No. 276—A ROUSING STORY OF DETECTIVE ADVENTURE AT ST. FRANK'S!

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The LANCASHIRE LAD.

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 Lake of Gold," "The Return of the Wanderers," "The Study of Mystery," etc.

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The Lancashire Lad

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

FATTY ON THE JOB.

TAP-TAP!

Tubbs, the pageboy of the Ancient House at St. Franks, rapped lightly on the door of the end study in the Remove passage. It was the study occupied by Dick Goodwin, the new boy in the Remove. And Tubbs eyed the panels of the door curiously as he waited for a response.

For Tubbs knew—as everybody else knew—that this study was a place of mystery. It was provided with a patent lock, and the window was barred and the glass was frosted. Nobody knew what that study contained, for Dick Goodwin was extremely sensitive concerning his private affairs.

Tap-tap!

Tubbs used his knuckles again, and this time a key turned in the lock, and the door opened, revealing the lad from Lancashire himself. Goodwin looked rather surprised when he saw the uniformed figure standing beside him.

"Oh, I thought it was some of the fellows trying to be funny!" he remarked. "Well, Tubbs, what's wrong?"

"Nothing, Master Goodwin," replied the pageboy. "But I've been told to come here and let you know that there's a parcel waiting at the station."

"A parcel?" said Goodwin eagerly.

"Yes, Master Goodwin."

"What kind of a parcel?"

"I don't know, sir," said Tubbs. "There's simply a parcel there, and I thought you might like to know about it, because it won't be brought up to the school, in the ordinary way of delivery, until to-morrow."

"Oh, I see!" said Goodwin. "Thanks!"

Tubbs grinned and looked knowing.

"You, see, Master Goodwin, I know as you young gents have hampers and boxes full of good things—tuck, and cake, and pastries. Them sort of things won't keep if they're left, and it's just as well to eat them while they're fresh."

Dick Goodwin smiled slightly.

"Yes, of course," he said. "I'll go down for the parcel almost at once, Tubbs."

He closed the door, and the pageboy turned away. As he did so, he became aware of the fact that a stout form was in the vicinity, standing quite still, in an intent attitude. The form belonged to Fatty Little, of the Remove, and Fatty's ears were wide open and his eyes were gleaming.

"What's that you were saying, Tubby?" he demanded eagerly.

"I was just having a word with Master Goodwin," said Tubbs.

"I know you were—talking about grub, weren't you?"

Tubbs grinned.

"You see, sir, there's a parcel at the station for Master Goodwin," he said, "and I just told Master Goodwin about

it. I know that these here parcels are best collected when they come, seeing that food won't keep fresh for long."

"Food—eh?" said Fatty Little. "Good egg! So Goodwin has got a tuck hamper from home—eh?"

"I don't rightly know whether its a hamper, sir——"

"It doesn't matter what it is, as long as there's grub inside!" declared Fatty. "All right, Tubby, you can slide off."

Tubbs grinned again and fled. He knew well enough that Fatty Little was hoping that he would be able to have a share of the good things which were contained in Dick Goodwin's parcel.

As a matter of fact, Fatty Little was hungry.

Not that this was very surprising. He was generally in a state of considerable hunger—it was an extraordinary thing for him to be satisfied at any time. His appetite was enormous; it was quite possible for him to demolish as much as any three ordinary juniors could comfortably manage. And even after that Fatty still had sufficient space for another complete blow out.

It was evening now, and tea had been finished in the junior studies for about an hour. Fatty had shared quite a decent spread with the Trotwood twins, whose study he shared. But Fatty was still hungry; he was feeling in fine fettle to share in the contents of a tuck hamper.

And Dick Goodwin would be going down to the station almost at once to collect his parcel!

Fatty decided, then and there, to be on the spot—to be ready. He even wondered if it would be possible for him to raid the parcel—to go down to the station first, collect Goodwin's belongings, and appropriate the grub.

But Fatty Little decided that this would not be the thing. He only wished that Goodwin had been a College House boy, and then it would have been perfectly legitimate for him to make a raid. But it would be decidedly offside to raid a parcel belonging to a member of his own house.

So Fatty decided upon another course.

He would wait and watch. He would wait until Goodwin went out, and then he would stroll down the lane and crouch in the dry ditch, waiting until Goodwin came back. Then, on the way up the lane, he would saunter out, get into conversation with the new boy, make himself extremely pleasant, and casually suggest that he was hungry. If Goodwin had any decency in him he would invite him on the spot to share the spoils.

But Fatty was prepared for any emergency. If Goodwin failed to take the hint then Fatty would have no hesitation whatever in suggesting, in bald language, that he should be allowed to share some of the grub. When it was a question of food, Fatty Little had no scruples whatever.

So, two or three minutes later, Fatty was hanging about the Triangle, keeping a sharp watch on the door of the Ancient House. The Triangle was rather deserted, for most of the juniors were away on Little Side, either engaged in practice, or watching the others. Football had been occupying quite a large slice of the juniors' time of late, for the Remove Eleven had been going strong, and a most important match was down for the next afternoon.

The St. Frank's juniors, in fact, were booked to appear at Bannington Grammar School, when we should do our utmost to wipe up the Grammarians. As skipper of the Remove eleven, I had been working my utmost; I had been driving my men extremely hard, forcing them to spend almost all their available time at practice.

And I was quite satisfied with the result of my work. I had got a very strong team together, and I was confident that we should be able to record many successes this season.

And while I was on Little Side with my men, Fatty Little remained in the Triangle, his thoughts far away from football. He was waiting for Dick Goodwin to emerge, and he did not find it necessary to wait for long.

For, five minutes later, the boy from Lancashire appeared. He came hurrying out of the Ancient House, across the Triangle, and then disappeared down the lane towards Bellton.

"Good!" muttered Fatty. "He'll be back again in about half an hour, and by that time I shall just be hungry enough to enjoy a good feed. Goodwin ain't such a bad sort, a bit quiet, perhaps, but he's bound to take pity on me when he sees that I'm perfectly starving!"

Fatty seemed quite unconscious of Goodwin's presence now; he allowed the new boy to walk down the road without even giving him a glance. It was not Fatty's policy to suggest anything at the moment. He would wait until Goodwin

had the parcel in his hands, and then he would speak. It was no good saying anything to the new boy until he had the goods on him.

Fatty strolled down the lane, and he decided that it would be the best position for him to crouch near the ditch somewhere against the stile which led into Bellton Wood. This would give him quite a decent walk with Goodwin up to the school, during which time he could make his suggestions with regard to sharing the tuck.

"It's the best plan," Fatty told himself. "A lot better than waiting until Goodwin gets up to the school. He might dodge into his study, and then I shouldn't have any chance at all! Thank goodness there ain't any other chaps about, or the grub might have to be shared among six or seven!"

Fatty was undoubtedly selfish. He was thinking entirely of his own stomach at the moment. He wanted as much grub as he could possibly eat, and he was not at all particular with regard to the manner in which he obtained it.

Fatty was one of the best fellows breathing—honest, upright, and straightforward. But when it came to food, he lost all sense of proportion, and he was willing to go to any lengths in order to satisfy his appetite.

And, to make matters worse, just at the present time he was very hard up. He had received a nice little tip at the beginning of the week, but that had gone long since—tips did not last Fatty Little for long. All his pocket-money found its way into the till of Mrs. Hake's little tuck-shop, and it generally found its way there with extraordinary rapidity.

Fatty took up his position in the ditch, as he had planned. It was quite dry, for there had been no rain for some time; indeed, this September was almost like mid-summer, for it was hot, dry, and extremely fine. At least, these weather conditions had been prevailing for the last week. There was no telling when a change would come.

A great many of the juniors would welcome a change, particularly the members of the football team. Playing football on a baking hot afternoon is by no means a pleasant task.

Fatty Little grew impatient. He waited and waited, and he continually glanced at his watch. But the minutes passed, and there was no sign of Dick Goodwin's return. It was growing dusk, too. In the lane, where the trees met thickly overhead, the gloom was quite deep, and it was only possible to see for a hundred yards or so in either direction.

The foliage of the trees formed a complete canopy overhead, although this canopy was not nearly so dense as it had been a month earlier. For the leaves were now falling, and they were thick underfoot on both sides of the road.

At last Fatty Little looked up with much satisfaction, for now, down the lane, he could see a solitary figure swinging along in the direction of the school. The figure was that of a junior schoolboy, and he was carrying a somewhat bulky parcel under his arm.

"Good business!" muttered Fatty. "It's Goodwin all right, and that parcel seems to be a pretty hefty one. Great doughnuts, I hope there's a plum cake and some jam tarts, and—and——"

Fatty Little did not dare to think further. He simply waited, all his thoughts centred upon various articles of food, the majority of them extremely indigestible.

And then suddenly Fatty stood upright in the ditch and stared harder than ever.

For something of a rather remarkable nature was taking place.

Goodwin, who was swinging along the road at a good pace, had had his thoughts far away from his present locality. He had been thinking, in fact, of his present life at St. Frank's, and, on the whole, he was quite satisfied with things as they were going.

There had been a certain amount of opposition from the other juniors, of course; some of the fellows had kicked up a fuss because Goodwin had a study to himself, and because he had it locked, and because none of the other fellows were allowed inside. But the juniors were growing accustomed to things by now, and Goodwin was very little bothered in that respect.

True, there was a certain feeling against him among a section of the Remove, the section which was largely ruled by Fullwood and Co. of Study A. This did not constitute a large number, and Goodwin knew well enough that such juniors were despised by the majority of the others.

The feeling of animosity against Dick Goodwin had been originally started by Ralph Leslie Fullwood himself, for a paragraph had been seen in a London paper concerning Goodwin's father. It

appeared that Mr. Richard Goodwin, of Hollingwood, near Oldham, had been summoned in the county court for debt, and Mr. Goodwin had been unable to pay. This was regarded as a disgrace by Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell and Merrell, and others like them. They had openly declared that it was a rotten shame for Goodwin to be at St. Frank's; that it was decidedly beastly for them to be compelled to mix with such a pauper.

Fullwood had sneered rather too openly, in fact, and he had received a violent punch on the nose from Dick Goodwin. That incident had occurred only a day or so earlier, and ever since Fullwood had been very bitter against the new boy.

Fortunately, the majority of the Removites took no notice of such talk. They were decent fellows, in the main, and they allowed Dick Goodwin to go on his own way, without interfering with him. He was very quiet and reserved, and he did not mix much with the others.

And now, as Goodwin was swinging along the lane, thinking of these things, he suddenly received a surprise, for two men emerged from the wood near by.

They came out in a determined manner, and it was quite obvious that they were not tramps. Both men were well dressed, and they jumped into the road, hurried forward, and stood in front of Dick Goodwin's path. The junior came to a halt and eyed them uncertainly.

"Just a minute, youngster," said one of the men, in a soft but grim voice.

"By gum!" muttered Goodwin. "I'm in a hurry," he went on aloud. "I can't stop!"

"Yes, I think you can, young man," interrupted the man, grasping Goodwin by the shoulder. "That little parcel of yours. I think it would be better in our keeping."

"Ay, but I'm not going to let you have this parcel!" shouted Goodwin, clutching the parcel fiercely. "If you touch me——"

"Don't be unreasonable, young man," interrupted one of the strangers. "Take my advice and give in quietly. It won't do you any good to resist—there are two of us here, and there is no help in sight. Just hand that parcel over and we won't touch a hair of your head. But if you refuse we shall take it by force."

Dick Goodwin looked round him desperately.

"Help!" he shouted, in a tone of alarm.

"By thunder," snapped one of the men, "keep the kid quiet!"

They both stepped forward at the same time, and the next moment Dick Goodwin was fighting desperately. He had only one arm to use, for the other was clinging tightly to the parcel. And he hit out right and left, and just for a moment or two he held his assailants at bay.

But it could not last, the men would overpower him in less than a minute.

Fatty Little, up the lane, jumped to his feet excitedly. He could see exactly what was happening, and all his indignation came rising to the surface. His eyes gleamed and he clenched his fist.

"The rotters—the thieving, burgling bounders!" he gasped. "They're going to pinch Goodwin's tuck!"

This thought was absolutely appalling, and Fatty Little positively throbbed with anger. He had been waiting all this time to participate in the grub, and now it was to be wrenched away from Dick Goodwin before his very eyes. Fatty Little jumped out of the ditch in a warlike spirit, and he went tearing down the lane towards the spot where Dick Goodwin was fighting with his two enemies.

"All right, old man!" shouted Fatty. "Hold on for just a tick—I'm here!"

"Help!" panted Goodwin. "Call the others; we sha'n't be able to fight these men alone!"

Fatty Little received a brain wave.

"It's all right—don't worry!" he yelled, as he came tearing along. "I say, you chaps, come on—show yourselves! Between the twelve of us we'll soon give these two rotters a few bumps!"

The two men looked round in a startled manner. They saw Fatty rushing towards them, and it seemed that other juniors were near by. And the fellows gave up the task as hopeless. Even as Fatty was just rushing up, they released Dick Goodwin and dodged helter-skelter into the dense recesses of Bellton Wood.

When Fatty arrived on the scene Dick Goodwin was alone—hot, breathless, and victorious.

The precious parcel was still in his possession!

CHAPTER II.

FULLWOOD GETS STUNG.

DICK GOODWIN looked at Fatty Little with a grateful expression in his eyes.

"Ay, but that was gradely!" he exclaimed, taking a deep breath.

"It was which?"

"It was gradely—good, you know," said Goodwin. "It was splendid of you, Fatty. You just came up at the right moment. In another two minutes those men would have stolen this parcel from me!"

Fatty nodded.

"That's what I thought," he said. "I took jolly good care they went off without it, you know. I jolly well wasn't going to let them pinch your tuck, Goodwin!"

Dick Goodwin looked rather puzzled.

"My tuck?" he repeated. "Oh, you mean the parcel? It was jolly good of you, Fatty, to come up like that. This parcel is very valuable to me, and I wouldn't have lost it for anything. The scoundrels! They must have been waiting for me, and they sprung out when they thought they could attack me without being seen. But, fortunately, you were near at hand."

"I took good care of that," said Fatty. "I was waiting for you, as it happens, Goodwin. By the way, do you know who those rotters were?"

The new boy seemed to hesitate.

"I—well, I don't exactly know them, Little," he replied slowly. "They—they—— Ay, lad, but there's no sense in us standing here and talking. Those men might come back, tha' knows. We'd better be walking up to the school—and it would be just as well if we walk fast!"

"That's my idea," said Fatty. "Well, never mind about those two men—they've bunked now, and I don't care a hang about them, in any case. That parcel seems pretty heavy. I'll carry it, if you like."

"Oh, I can manage it, thank you," said Goodwin.

"Quite a decent amount of tuck in there, I suppose?" asked Fatty casually.

"Tuck?"

"Grub, you know—things to eat!" explained Fatty.

Dick Goodwin smiled.

"No, there's nothing to eat in the parcel," he replied. "Ay, but I'm sorry to disappoint you, Fatty. There are other things in this parcel—a little electric dynamo, and some things which I had especially made for me—metal things, and——"

"Metal!" roared Fatty Little, coming to a full stop in the centre of the road. "Metal!"

"Yes——"

"Ain't—ain't it grub?" demanded the fat boy warmly.

"No!"

"Great doughnuts!" said Fatty, in dismay. "Why, you—you spoofer! You—you swindler!"

"But, see thee here, lad——"

"I don't want to see anything!" roared Fatty indignantly. "I've been waiting for hours out in the lane here—waiting for you to come back! I thought that parcel was full of grub, you know—I thought it was full of good things to eat! Tubbs told me that it was a tuck hamper—at least, that it was grub——"

"I am afraid Tubbs made a mistake, Little," said Dick Goodwin. "I'm awfully sorry, of course——"

"What's the good of being sorry?" demanded Fatty, glaring. "It's a gidd'y swindle—that's what it is! Do you think I should have come rushing down the lane to save that parcel from those two rotters if I'd known that it only contained metal and dynamos, and rotten things like that? I came to the rescue because I thought some grub was at stake!"

Dick Goodwin smiled.

"Well, I'm very glad you did make a mistake," he said. "I'm sorry, Fatty! If I'd known that you wanted some tuck, I should have brought some up from the village. But you can't be hungry, surely! We only had tea just over an hour ago——"

"Hungry!" echoed Fatty weakly. "I'm starving, you ass! We had tea an hour ago, eh? Well, that's a terrific time—especially when a fellow hasn't had much for tea! We were rather short in our study to-day—we only had one loaf of bread, and half a dozen jam tarts, and nine doughnuts, and two tins of sardines, and three pork pies!"

"Is that all?" asked Goodwin, with a smile. "Well, a third share of that lot seems to be pretty generous—and I expect you had more than a third!"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I had just

over half," said Fatty. "The Trotwoods couldn't eat any more, you know. But what's that amount to, anyhow? I was almost starving when I'd done—and now I'm feeling quite faint! St. Frank's is a ripping school, but they don't provide enough grub—that's the only fault."

"Well, let's get up to the school!" said Dick Goodwin, with a chuckle. "I don't suppose Mrs. Hake will be closed—and, if you like, I'll take you in there and stand you a feed!"

Fatty Little's face cleared, and he beamed.

"Honest injun?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes, of course!"

"Ripping!" said Fatty. "You're a brick! Come on—let's buck up! Mrs. Hake is pretty independent nowadays, and she doesn't keep open very late. We shall have to buzz!"

And Fatty Little and Dick Goodwin hurried up the lane towards the school. Fatty's disappointment was now completely dispelled. It didn't much matter to him where the grub came from so long as he got it. He knew well enough that Mrs. Hake had a good supply in hand, and Fatty fully intended treating himself to a record spread—at the Lancashire boy's expense.

Meanwhile, certain interesting events were taking place in Bellton Wood itself.

As it happened, Ralph Leslie Fullwood, the cad of the Remove, was coming along the footpath through the wood. He had been on a visit to Bannington, and he was just on his way home, and was taking the short cut through the wood to Bellton Lane.

Fullwood was not exactly in a pleasant temper. He had visited Bannington in order to interview a bookmaker—for Ralph Leslie Fullwood indulged in a flutter now and again. But the bookmaker had failed to turn up, the net result being that Fullwood had two pounds in his pocket, and he was also possessed of a somewhat nasty temper. He was angry because he had wished to place two pounds on a "dead cert." On the morrow, probably, he would be very pleased that the bookie had not turned up—for Fullwood would certainly be two pounds the richer.

But, at the present moment, he was in rather a savage mood, and he strode along the footpath, through the wood, with a rather vicious stride, and his brow was wrinkled.

As he was walking he suddenly paused and looked keenly ahead, for he had heard the cracking of twigs, and he knew that somebody was approaching. To his surprise, he saw two strange men running along the footpath with far greater speed than dignity. It was fairly obvious, in fact, that the strangers were in a great hurry.

In the gloom, Fullwood could not see them very distinctly, and he thought it quite possible that they were tramps, or suchlike. And Fullwood who was dressed with his usual splendour, felt somewhat nervous. Right there, in the centre of the wood, it would be easy enough for two men to set upon him and rob him. And Fullwood was not possessed of any great quantity of courage. He decided, on the spur of the moment, that it would be far better for him to dodge out of sight until these men had passed.

So he slipped back between two bushes, and found himself in a little clear spot, where the daylight streamed in through a break in the foliage overhead. Fullwood waited there, motionless.

He expected the two men to come running by within a few seconds; but this did not happen. He listened intently, and he came to the conclusion that the men had slackened their speed considerably, and they were now walking along the footpath in a more sedate manner. In point of fact, they came to a halt quite near the spot where Fullwood was hiding, and they were talking—rather breathlessly.

"Just our infernal luck!" snapped one of the men, panting hard.

"Well we had to come away—it was no good stopping there, with a swarm of kids around us!" exclaimed the other man. "It's not a bit of good, Colmore; we can't interfere with the kid when there are any other fellows in the vicinity. It's got to be private, or not at all. You must realise that."

"Oh, I realise it right enough," said the other man, who appeared to be named Colmore. "It was just a piece of rotten luck, Naggs. In another minute we should have had that parcel from Goodwin!"

Mr. Naggs nodded.

"Yes, and there were all sorts of things in that parcel that we required.

We ought to have got lower down the lane, and then there wouldn't have been any interruption. A cursed nuisance—that's what it was! Perhaps we shall have better luck next time."

"We may not get another chance to interfere with the kid in the lane," said Colmore savagely. "And I thought it was a dead cert., too!"

Fullwood stood listening, and he was now filled with wonder and curiosity. What did it mean? Who were these two men, and what was the parcel to which they referred? Why had they attempted to hold up Goodwin in the lane?

Fullwood was more than usually interested, because he hated Goodwin like poison—and he would willingly have gone out of his way to do any harm possible to the Lancashire boy. He was quite disappointed to learn that the efforts of these two strangers had been in vain.

"We sha'n't wait until we get another chance of interfering with Goodwin in the lane!" said Mr. Naggs grimly. "The next time we shall act in a different way, Colmore. We can't leave things to chance—there's no time to waste, and we've got to hurry up with this work. It won't do for us to get known in the district—we've got to perform our task, and then clear out."

"It's all very well to talk in that strain," said the other man. "But how on earth can we set to work? The first thing is to search that study in the school—as you know. And what chance have we got of doing that? How can we get into the school—and how can we get into that study? It's one thing to talk about these things, and another thing to do them."

"Yes, but we can——"

"Yow—yarooooh!" came a wild howl from near by.

The two men started violently, and stared into the bushes. That yell had come from a spot only a yard or two away, and the two men were thoroughly startled. They had believed themselves to be absolutely alone, and now it was quite obvious that such was not the case.

As a matter of fact, Fullwood had met with an unfortunate accident. Listening to the strangers, he had noticed that a tree stood just behind him, and Fullwood thought it would be just as well to lean against that tree.

He had done so, being quite unaware of the fact that a particularly aggressive wasp was crawling along that section of bark. The wasp was only partially squashed, and it managed to crawl out and affix itself to the tight portion of Fullwood's nether garment.

The next second the wasp retaliated, and its sting penetrated deeply into Fullwood's flesh.

It was a sharp sting and most unexpected, and Fullwood simply yelled with pain and surprise. He jumped about a yard in the air, and then sat down with such violence that the wasp was annihilated once and for all. But it had done its damage—and Fullwood was in great pain.

"Oh, by gad!" he moaned, rolling over. "Yow—ow! I'm stung! I'm in agony, by gad!"

And, as he lay there, the bushes parted, and two men came into view—two startled-looking men. They came into the little clearing, and they stood over Fullwood with grim expressions. The next moment Fullwood was grasped and yanked to his feet.

"So you were listening, were you?" snapped Mr. Naggs viciously. "All right, young shaver——"

"I've been stung!" howled Fullwood. "I—I sat on a rotten wasp!"

Colmore could hardly prevent a smile coming into his face.

"You sat on a wasp, eh?" he repeated. "That was a silly thing to do, kid!"

"I—I didn't do it on purpose, you fool!" roared Fullwood. "I—I leaned against that tree, and I didn't know the wasp was there! Yow! I'm in pain! Can't—can't you do somethin'?"

"We don't happen to be a chemist's shop!" said Mr. Naggs. "A wasp sting wont do you much harm—you can bear the pain all right. Now, I want you to tell me what you were doing here—and you'd better buck up about it!"

Fullwood glared.

"What the thunder has it got to do with you?" he demanded tartly. "I was comin' through the wood—that's all!"

"Oh, you were coming through the wood!"

"Yes, I was!" snapped Fullwood. "You don't happen to have bought it, I suppose?"

"I don't want any sauce——"

"An' I'm not goin' to be questioned

an' cross-examined by you!" interrupted Fullwood. "I've as much right in this wood as you have—an' you'd better not try any bullyin' tricks with me!"

The two men looked at one another.

"There's no need to get wild, young man," said Mr. Naggs, in a more amiable tone. "I want to know if you heard anything—if you were listening to our conversation——"

"I've got something better to do!" said Fullwood. "An' I'm not the kind of chap to sneak behind bushes, listenin' to the jaw of other people. In any case, what would it matter if I did hear you speak? You're not a couple of murderers, I suppose, with secrets to keep? Oh, by gad! This—this sting is hurtin' me frightfully!"

Fullwood proceeded to dance up and down, in a vain endeavour to alleviate the pain. But it was a severe sting, and it was causing him not only a great deal of inconvenience, but considerable agony.

Fullwood was cunning, and he wanted to let these men know that he hated Dick Goodwin—for, if possible, Fullwood was quite prepared to lend the strangers a hand, for it was obvious, from their conversation, that they were anxious to get into Goodwin's study for some reason of their own. Fullwood did not see why he should not take a part in the game, for he, too, was keen upon finding out the secret of the mysterious junior study.

"Oh, by gad!" he groaned. "This sting is awful!"

"Don't make such a fuss about it——"

"You'd make a fuss, if you had a sting like it!" exclaimed Fullwood. "When I get back to the school, all the fellows will howl—particularly that cad, Goodwin!"

"Goodwin?" repeated Mr. Naggs sharply.

"Yes, the new kid—that rotter from Lancashire!" said Fullwood savagely. "The beast will simply yell when he sees that I've been stung! The rotten cad ought never to have come to St. Frank's—he's not our class, in any case! If I could do anythin' to get him pitched out, I'd jolly soon get busy on the job!"

The two men again exchanged glances.

"You don't like Master Goodwin, then?" inquired Colmore.

"Like him!" exclaimed Fullwood savagely. "I hate the rotter—I detest him!"

"Well, it's none of our business," said Mr. Naggs. "Boys have their likes and dislikes, I suppose. Well, young man, you'd better be getting along—and I should advise you to have some liniment rubbed on that sting as soon as you can. Wasp stings are nasty things, especially when you are obliged to sit down on them!"

Fullwood groaned.

"This one's awful!" he exclaimed. "I wouldn't mind so much for the cackles and grins of the other fellows—particularly Goodwin. The cad! I'd like to see him kicked out, or disgraced!"

"Well, we don't know the kid, and we don't want to know him," said Mr. Naggs carelessly. "Boys don't interest us much—unless they happen to be sporting fellows. Mr. Colmore and I are rather keen on anything in a sporting line, you know. It's our business, as a matter of fact, although you needn't tell that to everybody."

"Sportin'?" repeated Fullwood. "You ain't bookies, are you?"

Mr. Naggs smiled.

"Maybe we are, and maybe we're not!" he said non-commitally. "But anything in that line is in our line, too. We're not particular. Billiards, or snooker, or a nice game of poker now and again. You look a bit of a sport, my lad—perhaps you indulge in those games occasionally?"

Fullwood nodded.

"Rather!" he said. "I've got two pals who are keen on them, too. We ain't good little Georgies, like a lot of the other fellows. We believe in enjoyin' life while we can. There's nothin' like it!"

Mr. Naggs nodded and smiled.

"Quite right, too, young gentleman," he said. "Maybe we could arrange a little meeting? What do you say to the idea?"

"Oh, I'm agreeable!" said Fullwood. "But I want to be a bit more comfortable than I am now! Oh, my hat! This sting is simply frightful, you know!"

"Well, it will probably be better by to-morrow afternoon," said Mr. Naggs. "Now, let me see! To-morrow is Wednesday. I reckon it's a half-holiday at St. Frank's, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Fullwood.

"There's a nice little inn just on the outskirts of Bannington," said Mr. Naggs reflectively "A place called the Foaming Bowl. Quite a homely, comfortable inn, it is. What do you say to our meeting there at three o'clock to-morrow afternoon? We might be able to have a little game of poker, or nap, between us."

Fullwood looked quite pleased for a moment.

"That's all right!" he said. "Nothin' I'd like better, except to have this taken away. Confound that rotten wasp! Well, we'll say three o'clock to-morrow afternoon, at the Foaming Bowl Inn."

"Right!" said Mr. Naggs. "We'll be there!"

He gave his companion a meaning glance, for it was quite clear that these two men thought that they could make use of Fullwood in some way. He had told them that he hated Dick Goodwin, and that he would do anything to disgrace the Lancashire lad. Therefore it was quite probable that Fullwood would be able to assist these men, indirectly, in their own particular task.

On Fullwood's side, he wanted the meeting to materialise, because he was anxious to find out more concerning Dick Goodwin's secrets. And Fullwood thought it quite possible that Mr. Colmore and Mr. Naggs could tell him quite a lot, if he only went to work in the right way.

Therefore the meeting was desired by all three parties, and it was arranged then and there. The appointment was finally fixed.

"That's good enough, then," said Mr. Naggs, glancing at his watch. "We shall have to be going, and you'd better not delay any more, Master—Master——"

"My name's Fullwood," said the cad of the Remove.

"Right you are, Master Fullwood," said Mr. Naggs. "We'll look upon that as settled. You'd better get to the school, and you'd better have that sting attended to."

Fullwood departed from the two strangers a few moments later, and he was by no means sorry to do so. Under ordinary circumstances, he might have lingered, and he would certainly have put questions to them; but, as matters were, Fullwood was in great pain, and he wanted to arrive at the school as quickly as possible, in order to have the sting soothed in some way.

He hurried through the deep gloom of the wood, and at length arrived in Bellton Lane. To his great horror, he now found that it was impossible for him to walk in a natural attitude. He was compelled to hobble and even then every step caused him further pain. It was a stiff, unnatural stride, and Fullwood was very conscious of the fact. He hoped against hope that the Triangle would be deserted when he arrived, and that he would be able to get into the Ancient House without being seen.

He decided that it would be better to make straight for the window of Study A, and to get in by that means. Then it would not be necessary for him to cross the lobby and to go down the Remove passage, where there would certainly be a number of juniors.

But Fullwood's hopes were dashed to the ground, for when he arrived in the Triangle he found not one or two juniors there, but at least a score. And he had not put in his appearance for more than ten seconds before the majority of the fellows were looking at him and passing comments.

"What's the matter with the ass?" exclaimed Handforth. "What's he walking in that fat-headed way for?"

"Goodness knows!" said McClure. "Perhaps he's torn his trousers somewhere!"

"You ass!" grinned McClure. "It's not that! He's hurt in some way. I remember Merrell walking like that last term—after he had been whopped by the Head."

Handforth and Co. strolled across the Triangle and intercepted Fullwood before he could reach the Ancient House. Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West and I were there, too. We had just come in from Little Side, and we were attired in football togs. We were warm, breathless, and highly satisfied with ourselves.

"What's the matter, Fully? You seem to be in pain," said Handforth. "What's wrong with your elegant walk?"

"Go an' eat coke!" snapped Fullwood savagely.

"A bit short-tempered, ain't you?" said Handforth, glaring. "If you can't answer me any better than that, my son, I'll give you a dot on the nose! Why ain't you walking like a peacock, as

usual? Why ain't you strutting along with your extra languid air? You look as though you'd been stung!"

"I have," snarled Fullwood.

"Eh?"

"I've been stung, you ass!" roared Fullwood. "A rotten wasp stung me in the rear, where I sat down——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth and Co. howled, and many other juniors, who had heard Fullwood's remark, howled also.

"Very funny, ain't it?" snapped Fullwood fiercely.

"Yes, rather!" grinned De Valerie. "You've been stung by a wasp where you sit down Poor old Fully! You'll have to take your meals standing up all day to-morrow."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Let me get past, you fools!" snarled Fullwood.

"Is it swelling?" asked Reginald Pitt, with exaggerated concern. "It's rather an awkward place——"

"Stand out of the way, confound you!" shouted Fullwood thickly. "I'm in agony, an' I want to get indoors as quickly as I can."

"That's all right!" said Handforth, winking at his chums. "You want a rest, Fully; that'll put you right. You need to sit down—like that!"

With a quick movement, Handforth jerked his foot out, sweeping Fullwood's feet from under him. The next moment Ralph Leslie bumped to the ground with a jar, and he sat right upon the sting.

"Yarooooh!" he howled wildly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Fullwood's plight did not seem to concern the juniors very much. At all events, they roared with laughter as Fullwood wriggled on the ground. They apparently looked upon it as quite a good joke.

"Let him get up!" I grinned. "A wasp sting is pretty painful, you know."

"Well, he's only got what he deserves," said Handforth. "As a matter of fact, Fullwood deserves about a dozen stings all over him, just to punish him for all his misdeeds!"

Fullwood didn't say any more. He jumped to his feet painfully, glared round, and then made a dash for the Ancient House, hobbling along in a manner which caused the juniors to burst into fresh roars of laughter. They certainly did not sympathise with the unfortunate leader of Study A.

Just as Fullwood was mounting the Ancient House steps, a figure with decidedly bow legs came out, and Fullwood collided with him violently. He did not even wait to apologise, although he knocked the other's hat flying.

Mr. Josh Cuttle looked round after the junior, and he gave a grunt. Mr. Cuttle was a new member of the household staff, and he was quite a character. The majority of the juniors were immensely amused by his sayings already, for Mr. Cuttle was quite a curiosity in his own way.

He had never been known to smile, and he was the very embodiment of gloom; but his very gloominess was sometimes quite comical.

Mr. Cuttle replaced his hat, and then he came down the steps into the Triangle.

"There was young gentlemen and there was young ruffians," he exclaimed. "Some of the young ruffians was dressed up like you wouldn't know 'em from the real article. That wasn't no young gentleman what just knocked my hat off. Why wasn't he? Ask me! Because he never stopped to apologise. Which was imperlite, to say the least."

"Hear, hear!" said Handforth. "Everybody knows that Fullwood isn't a gentleman, and he couldn't be polite if his life depended upon it."

"Still, there was some little excuse for Fullwood," put in Pitt. "He's been stung by a wasp, and he'd just been made to sit down on the sting."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Cuttle almost expressed satisfaction for a brief second.

"Wasps was vicious animiles," he said, in his deep voice. "Wasps was dangerous. Why was they dangerous? Ask me! Because wasps has got stings, and them stings was long, with pizen in 'em."

"Have you ever been stung by a wasp, Mr. Cuttle" inquired De Valerie.

"There was times when I was stung awful," replied Mr. Cuttle cheerfully. "Ten year ago I sat on a wasps' nest. By hokey, there was stings everywhere! Why did I sit on that wasps' nest? Ask me! Because I didn't know as it was a wasps' nest until I sat down."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Were you hurt much?" I inquired politely.

"I was hurt bad," replied Mr. Cuttle.

"I was hurt dreadful. There was stings where I sit down, and there was stings where I lay down, and there was stings where I wash my neck. I was near dead that time," he added, with a little sigh of happiness.

"You must have been a bit swollen," remarked Handforth.

"There was insects in this world which wasn't no good," said Mr. Cuttle. "Wasps wasn't no good. Wasps eat jam, and wasps eat fruit. What was wasps for? Wasps was for causing annoyance."

"Well, there's something in that," said Pitt. "Wasps certainly don't seem to be much good in the world. I don't suppose Fullwood thinks so, anyway."

Mr. Cuttle nodded.

"Stings was bad," he said vaguely.

"Well, the weather's all right—that's one thing!" remarked Pitt, with a glance at the sky. "Let's hope it remains fine for to-morrow afternoon. We're going over to Bannington, to play the Grammar School, and there's every indication that we shall have a fine afternoon."

Mr. Cuttle shook his head, and looked extremely melancholy.

"There was going to be a change," he declared gruffly. "There was going to be rain. Why was there going to be rain?"

"Ask me!" grinned Handforth.

"There was going to be rain to-morrow, because there was allus rain when something special was planned," said Mr. Cuttle. "It was the way of things."

And Mr. Cuttle passed on, shaking his head gloomily.

CHAPTER III.

NELSON LEE IS WANTED.

"FEELIN' better now, old man?" Gulliver asked that question in tones of sympathy. He was in Study A, in the Remove passage, and Bell was there, too. Upon the couch, with a soft cushion beneath him reclined Ralph Leslie Fullwood. The lad of the Remove was not looking excessively uncomfortable.

"Oh, I'm better now!" said Fullwood. "The sting wasn't so bad as I thought; anyhow, the pain a.. 't what it was. You might chuck a fag over, Bell."

"Certainly!" said Bell, handing his leader a cigarette.

"We'd better be gettin' on with our prep.," put in Gulliver. "It's gettin' late, you know, an' it'll soon be supper-time."

"Never mind about prep," said Fullwood. "I wanted to talk about somethin' more important. I suppose you chaps know there's goin' to be a football match at Bannin'ton to-morrow afternoon?"

"Of course we know it!" said Bell. "Nipper an' his gang are goin' over to be whacked by the Grammar School!"

"Rats!" said Fullwood. "They won't be whacked. The Grammarians are goin' to get it in the neck, if I know anythin' about football."

"Well, you don't know much," remarked Gulliver.

"I'm not goin' to argue," said Fullwood languidly. "An' it's all rot about hurryin' up with prep. There's hours before supper yet. It's only about seven o'clock."

"I thought it was later," said Gulliver. "The evenin's draw in early now, you know. Besides, it's pretty dull to-night."

"Rats to the weather!" said Fullwood irritably. "I was talkin' about the match at Bannin'ton to-morrow afternoon. We're goin' over there with the other fellows."

"Eh?" said Gulliver.

"What?" exclaimed Bell.

They both stared at Ralph Leslie.

"I say that we're goin' over to Bannin'ton to-morrow afternoon, to see the match," said Fullwood calmly. "It'll be a good match, by all that I can hear, an' it's only right that we should follow up the football."

"You've changed your views, haven't you?" inquired Gulliver. "If you want to go to Bannin'ton to see this rotten football match, you can go. I'm not goin'. I prefer somethin' more lively."

"Same here!" said Bell. "What's the matter with you, Fully?"

"There's nothin' the matter with me at all," replied Fullwood. "An' if you chaps would only listen instead of interruptin' me, you'd understand things. We'll go over to Bannin'ton to see the match. At least, that's what we'll tell the other chaps. It will create a good impression, don't you know. But when

we get to Bannin'ton we shall only watch the match for about half an hour, an' then we'll slip off."

"Oh," said Bell, "that's different!"

"Well, rather!" agreed Gulliver. "Where shall we slip off to, Fully?"

"The Foaming Bowl Inn."

"The which?"

"The Foaming Bowl Inn!" repeated Fullwood. "It's a little wayside pub, only about half a mile from the Grammarians football ground, so it'll just be handy. I'm goin' to introduce you to a couple of pals of mine—Mr. Colmore, and Mr. Naggs!"

"By gad!" said Gulliver, staring.

"Well, what's the matter, you ass?" demanded Fullwood.

"Mr. Colmore and Mr. Baggs!" said Gulliver. "Who the dooce are they?"

"Mr. Naggs, I said," declared Fullwood. "I happened to meet them this evenin', in Bellton Wood. I don't know who the thunder they are; but they're certainly not what they pretend to be."

"And what do they pretend to be?" asked Bell.

"Bookies, or somethin'," said Fullwood. "Anyhow, they asked me to meet them to-morrow afternoon in the Foamin' Bowl Inn, an' they promised that we should have a rippin' time. But I'm keen—I'm pretty wide awake, you know. An' I'm not takin' any of their swank! It was bluff; an' we're goin' to that inn to-morrow afternoon to find out the real truth."

Gulliver and Bell stared harder than ever.

"I'm hanged if I know what you're tryin' to get at!" said Bell bluntly.

Fullwood lost no time in telling his chums of the little incident which had occurred in the wood. He explained what he had overheard regarding Dick Goodwin, and then he explained how he had given himself away by yelling—when the wasp stung him. Gulliver and Bell listened with much interest.

"Well, it's a queer yarn," remarked Gulliver, at length. "I wonder what these chaps wanted Goodwin's parcel for? An' why do they want to get into his study, an' all the rest of it?"

Fullwood shook his head.

"Goodness knows," he replied. "But there's somethin' fishy about it—an' there's somethin' fishy about Goodwin. I mean to find it out, if I can. I'd do any dashed thing to get that chap kicked out of St. Frank's!"

Bell nodded.

"Yes, I suppose you're feelin' pretty sore," he remarked. "It's only a day or two ago since Goodwin knocked you down in the Triangle. It was a beautiful swipe, too!"

"Oh, yes! I enjoyed it immensely!" snapped Fullwood. "I'm going to make the beast pay for that, you mark my words! An' if there's anythin' we can do to discredit him at St. Frank's, we'll jolly well do it! These two men, Colmore and Naggs, know more than they would admit to me, an' I'm goin' to find out the actual truth to-morrow, if it can be managed."

"Well, it'll be a bit of sport, anyway," said Bell, strolling over to the window, and looking out into the gloomy Triangle. "An' if these men know anythin' about Goodwin, perhaps we can get to know it, too, and then we shall have a hold over him. We shall be able to make him sit up! My only hat!"

Bell uttered the last remark in a tone of astonishment.

"What's the matter?" asked Gulliver, looking round.

"There's a bobby comin' across the Triangle, an' he's nearly runnin'!" said Bell.

"A bobby?"

"Yes; a policeman, you know," said Bell. "He left a bicycle at the gates, an' it seems that he's in a dooce of a hurry over somethin'!"

Gulliver and Fullwood went to the window, and looked out. But the policeman, by this time, had disappeared from view. He was, in fact, just mounting the steps of the Ancient House, where Handforth and Co. were having a little argument. I was standing just inside the lobby with Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson. We all turned as we heard a strange voice.

"I want Mr. Lee—I want Mr. Lee at once!" exclaimed the voice.

We turned round, and found Handforth and Co. staring with much interest at the hot and breathless constable.

"Hallo!" said Handforth. "What's wrong?"

The policeman was perspiring freely. His trousers were clipped at the bottom, and his clothing was covered with dust—proving that he had been riding his bicycle furiously. He removed his

helmet for a moment, and mopped his heated brow.

"I think you ought to arrest yourself," said Handforth critically. "You ought to take yourself in charge for riding to the public danger! You've been scorching!"

"I have. I've been riding hard," said the constable, panting. "And I haven't got any time to waste here. Can you tell me how I can find Mr. Nelson Lee. I understand that he's the House-master——"

"Yes, that's right," I said, stepping forward. "Do you want Mr. Lee?"

"Yes, young man, I do!" said the constable.

"Well, I'm Nipper——"

"Mr. Lee's assistant?"

"Yes," I said briskly. "If it's important——"

"It's urgent—terribly urgent!" interrupted the constable. "I've got an important message for Mr. Lee, and I should be much obliged if you can direct me to Mr. Lee's study at once, Master Nipper."

"This way!" I said crisply.

The constable followed me across the lobby, and a great many juniors were interested in our progress. It was not often that officers of the law were to be seen within the gates of St. Frank's. And there was something so urgent about this man's attitude that I thought it as well to take him to the guv'nor without a moment's delay. He followed me down the passage, and at last I arrived outside the door of the House-master's study. I tapped upon it.

"Come in!" came Nelson Lee's cheery voice.

I opened the door, and we entered. Nelson Lee was sitting at his desk, leaning back, enjoying a cigarette and the evening paper. He placed the paper down, and looked at us curiously.

"This constable has just arrived, sir," I explained. "He says that he's got a most important message for you, so I brought him straight along."

"Quite right, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "Well, constable?"

The man saluted.

"I've got a message from Inspector Jameson, of Bannington, sir," he said. "It's most urgent, sir!"

"Let me see it!"

Nelson Lee held out his hand, and the constable passed over the desk an envelope, which Nelson Lee at once proceeded to tear open. He removed a single sheet of notepaper, and quickly scanned the words which were written there. I watched the guv'nor's face closely, and I saw no sign of surprise or emotion of any kind. His eyes merely grew a trifle more intent—that was all.

"Dear me!" he said quietly. "This appears to be rather curious, constable."

"Yes, sir, it's terrible," said the policeman huskily. "It's—it's the worst affair I've ever seen in all my life! It fair gave me a turn, I can tell you!"

"What is it, sir?" I asked, unable to restrain myself.

"You may as well read the note, Nipper," said Nelson Lee, passing the note over to me.

I quickly read the words which were written across the notepaper. They were scrawled in pencil, and it was obvious that Inspector Jameson had been in very great haste, and apparently in a state of agitation, too. For the note ran in this way:

"Dear Mr. Lee.—Can you spare the time to come to Oak Lodge, Edgemore, at once? I need your advice and assistance, and I shall deem it a great honour if you will do me this favour. There has been a terrible murder here, in this house—the most ghastly affair I have ever investigated. I am sure you will be interested, for this crime is mysterious, sinister, and appalling. Please come immediately.

"R. JAMESON."

I looked up at the guv'nor, and gave a soft whistle.

"Phew! This looks serious, sir!" I remarked. "A murder—in Edgemore, too! That's near home, if you like! Jameson must be in a pretty stew, or he wouldn't write like this!"

It was obvious to me, in fact, that the worthy Inspector Jameson, of the Bannington police, was not only in a stew, but in very much of a panic. It was not often that he was called upon to investigate murders, and this affair, being more than usually mysterious and terrible, had carried the slow-going, country inspector off his feet, as it were.

Nelson Lee looked at the constable.

"Do you know anything about this affair, my man?" he asked. "I presume you have just come from Oak Lodge?"

"Yes, sir," replied the constable. "All I know is that an old gentleman

has been foully murdered in that house; he was beaten to death by some heavy instrument. But I don't know if anyone has been accused, and if the inspector has managed to find any clue."

"You were not there long, then?"

"No, sir," said the constable. "I only just arrived when the inspector sent me on my bicycle straight to St. Frank's with this note. You see, Mr. Lee, I was only transferred to Bannington from Helmford last week."

"Oh, I see!" said Nelson Lee. "Then you don't know much about this district?"

"No, sir."

"Very well," said Nelson Lee. "I will come with you at once, constable. Jameson appears to be in trouble, so I will see if I can help him out."

The constable nodded.

"The inspector is in a rare way, sir," he agreed. "He hardly knew what he was doing when he scrawled that note. He dashed it off while I was waiting, and he was so agitated that he fairly shook. It's a terrible business, sir."

Nelson Lee nodded, then looked at me.

"Any chance of my coming, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"I'm afraid not, Nipper," replied the guv'nor. "It is getting late, and the other boys would wonder at your absence. And I do not want you to say anything about this business to anybody. There is no reason why the whole school should be talking about this murder. There will be quite enough publicity to-morrow I imagine!"

Nelson Lee passed out of his study, and I felt rather disappointed—for I had been hoping that he would take me with him. However, I realised that I was not absolutely necessary, and it would be just as well, perhaps if I did not leave St. Frank's. As Nelson Lee had said, my absence would only cause comment.

But I was anxious, nevertheless, and I watched Nelson Lee pass out of the Triangle with somewhat mingled feelings. He went on his bicycle, and the policeman accompanied him. Then I made my way to Study C., and told Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson all about it.

In doing this I was not disregarding Nelson Lee's instructions. Tommy and Montie were not included in the "other fellows." They were my own particular chums, and if I had a secret, it was theirs, too. I knew well enough that they would not talk.

"My only hat!" exclaimed Watson, when I had finished. "A murder—in Edgemore! Why, it's only just over a mile away from St. Frank's as the crow flies. Oak Lodge! Where is Oak Lodge?"

"I don't quite know," I replied. "I know Edgemore very well, but I don't seem to remember a house known as Oak Lodge. I expect it is one of those large places lying on the outskirts of the little hamlet. Well, the guv'nor is on his way there now, so everything will go all right. But if this murder is as serious as Inspector Jameson makes out, we shall see a few Scotland Yard detectives knocking about here to-morrow!"

"Begad!" said Sir Montie. "That will be frightfully exciting, dear old boy!"

"Rather!" said Tommy Watson. "Things will be livened up!"

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee was speeding along with the policeman down the quiet lanes towards the tiny village of Edgemore. The famous detective was feeling rather uncertain. He had an idea that Inspector Jameson had exaggerated the case, and that it would not prove to be so grim and ghastly.

At last Edgemore was reached, and the pair cycled quickly through the main street. Round the doorway of the public-house a little group of farm labourers stood, chatting together in an animated fashion. Probably they had heard of the murder already, and were discussing it. A little further on, two old men were standing by a cottage gate, deep in conversation. They looked up curiously as Nelson Lee and the constable went by.

"There'll be a rare commotion in this district to-morrow, sir," remarked the constable. "The news isn't known yet except just about here."

"Do you know when the tragedy was discovered?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Only about two hours ago, sir," replied the constable. "An old lady gave the alarm, and—— But here we are, sir. The inspector will give you all the details."

The policeman dismounted at the gateway of a fairly large house which stood right back from the road. The gate was old and dilapidated, and a gravel path led up to the house. There were many

trees and bushes in the front garden—so many, in fact, that the house was practically hidden from view. It would be possible to go by on a dull day without knowing that a house stood there at all.

Upon the gate, in faded letters, were the words "Oak Lodge." Nelson Lee noticed this as he passed inside, wheeling his bicycle.

A minute later, he and his guide were at the front door of the house, and the constable walked right into the hall—for the big door stood slightly ajar.

"This way, sir!" said the policeman. "The inspector is in the front room, I expect."

Nelson Lee entered. And then the schoolmaster detective received something of a shock. The front door closed softly, and with a click. He was quite in darkness, and Nelson Lee suspected something vague—something treacherous. He hardly knew what to think, for, until this moment, he had had no suspicions whatever.

And then a brilliant beam of light shot out from across the hall—the light from a powerful electric torch. It played fully upon Nelson Lee, and he was half dazzled by the brilliance of the beam.

"Good-evening, Mr. Lee!" exclaimed a soft voice. "You will oblige me exceedingly by putting your hands above your head!"

"Dear me!" said Nelson Lee calmly. "A trap—eh?"

"Precisely, Mr. Lee—a trap!" said the soft voice. "I am glad to find that you are taking it so calmly, because I simply hate a fuss. Let me hasten to add that if you are thinking of making any resistance, it will be just as well for you to think twice. I am not alone. The constable is behind you, and I have another companion by my side. We are all armed, and we are all determined!"

"You can bet your life on that, Mr. Lee!" exclaimed the man who had posed as a constable, in a mocking voice. "I deceived you nicely, didn't I? A policeman's uniform is very handy at times. You see, we knew that you were unacquainted with Inspector Jameson's handwriting, and so our little ruse was quite safe."

"Well, what do you intend to do?" asked Nelson Lee smoothly. "I am quite in your hands—please go ahead!"

"By thunder!" exclaimed the man who had spoken first. "You are a cool card, and no mistake!"

"I really see no reason why I should get excited," said Nelson Lee. "I have sufficient sense to know that any resistance on my part would be unfortunate—if not fatal. I am trapped, and I know it. Is that not sufficient?"

"Scarcely," said one of the men. "You see, Mr. Lee, we know that you are a very resourceful customer. And we do not wish to take any chances. Therefore we shall be obliged to deal somewhat drastically with you."

And then, even as Nelson Lee was wondering if it would be possible for him to make a fight for it, two strong arms clasped him round the shoulders. He was pulled round with terrific force, and hurled to the floor. It was the constable who had performed this action, and the next moment the pair were struggling fiercely.

But Nelson Lee really had no chance. The other two men quickly came to his assistance, and the detective's hands and feet were tightly bound. He was a prisoner!

He had walked into the trap, and he could scarcely be blamed for doing so. What reason would he have had to suspect? The whole affair had been engineered so cleverly, and in such a straightforward manner, that Nelson Lee had had no opportunity of suspecting the truth until it was too late.

And now he was a captive in the hands of——

Of whom?

CHAPTER IV.

NOT QUITE SUCCESSFUL.

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST shook his head gravely.

"Yes, dear old boys, this is a frightfully serious affair!" he declared. "Murders are awful things, you know, and it is sometimes frightfully difficult to lay hands on the murderer."

"Yes, Montie, we know that," I put in. "The guv'nor has been gone for about half an hour, and I am beginning to get impatient."

"Why, he won't be back for hours, you ass!" said Tommy Watson.

I nodded.

"Yes, I know that," I said. "At the same time, I'm impatient. I want to be there—I want to be on the spot with the guv'nor. I've a good mind to slip out, and to have a look round on my own."

"We'll go with you!" said Watson eagerly.

"No, that wouldn't do," I said firmly. "Three of us might give the game away; but I could go alone—— Come on!"

I broke off as a tap sounded upon the door. The next moment, Morrow of the Sixth entered the study.

"You're wanted, Nipper!" he said briskly.

"I'm wanted?" I repeated.

"Yes—on the telephone," said Morrow.

"By Mr. Lee?" I asked quickly.

"No; I don't know where Mr. Lee is," said the prefect. "I wanted Mr. Lee at first, but he doesn't seem to be in the place. The matter seems to be rather important, and so I came along for you."

"Who is it calling up?" I inquired.

"It is Inspector Jameson, of Bannington."

"Egad!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Inspector Jameson, eh?" I said quickly. "Right you are, Morrow. I'll come along at once. The telephone in the prefect's room, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Morrow. "And let me tell you this, my lad—it isn't usual for juniors to use the telephone——"

"Oh, that's all right, Morrow," I interrupted. "Keep your hair on!"

I passed out of the study, and slipped along the passage, and within a moment or two I was in the prefect's room, which happened to be deserted at the moment. I went over to the telephone, and picked up the receiver, which had been lying on the table, off its hook.

"Hallo!" I said. "Nipper speaking."

"Oh, is that you, Nipper?" came the voice of Inspector Jameson. "I really wanted to speak to Mr. Lee, but I have been told that he isn't on the premises at the moment."

"You ought to know that, sir!" I said wonderingly. "Hasn't he arrived yet?"

"Arrived?" repeated the inspector. "Arrived where?"

"Why, in Edgemore!" I exclaimed.

"In Edgemore?" exclaimed Jameson, in wondering tones. "What on earth are you talking about, young man? How should I know where Mr. Lee has gone to?"

I stared blankly before me.

"How should you know?" I repeated. "Why, considering that Mr. Lee has gone straight to you, inspector, I think you ought to know!"

"Why, that's splendid!" came the voice across the wires. "So Mr. Lee is coming here? Good! Then I needn't trouble you, Nipper. I shall be able to put this little matter before Mr. Lee himself."

I was more puzzled than ever.

"The little matter!" I repeated. "But, according to your note, inspector, the matter is terribly urgent—vital, in fact."

"What matter?" asked the inspector.

"Why, the murder at Edgemore!" I said impatiently.

I heard Inspector Jameson utter an exclamation.

"The—the murder?" he shouted.

"Yes!"

"What murder?" yelled the inspector.

"What—what murder?" I repeated. "Why, great Scott! This seems to be jolly queer! Mr. Lee has left St. Frank's with a constable, in order to go to Edgemore, where a murder has taken place at a house called Oak Lodge," I went on. "Is that clear, inspector?"

"I can hear your words clearly enough, but I'm bothered if I know what they mean!" said Inspector Jameson. "Are you trying to have a joke with me, Nipper?"

"Good heavens, no!" I shouted. "Aren't you in Edgemore now?"

"No; I'm sitting in my room at the Bannington police station!" replied the inspector.

"What?" I roared.

"There's no need to bellow like that, Nipper—I'm not deaf!" said the inspector sharply. "I say that I'm at the Bannington police station, and I don't know what in the world you mean by suggesting that I should be in Edgemore. In any case, I don't believe

I whispered to my chums to remain in the background—not that they took any notice. Then I went down on my hands and knees and peered through the iron bars of the grating.

there is a telephone there. And as for murder—well, I haven't heard anything about one!"

"Whew!" I whistled. "This is getting rather warm, sir! In any case, it is quite obvious that there's something deadly wrong. Will you answer me a question?"

"Yes, if you hurry up, and talk sensibly!"

"Well, inspector, did you send a note to Mr. Lee just over half an hour ago?" I asked eagerly. "Did you send a note by a constable, requesting that Mr. Lee should go at once to Edgemore——"

"No, I did not!" interrupted the inspector bluntly. "I haven't written Mr. Lee a note in all my life, that I know of—certainly not this evening!"

I quivered with excitement as I stood at the telephone.

"The note was brought here by a constable," I said. "The man told us that he had been transferred from Helmford, and that he was comparatively a stranger in this district."

"Well, the fellow was a liar!" said Inspector Jameson bluntly. "There has been no constable transferred from Helmford this year, nor at any time. The Helmford police is quite a separate force to the Bannington police. What does all this mean, Nipper? I don't mind telling you that I'm decidedly puzzled. And as for my sending Mr. Lee a note this evening—the idea is ridiculous!"

"Well, there's only one thing for it!" I said grimly. "Mr. Lee was taken away from St. Frank's by a trick—and it doesn't look very healthy to me, inspector. I suspect foul play!"

"Good gracious!" said Inspector Jameson.

"It is the only possible thing I can conclude, sir," I said. "Listen! I'll tell you what happened. This constable arrived at St. Frank's on a bicycle, and he was hot and breathless. He brought a note which was supposed to come from you, and, when Mr. Lee opened it, he found that the note requested him to go at once to Oak Lodge, in Edgemore, where you were waiting. There had been a terrible murder there, and you badly wanted Mr. Lee's advice and help."

"A tissue of nonsense, Nipper!" said Jameson. "That's what it is—absolute nonsense! I haven't been in Edgemore this week, and there has been no murder. If there had been one, I certainly should not have written appealing to Mr. Lee for assistance. I rang up now because I wanted to know if Mr. Lee could identify some old coins——"

"Bother the coins!" I interrupted anxiously. "Look here, inspector, this looks very bad to me, and we've got to do something. That letter was a decoy, and the guv'nor has been tricked. It might be serious—it might be even worse than serious. Can you send a couple of men to Oak Lodge, in Edgemore, at once?"

"I could send them, of course!" said Inspector Jameson doubtfully. "But I don't want the men to go on a fool's errand——"

"I've told you what happened—doesn't it seem to be significant?" I demanded impatiently. "Surely there's no need to haggle and hesitate about a thing like this, inspector? Mr. Lee's life may be in danger—and it is your duty to send two men at once, in case of emergency."

"Yes; but I want to be satisfied that everything is——"

"Are you going to send those men or not?" I demanded angrily.

"If I think it is necessary——"

"Haven't I told you that the thing is urgent?" I yelled.

"You've told me something; but I'm not perfectly satisfied——"

"Oh, rats!"

And I slammed the receiver on its hook, and glared at the instrument.

"Silly old idiot!" I snapped to myself. "Of all the wooden-headed asses, that inspector is the worst!"

As a matter of fact, I was exceeding anxious and greatly worried. My temper was rather short, and it was not to be wondered at.

For I knew the truth now.

I knew that the letter had been a decoy, and that Nelson Lee had gone off on an errand which was likely to be serious—for him. And, since it was no good relying on Inspector Jameson, I decided to take action on my own account.

And so I rushed out of the prefect's room, and hurried straight back to Study C. I burst in with my face flushed, and with my eyes gleaming.

Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West looked at me wonderingly.

"Egad!" exclaimed Sir Montie "Has anything happened, dear old boy?"

"You—you look absolutely scared!" said Tommy Watson.

"I am scared—I'm nearly off my head with worry!" I said quickly. "Listen, you fellows, and I'll tell you something. That constable who came here was a fake. That note he brought wasn't from Inspector Jameson at all—it was a fake, too; a decoy for the guv'nor——"

"Begad!"

"A—a decoy!" gasped Watson.

"Yes," I replied grimly. "It's a trick. And I wouldn't mind betting anything that those men we followed to the old mill are responsible."

I was referring to an incident which had occurred a night or two back, when I and my chums had followed two suspicious-looking characters from the vicinity of the school to the old mill on the edge of Bannington Moor. Those strangers, I suspected, were connected with the mystery which surrounded Dick Goodwin, the new boy in the Remove. For some reason those rascals were intent upon doing some harm to Nelson Lee, and they had adopted this ruse in order to carry out their programme.

Sir Montie and Tommy were greatly impressed when I had told them everything.

"But—but what shall we do, Nipper?" asked Watson, rather helplessly.

"Dear old boys, we must hurry away to Edgemore at once!" said Tregellis-West. "Every minute is of value, and we must simply run!"

"That's the idea, Montie," I agreed. "If the guv'nor has been trapped, we may be just in time to lend him a hand—to get him out of the hole. He hasn't been gone an hour yet, and it's wonderfully lucky that Inspector Jameson rang up. Otherwise we should have known nothing, and then the guv'nor wouldn't have had a soul to help him."

"Lucky isn't the word for it!" said Watson. "I reckon it was providential!"

"Rather!" I agreed. "Well, come on; don't waste any more time."

"What about supper——"

"Blow supper!" I said. "We can't think anything about that now—or bedtime, either. We are perfectly justified in going off, and we can easily suffer the consequences afterwards."

"I'm game, dear old boy," said Sir Montie promptly. "Anything you like."

Two minutes later we were hastening across the dark Triangle, out into the lane. And, once we arrived there, we stepped out at a brisk run through Belton Wood. By taking a footpath through the wood we cut off a big corner, and would arrive in Edgemore within the shortest possible amount of time.

We passed through the wood without incident, and at length we came upon the outskirts of Edgemore. We slipped quickly through the street, and then we encountered a slight difficulty. We did not know where Oak Lodge was—we did not know, in fact, whether there was such a place.

But this was soon settled.

Passing an old countryman near the end of the village, I paused, and questioned him.

"Oak Lodge?" repeated the old man. "Why, yes, sir; it's the big house just down the road, yonder—on the left-hand side. You can't miss it. It stands well back from the road, and the gate is a bit broke up."

"Thanks!" I said briskly.

We went on, and I felt more content. It was something to know, at all events, that there actually was a house called Oak Lodge. I had been fearing that Nelson Lee had been taken to some other place altogether.

But, of course, the men who had sent the decoy letter had no idea that Nelson Lee would tell anybody else and that Inspector Jameson would ring up personally that evening. The whole affair had happened so quickly that there had been no time for the rascals to do much.

At last we arrived at Oak Lodge, and we found the house in total darkness. It was deserted, and we had no difficulty in realising that the place had been empty for some time. We scouted round for a minute or two, and then I came to a halt, and looked at my chums.

"There's only one thing to do," I said, in a low voice. "We shall have to approach the house silently, and try to gain admittance. If we can get inside,

we'll search the place. If we can't get inside, we'll keep watch."

"That's the idea," said Watson. "But do you think Mr. Lee is still here?"

"I don't know. I hardly know what to think," I said. "In any case, all we can do is to get busy without delay. We mustn't stand here jawing. Come on!"

We slipped over the gate, and then under cover of the bushes, we approached the house.

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee's position was not a happy one. Bound securely hand and foot, he had been taken down into one of the cellars of Oak Lodge. These cellars were strong, and there were no windows—only iron gratings, which it was impossible to force.

And, even supposing these gratings were not secure, Nelson Lee could do nothing. He was powerless to move.

He did not know who his assailants were, or why they had imprisoned him in this old cellar. It was fairly clear that the men did not mean to harm him.

He had been in the cellar for about half an hour—and he had not wasted this time. Quietly and doggedly he had been working at his bonds, and at last they were beginning to show signs of becoming loose.

Nelson Lee was quite sure, in fact, that, if he was permitted to be alone for a further half-hour, he would be able to slip the loops from his wrists, and then it would be comparatively easy for him to make a bid for freedom.

The minutes passed slowly, and still the imprisoned detective continued his efforts. His wrists were already sore and aching, but he did not mind this. It was not the first time he had been bound up, and it would not be the first time that he had escaped—supposing that he did escape.

And then, after a further ten minutes had elapsed—and when Nelson Lee was beginning to think that he would be able to do the trick—he heard footsteps overhead. Less than a minute later a bolt sounded on the door of the cellar, and then a light appeared. It was the light from the electric torch, and it was cast downwards into the cellar.

"Sorry to keep you so long here, Mr. Lee," said one of the men, as he came down the cellar steps. "But we have been having a little conflab, you understand? And at length we have decided what we shall do with you."

He and another man came down into the cellar together, and they stood looking down upon Nelson Lee. The detective could only see these men indistinctly, for they were behind the brilliant electric light. But Lee was certain of one thing—these men were heavily masked.

"Measure him!" said one of the two men.

The other man had a long tape-measure in his hand, and he proceeded to take Nelson Lee's measurements. He only did it roughly, and then he rose to his feet again

"Oh, he'll fit the trunk splendidly!" he exclaimed. "I thought perhaps he'd be a trifle too large—but was wrong."

"I dare say you understand what we mean, Mr. Lee, eh?" said the other man pleasantly. "We intend to pack you away in a nice little trunk—but you won't be suffocated. You will simply be transferred in a motor-car to another spot—a spot which is not quite so public as this one. We shall be ready for you in about ten minutes' time."

The two men chuckled, passed up the stairs again, and then once more the cellar door was closed.

Nelson Lee was left to himself, and he did not feel exceedingly optimistic, for he felt certain that he would not be able to free his wrists within ten minutes. And then he would be placed in a trunk, thus making it practically impossible for him to regain his liberty.

But Nelson Lee did not know that three figures were prowling about outside the house.

Those three figures, needless to say, belonged to Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Tommy Watson, and myself. We had been scouting round, trying to find an opening.

But, so far, we had failed—and then, quite suddenly, we became aware of a gleam of light through a grating, quite near the ground on the south wall of the house, where there were no windows.

"By Jove!" I said softly. "Do you see it, you chaps?"

"Bogad!" breathed Sir Montie. "Rather, dear old boy!"

"It's a light!" said Tommy Watson unnecessarily.

We crept nearer, and I whispered to my chums to remain in the background. Not that they took any notice. I went down on my hands and knees when we arrived at the grating, and I peered through the iron bars.

My chums joined me, and they watched, too. We could only see a portion of the cellar, but this was quite sufficient for our needs. For Nelson Lee's legs were distinctly visible, projecting round a corner of the stonework. And we heard voices, too—and we listened intently.

Although we didn't hear everything that was being said, we heard some of it—and we knew well enough that Nelson Lee would only have ten more minutes alone. That was as good as saying that we had exactly ten minutes to render him the assistance he so badly needed.

The light disappeared, and all became darkness.

"Now, my sons, we've got to get busy!" I whispered. "It seems impossible to get into the cellar by means of this grating—it's imbedded right into the stonework, and we couldn't move it unless we had some dynamite handy."

"Then we're absolutely done!" said Watson, in dismay.

"Well, I'm not so sure!" I said. "Don't you remember we passed a coal-shute a few yards away, just near the house? A circular iron cover, you know. It's bound to lead into the cellar, and, if it's large enough, I may be able to squirm down and get into the coal-cellar."

"Well, it's a chance, anyway!" said Tommy Watson. "But even then you don't know whether you'll be able to get into this cellar—where Mr. Lee is."

However, it was quite useless standing there and making objections. The only thing was to get busy at once, and so we quietly retraced our steps until we came to the circular iron cover which concealed the coal-shute.

It was removed quite easily, and then we looked down into the black cavity.

"I think it's big enough!" I whispered.

I slipped down into it, and was able to lower myself, until I was hanging by my fingers. It was a tight squeeze, and I did not know what would happen when I released my hold. But this was no time to hesitate, and I took a deep breath, and dropped.

Down I went until—crash!

I alighted heavily on my feet, and then fell forward, for there were some loose bits of odd coal knocking about which made it impossible for me to keep an upright position. I was bruised somewhat, and grazed in one or two places; but this did not matter a jot. I picked myself up, and stood for about twenty seconds, listening. But no sound came to my ears—my entry had passed unnoticed.

Click!

I switched my electric torch on, and the little beam of light shot out, revealing the fact that I was in a small cellar, with a door over on the further side. This door stood half open, and I quickly went across to it, and passed out into a kind of passage. Another door stood a few yards away, and when I arrived at this I lifted the latch, and pushed the door gingerly. It gave a slight creak, and opened.

One flash of my electric torch was sufficient.

For there, almost at my feet, lay Nelson Lee!

My heart gave a jump of triumph, and I knew that the guv'nor believed me to be one of his enemies. So I went quickly down on my knees, and touched his shoulder.

"Guv'nor!" I exclaimed softly.

Nelson Lee started.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed, and didn't even turn a hair. "This is indeed a pleasant surprise, Nipper! I was certainly not expecting you this evening!"

"You don't seem to be very bowled over, sir!" I exclaimed, rather disappointed. "I thought you'd be a bit staggered, you know."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I am!" murmured Nelson Lee. "Splendid, my boy! You must tell me all about it later on. For the moment, the main thing is to get out of this predicament. The most necessary thing in the whole world at this juncture is a sharp pocket-knife."

"Here you are, sir!" I exclaimed quickly.

It did not take me more than ten seconds to slash through the ropes which bound Nelson Lee so tightly. The

guv'nor rose to his feet, and stretched himself.

"I don't know how you managed it, Nipper—you must explain things to me later on," he exclaimed. "Now, if it is possible—— Hush! I think I can hear——"

Nelson Lee paused, for at that very moment the door of the cellar—at the top of the steps—was opened, and a bright beam of light shone down upon us. A shout of anger went up on the instant.

"By thunder!" roared one of the men. "He is free! And there's somebody—it's Nipper! Confound it all——"

"Hands up—hands up, the pair of you!" snapped the other man rapidly.

Both the men were furious, and I expected to hear a bullet whizzing past my ear at any moment. But another interruption came at the crucial second.

A hammering sounded upon the front door, and then a third man came rushing up to the two who were at the top of the stairs. This third man was fairly breathless with alarm and excitement.

"The police!" he shouted huskily.

"What?" gasped one of the others. "It's impossible——"

"They've just come, I tell you. The police!" yelled the other. "They are hammering at the door now, and unless we make our escape at once——"

The others did not wait to hear any more, or to give any further attention to Nelson Lee and myself. They simply turned on their heels and rushed away with all speed.

"Come on!" shouted the guv'nor sharply.

We climbed the cellar steps, and arrived in a long, dark passage. A door stood open at the end, and it was clear that the three rascals had just made their escape by that means. We were about to follow, when there was a rush from the other direction, and two police officers appeared and an inspector. The latter was Inspector Jameson.

"Who's that?" he demanded sharply.

"I'm glad you have come, Jameson," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "I should advise you to send your men outside as quickly as you can. There are three questionable characters out in the grounds—they have just escaped."

The two constables were sent out at once, although Nelson Lee had very little hope of them succeeding in their search. Inspector Jameson looked at the guv'nor, and he looked at me.

"Then your yarn was true, young man?" he exclaimed.

"Of course it was true!" I replied. "Did you think I was having a game, or something? If only you had been here a little earlier, those three rotters would have been nabbed!"

It did not take me long to explain to Nelson Lee what had happened, and how I had got on the track of the affair. The guv'nor was highly delighted. And Inspector Jameson appeared to be extremely pleased with himself—although goodness alone knew why. He certainly hadn't done anything particularly great.

It was, however, fortunate that the police had arrived on the scene at the moment they did, for it saved any further trouble, and the guv'nor and I had not been obliged to fight. When at last we were on our way back to St. Frank's, I asked Nelson Lee what he thought about it.

"Really, Nipper, I hardly know!" he replied. "The whole affair is decidedly mysterious."

"You don't know who the men are?"

"I have not the faintest idea."

"And you don't know why they tried to kidnap you?"

"In that respect, too, Nipper, I am at a loss," said the guv'nor. "Perhaps I shall be able to learn something before long, but at the present moment I am nonplussed."

"Still, all's well that ends well," remarked Tommy Watson. "Thank goodness those rotters didn't carry out their rotten plan!"

Upon the whole we felt well satisfied with the way things had gone, and we returned to St. Frank's in excellent spirits. But Nelson Lee was looking grim and thoughtful. He knew that it would be necessary for him to keep his eyes well open, and be strictly on his guard.

But the mystery remained a mystery.

Who were these men, and why had they attempted to kidnap Nelson Lee? Were they in any way connected with the boy from Lancashire? Somehow I could not help thinking that there was a connecting link.

CHAPTER V.

SAINTS V. GRAMMARIANS.

"EVERYBODY ready?"

I asked that question briskly as I came out into the Triangle from the Ancient House doorway. It was the following afternoon, and I was attired in football togs, with a light overcoat thrown over my other things. The weather was fine—in spite of Mr. Cuttle's gloomy predictions—and there was very little wind blowing. It was, in fact, quite an ideal afternoon for the first football match of the season against Bannington Grammar School.

"We're waiting for you, you ass!" said Handforth.

"Good!" I replied. "Let's get a move on, then!"

The Triangle was quite thronged with juniors, a good many of them being attired in football clothes, the same as myself. We were all going over to Bannington on our bicycles, and there were quite a number of other fellows who were coming along just to see the match. Altogether there were at least thirty juniors who were going, and among them I noticed Ralph Leslie Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell, of Study A. The three nuts of the Ancient House were leaning on their bicycles, too.

"Hallo!" I exclaimed, looking at Fullwood curiously. "Are you coming over to see the match?"

"I thought about doing so," said Fullwood languidly.

"I'm glad to see it!" I said. "It's something new for you to take an interest in footer, Fully! It's never too late to mend, you know!"

"Thanks!" said Fullwood, with a sneer. "We're coming to look at the match, but, if it ain't good enough, we shall slide off somewhere. We thought we'd come just to give you a little encouragement."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, we shall be frightfully encouraged, old boy—we shall, really!" smiled Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "It will put such energy into us, that we shall be able to score half a dozen goals in the first half!"

Everybody grinned—except Fullwood and Co.; they scowled.

"Well, get on with it!" said Fullwood. "For two pins I won't come at all!"

"There you are—two beauties!" said Handforth promptly, passing him the two pins.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Don't be a fool!" said Fullwood.

"You see, we'd much rather you didn't come!" explained Handforth. "How do you expect me to keep goal with you looking on—with your face worrying me?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Besides, I'm going to give you a punch on the nose!" went on Handforth. "If you think you can call me a fool——"

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Fullwood. "Why, you—you——"

"Hold on, Handy!" I grinned. "Fullwood didn't call you a fool, after all. He only told you not to be one. And we're not going to have any row now, just as we are starting off. We want you to keep goal for us, and there's no sense in wasting some of your strength in punching Fullwood."

We managed to get Handforth out with us somehow, and then we started down the lane in a long procession, on the way to Bannington.

The team I had chosen for this match was, in a way, a trial one. Some of the fellows were being given a chance to show what they could do in unfamiliar positions, and I had an idea that the eleven, as a whole, would be a very effective one.

The team was made up as follows:

Handforth; Talmadge, Hart; Pitt, Watson, Yorke; De Valerie, Tregellis-West, myself, Somerton, and Christine.

The Bannington Grammar School fellows were rather hot stuff, and I was a bit anxious concerning this match. I badly wanted it to be a win for St. Frank's. If we could only pull it off, it would be a double victory for us—since we should beat the Grammarians on their own ground.

In due course we arrived at the Bannington Grammar School, and we were warmly welcomed by our friendly rivals.

The skipper of the eleven frankly told me that he and his men were intent upon wiping us up completely, and sending us back to St. Frank's with our tails between our legs. To this remark I replied that we did not happen to be monkeys, and that, as a matter of fact, we did not possess tails at all.

Those juniors who had come with us stood round the ropes with the Grammarians—ready to yell themselves hoarse the first time we scored a goal. Fullwood and Co. stood by themselves, watching languidly, and with only a superficial show of interest.

"A bally bore—that's what I call it!" yawned Fullwood. "Why don't they start?"

"They're just tossin' up now," said Gulliver, who took some slight interest in the game. "Hallo! Good! Nipper has won the toss!"

"Has he?" said Fullwood. "A fat lot I care!"

"What about the appointment at the Foaming Bowl Inn?" asked Bell, looking up. "We mustn't miss that, Fully!"

"My dear chap there's over three-quarters of an hour yet," said Fullwood. "Goodness knows how we shall exist until then. The appointment with Mr. Colmore and Mr. Naggs is for three o'clock. It's not a bit of good us gettin' there before time."

"Oh, well, it's all right," said Gulliver. "We shall nearly have time to see the first half before then."

They lounged against the ropes, watching idly. And just at that moment the referee gave his whistle a shrill blast.

"Good!" exclaimed McClure eagerly. "They're off!"

"Go it, St. Frank's!" roared Church. "Show us what you're made of!"

"On the ball, you chaps!" roared the Grammarians.

The game started well, although the home team had most of the luck. For two or three minutes the ball was within the Remove's half of the field continuously, and Handforth was dodging about from post to post as though he were standing on hot bricks.

The Grammarians' centre-forward was a pretty keen player, and when the ball came to his feet, he did not lose a second. He dashed forward, right in, beating Watson and Pitt fairly easily. And then he steadied himself and took a mighty kick.

Slam!

The ball drove straight for the net, and it went low and wickedly.

"Goal!" howled the Grammarians, in triumph.

But those juniors who shouted were somewhat too previous. For Handforth, flinging himself down full length, just managed to tip the ball round the post, where it rolled over the goal-line.

"Oh!"

"Hard lines!"

"Corner! Corner!"

Handforth picked himself up, looking pleased, but breathless.

"Good old Handy!" I shouted, as I ran past. "That was topping of you! I thought the ball was in that time!"

"Not much!" said Handforth. "I'm not letting the ball get between these posts to-day, my son!"

But Handforth was wrong.

The Grammarian outside-right took the corner kick, and he lifted the ball beautifully, and it went skimming across the mouth of our goal just near the bar. Handforth punched out steadily, and he just tipped the ball and sent it spinning. Then one of the Grammarian's heads got in the way, and the next second the ball was safely lodged at the back of the net.

"Goal!"

"Oh, good!"

"Goal! Goal!"

The Grammarians fairly howled with victory, and Handforth turned round, and glared at the ball in a most malicious manner.

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

"I thought you weren't going to let the ball between the posts this afternoon, Handy?" I grinned. "You can't be too sure in this game, you know!"

"But—but I—I don't understand!" gasped Handforth. "I sent the blessed thing out, you know——"

"Yes, and somebody else hit it in!" I retorted. "Well, never mind! We shall be able to equalise before long, if we buck up."

We did buck up. The Grammarians were now one goal ahead—it was, in fact, the only goal scored, so far. And we were now on our mettle, and we were determined to equalise at the very earliest possible moment.

I kicked off, and the ball was passed quickly to Tregellis-West, and Sir Montie slipped it over to De Valerie. But our outside-right was a trifle too slow, and he was robbed of the ball just as he was racing down the touch-line. The leather swung back into midfield, and from there a long shot sent it spinning over the St. Frank's goal.

Handforth took the kick, and it was a magnificent one. The ball came half over the field, dropping practically at the feet of Somerton.

"Go at it!" roared the Remove fellows round the ropes. "Now's your chance, Sommy!"

The Duke of Somerton lost no time. He streaked down the field, and there were only the Grammarian backs to stop him. But they were rushing forward in a most determined manner. At the very last moment, however, Somerton gave the leather a deft kick, and he passed it beautifully on to me. The Grammarian backs were tricked, and I had an open goal in front of me.

"Shoot! Shoot!"

"Go it, Nipper!"

Everybody watched breathlessly—particularly the Grammarians. Their goalkeeper came rushing out to meet me—and this was a bad mistake on his part. I pretended to shoot, but, instead, I passed the ball swiftly to De Valerie who had come up on the wing. It met his foot, and he sent in a perfect oblique shot which just skimmed under the bar and went shooting into the net.

"Goal!"

"Oh, lovely!"

"Hurrah!"

The other players came crowding round De Valerie and me, and they shook our hands warmly.

"Topping, dear boy!" said the Duke of Somerton. "We've equalised now!"

"You had the biggest share in that goal, my son," I said. "If we keep on at this rate, we shall wipe the Grammarians absolutely out before we've finished. What we've got to do is to keep up the pace."

"Rather!"

We lined up again, feeling extremely cheerful. But the Grammarians were now looking grim. We could see that they were determined to gain the lead again as soon as they could.

Round the ropes the onlookers were talking together excitedly.

"Blessed lot of fuss!" remarked Fullwood, yawning. "I'm hanged if I can see anythin' to go dotty about!"

"Oh, hang it all, Fully," protested Gulliver, "it's a rippin' game! I'm not much of a football enthusiast, but I like to see a fast game like this. Our chaps are playin' up rippin'ly!"

"Oh, well, it's nearly a quarter to three, so we shall be goin' soon," said Fullwood. "I'm fed up with this already. A nice quiet game of billiards—with a few bob on the result—is more in my line!"

"Hear, hear!" said Bell.

Gulliver did not seem to agree, although he said nothing. He watched the game with interest, and he followed the movements of the ball keenly after the game had restarted.

It was obvious, right from the very first, that our opponents were in deadly earnest. They came to the attack fiercely, and with very fine combination. Again and again they attempted to get the ball in the net, but every time Handforth was ready. And he was ably assisted by Talmadge and Hart, the backs. Not once did they allow the ball to get through, although there were many narrow shaves.

And, just before half-time, there was a piece of excitement.

Bob Christine, on the left wing, managed to get away with the ball. He streaked down the field, near the touchline, carrying the leather at his feet in a beautiful style. He was racing down to the corner, in order to send in a centre, for we were ready, waiting for the ball to come.

Meanwhile, the Grammarian backs were hot on Christine's trail, and they robbed him of the ball at the very last moment; but, in doing so, they succeeded in putting the leather over the goal-line.

"Corner, corner!"

A corner it was, and Christine took the kick. He sent it out rather wide, and I thought the ball was going to be cleared. But, somehow or other, Sir Montie dashed in, and he caught the ball beautifully. It simply went into the net like greased lightning. There was absolutely no chance of saving it.

"Goal!"

"Oh, hurrah!"

"St. Frank's! St. Frank's!"

The Grammarians were silent. It was nearly half-time, and there was very little hope of equalising before the whistle went. And their visitors were already one goal up! It was a bit startling for them, after they had expected to beat us hollow.

"Good old Montie!" I exclaimed, patting him on the back. "That was a ripping goal, old man!"

"Dear old fellow, I simply couldn't help it!" said Sir Montie modestly.

"I didn't really do anythin', begad! I simply kicked the ball, an' it went in!"

I grinned.

"That's what usually happens when a forward kicks a ball in the right direction," I said drily. "Well, it looks like a dead cert for us now; but we mustn't be too sure about it."

It was just as well, for immediately after the interval, the Grammarians opened the attack with terrific energy, and they were rewarded with a goal within the first five minutes.

The score now stood at 2—2. Again and again the home team attempted to add to their score, but they failed to do so.

And again and again the Saints stormed the Grammarians citadel, attempting to get the ball into the net. But the minutes passed rapidly, and still the score remained in the same condition.

"Oh, it's going to be a draw!" declared Church. "I call that rotten, you know. I was hoping for a jolly fine win to-day!"

"There's plenty of time yet," said McClure. "We've got another twenty minutes!"

"But there won't be any more scoring if things go on like—— My hat! Just look at Nipper!"

I had succeeded in getting away with the ball, and I shot down the field, and took no notice of various shouts of "Off-side!" from the Grammarian onlookers. I knew that I was on the side, and I kept on. It is always a fatal mistake for a player to take any notice of the shouts uttered by the spectators.

It was for the referee to rule me offside, or not, and the referee did not interfere. The backs came at me in a most determined fashion, and I decided upon a long shot.

I kicked hard, and the ball went soaring aloft, and dropped right into the mouth of the goal. But the custodian succeeded in punching out. But Somerton was there, with his head, and the ball went bouncing back into a corner of the net.

"Goal!"

The St. Frank's juniors simply shrieked themselves hoarse.

But this was absolutely nothing compared to the yell which went up about two minutes later. For De Valerie succeeded in adding another goal to the score, and that was by an individual effort which I have seldom seen surpassed. He took the ball right down the field himself, and he beat everybody who came against him. Finally he slammed the ball into the net in a manner which there was no stopping. The goalie was beaten to the wide!

After that the game was a foregone conclusion. The Grammarians lost heart completely, and the rest of the match was merely a waste of time. When the whistle finally went we had beaten the Grammarians on their own ground by four goals to two. It was a magnificent victory for the St. Frank's Remove.

Our first away match of the season had been a triumph.

CHAPTER VI.

FULLWOOD'S PROMISE.

MEANWHILE, Ralph Leslie Fullwood and his two study mates were in the little rear parlour of the Foaming Bowl Inn, about half a mile down the quiet country road which passed the Grammarians' football ground.

The nuts of Study A had presented themselves at three o'clock to the minute. And there, standing in the little private doorway of the inn, were Mr. Colmore and Mr. Naggs. Both men looked quite pleased when they saw their visitors approaching, and they welcomed Fullwood and Co. warmly.

"I knew you would turn up, young gentlemen," said Mr. Naggs amiably. "Well, we're going to have a nice little time this afternoon."

"Billiards, I suppose?" asked Fullwood languidly.

Mr. Naggs shook his head.

"No, not billiards," he said. "They haven't got any table here, for one thing. I vote we go into a little back parlour, and indulge in a game of poker. What's better than poker, after all? If you've got plenty of money you don't mind losing a bit, and if you're hard up you can't lose much! And you always stand a chance of winning some!"

"That seems fairly logical, anyhow," remarked Bell. "I'm not very flush to-day, as it happens."

"Then perhaps you'll rob me of a

quid or so," smiled Mr. Colmore. "Come in, boys!"

They passed into the stone-paved passage of the inn, and then made their way into the comfortable back parlour—where they were quite private, and free from observation.

The game of poker was quite interesting—from the point of view of Fullwood and Bell. Gulliver was not quite so impressed with it. These young rascals were all good players, and Mr. Colmore and Mr. Naggs soon discovered that they could not teach their visitors much.

And, after an hour's play, Fullwood was the richer by two pounds five shillings, and Bell had raked in thirty-six. Gulliver, on the other hand, was the loser by fifteen shillings— and he did not like it at all. He gave Fullwood an expressive look—meaning to convey the suggestion that the spoils should be shared later on.

"Well, I think we've had enough of poker, for the time being," said Mr. Naggs, stretching himself. "It's nearly half-past four, boys, and I could do with a cup of tea. What do you say?"

"Oh, I don't mind," said Fullwood. "But what's wrong with the game?"

"I dare say you find it very much to your liking," smiled Mr. Naggs. "However, I'd like to have a chat with you—on another subject. And we can chat during tea. They sell quite decent stuff here, and we can have a good feed, too, if you like.

The tea was ordered, and it proved to be a good one.

As soon as the beverage was poured out, and the juniors were sipping at their cups, Mr. Naggs opened the subject he had been waiting for all the time. He looked at Fullwood thoughtfully as he selected a slice of bread-and-butter from the plate.

"By the way Master Fullwood," he said. "There's a new fellow at your school, isn't there—a new boy in your Form?"

"Goodwin, you mean?" said Fullwood.

"Yes; that's the name," said Mr. Naggs. "Goodwin."

"Innocent, ain't you?" exclaimed Fullwood calmly. "You speak as though you've only just heard the name; but I bet you know a fat lot more about Goodwin than we do!"

Mr. Naggs smiled.

"I can see that you're a fly young gentleman," he said genially. "As a matter of fact, I do know a bit about Master Goodwin—a good bit. I dare say you've noticed that he's secretive, and that he keeps to himself?"

"He does!" said Gulliver. "He stops in his own study nearly the whole time, and he keeps it locked and barred, as though the place held about a thousand guilty secrets!"

"Well, I don't know about a thousand," said Mr. Naggs. "But that study of Goodwin's certainly holds one secret——"

"One guilty secret?" asked Bell, looking up.

"Well, it's not a very innocent one, at all events!" said Mr. Naggs grimly. "That boy comes from Lancashire, and his father is one the biggest scoundrels who ever trod this earth!"

"By gad!" said Fullwood. "I thought as much!"

"An absolute rogue!" proceeded Mr. Naggs, calmly. "I can't go into all the details, but I'll just put you in possession of a few facts. For example, Master Goodwin was sent to St. Frank's so that he could get on with his underhand work without being interfered with. You see, boys, it's this way."

Mr. Naggs sipped his tea, and then leaned back in his chair.

"This boy's father, Mr. Richard Goodwin, is a manufacturer at Hollingwood, near Oldham," he went on. Mr. Colmore and I were employed at Goodwin's factory, and we held excellent positions there. Well, we were pretty friendly, and we got our heads together, and planned out—after a lot of experiments—a new die. This die is our own idea entirely, and is something quite new to the commercial world."

"I see," said Fullwood. "Carry on."

"This die is something that has never been seen before—and the idea is entirely our own," continued Mr. Naggs glibly. "We trusted Mr. Goodwin, and we placed the formula for the die in his hands, asking him what he could do with it. He promised us that he would push it forward, and that we should be rich men within three months. Well, Master Fullwood, things didn't turn out like that. Goodwin kept our formula, and when we inquired about it, he pretended to be ignorant—he knew nothing of it!"

"The dirty rotter!" said Gulliver.

"Those words aren't strong enough, my lad," said Mr. Colmore grimly.

"He's worse than a dirty rotter," said Mr. Naggs. "He kept our formula, and then professed ignorance of it. Well, to cut it short, he knew that we should do everything in our power to get our own property back—our own patent, as it were—and so, in order to be on the safe side, he gave this precious document into the hands of his son, and sent him to St. Frank's. And that secret formula of our die—our own invention, mark you—is now in Goodwin's study at the school. That's why he keeps his door always locked, and his window barred. We daren't go near the place openly, because Goodwin would recognise us, and then he would have the formula placed in some other spot."

"But can't you go to the police?" asked Bell curiously.

Mr. Naggs laughed.

"The police?" he repeated. "What would be the good of that? Do you think that this cunning rascal, Goodwin, has allowed any evidence to collect against him? We trusted him, and we expected him to deal with us squarely. He didn't—and so we are in the cart. The only possible way in which we can get back our property—the only way in which justice can be done—is by taking the whole matter into our own hands. That's what we're doing—although it may seem to most people a questionable procedure. It can't be helped, we intend to get our rightful property back—and we're willing to go to any lengths in order to do so. We're not going to be robbed of our invention by this rascal and his son?"

"Rather not," said Fullwood, who swallowed the whole yarn completely. "Well, what do you propose to do? You can't break into the school, I suppose?"

"We shall break in if we're compelled to!" said Mr. Naggs grimly. "But we don't want to do that—we'd rather have the thing done quietly. After we've got our formula we sha'n't mind exposing this young rascal for what he is—and his father, too!"

"An' serve them right!" said Fullwood viciously. "Goodwin is a rotter—a cad! If I can help you in any way to bring about his downfall, I'll do it!"

Mr. Naggs and Mr. Colmore exchanged glances.

"That's the kind of talk, sir," said Mr. Naggs heartily. "I was sure that we could rely upon you to lend us a hand, if it was any way possible. You and your friends here aren't the kind to see injustice done to honest working men—for that's what we are, after all!"

The two cunning rascals watched Fullwood and Co. closely. And it was clear from the very first that the bright youths of Study A had accepted the story without hesitation. They did not like Goodwin, and they were ready to believe anything bad against him. Otherwise they might have questioned the truth of this plausible yarn.

"You can help us—if you want to," said Mr. Naggs at length. "You can do a lot, Master Fullwood."

"How can I?"

"By helping us to get into the school—not to burgle it, you understand!" went on Mr. Naggs hastily. "I don't mean that. We just want to get into that study, so that we can find the formula. Nothing more. Or, better still, if you could find it for us, we would reward you handsomely."

"I don't think that's possible," said Fullwood. "We couldn't get into the study, and, in any case, what is your idea of a handsome reward?"

Mr. Naggs considered.

"Well, you see, this formula is worth tens of thousands of pounds to us," he said. "We sha'n't get the money until later on, of course—until our die is fully developed and put on the market. But if you can help us to get the formula, we'll give the three of you twenty pounds."

"Each?" asked Bell.

"Yes—each!" said Mr. Naggs promptly.

"Phew!" whistled Gulliver. "That's not bad, you know!"

"Jolly decent, in fact," said Fullwood. "Of course, if the Head got to know anythin' about this, we should all be expelled—but we know that it will all be in a good cause, an' justice will be done. Goodwin is a young scoundrel, and if he gets his just deserts it will only be right. But I'd rather you search for the formula yourself, Mr. Naggs. It is just possible that we may be able to work somethin' together—we

might be able to let you into the school one night."

"It would be splendid if you could," said Mr. Naggs quietly. "I don't want you to think that there's anything underhand about it. You can watch us, if you like, all the time. You can see us into this study, and you can see us out—and we'll show you that we haven't taken a single article of value. All we want is that formula—nothing else. It's ours, and we have every right to it."

"Of course you have," said Fullwood. "And I promise you that we'll do the best we can."

"It was hardly possible that the three young rascals of Study A realised exactly what they were doing. They did not grasp the full significance of the affair. Otherwise they might have hesitated before agreeing to let the two strangers into St. Frank's.

Fullwood and Co. were merely foolish—they were rascally in their foolishness, perhaps, but they were not absolutely responsible.

"I'll tell you what," went on Fullwood. "We shall have to arrange another meetin'!"

"Another meeting?" said Mr. Colmore sharply.

"Yes," said Fullwood. "Say, in a day or two. In the meantime we can be lookin' round, an' we might be able to hit upon some scheme where we can let you into the school easily. A thing like this can't be arranged on the spur of the moment, you know. We've got to spy out the lie of the land, an' all that kind of thing. My idea is this. We'll do our utmost to arrange things to-morrow. We'll try an' fix something up so that you'll be able to get into the school to-morrow night. An' we'll meet you down in the lane—say just inside the wood—an' tell you what we've done. An' if you're collared when you're inside the school, we don't know anythin' about it. That's understood."

"Oh, of course," said Mr. Naggs promptly. "If we're caught we shall have our own explanation—don't you worry. There won't be any need for us to mention your names, gentlemen. Well, I must say that you are made of the right stuff. It's agreed, then, that we shall meet near the stile at Bellton Wood to-morrow evening?"

"Yes," said Fullwood. "At half-past nine exactly."

"Good enough," said Mr. Naggs, holding out his hand. "That's a promise!"

"Done!" said Ralph Leslie Fullwood.

. . . .

When Fullwood and Co. returned to St. Frank's, they were not feeling quite so sure of themselves. They vaguely wondered if they had done right in promising to let those two strangers into St. Frank's.

But, as Fullwood said, who would know anything about it? How could they—Fullwood and Co—be held responsible if things went wrong? Even supposing Mr. Naggs informed against them, they could deny the whole story—and their word would be believed sooner than the word of these strangers.

And so, upon the whole, Fullwood was feeling fairly satisfied. And there was always the one fine thought in his mind—all this scheming was being undertaken to bring Dick Goodwin to his knees, to expose Dick Goodwin before the eyes of St. Frank's.

And Ralph Leslie Fullwood obtained much comfort from that thought. He was bitter against the lad from Lancashire, and he was willing to go to great lengths in order to vent his vindictive spite!

But the Nuts of Study A had not the faintest idea of the stirring times which were destined to occur at St. Frank's in the very, very near future!

THE END.

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. Lin meets a stranger in a grey suit, who takes an interest in him. Lin nicknames him "Mr. Mysterious." The stranger sends him on an errand. He has to deliver a packet at a certain address.

(Now read on.)

A Queer Box of Toys.

LIN FLEET looked at the money the stranger had put into his hand rather doubtfully, and was half-inclined to run after the man and offer some of it back. Five shillings seemed a lot to give a boy, just for taking a little packet to an address not two miles away. For the tiny parcel bore upon it:

"J. CRAWSON-CRAKE, ESQ.,
Palace Mansions,
Bayswater, W."

"Five shillings! And sixpence would have been pretty good for a little errand like this," mused the boy. "I suppose it's all right; but I don't want to get mixed up in anything fishy, just as I'm trying to make a fresh start. Anyhow, I can't come to much harm if I just deliver the thing as I was told. So here goes!"

Arriving at Palace Mansions, the magnificence of the place rather overawed Lin at first, unprepared as he was for the—to him—regal splendour of this most "swagger" and expensive group of West End flats. Conscious of his shabby, work-worn clothes, he felt almost worm-like, when a gorgeous creature, six feet high, and all ablaze with scarlet and gold, waved him to a standstill at the entrance, and contemptuously demanded his business.

"To see Mr. Crawson-Crake," answered Lin boldly.

"Send up yer name," yawned the resplendent individual.

"He wouldn't know my name, so it's no use," said Lin, who saw that a bold, offhand manner would best answer here.

"Sixth floor," grunted the man, indicating the lift at the end of the hall with a flick of his white worsted glove over his tasselled shoulder.

"'Ere y'are—sixth floor! 'Op out an' don't keep the lift waitin'!" said the lift-boy, who, being in livery, eyed Lin in his shabby clothes with scorn unspeakable. "Now, then, clumsy!"

This as Lin, dizzy with the swift upward flight, and not much helped by a push from behind, shot out of the lift on hands and knees. He scrambled up with clenched fists and warm intentions towards the lift-boy. But the gates clanged to; he just caught a glimpse of a grinning face, and heard a jeering laugh, as the lift glided down again.

"Another time!" murmured Lin grimly. "Now, where am I? And how am I going to find Mr. Crawson-Crake's room?"

It was a little puzzling, as he was in a corridor having several doors, all very much alike; and not being aware that each tenant rented an entire floor, and was as much secluded as though in a private house, he had half-expected to find the name of the man he wanted painted on his door, after the manner of the business chambers with which he was better acquainted.

Lin looked up and down the broad marble corridor, rather hoping that someone might appear, to direct him.

But the place seemed deserted, and he began to wonder if the lift-boy, by way of a little fun to relieve the ups and downs of life, had stranded him on a vacant floor. It seemed queer, he thought, that there was not even a page-boy or porter about, to receive strangers, and enquire their business. He did not know that Mr. Crawson-Crake never received any visitors or callers, and that his "skip," or personal attendant, had long ceased to expect any; and was now, as usual, taking a comfortable afternoon nap in his own snuggery at the end of the corridor.

A snore might have guided Lin in that direction. But Simpson was too highly trained even to snore when he slept; and, moreover, his door was closed.

All was quiet, strangely quiet, in that corridor.

So quiet that Lin felt the strange spell

himself, and stood still, hesitating to disturb the peculiar hush by even a footfall. And, as we all do in any unusual spell of silence, he began to listen intently—for what, he could not have said.

There was nothing worth listening to. Even the lift-gear was silent in those few strangely tense moments after Lin recovered his balance, and stood there wondering what to do. The only sound came through an open skylight in the roof high above. It was that sound which is never wholly silent night or day, the whole year round—the murmur of London. But here it sounded subdued and distant, like the murmur of the sea heard from the summit of some tall cliff; for it was a building of considerable height, and this was the uppermost floor.

Suddenly that eerie hush was broken by a cry!

A cry in a man's voice, hoarse and deep, muffled by the closed door from behind which it came, yet still so loud that the startled boy caught every word, and marked the wild, tragic tone with which it rang:

"Keep back! Keep back, Humsdon, I say! Look—there he stands! And there's red upon his hair, and upon the hand he beckons with! Bah! It is only a dream, and I'm not the stuff to be frightened by dreams. He is dead—and dead men rise up never!"

Then followed a wild, hoarse laugh, that made Lin's flesh creep, it was so weird and unnatural!

For a moment or two he was inclined to wish himself elsewhere. He had never heard anything quite like that wild outcry, or that horrible, hoarse, croaking laugh, without a bit of real mirth in it. It sounded mad! And he thought of all the hair-raising stories he had heard or read, of encounters with maniacs who were out of control, and more terrible than savages or wild beasts in the strength of their insane fury.

What if there was a dangerous case of that kind lodged up there on that secluded top-floor, his keeper out of the way for the time, and a bad fit suddenly come on! For Lin Fleet had no very clear idea as to what sort of place he had got into. He was not familiar with high-class residential flats; and Palace Mansions might have been a nursing-home for mental cases, or a private asylum, for all he knew.

Perhaps that lift-boy had known all about it; and that's why the beggar had grinned, as he went down and left him stranded all alone up there!

Lin looked at the closed door behind which the voice had sounded; then at the closed gates of the lift; then behind him, where, at the far end of the corridor, he could see the head of a staircase, leading down. He took a step that way; then stopped, and actually blushed for shame. The sudden, startling alarm of the thing once past, the natural pluck of the boy, and his sound common-sense, came to his aid, and he laughed, if a little awkwardly.

"Silly chump!" he said, to himself scornfully; "as likely as not it's only one of those writing-men, reading over a strong bit he has just got off, to see how it sounds; or maybe some actor, getting off a telling line in his part. Anyhow, there's someone in that room, and if it isn't Mr. Crawson-Crake himself, they may be able to tell me where to find him."

Without a trace of timidity or hesitation he went to that door and tapped on the panel. There was no response, so he tapped again, louder. Then he heard, or thought he heard, a muttered exclamation within, that sounded something like "Come in!"

He turned the handle and entered.

He found himself, much to his surprise, for it was still broad daylight without, in a room where the windows were closely curtained, and the only light that of a shaded electric bulb above a table in the centre of the richly carpeted floor. The room was splendidly furnished, but in a queer state of disorder and neglect. The pictures—all gorgeously framed, and no doubt costly, but of questionable taste—hung awry upon the walls, with shattered glasses, and round black holes in every face or figure, as though they had been made targets for practice with a saloon pistol. Sporting papers, magazines, and illustrated journals—chiefly foreign—of the so-called "gay" variety, littered the chairs and overflowed on to the carpet, with a welter of music-hall programmes, signed photographs of fair variety stars in costume, bills from night-club or supper-room, cigar-stumps, ashes and corks, in fine confusion.

That much caught Lin's eyes as he stood hesitating at the doorway; then, as his vision quickly adapted itself to the change of light, he rapidly made out other queer details.

At one end of the table under the lamp was a massive, gilt tray, with a meal of some sort set upon it, breakfast, luncheon, or "high-tea"—Lin couldn't tell which; but he could see that, although served in all the glory of shining silver, dainty china and sparkling crystal, it had failed to please the individual for whom it was intended; for the silver dish-covers had been thrown aside, and the food tossed about the tray, as a pampered and ill-mannered child might have treated it in a fit of temper.

Beside the tray was a spirit-stand and a soda-siphon, an open box of very big and very black cigars, a champagne bottle, empty and on its side in a puddle of froth; and, in the middle of all this, a man's collar and neck-tie had been thrown, with a light waistcoat, from the pocket of which a superb gold watch had been jerked out, and now dangled over the edge of the table at the length of its massive chain.

Lin's not unnatural conclusion was that the occupant of that room was not strictly temperate. The appearance of the apartment suggested that its tenant had the drink-habit rather badly. But there were signs, if only Lin had understood them, that Mr.

Crawson-Crake was addicted to another and still more deadly vice!

One corner of the table had been roughly cleared, to make way for a small leather-covered case. It was unlocked, and the velvet-lined lid thrown back, showing a small crystal bowl, in which lay a miniature syringe, with the stoppered tops of one or two little green bottles, neatly packed in separate divisions. It was, in fact, the apparatus for the hypodermic injection of drugs. The little green bottles contained morphia, or the still more subtle—and perilous—cocaine!

Lin Fleet knew nothing of such things. But, boy-like, his fancy was rather taken with that little shining squirt. It was so tiny, yet so beautifully made, and had such a business-like look about it, that it couldn't be a mere toy. He wondered what it was used for, and, very curious about it, stepped noiselessly on the thick carpet to that corner of the table, and bent over the little leather case for a closer look.

Suddenly, as he stooped, his shoulders were seized in a pair of amazingly powerful hands; then he was swung round and thrown against the nearest wall with such violence that he almost fell.

Startled, breathless, he could only gasp and stare.

A man, who might have risen from the couch at the far end of the room—which, being in shadow, Lin had not yet noticed—stood before him, glaring at him with a pair of wild, bloodshot eyes, with an expression so strange and unnatural, that the boy thought of madman again, and could not help quailing a little for all his pluck.

Alone up there with a madman! He knew that if it came to a struggle he wouldn't stand a dog's chance!

For the man stood well over six feet, although he was without boots, or even slippers. And, being clad only in shirt and trousers, his powerful figure was revealed to the full.

"How the devil did you get in here?" he demanded, in a hoarse, thick voice. "Tell me! Then I'll fling you down the stairs, and pitch that blackguard fellow of mine after you for letting you pass!"

"I saw no one to ask," said Lin, "and I knocked before I came in. I thought this might be Mr. Crawson-Crake's room, and I have a little parcel for him."

"Well, it is," said the man, less fiercely, and even with a sort of grim humour in his tone. "I'm Crawson-Crake, so hand the parcel over, and clear out! Something I've ordered at some shop, and forgotten, I suppose," he muttered, as with a trembling hand he took the little sealed packet from Lin. "Now, clear out!" he ordered again.

"I was told to wait while you opened it," said Lin, who had not forgotten his orders.

Mr. Crawson-Crake merely nodded. He yawned, and, walking unsteadily to the table, dropped heavily into a chair. Clearing a space with a sweep of his hand, he tore the wrapper off the packet, uncovering a small cardboard box, such as jewellers use. Yawning again, and nodding sleepily, he jerked the lid off the box and shook out its contents upon the table.

Then he leant back in his chair, staring at the things he had cast out upon the shining wood. And then Lin Fleet stared at them, too, marvelling how the mere sight of such trifling things could work the awful change he saw upon the face of the powerful man before him.

For the things out of that box were only toys—just kiddies' toys!

Lin, who read adventure stories, and went to the pictures occasionally, guessed that they were meant to represent in miniature the sort of outfit used by gold-seekers. He had seen the sort of thing often on the screen at the cinema. There was a tiny pick and shovel, a sieve, and a shallow pan like those used for washing promising "dirt" in search of the precious yellow grains. There was, too, a very neat little model of a tent, tattered and weatherbeaten, a tripod of blackened sticks, with a liliputian camp-kettle suspended from it; and a frying-pan, and—an axe.

This last Mr. Crawson-Crake picked up with trembling fingers, then flicked from him far across the table, with a violent shudder and a low, half-strangled groan. As it fell, Lin saw that the tiny blade and part of the haft were daubed bright red. That looked ugly; but it was only paint on a tiny toy, and did not seem enough to make a big, strong man look sick and reel in his chair.

Yet that was its effect upon Mr. Crawson-Crake. For a moment he seemed as though likely to fall from his seat and collapse on the floor. Then, by a mighty effort, he recovered himself, and, picking up a folded paper that had also fallen from the cardboard box, opened it. It must have conveyed some message—threat or warning; for its effect upon Crawson-Crake was to set him trembling again; but this time, as Lin thought, rather with fury than with his former fear.

Suddenly he looked up.

"Boy," he said, in a deep, hoarse voice, "who sent you here with that box?"

"A gentleman whom I met by chance asked me to deliver it," said Lin.

"His name, boy! Tell me his name!" was the menacing command.

"I do not know his name," answered Lin. And he made a slight movement towards the door.

"Stop!" thundered the man at the table. Lin Fleet stopped, knowing that if he moved another step it might cost him his life. For he was under the muzzle of a revolver!

"Now, my lad," said Crawson-Crake grimly, "it is useless to attempt to escape, or to hope for help up here. Shout your loudest; there is no one to come to your aid, or if they did, so much the worse for

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them! You were lying, of course. You do know the name of the man who sent you here. And you shall tell me! There are five empty chambers in this revolver; the sixth is charged. Tell me that man's name before this thing has clicked five times, or you will get a bullet through your brain! So now, my lad, you understand!"

Yes; Lin Fleet understood all too well! He was in the power of a villain or a madman, and might expect no mercy!

On the Fifth Stroke.

IF the man behind that deadly looking iron tube expected any frenzied cry of terror, or wild appeal for mercy, to follow his sudden grim menace, he was disappointed. The boy was absolutely mute.

As a matter of fact, Lin Fleet could not have uttered the faintest sound, had he tried, in those first few awful moments when he found himself staring at the weapon so suddenly produced from the table-drawer. He was dumb, stricken dumb with a sense of hopelessness and horror! For he never doubted that this man was mad, and would certainly kill him. Who but a madman would behave like this at the sight of a few trumpery toys? If the thing was a hoax, a silly joke meant to annoy him, why, then, he might get angry, and perhaps be a bit rough with the boy that brought it. Lin could have understood that.

But this was something different, something worse than mere anger. It was madness! What man in his senses would go on in that way over a little boxful of kiddie's toys—shuddering at the sight of them, and recoiling in his chair, as though they were poisoned; and the mere touch of them meant death! It wasn't right—it wasn't natural. The man was mad!

And truly the man at the table looked like a maniac in those few tense, and to Lin, dreadful moments. He leaned his arm upon the table, levelling the revolver directly at the boy's head; and though he had been shaken with violent shudders but a moment before, his body was tense and still now; the hand that held the weapon never wavered from its deadly line by a hair's breadth. His face, which had been working convulsively, was now set and rigid. Behind the long barrel showed the white knuckles of his rigid hand; above them glared his bloodshot eyes, with a glassy glint which the boy had never before seen in any human eye. It was not the fierce light of anger, but a horrible, unnatural glare, which held him spellbound and helpless like a bird under the eye of a snake.

The slight creak of the opening drawer was the last sound; then came silence.

A silence so complete that the subdued ticking of the watch, hanging at the end of its chain over the edge of the table, could be distinctly heard. It seemed to inspire the man with a new idea, for a grim smile flickered at the corners of his set lips, and with the other hand he reached out for the watch, pulling it on to the table before him.

He looked at it. Then he spoke; not loudly or fiercely, but in low, even tones:

"Boy, tell me the name of the man who sent you here with that packet."

"I cannot tell you, sir. I do not know his name," answered Lin, not very boldly, but in a clear voice, and without hesitation. "He was a stranger to me, and I know nothing about him."

"You lie; of course," he said. "You were told to lie if I asked that question. But I will have the answer. You shall tell me the name of the man who sent you here, or never go back to him to boast that you have done your errand! No—don't move! You will only hurry the finish if you attempt to stir. Keep still, and you shall have a fair chance."

He held the watch up, his fingers around its rim.

"Now," he said, in the same low, even tone, without any trace of anger or excitement, "this watch is a repeater. The hand is just upon five, and when I press the stud it will strike that hour. You can hear it clearly if you listen. And you had better listen—and count the strokes carefully. You are to tell me the name of that man before the fifth has sounded, or I shall pull this trigger! You understand? You have absolutely no other chance. You tell me that man's name, or you die!"

When the motion of his lips ceased his face became set and rigid again, like his body. He sat leaning forward over the table; his eyes were fixed upon the boy's face with that horrible, intent, glassy glare, as though

(*Continued overleaf.*)

the answer to his question was a vital matter to him, and he looked for the least sign that the lad would yield to terror and give it before the limit of his grace was up and he kept his terrible threat.

Ting!

The first stroke rang out from the watch—a musical note, small and soft, yet quite distinct in the tense silence of that room.

Lin Fleet's thoughts began to race—a race with death. Was there no way he could save himself? A sudden stoop and a dash for the door? No good! It was two yards away, and closed. And the man at the table had only to bend one finger!

Ting! The second stroke.

Should he invent a name? Any name would do, and it might save his life! But he knew that it would have to be a quick and clever lie, and he was sure to bungle it. He had never been good at lying, and if he blurted out some commonplace name—and he could not in the turmoil of his thoughts invent one—the man would know it was false, and that wouldn't save him!

The brain works with the speed of lightning in moments of great emergency or acute peril. That last desperate idea came to Lin, and was rejected, in that fast-flying fraction of time ere the third stroke of the tiny gong rang out.

Ting!

A shudder which he could not repress made him move his head. The revolver-barrel shifted instantly, and covered him exactly as before, between the eyes.

Ting!—the fourth stroke.

"Your last chance!" said the eyes of the man at the table, for he did not speak. "Tell me that name."

"I can't! I don't know it!"

The boy's voice—shrill with desperation—still vibrated through the room when the fifth stroke was due.

Another second and it must sound!

(To be continued.)

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