed with age—rusted through," said the other man. "I thought the strongest wind there was couldn't move them. Still, it doesn't matter. We shall know next time. We'd better get inside. And, by the way, that window up there isn't covered, and the light can be seen."

"What does that matter? Who is there about here to see——"

"It will be better to have it completely shaded," said the first man. "We can't be too careful—not even in a lonely place like this."

They passed into the mill again, went up the steps, through the trapdoor, and thus upwards.

Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson and I crept out of our place of concealment, and lost no time in making tracks for the wood.

At last we reached there, and I paused.

"Well, my dear chaps, I've got something to tell you, anyhow," I said, in a satisfied tone.

"You—you reckless ass!" said Watson wrathfully. "We thought you were coming down head first! We thought you were going to kill yourself!"

"It was a near shave; but as nothing terrible happened, there's no sense in talking about it," I said lightly. "The main thing is that I discovered something which will be of great interest to the guv'nor. I mean to tell Mr. Lee all about this, of course, and I think I have done a fairly decent night's work."

"With our assistance!" put in Watson.

"Exactly—with your assistance!" I agreed. "That top room in the mill is a prison!"

"A what?"

I explained to my chums what I had seen—the heavy door, the barred window, the stock of food, etc. And they listened with growing astonishment, and with some little excitement.

"But who is the prison being prepared for?" asked Watson, at length.

"Goodwin, of course! Who else?" I said. "We know for a fact that those men kidnapped me in mistake for Goodwin, and here they are, in an old mill with a specially prepared room at the top. It is absolutely obvious what it means. If they had managed to get hold of Goodwin to-night, they would have brought him here, and the countryside would have been searched to-morrow in vain. For who would have thought of looking in that old mill?"

"Yes, it's a very good thing we came out to-night, dear old boy," said Sir Montie, nodding. "There is somethin' frightfully queer about it, an' I'm wor-

ried. I don't like it at all, begad! Why should Goodwin have these enemies—why should they want to capture him?"

"And why has he got a study that must be kept so secret?" asked Watson.

"And why is this, and why is that, and why is the other?" I said. "We can ask all sorts of questions, Tommy, and we can't get any satisfactory replies. There is a mystery, and we must leave it at that. But I have every hope that within a few days we shall get to the bottom of it, and then we shall know exactly what we are doing. The best thing we can do now is to go straight back to the school, and go to bed. In the morning I will tell the guv'nor what has happened, and he will know the best thing to do."

"Hear, hear!" said Sir Montie.

"Leave it to Mr. Lee, and everything will be all serene!" said Tommy Watson.

And so, without any further delay, we made our way back through the wood, and arrived at St. Frank's in good time. On the way we had been chatting about the queer adventures which we had passed through, and the rather strange happenings at St. Frank's since the beginning of the new term. All these happenings were connected with Dick Goodwin, of the Remove. The new boy was undoubtedly causing some interest.

We were just about to climb over the wall when I thought of something.

"Hold on!" I said. "What about that sheet of paper the men tore out of that pocketbook? They threw it down in the ditch somewhere, and I want to find it!"

"Oh, that'll do in the morning——"

"It won't—it'll do now!" I interrupted keenly. "Six eyes are better than two! So lend a hand!"

"What's the good of a hand when you want eyes?" asked Watson humorously.

We went to the spot where the two men had been standing, and we searched about among the weeds and grass. And, at last, I found the scrap of paper which had been thrown away. I straightened it out, and looked at it intently, but the light was not powerful enough.

"Well, what is there on it?" asked Watson. "I'll bet it's a blank sheet!"

"I can't see here," I replied. "We'll wait until we get indoors."

We crossed over the wall, and within three of four minutes we were inside the Ancient House—having gained admittance by means of the lobby window—which was smashed.

"Now for a match!" I breathed. "Who's got one?"

"I have," said Watson. "Here you are!"

He struck a light, and we all looked at the scrap of paper which I had spread out between my two hands. It was a ruled sheet, and we saw at once that upon it was a rough drawing of the Ancient House—or, at least, a portion of the Ancient House.

There were all the windows scrawled there—the upper windows and the lower windows. And against one of them, was a mark—a cross.

"Hallo!" I said keenly. "What does this mean? One of the windows is marked—the fourth one from the left."

"That's Mr. Crowell's bedroom," said Watson.

"By jingo! So it is!" I said. "Now, why in the world did those men mark Mr. Crowell's window with a cross? There's another mystery here, my sons. Hold on, though! I expect it was a bloomer. They put a cross against the wrong window, and so they threw the paper away. That's about the truth of it."

"I expect you are right, dear old boy," said Sir Montie. "In any case, we can do nothing more now. I vote we go straight to bed, and leave all further discussion until the mornin'!"

"That's exactly what I intend doing," I replied.

We were just about to creep forward, in order to mount the stairs, when we heard the faint sound of a closing door down the Remove passage. I at once came to a standstill, intent and alert.

"There's somebody coming!" I breathed. "I wouldn't mind betting anything you like that it's Goodwin; he's just left his study. We don't want him to see us here, so we'd better dodge into the doorway of the cloakroom. Buck up!"

We slipped across the lobby again, and into the doorway of the cloakroom, and waited there.

And we were only just in time.

For a figure appeared out of the Remove passage—a figure which was certainly not that of a schoolboy. It was, in fact, a figure which I recognised in an instant—even in the dim light.

"It's Cuttle!" I whispered under my breath.

"Regan!"

The figure was certainly that of Mr. Josiah Cuttle. We could tell that instantly, although we could not possibly see his face. But the gloom was not deep enough to conceal Mr. Cuttle's legs. We recognised them at once, and we were filled with astonishment.

Why was Mr. Cuttle prowling about the Ancient House at this time of night—between one and two in the morning, rather? What could his object be?

I was suspicious on the instant.

The first thought which came into my head—a thought which was not entirely without foundation, was that Mr. Cuttle was a spy inside the House. He was a newcomer at St. Frank's, and we knew nothing whatever of him. He may possibly have got in with the deliberate intention of assisting in the kidnapping of Dick Goodwin. He was probably a confederate of the two men we had been following. If this was the case, we should be able to frustrate the whole design very neatly—for we were warned in advance.

But it was a disappointment to me. I rather liked Mr. Cuttle, and it was disconcerting to realise that he was not on the square—that he was, in fact, a crook. But it was not wise to take things for granted.

It was only a suspicion, after all.

Mr. Cuttle walked through the lobby, and then turned down the passage which led into the servants' quarters—down into the domestic section of the Ancient House. We heard a door softly close, down the corridor, and then all became silent.

"My hat!" said Tommy Watson. "What on earth does this mean?"

"It looks suspicious, but it will be just as well not to take things for granted," I said. "Mr. Cuttle is a queer chap, and for all we know he may have been engaged as a kind of night watchman. His occupation is a bit of a mystery, in any case. If he is a night watchman, then it stands to reason that he has every right to prowl about the Ancient House at this hour. We'll wait until the morning before we form any opinion. Come on."

We crept upstairs, but it was destined that we should not get to bed without even another interruption. For we were just moving along the upper corridor when the door opened, and a brilliant gleam of light shot out into the passage. Nelson Lee stood there, attired in his dressing-gown and slippers.

"Who is that?" he demanded sharply.

"Oh, my only hat!" muttered Watson, in dismay.

"It's all right—this has just come right!" I whispered. "We wanted to tell the guv'nor everything, anyhow!"

Nelson Lee walked up, and he eyed us with a grim expression on his face.

"Oh, indeed!" he exclaimed. "Nipper, Tregellis-West, and Watson. I shall be very obliged, Nipper, if you'll explain to me what you mean by being dressed and out of your beds at this hour of the morning? I fancy it will be rather difficult for you to give me an adequate explanation."

I grinned.

"Come off it, guv'nor," I said cheerfully. "I——"

"Now, look here, Nipper, I am in earnest!" interrupted Nelson Lee. "I am your Housemaster now, and I will not put up with any nonsense, or weak excuses. If you have been breaking the school rules——"

"We have—we've smashed about a dozen of them!" I interrupted cheerfully. "Now, listen, sir, and I'll tell you all about it!"

And, without further delay, I told the guv'nor exactly what had happened from the very first. I explained how I had gone downstairs, and how I had been kidnapped. Then I went on to describe the other events which took place. Nelson Lee listened without comment to the last.

"Let me see that piece of paper, Nipper," he said finally.

He took it and examined it carefully.

"Well, sir?" I said, "you haven't expressed any opinion yet."

"I hardly know whether I have an opinion, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "In any case, you boys are quite exonerated, and you may go into bed just when you like. Under the circumstances, I think you were fully justified in acting as you did."

"That's one good thing, anyhow," I remarked. "But what is the meaning of all this mystery, sir? Why did those chaps want to kidnap Goodwin? Why have they got that place prepared——"

"It is quite useless asking all these questions, Napper," said Nelson Lee. "I agree with you that those two men were obviously intent upon kidnapping Goodwin, of the Remove. There is no doubt upon that point. It simply proves that it is necessary for us to be well on the alert, and to see that Goodwin comes to no harm."

"And what about Mr. Cuttle, sir?" asked Tommy Watson.

"Oh, I do not think Cuttle is implicated," said Nelson Lee. "He is not employed as a night watchman, I will admit, but it is quite possible that he was walking about for some perfectly legitimate purpose. You had better go to bed straight away, and obtain some sleep. You will not be ready to rouse yourselves when the rising bell goes in four or five hours time!"

And so, without any further discussion, we bade Nelson Lee good-night, and went to the Remove dormitory. And, somehow, I had an idea that many further adventures were to happen in the near future.

And they would probably prove exciting.

CHAPTER VI.

RALPH LESLIE FULLWOOD IS AMUSED.

"FULLWOOD AND CO. seem to be very much amused over something, this morning," remarked Reginald Pitt, as he stood in the Ancient House doorway, looking out into the Triangle. "The rotters have been cackling away there for about five minutes—they appear to be interested in something in that newspaper."

"Oh, leave them alone!" said Jack Grey, in a tone of disgust. "It's a ten-to-one chance that they are laughing at somebody's misfortune. It's a queer thing, but Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell always seem to be highly delighted when somebody is in trouble."

"It's just a habit of theirs," remarked De Valerie.

A moment or two later I strolled out, accompanied by Tregellis-West and Watson. It was quite a glorious September morning, and the Triangle was looking splendid in the bright sunlight. The old chestnuts were rapidly losing their leaves, and they had a somewhat forlorn aspect. But there was always a reward for the coming of autumn, in my opinion. For King Football now held sway, and the great game was being entered into with tremendous gusto by both the seniors and the juniors of St. Frank's.

Sir Montie and Tommy and I were feeling quite all right, although we had lost several hours of sleep. My chums, perhaps, were looking rather sleepy eyed, but the loss of a few hours rest had no effect upon me.

We did not discuss the happenings of the night, for Nelson Lee had told us, in the strictest possible terms, that we should not say a word to anybody else. He advised us to keep the whole matter secret, and to leave everything to him. And we were doing this.

I noticed that Dick Goodwin was out in the Triangle, and that was rather an unusual proceeding for him. He generally spent every spare moment of his time in his mysterious study. But this morning he was taking the fresh air, and he was apparently deep in thought.

For he paced up and down the Triangle on the far side, where it was quite deserted, and his hands were stuck deep in his trousers' pockets, and he appeared to be quite oblivious of his surroundings.

Fullwood and Co. were over by the wall of the gymnasium. They were helping to prop it up, and they had a newspaper, which appeared to be causing them a great deal of fun. At all events, they were grinning and they were laughing, and occasionally they yelled.

Finally, some of the other juniors wanted to know what the laughter was about. Hubbard and Owen major and Singleton and several others strolled over, and made inquiries.

I was near by, and I stood still, watching. I saw that Fullwood's expression changed now, and he curled his lip disdainfully.

"Oh, nothin'—nothin' much, anyhow," he said, in reply to a question from Owen major. "Only I think it's a bit steep to have a pauper in the Remove!"

"A pauper!" echoed Hubbard.

"That's what I said—an' that's what I meant!" said Fullwood. "I'm not a snob——"

"O, no!" exclaimed the Hon. Douglas

[illegible] languidly. "Fancy you telling us that. Fullwood—something we know so well! You're not a snob? Dear me! That piece of news is quite refreshing."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm not a snob!" repeated Fullwood grimly. "I don't mind if anybody is in the Remove who happens to be stony now and again. But I draw the line at a chap whose father is shoved in the giddy county court for debts!"

"What!"

"Half a minute," I said, strolling up. "What's the discussion about?"

"Mind your own business!" snapped Fullwood savagely. "Who told you to interfere, Nipper?"

"A chap named Nipper told me to interfere," I replied deliberately. "I want to know what you're talking about. I want to know who this chap is who's a pauper!"

"He's on full view, if you want to see him," said Fullwood sneeringly, with a jerk of his head.

I glanced round, and knew at once that Fullwood had indicated Dick Goodwin.

"You mean Goodwin, I suppose?" I said. "What's the idea of calling him a pauper?"

"Because he is a pauper!" put in Gulliver. "I think it's a bit thick his bein' at St. Frank's with his beastly father in the county court for debt. It's a disgrace to the school—it's a rotten shame that we should be compelled to mix with a chap like that!"

Handforth strode forward.

"It's a rotten shame that we should be compelled to mix with chaps like you and Fullwood and Bell," he roared. "Even a pauper may be a gentleman, but you'll never be a gentleman if you live until you're two thousand years old!"

"Hear, hear!"

Fullwood scowled.

"Well, I'm goin' to make a fuss about it," he declared. "I don't see why we should put up with a disgrace like this. It's jolly well too thick! The chap ought to be kicked out of the school!"

"Neck an' crop," said Gulliver.

"And without any delay!" put in Hall.

"I thought there was something funny going on here," said Reginald Pitt. "Well, now that we've arrived on the spot, all you rotters can do is to sneer and make insulting remarks about Goodwin!"

"They were only cackling and laughing in order to attract a crowd," I said. "Don't you know Fullwood by this time, Pitt? He and his pals always go to work in that way when they've got something particularly nasty to say. Even if this is true about Goodwin's father——"

"There's no question about it at all—it is true!" snapped Fullwood. "You're not goin' to say that this paper is tellin' a lie, I suppose?"

I grinned.

"Newspapers are not always absolutely truthful," I said drily. "I think that it is quite possible that you are making a mistake."

"Of course he's making a mistake!" said Handforth. "And he's going to pay for it, too, because I'm going to punch his nose!"

"Hold on!" I interrupted. "We'll read that news item first."

"You're quite welcome!" sneered Fullwood. "Here's the paragraph."

He handed the newspaper over, and several juniors grasped it. It was a London paper, and the item which had so interested Fullwood and Co. was halfway down the page, in the centre of the paper. It was only a very small paragraph, and was not very startling. It ran:

"MANUFACTURER IN COURT.

"Mr. Richard Goodwin, the well-known manufacturer, of Hollinwood, near Oldham, was a figure in the county court in Manchester yesterday. The sum in question was one of £758, this sum being claimed by Messrs. Bryant, Hudson and Co., Ltd., of Manchester. Mr. Goodwin admitted his responsibility, and pleaded that his business is in such low water that he has been unable to discharge all his debts. He requested time to pay, and this was granted him. The incident is rather significant, as it proves quite plainly that all manufacturers are not making their fortunes at the expense of the working classes."

"That last bit is rather sarcastic, I imagine," said Pitt, with a grin. "I fancy a good many manufacturers have been going under lately, what with the expense of materials, labour, and all the rest of it. It hardly pays anybody nowa-

days to keep a factory running—unless he happens to be a philanthropist!"

"Well, we won't go into any argument about that now," said Handforth. "Personally, I don't believe that this Mr. Goodwin is Goodwin's father at all! It's just a coincidence!"

"Rats!" said Fullwood. "Of course it's Goodwin's father. We all know he comes from Lancashire—an' this chap here is named exactly the same. A giddy fine thing—I don't think! A chap's father bein' pushed into the county court, an' bein' unable to pay his debts."

"Why don't you say all this to Goodwin himself, instead of talking to us?" demanded De Valerie hotly. "We'll fetch Goodwin over here!"

Fullwood shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm quite agreeable!" he said. "Fetch him, if you want to!"

Handforth turned round abruptly.

"Goodwin!" he roared. "I say!"

Dick Goodwin looked round.

"We want you over here!" bellowed Handforth.

Goodwin came over, looking rather surprised. He had been so deep in thought that he had not noticed the crowd near the gymnasium, and now he came up, only mildly interested. Handforth pushed the paper under his nose.

"Read that paragraph!" he said. "Then tell us what you think about it!"

Dick Goodwin read the item, and, although his face went a trifle paler, he did not move a hair.

"Well?" he said at last. "What about it?"

"Is that Mr. Goodwin your father?"

"Ay, he is that!" replied the new boy quietly.

"Oh!"

"What did I tell you?" sneered Fullwood.

"He's your pater, then!" said Handforth. "Brought into court for debt!"

Dick Goodwin's eyes flashed somewhat.

"Ay, my father has been brought into court for debt," he replied quietly. "Is there any disgrace in that? Is there any disgrace in a manufacturer being unable to pay a debt just when it is convenient?"

"My dear chap, you misunderstand!" said Handforth. "I'm all sympathy. It's rough luck on your pater, and I'm sorry. I wouldn't have interfered in this affair if I'd known. I hope your pater gets out of his trouble all right—that's all."

"Thank you!" said Goodwin. "Anything else?"

"Yes, there is somethin' else!" said Fullwood nastily. "I think it's a bit offside for you to be at St. Frank's! This is a school for the sons of gentlemen—not for the sons of people who can't pay their debts!"

"By gum!" said Goodwin, his eyes flashing again. "There is nothing disgraceful——"

"Nothing disgraceful, eh?" interrupted Fullwood sneeringly. "Well, I think there is—an' a lot of other fellows think so, too! It's a rotten shame that you should be at St. Frank's—that we should be compelled to mix with the son of a swindling Lancashire manufacturer who won't pay his debts!"

"Hear, hear!" said Gulliver and Bell.

"You—you cads!" roared Handforth. "I'll——"

"Hold on, Handy!" I interrupted. "Let Goodwin deal with the rotters!"

Dick Goodwin had turned very pale, and now he took a step forward.

"See thee here!" he exclaimed quietly. "Was it my father you were calling a swindler?"

"Yes, it was!" said Fullwood. "He is a swindler, too——"

Crash!

Dick Goodwin's fist flew straight out from his shoulder, and it landed with terrific force upon Fullwood's nose. Ralph Leslie gave a terrific howl, staggered back, and measured his length on the ground. His nose was bleeding profusely, and he simply roared.

"Yarooooh!" he bellowed. "How—ow!"

"Ay, and there'll be another punch if you say a word against my father again!" exclaimed Goodwin hotly. "By gum! I won't have my father insulted!"

"Good for you, Goodwin!"

"That's the style!"

"You — you miserable hound!" snarled Fullwood, getting to his feet. "I'll have you kicked out of the school for this! I'll have you pitched out neck an' crop——"

"One moment!"

Fullwood turned, gasping. For Nelson Lee had come up in the rear, and the

Housemaster-detective stood there, looking very grim and serious. Many of the juniors ran for it, but the majority of the juniors held their ground.

"I'm glad you've come, sir!" exclaimed Fullwood savagely. "Did you see what happened? That cad suddenly flew at me like a tiger——"

"I saw everything that took place, Fullwood," said Nelson Lee quietly. "Goodwin deliberately attacked you—and he ought to know that it is against all the school rules to fight in the Triangle. Goodwin, you will write me fifty lines for breaking the school rules."

"Yes, sir," said Goodwin.

"Fifty lines!" shouted Fullwood. "Fifty lines for knocking me down——"

"And you, Fullwood, will write me five hundred lines!" continued Nelson Lee grimly.

Everybody roared, delighted at Nelson Lee's keen sense of justice.

"Five—five hundred lines!" gasped Fullwood. "But—but——"

"You deliberately insulted Goodwin, and he had certain justification for punching you," said Nelson Lee. "I do not want to hear another word, Fullwood—and let me tell you this. If ever I hear you uttering insulting words about Goodwin again, I shall punish you with much greater severity. I have seen the paragraph in the paper which has caused you such amusement, and my sympathy is all with Goodwin's father. For you to sneer and make fun of the gentleman's misfortune is despicable in the extreme, and you ought to be thoroughly ashamed of yourself!"

Nelson Lee walked off, followed by a cheer from the crowd. And Dick Goodwin, without a word, walked straight into the Ancient House.

. . . . . .

But the new fellow in the Remove had made three enemies—Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell. They were bitter against him now, and they would seize any opportunity to do him harm. It would be a great delight to the cads of Study A to injure Goodwin, if they could possibly do so.

As events were destined to turn out Fullwood and Co. would have their chance very soon.

THE END.

TO MY READERS.

I HOPE to be able to announce very soon the result of your ballot for the most popular story and character (other than Nelson Lee and Nipper) in THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, *and also the favourite story and character of the year that has appeared in these pages. If any of my chums has not yet recorded his vote, I hope he will lose no time in sending me a penny postcard stating his opinions.*

During Nelson Lee's absence from England, a secret organisation has sprung into being, and its leader, hearing of the unexpected return of so formidable an enemy, has prepared a plot to get the famous detective out of his way once and for all. Added to this is the mystery surrounding Goodwin, the new boy from the North, and with the amusing new character, Mr. Cuttle, the present series should prove of exceptional interest.

Look out for Next Week's story:

"THE LANCASHIRE LAD!"

THE EDITOR.

JUST STARTED—GRAND NEW DETECTIVE SERIAL!

KIT & CORA

Mysterious Detectives

A TALE OF MYSTERIOUS DETECTIVE ADVENTURE IN LONDON.

INTRODUCTION.

LIN FLEET, a lad of fifteen, wrongfully accused of stealing, loses his job at a motor garage. His parents being dead, he lives with an unscrupulous pair known as Uncle and Aunt Pawley, the former being better acquainted with the thefts at the garage than he would care to admit.

(Now read on.)

Prompt and Plucky.

IT was a very warm afternoon, and the driver of the dingy green car was decidedly thirsty.

He had been thirsty when he started, having had a couple of rather salty kippers for breakfast, followed by the hot and dusty job of beating and brushing the mothy, gritty old cushions of the car, before running it up to town to fetch the "missus," who had been staying overnight with a friend at her flat off Oxford Street. The run up from Sidcup was not a long one, but if he had crossed the Great Desert, instead of Blackheath, he could hardly have suffered worse with that thirst!

The sight of a carter having a pint of Government ale outside The Tiger at Lea was very hard to bear. And he passed other places—many of them; and that thirst got worse with every mile. But it was not to be thought of. He had Master Algy with him—and Master Algy was a terror! Safe to report him! Take a delight in it, the young imp!

So the chauffeur grilled on and endured. But in the Strand, where the heat beat up from the shining asphalt and the dust blew in hot puffs, his endurance gave out.

It wouldn't take half a minute, and he thought he could manage to pull the wool over Master Algy's eyes just this once.

He pulled up just short of Charing Cross, opposite to the opening of a narrow court between two shops. There was a nice quiet place down there he knew.

And it wouldn't take half a minute!

He turned to Master Algy, and half-showing a grimy envelope in his breast-pocket, said, with all the impressiveness at his command:

"Got to deliver this down there," indicating the court by a nod. "Sha'n't be more'n 'alf a minute. Now look 'ere, Master Halgy, you just sit still and keep yer hands off them levers and things! Don't you touch one of 'em, or——"

Master Algy nodded. Speech was impeded by a wad of chewing-gum behind his Cupid's-bow lips. Shaking a warning finger at the small boy, the chauffeur got out of the car, leaving it with the engine running, buzzing and vibrating at the edge of the pavement, while he disappeared down the court.

Master Algy, a petted imp of about nine or ten, sat very still for the space of half a minute. He was thinking.

Well for the chauffeur if he had not given that warning; for then most likely Master Algy would never have thought of it. As it was, he thought of it the instant the man's back was turned; and the first hazy idea speedily became a burning desire!

The temptation was too much for him.

He looked at the levers and handles and other bright and shiny things, that were so near, so temptingly near to his small hands! From just looking it was an easy step to touching. The car was rather an elderly one, and a bit cranky; parts of its gear working stiff, and other parts with unexpected ease, owing to wear. One wanted to know its little failings and nurse it with a careful hand. Though really Master Algy did nothing very violently. It was only a very little pull he gave that thing with the shiny handle—it seemed to drop over all by itself.

The result was like that of meddling with a live bomb to him!

The big dingy-green car seemed to wake up suddenly, like an elderly party startled out of a doze by the jab of a pin! It had been left with a half-turn towards the pavement, and now mounted the kerb sideways, with a jolt that threw Master Algy over the back of the seat into the body of the car, and wobbling along the pavement at gathering speed, scattered the alarmed pedestrians to right and left!

By fortunate chance the pavement at that part happened to be rather bare of people at the moment when the car mounted the kerb, or the consequences might have been terrible. But an even worse disaster seemed inevitable; for only a little farther down the pavement was the front of a popular theatre, with a closely-packed queue lined up for the afternoon performance.

The big dingy-green car swerved inwards, and as if guided by some invisible demon of destruction and death, bore down upon the packed throng of pleasure-seekers!

There was a moment of wild panic, of mad

stampede; the shouts and even oaths of men; the piteous cries of women mad with terror.

A man of slight but athletic build, who had been gazing at the pictures in a print-shop over the way, turned at those piercing cries and dashed across the roadway, threading the traffic like a hare through standing corn. Whatever he had in his mind to attempt in the way of agility and daring, he must have been too late. But he was not too late to witness an act, which for promptness and pluck he had never seen equalled.

A boy, a mere slip of a lad, who had been standing with a listless and dejected air at a shop doorway, as though hesitating whether to enter or not, suddenly awoke to amazing activity.

As the big car was about to sweep past him, he gathered his slim form together much as a cat will do, and sprang with one clean bound on to the footboard. It appeared to stop as if by magic, almost on the instant that he landed in it with that clean, well-judged leap; stop with a jerk so violent that its front wheels rose from the pavement and fell again with a thud. Then the car was seen to back, drop over the kerb, bump, bump, take a neat half-turn in little more than its own length, and come to rest alongside the kerb as though it had never stirred from there, or caused that mad moment of peril and panic!

For it all seemed to pass in one swift, lurid moment; had happened and was over before the spellbound spectators had time to recover breath.

All over—and the boy gone!

He was gone before the first and swiftest of the crowd could reach the car, or the first policeman—though he seemed to drop from the clouds—could reach the spot; gone before Master Algy, all white with terror now, could sit up and let out his first shrill howl to prove to himself that he was still alive.

The prompt and plucky thing done, the lad who had done it sprang from the car and vanished—so swiftly that few saw him go. But that tall, athletic man marked the slight figure as it darted through the traffic across the roadway, and moved by a sudden impulse, followed with scarcely less speed.

He overtook the boy a few yards down the quiet side-turning, for which he seemed to have made as though his great object was to escape from the scene of his late exploit. As a matter of fact, he only wanted to get away from the fuss that he knew would be sure to follow. But, clear of that, and safe from observation, his pace slackened and his head drooped with his former dejected air.

He might have bolted after some bad act, instead of having done that prompt and plucky thing. For he positively jumped, and turned a startled face from which the colour swiftly fled, as the man who had followed him laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Why run away, my lad? Jove! You've just done one of the smartest, pluckiest things I ever witnessed, and then you bolt as though you had stolen a watch!"

The man laughed; but the boy did not. He winced at those last words, and stole a swift, half-frightened, half-indignant glance at the speaker. He was an utter stranger to him; a young man, with a slender but athletic figure, plainly clad in dark grey. He met the boy's glance with a shrewd but not unkindly look upon his clear-cut, rather strong than handsome type of face, and with, just then, a twinkle of almost boyish fun in his keen hazel eyes.

The boy felt reassured. He didn't know why. There was something about the stranger.

"Sorry, but I seemed to have touched a raw spot by my remark about a watch," said the man in grey. "I meant nothing; but you have had trouble over a watch—lately?"

It looked like a home-shot, for the boy coloured violently, then went pale again. But his tone was neither over-bold nor sneakish, and he looked the stranger straight in the face, as he answered:

"You are right, sir—though I can't think how you could have known! It only happened this morning—an hour or two ago. I was accused of stealing a watch—and—and other things that had been missed. I know it looked as if I was a thief. But I'm not! I've never stolen a thing in my life! But I was discharged. I knew it was no good saying a word. I shouldn't have been believed. And I can't get another decent job; I've got no character."

Then he flushed with annoyance, at having let out all this to an utter stranger. But somehow he hadn't been able to help it. Those keen hazel eyes seemed to draw it all out of him!

The man in grey shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

"No character—eh? By Jove, I think you've got 'character' enough for a score of boys! Why, that neat little act of yours with the runaway car just now shows character of the top-hole variety, I think. Prompt and plucky—that's the sort of character that takes with me!"

This half-aloud, as if more to himself. But the boy heard, and looked at him sharply, as though he suspected that he was being mocked. So little praise or approval had ever come his way that he was doubtful and suspicious about it now.

"It was nothing much," he muttered; and would have moved off, but the man in grey detained him by a light but firm grip upon his shoulder.

"No, nothing much perhaps," he said, smiling; "only it just happened to be done at precisely the right moment, in precisely the right way. And that made it something—something that few could or would have done!"

The boy flushed again; but this time with pleasure.

"Oh, well, sir, you see," he murmured awkwardly, "I'm used to motors, because it was a garage I've been working at, and I learnt all sorts of tricks with the cars, out on the trial-track."

"I see," said the man in grey. "W

I can't offer you an engagement as trick-motorist; but I can offer you a little job—a very small one—to go on with. It is merely to take this little parcel to the address written upon it. It must be given into no hands but those of the gentleman whose name is upon it. That is so important that I have actually kept it by me for some time, looking for a messenger whom I felt I could trust."

His look, as he took a tiny square parcel from his pocket, said as plainly as words, "And I think I have found one at last!"

"Is it—is it so very valuable, sir?" asked the boy, taking the little packet with some hesitation.

"It's not worth twopence!" laughed the stranger. "But," he added, quickly changing to a low, impressive undertone, that rather startled the boy by its intense earnestness, "but it may be worth much to me—and shall be to you, if only you carry out this little errand to the letter of my instructions. You are to deliver this packet into the hands of the man whose name it bears—not to any servant or second person whatever. I repeat that because it is of the utmost importance."

"But if the gentleman should be out, sir?"

"There is no fear of that. This—er—gentleman never goes out until the dusk of evening; and you should be there long before that. When you have placed it in his hands you are to wait and see him open it, and to carefully note its effect—so carefully as to be able to describe his manner, and to repeat any words which he may let fall accurately to me. That is also of the utmost importance. Do you think you can manage that?"

"I think so, sir."

"He will probably take little or no notice of you—at first—being very interested in the parcel; but afterwards he may get a trifle excited, even rough in his manner, for he has rather jumpy nerves, and is very excitable. To any other boy I should say, don't be frightened. But I think you are not that sort of boy."

He took out a card, and tearing off the name, leaving only the address, gave it to the boy, with some loose silver.

"Go how you like—it is not far," he added. "But do not loiter over it. And when the thing is done, come straight to me at the address on that card. That is all, I think. You quite understand?"

"Yes, sir."

They parted. And that is how Lin Fleet came to undertake his first little job for the man in grey, or, as the boy soon named him, "Mr. Mysterious"

(To be continued.)

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