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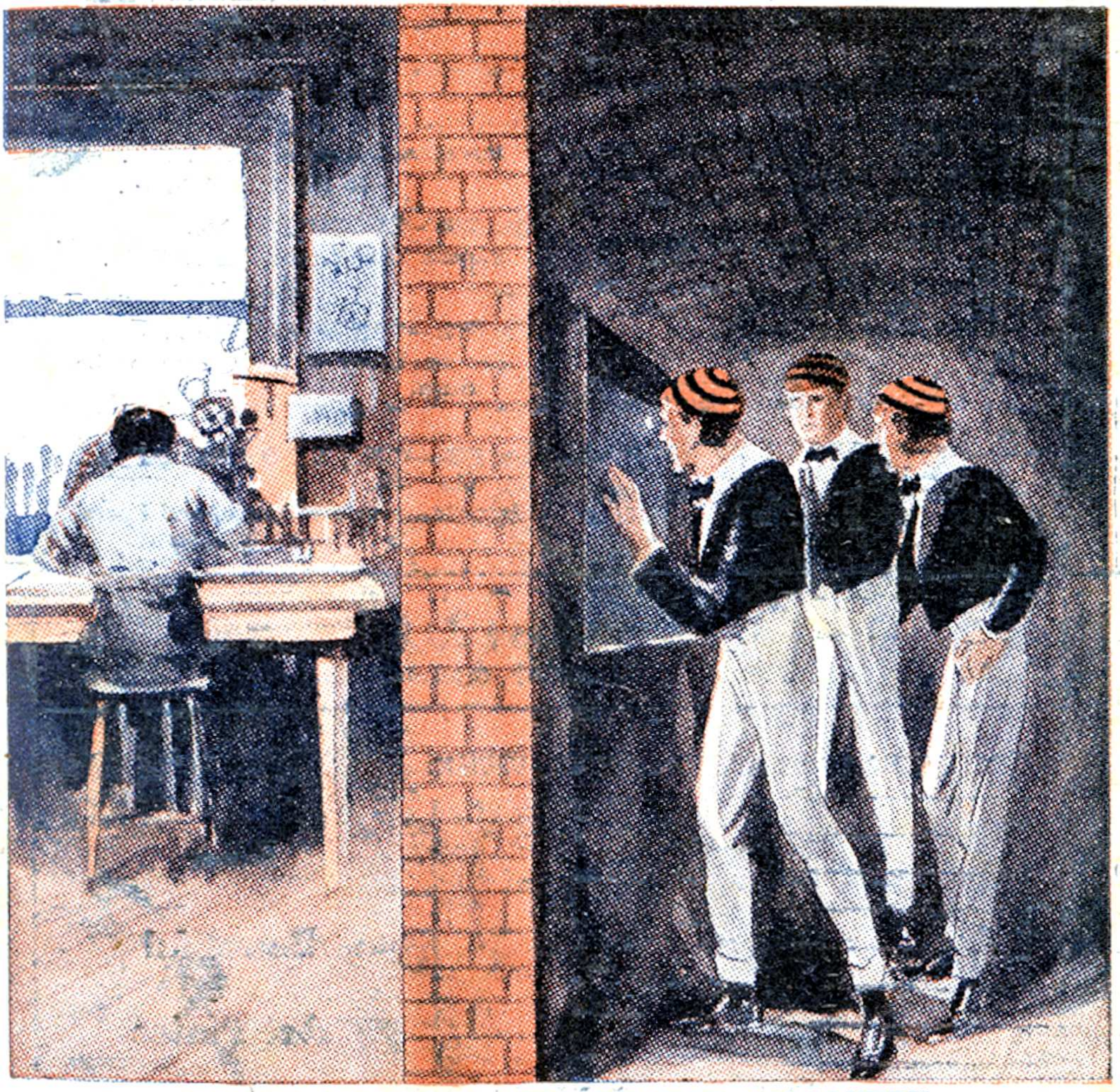

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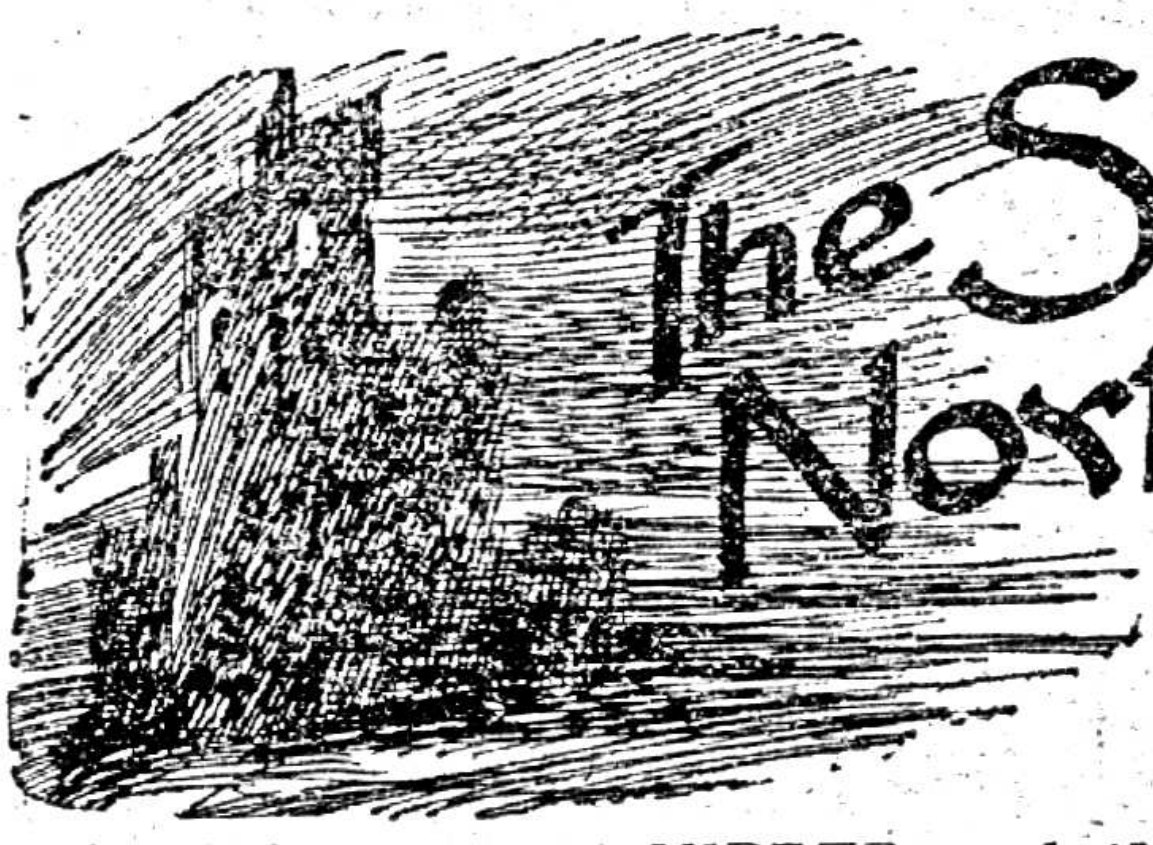

# The Secret of the North Tower!

**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 Return of the Wanderers," "The Study of Mystery," "The Lancashire Lad," etc.**

## (THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

### CHAPTER I.

#### NIPPER AND CO. MAKE DISCOVERIES.

MR. JOSH CUTTLE rubbed his hands together, gently and softly.

"There was rain, and there was gales!" he exclaimed gloomily, "and it was a half-holiday! There was no football, and there was no outdoor sports. Why was there none? Ask me! Because the weather wasn't fit not even for ducks!"

"You seem to be jolly pleased about it!" grunted Reginald Pitt.

"Things as was bad was always pleasant to talk about!" said Mr. Cuttle. "It wasn't right for people to be too cheerful. Cheerfulness makes a man forget things, and after that comes trouble. I was serious, and I was thoughtful. Why was I serious and thoughtful?"

"Ask me!" chuckled De Valerie.

Mr. Cuttle looked at De Valerie rather severely.

"I wasn't going to ask you—I was going to ask me!" he said. "I was serious because it ain't right for a man to be any other way. Everything was serious—life was serious, and so was the weather. If these storms go on there won't be no dryness! There was floods, and there was deaths——"

"Oh, dry up!" interrupted Tommy Watson. "You're giving me the creeps! I don't mind listening to your concentrated gloom when things are all right—but to-day things are all wrong!"

"Hear, hear!"

There were several juniors grouped round the doorway of the Ancient House, and they were looking out into the soaking Triangle without any particular joy. The rain was pelting down in torrents, driven by a gale which whistled and howled round the grey old stones of St. Frank's in great blustering gusts.

And it was a half-holiday.

Nearly all the juniors were feeling rather fed up. A House match had been fixed for that afternoon—Ancient House versus College House. But the weather had knocked all sport on the head, and the fellows were obliged to remain indoors, with nothing particular to occupy their attention.

"Dear old boy, the weather is certainly frightful!" remarked Tregellis-West, adjusting his pince-nez, and gazing out into the Triangle. "Begad! Ain't it comin' down?"

"Rain usually comes down!" grunted Tommy Watson.

"And this is September!" exclaimed Pitt, disgustedly. "Rather late in the month, I'll admit—but we ought to get better weather at this time of the year. We don't expect gales and storms until the end of October! What a rotten climate!"

"Rotten ain't the word!" said Handforth indignantly. "I was going out this afternoon, with Church and McClure—we'd planned a bike ride, and a visit to the Bannington Cinema. And, what's more, I've a dashed good mind to go!"

"You ass! You'd get nearly drowned!" said Church.

"I'm not taking any, thanks!" added McClure.

"We've got mackintoshes, and our bikes are all serene," argued Handforth. "What's the good of taking any notice of the weather? If I make up my mind to do a thing, I generally do it!"

"You're welcome!" said Church. "But I'm not going, anyhow!"

"There was times when a feller was fed up!" remarked Mr. Cuttle, who was standing with the juniors. "At them times the weather don't count. Why don't it count? Ask me! Because fellers get reckless, and things was done which oughtn't. If I was you I'd go, Master Handforth."

"Well, I've a good mind to!" said Edward Oswald.

Mr. Cuttle nodded.

"Mebbe you'll get blown off your bike!" he said musingly. "There was big gusts. Mebbe you'll get blown over the 'edge, and your bones might be broke!" he added cheerfully. "Then it'll be a horspital job!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Jolly funny, ain't it?" said Handforth sourly. "I don't want to get blown over the giddy hedge, and broken up!"

"What a disappointment for Mr. Cuttle," I grinned. "He was hoping that you'd meet with an awful accident, Handy. Awful accidents are just in his line—they make him feel cheerful!"

Mr. Cuttle nodded.

"Accidents was bad—but they was good!" he exclaimed. "Why was they good? Ask me! Because accidents causes people to larn things—and next time they was more cautious. If it wasn't for accidents there would be no larning at all!"

There was a certain amount of logic in this statement, and nobody argued the point with Mr. Cuttle. He amused the juniors exceedingly, and they rather liked him. Mr. Cuttle had only been at St. Frank's since the beginning of term. He was employed somewhere in the domestic quarters of the Ancient House—but he never seemed to do much. Nobody exactly knew his capacity.

There was probably only one junior in the Remove who was quite satisfied with the weather conditions that miserable afternoon—and that junior was Dick Goodwin, of the Remove.

The Lancashire lad was not much affected by weather conditions. Rain or shine he confined himself to his study—the mysterious study at the end of the Remove passage.

There had been a great deal of discussion regarding this apartment, for Dick Goodwin kept himself exclusive—he was behind a locked door and a barred window—and nobody knew why. His study was a place of mystery.

Soon after Goodwin's arrival Handforth had certainly made an attempt to probe the mystery—and he had forced his way into Goodwin's study—a good many other juniors taking advantage of the opportunity.

And they were all astonished to find nothing of a startling character. The study seemed to be quite ordinary in every respect, and it was now popularly believed that Goodwin was merely a swot, and that he was secretly trying for some scholarship or other.

Personally, I held different views.

I didn't know what the secret was, but I knew there was a mystery about it. Certain strange happenings had taken place which had aroused all my suspicions.

But I did not concern myself too much over the matter, and I was certainly not thinking of Dick Goodwin on this particular afternoon. I went to Study C with my two chums, and we tried to come to a decision.

I sat down in the chair. Tommy Watson glared morosely out of the window, and Sir Montie sat elegantly on a corner of the table.

"It seems, my dear old boys, that the afternoon is frightfully messed up!" he remarked.

"It's ruined—absolutely spoiled!" snapped Watson. "What can we do on an afternoon like this? Read? I don't want to read!"

"There are all sorts of things we can do," I said cheerfully. "We've planned out many programmes for wet afternoons——"

"Exactly, my dear boy, but we've

forgotten what those programmes are," said Sir Montie calmly.

"Not all of them," I said. "For example, we promised ourselves that we'd explore the old passage, which leads from the tower down into the cellars. That's a dry job, and pretty interesting, too. What's wrong with the idea of exploring now?"

"Who wants to go down in those musty old places?" grunted Watson.

"Well, I do," I replied. "We've only been in that tunnel about twice, and I'm quite convinced that there are other discoveries to be made. So far we've only found the single staircase which leads from the tower to the cellar, and two short passages. There must be others, if we only look closely enough. And now there's a good time to explore—two hours, at least, before tea."

"I'm game, dear old boy," said Sir Montie. "Anything for a quiet life—although I'm frightfully afraid that we shall get our clothin' into a shockin' mess."

"Oh, bother that," I said. "Somebody invented clothes brushes!"

Watson agreed to the plan rather grumpily. He was disappointed about the football, and any other programme did not suit him. However, even the musty task of exploring the old secret passages of the Ancient House was better than lounging about, doing nothing.

We did not advertise the fact that we were bent on this mission. Hardly any of the fellows knew about the secret stairway—we had kept it to ourselves. And we made our way upstairs, along the corridors, until at length we arrived at the short staircase which led to the North Tower.

There was really only one tower at St. Frank's, but originally there had been two—a North Tower and a South Tower. But the latter had been demolished countless years ago.

We soon found ourselves in the circular apartment at the very top of the tower. The walls were bare, and there were two little slits of windows, without glass. The only doorway was that by which we had entered—at least, so it appeared.

The walls were thick—tremendously thick. The circular stonework was of large circumference outside, but the apartment itself was small. It had occasionally been used as an observation post—during paper-chases, and such like, for a splendid view of the surrounding country could be obtained from the tower.

"Well, here we are," I remarked. "I've brought my electric torch, so we're well equipped for light. And you chaps had better be careful, because we pass several rooms as we go down the staircase, and we don't want to be heard, or we shall be mistaken for ghosts or rats!"

"Oh, get on with it!" said Tommy Watson shortly.

I passed my hand over a section of the wall, and it did not take me long to find a tiny, irregular hole between two of the bricks. It was nothing to cause any comment, and a casual observer would merely say that the plaster had broken.

But I produced a long pencil and inserted it into the hole. Then I pressed hard, and a faint, sluggish click sounded. The next moment a portion of the wall itself swung back, revealing a dark cavity.

"Begad!" said Sir Montie. "Ain't it marvellous!"

"You've seen it before, you ass!" said Watson.

"I know I have, dear old boy, but that doesn't make it any the less marvellous," replied Tregellis-West. "I feel quite staggered, you know, when I think of these things. That door was built hundreds of years ago, before the times of modern science and invention. And yet the door fits so perfectly that it is impossible to tell——"

"Oh, we all know that!" interrupted Tommy. "If we're going down, let's go down! Who'll lead the way?"

"I will!" I said.

I stepped through the opening, and found myself in a low, narrow space, with a flight of stone steps leading straight downwards. This secret staircase had been constructed in the very interior of the thick wall, and it went down the tower in a circular fashion.

Nearly all the steps were well preserved, and the air was quite good, too. There was certainly nothing unpleasant or musty about it.

And so we went down, Tommy Watson bringing up the rear.

My electric torch was sufficiently bril-

liant to illuminate our path perfectly, and, after descending for some little distance, we saw a straight passage ahead of us. To the left the stairs continued downwards, but now in a straight line.

We had reached the bottom of the tower, and the staircase now continued on its course through the main wall of the Ancient House itself. And the passage was simply a little addition, with two doors giving access to the dormitory passage.

"There's no need to go along there," I murmured. "The best thing we can do is to continue on our way until we reach the ground floor. So far we only know about the exit in the cellar, but I'm pretty sure there must be another somewhere near the lobby."

"Well, there is one," said Watson.

"Near the lobby?"

"Well, no—I mean that door leading into the Head's study."

"That's miles away," I said. "That's right away at the end of the second passage. I want to discover if there's anything nearer—and I believe there is. It would be very useful, say, if we wanted to break bounds after lights-out. We could simply nip into the dormitory corridor, then down this secret passage, and out into the open."

"Begad! That would be frightfully handy—for Fullwood and Co.," remarked Sir Montie.

"I dare say it would," I replied. "But Fullwood and Co. won't know anything about it, my son. They are the last chaps in the world who ought to discover this secret."

We passed along the passage, and we went slowly. There was no hurry at all. We had practically the whole afternoon before us, and we could afford to do our exploring in a leisurely fashion. We had not really examined this passage very carefully, but now a good opportunity presented itself.

I knew that we were in one of the walls of the Ancient House—for they were tremendously thick. It was quite possible that there were many other secret passages which we had not even dreamed of. And, as it happened, it was not very long before we made a discovery of the very first importance.

We reached the end of the passage, and found a stone wall barring our path. There were no doors leading out of this passage whatever—no secret panels. It was simply a blind alley, so to speak. I flashed my torch round at the walls, I flashed it on the floor, and on the low ceiling.

"Now, this looks rather fishy!" I remarked thoughtfully.

"Fishy?" repeated Watson.

"Yes, my son."

"And where does the fish in it come in?" inquired Tommy. "This passage seems quite ordinary to me."

"Does it?" I said. "What is the good of it?"

"Eh?"

"What is the good of this passage?" I repeated. "Why is it here?"

Tommy Watson stared.

"How the dickens should I know?" he said bluntly. "What's the good of asking us riddles, Nipper?"

"My dear chap, I'm simply attempting to make you understand things," I said. "Here is this passage, leading away from the secret stairway. The passage ends in a blank wall, and there are no panels or doorways. It seems then, that this passage was built for nothing at all—just for fun!"

"Dear old boy, I suppose there must be some reason for it," remarked Sir Montie.

"Exactly," I agreed. "There must be some reason for it. Therefore, it stands to reason that there is an exit somewhere—an exit which we can't see at the present moment. It is my belief, in fact, that this passage is more than a blind. There might be a door leading out into another tunnel, and our job is to discover that doorway!"

Watson scratched his head.

"That seems to be a bit of a tall order!" he observed.

"There's no telling," I said. "We might be able to find it within a short time, if we only look properly. Now, I'm going to begin this end, and I'm going to examine the walls from floor to ceiling, every inch. You chaps can help me."

For some little time our task was quite useless. We searched everywhere: we tested the walls by tapping, by pushing, and by pressing. But it was all solid, and there was no sign whatever of any opening.

"Oh, it's no good, Nipper!" said Watson at last. "This is simply a waste of time. I vote we go down the stairs, and then into the cellars——"

"Hold on!" I interrupted keenly. "I—by Jove!"

"Found anything?" asked Watson eagerly.

"Begad! There seems to be something here, dear old boy!" said Sir Montie. "I distinctly heard——"

Tregellis-West broke off suddenly. For at that very second the floor practically at our feet commenced moving. I had been tinkering about with a little rough projection on the wall, hoping that it might prove to be of some significance, and then, without warning, the floor commenced moving!

"Hallo! This looks interesting!" I remarked.

A square of the floor slid right back beneath the wall, leaving a black cavity at our feet. It was quite large enough to admit any ordinary person, and when I flashed my light down I saw that there were some stone steps. They were short and narrow, and there were not many of them, for we could distinctly see the bottom. A draught of cold, damp air came up into our faces.

"Now I can understand what this passage is for," I remarked calmly. "It was built simply to lead to this secret doorway. There must be another tunnel just along here, my sons, and we are going to explore it at once."

"Yes, rather!" said Tommy Watson eagerly. "This is ripping, you know!"

"Who is going down first?" asked Sir Montie.

"I am," I replied. "You fellows can follow behind. The air seems to be all right, so there is not much fear of our suffocating or being poisoned. But as soon as I get down I'll strike a match—if the air isn't pure, the match won't burn."

I went down the short flight of steps, and I soon discovered that another passage ran ahead of me, and this passage was very low and very narrow. One wall was of brick, but the other appeared to be merely panelling, and the ceiling was so low that I was obliged to crouch down. I tested the air, and found it was really quite good.

"You fellows can come down!" I called up. "But don't speak loudly; there's only a thin panel between us and the interior of the house. We may be heard if we speak too loudly."

"Don't you worry, dear old fellow," murmured Sir Montie. "We'll speak in whispers!"

They followed me down, and then we passed along this narrow tunnel, wondering what we should discover. I kept my eyes well open for any sign of a secret door, but could find none—until, just as we were turning a corner, I came to a halt.

"Hallo!" I murmured. "What have we here?"

I paused in front of one of the panels, and I saw immediately that a section of it was movable. There were metal attachments, old and discoloured, and there was a neat little fastener, which was operated by a spring.

"It looks like a door!" murmured Tommy Watson.

"It is a door," I said. "We'll see if it will open!"

"But what a fat-headed idea!" said Watson. "There's nothing secret about that door, you know. Anybody could see that it was meant to be an opening——"

"You hopeless ass!" I interrupted.

"Look here——"

"You dense fathead!" I went on calmly. "The people who built these secret passages knew what they were doing. How is it possible to make a secret doorway with the fastening invisible on both sides? It's only necessary to make the door secret from the other side—it doesn't matter a jot here, in this passage."

"Oh, I see," said Watson. "Perhaps you're right, Nipper. Well, anyhow, open it, and see where it leads to!"

"Hold the light, then," I said.

Sir Montie took the electric torch, and I commenced fingering the various catches and fastenings upon the door. It was not long before I was able to push the spring back, and then a small panel, about three foot by two, came away loose, and a strip of daylight appeared.

"Quick!" I whispered. "Put the torch out!"

Sir Montie snapped it off, and we were in total darkness, for I had closed the panel again. Then, cautiously, I opened it slightly, until there was just a crack about half an inch wide. Through this I was able to peep, and I received a fairly considerable surprise.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" I murmured. "This is a bit startling, my sons!"

"Let's have a look!" said Watson eagerly. "Where are we?"

"I dare say you will recognise the spot," I murmured.

Both Watson and Tregellis-West

looked through the little crack, and then they uttered low exclamations of astonishment.

"Why—why, it's the Remove passage!" murmured Tommy.

"Begad! So it is, dear old boy!" breathed Sir Montie.

"Exactly!" I agreed. "We are just at the corner of the Remove passage—only a few steps away from Study C. A bit surprising, isn't it? This door will prove jolly handy at times, if we can only discover how to open it from the other side."

"Look out!" gasped Watson suddenly. "Some of the chaps are coming!"

Two figures had appeared in the passage, and I closed the panel door swiftly and silently. A moment later, as we stood there listening intently, we heard the voices of Reginald Pitt and Cecil De Valerie. They walked past, totally unconscious of the fact that we were so near by.

"By Jingo!" murmured Watson. "Fancy coming out in the Remove passage! But where are we? I don't know where this passage fits in."

"Oh, that's easy!" I said. "The wall on this side of the passage is the outer wall, and we all know that it's tremendously thick; it isn't thick everywhere, but in places. Things like that are generally found in all very old houses—that's why there are so many secret cavities and passages, and all that kind of thing, you know."

"Well, look here," said Watson. "We might be able to make some more discoveries."

I secured the panel once more, and then we turned the corner in the secret tunnel. There was only a very short distance of the passage left, and we soon traversed this, and, at the very end, we came upon another door—for the catches and fasteners were instantly obvious.

"Now, according to my sense of direction, this door ought to be right at the end of the Remove passage," I said softly; "either in the wall of the passage itself, or in one of the rooms. But what room is there?"

"The end study—Goodwin's study," whispered Watson.

"Yes, that's right!" I agreed. "There's only that one room at the end of the passage here. It isn't a study, really—it was only made one, especially for Goodwin. This room always used to be locked and bolted, and it was kept empty. It will be a bit queer if this door leads right into Goodwin's study!"

"Well, open it, and we shall soon see!" said Watson eagerly.

I was fairly sure that my calculations were correct, startling though they were. After all Dick Goodwin's precautions to keep his study secret, it would be extremely remarkable if we found a way into that apartment by means of this secret passage. Not that we were at all anxious to pry into the Lancashire lad's concerns.

And as we stood there, looking at the door, we distinctly heard the faint sound of tapping. It came to our ears distinctly, though vaguely—and I wondered.

And then I saw something else.

There was a section of the panel just opposite the level of my eyes which projected above the other woodwork. It was, in fact, a little slide provided with its own slot and with a knob. I knew what it was at once.

A spy-hole!

By moving that knob back, a small portion of the woodwork would slide away, revealing a tiny circular hole, through which it would be possible to see into the room beyond. I knew this, because there was a slide, exactly similar in every way, in the secret door which led into the Headmaster's study.

Just for a moment I hesitated. Would it be fair to push that slide back, and peep into Goodwin's room? Would it be acting straight? I came to the conclusion that no harm could be done, for, whatever we saw, we should not speak about. We should keep it entirely to ourselves, and Goodwin's secret would not be spread abroad, and so I considered that we should be justified in having a look.

Because we did not know for certain that this was Goodwin's study—it might be quite another room, and it would be foolish to refrain from taking a peep because we suspected vague things.

I touched the knob, and put a little pressure upon it.

"What's happening?" whispered Tommy Watson.

"Hush!" I breathed. "Don't you see? This little slide is covering a spy-hole!"

"Begad!"

"I'm going to take a peep through," I whispered. "We don't know what room this is on the other side, and so I'm just going to make sure. And, for goodness' sake, don't make any noise. You'd better switch that lamp off, Montie."

A moment later, and we were in darkness. I had taken the precaution to place my fingers upon the knob, and now all I had to do was to press it slowly back. I proceeded to do this with extreme caution, for the slightest sound would probably attract attention on the other side, if this room happened to be occupied. And it certainly did seem as though somebody was there, for we had heard tapping noises.

The knob slipped back, and a tiny circle of daylight came right through into the black tunnel. The hole was no larger than a marble, but it was quite sufficient for our ordinary needs. By applying one's eye to that hole, it was possible to take in every detail of the room on the other side.

One glance was sufficient for me.

I knew in that first moment that my surmise was correct. I was looking right into the secret study—right into Dick Goodwin's apartment of mystery!

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## CHAPTER II.

### SCARING FULLWOOD AND CO.

TOMMY WATSON tugged at my sleeve.

"Well?" he whispered impatiently. "What can you see?"

"Hush!" I breathed. "You can have a look in a moment!"

I was, as a matter of fact, filled with astonishment, for I could see something which I had certainly never expected to see. And it was something which was totally and absolutely out of place in the study of a junior schoolboy.

By placing my eye quite close to the little hole, I could look into the room without the least inconvenience. Everything was plain to me. The window, nearly opposite, was of frosted glass; the table in the centre of the room, and other articles of furniture. And Dick Goodwin was there himself, in his shirt-sleeves, and he was decidedly busy.

The table was a very curious contrivance. Upon the top there was a kind of shallow well, and in this we'l there rested a very complicated piece of machinery. It glittered as I looked at it, and I saw countless wheels, cogs, and eccentric movements.

The whole thing was made of polished steel, and Dick Goodwin was busily using a file. He bent over that piece of machinery as though he loved it, and what it was I could not for the life of me tell. I could only see that it was an extremely complicated machine, beautifully constructed, and a masterpiece of intricate mechanism.

It was fairly large, too, being about three feet square, and at least eighteen inches high, and it was quite impossible to count the cogs and wheels and other things.

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

"Dear old boy, I suppose you know that we are fairly shaking with impatience?" inquired Sir Montie, in my ear. "We can't stand it much longer, really!"

I turned my head.

"Look!" I breathed. "But, whatever you do, don't make a sound!"

Sir Montie applied his whole eye to the spy-hole, and just for a moment I feared that he would utter an exclamation loud enough for Dick Goodwin to hear. But Montie checked himself admirably, and only a soft hiss passed between his lips. He stood there for some moments, and then he turned to us.

"Amazing, dear old fellows—absolutely amazing!" he murmured. "Begad! I hardly know what to say!"

"Lemme look!" said Watson impatiently.

Two minutes later Tommy was satisfied—he had seen. Then I closed the slide, and I switched the electric torch on. We stared at one another in a wondering kind of way.

"Now, what on earth does it mean?" said Tommy. "What is this machine Goodwin has got in his study?"

"You might just as well ask one of these bare walls," I said. "I can't tell you, Tommy. It's a mystery. We have been permitted to gain a little insight into the secret, but we don't know any more now than we did before. And I don't think we ought to inquire; we have discovered this by accident, and we've got to keep it strictly to ourselves. We mustn't breathe a single word to a soul!"

Sir Montie nodded.

"Dear old boy, you are quite right," he agreed. "It would be a frightful thing if we gave Goodwin's secret away. It would be positively appalling."

"You can keep your hair on!" murmured Watson. "I sha'n't say anything. But what is that piece of machinery—that's what I want to know?"

"It seems to be a model of something," I said. "That's the truth about it, I think. Goodwin has evidently manufactured a model of some huge machine, and he seems to have done it extremely well. Whether it is of any value, I don't know—and I don't suppose we shall ever know. I'll have another look, and see if I can recognise the style of thing."

Once more the torch was extinguished, and once more I slipped the slide back. I applied my eye to the hole, and received another surprise.

For now, when I looked through, the whole aspect of Dick Goodwin's study had changed!

The table was still there in the centre of the room, but there was no machine upon it!

The table was quite innocent of any object, except a small cloth, a little inkstand, and a blotting pad. The study, in fact, looked ordinary in every way—just what a junior's study ought to look.

What had become of that complicated piece of machinery?

It did not take me long to get at the truth. I saw now that the table was one of those large pedestal affairs, with sets of drawers on either side, and with a thick, heavy top. I knew how that piece of machinery had vanished. It had simply been sunken into the table, and the top had probably slid over, concealing the thing completely.

Dick Goodwin had evidently finished his work for the time being, and he had made his study look presentable again. Now I understood why he always kept his door locked, and why a screen was fitted round the doorway. The boy from Lancashire was doing something in his room he did not want anybody else to know about. And I felt rather guilty. I thought that we ought not to have looked through that spy-hole upon him.

But, really, no blame could be attached to us. We had not known for certain that that door admitted into the study, and we had only looked through the spy-hole in order to make sure. In any case, there was no danger of Goodwin's secret being spread abroad.

My chums had another look through the hole, and they were surprised, too. And after that I decided that it would be just as well for us to leave the vicinity, for Goodwin was alone, and he would easily hear any sound we might make, particularly now that he had stopped his own filing and cutting. And so we went softly along the passage to the little stairway again, and were very shortly up in the other tunnel.

"We'd better close this hole in the floor," I said softly. "We don't want to leave it open——"

But, while I was speaking, I found that it was impossible to close the opening. Try as I would, I could not get the section of the floor to slide back into its proper position, and so we were compelled to leave it open. Not that it mattered at all; nobody else would come down this way and explore.

"Now we'll go down the main staircase and into the cellars," I remarked. "We might be able to discover——"

"Listen!" interrupted Watson suddenly. "I thought I heard——"

"Begad!" breathed Sir Montie. "Somebody is coming!"

I started.

"But it's impossible!" I muttered. "I don't see how——"

"Listen, you ass—listen!" hissed Watson.

We all remained perfectly still, and then, quite distinctly, voices came to our ears. And with the voices we heard the sound of footsteps upon the stone stairway. Two or three people were approaching. This was extremely startling, and I hardly knew what to think; but, a moment later, we received a bigger surprise than ever.

"I reckon we'd better go back!" said one voice. "I don't like this at all, you know; it's awfully creepy, and there's no telling what we may come across!"

"Oh, don't be a funk!" came Fullwood's voice. "There's nothing to be afraid of here!"

"But—but we might find some skeletons or some skulls!" said the voice of Gulliver. "I—I don't like it!"

I clenched my fists, and compressed my lips. What did it mean? Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell, the Nuts of Study A, had managed to get into the secret stairway—the very last persons in

the world whom I wanted to know the secret. How had they managed it?

It was startling, and I was thunderstruck.

"How did they find their way into the tunnel--that's what I want to know?" I exclaimed. "They're coming down the stairs from the north tower. They didn't know anything about that secret door——"

"My hat!" said Watson abruptly.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't think I closed the door!" said Watson blankly. "I came down last, you know, and I can't remember pulling the door to——"

"Then that explains it!" I said gruffly. "You silly ass! I didn't think to tell you to close the door; I thought your own common sense would be enough! Fullwood and Co. must have gone up into the tower for something and they found the door open!"

"And so they commenced exploring, begad!" murmured Sir Montie.

"That's what happened. I'll go and see!" I said. "Well, we've got to decide what we shall do—and we must decide quickly! They'll be down here within two minutes!"

"I vote we kick the rotters out!" said Watson grimly.

"Well, I don't know whether that would be the best course," I said. "We don't want to cause a row, and if we started pitching Fullwood and Co. out, there would be a tremendous bust up, and it would be heard from the other side."

"That's true, dear old boy!"

"Now, I think the best thing we can do is to conceal ourselves," I went on. "We'll let Fullwood and Co. come down the tunnel, and we won't show ourselves."

"What do you think we are—ghosts?" asked Tommy Watson sarcastically. "Where are we going to hide? In a narrow passage like this, those cads will see us in a moment."

"There is a recess only a few yards from here," I said. "If you used your eyes, and observed things, Tommy, you wouldn't ask where are we going to hide. And talking about ghosts has put an idea into my head. Come on!"

We slipped along the passage until we nearly came to the spot where the passage joined the staircase, and here, to our left, lay a big recess in the wall—a long slit, with a turn at the end. It was quite possible for us to squeeze into this little cavity, and to remain unseen. It was almost certain that Fullwood and Co. would walk right past without noticing the recess at all.

In any case, we would chance it. If Fullwood and Co. found us, then we would pitch the rotters out.

The Study. A trio were not equipped with an electric torch; their only light consisted of wax vestas, which were struck at intervals. They came along, Fullwood leading the way. At the junction where the passage lay off from the stairway, Fullwood came to a halt.

"Hallo! This looks rather interesting!" he said. "We'll explore this passage, you chaps."

"I call it a mad idea!" grumbled Gulliver. "The best thing we can do is to go straight down these stairs——"

"To go straight up them, you mean!" grunted Bell, from the rear. "It—it's awfully creepy in this rotten place!"

"Oh, don't be a couple of funks!" grated Fullwood. "There's nothing here to make any fellow afraid—just a mouldy old passage, which hasn't been disturbed for years—hundreds of years, probably. We're the first human beings to come along here since the time of William the Conqueror!"

Fullwood would have been somewhat surprised if he had known that three healthy, energetic juniors were listening to his words, only a few yards away.

The cad of the Remove struck another match.

"Come on!" he said briskly. "We'll see what there is at the end of this tunnel!"

The three young rascals came along the passage, and, as I had anticipated, walked straight past the recess without even looking at it. It was rather fortunate that Fullwood's match gave out just before he got to the recess—and by the time another one was struck, the trio had passed by.

We heard them creeping along, and at last they vanished down into the slightly lower passage, where Dick Goodwin's study was situated.

"Dear old boys, I'm afraid we're a set of frightful asses!" remarked Sir Montie softly.

"Why?"

"Because we have let those cads go along the tunnel," said Sir Montie.

"They will see Goodwin's study, and they will find out the secret——"

"Exactly!" I agreed. "That is what I intended."

"Eh?"

"You—you wanted Fullwood and Co. to see into Goodwin's study?" asked Watson.

"Yes."

"Nipper, dear boy, you must be joking, surely?"

"I'm not joking, Montie," I replied. "It's this way, you see. If we had stopped Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell, we should have pitched them out; but they would certainly have explored this tunnel at another time, when we weren't handy, and then they would have found that secret door leading into Goodwin's study. I thought it was just as well to let them find it at once, while we're on the spot."

"But—but why?"

"Because we know for a fact that there is nothing in Goodwin's study to arouse any suspicion," I replied. "It looks quite an ordinary study—it's not likely that Goodwin will have got that machinery out again in this short space of time. He has put it away for the afternoon, by the look of things. And even if Fullwood and Co. peep through that hole, they won't see anything that they can make capital of."

"Dear old fellow, there is somethin' in your idea, after all!" admitted Montie. "In fact, it is rippin'—it is, really!"

"Well, I'm blessed if I can see it!" said Watson bluntly. "What's to prevent Fullwood and Co. coming down here to-morrow, or on the next day? They'll be able to look into Goodwin's study again——"

"No, they won't!" I interrupted.

"Why won't they?"

"Because, for one thing, that secret door will be blocked up!" I said calmly. "The spy-hole will be blocked up, too. So if these cads come along another time, they'll be a bit disappointed with the result."

"But they can unlock it, I suppose?" said Watson.

"I don't think they'll be able to," I replied. "I'll tell you my idea later on, when the position is more favourable."

We waited, and I was convinced that my decision was for the best—that it was just as well to let Fullwood and Co. go along the passage and see into Goodwin's study—that is, providing they had sufficient sense to push back the slide and to use the spy-hole.

Five minutes elapsed, and then we heard the sounds caused by Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell as they came through the opening in the floor of the passage. Once there—only a few yards from us— they paused, and they commenced talking. We could hear every word they uttered.

"By gad!" said Fullwood, in a voice which denoted triumph and gloating satisfaction. "Goodwin's study! This tunnel leads straight into Goodwin's study!"

"Well, what of it?" asked Gulliver.

"What of it!"

"What of it! Why, you ass, it means everythin'!" said Fullwood.

"Well, I can't see it—that's all!" grunted Bell. "An' what was there to see in Goodwin's study, if it comes to that? Nothin'—nothin' but furniture an' everythin' ordinary."

Fullwood laughed.

"What did you expect to see?" he asked. "You know as well as I do that Goodwin has got that secret dye formula in his study—an' that's locked away in a drawer, I suppose. He has only barred himself up because of that formula. This discovery of ours makes everythin' as easy as winkin' an eye! We shall be able to arrange the whole thing with Colmore an' Naggs at once!"

"How do you mean?" asked Gulliver.

"Why, we have agreed to let those two men come into the school," went on Fullwood. "We've arranged that we shall see justice done. Goodwin has got the formula belongin' to Mr. Naggs, an' we're goin' to see that the young cad is made to give it up to its rightful owner. So we are goin' to let those two men into the school. It would be risky in the ordinary way, but this secret tunnel makes it as safe as houses!"

"Yes, of course!" said Gulliver, rather doubtfully. "It'll be much better for those chaps to get into Goodwin's study this way; in fact, it's the only way they can get in!"

"That's what I was thinkin'," said

Bell. "The window's barred, the door's locked—so it would be impossible for Naggs an' the other man to get in by the ordinary way. What a stroke of luck, eh?"

"Rather!" agreed Fullwood, with great satisfaction. "This is what I call toppin', you know. Let's go back an' make sure of that door—I want to give Mr. Naggs full instructions."

Gulliver and Bell demurred at first, but then they accompanied their leader back to the other passage. Meanwhile, Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West and myself had heard all—and we were greatly impressed.

"Well, what do you think of it, eh?" said Watson grimly. "The rotters—the absolute rogues! They're talking about letting some men into the school, so that they can get into Goodwin's study! I've never heard of anything so absolutely villainous in my life!"

"The asses don't know what they're doing, Tommy," I said quietly. "It's as plain as possible that these men have been spinning a yarn, and Fullwood and Co. have swallowed it whole. It's a very good thing that we stopped here—that we allowed the Nuts to come past, because we know everything now, and we shall be able to take proper measures!"

"What measures?" asked Tommy.

"I'll tell you later on," I said. "For the present we'll just have a little fun—rather grim fun, perhaps. I don't want Fullwood and Co. to go up to the tower again. I want them to discover that there is an exit in the cellar, because they will certainly use that exit as an entrance when they guide these two strangers into the place."

"Yes, but how——"

"You'll see!" I interrupted. "Come on—we'll slip out of this while we've got the chance!"

Before the Nuts of Study A could return we left our place of concealment, crept along the passage until we came to the junction, and then mounted some of the circular stairs which led right up to the north tower. Then I called a halt.

"Dear old fellow, what is the idea of this?" inquired Sir Montie politely. "As soon as Fullwood and Co. come along they will discover us, an' they will know we have been listenin'. It would spoil everythin'——"

"I don't think it will, because Fullwood and Co. will never discover us, Montie," I said. "I want you chaps to be absolutely quiet—and I'm going to make a few noises."

"Noises?"

"Groans, horrible moans, and all the rest of it!" I explained. "Those chaps are pretty nervy already, and they were half expecting to find ghosts and skeletons, and all that sort of thing. Well, it would be a pity to disappoint them. We'll provide an invisible ghost—to prevent them coming up these stairs again!"

"Oh, good wheeze!" said Watson.

We stood where we were, listening for the return of Fullwood and Co. And we did not have to wait long, for, after about three minutes had elapsed, we heard the Nuts coming along the passage, until at length they were on the stairs once more. By listening intently we could just hear what they were saying.

"Well, I think we'd better go up again," said Fullwood. "But perhaps it will be just as well to explore these other stairs—we go down——"

"Rather not!" interrupted Bell. "We—we don't want to go down there! We—we might find skeletons——"

"Oh, hang! All you can think about is skeletons an' ghosts an'——"

Fullwood paused abruptly.

"What—what was that?" came Gulliver's voice, in husky tones.

"I—I don't know!" said Fullwood uncertainly.

They stood stock still, listening, with their hearts beating rather wildly, for, throbbing down the circular staircase, in the most eerie tones, came a blood-curdling moan.

"Oh, by gad!" exclaimed Bell, with chattering teeth.

Again came the moan—this time more throbbing and more terrifying than ever. I rather pride myself that I can fake up a rather excellent groan when the occasion demands, and certainly my efforts on this occasion were entirely successful.

"Oh!" shivered Gulliver. "Oh, my goodness! Can—can you hear it, you chaps?"

"Y-y-yee-es!" stuttered Bell. "It's—it's a ghost, you know——"

"Don't be a fool!" snapped Fullwood, trying to be calm. "It can't be a ghost

—it must be the wind in the staircase, or somethin' of that sort. There aren't such things as ghosts! Pull yourself together, you fool!"

Moan! Moan!

I kept it up, and Fullwood and Co. dared not come up the stairs. Even if Fullwood himself had had sufficient pluck—and this was difficult to determine—Gulliver and Bell were certainly scared stiff. And, after a few more moments, they decided upon their only course of action. They pelted down the stairs as though demons were after them, and finally they reached the secret door which led them out of the secret tunnel into the cellar.

When the Nuts found themselves in these familiar surroundings, they breathed great sighs of relief. And Fullwood was now looking extremely pleased with himself, for he had noted how this cellar door could be opened, and he tested it once or twice to make sure.

"Rippin'!" he declared softly. "This means everythin', you chaps. We can easily direct Mr. Colmore an' Mr. Naggs into the cellar, here, and then we can come straight up this tunnel, an' they can go right up to Goodwin's study. There'll be nothin' on earth to stop them."

"Nunno—of course not!" said Bell, who was still a bit shaky. "But—but I'm not comin' here at night, Fully—not likely!"

"Rather not!" said Gulliver promptly. "It's bad enough in the daytime, Fully. An' those chaps can come along that tunnel by themselves at night. I'm not goin' to——"

"Who's askin' you to?" interrupted Fullwood tartly. "In any case, there'll be no need for us to be here at night. We shall give Naggs full instructions, an' he an' his pal will have to find out the thing for themselves. It wouldn't do for us to appear at night, in case things go wrong. If we were spotted in the school with two strangers we should be sacked at once—because, of course, the Head would never understand that we were doin' this for the sake of justice."

And Fullwood and Co., without wasting any further time, got out of the cellar, and returned to the more inhabited quarters of the Ancient House.

## CHAPTER III.

### A TIP FOR DICK GOODWIN.

"HALF-A-MINUTE, Goodwin!"

I was in the Remove passage, as it was nearly tea-time. Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson were with me—and Dick Goodwin, of the Remove, was just passing along the passage. He paused and smiled at us. There was something very cheerful about Goodwin's smile.

"Ay, I'm in no hurry, Nipper," said the Lancashire lad. "What will you be wanting?"

"I was simply going to invite you to tea in Study C—that's all," I said. "We should rather like to have you with us, Goodwin, if you will do us the honour to accept the invitation. We've got rather a decent spread to-day——"

"Ay, that's champion of you," said Goodwin. "Thank you very much, Nipper. I've no doubt that you have a gradeley tea, but I can't accept—thanking you all the same. I haven't got time to spare to have tea in any other fellow's study——"

"Oh, nonsense!" I interrupted. "Surely you can stop your swotting business for a half hour now and again, Goodwin? I particularly want you to come to tea to-day, because we shall all be in private, and there is something I'd like to say to you."

Dick Goodwin looked rather curious.

"Something you'd like to say to me?" he repeated.

"Yes."

"Ay, but I'm puzzled," said Goodwin. "At the same time, I'm afraid I can't——"

"Look here, I'll put it bluntly," I said. "Its very important that you should see us privately, Goodwin. That's a hint. It is very important indeed, let me tell you, and, if you refuse to have tea with us, you will regret it for long afterwards. If you don't feel inclined to accept our hospitality, then you can come along to Study C, and listen to me for five minutes. Surely you can spare five minutes?"

Dick Goodwin laughed.

"Ay, lad, but you make me feel uncomfortable," he remarked. "Of course I'll come, and thank you very much. It's champion of you. I'll be in your

study in about ten minutes time—if that will do."

"It will do splendidly," I said.

Dick Goodwin passed along the passage, and my chums and I went into Study C.

"Well, he don't seem particularly anxious to enjoy our company at tea-time," remarked Watson. "He's a queer chap, is Goodwin. At the same time, I think he's all right, although goodness only knows why he wouldn't accept our invitation right off!"

"Oh, that's easy enough to understand," I said. "He probably thinks that if he accepts ours, he will be compelled to ask us to tea in his study, in return. And he wants to avoid that—naturally. However, we'll make it all right, when we explain things."

The tea we had prepared was certainly a very excellent one. And when Dick Goodwin arrived, about ten minutes later, he eyed the table with approval. The Lancashire lad possessed a very healthy appetite, and he had a good eye for food.

"It's champion," he declared, as he sat down.

"Nothin' very special, old chap," I said. "Now, lemme see—do you take sugar?"

"Yes, please."

Tea was soon on the go, and Goodwin appeared to enjoy himself immensely. I did not mention anything about the matter on hand until tea was nearly finished. And then I looked across at Goodwin, and my expression was serious.

"Now, look here, Goodwin, I've got something to say to you," I remarked. "There's no need for you to jump up, and there's no need for you to get alarmed. But I may as well tell you that I had a look into your study this afternoon."

Goodwin started.

"You—you looked into my study?" he said quickly.

"Yes."

"Ay, but that's impossible!" declared the Lancashire lad. "You couldn't have done it, Nipper—the door was closed, and the window was closed——"

"At the same time, I looked into your study," I said. "I didn't see anything particular to startle me—just an ordinary desk-table, a few chairs, and other pieces of furniture. You looked quite comfortable, in fact."

A little expression of relief came into Goodwin's eyes. I did not think it necessary to tell him that Sir Montie and Tommy and I had seen other things—for that would only make Goodwin anxious. I wanted to give him to understand that we had not looked through the spy-hole until he had put his wonderful piece of machinery away.

"Yes," I went on, "we all looked into your study, Goodwin, and we looked into it through a secret spy-hole. It may interest you to know that there is a passage through the wall of the Ancient House, and this passage is unknown to almost everybody in the school. It's an old passage, dating back for hundreds of years, and there is a panel leading into your study, with a spy-hole covered with a slide!"

"By gum!" said Goodwin, startled. "You—you must be joking——"

"I'm not," I said grimly.

And I proceeded to explain in more detail. Dick Goodwin listened to me with great interest, and with a certain amount of alarm in his expression. He heard how we had entered the passage from the tower, how we had passed down the stairs, and how we had, at length, come upon the panel which led into his study. He seemed greatly relieved when we told him that we had looked through the spy-hole, and we had seen him at his desk—with a blotting-pad and inkstand upon it.

"But why have you told me this?" he asked at length. "I should have thought you would have told all the other fellows—so that they could come and look into my study. They are all curious, and they would give a great deal to find out why I have got the door locked, and all the rest of it. But I can't tell a soul, Nipper. It's a secret. One day you will understand, but I can't tell you now. I'm sorry."

"My dear chap, there is no need to explain anything," I said. "We are not fools. We have got you here to-night because we want to give you a friendly word of warning."

"It's champion of you," declared Goodwin gratefully. "I don't think any other fellows in the Remove would have acted in this way."

"Oh, there are plenty of decent chaps in the Remove," I said. "Your busi-

ness is not our business, Goodwin. You are at liberty to lock yourself in your study, if you want to. And I am only telling you all this because there is great danger of your secret being discovered—and spread broadcast throughout the school."

"I—I don't quite understand."

"You will in a moment," I said. To be blunt, Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell know all about that passage, and they know all about the secret door, too."

"By gum!"

Dick Goodwin stared at us in real dismay.

"Still, no harm has been done yet," I went on. "There may be something in your study that you don't want other fellows to see. That is for you to know, Goodwin. In any case, Fullwood and Co. only saw what we saw—an ordinary study, with ordinary furniture. But there is this about it—they may go there at other times, and they may see things which you don't want them to see. No harm is done yet. So, if you take prompt measures, everything will be all serene."

"Ay, but I don't know what to do!" said Goodwin in alarm. "I—I'm not private at all, as I thought I was!"

"You certainly are not," I agreed. "Your study is absolutely public, in a way of speaking. You can have the door locked, you can have the window shuttered, but other fellows can see right into the room, and observe everything you are doing."

"By gum," said Goodwin again; "it's awful, tha' knows!"

"No; it's not awful," I corrected. "If you take steps at once no harm will be done at all. My advice to you is this—cover the door securely——"

"Cover it?"

"Yes," I said. "It is in the wall almost opposite the window. If you like I will take you along, and show it to you, so that you can see the exact position. Then I should move a large piece of furniture over the door, if I were you, thus blocking the spy-hole completely, and making it impossible for anyone to get into the study, even if the door is opened. Either that, or you must nail some huge board across the wall——"

"Ay, but the furniture idea is the best!" interrupted Goodwin. "I've got a champion bookcase in my study—so heavy that it can hardly be moved. If I put that in front of the secret door, and nail it to the wall at the top, nothing can shift it."

"That's the idea!" I agreed. "Then you'll be absolutely private, Goodwin. It's the only thing I can suggest, and I've told you about this now, because I don't want those cads to be prying into your affairs. You can rely on us saying nothing—although we've got nothing to speak about in any case."

Goodwin looked at us gratefully.

"It is good of you, Nipper—wonderfully good!" he said quietly. "I don't exactly know how to thank you."

"There's no need to thank me," I said, smiling. "We know a decent chap, Goodwin, and we don't want those rotters from Study A to go interfering into your affairs. That's all. As soon as you've finished that cup of tea, we'll go along to the tower, and get into the passage. Then you will be able to see the door with your own eyes."

Dick Goodwin gulped down his tea at once.

"I'm ready now!" he said quickly.

"Right you are," I smiled. "Come along!"

Sir Montie and Watson did not accompany us. There was really no need for them to come, too. And I took Dick Goodwin up into the tower, and then we were soon passing down the old stone stairs until at length we came to the junction where the little passage branched off.

Within three or four minutes Goodwin was looking through the spy-hole into his own study. Of course, he saw nothing at all startling—only an ordinary room, filled wih very beautiful furniture.

"Ay, it's marvellous," said the Lancashire boy. "And I thought my study was private, too! Nipper, I don't know how to thank you for giving me this warning—it means everything. It's—it's champion!"

"So you said before!" I smiled.

"It's—it's even better than that!" said Goodwin, eagerly. "You've told me about this secret door before any harm has been done—and I shall be able to remedy it at once. All I've got to do is to shift that piece of furniture, and the door will be completely blocked."

I nodded.

"But how are you going to shift it?" I inquired. "It's a heavy bookcase, and you can't do it alone, Goodwin."

"No, I suppose not," said the Lancashire boy. "I shall have to obtain help."

"We'll give you a hand, if you like," I said. "Tregellis-West, Watson and me. What do you say? We can do it now—at once!"

"Ay, that would be gradeley!" said Dick Goodwin, without hesitation.

And so, about ten minutes later, Tommy and Montie and I were ushered into Dick Goodwin's study. And, without wasting any time, we set about moving the tremendously heavy bookcase across the room. We placed it against the wall so that the secret door was completely blocked up. There was no chance of anybody seeing into the room, or gaining admittance. For the secret door was small, and even the strength of a full-grown man would not be sufficient to push the bookcase over from the inside of the passage.

"That's all right," I remarked, eyeing our handiwork with satisfaction. "You are all serene now, Goodwin. Come along, you chaps, we'll depart from this forbidden apartment!"

"Wait a moment," said Goodwin, touching my arm. "I—I feel that you ought to know something more about me, Nipper. You have been so good—you have acted so honourably, that it seems to be up to me to satisfy your curiosity."

"But, my dear chap, I'm not curious," I put in, smiling. "As I said before, your business is not ours—and we really don't want to interfere with it. There's no need for you to explain anything. We sha'n't be curious, and we sha'n't wonder. Just go ahead as you are going, and don't worry any more. I'm quite satisfied, in any case, that what you are doing is perfectly honest and straightforward. Is that good enough?"

"Yes, of course it is," said Dick Goodwin. "And I know that you three fellows are friends—champion friends. I sha'n't forget this, Nipper—I sha'n't forget this all my life!"

His gratitude was real, and I knew that we had made a very sincere friend of Dick Goodwin, from Lancashire.

Meanwhile, in Study A there was much satisfaction. Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell had just finished tea. Outside, the rain had almost stopped, and the Triangle was looking less like a lake, although there were great puddles of water everywhere. Fullwood and Co. were lounging back in their chairs, thoroughly at home.

"Yes, everythin' is goin' fine!" said Fullwood, as he lit a cigarette. "In fact, the situation couldn't be better. We've done a fine afternoon's work, you chaps—the best afternoon's work we've performed for a good many months. Just think of it! We know how to get into Goodwin's study, without even looking at the door or the window. It's a triumph for us, by gad! Before we've done, we'll have Goodwin sent out of the school, neck and crop! The miserable little worm! I'll make him sit up all right!"

"But what is your plan, Fully?" inquired Gulliver.

"My plan?"

"Yes."

"Well, my dear chap, that's obvious," said Fullwood. "This evening, I'm goin' down to the White Harp, an' I shall interview Mr. Naggs—he an' Colmore are stayin' at the White Harp, you know. It won't take me long to explain the position, an' to give those fellows the tip!"

"You mean to tell them everythin'?" asked Bell.

"Yes," replied Ralph Leslie. "Why not? We agreed to help them in their task, and we're not going to back out of it. This rotten Lancashire kid has stolen a formula belongin' to Mr. Naggs—at least, his father has, an' Goodwin is keepin' it in his study. We can't go searchin' the study ourselves, because we might be spotted—an' it would mean the sack if we were discovered. But we can let Mr. Naggs come and have a look, without getting into any trouble on our own account. An' as soon as that paper is discovered in Goodwin's possession, it will mean disgrace for him an' his father!"

"An' that's what they jolly well deserve!" said Bell viciously. "But all I say is this, Fully—we've got to go jolly easily. We've got to be cautious, because, if Naggs an' the other man say anythin', we shall be in the cart ourselves!"

"Rot!" said Fullwood. "If those men talk, an' turn against us, we can

deny everythin'! There'll be no proof against us—not an atom. I'll take good care of that! An' don't forget that we're goin' to get sixty quid between us—twenty quid each!"

"I haven't forgotten that!" said Gulliver, with a nod.

And that was the secret of the whole matter. These unscrupulous young rascals—more foolish than criminal—were only working hand in glove with the two mysterious strangers simply because they were going to receive a large sum of money in return for their pains. They tried to convince themselves that what they were doing would aid the ends of justice, and thus their consciences—if they possessed any—were relieved of all responsibility.

"I'll be gettin' along as soon as it's dark," said Fullwood. "It wouldn't be wise for me to go before. As soon as it's dark—an' that'll be in about an hour's time—I'll slip down to the White Harp, and I'll interview Mr. Naggs. He's bound to be there. The last time I saw him we arranged that he should be in the little back parlour every evenin' from seven till eight, in case I came along with some information."

"Those two men expected to get into the school a day or two ago, but we couldn't manage it," said Bell. "Still, they've got to wait our pleasure. At the same time, it's much better for us to hurry up, or there may be no sixty quid at the end of it!"

"That's what I was thinkin'," said Fullwood. "We mustn't allow those chaps any time to change their minds—it's rather important, in fact!"

Nearly an hour later, Ralph Leslie Fullwood, attired in his mackintosh and cap, passed quickly out of the lobby into the wet Triangle. He fondly imagined that he had not been observed—that he had succeeded in getting out without anybody seeing him; but Fullwood was mistaken.

Two keen eyes had observed all his movements—and those belonged to myself.

I had seen Fullwood leave his study, and I had seen him go to the cloakroom, and I guessed at once that the end of the Remove was intent upon venturing out with the intention of going to the men he had called Mr. Colmore and Mr. Naggs. I had no doubt that they were the same fellows Sir Montie and Tommy and I had followed one night during the previous week.

I was suspicious, and I was determined to see this matter through.

## CHAPTER IV.

### AT THE WHITE HARP.

TAP! Tap!

Mr. Naggs glanced sharply at the window.

"What was that?" he exclaimed softly.

"Oh, only a piece of creeper, I suppose!" said Mr. Colmore angrily. "No need to get nervy, Naggs——"

Tap!

"There it is again!" exclaimed the other man. "That's no creeper, man! There's somebody there, tapping!"

Both the men were seated in the little rear parlour of the White Harp Inn, just on the outskirts of Bellton. It was not a very respectable inn, and Fullwood and Co. had frequently broken bounds at night in order to play cards in this little rear parlour. At the present moment it was occupied by Mr. Naggs and Mr. Colmore, who were lounging easily in their chairs, with whisky in front of them. The air was blue with rank tobacco smoke, and it smelt strongly of whisky fumes.

Mr. Naggs rose to his feet, and crossed over to the window. He pulled the blind aside, and stared out into the darkness. Then he started. A face was pressed close against the glass, and it was rather startling at first sight. But Mr. Naggs instantly recognised that face—it belonged to Ralph Leslie Fullwood. He nodded quickly, and allowed the blind to drop back into position.

"It's Fullwood!" he muttered. "That kid from the school!"

"Oh!" said Mr. Colmore. "Perhaps he's got some information for us."

"That's pretty certain," said Mr. Naggs. "He wouldn't come here for nothing. There's no telling, Colmore—we may be lucky, after all. We've got this kid in our power, and we can make him do what we want. But don't forget to treat him kindly, and pretend that he's everything that's good!"

Mr. Naggs went to the door, passed out, and then walked quietly down the tiny passage until he came to the rear

Mr. Colmore gave a cry of terror as the rope with a sharp jerk pinioned his arms to his sides.

door. He opened this, and found Fullwood on the steps.

"Good-evening, young gent!" he exclaimed genially.

"Hush! Don't talk too loud!" whispered Fullwood. "I don't want everybody to know I'm here. I don't mind comin' after closin' time—the landlord knows me. But there are plenty of other people about now, an' if they spotted me they might go to the Head."

"Oh, there's no danger of you being spotted," said Mr. Naggs. "You can come in—the coast is clear. You'll be absolutely private in the little parlour."

Fullwood followed his companion along the passage, and they entered the parlour. Mr. Naggs closed the door, and looked at his young visitor.

"I've got somethin' to tell you—somethin' jolly important!" said Fullwood, without wasting any time.

He sat down, produced a cigarette-case, and lit a cigarette. Then he gazed at his two companions with an air of triumph. He was more at home now, and he felt he had the upper hand. He saw no reason why he should not profit by the knowledge he possessed.

"Now, look here," he said. "What you've got to do is to get into Goodwin's study, so that you can obtain that formula of yours!"

"That's it," said Mr. Naggs promptly. "This kid's father stole it from us before the boy came from Lancashire."

"Yes, I know all about that," said Fullwood. "Well, I have discovered a way in which you can get right into Goodwin's study without even bothering about the window or the door. It's a special way—a secret way, an' it will enable you to search the room without a soul knowing, and without the slightest atom of danger. It will be child's play from start to finish."

The two men exchanged glances.

"Good!" said Mr. Naggs. "That's what I like to hear, young gent! Now, tell us all about it!"

"Hold on!" said Fullwood. "I think you agreed that if we did this for you, you would give us—that is, myself, Gulliver, an' Bell—twenty pounds each."

"That's the agreement," said Mr. Naggs, nodding.

"Well, considering that we have planned everything so perfectly," went on Fullwood—"considering that we have made the whole thing safe, I thought you ought to give us something extra; in fact, I consider my present information is worth at least thirty quid each."

Mr. Naggs smiled.

"On the make, eh?" he remarked genially. "Well, I don't blame you, young man. But let me hear your information first. If I think it is worth the extra money, there won't be any haggling about it."

Fullwood nodded.

"Well, I'll tell you, as quickly as I can," he said, bending forward. "There is a secret passage leading up from the cellar to the north tower. All I have got to do is to leave a grating of the cellar open, and you can get in there, find your way into the secret passage, and get up into the very heart of the school, without any possibility of being discovered."

"By thunder!" muttered Mr. Colmore, looking at Fullwood intently. "Is this straight, young man?"

"Absolutely!" declared Fullwood. "An', what's more, there's a secret door in this passage, an' it is situated right in Goodwin's study. Do you realise that? You can walk into the cellar, go up this passage, and enter Goodwin's study while the door is locked and the window barred! It will be utterly impossible for anybody to know that you are there. You will be able to search the whole room at your leisure, without hurryin'!"

Mr. Naggs looked rather startled.

"Is this—square?" he asked sharply.

"Of course it's square!" said Fullwood. "What do you take me for? Do you think I'd come down here an' spin a yarn? I an' my chums have been doin' our best to find an easy way for you to do this job—an' now we've found it. I call it a bit thick for you to doubt my word!"

"My dear young gentleman, I'm not doubting your word!" said Mr. Naggs gently. "But it seems too good to be true—that's all I mean. For us to be able to get into Goodwin's study without passing through the door or the window seems altogether too—well, it's positively wonderful!"

"An' so it is!" agreed Fullwood. "It's top hole—an' the best of it is, nobody can possibly find you even if there is an alarm! This secret passage isn't known to the school servants, or

to any of the masters. Who'd think of lookin' for intruders there? You'll be as safe as houses!"

"And how do we get into this secret passage?" asked Mr. Naggs practically.

"I'll tell you," said Fullwood. "Look here! I've got a piece of paper, an' here's a pencil. The best thing I can do is to draw a diagram; then you'll be able to follow the directions without any trouble at all."

"That's a good idea!" said Mr Naggs, nodding.

Fullwood drew himself up to the table, and prepared his paper and pencil.

"Now, you see this line here is the real wall of the Ancient House," he said, proceeding to get busy with the pencil. "Just here there is a grating—you can't possibly mistake it, because it lies exactly opposite the big outhouse. This grating is usually bolted on the inside—it isn't looked at for months on end, you know. Well, before goin' to bed to-night, I'll slip that bolt back, so that you an' Mr. Colmore can push the gratin' aside, and get into the cellar."

"That's satisfactory," said Naggs. "Well, an' after that?"

"What I'm doin' now is to draw a plan of the cellar," said Fullwood. "Here is the main passage leading from one of the cellars to the other. You'll run into this passage as soon as you get into the grating. Well, turn to your left, and walk right up the passage, passing four doors. As soon as you have passed the fourth door, you'll come to a corner. A blank piece of wall is facing you, an' there seems to be no door there at all."

While he was talking, Fullwood was drawing on the paper, illustrating his meaning quite clearly and accurately. Mr. Naggs and Mr. Colmore watched with great interest.

"Now, you've got to be careful when you get to this piece of blank wall," went on Fullwood. "Measure exactly two feet three inches up from the floor, an' one foot fourteen inches from the right-hand side. I'll put lines an' arrows on the paper, to show exactly what I mean. And I'll put the measurements, too. Well, if you take those measurements correctly, and press on the spot you arrive at, you'll find that a big portion of the wall will slip back, revealing a hole."

"By thunder!" muttered Mr. Colmore.

"It does seem a bit startlin', doesn't it?" said Fullwood, enjoying the interest he was causing. "Well, when you get into that passage, all you've got to do is to go straight on, up the stairs, until you come to a passage on your left-hand side. You can't possibly mistake it, because it is the only passage there. Walk along this passage until you come to a hole in the floor, then you go down a few steps, and the passage continues. At the end of this is the secret door leading into Goodwin's study."

"The secret door?" repeated Mr. Naggs.

"Yes!"

"But how can we tell which is the door, if it is secret?"

"Oh, that's easy," replied Fullwood. "You see, the door is absolutely invisible from inside the room, but from the interior of the secret passage, the door is perfectly obvious—anybody with half an eye can see it. It is simply one panel with some patent fastenings—all rusty with age, you know."

"And how do we get in?" asked Mr. Naggs.

"Nothin' easier," replied Fullwood. "All you've got to do is to slip back the catch—you'll find out the way by looking at the thing for about ten seconds—and then the door comes open. You simply walk through, and you're inside Goodwin's study. The door is locked, and the window is barred. Not a soul will know that you are in there, and you will be able to search the whole place at your leisure. Don't you think it's a fine idea!"

Mr. Naggs nodded.

"Yes; if all this is correct, it's——"

"What do you mean—'if' it's all correct?" demanded Fullwood sharply.

"Well, you see, young gent, it sounds remarkably like a yarn," said Mr. Naggs frankly. "I don't want to offend you, or anything of that sort——"

"Well, you are offendin' me!" interjected Fullwood curtly. "What I have told you is the truth—an' if you don't like to believe it, you can bally well do the other thing! I went down this passage myself, an' I know all about it—I know what I'm talkin' about."

"Very well, Master Fullwood, we'll accept your word!" said Mr. Naggs, in a soothing voice. "There's no need to get wild. Now, about these measurements. Let me see if your figures are plain to read. When we get to that piece

of blank wall down in the cellar, we've got to measure two feet three inches from the floor, and one foot fourteen inches—that is, two foot two inches—from the right-hand side?"

"That's correct," said Fullwood, nodding.

"I suppose you couldn't be on the spot to-night, to open the secret door for us?" inquired Mr. Colmore.

"No, I couldn't," replied Fullwood firmly. "I've told you what I'll do—I'll unfasten that grating, so that you can get in easily. I've given you full instructions, an' there's no reason why you shouldn't got into Goodwin's study without a second's delay. It will be positively ridiculous for me to be on the spot with you. Supposin' there was an alarm—supposin' you were caught? I should be with you—an' that would mean the sack for me!"

"Well, perhaps it's just as well to be on the safe side," said Mr. Naggs. "You can remain in the dormitory—snug in your little bed."

Fullwood nodded.

"Rather!" he said. "I'm not takin' any risks, thanks! I reckon you ought to be jolly glad that I've done so much!"

"We are," said Mr. Naggs promptly. "We are tremendously obliged to you, young gentleman. This information of yours is of the utmost value to us."

"An' you'll pay up?" asked Fullwood.

"Yes—if we get into that study, as you say we can," replied Mr. Naggs. "Come down to this inn to-morrow evening, and I'll hand you ninety pounds in cash—that is, thirty pounds for you and your two chums."

Fullwood looked rather doubtful.

"I don't distrust you, or anythin' of that sort," he said, "but don't you think that that arrangement is rather one-sided, Mr. Naggs?"

"One-sided?"

"Yes," said Fullwood. "How do I know that you'll be here to-morrow evenin'?"

"You've got my word for it!"

"I know I have. But you might take it into your head to go off during the night, after you have recovered that formula from Goodwin's study," said Fullwood shrewdly. "Then I should be left in the cart, shouldn't I?"

Mr. Naggs shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, that argument cuts both ways, young man," he said. "We've got to take your word—and you'll have to take ours. That's understood. You can't expect me to pay you until we've proved that your information is worth the money!"

"Well, perhaps not," said Fullwood. "At the same time, I think you ought to pay half now, and half to-morrow. That would be fair, wouldn't it? I suggest that you hand me forty-five quid now, an' the rest after you have done the job. Of course, I wouldn't agree to this if I didn't know that you were doin' somethin' right. We understand each other; but to an outsider it would seem as though I were lettin' you into the school for an unlawful purpose."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I suppose it is unlawful," said Mr. Naggs candidly. "But the law doesn't always deal out justice, Master Fullwood—that's why I'm taking matters into my own hands on this occasion. With regard to paying you the money, I don't think I shall be justified in doing so until we have the concrete result; therefore, we'll let the original programme stand. If I find that everything is as you have stated, you will receive the money to-morrow night."

"Well, let's suggest somethin' else," said Fullwood. "Supposin' I come down here early to-morrow mornin'—say, at about seven o'clock. Will you dub up then?"

"Certainly!" replied Mr. Naggs, without hesitation. "I pay you on the spot, Master Fullwood."

"Right you are!" said the leader of Study A, rising to his feet. "We'll leave it at that, then. I'll open that cellar gratin' for you to-night, an' to-morrow mornin', at seven o'clock, I'll be down here."

"Good enough!" said Mr. Naggs. "An' thank you for your information, young man."

Very shortly afterwards Fullwood took his departure, and he was feeling fairly satisfied with the result of his interview with the two strangers. He realised that it would be impossible for them to pay any money over until they had some definite results.

At the same time, Fullwood was suspicious. He knew that these men were quite capable of leaving the district without paying what they had promised to pay. And this proved quite conclusively that Fullwood did not trust the men, and he probably did not be-

lieve, right down in his heart, that their story of a dye formula was correct.

However, Fullwood did not worry his head over these matters. He was doing something against Dick Goodwin, and that was all his vindictive mind cared about. He told himself that there was nothing wrong in just mentioning to these men that they could gain admittance by means of the secret passage. Neither was there anything wrong in leaving a cellar grating unfastened. How could Fullwood be held responsible if these men broke into the school at dead of night?

And so the rascal of the Remove satisfied his conscience that everything was correct, and that he could not be blamed for what had occurred.

The gates were locked when Fullwood arrived back at St. Frank's, but that did not worry him at all. He easily slipped over the wall, and managed to get into the Ancient House without being detected by Warren, the porter, or any of the prefects. He made his way straight to Study A, and he went in languidly.

"Well?" asked Gulliver and Bell.

"It's all serene," said Fullwood. "I've arranged everythin', an' we're goin' to get the cash to-morrow!"

"Good!" said Gulliver. "I'm pretty short just now, an' that money will come in handy. By the way, did those chaps promise to make it any more?"

"Thirty quid each!"

"Phew!" said Bell, with a whistle. "That's good! Thirty quid each, eh? Look here, you chaps, it seems to me that these men need that formula pretty badly. They wouldn't be willin' to pay ninety quid for nothin', you know! I can't quite believe it's square!"

"Neither can I," said Gulliver. "The rotters will trick us somehow, if we ain't careful!"

Fullwood nodded.

"That's what I think, too!" he said. "I've arranged to go down there at seven o'clock in the mornin'——"

"They may have scooted before then!" objected Bell.

"Quite so!" said Fullwood calmly. "But I'm up to their dodges. I shall be awake to-night, and on the watch. An' when they leave the school, I shall be waitin' for them in the lane. You chaps will be with me, an' we'll get the money out of them at once—or raise the alarm!"

"That's a good idea!" said Gulliver. "There's nothin' like bein' on the safe side!"

Fullwood explained to his chums exactly what he had arranged, and, a little later, Fullwood made several attempts to get down into the domestic quarters of the Ancient House, in order to enter the cellar.

But he found it difficult.

Every time he made for the rear section of the Ancient House, he met prefects or servants—in fact, everybody he wished to avoid. And at last bedtime came, and still Fullwood's mission was not accomplished—he had not unfastened that cellar grating.

However, there was no help for it, and Fullwood told himself that the only method now was to slip out of the dormitory after all the other fellows were asleep. He would then have no difficulty in going down to the cellar and unfastening the grating. Perhaps, on the whole, it would be better this way.

Fullwood waited until everybody was asleep—at least, he thought everybody was asleep. But in this supposition he was slightly mistaken. I remained awake, and I was fully aware of the fact that Fullwood was hastily slipping into his trousers and slippers. I was suspicious, and had remained on the alert. It was fortunate that I did so.

For, as soon as Fullwood left the dormitory, I was out of bed in a flash. Then, slipping a dressing-gown over my pyjamas, I went to the dormitory door, too, and passed out into the dark corridor. Fullwood was just creeping down the stairs.

At first I thought it was his plan to make his way out of the school, probably in order to meet Mr. Colmore and Mr. Nagg. But this was not the case. Fullwood merely went down into the lobby, and then he turned into the domestic quarters of the Ancient House. I followed him silently, and did not give him any opportunity of knowing that his movements were observed.

Fullwood went straight to the cellar door, which was usually kept locked and bolted at night; but the key, as a general rule, was left in the door. Fullwood turned it softly, pushed back the bolts, and then he switched on the electric light. There was no danger of that light being seen from outside, for it only illuminated the long cellar passage.

However, it was not very convenient

from my point of view, for it would be very risky for me to descend the stairs in the full glare of the light—my presence would be revealed at once if Fullwood happened to turn.

So I waited at the top, and listened carefully.

And this, I found, was all that was necessary, for I faintly heard a grating sound, and I knew at once that Fullwood was pulling back the bolts which secured the iron bars of the cellar grating. He was, in fact, making it extremely easy for the two mysterious strangers to enter the school.

"The fool!" I muttered grimly. "The reckless idiot!"

I knew well enough what a mad action this was on Fullwood's part. But he probably didn't realise it—he didn't look at it in that way. The leader of Study A did not seem to understand that what he was doing was practically a criminal action. He was, in short, aiding and abetting a burglary. But if this had been suggested to Fullwood, he would have laughed the very idea to scorn.

A few minutes elapsed, and then he came into view—and I dodged quickly back, and concealed myself in a recess. Fullwood soon came to the surface, then he switched off the light, and left the cellar door just closed. He locked the cellar door and rebolted it, and then, after a moment's pause, turned and made his way back to the lobby. He slipped along the passage, entered the lobby, and then mounted the stairs with the evident intention of going straight back to the Remove dormitory. I shadowed him silently and with extreme caution.

And just as Fullwood reached the top of the stairs, a dim form appeared out of the shadows—a form with extremely bandy legs. Fullwood paused, and attempted to press himself against the wall. And then came a deep though soft voice.

"There was somebody on the stairs," it exclaimed. "Why was there somebody on the stairs? Ask me! Because that there somebody was anxious to get to the top landing!"

"Mr. Cuttle!" I murmured. "I wonder what he's dodging about for at this time? This looks rather bad for Fullwood—he'll be reported in the morning, and that may land him in the cart properly!"

"There was darkness, and there was eyes in my head!" said Mr. Cuttle gloomily. "But them eyes wasn't able to see in the dark. Why wasn't they? Ask me! Because I wasn't a cat! Young man, I want your name—— By hokey!"

Mr. Cuttle uttered that last exclamation in a tone of dismay and alarm, for Ralph Leslie Fullwood seized the only possible chance of regaining the dormitory without being recognised. Mr. Cuttle barred the top of the staircase—at least, he stood on the landing, and his broad person filled the whole space.

But Mr. Cuttle's legs were bandy, and Fullwood was well aware of this fact. He made a sudden dive, and succeeded in worming his way between Mr. Cuttle's legs in less than two seconds. Their semi-circular shape assisted Fullwood very materially.

"By hokey!" said Mr. Cuttle again.

By the time he recovered his balance and turned round, Fullwood had vanished into the blackness. And even if Mr. Cuttle entered the Remove dormitory now, it would be quite impossible for him to say which junior had been out of his bed.

I really couldn't help smiling to myself. Fullwood had been smart on this occasion—and there was no denying the fact.

"There was boys, and there was birches!" muttered Mr. Cuttle, in a melancholy voice. "Birches was painful when they was used in the proper way. But there won't be no birch used on that young varmint. Why won't there? Ask me! Because my eyes wasn't like a cat's, and cats see in the dark; but I wasn't able to see in the dark!"

Mr. Cuttle came downstairs muttering gloomily to himself. He went across the lobby, shaking his head, and I watched him from an obscure corner. There was no reason why I should let him see that I was out of bed also.

"There was awful ends for boys like that there young raskeel!" muttered Mr. Cuttle, as he passed along. "Boys like them wasn't no good—and never wouldn't be, neither! And why wouldn't they be no good? Ask me! Because they was too cunning, and people with too much cunning was born without proper brains. Cunning wasn't cleverness!"

And, still nodding his head sadly, Mr. Cuttle passed on.

I chuckled, and quickly remounted the stairs. But I did not make the mistake of going back to the dormitory. Fullwood was certainly awake still, and he would see me enter, and would know at once that I might probably have been watching his movements. As matters stood, he had certainly made no attempt to investigate my bed, which was right at the far end of the dormitory. And Fullwood no doubt imagined that I was fast asleep.

So I waited, patiently and expectantly.

I knew very well that some stirring events were to happen long before the arrival of dawn.

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## CHAPTER V.

### PROWLERS IN THE NIGHT.

MR. NAGGS nodded with keen satisfaction.

"The boy wasn't bluffing!" he muttered. "This grating is unfastened right enough, Colmore! We can get in the cellar without any trouble at all!"

"Good!" whispered Mr. Colmore. "But don't talk so much, man; we can't be too careful!"

Mr. Naggs nodded.

"I agree with that view," he said. "But there's nobody about here to listen to us, and we can just take our time. The whole school's asleep, and it'll be child's play."

"Providing that we find that blamed secret passage!" said Mr. Colmore.

"Exactly—providing we find it!" agreed Mr. Naggs. "Well, we sha'n't be left long in doubt—that's one thing!"

They were soon in the cellar, and then, using a small electric torch—which only gave one tiny ray of light—they crossed over, and entered the little passage. Carrying out Fullwood's instructions, they passed along this until they arrived at the blank wall. Mr. Naggs looked at it rather doubtfully.

"It looks solid enough to me!" he murmured. "I can't see those great bricks moving back!"

"Neither can I!" said Mr. Colmore grimly. "It's my belief the kid was only spoofing, just to get the money out of us; but that trick failed, anyhow. He didn't get a cent—and he ain't likely to, either!"

"Not much!" said Mr. Naggs. "Whether we do this thing, or whether we don't—it makes no difference. Them kids won't get a farthing from us!"

He produced a small rule from his pocket, and proceeded to open it, while Mr. Colmore held the electric torch. Then, without wasting any time, Mr. Naggs took the measurements exactly as Fullwood had directed. When he had finished, his finger was upon one of the great squares of stone, near the edge, where it was somewhat rough.

Mr. Naggs pressed with all his strength.

Nothing happened.

"Just as I thought!" grunted Colmore savagely. "We were fools to take any notice!"

"Yes, I suppose we were!" agreed Mr. Naggs disgustedly.

"Anyhow, there's nothing here. I knew this wall was solid!"

He shifted his finger slightly, and then pressed again.

"Maybe the kid dreamed it!" he said. "But he seemed so positive—— Why, what—— By thunder!"

Mr. Naggs uttered a gasp, for there, clearly visible, a crack had appeared in the stonework, and it was widening every instant! Naggs had felt the stone give slightly under his pressure, and then the whole square of brickwork commenced moving backwards, revealing a black cavity.

"Great snakes!" muttered Mr. Colmore, startled.

They stared at the doorway as though they could not believe their eyes.

"It's true, then!" exclaimed Mr. Naggs, in a quivering voice. "By George! The kid hasn't swindled us after all! This is a secret door all right, and it's a certainty that the rest of Fullwood's yarn is true, too! Give me that light!"

Colmore passed it over, and a moment later the two men were in the secret passage, and they were slowly mounting the stone steps which led upwards, right through the great wall, into the very interior of the Ancient House. Both men were very excited, and they could hardly believe they were not dreaming.

At length, after mounting a good many stairs, they came to a point where a narrow, low passage branched off to the left. The stairs continued straight

on. Mr. Naggs came to a halt, his eyes gleaming.

"Yes, the boy was right!" he whispered. "There's the passage, just as he said. We've got to go along this until we come to a hole in the floor, and then we get down there, and go along another short passage. And at the end we shall find the secret panel leading into Goodwin's study!"

"Great snakes!" said Mr. Colmore again.

He could really think of nothing more original to utter at the moment. Mr. Naggs commenced moving forward, and his companion followed. They had not proceeded far along the passage before they came to a square opening in the floor which had been left by the secret trap. Sir Montie and Tommy and I had been unable to close that, and then the hole was visible to anybody who came along.

The two men passed down the three short steps, and then they found themselves in the other secret passage, which was much lower and much narrower.

They were compelled to bend almost double as they moved along.

"Yes, this is exactly as Fullwood described!" said Mr. Naggs intently. "Splendid, man! The boy is worth a hundred quid to us!"

The two rascals in the passage were quite pleased with themselves—and extremely pleased with Fullwood. But they would not have been quite so pleased, perhaps, if they had known that their privacy was not so sound as they imagined.

In point of fact, three ears were pressed tightly against the panelling in the Remove passage—three very keen ears. They belonged to Tregellis-West, Watson, and myself. They were our left ears, and we stood in the Remove passage in a line, listening intently.

"Yes, they're there!" I whispered, after a moment. "Can't you hear them?"

"Begad! Yes, old boy, rather!" murmured Tregellis-West.

"We mustn't talk—we mustn't breathe, even," whispered Tommy Watson. "If we can hear them, they can hear us!"

This was true enough, but we had only been speaking in the faintest of whispers. And now we stood away from the wall, and gathered together in a little group.

I had remained awake, and I had been alert and watchful. And after what had seemed an interminable time, I had heard very faint sounds from below.

Without wasting a moment, I had awakened Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson. And I satisfied myself that Ralph Leslie Fullwood was fast asleep. He may have desired to remain awake, but he had dosed off, in spite of any resolve of his.

And so Sir Montie and Tommy and I crept out of the dormitory, and we descended to the Remove passage. I knew that if those men got into the secret panel, they would betray themselves when they reached the panelling near Goodwin's study. For, by pressing our ears to the woodwork, we could hear any sound from within the secret passage.

"Well, what's to be done?" whispered Watson eagerly.

"There's only one thing," I said. "We've got to go up to Mr. Lee's room, and we've got to tell him!"

"Begad!"

"There's no need to be startled, Montie," I said. "We can't deal with this thing alone; the guv'nor must be told. He'll know what to do, and both those rotters will be trapped, if I'm any judge. Come on!"

"But—but——"

"But what?" I asked.

"We shall get into a frightful row, dear old boy!" protested Montie.

"Rubbish!" I said briskly. "Do you think the guv'nor will cane us, or give us lines, for giving the alarm about burglars? Rather not! We shall be highly commended, my sons!"

And, without any further argument, we hastened down the Remove passage, and mounted the stairs, until we arrived on the landing. Then we passed down it until we reached the door of Nelson Lee's bedroom. I tapped softly, and almost at once came the guv'nor's voice.

"Who is that?"

"It is me, sir—Nipper," I murmured.

"Oh, indeed!" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "Wait a moment, my lad!"

He was soon at the door, and he stood there in his dressing-gown and slippers

looking somewhat curious and rather severe.

"Well, what is it?" he asked. "Upon my soul, three of you! What are you doing out here at this time of night?"

"There are burglars in the house, sir!" blurted out Watson excitedly.

"Burglars!"

"Yes, sir!"

"I'll explain!" I interrupted. "Look here, guv'nor, it's this way. I—I happened to be out in the corridor, and I heard a suspicious sound——"

And, without going into very close details, I told Nelson Lee all about it. I told him that the two men were even in the secret passage, attempting to make an entry in Goodwin's study. But I did not mention any names—I did not inform the guv'nor that Fullwood was the responsible party.

And Nelson Lee, probably realising that I had some reason for not going into the full facts, refrained from asking me. After all, it was quite sufficient for him to know that the two intruders were in the building.

"And so, Nipper, I am to understand from your story that two housebreakers are even at this moment in the secret passage which leads to Goodwin's study," said Nelson Lee. "Very well, we'll deal with them at once—and drastically."

"Good egg!" I exclaimed. "That's the style, guv'nor."

"But what are we going to do?" whispered Watson.

"Leave it to the guv'nor!" I murmured. "He'll know what to do!"

"Begad, rather!"

Nelson Lee went into his bedroom again, telling us to remain outside for a minute or two. When he reappeared he was attired in his coat and trousers, and I noticed that he held a small but serviceable revolver in his right hand.

"You have an electric torch, Nipper?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Good," exclaimed Lee. "That is all we require, I think."

I looked at him keenly.

"What is your plan, sir?" I inquired.

"It is quite simple, Nipper," replied Nelson Lee. "You have told me the facts, and we may take it for granted that Naggs and Colmore cannot get into Goodwin's study from the secret passage. The panel is blocked up."

"That's right, sir."

"Very well. If we enter the secret stairway, and reached the junction where the narrow passage branches off, we shall completely entrap the precious pair," said Nelson Lee keenly. "They will not be able to pass my revolver, and they cannot escape at the other end. They will therefore be compelled to surrender."

"Yes—but we shall have to be quick," I said.

"Exactly. Come along!"

"Hold on, sir," put in Tommy Watson. "What about the door leading into the Remove passage? The rotters may get out that way."

"But I understand Nipper to say that that door was secured——"

"So it is, sir," I said. "The catch won't work, and you can't open the door. I opened it at first, but then it secured itself somehow. It's absolutely fast."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"That is all we need to know, then," he said. "We must go at once."

Not another moment was wasted. We passed along the corridor, and then went into the North Tower. It did not take me more than a couple of seconds to show the guv'nor the secret door, and then we passed through into the stairway—Nelson Lee leading.

"You boys must keep behind—a good way behind," he ordered. "There may be some firing. I hope not, but we cannot be too sure. Do not follow me closely, but remain well in the rear."

"Yes, sir."

I mentally resolved that it would not be necessary to take the guv'nor's orders too literally. But I allowed him to get well in advance to start with. In case of need we could easily rush up.

At last we arrived at the junction, and Nelson Lee stood there for a moment or two in total darkness. He was listening, and his patience was soon rewarded. Along the passage came faint sounds of conversation.

Lee moved forward at last, and he soon arrived at the trap in the floor. Just for a moment he allowed his light to play upon the square, then he switched it off, and lowered himself into the low, narrow passage.

And now he could see what was happening.

Mr. Naggs and Mr. Colmore were at the panel leading into Dick Goodwin's study. And they were saying several things which gentlemen certainly did not say. But, of course, they were not gentlemen.

They were unable to get into the secret apartment—owing to the heavy bookcase which barred the way. And they were hot and dusty and impatient. In addition, they were angry.

"It's no blamed use," said Naggs savagely. "We can't open the thing ——"

"Hands up—the pair of you!"

The voice cut through the air crisply and distinctly. Two startled oaths came from the lips of the two rascals, and their electric torch snapped out. But Nelson Lee's torch beamed down the passage—revealing the automatic in the detective's grasp. The situation was dramatic.

"Lee—Lee himself!" snarled Naggs. "By thunder! We're done!"

Nelson Lee's nerves were as steady as a rock.

"There is really no way of escape, my friend," he said grimly. "Your only course is to surrender—and I should advise you to do so quietly!"

Mr. Naggs and Mr. Colmore were trapped, and they knew it. It was impossible to get through the secret door leading into Dick Goodwin's study—and it was equally impossible for them to pass Nelson Lee, who barred the passage. The schoolmaster-detective was holding a revolver, and the light from his electric torch played right down the passage fully upon the trapped rascals.

Nelson Lee could not recognise them, since they were wearing heavy masks. But they were desperate, and they wondered how they could escape. It really seemed as though they could do nothing. There was no other exit from this trap.

"Come, it will be just as well for you to take the situation calmly," said Nelson Lee. "Resistance is quite out of the question."

"Is it?" snarled Mr. Naggs. "We'll see about that! You won't dare to fire—the revolver is only bluff! And if you think we're trapped in here, you've made a mistake!"

"But we are trapped, you fool!" snapped Colmore.

"Not yet!" said Mr. Naggs curtly. "There's another door!"

He moved forward a few paces, until he was opposite the panel which led to the Remove passage. Mr. Naggs had remembered this, and he thought that if it would be possible for him to open that door both he and Colmore could escape. But it was very doubtful—Nelson Lee was there, watching their every movement.

The two men reached the panel, and Mr. Naggs commenced fingering the fastenings of the secret door. Nelson Lee observed the movement at once, and a grim smile appeared at the corners of his mouth.

"Now, now, that won't do!" he exclaimed, grimly. "You'll kindly leave those catches alone, my friends. If you disobey my order I shall not hesitate to fire. I am not bluffing quite so much as you imagine. Put your hands above your heads!"

"Hang you!" snarled Mr. Naggs furiously.

He was desperate, he was like a rat in a trap, and he knew it.

And, in that moment, he went almost off his head. To open the secret panel in the ordinary way was impossible, and there could be no escape.

But Mr. Naggs lost complete control of himself, and he uttered a hoarse shout, and threw himself against the secret panel with every ounce of his strength.

Crash!

To Mr. Naggs' extreme surprise, he went right through that panel as though it had been made of cardboard. It was not excessively strong; it had not been made to withstand such a tremendous onslaught, and possibly the woodwork was rotten with age.

In any case, Mr. Naggs went clean through, and landed in a tumbled heap in the Remove passage! And Mr. Colmore, without waiting to say anything, dashed through the opening which had been provided. He found Naggs just getting to his feet.

"Upon my soul!" rapped out Nelson Lee furiously. He had not expected anything of this nature, and he tore down the passage until he arrived at the smashed panel.

When he emerged into the Remove passage both the masked scoundrels had vanished.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE CAPTURE.

THIS was a night of strange happenings.

While the excitement was going on within the house, other strange events were taking place outside, in the cold, blustery air.

It was very dark out in the Triangle, and the wind was whistling through the leafless elms and the old chestnuts. Brown leaves were being swept up in the gusts, and the wind itself was cold in the extreme.

Against the wall, which divided the Triangle from the road, two men were standing. They certainly could not have been Mr. Colmore and Mr. Naggs, for those two individuals were, at that very moment, exploring the passage in the interior of the Ancient House.

Who, then, were these other two strangers?

It was a mystery. The two figures climbed cautiously over the wall, and they dropped into the Triangle. Then they moved across the open space until they came to one of the tall chestnut trees. Here they halted for a time, and talked together in low tones.

"Yes, we're going to do it at once," said one of the men. "There is no need for delay."

"But do you think he is asleep?"

"He is bound to be by this time—and our plans ought to work out well," said the other. "There is no reason why it should fail. You are ready to do your part, I presume?"

"Yes; of course I am."

The other man nodded, and said no more.

He looked up at the tree, and then commenced climbing. Round his waist was bound a long coil of thin, strong rope. The man on the ground watched his companion as he climbed.

At last he reached the topmost branch of the tree, a stout young branch which was waving slightly in the wind. Securely perched on his branch, which projected far out beyond the other branches and twigs, the man proceeded to unwrap the rope.

At last he had the coil in his hands, and, steadying himself, he gave a tremendous swing, and the thin rope went whistling through the air.

Twang!

The end of the rope, in a loop, passed completely over a chimney-stack on the roof of the Ancient House. And the rope became taut, and it made a slight sound. The man in the tree did not lose a moment in securing the rope to the branch. Then he glanced down.

"Right!" he murmured.

The man below heard that word, and at once commenced climbing. Meanwhile, the man who was already in the tree commenced to perform an extremely hazardous task. He grasped the rope, and then swung himself across, far from the ground.

Hand over hand he went, dangling over space.

But he reached the parapet of the roof without mishap. Then, perfectly cool, although rather breathless, he pulled himself up into safety. But he did not pause. He passed softly over the flat roof until he came to the chimney-stack. Here he unlooped the rope.

And in the tree the other man was waiting. He unfastened the rope from the branch, and it was drawn over on to the roof.

The man standing there waved his arm, and this signal was understood, for his companion climbed down the tree again until he reached the gravel of the triangle. And now he proceeded to perform a rather curious operation.

Picking up one or two small stones, the stranger walked towards the wall of the house, and then he threw those stones. He threw them up at a window, and they rattled noisily upon the glass.

It was the window of Nelson Lee's bedroom.

But, unfortunately for these mysterious men, Nelson Lee was not there. Nelson Lee was down on the ground floor of the Ancient House. He was, in fact, in the Remove passage, roundly abusing himself for having allowed Naggs and Colmore to escape. Not that Nelson Lee could be blamed in any way. He had never believed it possible that the trapped scoundrels would smash through the panel in the way they had done.

Sir Montie and Tommy and I followed Nelson Lee out of the passage, and we were rather startled.

"They've escaped, sir!" I panted. "They've——"

"I know they have escaped, Nipper," he

said Nelson Lee. "What is the good of telling me that?"

He did not wait to say any more, but dashed down the passage towards the lobby. We followed him, and at that moment, we heard the sound of footsteps. We simply dashed up at the double.

Meanwhile, Mr. Nagga had managed to get completely away, for he had not gone upstairs; he had made for the domestic quarters, and he had opened the window, and was now streaming across the meadow at the back of the school—making tracks for the wood.

But Mr. Colmore was not quite so lucky.

He had chosen the staircase in his panic. He had hardly known where he was going. And he rushed up, and then pelted along the upper corridor. He was desperate, and he dashed into the first open doorway he could find. And this, as it happened, was the doorway of Nelson Lee's bedroom, for the detective had failed to close the door when we had given the alarm.

Mr. Colmore breathed a great sigh of relief. He closed the door, and tried to lock it, but, somehow, the lock seemed to stick, so he did not waste any further time. He ran lightly across to the window, and threw up the sash.

Not quite sure of it, it seemed to him that he had heard a slight rattle at the window, but he took no notice of this. He was too intent upon escaping.

The window was high, but Colmore thought it possible that he might be able to get to the ground.

He leaned far out of the window, searching for a pipe, or for some strong ivy. Anything would do.

And then Mr. Colmore gave a cry of terror.

For, at that moment, while he was leaning out of the window, a thin loop of rope came circling down. It swung itself over his head and shoulders, and then with a sharp jerk, it became tight.

"Oh!" gasped the man.

He struggled fiercely, but it was no good. The rope was pinioning his arms to his side, and it was so tight that he could almost have shrieked with pain. And then the rope became tighter and tighter, until, at length, Colmore was lifted right off his feet and swung clean out of the window into the air!

He dangled there, many feet above the ground.

Then, with a swiftness that was startling, he was lowered to the ground. It was almost a fall, and he arrived in a heap upon the gravel. He had descended the last six feet, in fact, in a sheer fall. He was hurt considerably.

Quick as a flash, the man who had been waiting in the Triangle dashed forward. He sprang upon the prostrate Colmore, and proceeded to bind other ropes about him. Meanwhile the man on the roof had another rope handy, and he came slithering down this to the ground.

He ran lightly up to his companion.

"Splendid!" he murmured. "We've got him!"

"He's a bit dazed, too!" murmured the other. "That's all the better. We must lose no time——"

A head appeared out of the window above.

"Who is that down there?" came a sharp voice. "I am glad to see you have captured the rascal. I will be down in a minute!"

The two men in the Triangle muttered low oaths. The next second an electric torch flashed out, and it played upon the features of Mr. Colmore.

"Hang it all!" snarled one of the men. "We've made a mistake!"

There was untold fury and chagrin in his tones, and he and his companion did not wait a moment. They simply streaked across the Triangle, jumped over the wall, and vanished down the road.

They had, as a matter of fact, made a very bad bloomer indeed. For it was quite evident that it had been their intention to capture Nelson Lee. Instead of doing that, they had very kindly assisted Lee by capturing Mr. Colmore!

A moment later Nelson Lee came hurrying round a corner of the Triangle, and he was followed by Tregellis-West, Watson, and myself. Colmore, at that moment, was attempting to struggle to his feet.

"Oh, you've got me!" he muttered as Nelson Lee bent over him. "I'm done—absolutely finished! But Nagga has escaped—good luck to him!"

"I am glad you realise that you are in a somewhat hopeless position, my son," said Nelson Lee grimly. "You were captured very neatly——"

"I was!" growled Colmore savagely.

"I don't know how it happened, either. I just looked out of the window, and a rope came swinging down, and it lifted me right off my feet, and it threw me down here. I was lassoed!"

"Begad!"

"He must be dreaming!" murmured Watson.

Nelson Lee looked rather keen for a moment.

"You say that you were roped as soon as you leaned out of the window?" he asked.

"Yes, I was!" said Colmore. "There was somebody on the roof with a rope, waiting. And directly I looked out of the window I was collared. Curse the luck!"

Nelson Lee looked at me.

"Dear me," he exclaimed in a low voice. "This is quite remarkable, Nipper."

"How do you mean, sir?"

"Why, you heard what this man said," proceeded the guv'nor. "It is fairly evident that a little trap was set for my benefit—and Mr. Colmore fell into it. Those two men who were in the Triangle, bending over our prisoner, here, were enemies of mine. They thought it was I who looked out of the window, and they captured me, or, to be more exact, they captured this rascal!"

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

It was all a mystery to me, and I was decidedly puzzled. Colmore was quickly transferred to one of the cellars, where he was made a secure prisoner. It would be impossible for him to escape until the police arrived, when he would be charged with housebreaking and a few other choice things.

Fortunately, the school had not been aroused, and hardly anybody knew what had been taking place. The excitement was over, and there had been a great deal of it, too!

But what did it all mean?

Who were these two men—these two who had appeared so mysteriously with the ropes? Why had they attempted to kidnap Nelson Lee? Were they in any way connected with Colmore and Naggs? Somehow, I felt quite convinced that they were not.

Nelson Lee told us to go straight up to bed, but we didn't do so immediately. We went down into the Remove passage with the guv'nor, and then we repaired the secret panel.

There was only one way in which it could be done at the moment, without attracting attention. And that was to tear the remains of the smashed panel out, and put another panel in its place. We did this by removing the secret door from Goodwin's study. It would not be noticed there, because the bookcase was in front of it. The matter could be easily attended to when there was more time.

But it was most important that there should not be a gaping hole in the wall of the Remove passage in the morning. The juniors would get very excited, and there would be a tremendous lot of discussion. And so all signs of the night's work were concealed, and then we all went up into the dormitory passage, in order to get back to bed.

"Well, boys, we have had a little excitement," said Nelson Lee. "But it is over now, and if you will take my advice, you will say nothing about it to the other boys."

"Oh, we sha'n't say a word," I said. "But who were those two fellows out in the Triangle, sir?"

"I don't know, Nipper."

"But they were after you——"

"Undoubtedly."

"They must be the same men who tried to kidnap you the other day, sir," I said seriously. "Don't you remember that affair at Oak Lodge, in Edgemore? They nearly got you then."

"But, thanks to your timely assistance, Nipper, they failed," said Nelson Lee quietly. "This time they failed because of another reason. It is fairly obvious, however, that I must use extreme caution in the future. It will not do to take any risks. I have certain enemies prowling about the school, who are intent upon doing me an injury. And, in future, I shall keep a very strict watch."

More than that, the guv'nor would not say, and we returned to the dormitory, and slipped into bed.

"Well, you chaps, I don't know what to make of it," I remarked, as I hugged my knees under the bedclothes. "It's all a giddy mystery, and the sooner it's cleared up, the better."

"Begad, rather!"

"Well, I'm sleepy!" yawned Watson.

"We'll talk about this in the morning!"

And he rolled over and composed himself for sleep.

It was some little time before I followed his example. For there was much on my mind, and there was much to think about. Naggs had escaped, but Colmore by this time was in the hands of the police.

They had failed in their attempt to search Dick Goodwin's study. And I knew well there was no secret formula—as Fullwood imagined.

As for Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell, they were fast asleep. They had done their work, and no result had followed. In future, probably, they would steer well clear of Mr. Naggs. For, after what had happened, it was not likely that Mr. Naggs would feel very amiably disposed towards the Nuts of Study A. He would probably take it for granted that they had led him deliberately into the trap.

In any case, the whole affair was a tangle, and I hardly knew what to make of it. But, out of all the maze, I knew two certain things. Naggs and Colmore had been after Dick Goodwin, it had been their intention to enter his study with the idea of taking something which they wanted.

The other two men were not at all connected with Colmore and Naggs. They were prowling about St. Frank's with the idea of kidnapping Nelson Lee. But why they should want to kidnap the guv'nor was a puzzle. And why Mr. Naggs and Mr. Colmore should want to search Dick Goodwin's study was another puzzle.

However, everything would come clear before long.

But we were destined to go through many more excitements and adventures before the actual truth was known.

THE END.

# TO MY READERS.

*I MUST first acknowledge my great indebtedness to those numerous chums who sent in votes for their favourite story and character that have appeared in this Library. The response was magnificent, every post bringing in shoals of postcards. In fact, I have had quite a busy time sorting out the votes.*

*Most of my chums favour "The Battle of the Giants" as the best story that has ever appeared in* THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY, *and since it was published only a few weeks ago, it also becomes the most popular story of the year. The stories of the Singleton series come second in the general estimation of my chums. As to the favourite character, excluding Nelson Lee or Nipper, Handsforth stands well at the top of the poll. Lord Dorrimore second, and then Sir Montie, Tommy Watson, Timothy Tucker, Fatty Little, etc.*

*I have every reason to be satisfied with the result of the ballot, the preponderating votes on the recent holiday series indicating a progress in the right direction.*

*Now a few words about the present series. The mystery concerning Goodwin and the attempt to steal his invention by hired russians is heightened by the more sinister appearance of two other russians who had vainly tried to capture the Schoolmaster-Detective. Next week in another thrilling yarn, "MISSING FROM SCHOOL," there will be many exciting adventures in which Nelson Lee will take a prominent part.*

THE EDITOR.

# GRAND NEW DETECTIVE SERIAL JUST STARTED!

# KIT & CORA

## Mysterious Detectives

**A TALE OF 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, and the boy nicknames him "Mr. Mysterious." The stranger sends him on an errand to deliver a packet to a Mr. Crawson-Crake, who, on opening the packet, which contains a model of a miner's camp, behaves like a madman, and covering the boy with a revolver, threatens to shoot unless Lin discloses the name of the man who had sent him on the errand*

*(Now read on.)*

## A Strange Reception,

BUT the fifth stroke was never heard. Suddenly Crawson-Crake flung the watch from him among the litter on the floor, and dropped the revolver with a thud on to the table. Lin heard him mutter hoarsely:

"By the powers, I believe he speaks the truth! And I meant to kill him!"

Then he pointed to the door, and shouted: "Clear out, boy! Clear out!"

Dazed though he was by the sudden reprieve from what he had looked upon as certain death, Lin Fleet did not take any risks by lingering! He tore the door open and dashed out into the corridor. A man in a red waistcoat—it was Simpson, aroused from his nap, and coming to see if he might be wanted in his master's room—met him at the door—that is, met Lin's head, which took him in the middle of his crimson vest and sent him across the marble floor on his heels, against a door which opened and let him in backwards, with a crash of crockery and a rattle of things falling.

Lin had no thought of stopping to ring up the lift, but ran down the long, successive flights of stairs, and so gained the street.

But even before he reached it his feelings underwent a rapid change. Away from the spell of that strange room, with its heavy, "druggy" air and oppressive silence, away from the horrible glare of that man's bloodshot, glassy eyes—out of it once more into the life and bustle of the free, active world, the boy's natural courage returned, and he was inclined to be ashamed of his late fit of downright funk. He couldn't understand the affair a bit.

But one thing he was quite clear about. He was angry with the man who had sent him to that place, and vowed that he would never undertake another job for "Mr. Mysterious."

And he fully meant it!

Lin, in his rising indignation, was half inclined to drop the business now that he had delivered the packet, and leave the man who had sent him to guess the result of his errand.

"It would serve him right, if he knew what sort of a man he was sending me to with that thing, without a word of warning as to what I might drop in for!" mused the boy, his indignation growing warmer with the suspicion that he had been made a ready and simple tool in some senseless practical joke—or worse, some fishy affair of a more serious nature.

"It looks as though he did not know the sort of man this Crawson-Crake was, and that's why he wouldn't go himself; though he didn't mind sending a boy, without a hint to put him on his guard!" thought Lin, with increasing resentment. "He was very keen on knowing how Crawson-Crake behaved when he opened the packet—which shows that he did know something about the man. And it would just serve him right if I didn't go and tell him what happened. No, I won't go!"

Yet he had no sooner made that resolve than he knew that he could not keep it.

Lin Fleet was a somewhat peculiar boy; that is, considering the circumstances of his upbringing and home life. His parents he could not remember, and the uncle and aunt with whom he had lived as far back as he could recall were hardly the sort of guardians to lead a boy into the right path.

To put it mildly, they were a tricky pair.

And yet from somewhere—father or mother, or some ancestor more remote—Lin Fleet had inherited the jewel of Honour; and in spite of his doubtful surroundings of his childhood, and still more impressionable early boyhood, he had somehow contrived to keep that jewel bright and unsullied

within his breast. He never thought about it in that way, or in any way; but it was there, and was, without his being aware of it, the lode-star by which he steered through life.

By pure instinct he shrank from all that was mean or base. He did not steal or tell lies, because of something within him that wouldn't let him. And, having given his word, he would go to no end of trouble rather than break it.

And he had given his word to go and tell this "Mr. Mysterious" the result of his errand. So, of course, he would have to go; a fellow must do a thing when he has promised. And then there was all the rest of that five shillings. He couldn't stick to all that lot of money. He couldn't have been meant to. It must have been a mistake in the hurry of the moment; or—and his cheeks reddened at the thought—a dodge to try if he were honest enough to come back at all, when he might stay away and keep the money.

"I'll take it back, every penny of it but what I have to spend on fares—and that won't be much," resolved Lin. "I've a jolly good mind to throw it at him! Anyhow, I'll give him a bit of my mind! I'll let him know that I'm not to be played with, if I am only a boy!"

He took out the torn card which the man in grey had given him. The address upon it read:

"THE WATCHBOX,"
HEATHSIDE,
HAMPSTEAD.

Lin had not noticed the address before. It was farther than he had expected to have to go, and that did not help to sooth his feelings towards his mysterious employer. He had been out looking for work many hours, and was now tired and hungry. But he had no idea of stopping for anything to eat before he started. He wanted to get done with the business, and finish with this "Mr. Mysterious" for good and all!

He mounted a Hampstead 'bus, and during the long and rather chilly ride kept himself warm by nursing his indignation, and working up a stinging little speech, calculated to crush Mr. Mysterious, and to show him that he had picked the wrong boy, if he wanted one of the sort that would go anywhere and do anything as long as they had a shilling tossed to them when it was done!

He had time to go over it again after he got down from the 'bus, for he had a bit of a walk, and a little difficulty in finding the house he wanted. It seemed to have hidden itself away on purpose to delay and annoy him!

He found it at last, just as dusk was falling. It was quite at the other side of the heath, and stood almost by itself; a queer little old-fashioned house, it looked as though it had been made by knocking two or three cottages into one, being long, low, and straggling, and having odd windows of all shapes and sizes placed anywhere. It was well back from the road, with a perfect wilderness of a garden in front, enclosed by a low stone wall with a curious entrance-gate.

Lin couldn't make that gateway out at first. He had never seen anything like it before, except in pictures. Then it came to him what it was—a watchman's box, such as stood at street corners in our great-grandfather's days to shelter the old watchmen, or "Charlies," who were London's only night guardians in those times. An opening had been made through the back of the box, corresponding with that in front, where the old original halfdoor still hung and now served as the entrance-gate. On it was carved in quaint, old-time lettering:

"THE WATCHBOX."

A genuine old watchman's lantern, with horn instead of glass, hung from the roof within, and there were seats on either side of the doorway. With a fine view over the heath, framed by the half-door, it must have made a pleasant lounge on a fine summer evening.

At another time Lin might have been tickled with the idea; it was quaint and romantic. But he was cold, hungry, and disgusted, and his mood was rather one of contempt.

"Silly crank he must be, to go and stick a thing like that outside his house!" he muttered, half aloud, as he pushed the gate open and entered the watchbox. "He is an artist-chap, I expect, or one of those fellows who write stories and plays. I've heard that most of 'em are a bit cracked. And he must be, to send me with a box of kiddies' toys to another madman, and nearly get me killed!"

Then he jumped! A hand was laid upon his arm, and a voice—a girlish voice, and the most musical, he thought, that he had ever heard—said:

"I am afraid I startled you; it is so dark, you couldn't see me. I have been watching for you. You are later than I expected; but never mind! Tea is all ready. Come along in!"

Lin gasped.

"Here's somebody else that's mad!" he thought. Then he said aloud: "I think there's some mistake—er—miss. You must fancy I'm someone else. I'm only——"

"Oh, I know who you are," said the voice. "There's not the least mistake about it. Come along! Mind the path—it is disgraceful! There, I'd better take your hand, or you'll stray into the jungle and lose yourself!" Ending with a little musical laugh.

Lin wanted to explain things; he was sure that it must be a mistake. But he hadn't the chance. A hand was slipped into his, and he found himself compelled to walk quite swiftly to keep up with the light, swift step of his unseen guide.

What with the sharp pace and the darkness he became confused, and simply stumbled on in silence. It certainly was an amazing sort of path for the front-garden of a house in a London suburb! It seemed

***(Continued on page iii of cover).***

to be made of stones of all sizes pitched down anyhow, with things growing between them to catch one's toes, and long branches of taller things to switch one's face, or hook into clothing and try to tear it. And it went up and down, and wound in and out like a bit of string thrown on to the ground.

It was the maddest sort of path that Lin had ever trod, and it made him feel more certain than ever that the man who lived in that house must be a crank or a downright lunatic!

Once or twice he felt inclined to back out of it and get away. He had had enough of mad people for one day!

But the hand that held his, though small, slender and soft, had a wonderfully firm grasp. He could not have pulled his own away without actual roughness, and he didn't like to try. So he stumbled on, and presently his hand was released, and he found himself—quite suddenly, as it seemed to him in the confusion of that queer, corkscrewy walk through pitchy darkness—in a lighted room, blinking and bewildered with the startling change.

His eyes were dazzled at first with the sudden transformation from gloom to brightness. Then he stared about him.

It was a queer kind of room, and might have made anyone stare who had come into it suddenly as he had. It was long and low; the floor quite bare from one end to the middle; where began a carpet which might have been woven on a fairy loom, it was so delicately beautiful.

The rest—the bare half—looked like a man's room. It had lots of things, all sorts of things, crowded into it anyhow. There was not much furniture—only a couple of ugly black chairs, with knobbly backs and twisty legs, a writing-table with heaps of books and papers on it, and an easel with a drawing-board leaning against it.

The writing-table, with its books and papers, made Lin think again of some crank in the author line. But then there was the easel with its drawing-board to suggest that he might just as likely be an artist. But then, again, there was a glass-fronted cabinet on the wall full of bottles, test-tubes, and other chemical gear, to hint at something in the scientific way; and lots of other things, belonging to all sorts of totally different callings, trades, or professions! Lin gave it up, and turned his bewildered gaze to the other half of the room.

The contrast was amazing.

Lin could not have described it had he tried. No description in mere words could convey the charm and wonder that it had for him. It was just a dainty bower, that might have been a nook in a fairy palace, only that it contrived to combine a good deal of solid cosy comfort with its grace and prettiness. There was—not the least attractive part of it to the tired, chilled, and hungry boy—a table spread for tea; a tea of the substantial sort, with heaps of things to eat! There was not only bread and butter, cakes, and jam, and all that sort of thing; but stacks of cunning little sandwiches cut into all kinds of fancy shapes, and potted meats, and a big, queer-looking sausage with a black, winkled skin, like a bit of burnt wood.

The table was placed on a big fur rug, close to the large, old-fashioned fireplace, which was a genuine ingle-nook, like a little room in itself, with a fire of real wood logs on the stone floor in the middle, flaming and crackling, and sending big clouds of rosy smoke and glowing sparks up the great wide chimney.

Lin thought that the girl could not be much more than twenty—of the petite mould, her figure was slight, but perfect; and her small oval face was absolutely bewitching, especially when she smiled, as she did at Lin, across the table, while she filled the teapot from a silver kettle hissing on a spirit-stove.

"Kit!" she called; then, shaking her small head, crowned with fluffy masses of soft, dark hair, said gravely: "Now, if that brother of mine doesn't come this instant we'll begin without him, and not leave him a thing!"

"Coming, old girl!" responded a voice—from the middle of the fire, as it seemed to Lin—and a man stepped out of the ingle-nook, bringing a cloud of the wood-smoke with him, like the genie in the eastern story emerging from the brass bottle.

He carried a steaming dish in one hand, in the other a big toasting-fork. He had a cook's apron tied around his waist, and on his head a cook's white linen cap, which the edge of the fireplace arch had tilted over his forehead as he stepped under it; although he was not very tall, being, like the girl, rather of the slight, compact build.

He pulled off the apron and the cap, and threw them into a corner. Then Lin saw his face. It was a handsome face, a manly likeness of the girl's. A keen, shrewd face—the face of a man who knew what he wanted, and was used to getting his own way.

Lin was going to show this man that he was not the sort of boy to be sent on fools' errands for the sake of a few shillings!

In short, it was going to be a test of will-power between Lin Fleet and "Mr. Mysterious."

***(To be continued.)***

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