No. 291.—AN AMUSING STORY OF THE ST. FRANK'S AMATEUR BUILDERS.

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The Schoolboy Builders

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 Schoolboy Cinema Owners," "The Haunted House," "The Christmas Plot," and many other Stirring Tales.

January 1, 1921.

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER 1.

A VISIT OF INSPECTION!

SOLOMON LEVI sprang out of the train briskly at Bannington station. The Jewish boy in the Remove at St. Frank's was looking very bright and cheerful this particular wintry afternoon, and his eyes were shining with an eager light.

"Here we are, dad!" he said briskly. "I'm as curious as a kid about a new toy. I want to see how far the work has proceeded, and all the rest of it."

Mr. Isaac Levi smiled.

"You mustn't be too optimistic, Solly, my boy," he said. "A bare two weeks have elapsed since I completed the purchase of the property—and much cannot be done in two weeks, as you ought to know. The actual operations on the building have barely commenced, in fact—only this week. But from now onwards we shall go forward without a hitch. And I mean to spare no time or expense in making the new cinema a reality instead of a myth."

The pair walked along the platform, and were soon at the exit. Then they passed out through the booking office, into the wide station yard, and commenced walking down the road which led to the centre of the town.

It was afternoon, and the short winter's day was already showing signs of drawing to a close.

Mr. Levi and his son had made all arrangements for this journey, and they had rooms booked for them at the Grapes Hotel, which was only a short distance from the station. In fact, they came to the Grapes Hotel really before they entered the town itself. It was a palatial building—the one really first-class hotel in Bannington.

Up till a day or two ago Solomon had been staying at Tregellis Castle, the ancestral home of Sir Lancelot Montgomery Tregellis-West. There had been numerous other guests, too, including Handforth & Co., Reginald Pitt, Tommy Watson, myself, and, of course, Nelson Lee.

But Sir Montie's party had dispersed, all the guests going to their various homes. For the Christmas holidays were not yet over, although it was now well into January. Another week must elapse before the new term at St. Frank's commenced.

At present the old school was silent and deserted. Hardly a soul remained. But, after the lapse of a week, St. Frank's would resound with the shouts of the boys, and the villagers in Bellton would not feel quite so deadly dull. For when St. Frank's was closed, the whole district seemed to be drab and deserted.

Mr. Isaac Levi had come to Bannington on business. He had been very active of late, and a great deal had been done with regard to his cinema scheme, or, to be more exact, his son's cinema scheme. For it had been Solomon's idea in the first place.

Mr. Levi had purchased the old house in the High Street, which was known as Bannington Grange. It had stood there, empty and desolate, for many, many years, and Mr. Levi had purchased the place and the entire grounds, for a mere song. This was because the house was reputed to be haunted, and it was impossible to sell it at even a fair price.

Solomon Levi had conceived the idea of pulling the old house down, and building up a super-cinema—a palatial, magnificent place which would draw the whole of Bannington, and also people from the surrounding villages. Bannington was quite large enough to support a first-class cinema. At present it only possessed a little miserable hole of a place in a side street, and the proprietor of this place, Mr. Stanley Webb, was by no means an amiable gentleman. He was, to tell the truth, several kinds of a rogue.

For he had been attempting, for some time past, to defeat Levi's scheme. He had done his utmost to obtain that property for himself, for he had realised, quite suddenly, that his own cinema was in danger, and he had tried his utmost to oust Levi and his father, and to wreck the whole scheme. Mr. Webb, to be exact, wanted to purchase that site for himself, so that he could build the new cinema, and reap the benefit.

But he had failed.

Time after time he had used his cunning in order to get the better of Solomon Levi; but the Jewish boy had proved to be more than Mr. Webb's equal on every occasion.

And now Solomon was feeling quite content. For, he told himself, Mr. Webb could do nothing. The property had been purchased by Solly's father, and a company had been already formed, many of the St. Frank's juniors, in fact, had bought shares in the company.

Mr. Levi's business methods were brisk and active. He did not allow grass to grow under his feet. once he started upon an enterprise, and already work had been commenced, demolishing Bannington Grange. A large number of workmen were engaged upon the task, and everything was going smoothly. At least, so Mr. Levi supposed. Presently, he was destined to receive something of a shock.

Mr. Levi intended remaining in Bannington for quite a while, and he had booked his rooms at the Grapes Hotel for a month. Solomon would remain with his father just for a week, until the new term at St. Frank's commenced. Then, of course, he would go to the old school and take his usual place in the Remove. But, until the new term did commence, Solomon intended to spend his time in Bannington helping his father, and doing everything possible to aid in the building of the new cinema.

Having reached the Grapes Hotel, Mr. Levi and his son went to their apartments, washed, brushed themselves tidy, and then decided to walk down the High Street, and have a look at the haunted house, as it was still called by most of the inhabitants.

"Fortunately, I have been able to engage a large number of men," said Mr. Levi, as he and Solly walked along. "I am losing no time over this project, my son. If possible, I intend to have day and night shifts—the work shall not cease. And in an amazingly short space of time, this palatial new cinema will open its doors to the Bannington public!"

The Jewish boy nodded.

"That's the stuff, dad!" he said heartily. "By my life! We'll wake these sleepy country people up, believe me! We'll make them rub their eyes and stare! Anybody else would take six or eight months to build this new cinema; but we shall do it in the course of a few weeks!"

"That is my plan, Solly," said Mr. Levi, nodding. "The sooner this place is up the better. It is now the finest time for cinema exhibitors. Before so very long the spring will be here, and then the summer—always a slack period in this line. If we open our doors early in February or, at the latest, at the end of February, there will be at least two months of good business ahead. So it is all to our advantage to make haste, and to get this new cinema up without any delay."

Solomon Levi grinned.

"Well, you haven't wasted much time so far, dad!" he chuckled. "You've been at it like a Trojan; you've done wonders! It's simply astounding what you've accomplished in such a short time!"

"Yes, my boy, I am quite satisfied," said Mr. Levi comfortably. "But one can do anything with money. It's money that counts in this world, Solly."

"I can't quite understand how you got the plans of the cinema executed so quickly, dad," said Solly. "That architect must be an amazing chap——"

"Ah, my boy, you don't understand,"

smiled Mr. Levi. "To begin with, there were no difficulties to be met with in the site. It is just a plain piece of ground, open and free, and perfectly level. There were no awkward problems for the architects to solve. And the plans for this cinema of ours are to be almost identical with the plans of a cinema which was erected on the outskirts of London several months ago. I saw that cinema—a palatial, magnificent place. And I felt convinced that the design could not be improved upon. And so I got in touch with the architect, and his plans for our cinema are almost identical. First, as you will see, there was very little work to be accomplished. It merely necessitated a visit here, and a look round, and then the man got straight to work."

"Wasn't there a bit of trouble with the Bannington Council, dad?" asked Solly.

"There was, my boy, but not much," replied his father. "When these plans were submitted to the local council, there was some opposition. One or two members moved that the plans should not be approved or passed. But, in the end, they were defeated, and the council gave us permission to get straight ahead with the work."

"I'm blessed if I can understand why any of the old fogeys should object," said Solomon. "It's all to the good of the town that a cinema should be erected; it'll be a magnificent building, and the council ought to be jolly pleased that we're going to erect it in the middle of the High Street, beautifying the town."

"I rather fancy that our excellent friend, Mr. Wobb, was responsible," said Mr. Levi drily. "As you know, Solly, Mr. Wobb has met with many disappointments, and he is now rather bitter against us. I am expecting some slight amount of trouble from the gentleman, although he does not worry me in the slightest degree. I am quite convinced that Mr. Wobb used his influence with certain of the councillors to get the plans rejected, but Mr. Wobb's influence was not strong enough fortunately."

By this time the pair were well in the High Street, and they now came within sight of the old haunted house—Bannington Grange. This building was an ugly, square stone house, which lay quite close to the road. Levi had not seen it since he had left St. Frank's for the Christmas vacation, and there was now a tremendous change.

Then Bannington Grange had looked deserted, forlorn, and desolate; but now the place was a hive of activity. Giant hoardings were erected right across the front, and scaffolding almost concealed the old building from view. Men were walking about everywhere, and the task of demolishing the building was in full swing. For, of course, before the new cinema could be built, Bannington Grange itself had to be completely demolished and removed.

At first there had been some idea of leaving the four outside walls of the old house. Solomon had thought it possible the cinema could be built within these four walls, thus saving expense. But Mr. Levi had not agreed to this idea. He declared that the only sound way of erecting the new cinema was to completely demolish the old place, and build a new one on the bare site. In this way a cinema would be erected which would be a credit to the town.

There was no doubt that tremendous activity was proceeding. A great number of workmen were busy—hundreds of them. Mr. Levi was sparing no expense, and the work was being pushed through with all speed.

High wages were being paid, but this was only natural—since rapid work was demanded. Mr. Levi and Solly were quite pleased as they walked up and down the High Street, regarding the intense activity.

It was not long before Mr. Levi sought out the manager, a very capable man from London, who had the whole business well in hand. Mr. Levi and Solomon went into the manager's private office, and found that worthy gentleman looking rather worried. The manager, Mr. Farrow, did not waste any time in opening the conversation.

"I'm glad you've come down, Mr. Levi," he said. "To tell you the truth, I'm rather uneasy."

"Uneasy?" repeated Mr. Levi.

"Yes, sir, that's just the word," said Farrow. "I don't quite like the way things are going. Most of the men here are very discontented."

"You surprise me," said Mr. Levi. "Discontented? Why? I'm paying them good wages, far better wages than they could get elsewhere. What reason have they for not being satisfied?"

Mr. Farrow looked rather uncomfortable.

"It seems ridiculous, sir, and it is ridiculous, and all I've said won't make any difference!" he exclaimed. "But the fact of the matter is, Mr. Levi, the workmen on this job are scared."

"Scared?" repeated Mr. Levi curiously.

"Yes, sir."

"Of what—hard work?"

The manager smiled slightly.

"I'll admit some of them need gingering up now and again, sir," he remarked. "But on the whole they are a good body of men, and they work well; they know their jobs, and they don't waste time. No, it's not that, sir. It's this haunting."

"Good heavens!" said Mr. Levi, sitting forward. "What preposterous nonsense! Haunting! Do you mean to tell me, Farrow, that these workmen are afraid to continue their jobs because Bannington Grange had the reputation at one time of being haunted?"

The manager nodded.

"I don't know about 'at one time,' sir," he said. "It's haunted now—it always has been haunted."

"You surely don't believe this, do you?" asked Solomon, staring.

"No, young gentleman, I don't believe it personally, although there has been some queer doings," said Farrow awkwardly. "What with the articles in the papers, the gossip among the townspeople, to say nothing of uncanny happenings——"

"What uncanny happenings?" inquired Mr. Levi sharply.

"Well, it's a fact, sir, that ever since this job started there has been a large number of queer accidents," said the manager. "Accidents that cannot be accounted for—and sometimes they are really uncanny. And the men don't like the talk that's going about—the talk regarding a year's bad luck."

"I don't understand," said Mr. Levi.

"Well, sir, there's an old legend about this haunted house," said Mr. Farrow. "A lot of people have been taking an interest in the Grange since the ghost appeared, just before Christmas. And a legend is being told that anybody who works here—even for a day—will have a year's bad luck."

"What rot!" said Solomon scoffingly.

"I agree with you, Master Levi," said the manager, nodding. "But, although we think it rot, these workmen don't. They are countrymen, don't forget; and they are simple, hardworking fellows. Most of them are good natured, and sensible enough on all ordinary matters. But they're superstitious, and that's hardly to be wondered at. They don't call it 'all rot,' as we do. They've taken the thing seriously, and I'm very worried. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if the whole gang of men down tools, and walk out of the place."

"They mustn't do that," said Mr. Levi decidedly. "We must avert such a happening as that, Farrow, at all costs. Now tell me what this means; go into the details. I'm very interested to hear the whole story."

Farrow picked up a newspaper from a side table.

"Perhaps you'd like to have a glance at this, sir?" he suggested. "It's to-day's issue, and there's something fresh in it. Another short article."

Mr. Levi took the paper without comment, and glanced at the column which Farrow indicated with a stumpy forefinger. Solomon looked over his father's shoulder, and they both read the little article together. It ran as follows:

BANNINGTON'S HAUNTED HOUSE.

"Widespread interest, not only in Bannington, but in the whole surrounding district, has been aroused by the remarkable manifestations which have recently occurred at Bannington Grange, the old house situated almost in the centre of the High Street.

"As our readers are aware, this house has been recently purchased by a London company for the purpose of erecting a first-class cinema on the site. The work has been proceeding for a few days, but during these few days many remarkable—indeed, extraordinary—incidents have occurred. There is a legend connected with Bannington Grange, a legend which dates back to the seventeenth century. This legend was given in full in our issue of Monday, and it told how a year's bad luck will pursue the unfortunate person who crosses the threshold of Bannington Grange. Whether there is any truth in this story or not, it is indeed a peculiar circumstance that bad luck has persistently dogged the efforts of the contractors since the first moment of their commencing the job.

"It is hardly to be wondered at that the men engaged upon this work are feeling uncomfortable and restless. The most uncanny events have taken place. Accidents have occurred without the slightest reasons, without any feasible cause. Some put down these mishaps to supernatural agency, others declare that they are a mere coincidence. For our part, we should prefer not to pass an opinion at this early date, but we are greatly impressed by all this phenomena, and we await developments with very great interest.

"It is just as well to remember that

there have been many cases of haunting—proven cases. It is all very well for some clever people to characterise these manifestations as 'bosh,' but sometimes they are not bosh, and, for our part, we are rather glad that we are not employed in this gloomy, sinister, mysterious old house. We are certainly not anxious to have a year's bad luck."

Mr. Levi laid the newspaper aside.

"Such articles as these will not help matters in the least," he remarked. "If the workpeople read this news-paper—as is quite possible—they will not be greatly encouraged by journalistic efforts of this description."

"It's a pity the editor of this beastly rag can't mind his own business," broke in Solomon warmly.

Mr. Farrow nodded.

"That's just what I say, young gentleman," he declared. "It's only making things worse to write this sort of rubbish."

"And what about these uncanny accidents, Farrow?" asked Mr. Levi. "Is there any truth in these statements? Have there been accidents—accidents which cannot possibly be accounted for?"

The manager looked grave.

"Well, as a matter of fact, sir, there have been some queer things. Personally, I think it's just coincidence, but everybody doesn't think as I do."

"Give me an example," said Mr. Levi.

"Well, for instance, sir, pieces of brick and stone will come flying down from above," said Farrow, "Nobody can tell where they come from, or why they drop. And there have been several narrow escapes. Some of the men say that they've heard queer sounds too. Pick handles are broken without the slightest provocation, and quite a number of men have met with minor accidents—they've slipped down, or stumbled over something, or have gashed their hands about."

"Those sort of things would have happened in any case," said Mr. Levi.

"I don't doubt it, sir," replied Farrow. "But the men don't think that—they've got it into their heads they're going to have a bad spell—bad luck for a year, they say. In any case, I'm having my hands full, keeping the men here, and making them get on with the work."

Mr. Levi nodded absently. He was thinking. And he was thinking of Mr. Stanley Webb. He was quite convinced, in fact, that the unscrupulous proprietor of the existing Bannington Cinema was at the bottom of all this trouble.

CHAPTER II.

THE SCHEMERS!

"MR. RYAN to see you, sir!"

The attendant whispered the words cautiously into Mr. Webb's ear. The latter was sitting in one of the seats of the last row in his somewhat empty little cinema. A comedy picture was being shown, and Mr. Webb was not particularly interested. A piano was strumming down at the front of the hall, and the music was rather discordant.

Mr. Webb passed out through the curtains, and found himself in the vestibule. Then he turned to a doorway, and within a moment or two he was in his private office—a rather cosy little room, where a gas fire was burning. The apartment was already occupied—by a somewhat largely built man who was attired in a thick overcoat. His hat lay upon Mr. Webb's desk.

"You came by the afternoon train, then?" said Mr. Webb, as he grasped the other's hand. "Good! Well, Ryan, have you been successful?"

"Sure!" replied the other. "Everything's fixed proper!"

"Splendid!" said Webb. "Sit down, old man. Take your overcoat off—it's rather warm in here. We might as well have a chat."

Mr. Hooker J. Ryan removed his overcoat, seated himself, and then selected a cigar from the box on Mr. Webb's desk. Having lit it, he lay back comfortably.

"Yes, I've seen our friends in London, and they are quite agreeable to the proposition," he observed. "The work will be carried out, Webb, as soon as possible. Say! We'll make this place into a dandy cinema—we'll put one over on our Jewish friend, Mr. Levi!"

"We certainly will!" said Webb grimly. "Tell me, Ryan—what exactly have you arranged with your Syndicate?"

"I put the proposition before them," replied Ryan. "They agree, and this cinema is to be enlarged, redecorated, and thoroughly brought up to date. The work is to be started at once—without the slightest hitch. We shall get done weeks before Levi—and when his place opens—if it ever does—he'll find himself left out in the cold."

"He'll never open!" said Webb. "What's more, he'll never get the place built. I'll guarantee that before the end of this week all the workmen will leave the

job - they'll abandon it—even if they're offered double wages to continue!"

"Things have been going all right, then?" asked Ryan.

"Exactly as we planned," replied Mr. Webb softly. "I'll tell you all about it. You've been away for a day or two, and you've got rather out of the swing of things. Some very interesting events have been taking place, Ryan."

"So I gather," said the American.

"I think those articles in the 'Gazette' have had a lot to do with it," went on Webb. "They are quite interesting, and merely discuss the haunting of Bannington Grange from an outsider's standpoint. But, at the same time, they serve to impress everybody with the fact that the old house is dangerous—that it is risky to walk there—and that these stories about the ghost are well founded. I know the man who writes these articles—I've put him up to it, as a matter of fact—and he is writing exactly what I require. It is doing our cause a lot of good, Ryan."

"Sure!" agreed Mr. Ryan, nodding. "I guess you're dead right, Webb. Upon the whole, I'm not sorry that we failed to obtain that option from Levi's youngster. We tried hard enough, but those guys were too cute for us every time. I guess it needs a clever man to best a Jew!"

Mr. Webb sniffed.

"When it comes to swindling—perhaps so!" he sneered. "I'll admit it's a difficult job to swindle a Jew—but that's because they're always so accustomed to swindling on their own account. Well, Levi has got this site, and he's going to build this cinema—a palatial place, by all that I can hear. But he'll have a tremendous job—I can tell you that—I don't believe he'll get the place erected, no matter how hard he tries. And, in the meantime, we'll enlarge this place, improve it, and capture all the people in advance. We're on a safe business, Ryan—and it's going to bring us big money."

"Well, so I calculate," said Ryan. "I convinced my syndicate that everything would be O.K.—and they need some convincing, I can tell you. But what about these ghost stories? What are all these yarns we hear about accidents happening—strange, unaccountable mishaps——"

"I think you know the reason for them, Ryan," smiled Mr. Webb. "Our game, now, is to play upon the superstitions of these workmen. We have started well, and we could continue the game in just the same way. Gossip has done a great deal, but these unaccountable little accidents—these uncanny happenings—have got hold of the imaginations of the men."

"That's just what we want," said Ryan.

"Exactly! You see, I've got three men working for me," said Webb softly. "They appear to be ordinary workmen—they are employed on this new building, and Levi's manager—Farrow—hasn't the faintest idea that he has three spies in his camp. But these men have been working well."

"I guess they've caused these little accidents then, eh?"

"Every one of them!" replied Webb. "They have been throwing stones about—seizing their opportunities, of course. Therefore, our men have not been suspected. And, as long as they remain cautious, our programme will continue to be carried out in just the same way."

Ryan nodded.

"It's a good stunt," he said. "I guess this is one of the best things that we could have thought of."

"I have got some more ideas in my head," said Mr. Webb confidently. "I can tell you, Ryan, that before another two days have passed all these workmen will clear out. They'll chuck up their jobs—they'll finish with Bannington Grange for good. And Levi will have his work cut out to obtain fresh labour. You can take it from me that I have the thing well in hand—and I am not going to relax my efforts in the slightest degree. We're going to spoil Levi's game, Ryan, and we're going to spoil it in such a way that he'll never be able to succeed in his efforts."

"I guess it's the only thing for us to do," said Ryan. "If we're going to make this place a success—after it has been enlarged and redecorated—our only chance is to squash this other enterprise. If this new cinema is built, Webb, all our efforts will be for nothing. Our money will have been wasted, and this theatre will simply go to rot. At all costs, we must prevent the new place being built."

"Everything is going on all right," said Webb. "And if this ghost business fails to do the trick, we have other cards up our sleeve. There's no need to worry."

At that moment a tap sounded upon the door, and Webb looked up.

"Come in!" he called out.

The door opened, and a respectably dressed man appeared. He looked like a good class workman, now attired in his best clothes. But his features were rather coarse, and there was a shifty look about his eyes. Quite a number of people in Bannington would have said that Mr.

Joseph Williams was several kinds of a blackguard.

"Good evening, sir," he said as he closed the door.

"Good evening, Williams," said Mr. Webb. "Well, is everything going all right?"

The man grinned.

"Splendid, sir," he replied. "Most of the men are regular scared already. We worked two or three more of them accidents to-day, and nobody guessed anything."

"You must be very careful, Williams."

"Oh, we're careful all right, sir," said Williams. "We faked up one or two mishaps to-day—falling bricks, and all that kind of thing. Nearly all the men put it down to spirits, and they're almost ready to chuck up their jobs."

"Good!" said Mr. Webb. "Keep it up, my man. Your two friends, I presume, are doing their part of the business in a satisfactory manner?"

"They've been helping well, sir," replied Williams. "To-morrow we're going to get up to some more tricks—but perhaps they won't be necessary after what happens to-night," he added with a grin.

"Yes, there will be quite a lot of talk in the morning, I fancy," said Mr. Webb, nodding. "It will not be necessary for you to take part in to-night's work, Williams. I have it well in hand, and I can manage quite easily without you."

"Thank you, sir," said the man. "I thought I'd just look in now, and tell you that everything is going smoothly. I thought perhaps you might have some suggestions, too."

"No, not at the moment, Williams," said Mr. Webb. "But if you call here to-morrow—at the dinner hour, say—I may have one or two ideas for you. The main thing is to get something fresh—something even more startling and unaccountable than what has already taken place."

"Right, sir," said Williams. "I'll call in to-morrow. Good-night, sir."

The man left, and after he had gone, Webb turned to Ryan and chuckled.

"He's one of them!" he exclaimed. "There are two others, and these men are causing most of the mystery. They are not suspected, and it is quite certain that if we keep the game up well, the other workmen will get thoroughly scared. And once we have succeeded in frightening them out of their jobs, it is very doubtful whether Levi will be able to obtain other workmen. Nowadays one cannot get labour very easily."

Webb and Ryan continued talking for some little time—making further plans, and discussing ideas, and when they finally parted they were both feeling very well satisfied.

Meanwhile all was quiet at Bannington Grange. The workmen had left, for it was now fairly late in the evening. Darkness had come over Bannington, and the night was cold and raw. The old house looked gloomy and desolate, with its hoardings, and with the scaffolding lifting up its gaunt arms towards the dark sky.

At the rear, in the wide grounds, the night watchman was preparing his supper. He had a most comfortable little hut, and in front of it a pail filled with glowing coke. It was a very cheerful fire, and the night watchman was quite cosy. His shelter was only a small one, but quite satisfactory, for it protected him from the wind, and the glow of the fire filled the little place.

The watchman was rather an elderly man, and he had counted himself lucky in getting this job, for he had been out of work for many weeks owing to a bad leg. For this particular work, however, his bad leg did not matter much.

He sat back in his shelter and partook of hot tea out of an enamel mug. Meanwhile he munched sandwiches of bread and meat. He had a long night in front of him, and he was not looking forward to it very cheerfully.

For the stories which had got about concerning Bannington Grange had not made the watchman feel any more comfortable. Not that he was a nervous man; he was not even superstitious, and he openly scoffed at the uncanny tales which were going around.

At the same time the watchman could not help feeling that there was something very strange about this old house, which was now in the process of being demolished. Without a doubt there had been some remarkable happenings. They were happenings which could not be accounted for in the ordinary way. And the watchman was not cheered by the statement—which had been made by many men—that they would not take on his job, even if they were paid ten times the wage. He was constantly being asked if he had seen the ghost, if he had heard any strange sounds, and if he felt nervous when watching the house at night.

But the old man was rather stolid and unemotional. He did not take much notice of these tales. He had a good job, and he intended sticking to it.

He was just finishing his supper when

he heard a footstep, and he looked up quickly. But he need not have been alarmed, for a figure that was well known to him approached. It was a burly figure, attired in a thick overcoat, muffler, and a cap. The newcomer, in fact, was Jim Sharpe, the foreman of the job. He was a burly individual, and he was generally known as "Big Jim." He came to a halt against the fire, stuck his pipe between his teeth, and held out his hands to the grateful heat.

"Nice fire you've got here, Benson," he remarked.

"Eh, it ain't so bad," said the night watchman.

"Seen any spooks?" asked Big Jim, with a grin.

Mr. Benson grunted.

"Drat them stories!" he exclaimed. "I don't believe there are any of them ghosts about this place, Jim. It's all talk and gossip—that's what it is. Leastways, I ain't seen anything since I've been here."

"That don't mean to say you won't see anything, Benson," said Mr. Sharpe. "I ain't a superstitious man myself, but I've seen one or two queer things since I've been on this job. Things as I can't account for. I was talking to a gent only to-day—a fellow who knows a good deal of these supernatural affairs. He reckons that a house can be haunted without no ghost appearing."

"It's the first time I've heard of one," said the night watchman, filling his pipe.

"Well, there's things we don't know of, mate," said Jim, shaking his head. "For instance, this gent was telling me about a bloke that lived years and years ago—named Wesley, I believe. All the things in this fellow's house was broke and upset, and it was done by ghosts during the night. These blooming spirits come in and simply played old Harry with the furniture. There wasn't nothing to be seen, of course—but there you are!"

Mr. Benson grunted again.

"I don't believe in them things," he declared. "It's all a lot of old wives' tales, and I'm surprised at you, Jim, taking any notice. You're a big man, and you ought not to have nerves of that kind."

"Nerves!" exclaimed Big Jim, with a laugh. "I ain't got no nerves, man! All the same, I wouldn't much care for your job. I just come in on my way home from the White Lion. I thought I'd see if you was all right. At the same time, these accidents do seem to be a bit queer. We've had bad luck ever since we started this job; everything's gone wrong. And I'm having a bit of trouble with the men, too."

"Well I ain't surprised at that," said the night watchman. "By what I've seen of them, these men ain't particularly bright. They'd be scared of anything. But it takes more than talk to scare me. Afore I gets frightened, I want to see something, and I ain't likely to see ghosts about—not unless I've had a good few at the pub!"

Big Jim laughed.

"You ain't that sort, Benson," he remarked. "I keep on telling myself that there must be some natural explanation for all these accidents, but somehow I can't get the feeling out of my head that everything ain't right. I'll be glad when this old place is pulled down, and we're building up the new cinema. I don't reckon there'll be any spooks then!"

"There aren't any now," said Mr. Benson, "excepting what the men fancy."

Very soon afterwards the foreman took his departure, and old Benson was left alone. The wind was cutting and bitter, and the old man piled up more coke on the fire, and it crackled cheerfully.

After getting thoroughly warmed up, the night watchman left his shelter and went round to see that everything was in order for the night. It was now quite late—past eleven, in fact.

And at length, fully satisfied that everything was safe, Benson went back to his shelter, settled himself down, and commenced to read a newspaper. He could easily do this, for the fire was sending out a ruddy glow which provided quite sufficient light to read by.

The watchman had not been engaged in this manner for long before a rather startling incident took place. Without the slightest warning, three raps sounded on the back of the old man's shelter. They were distinct raps, and the watchman put his paper down and started.

"Who's that out there?" he demanded sharply.

No reply came.

The old man got up from his seat, walked out, and went round to the back of the shelter. Not a soul was to be seen. The wind moaned icily round the old house, and it whistled through the scaffolding. There was no sign of any living soul. And, at the rear of the shelter, there was quite a good space. Nobody could be concealed there.

"That's blame queer!" muttered Mr. Benson, scratching his head. "Some fool having a game, I suppose—might be some

boys, only it's too late for boys to be out of bed."

He went back into his shelter, feeling rather uncomfortable. And here he received a fresh shock. For the newspaper, which he had left lying upon the seat, was now on the floor in a corner. At any ordinary time, the night watchman would have thought nothing of this—but he did think something of it now. As a matter of fact, a gust of wind had come in, and it had blown the newspaper down. But Mr. Benson did not think of this very obvious explanation.

"Well I'm durned!" he exclaimed.

He sat down again, removed the pipe from his lips, and——

Rap! rap! rap!

There it came again—three distinct raps upon the woodwork at the back of the shelter! This time the watchman jumped up quickly, and he hobbled round to the rear as fast as his bad leg would permit him. But there was nobody there—not a sign! The old man cast a rather nervous glance over his shoulder.

"Blame me if this ain't rummy!" he muttered. "Sounded just as if a man was knocking' his knuckles against this boarding!"

He stopped there for five or ten minutes, but he saw nothing and heard nothing—nothing, at least, which would account for those mysterious raps. Then, getting cold, he went back into his shelter.

He waited expectantly—and, to tell the truth, rather anxiously. But no further rapping sounds came.

And then, from afar, came the sound of midnight being chimed on the old bells at Bannington Church. Mr. Benson looked about him rather apprehensively. He pulled himself further into the interior of his shelter, and shook himself.

"You're getting nervous—that's what's the matter with you, you old fool!" he said, rather impatiently. "It was only some——"

The old man paused, and his eyes nearly started out of his head.

For a most extraordinary thing had happened to the fire. A second before it had been flaring warmly, with a cheerful, ruddy glow. But now, all in a moment, great green flames sprang out.

Those flames surged up towards the sky, and there was an intense, vivid green. They came out of the fire in little puffs, almost like explosions, and the night watchman took in a big gulp.

"Good heavens!" he gasped.

There was absolutely no accounting for these green flames. Where had they come from? Why had they appeared? What had caused them to burst out so suddenly?

But Mr. Benson was not able to ask himself questions. For his uncanny experience had knocked him over.

Even as he stared at those green flames in a fascinated, unbelieving kind of way, a sound came to his ears—a horrible, ghastly sound, which made his old grey hair almost stand on end.

The sound was a cackle—an awful, horrible laugh. It seemed to be up in the air somewhere, and it was nothing human—it was wild and ghostly.

And, at the same moment, the watchman's shelter commenced to rock to and fro violently with Mr. Benson inside it. He gasped, now thoroughly scared out of his wits. But, before he could emerge, the shelter went over on its side, carrying Mr. Benson, too.

The old man scrambled out, quite unhurt—for, of course, the little shelter had not fallen with any great violence.

"There's spirits about—there's ghosts!" panted Mr. Benson, hoarsely. "There can't be no other way of explaining——"

Again that cackle sounded, and the night watchman's blood seemed to freeze in his veins. He pulled himself to his feet, and stared round wildly. There was not a soul to be seen—darkness reigned everywhere. The wind whistled round him, but of any other human being there was no sign.

Turning, Mr. Benson saw that the fire was almost normal again. And then his gaze strayed on towards the old building, which had been in pitchy darkness a minute or so before.

But now the night watchman stood quite still, rooted to the spot.

For, in one of the windows, a faint, flickering bluish light could be seen. This light grew stronger for a minute or so, and then died away.

Then, as it did so, a figure appeared at the window. It floated down to the ground danced about for some little time, and leapt into the air.

It was a white, ghostly figure, with a head. Yes, there was a head, quite distinct. And it seemed to the night watchman that it was a skull—grinning at him!

The horrible figure flitted about for some little time, and then it seemed as though it was coming towards Mr. Benson. But this was too much for the old man. His nerves were already shattered, and he was trembling like a leaf.

With a hoarse cry he turned and fled.

He didn't care where he went—so long as he got away from this horrible old place. A few moments later he was in the High Street, and he hobbled along at an amazing pace.

CHAPTER III.

NOT QUITE GOOD ENOUGH!

SOLOMON LEVI looked across at his father.

"What can it mean, dad?" he asked. "What can the explanation be?"

"I have not the slightest doubt that Mr. Stanley Webb is responsible," said Mr. Isaac Levi, grimly. "You need not think, Solly, that I believe this story about ghosts. The whole thing was faked up, especially for the benefit of the night watchman."

"That's what I think, dad," said Solomon. "But it makes it pretty bad, doesn't it? The man has thrown up his job, I believe—and the workmen are all discussing the matter. They're a bit scared, too."

Mr. Levi nodded, and continued his breakfast. The pair were sitting in their comfortable apartment at the Grapes Hotel, and they had nearly finished breakfast. Solomon stirred his coffee, and helped himself to another boiled egg.

"The ghost was faked, of course," remarked Solomon "Either that, or the watchman imagined he saw it. But what about those green flames, dad? How were they caused?"

"Some chemical, no doubt," replied Mr. Levi. "The thing could quite easily have been done, Solly."

"How?"

"This night watchman's shelter was one of the ordinary type—that is, closed on three sides, and open on the other. While the man was seated in that box, he could not very well see what was happening at the rear. And I am quite sure that somebody crept up, and threw a handful of chemical powder on the fire. You ought to know, Solly, that it is quite easy to make green flames if you use certain chemical compounds—particularly when you are dealing with a coke fire, which is glowing hot."

"That's quite right, dad," said Solomon. "But the old man saw nothing—not even when his box was knocked over."

"In the darkness, anything was possible," said Mr. Levi. "It was faked, Solomon—there is no other possible explanation. It is perfectly ridiculous to assume that these things took place because of supernatural agencies——"

"Oh, I don't believe that at all, dad," said Solomon quickly. "I am certain that somebody has been up to some tricks."

At that moment a tap came at the door, and in answer to Mr. Levi's invitation, Mr. Farrow entered.

"Good-morning, sir," he said.

"Good morning, Farrow!" said Mr. Levi. "No doubt you have come to tell me about the adventure which occurred to the night watchman——"

"That's one of the things, sir, but I see you know about it already!" said the manager. "I'm not surprised at that—since the whole town is talking about the affair. There's no other topic of conversation, in fact."

"What do you think about it, personally, Farrow?" asked Mr. Levi.

"Why, I think somebody has been up to mischief, sir," said the manager quietly. "There would be nothing particularly clever in deceiving old Benson. He hasn't got much sense, and one of his legs is a bit gammy. Therefore, he couldn't move about quickly, and the practical jokers were able to do almost anything they liked."

"Practical jokers!" echoed Solomon. "I don't call it a joke, Mr. Farrow. It's a plot—a conspiracy!"

"I'm beginning to think the same thing, young gentleman!" said Mr. Farrow. "Somebody is trying to put a stop to our work—to get the whole business closed down. That's about the size of it, sir," he said, addressing Mr. Levi. "And it won't need much more to thoroughly scare our men—every one of them. And then they'll walk out in a body, and we'll never get them to come back—even if we offer treble wages!"

Mr. Levi nodded.

"We will see how things go on to-day Farrow," he said. "I am not particularly alarmed about the night watchman incident. You must do your best to convince the men that it was a joke, and that no supernatural agency was responsible."

"It'll be difficult to convince the men of that, sir," interrupted the manager. "They've got it firmly fixed in their heads that this house is haunted. As you know, sir, it's had a reputation of being haunted for many years past. And the men say

that by pulling the house down we're interfering with the spirits, and disturbing them. That's the story that's got about now, and it's hardly to be wondered at, after what's happened during the night!"

"You mean what the night watchman saw?" asked Solly.

"Not only that, Master Levi," said Mr. Farrow. "There's the other thing as well."

"The other thing?" repeated Mr. Levi quickly.

"Why, haven't you heard, sir?"

"We've only heard about the adventure which befell Mr. Benson."

"Why, sir, a lot more than that took place," said the manager. "When the men went to work this morning they found dozens of their tools smashed—broken to pieces!"

"Great Scott!" said Solomon, staring.

"Other tools were displaced, and in some instances, articles were carried right to the top of the house—heavy things, too. I'll swear two men could not have carried them. How did they get there? Who entered the house in the middle of the night and carried on this destruction—this absolutely senseless piece of foolery?"

"What do the men say?" asked Mr. Levi.

"Why, sir, they put it all down to the spirits," said the manager. "They are all agreeing now, although, a day or two ago, quite a number of men were openly sceptical. They've been convinced at last—they all say the same thing—they all declare that the house is haunted, and that it's a bad thing to interfere with it. They reckon we're disturbing the spirits, and some say the best thing to do is to burn the place to the ground."

"That would never do," smiled Mr. Levi. "There is other property to consider; moreover, a great deal of material can be sold, or used profitably."

"Yes, Mr. Levi, I'm worried—I don't know what to do."

Mr. Levi rose to his feet.

"I will go back to the building with you, Farrow," he said briskly. "I will have a look round personally, and chat with two or three of the men."

"I'll be glad if you will, sir," said the manager.

Very shortly afterwards the trio left the Grapes Hotel together—Farrow, Mr. Levi, and Solomon. The junior was looking very anxious and worried.

It had been his idea, in the first place, to pull down the old haunted house, and to build a super-cinema on the spot. And Solomon was very anxious now—he did not want any hitch to occur. It would be appalling if the whole project had to be abandoned after it had started so well.

Solly was quite certain that his father would not abandon it willingly. But what if he could obtain no workmen to do the work? The labour question was the most important of all, and, without men, the scheme could not be carried out.

Levi, junior, was certain, in his own mind—as his father was—that Webb was responsible for all this trouble. The owner of the present Bannington Cinema was the culprit—Levi was sure of it. Taking advantage of the fact that the old house had the reputation of being haunted, Webb was causing all those mysterious manifestations. That was the only explanation. But what could be done?

Webb had not committed any criminal act—it was not possible to inform the police—for, in any case, there was no proof.

Solomon felt tremendously sorry that his father had allowed Webb and Ryan to go free a week or so ago, during the Christmas holiday at Tregellis Castle. The two rascals had kidnapped Mr. Levi then, and had held him a prisoner for a few hours. But Solomon's father had allowed the pair to go—declaring that they could not do any harm, and that he did not wish to trouble over a prosecution.

It would have been far better if Mr. Levi had handed the precious pair over to the police.

When the trio arrived at Bannington Grange, they saw, at a glance, that everything was not as it should be. The men, instead of going about their work steadily and industriously, were seizing every opportunity to stand in little groups and gossip. And many of them wore uneasy looks, and, out in the High Street, quite a number of people were staring at the old house with idle curiosity. They were attracted by the strange stories which had been going about, and some of them evidently expected to see ghosts walking about the scaffolding instead of human beings.

"I'm afraid we shall have a difficulty in obtaining a fresh night-watchman, sir," said Mr. Farrow. "Benson has gone—he won't come back. The old man is nearly insane with fright, and it's a wonder to me he's not in the asylum."

They were now on the other side of the hoarding, standing at the side of the old building, watching the operations. The house was being demolished, and the

army of workmen had been getting on with their task very well. The roof was practically off, and many of the walls were being smashed up even now.

Big Jim, the foreman, approached the manager with a very serious expression on his face.

"I don't know what's going to happen, sir!" he exclaimed doubtfully. "It's as much as I can do to get the men to start work this morning. And they are talking about leaving at any minute. I can't guarantee them remaining at their jobs until the day's over!"

Mr. Levi turned.

"If the men have any real grievance, I will give it full attention," he said. "But it is ridiculous of them to take so much notice of these stories which have been getting about."

"I ain't so sure of that, sir!" said Sharpe. "I ain't a superstitious man myself, but after what took place last night, my notions have been a bit shook up. And I'll swear that no human hands made green flames come out of a coke fire! And old Benson wasn't imagining things, either, because the policeman on point duty in the High Street saw the reflection of them green flames—and he wondered what it was at the time."

"You must tell the men that——"

Mr. Isaac Levi got no further.

For, at that moment, a really startling interruption came. A crack sounded, a dull, long-sounding crack. Almost immediately afterwards the voices of men were raised in alarm and fright. Then came a dull rumbling—to be followed immediately, by a devastating crash. From the other side of the old house great clouds of dust arose on the air, and then all was confusion.

Men were running, shouts were uttered, and, above all, came the cries of injured men. Solomon Levi was startled, and he ran round the building quickly, without waiting for his father. When he reached the other side, a strange spectacle met his gaze.

Levi paused, rather dumbfounded.

"By my life," he exclaimed.

For some little time he could not see what had occurred. Clouds of thick, choking dust obscured the whole scene. But Solomon could easily guess, and it was not long before he came to the conclusion that one of the walls of the old house had collapsed—not merely a portion of it, but the whole wall.

It was little wonder that there had been a tremendous crash, and this cloud of dust now obscured the whole scene. And a terrible thought immediately sprang into Levi's mind.

Had there been any men underneath when the wall fell? If so, they were certainly killed—for tons and tons of masonry had fallen, burying everything beneath its terrible weight.

The foreman came rushing round, white and agitated.

And, for some little time, nobody knew exactly what had happened, or whether anybody had been killed. Ultimately, however, it was discovered that no workman had been actually beneath the fallen wall. Several men had been struck by flying bits of masonry, and one or two labourers were rather badly hurt—gashed about. But there were no serious casualties.

This was a miraculous fact, for only a minute before at least eight or nine men had been on the very spot where the wall collapsed. They had escaped death only by seconds.

"Thank Heaven nothing serious has occurred!" exclaimed Mr. Levi, when he had heard the truth. "But there must have been carelessness on somebody's part, or that wall would not have fallen."

"Carelessness, sir!" interrupted one of the workmen who happened to be near. "There wasn't no carelessness there. The wall fell of its own accord!"

"Perhaps so," said Mr. Levi; "but the men in charge of operations ought to have been more careful——"

"It ain't any good to be careful when there are spirits about, sir!" growled the workman. "That's what this is—it's the work of ghosts! This blooming house is haunted—and, what's more, I ain't going to do another stroke of work on this job!"

"Look here, my man, this is perfectly ridiculous!" said Mr. Farrow, who was standing by. "Accidents of this kind are always liable to happen when an old house is being pulled down. You've lost your nerve—that's what's the matter with you!"

"Well, I've had enough of it, sir!" said the man, obstinately. "This job ain't quite good enough for me!"

"Nor for me, neither!" chimed in two or three others.

"We're clearing out," said the first one. "This ain't the first accident that's took place. There was accidents yesterday, and the day before. And the night watchman not only see the ghost, but he was knocked

over—and we ain't going to wait to be killed in this bewitched place! We've finished with it, sir."

And the man was obviously firm. Others were of the same opinion, and presently the whole body of workmen commenced streaming out into the High Street. By this time a large crowd had collected, for it had got round that a serious disaster had occurred, and that several men had been killed. This rumour, fortunately, was false.

Mr. Farrow stood by, looking on helplessly. And Mr. Isaac Levi stood there, too. His face was grim, and there was a keen glitter in his eye. He knew that it would be quite useless to talk to the men now. And, in any case, Mr. Levi did not feel like talking to them. He had been paying them high wages; he would obtain other workmen. That was the only thing to be done.

"It looks serious this time, sir," said Mr. Farrow.

"I'm afraid it is serious," said Mr. Levi, nodding. "Well, I am going to give these men another chance. They will either return to work within half-an-hour—or every man-jack of them will be dismissed."

The manager looked rather doubtful.

"I don't think it will be necessary to dismiss them, sir!" he exclaimed. "They won't work again in this place, if I'm any judge at all. They wouldn't take on the job, not if we offered them double or treble the wages. They are thoroughly scared—that's what's the matter with them."

"This is awful, dad!" said Solomon. "What on earth shall we do?"

"I don't know yet, my boy," said Mr. Levi. "But there's no sense in worrying. If these workmen desert us, we shall obtain others."

And, certainly, the workmen did desert.

Without any loss of time, a meeting was held right in the centre of the High Street, regardless of traffic. Excitement was at a great pitch, and everybody was talking. Not only the workmen, but the townspeople were of the same opinion. They came to the positive conclusion that Bannington Grange was haunted, and disaster would certainly follow if the men continued to work there. The townspeople of Bannington were rather a superstitious lot.

And Big Jim Sharpe was as bad as anybody. At first he had been rather sceptical, and had been inclined to scoff at the stories which had been told. But now he was changed.

It was only by a miracle that he had escaped death, for he had been only a few yards away when that wall collapsed. And Mr. Sharpe was fully convinced that evil spirits had brought about the collapse. His last doubts had fled, and he was fully determined not to work in Bannington Grange again. Not only that, but he was also determined to do his utmost to prevent the other men working there. Big Jim was quite sincere in his belief. He thought he would be doing the other men a good service by urging them to throw up the job.

"Take my advice, men, and leave this job at once!" he shouted, addressing the crowd of excited workmen. "It's no good playing with the Evil One! And you can take it from me that he's responsible for all these happenings in this old house. It's haunted and nothing we can do will make any difference. If we stop there, we shall all be killed, sooner or later."

"Hear, hear!" shouted somebody. "We won't work any more in this place!"

"No blooming fear!"

"We've chucked it!"

"Yes, and it seems we're chucking our bread-and-butter away, too!" said one of the more elderly workmen. "It's a good job, it is, and it's going to last for months—right through the worst time of the year. We can't afford to lose our work like this, mates; we've got our wives and kiddies to think about. We're getting good wages, and the hours are light. Ghost or no ghost, we'd better stick to our work!"

"And get killed?" demanded one of the other workmen. "Not likely!"

"I believe it was a pure accident!" said the other workman, obstinately. "There wasn't no spook business about that, mate! As for the night watchman, I reckon he must have had a few before he saw them things last night——"

But the man was not allowed to proceed any further. He was shouted down, and his voice was completely drowned in the hubbub. Among the whole crowd there was, perhaps, half a dozen who supported this elderly labourer—who were anxious to continue work. The others, although good fellows all of them, were completely frightened by what had taken place in the old house. As workmen, they were splendid fellows, but they were all convinced that Bannington Grange was fatal—that to remain working on this job would be equally fatal.

And the men commenced to surround Mr. Farrow, and demanded the money for the time they had put in. The manager, of course, could do nothing but pay them. At least, he made arrangements to pay

them on the following day; he had not sufficient cash at the moment to pay everybody.

Perhaps the men would not have been so eager to leave their jobs but for a rumour which had gone round that morning. Who had set it going, nobody knew, but this rumour was to the effect that the present Bannington cinema was to be enlarged, improved, and generally renovated. And a large body of workmen would be required for the task. Any man who liked to apply for work would be engaged at once—and paid in full until the work commenced. This, of course, was one of Mr. Webb's ruses. As a result, half the men from the Bannington Grange job surged round the cinema, and they were every one of them engaged. It was an absolute certainty that these men would not return to Mr. Levi's job.

Solomon was quite dismayed by what had occurred. Everything had been going so well—the work had been proceeding at a great pace. But now it had been brought to a stop—a dead standstill. Nothing was doing. The old house was deserted and absolutely alone. Not a soul had remained behind; it was looking extremely forlorn.

Mr. Levi and Solomon went back to the Grapes Hotel after the excitement had died down, and Levi senior was looking very grave and troubled.

"Well, my boy, we must do the best we can under the circumstances," he said. "There is certainly no sense in getting angry, or making a fuss. These men have left the job, and I am afraid we cannot get them back."

"But what shall we do, dad?" asked Solomon, anxiously.

"I have already made up my mind as to the course I shall take," said Mr. Levi. "I shall obtain labour from another town—a good many miles from here. I shall go to-morrow and make full arrangements—and obtain a whole host of workmen. Perhaps they will be more sensible than these fellows."

"And what's going to happen in the meantime, pater?" asked Levi.

"In the meantime, my son, all work will have ceased," replied Mr. Levi. "It will mean three or four days' delay, but that cannot be avoided."

"But three or four days' delay may be very important, dad!" said Solomon. "Webb is getting busy, you know—he means to enlarge his own place, and if he gets ahead of us, it may be very serious."

Mr. Levi nodded.

"It will be serious," he said quietly. "But we must make up for lost time later on, Solly. If we could only obtain a dozen men, it would not be so bad—there is plenty of work to be done in demolishing the old walls, and clearing away the rubbish. But I am afraid it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack, to search for labour in Bannington."

And Mr. Levi was undoubtedly correct.

After what had happened, nobody in Bannington, or in the district, would agree to work in the old haunted house. The place had a terrible reputation now. It had always been considered haunted, and now it was regarded as a place of horror.

All that afternoon Solomon was looking serious and thoughtful. And towards the evening he got an idea—an idea which rather startled him at first. But then, after a while, he smiled to himself. And he decided, then and there, to put his scheme into operation.

And, without saying anything to his father, he went to the post-office, and despatched a whole sheaf of telegrams. Every message was worded in exactly the same way, and the majority of them went to different addresses in London.

It went against Solomon's grain to see all the work suspended. Until the new gang came in he wanted to have somebody working there—so that Webb would not be able to crow over his rivals. Just as long as the work went on, no matter how slightly, it would be all to the good. And Solomon Levi's idea was rather promising.

He was quite certain that he would have a body of workers on the spot before noon on the following day.

But whether these workers would be any good was quite a different matter!

CHAPTER IV.

MAKING THINGS HUM.

"PLEASE come down by first train in morning. Your presence urgently, vitally needed. Will pay all expenses. Accommodation arranged. Please don't fail me.—SOLOMON LEVI, Grapes Hotel, Bannington."

That's how the telegram ran.

I had read it through once or twice, and I couldn't possibly understand why Levi of the Remove wanted me so urgently.

However, I decided to go down to Bannington, for I could easily see that Solomon was in earnest.

Accordingly I arrived at Victoria in time to catch a train which would land me in Bannington about eleven-thirty. It was a fast train—the only really good train of the whole morning. And I was considerably astonished, when I arrived at the great London terminus, to find a whole crowd of other fellows who were also going down by the same train.

And every one of these juniors had a telegram which was worded in exactly the same manner as my own!

Sir Montie Tregellis-West was there, and Tommy Watson, Handforth, Church, and McClure, Reginald Pitt, Jack Grey, Fatty Little, Cecil de Valerie, Somerton, Augustus Hart, Singleton, and even Christine and Co., of the College House—Bob Christine, Yorke, and Talmadge. The whole crowd had collected before the train was due to depart, and we were all rather mystified.

Why had Solomon Levi sent us these telegrams, asking us urgently to go down to Bannington? One of the fellows suggested that it was a joke, and that it would be a good idea for us to abandon the scheme and go home again. But I put a stop to this. I was convinced that Solomon had not been joking when he sent those telegrams. Levi was not the kind of junior to spend a large amount of money for nothing. And it had cost him a pretty penny to send all those wires.

And so we went down.

And, when we arrived at Bannington we found Solomon waiting for us on the platform—he had been confidently expecting that we should arrive by that train. He was delighted to see us all, and there was a keen, brisk sparkle in his eyes as he led the way out into the station yard. The fellows crowded round him, demanding explanations, for, so far, we were quite in the dark.

"It's all right, my sons," said Solomon calmly. "I shouldn't have brought you down here unless I had a good reason. It's jolly decent of you to come, believe me."

"Dear old boy, I thought you were in trouble, so I came flyin' to your assistance," said Sir Montie gracefully. "We shall be only too willin' to do anythin' you require."

"Thanks," said Levi. "Well, I've got some rough work for you."

"Begad! Rough work?"

"You bet your life!" said the Jewish boy. "I'll explain all about it if you'll listen."

"That's what we're waiting for," said Edward Oswald Handforth. "We're about fed up with guessing things, Levi. If you don't trot out that explanation pretty quick, I'll dot you on the nose!"

Levi grinned.

"Good enough!" he said. "I won't waste any further time."

"That's the idea!" said Bob Christine. "We've all come down to Bannington, Levi, because you sent us such urgent telegrams. If your reason ain't a good one, we'll scrag you. I was rather surprised to get a wire from you, because I'm not in your House at all."

"Same here!" said Talmadge.

"Oh, I didn't think about that," said Solomon. "We're not at school now—the new term hasn't started. You all belong to the Remove, and there's no such thing as House rivalry during the holidays. I just knew you were in London, so I grabbed a directory, picked out all your addresses, and despatched the wires."

"Well, trot out the wheeze!" said De Valerie.

Solomon Levi wasted no further time. He explained to us, in detail, what had been happening at Bannington during the past two or three days. He described the various ghostly manifestations which had occurred at Bannington Grange. He explained how the workmen had become thoroughly scared, and how they had, finally, thrown up their work, and left the old house deserted and forlorn. He further explained that his father was obtaining labour from another town, and this labour, within all probability, would be on the spot within two days.

"Did you send those wires to us so that we should come down here just to listen to this?" asked Handforth.

"No, of course not," said Levi. "I want you to help."

"Help? How?"

"By carrying on—until the new workmen arrive," said Levi calmly.

"Begad! Carryin' on, dear old boy?"

"Exactly," said Levi. "The work that's being done now doesn't require skilled labour. It's demolishing work, in the main. There are tons of tools there, and if we put our backs into it, we can show these workmen a thing or two—we can show them how the job ought to be done!"

"My only hat!"

"Great Scott!"

"Well, I'm dashed!"

"Great bloaters!" said Fatty Little. "I—I thought you were asking us down to a feed, Levi!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, there'll be plenty of feeds," said Levi. "You needn't worry about that, Fatty—everybody can have as much grub as they require while they're my guests. Now, don't you understand the position, you chaps? This Cinema, in a way of speaking, is ours—we've all got shares in the company, and, therefore, we've got a great interest in the new cinema itself. The sooner it is erected the better—and every hour is of importance. If we carry on while my dad arranges about the new workmen, we shall be doing a good service. That's my scheme. Who's willing to help? Who's willing to take their coats off and lend a hand?"

"All of us!" said Handforth promptly.

"Hear, hear!"

"Begad!" ejaculated Sir Montie, looking rather startled. "But what—what shall we have to do, dear old fellows?"

"Oh, mix mortar, pull down walls, cart rubbish about in wheelbarrows, and all that sort of thing," said Handforth.

"Begad!"

Sir Montie adjusted his pince-nez, and looked round in dismay.

"But our clothes, dear old boys?" he asked. "We shall get ourselves into a shockin' state, we shall, really! We shall ruin our trousers and our boots, and ——"

"That's all right, Montie, don't you worry," put in Levi, with a smile. "I've made all arrangements for that. At the hotel I've got over two dozen sets of clothing—rough old things—and big hobnail boots. I hired them this morning from a place in the town. When we get into them we shall look workmen to the life, and we shall be able to carry on without any fear."

"But—but we shall look such awful frights, dear boy."

"That doesn't matter," grinned De Valerie. "All the better. I rather like this idea, you chaps. A bit of a change—what? By gad! We'll show these Bannington workmen a thing or two, once we get started!"

"Rather!"

"We'll show them that we don't care for spooks or ghosts, or silly legends," said Tommy Watson. "I reckon this is a first-class wheeze of yours, Levi, and we'll all work with a will. And we sha'n't require two bob an hour, either."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, the longer we stay here talking, the less we shall do," I said briskly. "If we're going into this thing, we might as well start straight away; it'll be dinner-time soon."

"It's dinner-time now, you ass!" said Fatty Little.

"Oh, I'm not counting you," I grinned. "It's always a mealtime with you; you're always ready to feed your giddy face. Come on—we'll make the fur fly!"

"Rather!" said Handforth. "We're going to make things hum."

"Hear, hear!"

"And hum with a vengeance!" added Handforth firmly.

It was an astounding idea of Solomon Levi's, but, at the same time, it was distinctly amusing. The Jewish boy knew well enough that we could not go into this thing seriously, it would be more or less of a joke, right from the start.

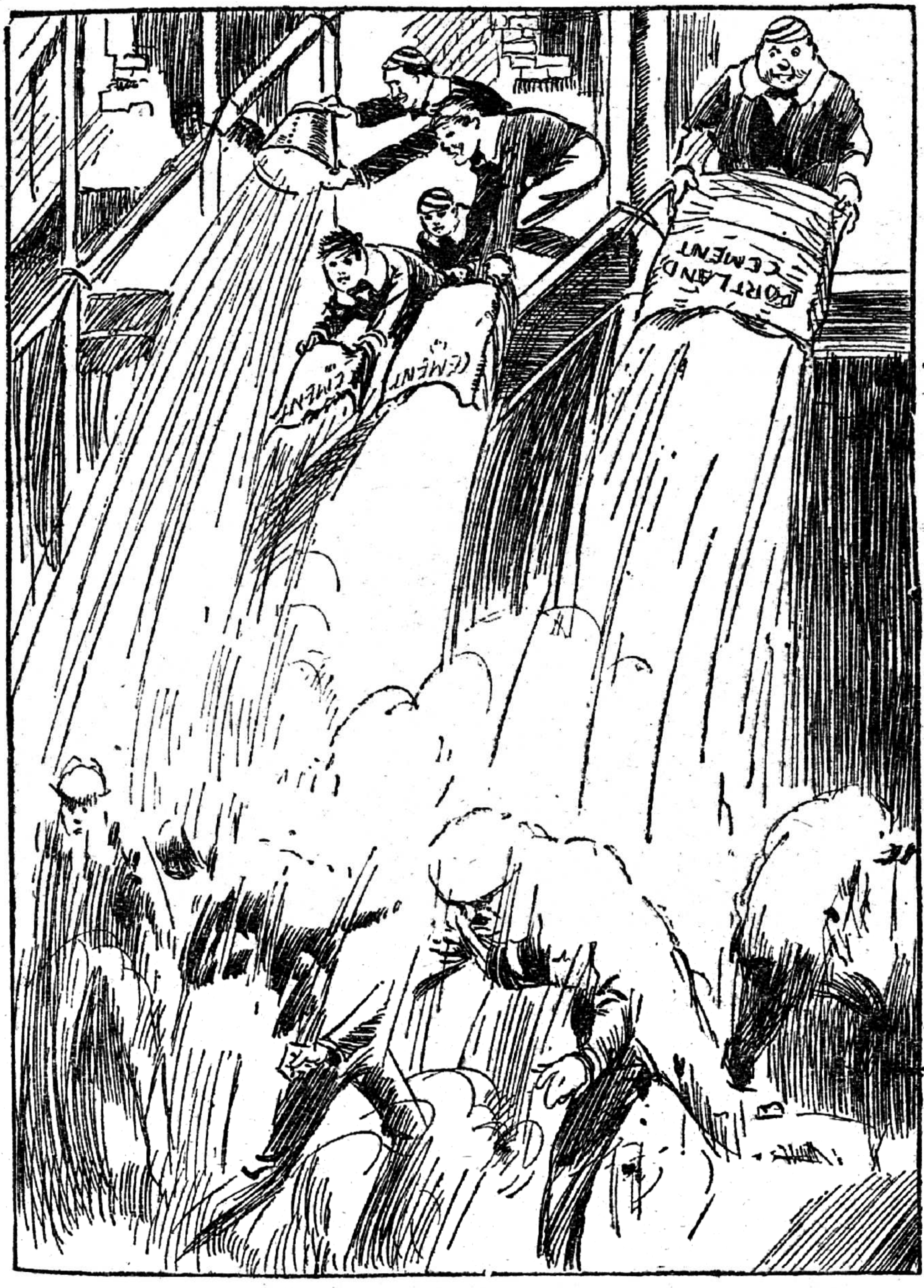
However, we saw his point.

He did not want to be interrupted for long, and if we simply carried on during to-day and to-morrow—well, the work would progress, and the Bannington labourers would receive a lesson which would probably sink deep. For the men would hardly care for the idea of schoolboys taking on the work which they had thrown up. We had nothing against the men, and, in all probability they were good, honest, hard-working fellows. But they were superstitious, and we wanted to knock this sort of thing out of them. That was Levi's main object for certain. He wanted to give the men an object lesson.

And so, less than half an hour later, the worthy people in Bannington High Street received a mild shock. Shopkeepers came to their doors and gazed out in wonder. Large numbers of workmen, who had nothing to do, and who were strolling about, stopped and stared. For there was certainly something to stare at.

A score of St. Frank's schoolboys, marching up the High Street in a body, and attired in the most weird garments. Great thick hobnailed boots, rough trousers—which were altogether too large—and with no collars. Handforth and Co., and one or two others, had fastened straps just under their knees in the true labourer style. The effect was rather comic.

But none of the juniors were smiling. They took it seriously, and marched into the old building with a very business-like air. I was there, of course, and I was taking a lively interest in the proceedings. Sir Montie's dignity, of course, had been thrown to the winds—dignity, in a case of this sort, did not count.



Then the cement went down in a great heavy cloud. It simply smothered everything, and in a minute the attackers were choking, sneezing, and staggering about blindly.

Levi, by consent, was the foreman of the gang, and he proceeded to issue his instructions. Meanwhile, Mr. Isaac Levi was strolling about, highly amused by the whole thing, but not at all displeased. His own arrangements had been made, and now he was interested to see what we should be able to do.

I think he was rather surprised, and, as a matter of fact, we were surpised, too. For we set to work with a will, and the amount of work we got through was decidedly startling. Considering that we were novices at the game, and that we had had no previous experience, we got on wonderfully well. At all events, Mr. Farrow, who came in and watched us, declared that we were working equally as well as a gang of men, and, if anything, doing more.

"But that's only natural," added the manager, with a smile. "You're enthusiastic, and you're going into it with all your might. One can't expect a working man to keep up this pressure day after day, it wouldn't be natural."

However, it was all to the good, and a a considerable amount of what we were doing could be seen from the road, for a good many of us were high in the building, above the great hoardings.

Pickaxes were brought into use, shovels, and all manner of other tools. And there we were, perspiring freely, and covered with dust and dirt from head to foot. But we didn't care—we were working with an object, and the townspeople of Bannington watched with interest and amusement.

But the workmen who had thrown up the job were not amused.

They stood out in the road, watching our progress with solemn, frowning faces. They did not like this at all.

"Blooming cheek, that's what I call it!" exclaimed one of the men. "Well, these kids will pay for it before long, just you see, mates. One of them walls will fall down, or something of that kind. There's going to be a haccident to-day."

"They'll all get killed—every one of them," said another man. "That place ain't safe. Them evil spirits will soon start making things go wrong."

But the evil spirits fortunately were not able to gain access to Bannington Grange on this particular afternoon. The evil spirits, of course, were the three paid spies of Mr. Stanley Webb. They had been able to wreak their work when all the ordinary men had been on the job, but they couldn't come in now, consequently, there were no mysterious happenings, no unaccountable accidents.

The work proceeded smoothly, and without a hitch. And the workmen, watching in the High Street, grew more and more angry and exasperated. They thought themselves slighted, they called it cheek that juniors should come in and brave the evil spirits after they—the workmen—had been driven out.

There were some juniors, of course, who did not do much. Fatty Little, for example, only succeeded in getting in the way of everybody else. And when he dared to mount the scaffolding to one of the upper floors, everybody predicted that the whole lot would collapse, much to Fatty's indignation.

Handforth & Co., too, although extremely industrious, did not do much useful work. At least, this may be said of Handforth. Church and McClure, after remaining with their famous leader for some little time, found that his ideas did not coincide with their own. So they left him to his own devices, and took orders from Levi.

Handforth, in the meantime, got busy.

He decided to mix some mortar. What on earth for, he alone knew. But that is probably wrong, for it is extremely doubtful if Handforth himself knew why he was mixing the mortar. Certainly, no building operations were in progress. Perhaps Handforth had an idea of trying his hand at bricklaying, or something of that kind. At all events, he proceeded to mix mortar with a will.

He was quite by himself at the back of the house, where piles of cement lay, heaps of sand, and so forth. Water was laid on, too, and Handforth seized a shovel, and emptied a couple of sacks of cement on the ground. He knew—or he thought he knew—that cement was one of the ingredients of mortar. He fetched two barrowloads of sand, and dropped this upon the cement, then he mixed the whole lot into a nice mixture, and looked round for other ingredients.

"Now, lemme see," he murmured. "Mortar has all sorts of things in to make it thick. Cement, sand, dust. There's got to be something else."

He looked round, and then grinned to himself, and nodded.

"Plaster of Paris!" he exclaimed. "That's the stuff. I knew there was something else."

He had seen a big metal drum with a label upon it announcing that the contents were plaster of Paris. Handforth was quite certain that this substance was necessary in the manufacture of mortar; therefore, he seized the metal drum and

found it extremely heavy. So he rolled it along the ground towards the pile of cement and sand. Handforth was fairly correct in his mixture, so far—Portland cement and sand—but he had got the proportions all wrong. However, a little detail of this kind did not worry Handforth in the slightest degree. He prised open the lid of the metal drum and stared down into the interior.

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

He had always supposed plaster of Paris to be a powder, but the contents of this drum were very different. In fact, it looked like small, broken pieces of stone, grey in colour; and a very peculiar odour came up to Handforth.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he exclaimed. "It's just like carbide, like we put in our cycle lamps."

He looked at the outside of the drum again, and there it was, quite plain—"plaster of Paris." This settled it for Handforth. He could not remember ever having seen some plaster of Paris, but he knew that it was extensively used.

"I expect it smells like carbide before it's mixed up," he muttered. "It probably goes to powder afterwards and mixes with the other things. Anyhow, I'm going to chance it. I jolly well know that plaster of Paris has got to be mixed with morter!"

He dumped the contents of the drum on to the pile of sand and cement. He mixed it all thoroughly in with a shovel.

"Now, the next thing is water," he told himself. "Plenty of water, and mix it all up into a smooth paste. Then it'll be ready to be used, and I'll get a crowd of the fellows to help me. There are tons of bricks, and it won't take us more than half an hour to build a little outhouse. It's bound to be useful for somebody or other."

Handforth went over to the water-tap seized a pail, and then flung a great amount of the water over his precious mixture. Suddenly he came to a halt and sniffed.

"My only hat!" he ejaculated, with a gasp.

For a most objectionable odour came to his nostrils. He recognised that smell at once. Carbide of calcium! The smell of the gas which is freed when water goes upon carbide is not particularly attractive.

"That's funny!" muttered Handforth, staring. "I never thought that plaster of Paris smelt like carbide. It's worse now. Poof! What a frightful whiff!"

His mixture was bubbling and hissing, but Handforth continued manfully mixing it thoroughly into a paste. A fairly stiff wind was blowing towards the old house, and Handforth got behind it. In this position he did not get very much smell, and he proceeded with his work rather hastily.

Meanwhile, I was helping a crowd of other fellows to pull down one of the plaster walls in the interior of the house. We were working well, and had already accomplished a great deal; but suddenly I paused and sniffed the air.

"Help!" I exclaimed. "Who's been using eau-de-Cologne?"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Somebody must have opened a sewer!"

"What a frightful niff!"

Reginald Pitt went to the window and leaned out. Then he staggered back, holding his head.

"Oh, my goodness!" he said faintly. "It's—it's out here! It's coming up in great billowing gusts!"

"Begad!"

"Hullo! What's the matter in here?" inquired Levi, entering the room at that moment. "Why, what—by my life! Who's been picking violets?"

I held my breath, walked to the window, and stared out. There, down below, was Handforth, working away for all he was worth. I took a big sniff, and then I grinned.

"It's carbide!" I said. "Are there any acetylene lamps here, Levi?"

"Plenty of them," said the Jewish boy. "Flares, you know; whacking great big things to be used at night! Mr. Farrow—he's the manager, you know—means to have night shifts on the go as soon as possible, and we've got a great number of acetylene flares in readiness."

"And plenty of carbide, I suppose?" I asked.

"Oh, any amount of it!" replied Levi.

"Well, somebody has been using some," I said grimly.

"So it appears—or, rather, so it smells!" said Levi.

I stared down suspiciously at Handforth.

"Hi!" I roared. "Handy! What's the game down there?"

Handforth looked up.

"I'm mixing morter!" he yelled. "It's nearly done now, and I want about half-a-dozen fellows to come and give me a hand,

We're going to build a brick shed out here."

"Great Scott!" shouted Levi. "Have you used anything out of that drum?"

"Yes, plaster of Paris."

"Ha, ha, ha!" howled Levi. "You—you silly ass!"

"Why, what's the matter?" grinned Pitt.

"It was carbide in that drum!" said Levi. "Those drums are air-tight, you know, and so the carbide was packed in them; and just because that drum was labelled 'Plaster of Paris,' Handforth used it, the silly fathead! Doesn't he know the difference between plaster of Paris and carbide?"

"He ought to by this time!" I said, holding my nose.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, Handy said he was going to make things hum!" chuckled Pitt. "By jingo, he's done it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

About ten of us went down, seized Handforth, and thought about hurling him into his own frightful mixture. But we took pity on him and brought him indoors, and made him give a hand with work which was useful.

Of course, he only succeeded in hindering everybody else. But there was not much time now, for daylight was already failing and darkness was coming on. But by the time we knocked off for the day we had done a considerable amount of work, and we were feeling quite pleased with ourselves.

Tired out, satisfied, and thoroughly dirty, we made our way to the Grapes Hotel, feeling that we had earned a hearty tea and a rest.

But, unknown to us, our action was destined to cause trouble in Bannington. Already a storm was brewing.

CHAPTER V.

WATCHERS BY NIGHT.

"WHAT about a night watchman?" asked Solomon Levi.

"Eh?"

"What?"

"A which?"

"A night watchman," repeated Levi. "We've got to have one, you know."

We were all seated in the dining-room at the Grapes Hotel, and we had just finished a very excellent tea. We had the apartment to ourselves, and, of course, we were now attired in our usual clothing. And we felt clean, too, after a thorough wash and scrub.

"A night watchman!" I repeated. "Surely that's not necessary, Levi? I hardly think anybody will dare to go into the grounds of Bannington Grange after dark."

"That's what we thought," said Levi. "Last night the place was absolutely deserted, simply because we couldn't get a watchman to go on duty; and this morning, according to Mr. Farrow, several valuable tools had disappeared. And Mr. Farrow is rather anxious about to-night."

This was hardly to be wondered at. Farrow was the manager for the large firm of contractors who were doing the work. Personally, I couldn't quite understand how it was that Mr. Levi himself was obtaining the labour from another town; but probably Mr. Levi was making arrangements with the contractors over that business. Solomon's father wanted the work to go on without a hitch, and he knew well enough that, in order to get the thing done, it would be necessary to move on his own account.

"Well, we might as well do the thing properly," said Handforth. "I've no objection to going on duty, if you like, although I don't see why we should have any one-sided arrangement."

"My idea is for us to go on duty in shifts," said Levi. "Two of us together, say, for a couple of hours each. Nipper and I, say, will go on duty first, from eight o'clock until ten. Then two other fellows will go from ten until twelve, and so on. In that way the stuff will be guarded throughout the night. Besides, it will be a lesson for these nervous people in Bannington. They're scared out of their wits even when they pass the Grange. It'll make them think when they know that two schoolboys are keeping watch, at the back of the house, absolutely alone!"

"Rather," said Levi, smiling. "We'll go along there after tea, and light the fire, in a pail, you know. Coke, burning hot. There's a cosy little shelter, too, and we shall be able to keep ourselves fairly warm."

"What about grub?" asked Fatty Little. "If I'm going to do a turn at this job, I shall want some grub there, you

know. A chap can't keep watch at night unless he's got something to eat!"

"Oh, you needn't worry about that, Fatty," smiled Levi. "I'll provide plenty of grub."

"Good!" said Fatty.

In order to make it quite fair, we drew lots, and it happened that Levi and myself were to take the first spell, from eight o'clock until ten. Then Fatty Little and Sir Montie would come on duty until twelve o'clock. Other juniors had the task divided between them until eight o'clock in the morning.

When we went out, in a body, laughing and cheerful, on our way to the Grange in order to light the night watchmen's fire, we found a good many workmen waiting outside the hotel. They were looking angry and impatient, and they glared at us as we appeared.

"Take our jobs away, will yer?" demanded one man roughly. "We ain't standing none of that kind of thing, you young varmints!"

"Rot!" said Handforth. "We ain't taking your jobs away. You've chucked them up of your own accord, just because you were like a lot of frightened kids——"

"Steady on, Handy," muttered Levi. "There's no need to make a scene!"

"Well, that chap spoke first!" said Handforth warmly.

"Yus, and I'll speak again, too!" said the workman. "If you kids go on that job to-morrow, there'll be trouble. Mark my words, we ain't standing none of this sort of thing from you boys!"

"But what have these men got to grumble at?" enquired Singleton. "Nobody sacked them, nobody asked them to leave their work. They took themselves off, by what I can hear, and now they are blaming us because we——"

"My dear chap, it's no good arguing," I put in. "All the decent men among these labourers have accepted the situation. It's only the ruffianly crowd, the discontented elements, that feel inclined to stir up trouble."

"They will stir up trouble, too," said Levi. "I'm pretty sure of it."

There was certainly every indication that Solomon was right. Men were standing at street corners, talking, and they all looked at us angrily and morosely as we passed. One might have thought that we had done them an injury. It was just an example of the unreasonable enmity of men who were incapable of seeing the affair in its true light. Fortunately, these men were in the minority.

But our action had certainly shown the workmen up, and many of them were beginning to realise it now. They had thrown up good work, and good wages, just because of their silly superstitions. And they were beginning to understand, when it was too late, that they had been foolish.

Mr. Webb was rather upset.

He sat in his office at the Cinema, and he was talking to Williams, the man who had helped to cause all the trouble. Now, of course, Williams was no longer at work, since he had walked with all the rest.

"I don't quite like it," said Webb, frowning. "I believe that Levi is getting men from another quarter, Williams."

"Well, that don't matter, sir," said Williams. "We shall be able to scare them just the same——"

"I'm afraid not," said Webb. "For one thing, you will not be able to obtain employment, as you did before. Therefore, you will not be able to work the many little 'accidents,' as you did. We shall have to rely upon the ghost, in the main."

"Well, we can fake up all sorts of things," said Williams. "And I don't reckon it would be a bad idea to scare these kids. I understand they're going on watch to-night. Two at a time. If we could succeed in frightening them off it would be a big thing."

Webb nodded.

"I quite agree," he said thoughtfully. "And we must do our best to frighten these boys. It will create a good impression, and it will serve to prove that the ghost appears to everybody alike—workmen or boys. These infernal youngsters have taken it upon themselves to prove that no ghost exists, they scoff at the idea of the Grange being haunted. Well, we must make them change their views. And I do not think it will be so difficult. To-night, Williams, we must become active."

"Yes, sir."

And Mr. Webb proceeded to outline his scheme. And while he was doing this, while he was planning his pretty little plot, the juniors were making a roaring fire at the back of the old building. We were all there, including Sir Montie and Fatty Little. Fatty, naturally, had brought a supply of food with him.

"Well, it won't be so bad here," said the fat junior, after the fire was well alight. "So long as we've got plenty of grub for the two hours, I dare say we shall be able to get through it."

"You'd better be careful, Fatty,"

grinned Handforth. "The ghost might come along and pinch all your tuck!"

Fatty Little scoffed.

"I don't believe in ghosts," he replied. "It's all superstition."

And that was the general opinion among the fellows. At the same time, I noticed one or two juniors looking about them rather uncomfortably. This old house had a very creepy aspect, and it was not at all the same at night as it was in the day time.

I believed, in my own mind, that some of the fellows would become very nervous during the later spells, say, between midnight and two a.m. But it would be a good test for their nerves.

"Now, you chaps, I'd like a word with you," said Solomon Levi, as we were all gathered round the fire. "I want you to thoroughly understand that this place isn't really haunted."

"Of course, it isn't," said Handforth. "We know that, you ass!"

"At the same time, it's quite likely that you might see something to-night," went on Levi. "You might see a ghost, for example, and there might be uncanny sounds, such as ghostly cackles and laughs and moans——"

"My hat!"

"But—but how can there be these sounds if the place ain't really haunted?" asked Bob Christine.

"And how can we see a ghost, if there isn't one?" demanded McClure.

"That's just what I'm getting at," said Levi. "The night watchman saw a ghost, and green flames came out of his fire, and he heard rappings, and all that sort of thing. The old chap swears that this place is haunted, and he wouldn't come in here again for a king's ransom."

"It was all imagination," said Pitt.

"No, it wasn't. He really saw the ghost, and he really heard those rappings," replied Levi. "But it was all faked. And I wouldn't mind betting anything that the ghost was really Webb!"

"Webb!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Great pip!"

"Of course it was Webb," I said. "Anybody could have guessed that, you chaps."

"Webb is doing his utmost to spoil our plans," went on Solomon grimly. "It's owing to him that our workmen left us, and all this trouble came about. Webb caused those articles to be put in the newspapers, and he stored up trouble all along. But we can't prove it against him, we can't do anything. I think all you fellows know that Webb is going to have his own place enlarged and improved, and his idea is to get his alterations done before this new cinema is put up. In that way, he hopes to ruin our chance, but he won't succeed."

"Rather not!"

"We're not going to be stopped by that rotter!"

"That's why I'm warning you now," went on Levi. "I think it is quite probable that Webb will attempt to scare somebody to-night, probably between ten o'clock and midnight, or between twelve and two. He'll appear as a ghost, or there may be some other manifestations. If so, don't be scared—simply laugh at everything. It will be ghostly, and rather creepy; but you'll know, all the time, that it's a fake. Whatever you do, don't run—don't let this rotter have the laugh over us."

The juniors promised, and we stood round the fire, talking about general matters, until the time was nearly eight o'clock. We discussed St. Frank's, and conjectured as to how many new fellows would arrive when the new term commenced, how the football would go on, and all manner of things of that description. It was a novelty for us to be in Bannington—so near to St. Frank's—and yet be free. We were not compelled to get in before calling over, and we were not breaking bounds or anything of that sort. We were entirely our own masters, for our holidays were not yet over.

Solomon Levi and myself stayed behind when all the other fellows went away, back to the Grapes Hotel. And during our two hours of duty—from eight o'clock till ten—nothing whatever happened.

We simply remained there, chatting, and keeping our eyes well open for anything that might occur. But nothing did occur, and, just as the old church was chiming ten, our relief appeared.

Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Fatty Little put in an appearance.

Fatty was carrying a huge package with him, and I grinned as I looked at it.

"Sandwiches, cakes, and all that sort of thing," said Fatty. "We must have something to keep us alive, you know. There'll just be about enough here to last until midnight. Then Pitt and De Valerie will come on the scene——"

"Only to find all the grub vanished!" I remarked. "Good old Fatty! My mind staggers when I think of the amount of grub you would have brought if you were to remain on duty all night long!"

"Dear old boy, Fatty would have required a wagon—he would, really!"

remarked Sir Montie calmly. "I'm afraid he won't be much good as a watchman, he'll be eating all the time."

We went off, leaving Sir Montie and Fatty alone to do their spell. As a matter of fact, we were hungry, and we were looking forward to the supper we should have when we arrived at the hotel. Meanwhile, Fatty was eating already; he did not see any reason why he should waste any time. As he explained to Sir Montie, he was having a snack to keep him alive.

This snack lasted until half-past ten. Then Fatty waited until eleven.

"Good!" he said, as he heard the old clock chiming. "I've got just about time for another bite, Montie!"

"Begad!" said Tregellis West. "You can't eat any more now, surely?"

"You wait and see!" said Fatty, opening a bag.

"Dear old boy, you'll make yourself ill, you will, really!" said Sir Montie.

"I should be ill if I didn't eat anything!" retorted Fatty, as he commenced munching. "Have a sandwich?"

"No thanks, dear old boy; we shall be having supper in just over an hour."

This, of course, was quite beyond Fatty Little's comprehension. He couldn't possibly see why Sir Montie should refuse a sandwich now, because supper would be ready in just over an hour. An hour without food, to Fatty, was a period of agony.

And while the pair sat there, before their cheerful fire, a shadowy, silent figure hovered about near the bottom hedge of the Grange grounds. In the darkness it was impossible for Sir Montie or Fatty to see this figure—it was too far distant.

It had been there for some minutes, and when eleven o'clock chimed out, it moved forward cautiously, in the direction of the house.

Then, suddenly, another figure appeared. This, too, was muffled up, and it stood quite still, waiting for the other to approach.

"I'm glad you're here, Williams," said the other, in a soft, low whisper. "But I thought you would be nearer to the house. You know what to do, don't you?"

"Yes, sir!" came a whisper from the other.

"Very well, then," went on the first figure—which was that of Mr. Stanley Webb. "Your business now, Williams, is to creep up behind that watchman's shelter. Do so very cautiously, and rap upon the woodwork, as you did in the case of the night watchman. But you'll have to be very quick here, because these boys are active. Meanwhile, I will don my special garb, and I will appear at one of the windows of the house."

"You have everything on you, sir?" whispered the other.

"What do you mean?" demanded Webb.

"The ghost stuff——"

"Of course," said Webb impatiently. "You know I have it on me, Williams——"

"In that case, Mr. Webb, I shall be obliged if you will don that garb without any delay," said the other grimly, in a normal voice. "Furthermore, I should advise you to waste no time."

"Why, what——" he stammered. "I—I——"

"You have made a slight mistake, Mr. Webb, that is all!" said the other evenly. "I am not Williams, as you supposed. My name is Lee—Nelson Lee. Possibly you have heard of me?"

Webb uttered a snarl.

"What—what are you doing here?" he demanded harshly. "Let me go! I—I was only looking round——"

"Just so, Mr. Webb—just so!" said Nelson Lee smoothly. "You were only looking round, and it was your intention to appear dressed up as a ghost. Well, I intend that you shall do so."

Webb was absolutely startled.

"I—I don't know what you mean!" he stuttered. "In any case, you—you can do nothing. I have not committed any criminal act——"

"I am not saying that you have, Mr. Webb," interrupted Nelson Lee. "You need not think that I am going to hand you over to the police—although I might possibly take you to the officer on point duty in the High Street. Now, Mr. Webb, make haste! Put that clothing on!"

"I won't! I absolutely refuse!" snapped Webb, shivering with anger and fear. "You have no right——"

"Unless you comply with my order within one minute, Mr. Webb, I shall use force," said Nelson Lee, in a cold, grim voice. "I wish to avoid that, if possible, so please do as I say."

Somehow, Webb knew that Nelson Lee was speaking the grim truth. He would, indeed, use force if the man did not obey. And so, with shaking hands, Webb produced a bundle of white material—muslin, or some such stuff. It was fashioned into a kind of gown, and Mr. Webb donned this. Then he placed over his face a mask—a hideous affair which looked like a death's head. It was painted with some luminous

stuff, which shone with a bluish green light. At a distance, Mr. Webb now looked positively awful, but at close quarters he would not have scared a child of five.

"What—what are you going to do?" demanded the exposed rascal.

"You will see quite soon, Mr. Webb," said Nelson Lee coolly. "This way, please, and if you attempt to escape, it will be the worse for you."

Nelson Lee commenced moving forward, and he and his companion came out from behind the trees, and were in full view. Fatty Little, at that moment, was just transferring a tart from the bag to his mouth. He paused, with the tart half way.

"Look!" he gasped. "Can—can you see anything, Tregellis-West?"

Sir Montie started.

"Begad! There—there seems to be somethin', dear old boy!" he ejaculated. "But there are two figures, one frightful-looking thing, and—why, begad! It's Mr. Lee!"

"Great doughnuts!" said Fatty Little blankly.

Both the juniors stared, filled with wonder.

"But—but what's that thing with Mr. Lee?" asked Fatty. "It—it doesn't look human——"

"I rather fancy that Mr. Lee has laid the ghost, dear old boy!" said Sir Montie calmly. "This is rather excitin'—it is, really!"

Nelson Lee and his prisoner came into the warm glow of the firelight.

"It's all right, boys; you needn't be alarmed!" said Nelson Lee. "I have only approached you because I wanted to set your minds at rest, and to save you from a fright."

"That's all right," said Sir Montie, smiling. "We weren't scared at all, begad! We were on the lookout for somethin' to happen; and if I was in the habit of bettin', I should lay long odds that the—the queer-looking thing with you is Mr. Webb!"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"You are quite right, Tregellis-West," he said. "This gentleman is certainly Mr. Webb. He was about to make an attempt to frighten you, but apparently he would not have succeeded."

"Rather not, sir!" said Fatty. "It would take more than a silly looking thing like that to scare us. But we didn't know you were in Bannington, sir."

"I happened to be down here," replied Nelson Lee smoothly.

He said no more, but forced Mr. Webb along the path until the side gate was reached. This led into the High Street. And, as the queer little procession appeared headed by the extraordinary-looking Mr. Webb, there were one or two shouts of astonishment.

For, by pure chance—and good luck—three or four people were in the High Street, near the old haunted house. One of them was Inspector Jameson, of the Bannington Police. There was a constable, and two of the local tradespeople. The four had been having a little chat.

"It's all right, gentlemen; you need not be alarmed!" said Nelson Lee, approaching the group. "I just wish you to investigate the ghost!"

"Confound you!" snarled Webb. "It was only a joke. I was only attempting to play a trick upon the boys. It was nothing else——"

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Inspector Jameson, staring at the ghost. "What—what is this? I hardly expected to meet you in this way, Mr. Lee; and I am now wondering who this queerly attired individual may be."

"He is the gentleman who has been appearing as the ghost of Bannington Grange for some few nights past," replied Nelson Lee. "Not only that, Jameson, but he has faked other ghostly manifestations—for example, the green flames from the night watchman's fire, the mysterious rappings——"

"Then—then it was all a fake?" demanded one of the tradespeople.

"Naturally it was a fake," replied Nelson Lee. "It could have been nothing else."

"Well I'm hanged!" said the man. "We've been hoodwinked. And so have those workmen, too—they left their jobs because of this ghost, and it turns out to be a practical joke!"

"Not much of a joke, I fancy," said Inspector Jameson grimly. "I don't think this man can be charged with any criminal offence, but I fancy he would get a warm reception if a crowd of those workmen were about here just now. Who is he, Mr. Lee?"

Nelson Lee tore the mask from Mr. Webb's face, and all the onlookers started.

"Why, it's Mr. Webb!" said the inspector. "Good gracious me! Why, Mr. Webb, what does this mean——"

"It means that Mr. Lee has made a mistake!" snarled Webb furiously. "I—I was only having a joke upon the boys—that is all. It was foolish, I will admit,

but I know nothing whatever of the other ghostly manifestations——"

But the men would not listen to Mr. Webb. He was obviously telling lies, and, finding that his position was an intolerable one, the rascal hurried off down the street as fast as he could go. Nelson Lee smiled as he watched him.

"I rather fancy," said the great detective, "that the ghost is laid—for good!"

CHAPTER VI.

GETTING EXCITED.

THE exposure of Mr. Stanley Webb was the sole topic of conversation in Bannington the next morning.

The news had flown round with extraordinary speed, and, by breakfast time, the whole town knew the truth.

We were very greatly surprised to find Nelson Lee in Bannington. The guv'nor had not told me of his intentions, and I was delighted when I heard. But it was plain to me that Nelson Lee had come down in order to give a hand, because he was convinced that he would be able to expose Mr. Webb's trickery.

Nelson Lee had succeeded, and the townspeople of Bannington were grateful to him. The guv'nor had thought it best to expose Webb publicly, for then there could be no question about the matter. It was only by taking a bold step of this kind that the truth was made really public.

And feeling against Webb ran high.

When he was rash enough to appear in the street, during the morning, he was hissed by several people. Others glared, and it was quite evident that his fellow townspeople were hostile. Mr. Webb himself was furious—and alarmed. He didn't exactly know what to do, and he was quite sure that Nelson Lee's action had made it impossible for him to carry out his original plans.

The myth was exploded.

And it did not make Mr. Webb's temper any the better when he learned that several reporters had come down from London—just in time to hear the truth. For, of course, the mystery of Bannington Grange had been rather prominent in all the London papers during the last day or two. Many famous experts in the occult had half decided to come down to Bannington, in order to make an investigation. But this, of course, had put a stop to it. And Mr. Webb found himself the laughing-stock of Bannington; and something worse than that. For a great many people did not feel inclined to laugh. The more intelligent members of the population realised that Webb had had an ulterior motive in working his treachery. For he was a cinema proprietor, and he had deliberately brought to a standstill the work which was in progress in connection with another cinema.

As for the workmen who had been employed on the old building, they were furious and indignant. They had left their work—they had thrown up their jobs of their own accord—on account of the spirit manifestations which had been going on in the Grange. And now, like a bombshell, they knew that they had been tricked. They knew that the ghost was only a fake. And, therefore, it naturally stood to reason that all the rest of the "haunting" business had been a fake.

By nine o'clock all the juniors were at work again, and they intended to put in a full day. For the new workmen were not due to arrive until the next morning. I was on the job, of course, and I was working as industriously as the others. But, after a while, we became aware that a commotion was going on round Mr. Farrow's office. This was a portable wooden building in the grounds of the house, and it was surrounded by angry, excited men.

Jim Sharpe led a small deputation of men into Mr. Farrow's office, and they found the manager sitting there, busily writing.

"Good-morning, sir," said Big Jim.

"Good-morning, Sharpe," said Mr. Farrow, looking up. "What are you doing here?"

"We've come back to work, sir," said the ex-foreman. "The men have realised that they made a mistake, and they are willing to start work again now. We're all willing to start again."

"That's right, sir!" said the others.

Mr. Farrow laid down his pen.

"I'm sorry, men, but I'm afraid it's impossible," he said quietly.

"Impossible, sir?"

"Yes," said the manager. "We cannot allow you to play about with us in this manner. You left your jobs without a moment's notice—and, I consider, without any provocation. You were told repeatedly that this house was not really haunted. Yet, in spite of that information, you left

your work and, incidentally, you left me in the lurch."

"But—but we're willing to come back, sir——"

"I'm afraid it is too late now, Sharpe," said Mr. Farrow. "Mr. Levi and myself have made full arrangements for another body of workmen. Your own common-sense will tell you that, having engaged this fresh set of men, we cannot very well go back on them. It would hardly be fair."

"But we were first, sir——"

"That makes no difference—now," said the manager. "You deserted us, and you cannot blame either Mr. Levi, or my employers, or myself for taking immediate steps to obtain fresh labour. We have obtained that labour, and we must keep to our bargain. You broke your bargain, and I am afraid there is no sense in continuing this interview."

Jim Sharpe nodded.

"I reckon you're right," he said soberly. "We were fools to leave our work—that's the truth of it. And we can't blame you for getting other men. And, as you say, it wouldn't be fair to take us all back, and to give this fresh lot the chuck—before they start. It seems to me we've made a pretty fine mess of things, mates," added the foreman, turning to his companions.

They trooped out disconsolately—sensible fellows, every one of them. They knew quite well that they had only themselves to blame for this position. And a great many more of the workmen were in agreement. They saw that what had happened was entirely their own fault.

But, unfortunately, there were other workmen who were not quite so intelligent.

These men—fortunately a minority—were obstinate, narrow minded, and aggressive. They formed the hooligan element of the men who had lately been at work on the building.

And it was quite obvious that they meant to cause trouble. Several dozen of them collected out in the High Street, and they stared up at the walls of the Grange with angry, aggressive faces. They could see the juniors working industriously, and this sight was similar to a red flag waved in front of a bull. It drove the discontented workmen almost into a frenzy.

And it was here that Mr. Webb seized his opportunity. He sent three of his own men in amongst these angry labourers. They were agitated, and they talked continuously—urging them to attack the house, and to drive the boys out of it.

"We've got to do something, mates—that's certain!" said one of the agitators. "We ain't going to stand by idle while these boys do our work, and keep us from earning an honest living!"

"Yes, we'll chuck 'em out!"

"They ain't got no right in there, any way!"

"No right at all!" continued the agitator. "And I say that the best thing we can do is to attack the house in force—all of us. It won't take us long to get in, if we're determined!"

"And what can we do then?" questioned one of the men.

"Why, we can chuck these young school kids out—that's what we can do!" said the other.

"After that we can take our jobs back——"

"But they won't take us on no more!"

"They'll have to!" said the agitator darkly. "If they don't, we'll burn the house down!"

"'Ear, 'ear!"

"That's the idea!"

"Here, steady on, mates!" said one of the others. "That's going a bit too stiff!"

"Oh, is it?" demanded Webb's agent. "Ain't we got to live? Ain't we got to earn bread and butter for the kids? I suppose you're going to sit down and starve, while men from another town come here and do this building work—when it's ours? We was engaged for this job, and if we ain't took on, we won't let nobody else do it!"

"That's the talk!"

"It's up to us, mates, to show them we're in earnest!" shouted one of the hotheads. "Who's going to join us?"

"I am!"

"And me, too!"

"We're all in it, mate!"

"Go on—rush the house!"

The fever had caught on, and the men lost their heads altogether. They were young, most of them—young and irresponsible. They did not realise the seriousness of their action. They were furious, and they felt an unreasoning hatred towards the men who had lately employed them. They failed to realise that if they had been sensible, they would have been working peacefully even at that minute.

And it was this kind of thing—which was now about to happen—which would make it absolutely certain that none of the Bannington workmen would be taken on again. These foolish young hot heads were doing their more sensible fellows the worst possible turn they could do.

With a series of wild shouts the crowd

threw themselves across the High Street, and then they commenced the attack against the old building. It was not such an easy matter as the men had at first supposed.

For the big wooden hoarding barred the way; there was only one doorway in this, and this was closed and locked.

But the men scrambled up, climbing, hammering, doing everything they possibly could to break down the barrier. And the noise they created was rather tremendous. People came out into the High Street from all the shops, and excitement ran high. It seemed that a riot was in progress.

People shouted for police, women ran screaming into shops, and there was general commotion.

In the building, the juniors were taken quite by surprise.

I was the first one to notice that anything was happening. And, staring out of one of the upper windows, I saw the crowd surging below, doing their utmost to break down the wooden hoarding. I could see at a glance that the crowd was in a dangerous mood. And my very appearance fired up the hotheads all the more.

"Come down out of that, you young varmint!"

"We'll have you out in no time!"

"We'll half kill you and your young pals!" shouted another man. "We ain't going to be done out of our jobs by a pailful of rotten young school kids!"

Crash! Crash!

Several of the boards gave way, and a hole was made in the hoarding. Two or three men climbed through, and they seized pick-axes. Then they commenced to smash away for all they were worth. By this time several other juniors had come running up, attracted by the noise.

"What's the matter up there?" gasped Pitt.

"Some of the workmen trying to smash their way in!" I said quickly. "Look here, my sons, we've got to stop this!"

"But how—how can we stop it?" asked Augustus Hart. "There are dozens of these chaps, Nipper, scores of them! Once they get in, they'll go for us, and we shall be wiped up!"

"We mustn't let them get in!" exclaimed Solomon Levi, who was among the juniors there. "If they get in, there'll be terrific damage done. These men are angry—they don't care what they do when they're in this state. They'll smash things up, they'll break tools, and do as much destruction as they possibly can. It'll cost hundreds and hundreds of pounds if these fools get in here. We've got to keep them out!"

"It's easier said than done!" put in De Valerie.

Levi looked round desperately.

"Can you think of anything, Nipper?" he asked.

"Yes!" I said promptly. "We can't keep these ruffians back with our bare hands, therefore we must have something to throw, and I suggest that we get up some of those bags of cement, and chuck them down——"

"But they are heavy!" protested Pitt. "Why, one of those bags, thrown from this window, would kill two or three men!"

"You ass!" I exclaimed. "I mean we'll empty the bags up here, and the cement will fall down in a powder. It will be like a fog, and it will choke the beggars."

"Oh, good!"

"That's a great idea!"

"Water, too!" I shouted. "Get a string of fellows up the stairs, and we'll pass pails of water up as fast as we can go. Cold water isn't very nice at any time, and at this period of the year nobody likes it!"

"That's a ripping idea!" said Handforth. "Cement first, and then water. The beggars will set hard as they stand!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There were plenty of us there, and in less than no time a number of cement bags were brought up. Then, going to the front windows, we swung them open and tilted the bags out.

"Now!" I roared. "Go!"

At that very minute the men had succeeded in smashing down a big part of the hoarding, and they were in the act of surging through.

Then the cement went down—in a great, heavy cloud.

It simply smothered everything, and in a minute the attackers were choking, gasping, sneezing, and staggering about blindly.

And before they could recover themselves, water came down—pailful after pailful.

"Hurrah!"

"That's the stuff to give 'em!"

"Buck up, the Remove! We'll show these chaps what's what!" roared Bob Christine.

"Hear, hear!"

"We'll dampen them a bit more!"

Splash! Splash!

Water was sent down again, and many of the men staggered away, drenched, and

shivering. The fiery spirits had been dampened, and they wanted to escape. Others, however, who were still dry, came on to the attack.

But they shared the same fate as their fellows, and retreated in disorder, soaked through.

"You young rascals!" roared one man, shaking his fist up at us. "We'll have you out of there, and then we'll have our own back!"

"Yes, mate, that's the idea!"

"Come on—we don't care!" roared Handforth. "But I'll bet you won't get into this house to-day. You took on a big proposition when you tackled the Remove!"

"Come on, mates!" shouted one man. "We ain't going to be done by these kids!"

Once more the crowd attacked, and once more the crowd was repelled. Cold water splashing down in a continuous stream did the trick. There was no getting away from it. It came down in cascades, and the men scattered like chaff before a high wind.

And then, to finally clench matters, the police appeared upon the scene. Ten or twelve constables came hurrying down the High Street. And the sight of the men in blue put the final touch to the defeated. The hooligans, now in a reckless, mad mood, ran helter skelter in all directions. The attack had been warded off, and very shortly everything was peaceful again.

But we knew well enough that further trouble was to come.

We had only had a taste of the excitement. Although we had beaten back this attack, it was a certainty that further attacks would be made later on—perhaps at night. And it was necessary that Bannington Grange should be guarded constantly. These men had opened hostilities against us, and they had been beaten. Therefore, they would be angry, sullen, and dangerous. There was no telling what villainy they would get up to later—after they had had a chance to gather themselves together and plan things.

Mr. Isaac Levi was very concerned.

"It was splendid of you, boys," he said. "I must thank you for what you did, for without a doubt you saved a great deal of destruction. Heaven only knows what those ruffians would have done if they had gained admittance into the house."

The excitement at Bannington was at fever pitch. Everybody was discussing the affair, and everybody was equally certain that the trouble was not over.

On the morrow the new batch of workmen would begin their labours, and this event would, almost certainly cause the local workmen—who were now out of a job—to renew their efforts against the old house. War had been declared, and Mr. Levi was just as grim as the men. Never would he submit; he was in the right, and he intended to hold out. But not one of them had the slightest idea of the dramatic events which were destined to take place so soon.

THE END.

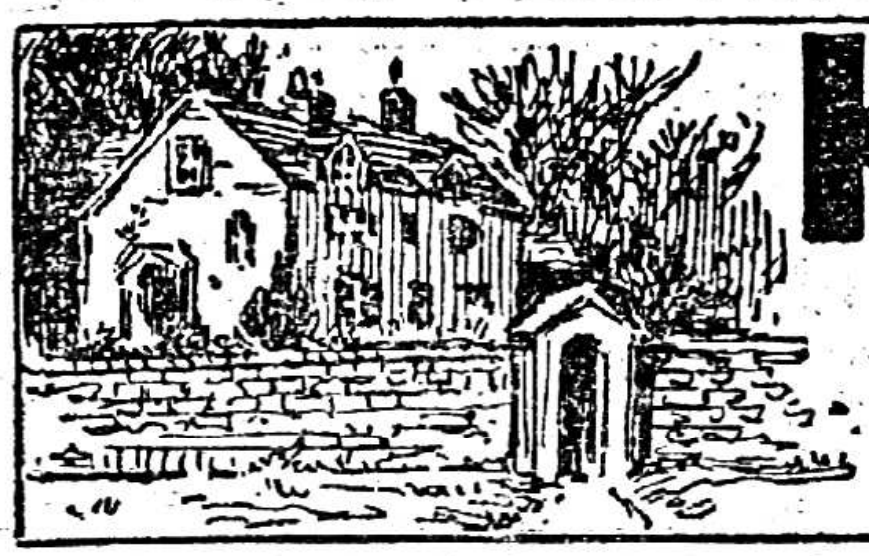
TO MY READERS!

I was most agreeably surprised at the large number of entries for the Map-making Competition. Some of the sketches submitted are remarkably clever, indicating almost every landmark and feature mentioned in our stories from the first number. I have not yet examined all the attempts—which number between two or three thousand—and to do justice to them all, I must postpone the result until next week.

There will be another splendid story of the cinema series in next week's number entitled "THE CINEMA STRIKERS."

The Editor.

Thrilling New Serial of Brother and Sister Detectives!



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 employs Lin on some dangerous missions in order to give the lad an opportunity of displaying his detective abilities. One night Lin accompanies his employer to a lonely house inhabited by a dangerous gang of foreign secret service agents.

(Now read on.)

Lin Receives a Shock.

THE speaker now appeared at the head of the stairs; a woman who, though slightly-made and by no means tall, yet seemed to carry herself with the air of an empress. She was clad in dark furs, and a motor-veil concealed her features. That much Lin saw in the murky moonlight, by an upward glance, as he crouched low at the foot of the wall.

Had she seen him? If so she gave no second look his way, but glided forward a little, and seemed to watch the bearded man with alert eyes behind her veil.

"A curse on my blindness!" he ejaculated fiercely. "It was no rat! And it is here still—my senses tell me!"

And with one hand he began to feel over the surface of the wall, just above Lin's head. The other hand, in which a long knife glistened under the moonbeams, was drawn back, as if to strike when those groping fingers found the living mark!

Lin crouched until he could compress even his slender form no closer into the angle of the wall and floor. Then for a few dreadful moments that seemed hours long to him, he could do nothing but hold his breath till his chest felt like to burst, and watch those groping fingers, in narrowing sweeps, glide down the wall, nearer and nearer to where he lay!

Already in imagination he felt their touch—and the knife thrust that would swiftly follow!

Suddenly the slight, fur-clad figure glided forward, and with a swift, imperious movement pushed the man away from the wall.

"Bah!" she exclaimed scornfully. "A rat, I tell you! It sprang from the ledge under your hand, scampering down the stairs. Go on, sir! We are keeping t' ose rascals of ours waiting in yonder room, and all to-night's business yet to be transacted. Put away that weapon, and go on, I say. We have no time to waste in such fooling!"

It was clearly a command, and one that the man did not dare to disobey. He muttered under his breath; but he put away the knife, and moved off, slowly, as if reluctantly, farther down the corridor. The woman removed her hand from the breast of her fur coat, dropping back into an inner pocket the small revolver she had held in hidden grasp.

"Had the brute stayed I must have shot him!" she murmured, with a little sigh of relief. Then, quickly stooping over the crouching boy, she whispered close to his ear:

"You are safe now, Lin! Keep a cool head, and go on with what you have to do. Tell my brother I can hold these men in play for about half an hour—no longer with safety. He must manage all his work in that time. You may stand up, and walk as boldly as you please. But make no sound, as you value your life—and mine."

With that she glided away. Lin had not seen her face; but that low, musical voice thrilled him to the heart. He knew that he owed his life to Cora Twyford!

Her calm courage inspired the boy with the same cool daring. The nervous tension—it was not fear—that was likely to spoil his hand, causing him to blunder, left him, and he felt perfectly master of himself.

He waited until the door at the end of the corridor opened, letting out the louder sound of voices and a gush of light, and closed again as before; then rising to his feet, but still keeping close to the wall, he crept down the dark staircase. It led to a stone lobby, with a passage on the right leading probably to the main entrance-hall. But Lin remembered that his directions were to turn to the left, and by groping along the wall—for it was pitchy dark down there—he found a smaller passage on that side,

and at the end of it the door that he had to deal with.

It was bolted top and bottom, as Twyford had expected, and the bolts rusted thickly, as if undisturbed for years.

They were hard to move; but oil and "elbow-grease" overcame their stiffness at last, and Lin worked them back with very little noise. Then he rapped three times.

"Good!" said a voice from the other side. "Now the lock. Plenty of oil."

Into the keyhole, through which came a tiny shaft of moonlight, Lin pumped oil freely from the little can. Then some steel instrument glinted in it for a moment. There was a slight click, the door opened slowly, stiffly, and Mr. Mysterious stepped in.

He looked more mysterious than ever—even sinister, in the brief glimpse Lin caught of him in the moonlight, before he closed the door again—for he wore a black mask over the upper part of his face. It made an evil-looking figure of him, and for a moment Lin doubted if it were the same man.

But the voice reassured him.

"Capital, so far! But you have been longer about it than I calculated. Something has happened to detain you—eh, Lin?"

In a rapid undertone Lin told him.

"Ah, it was well for you that the man is blind!" remarked Twyford. "He lost his sight some years ago by the premature explosion of a bomb—one of his beloved playthings. That is Sapt, the famous—or infamous—Bulgarian brigand; for he is no better, though he calls himself an anarchist."

"A brigand—an anarchist! In this house so near London!" said the startled and amazed boy. "What on earth is such a man doing here?"

"Evil, as he does wherever he goes," said Twyford. "But we haven't time for explanations now. Half an hour, she said? —and every moment of it a cruel nerve-strain, even for her, brave girl! Well, it is little enough, but we must make it do. Come, Lin, follow me closely, and make no sound."

He led the way—with an assured step, as though he carried a perfect plan of the place in his brain—through that opening on the right, across a great bare hall and down a flight of stone stairs into the basement.

"We will venture a light now," said Twyford.

And from somewhere under the short, but roomy, rough dark coat he wore he produced a bull's-eye and slipped back the dark slide. With its narrow shaft of rays to guide them they passed a range of gaunt stone kitchens, and such places—all bare, disused, and long given over to the rats that scampered right and left at their approach.

Twyford stopped at last in what looked to be a scullery, for it had in it a sink, with a leaky tap, and there was a copper for boiling washing in the corner.

"What do you notice here different from the other places we have just passed through, Lin?" asked Twyford, after casting the rays of his lantern around.

"It has a wooden floor, and the others were all stone-paved," answered the boy. "And the boards look old and rotten, but they fit closely, and are quite firm underfoot."

"Not bad. You have eyes, and know how to use them, lad," said Twyford approvingly. "Yes, this aged floor is a fake—a very clever one, I must admit. Now for its little secret. Hold the lantern—so, Lin."

Lin took the dark-lantern, and in a thrill of excited interest watched Mr. Mysterious perform a very peculiar piece of work.

He knelt down about the middle of the floor, and tapping over the boards gently with his knuckles, seemed speedily to find the spot he sought. Then with the tips of his fingers he pulled out one of the knots in the apparently worn and time-stained boards—a knot no different, as far as Lin could see, from any of the many others around it. But Mr. Mysterious gave vent to a little chuckle of satisfaction, as, having carefully laid the knot aside, he produced a slender steel instrument from a pocket in that remarkable coat of his, and inserted it in the hole where the knot had been. It did not seem to answer, for he tried another, and yet another. Then Lin heard a subdued click, followed by a dull throbbing of the planks under his feet.

Twyford rose up and drew back quickly, pulling Lin back with him.

The boy was not left long to wonder why. A portion of the floor sank several inches, and seemed to slide away under the other, showing a great dark opening yawning where the solid planks had been!

Twyford took the lantern from Lin and threw its rays into the pit-like opening. It revealed a strong, and new-looking wooden ladder leading downwards. Motioning the boy to follow, he descended without hesitation. The ladder was of no great length, and its few broad, strong steps ended in a large vault-like cellar. It might once have been the wine-cellar of the great house; but its contents were different now.

A number of packing-cases stood there. They were of various sizes, some exceedingly large. All were new-looking, and very strongly made. They all had a lot of writing stencilled or painted on top or side. But it was in some foreign language—French or Italian, Lin thought; and he was not scholar enough to make it out very well. One line, however, was repeated in English:

"SPORTS REQUISITES. STOW AWAY FROM HEAT OR MOISTURE."

That, of course, he could understand. And the last word of what seemed to be the address—in extra large letters—was also plain enough:

"MONACO."

"Hold the lantern steady, Lin," said Twyford. "Throw the light on that big, queer-shaped case. That's right."

He took a book and pencil from his

pocket, and seemed to make a number of sketches, and to jot down many notes—all with great rapidity.

Putting away the book and pencil, he then produced from one of his capacious pockets a short but strong screwdriver. The boards forming the lids of the cases were fastened down with screws. Selecting one of the larger cases, Twyford drew out the screws and removed two of the boards. A layer of straw matting was exposed, and this he carefully rolled back.

Lin felt a thrill of curiosity. He came a little nearer and took a peep as he held the light.

All he saw was an array of golf-clubs, tennis-rackets, hockey-sticks, and such sporting gear—all new and shiny, like goods in a shop window. He was rather disappointed. He had vaguely hoped for something a bit more sensational than this—he didn't 'quite know what. But it seemed rather a fizzle to break into a house like burglars, discover a secret trap-door and an underground cellar—only to find boxes of golf-clubs and tennis bats!

Mr. Mysterious seemed to understand his feelings, for he smiled as he caught his eye.

"Look nice, eh, lad?" he remarked, with a dry laugh. "Now let us see what other 'sporting requisites' the good people of Monaco are to be amused with this coming season!"

With great care he removed the sporting goods and laid them aside. Underneath was another layer of straw matting, and when Twyford gently rolled this back Lin saw no more golf-clubs, or anything as harmless, but a row of magazine-rifles, neatly packed, each with a murderous-looking knife-bayonet in between it and its neighbour!

Twyford laughed at the startled expression on the boy's face.

"You were hardly prepared for that?" he said. "I was. And I think I need not bother to sample the other cases. I can pretty well guess their contents. Revolvers or automatics in that; in the flatter ones ammunition, the smaller square boxes grenades, probably—all nicely camouflaged to look like a consignment of harmless sports goods!"

"But——" began Lin, much puzzled and decidedly curious.

"Wait, lad; no time to explain things now. You shall know all about it later," said Twyford. "That half-hour is flying, and there is still much to be done."

With deft, yet rapid and noiseless movements, he restored the camouflage of sporting goods to the opened case exactly as he had found them; then put back the loose boards and screwed them down as before. This done, they returned to the scullery above. Twyford—as though he had mastered the trick by a kind of instinct—caused that strange trap-door to travel back into its place, and fitted the loose knot into the hole it had come from. Then with the rough cap he wore he fanned the grimy dust that covered the floor lightly over the spot, leaving it as though untouched by recent hands.

"We have finished here," he said. "Follow me closely, Lin, for we must do without a light. Turn the dark-slide."

Lin obeyed; and in darkness followed his unerring guidance through the great, empty basement and up the stone stairs.

On reaching the hall above, he gave Lin a sign for extra caution, and with the light, silent tread which the boy had already learnt to imitate, crossed the bare stone floor to a door on the farther side.

This was closed, and might have been locked. If so, that made very little difference to Mr. Mysterious. A slight tinkle of steel in the keyhole, and the door was open.

Once more at a sign Lin followed him in, and he closed the door silently.

Wan moonlight through the window showed a room scantily furnished after the manner of an office; there being a writing-table and a couple of stiff-looking chairs set in the middle of the floor. Beyond these, the only other piece of furniture in the room seemed to be a large, strong-looking bureau of black oak, which stood against the wall at one side, not far from the window.

Twyford's first act was to cross to the window, slip back the catch and raise the lower sash several inches. Then he drew over it the heavy curtains of thick, dark stuff that covered it from top to sill.

"As well to have a loophole if things get tight for us," he remarked. "Now we will have a light, Lin. That's it. Turn it on to that bureau, and hold it steady. A bit more cracksman's craft, lad!" And he laughed softly.

It certainly was; and Lin didn't quite like it, though he was, he felt, in the burglary line up to the neck himself now. But he comforted himself with the reflection that they were not actually thieves. They had stolen nothing.

He did not enjoy that scrap of comfort long.

The bureau, a strongly-made affair of stout oak, was provided with patent locks; but these did not resist the peculiar, and to Lin, rather sinister skill of his mysterious employer. He merely applied to the pockets of that remarkable coat, and with sundry queer little implements forced the locks rapidly and silently, one by one.

The desk-like upper part seemed to contain only papers, and from these he made a selection, took notes in his pocket-book, and restored them to the bureau.

That did not trouble Lin. It was when he came to the bottom drawer.

From that Twyford took out two small canvas bags, which gave forth a musical chink as he shook them. One he opened, and the boy saw the now rather unfamiliar English sovereign glisten in his hand.

"Of course, they would need gold to pay their way in this little enterprise; the kind of agents they would have to employ would not look at paper-money," murmured Twyford, as if to himself. "A hundred at

the least in each." He weighed the bags in his hand thoughtfully. "I wonder how they managed to secure such an amount, when more honest men have to be content with dirty, dog-eared 'Fishers'?" He smiled under his mask, and Lin thought his face looked rather evil, shadowed by the black crape. "Yes," he muttered finally; "I think that I will loot these. It may be a wise precaution if——"

And Lin saw him stow away these two bags of gold somewhere in the lining of his coat.

The boy was shocked and indignant. A strong instinct within him had always made him loathe the mere idea of theft. It was strictly true of Lin Fleet that he would rather have died of hunger than stoop to stealing. And here he was being made party to a barefaced robbery! After all, what did he know of this mysterious man? He might be nothing but an extremely clever thief. At any rate, it looked very like it now!

An indignant protest was actually on his lips. But it never passed them.

Twyford, who had returned to the drawer of the bureau and was bending over it, suddenly looked round towards the door of the room. Lin also glanced round sharply, and nearly dropped the lantern with a start.

The door was open, and two men stood there, each with an automatic pistol in his hand.

Stopped at he G ate!

"THE window—quick, Lin! You can get clear away yet!" was Twyford's rapid whisper in the boy's ear.

But Lin did not move. He was not thinking of his own safety just then. The men would fire at Twyford first. He darkened the lantern. That would give a moment's respite.

There was barely that ere a strong light was thrown into the room from the doorway, and the tall man with the great beard appeared behind the others; towering above them with a lighted lamp in his hand, and craning forward into the room, as though he would force his sightless eyes to tell him what was there.

"What is it?" he cried, shaking one of the men roughly by the shoulder. "Speak! Perdition seize you—speak! Tell me what you see there!"

"A thief, Herr Sapt—a masked thief, at the bureau!" answered the man.

"A masked man at the bureau!" exclaimed Sapt. "The papers are there—the names! Thief! He is no thief, but a police-spy! Do not let him get away! Shoot him down! Fire on him! Shoot—shoot, I say!"

The two men covered Twyford with their pistols, but hung upon their aim, as if reluctant to pull trigger. For the supposed burglar, who had backed to the window, fumbling with the curtains as though he meant attempting escape that way, now dropped them and threw his hands above his head. He looked a low-down, half-brutish sort of ruffian, whose pluck had clean oozed out of him, and left him a whining, shrinking cur.

And his coarse, husky voice was well in keeping with his appearance.

"Don't shoot, gents!" he whined. "It's a fair cop. You've got me cornered, an' me 'ands is up! Don't shoot a pore bloke in cold blood!"

"Fire! Shoot him down, I tell you!" roared Sapt.

"Stop! Lower your weapons! You fools! This fuss—and only a common thief, a mere housebreaker!"

It was a woman's voice, but imperious and commanding. And the figure that swept past the men at the door, and interposed between the cringing burglar and the levelled weapons, was slight, but imposing, with queenly dignity, and the air of one having authority and the power to rule. Lin looked at her in wonder and thrilled admiration. All was mystery to him; but this much he knew—that the brave girl was playing a difficult and daring part, and that her brother's life, and perchance her own, hung upon her coolness and strength of nerve.

Failure meant the death of one, or both.

She turned upon Sapt, who now came into the room and placed on the table the lamp he carried.

"I will have no killing here!" she said. "This is not Soviet Russia, Herr Sapt. This is England; and you may not kill a man here, not even a common thief, without involving yourself with the police. And do we want that, now, when our plans are ripe for action?"

The other men showed approval by their looks; but Sapt gave a savage scowl, and growled angrily:

"He is no common thief, but a police-spy—a detective, I tell you! And he has been at the bureau. He has the papers, or has taken notes. Shoot him, one of you! Kill him out of hand!"

The men with the pistols hesitated in perplexity. That slender, queenly figure still stood in the line of fire, covering the supposed thief.

"I tell you I will have no killing here to-night," she said, in that firm, imperious voice. "What! Do you venture to dispute authority with me, Herr Sapt—to question my command in the league? You, who cannot even command yourself! Take care, or I will have the black star placed against your name. And you know what that means!"

Apparently he did, for the vague, mysterious threat seemed to send a slight tremor through his huge frame, and to drive the colour from his rugged cheeks. His tone was less arrogant, though still sullen and fierce, as he said:

"Let the fellow be searched! You will, at least, see the wisdom of that, Madame Otterie?" This with a half-mocking bow in

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Cora's direction. "And if those papers are found upon him, or extracts or notes upon our affairs, you will admit then, I venture to think, that he is no common thief! And then, madame—and then——"

"Why then, Herr Sapt, it will prove that you were right," said the supposed Madame Otterie quietly; "and then, of course, that man cannot be allowed to leave this place alive."

Sapt bowed again. His face flushed, as with coming triumph.

"Ah, that I had my sight again, but for a few minutes!" he sighed. Then aloud, and sharply: "Keep him covered, one of you, whilst the other searches him with the utmost care! A scrap of paper may be hidden anywhere—and one such, however small, will be enough to prove that I, at least, am no fool!"

"Search him," said madame, in cool, even tones. "You, Wetzlar, keep him covered with your weapon whilst Rideau makes the search."

The search was begun. Lin Fleet might have slipped out then by the open door, for so far no one had bestowed more than a passing glance upon him, as though, a mere boy, puppet or tool of the thief or spy, he was of no consequence. But Lin had no thought of flight. He knew that Twyford's life—and probably that of his sister—hung upon the result of that search.

And there was that notebook, filled with jottings from the papers in the bureau, and with sketches and notes taken in the cellar below! And finding of that would seal Twyford's fate. Already, with an imagination feverishly active under the strain of suspense, he could picture the savage triumph of the huge man who leant over the table, one hand clutching its edge as though his fingers were on an enemy's throat, the other tearing at his great, ragged beard, and his face thrust forward, as if he would force his sightless eyes to tell him when the moment of his triumph came!

Lin stole a glance at the supposed Madame Otterie.

Her face was slightly pale, but its expression was that of haughty indifference. However fearful the strain of anxiety in her breast, not a trace was betrayed by her features. There was even a scornful smile curving her red lips. She might have been a mere spectator bored by a scene too stupid for interest or amusement, rather than sister of the man whose life was then at stake!

First the bulky little bags of gold came to light. The man called Rideau, who did the searching, threw them with a clatter on to the table.

"What is that—money?" demanded Sapt.

"The bags of English gold—all of it—taken from the drawer in the bureau!" answered Rideau. "Peste, but he has taken every penny!"

"Oh, the rascal! The dishonourable wretch, to take our money!" cried Madame Otterie, with a hard, scornful laugh. "What! Is there no honour among thieves? Oh, Herr Sapt, think of it—think of it! The rascal has actually stolen money—like a common robber!"

"Curse the money!" growled Sapt, sweeping the bags off the table with his huge hand. "It is nothing. He simply took it for himself, because he found it there. The papers—the papers! Go on with the search!"

Rideau continued his work. It was a queer collection he delved out of the mine-like pockets and hidden recesses of that astonishing coat of the suspected spy. One by one the tools of the burglar's craft were brought out and laid upon the table—Rideau describing each article for Sapt's benefit as best he could.

Madame Otterie suppressed a yawn, and laughingly said, with a motion of her slender white hand towards the array of fantastically-shaped implements on the table:

"So these are the things with which the burglar pursues his gentle craft?" she said. "My faith, he must be a clever man to know the uses of half of them. Herr Sapt, it is a thousand pities that you have not eyes to see, for you may never again be present at the capture of a modern burglar, with all the outfit of his profession upon him."

"Madame forgets that the mouchard—the police-spy—must also know how to pick locks and force doors occasionally," said Sapt, with a bitter grin. "Go on with the search, Rideau! Go over every thread and fibre of his clothing. Ah! What is that you have found?"

"Pouf! A foul old pipe and a tobacco-box," answered Rideau. "No, Herr Sapt, there is nothing in the box but a little of the rankest tobacco. There is not a scrap of paper upon the fellow, or trust me to have found it!"

Lin drew a breath of relief. He had dreaded each moment to see that fatal notebook brought to light!

Madame Otterie crossed to the bureau.

"And meanwhile," she said, "here are the papers that we came down here to examine, reposing undisturbed in this bureau. Suppose, Herr Sapt, that we end this farce and get to the business that brought us here, before we have our friends upstairs trooping down to know why we loiter, when every moment is so precious and the night so short? Come! I will have no more of this! Herr Sapt, take these papers and return to the upper room. Rideau, Wetzler, lead that poor wretch to the house door and let him go. I'll warrant he'll not linger. The boy? Ah—let him follow."

"And the fellow's tools, madame?" inquired Rideau.

"Let him have them. We must not deprive the poor rascal of his means of livelihood! Honour among—er—thieves!" laughed madame, turning to the bureau.

Sapt took the papers she had placed in his hands, then, with a scowl upon his face, went from the room. The supposed burglar was allowed to come to the table and gather up his kit of tools.

(To be continued.)

Printed and Published every Wednesday by the Proprietors, The Amalgamated Press, Limited. The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Subscription Rates: Inland, 11s. per annum. 5s. 6d. for six months. Abroad, 8s. 10d. per annum; 4s. 5d. for six months. Sole Agents for South Africa: The Central News Agency, Limited. Sole Agents for Australia and New Zealand: Messrs. Gordon & Gotch, Limited; and for Canada: The Imperial News Company, Limited.