

THE AMAZING SCHOOLBOY!

A TOPPING STORY
OF SCHOOL LIFE
& FUN AT ST. FRANK'S

INTRODUCING **NELSON LEE, NIPPER,**
SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST,
TOMMY WATSON, HANDFORTH & CO.,

AND

TIMOTHY TUCKER

THE
AMAZING
NEW
BOY.



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THE AMAZING SCHOOLBOY

A TOPPING STORY OF SCHOOL LIFE AND FUN AT ST. FRANK'S

Introducing Nelson Lee, Nipper, Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Tommy Watson, Handforth & Co., and Timothy Tucker, the Amazing New Boy

By the author of "The Honour of St. Frank's,"
"The Master of the Remove," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I. The New Arrival.

Handforth, of the Remove, saw it first.

He was just emerging from the Ancient House, with Church and McClure just behind him. The famous chums of Study D had been having a bit of an argument—by no means an uncommon occurrence—and the lordly Handforth was in a bit of a huff. He was generally in a huff if he failed to get the better of an argument.

"My only hat!" exclaimed Handforth.

He came to a halt, and stared out across the Triangle towards the big gateway. It was a half-holiday, and the afternoon was fine. The Triangle happened to be deserted at the moment—except for the curious-looking specimen which had attracted Handforth's attention.

"Anything the matter?" asked McClure politely.

"I wasn't talking to you, Arnold McClure!" snapped Handforth. "If you can't learn sense, the best thing you can do is to keep quiet! Just because I tried to convince you that I was swindled by old Binks—"

"Oh, don't go over it all again!" interrupted Church, with a sigh. "I thought we'd finished with the argument, Handy. There's no sense in— Great Scott! What's that—that thing over there?"

The three juniors stared out into the Triangle, and they were all rather curious. The object which claimed their attention was certainly of an unusual character. It appeared to be a boy, but he was a most extraordinary looking individual.

His clothing was quite good by the look of it, but it was worn in a most careless manner. A trilby hat was perched on the back of his head, and its original shape had been quite lost. In many respects it would have disgraced any well-meaning scarecrow.

The boy was fairly tall for his age—which seemed to be about fifteen—and the one chief feature about his face was his mouth. This was certainly large in proportion to the rest of his features. His hair was dark, and, strangely enough, a faint wisp of a moustache grew on his upper lip. This would not have been apparent had he been fair-haired.

He wore spectacles which were slightly blue in hue, and his general appearance was so different from the usual run of fellows of his age that Handforth & Co. were quite astonished for the

moment. Moreover, the boy was a newcomer, and Handforth was famous for his curiosity.

"What's that funny merchant doing here?" he demanded warmly. "Like his blessed check, walking into the Triangle as if he owned it!"

"Perhaps he's come to see somebody," suggested Church.

"Well, he's going to see me!" declared Handforth grimly. "Great pip! Mr. Crowell was saying that a new fellow was coming for the Remove this afternoon! It can't be possible that—"

"That?" said McClure, shaking his head. "Oh, out of the question!"

"Of course it is!" agreed Handforth. "Why, we wouldn't have such a thing in the Remove, anyhow—we wouldn't own such a thing!"

Handforth and his chums advanced towards the stranger in a manner which caused the latter to come to a halt. He placed his leather valise on the ground, adjusted his spectacles, and waited.

"Well, what do you think you want here?" demanded Handforth abruptly.

The stranger blinked at the Removites through his spectacles.

"H'm—h'm!" he exclaimed, in a peculiarly high voice. "The position is this, my dear sir—"

"Eh?" said Handforth.

"The position is this—"

"What position?" demanded Handforth. "Can't you speak in proper English, you ass? Have you come here to see somebody, or what? I suppose you know that you're disfiguring the whole landscape with that rotten hat of yours?"

"Is that so?" said the newcomer mildly. "My dear sir—"

"I'm not your dear sir!" roared Handforth. "Who the dickens do you think you're talking to? Have you come here for any particular reason?"

"Exactly—admitted!" said the other. "Admitted, my dear sir. I have come here because I have every reason to believe that for some considerable period I am destined to lodge here."

"Lodge?" said Church, staring.

"Exactly!" exclaimed the new boy. "I intend to live here."

"Do you mean to say that you're the new fellow for the Remove?" gasped Handforth faintly.

"Yes, that is the position," replied the new boy. "The position is this. I regret to say that my pater has thought it necessary to place me in this environment, which, my dear sir, is totally opposed to all my own particular ideals. However, I am not yet in a position to determine my own movements. If such was the case, I should certainly refrain from lodging in a place of this character!"

"Oh, would you?" said Handforth grimly. "Do you know what you're asking for, you—you walking scarecrow?"

"I've not the faintest idea," said the stranger.

"Well, you're looking for a thick ear, and you'll get a pair of beauties, if you don't mind!" said Handforth. "It's like your nerve to come here and run down a fine place like St. Frank's! I don't believe you're a new kid at all! Why, you've actually got a moustache!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Church and McClure.

"Shut up—shut up!" exclaimed the new boy rapidly. "How dare you insult me in this gross manner! My moustache—such as it is—is my misfortune. I refuse to listen to these personal remarks—"

"It doesn't matter whether you refuse or not!" interrupted Handforth. "How old are you?"

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"Fifteen, my dear sir!"

"And what's your name?"

"Tucker—Timothy Tucker," said the new boy.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to see any occasion for such ribald merriment," said Timothy Tucker. "Your manners are even worse than your looks! They are even worse than your looks! Quite so—quite so!"

"Dotty—clean dotty!" murmured McClure.

"The position is this," said Tucker mildly. "I have come here in order to enter the Ancient House. So far I have failed to discover that particular building, and I shall be most gratified if you will give me a few directions. I am a stranger within your gates. Admitted—admitted. I am a stranger within your gates."

"We heard that the first time," said Handforth. "We've had a few queer merchants at St. Frank's, but you're just the limit. I don't see why we should put up with you in the Ancient House. You'd better become a monkey."

"A monkey?" repeated Tucker.

"If you enter the Ancient House you'll be a Fossil!" explained Church. "But if you board over in the College House you'll become a Monk—or a monkey."

"Is that so?" said the new boy. "Most interesting, my dear sir—most interesting! Speaking broadly, I always have been a monkey."

"Exactly!" agreed Handforth promptly. "That's the first sensible thing you've said!"

The new boy nodded.

"Admitted—admitted!" he said. "You, also, are a monkey——"

"Eh?"

"We are all monkeys!" said Timothy Tucker smoothly. "Taking up that line of reasoning, you will agree with my argument. It is only necessary to refer back to the prehistoric era to get at the exact truth of these matters. For example, it is widely admitted that man, in the dim ages of the past, was little better than a mere animal, feeding and living among the trees—he was, in short, an anthropoid ape. Taking that argument as the fundamental basis of our discussion, it is clear that an individual of even your low standard of intelligence will grasp the fact that we humans of to-day are the direct descendants of the apes which roamed the earth in the glacial period——"

But Handforth was not in the exact humour to listen to such a lecture any longer. He came to the conclusion that the time had arrived for action. He also thought it necessary to assert himself without further delay.

Biff!

His right came round, and caught the new boy squarely upon the chin. Master Timothy Tucker reeled back and sat down in a puddle.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed, with a gasp. "That was most unnecessary, my dear sir—most unnecessary. If it is your custom to welcome new boys in this fashion, I will say no more. If, on the other hand, you have dared to lay fingers upon me unnecessarily, I shall be compelled to retaliate!"

"Good!" said Handforth. "Try it on, you—you lunatic!"

The new fellow picked himself up and pushed back his sleeves. Handforth stood ready, grinning. Church and McClure were grinning, too. The very idea of this queer specimen attempting to punch Handforth's nose was quite humorous.

"The position is this," said Tucker. "It will not give me any pleasure to take drastic action, but I regard it as a duty. You understand? I regard it as a duty, my lad. It pains me far

more than it will pain you—but there are some things which one must grin and bear. This, for example!"

Biff!

The new fellow lunged out at Handforth, and the latter, still grinning, put up his hand to ward off the absurd-looking blow. Somehow, Handforth's fist went wide, and the next second some bony knuckles struck him fully upon the nose.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Church and McClure.

Handforth sat down in the same puddle which had just been vacated by the new boy, and the expression of pain and surprise upon his face was certainly comical. And it had been no slip. That lunge of Tucker had been deadly.

"You—you silly ass!" roared Handforth, scrambling up. "I'll—I'll knock you into the middle of next term! If you think you can——"

"Handforth!" exclaimed a stern voice.

Handforth turned abruptly, with a gasp.

"I—I—— Yes, sir?" he spluttered.

"What is the meaning of this, Handforth?" demanded Mr. Crowell, who had come up unseen. "Did I hear you threatening to assault this stranger?"

"I—I—— That is to say——"

"The position is this, my dear sir!" interrupted Tucker. "There is no quarrel between myself and this youth. We were having a slight argument, you understand—merely a slight argument."

"If that is the case, I will say no more!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell.

"I take it that you are a stranger here?"

"Admitted, my dear sir—admitted!" said Tucker, nodding. "I am, in point of fact, a new boy, destined to lodge in the Ancient House."

"Oh!" said Mr. Crowell. "I understand. You are Tucker?"

"That is so, my dear sir—admitted!" said the new boy.

"Well, Tucker, you will come with me, and I will put you through the necessary examination at once," said Mr. Crowell. "You are amid new surroundings, and you are naturally somewhat strange. You will find it necessary to modify your peculiar method of address. I might also mention that your—ahem!—your hat is decidedly disreputable. And from henceforth you will wear the regulation school-cap, which, I fancy, will be far more suitable."

"The position is this——" began the new boy.

"We will discuss the position in the privacy of my study, Tucker," said Mr. Crowell briskly. "Come!"

And Handforth & Co. stared curiously as the latest addition to the Remove accompanied the Form-master into the Ancient House. Master Timothy Tucker was surely the limit in new boys!

CHAPTER II.

Not Quite a Success!

"Clean off his rocker!" said Church. "I've met a few dotty merchants in my time, but this chap takes the cake!"

"He's not quite such an ass as you seem to think," observed McClure. "The way he dotted Handforth on the nose was gorgeous!"

"Eh?" said Handforth, glaring. "It was what?"

"Ahem! It—it was like his giddy nerve, of course!" said McClure hastily. "Still, you must admit he brought it round pretty neatly, Handy!"

"I don't admit anything of the sort!" snapped Handforth. "It was a slip—a mere slip——"

"Don't you get into the habit of saying everything twice—like

that new ass!" interrupted Church. "All he can say is 'admitted,' and 'the position is this.' It strikes me the chap's slightly touched, although he can certainly use his fists."

"Admitted!" said Handforth. "Oh, my hat! I've caught it already! If that chap stops here for a couple of terms we shall all be dotty in the Remove. I can't make out why fellows of that sort can't be sent to an asylum! It's a dirty trick, planting them in a public school!"

By tea-time nearly every fellow in the Remove was acquainted with the fact that the new fellow had arrived. The majority of them had also had the doubtful pleasure of meeting him. He was generally regarded as a mild type of idiot, and the only interesting discovery about him was that he was blessed with a plentiful supply of pocket-money.

He had exposed a considerable number of currency notes, and a handful of small silver. And fellows who had said they would not have him in their study at any price clamoured to be honoured by his company.

However, Mr. Crowell settled the question finally by placing Tucker in Study E, with Reginald Pitt and Jack Grey.

Nipper, the captain of the Remove, was quite pleased with this decision.

"The new kid's a bit queer," he remarked, "and Pitt and Grey can be relied upon not to take advantage of him. Besides, they'll probably mould him into a different shape before long."

Pitt and Grey were not exactly delighted by Mr. Crowell's decision, but as they had no choice in the matter, they made the best of it, and they also made Tucker welcome. He beamed upon them amiably when he was escorted into the study for tea. And he regarded the table with distinct approval.

"H'm—h'm!" he exclaimed, in his strangely high voice. "Quite a pleasing array of edibles, I observe. Well, my dear sir, the position is this—"

"Hold on!" said Pitt, grinning. "Am I dear sir, or is Grey?"

"Both, my dear sir—both!" said Tucker. "The position, as I said before, is this. I wish you to fully understand that I insist upon paying an equal share in the commodities which are supplied to this study. I insist upon taking my share. I cannot undertake to lodge here unless I have that honour."

"That's all right," said Grey. "You needn't worry over that point, my son. After to-day you can share the exs. if you want to—but we're standing this feed, you understand."

"Is that so?" said the new boy. "Your generosity is considerable, my dear sir. I suggest that we commence activities forthwith—for, to be frank, I have tasted no food since this morning, and my hunger is quite in keeping with the liberality of your excellent table."

Tucker behaved himself quite well during tea. Certainly he did not seem to know what he was eating, and Pitt and Grey could hardly be blamed for staring when he partook of sardines and cake at the same moment. He appeared to be in a considerable state of concentration, and he was always absent-minded.

After tea Pitt and Grey went off to attend a cricket meeting in Study C, leaving Tucker alone. And this, apparently, was the opportunity for which Fullwood & Co. had been waiting.

The young rascals of Study A had not met the new boy, so far, but they had heard many stories concerning his supplies of pocket-money. And Fullwood & Co. saw no reason why they should not do a little profitable business.

"It'll be easy!" declared Fullwood. "This chap is a greenhorn! It'll be as simple as pie to wangle some tin out of him. We're all a bit hard up just now, and we could do with some cash."

Gulliver and Bell had no objection, and shortly after Pitt and Grey had departed from Study E. Fullwood & Co. presented themselves. Tucker took no notice of them as they entered. He appeared to be in a brown study.

"Hallo!" said Fullwood genially. "How goes it?"

The new boy looked up.

"Of course, regarding the economic question from a certain standpoint, one would naturally be ready to admit—Eh?" Tucker paused, and came to earth. "Oh, did you say anything?" he asked mildly.

"Just popped in to have a word or two with you," said Fullwood. "New fellows are generally a bit lonely, an' we thought you'd like a chat. I don't believe in bein' down on a chap because he's a new kid."

"Is that so?" said Tucker. "Well, my dear sir, I trust your visit will be brief, since I am engaged at the moment in preparing a speech which I intend to deliver at the first opportunity."

"A speech!" said Gulliver, staring.

"Quite so—quite so!" nodded Tucker. "The position is this—"

"Shut the door!" interrupted Fullwood. "That's right! Now, Tucker, there's no reason why we shouldn't get on well together. We really came here to give you a word of warning."

"Dear me!" said Tucker. "Is that really so?"

"A word of warnin'," repeated Fullwood easily. "You see, in a big school like this there are always tons of fellows ready to take advantage of a new kid. And there are one or two little details you'd probably like to know. We thought you'd be rather keen to take a few hints. It's worth a good bit to a new chap to know the ropes."

Timothy Tucker nodded.

"Admitted—admitted!" he declared. "I quite agree, my dear sir. But what are the ropes you wish me to know? Pitt or Grey said nothing to me on the subject; they said nothing whatever."

"Of course they didn't," agreed Fullwood. "They're too keen for that. Their game is to spoof you. You understand? Well, we've come here to spoil rotten trickery of that kind."

"That is very kind of you—very kind of you," said Tucker mildly. "I had no idea that anybody so generous existed in this school. I shall be most interested to hear your remarks, my dear sir—most interested!"

"Well, to begin with," said Fullwood, "there's just a little matter of the pool. That's one subject."

"The pool?" repeated the new boy.

"Exactly! You've heard about it, of course?"

"I cannot say that I have," replied Tucker. "No my dear sir, I cannot say that I have. The pool? H'm! I am certainly impressed. And what, may I ask, does the pool happen to be?"

"It's queer the other fellows haven't said anythin' to you about it," remarked Fullwood, winking at his chums. "Well, it's our custom in the Remove to pool all our funds. Every junior hands his pocket-money over to a chap who happens to be the treasurer. The treasurer is changed every week, you see. He doles out the cash as the fellows require it."

"Is that so?" said Tucker. "Dear me! It seems to be a remarkable method—a most remarkable method. And what happens if a fellow desires to keep his money in his own pocket?"

Fullwood grinned.

"It can't be done," he said glibly. "No junior is allowed to keep his pocket-money. It isn't the thing at St. Frank's. I happen to be the treasurer for this week—that's why I'm puttin' it to you. What you've got to do is to hand over your cash, and give it to me."

Tucker seemed to be much impressed, and Gulliver and Bell attempted to keep their faces straight. They hardly thought that the unscrupulous trick would work. Even Timothy Tucker was not quite mug enough to fall into such a trap.

"Well," said Fullwood, after a moment, "you're goin' to hand over, I suppose? It's quite the usual custom, an' I'm tellin' you straight away to save you trouble."

The new boy nodded.

"The position is this," he said. "I should really like to have some evidence that you are—— H'm! To be exact, that your words are truthful. I do not wish to offend you——"

"Well, you have offended me!" snapped Fullwood. "If you think you can call me a liar, you're mistaken. Look here! I'll show you my account-book, if you like, and the cash I have in hand."

And Fullwood produced a leather pocket-book with a flourish. He had come prepared to work this version of the "confidence trick" upon Timothy Tucker. In the pages of the pocket-book a number of names had been scrawled, with various small amounts jotted opposite.

"There you are!" said Fullwood. "Perhaps this is good enough for you?"

"This is certainly an impressive document," said the new boy. "Admitted—admitted! And you wish me to add my name, my dear sir?"

"It's not my wish," said Fullwood. "It's simply one of the customs of the school which has to be complied with. There's no gettin' out of it, even if you want to. Here's the cash I have in hand."

Fullwood took four currency notes from his pocket—three pound notes and one for ten shillings. They represented the total resources of Fullwood and his chums—lumped together in order to make an impression. Having exposed them to view, Fullwood slipped them back into his pocket.

"Buck up!" he said. "We can't wait here all the bally evenin'!"

"Admitted!" remarked Tucker. "I agree with you, my dear sir. I shall certainly comply with this regulation—— Dear, dear, dear! My glasses! This is really most distressing! I cannot see properly——"

He broke off, and groped on the floor, his spectacles having slipped from his nose. He bumped against Fullwood, and then banged his head against the table. Handforth was considered to be the clumsiest fellow in the Remove; but Timothy Tucker was far more elephantine in his movements.

"Ah! Good—good!" he murmured, as he replaced the glasses on his nose. "That is better, my dear sir—that is certainly much better. And now you wish me to hand over my cash?"

"Yes," said Fullwood briskly. "Buck up!"

"The position is this," went on the new boy. "I shall need some of this money soon, you know. There are various expenses to be met, and I shall be lost without any cash——"

"That's all right," interrupted Fullwood. "Just come to me, Tucker, when you're hard up. I'm the treasurer."

"Is that so?" said Tucker. "Well, here you are, my dear sir."

He fumbled in his pocket, and produced three crumpled Treasury notes. Gulliver and Bell stared hard as the new boy handed the money over to Fullwood's care. Timothy Tucker was certainly as green as grass.

"Three quid," said Fullwood. "Is that all you've got?"

"I regret that I——"

"All right!" interjected Fullwood hastily. "I'll shove this down in the book, kid. Come on, you chaps!"

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The Nuts bustled out of the study hurriedly—for a reason. They had heard the voices of Reginald Pitt and Jack Grey, and they did not want to explain the nature of their errand to Study E.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Pitt, with a frown, as Fullwood & Co. emerged into the passage. "What have you cads been doing in there? Ragging the new kid, I suppose? If you've—"

"Keep your hair on!" said Fullwood sourly. "We haven't touched the ass! He's off his rocker! He's mad! He can't talk about anything sensible. He seems to think that he's given money to everybody!"

And Fullwood strode down the passage—his intention being, if asked about the money later, to swear that Tucker didn't give him a penny. Gulliver and Bell would back up the lie.

Pitt and Grey entered the study, and found Tucker gazing contemplatively into the fire.

"I say, T. T.!" exclaimed Pitt. "We'll call you T. T., you know—it's shorter than Timothy Tucker. What were those cads doing in here a minute ago? Did they bother you at all?"

"Not in the least," said Tucker. "The position is this, my dear sir. One of the youths requested me to hand over my money—"

"He did what?" roared Pitt angrily.

"Dear me! I hope—"

"That's all right," said Pitt. "Did you fall into the trap, you ass?"

"Shut up—shut up!" exclaimed Tucker. "No insults! How dare you call your elder an ass! I am at least a month older—"

"Oh, chuck it!" said Pitt. "You're a queer card, Tucker. I shall begin to think you're an escaped lunatic, or something! Did you give Fullwood any money?"

"Yes," replied T. T. "I certainly handed Fullwood three pounds."

"Three quid!" ejaculated Grey. "Whew!"

"The position is this," went on the new boy. "Fullwood explained that he was the treasurer of the Remove funds—"

"We'll hear that later," interrupted Pitt. "First of all, we'll recover that tin. The beastly swindler! Come on, Jack!"

They hurried out of the study, leaving Tucker blinking at the door. Meanwhile, Fullwood & Co. had entered the privacy of Study A, and they were all looking pleased with themselves.

"A quid each, anyhow!" said Gulliver. "I expect the ass has a lot more cash, but we haven't done so bad. If there's any inquiry about this we'll pretend to know nothing."

"That's the idea!" agreed Fullwood. "We'll say that Tucker is dotty, an' deny that we touched a bally farthin'. Now, let us see. I've got a quid of yours, Bell, an' ten bob of Gully's."

"That's right," said Gulliver. "I shall have thirty bob now, Bell will have two quid, an' you three quid, Fully. We shall be all right until the end of the week. Hand over the cash!"

Fullwood dived his hand into his side-pocket, grinning amiably. But as he felt about with his fingers his smile vanished, and a somewhat puzzled expression found a place on his face.

"That's queer!" he exclaimed. "I can't find— By gad!"

He withdrew his hand, and it contained a single currency note to the value of ten shillings. Fullwood gazed at it rather blankly as he continued to fumble in his pocket.

"What about the other three?" asked Gulliver.

"They're not here!"

"Not there?" said Bell. "Rot!"

"I tell you— By gad!" Fullwood paused and caught his breath in, and a sudden scowl appeared on his unpleasant features.

"What's the matter?" asked Gulliver.

"The matter!" snarled Fullwood. "We've been tricked—diddled!"

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"Tricked!" gasped Bell.

"Yes!" snorted Fullwood savagely. "Don't you remember how he dropped his glasses? Don't you remember how he bumped into me? Well, he must have lifted three quid out of my pocket!"

"Great Scott!"

"An'-an' then he gave us that three quid——"

Fullwood paused, too overcome to say anything further at the moment. It seemed almost impossible that Timothy Tucker had actually played such an astute trick upon the rascals of the Remove. They had demanded his pocket-money, and he had given them their own!

And just then the door burst open and Pitt and Grey entered.

"You burglars!" shouted Pitt, hotly. "You wangled three quid out of that new kid, and you've got to dub up, or——"

"You silly fool!" howled Fullwood. "We haven't got a farthing out of him!"

"He said he'd given you three quid——"

"So he did, but he pinched it out of my pocket first!" yelled Fullwood. "The thieving cad! He pinched three notes out of my pocket, an' gave 'em to me as if they were his own——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Reginald Pitt and Jack Grey howled. The humour of the situation struck them very forcibly, and they retired from Study A in doubled-up positions. And their opinion of T. T. rose considerably.

But, somehow, Fullwood & Co. were not capable of appreciating the point of the joke.

CHAPTER III.

A Lunatic at Large.

"The chap is certainly peculiar in his ways," admitted Nipper. "He may be a bit dotty, but there's not much wrong with him in the main. Pitt seems to think he's as keen as mustard."

"Well, dear old boy, Tucker undoubtedly left Fullwood & Co. in the cart," observed Sir Montie Tregellis-West urbanely. "Begad! It was frightfully rich, judgin' by what Pitt told us."

Nipper and Tommy Watson chuckled. The chums of Study C were on their way to the village in order to purchase a few supplies. They had not come into contact with Tucker to any large degree, but they agreed with the rest of the fellows in the Remove that T. T. was a remarkable specimen.

"Hallo! Who's this?" said Watson curiously.

A form was looming up out of the gloom, and Nipper & Co. soon saw that the figure was that of a stranger, a boy of about fifteen, attired in a black overcoat and a bowler hat. He paused uncertainly as the three Removites came up.

"Stranger here, aren't you?" asked Watson bluntly. "If we can be of any service to you, my son, we'll willingly oblige. Do you happen to be looking for St. Frank's?"

"Yes, I'm looking for St. Frank's," said the boy, rather nervously.

"I suppose you're a second Timothy Tucker?" grinned Watson.

The boy nodded.

"That is my name," he agreed. "I am Timothy Tucker."

"What!" yelled Tommy.

"Begad!"

"Tucker!" echoed Nipper. "You say your name's Tucker?"

"Yes."

"And you're looking for St. Frank's?"

"Yes."

"Are you the new kid that's expected to-day?" yelled Watson.

"Are you the new chap that's booked for the Remove?"

"Yes, of course!" snapped the boy sourly. "There's no need for you to shout like that. I object to being bullied! I won't stand it! My name's Tucker, and I'm the new boy for St. Frank's!"

He walked on, apparently in a bit of a huff, and Nipper & Co. stared at one another in the gloom with rather blank expressions.

"Well, I'm dashed!" said Watson. "We've been spoofed!"

"Dear old fellow, it certainly looks like it," observed Sir Montie.

"Spoofed clean!" put in Nipper. "That chap at the school isn't Tucker at all! He's some funny merchant trying to jape us, I expect. I shouldn't be surprised if he's one of those River House chaps, made-up for the occasion. Anyhow, we'll buzz down to the village quickly, and get back in time to see the fun. I must get those letters in for the post."

They hurried down towards the village, and they were determined to give the spurious Timothy Tucker a hot time when they got back. There could not be two new boys of that name, and it was obvious that the first arrival was either a harmless idiot or a practical joker.

Just outside the post-office the three Remove chums noticed officers, and the juniors would have entered the post-office without taking any further notice, but they were hailed.

"Just a minute, young gents!" said one of the uniformed men. Nipper & Co. approached.

"Anything wrong?" asked Nipper.

"I suppose you don't happen to have seen a boy of about your own age knocking about this district—a rather dark youngster, with queer-looking eyes?" asked one of the men. "We're keepers from the Helmford Lunatic Asylum——"

"What!" shouted Nipper.

"Do you know something, sir?" asked the keeper quickly.

"Well, I believe so," replied Nipper. "A new fellow came up to the school this afternoon, wearing glasses, and he's made everybody think he's a bit touched in the upper story. Says his name's Timothy Tucker."

"I'm afraid he's not our boy, sir," said the keeper, shaking his head. "I was speaking to another lad a few minutes ago, and he says that this Tucker was expected by the masters——"

"Yes; but the real Tucker has just arrived," interrupted Nipper. "We found him near the school not ten minutes ago. So the other chap with the dotty ways must be that cheerful lunatic of yours."

The keeper slapped his thigh.

"By gum! I dare say you're right, sir!" he exclaimed. "The glasses are nothing; that youngster is rare cunning. He escaped early this morning, and we've been chasing about all day. He's a bit dangerous, too."

"Dangerous!" said Watson.

"Ah, that he is!" said the keeper. "When he gets excited there's no telling what he'll be up to. We'd better come along with you boys now, if you don't mind. I'll be real thankful if you've led us on the right track."

They all hurried up to the school, Nipper & Co. quite animated. Timothy Tucker had struck everybody as being somewhat dotty, but nobody had believed him to be a dangerous lunatic. He was too cheerful to be regarded in that light.

At the school Nipper led the way straight into the Ancient House. Handforth & Co. and a good few others were chatting excitedly in the lobby. Handforth turned as he heard the steps of the newcomers.

"Heard the latest?" shouted Handy. "There's another lunatic arrived!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"A chap's come calling himself Tucker," said Handforth. "We can't understand——"

"You'll understand soon," said Nipper briskly. "The second chap is the genuine article, right enough. He didn't strike us as being dotty, and everybody can tell that the first fellow is off his rocker!"

"Of course," said Handforth. "That's what I reckoned."

"Where is he, anyhow?" asked Nipper. "The cheerful lunatic, I mean."

"In Study E, I suppose," said Handy. "The second one went straight off to Mr. Crowell, and I think he's in Mr. Crowell's study now."

"That's all right, then!" exclaimed Nipper briskly. "This way."

The two keepers strode into the study, and Timothy Tucker regarded them serenely, without any tendency to become violent. One of the keepers laughed.

"I think there's a little mistake, sir," he said. "This young gentleman is not the boy we're looking for."

"Not the lunatic?" shouted Watson.

"How dare you!" exclaimed Tucker. "Shut up—shut up! No insults, my lad! Do you dare to insinuate that I am insane? You had better understand, my dear sir, that I shall put you through a course of disciplinary treatment——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The position is this," went on Tucker, with dignity. "You had better realise that I was deep in thought when you broke in upon me. Admitted."

The fellows cleared away from the doorway, chuckling. And at that moment the sounds of a commotion were heard. And the juniors were startled to see a somewhat wild-looking youth dashing along the passage, with Mr. Crowell in full pursuit.

"Stop that boy!" shouted the Form-master hoarsely. "He actually had the audacity to fly at me—to fly at me like a young tiger! Stop him, I say!"

There was not much difficulty in this, for the boy ran right into the arms of the two keepers, who succeeded in holding him tight, in spite of his violent struggles.

"Yes, this is the lad" said one of the men grimly. "You've given us a fine outing to-day, Robert, my boy. No, it's no good struggling; you won't get away. You've got to come home to your nice little bed!"

And the unfortunate youngster was led away.

"But I don't understand," said Watson, afterwards. "The chap told us his name was Tucker, and that he was booked for the Remove."

"No, he didn't," said Nipper. "We asked him questions, and he agreed with us, that's all. Lunatics generally do that, you know."

"Well, old boys, I must acknowledge that I am quite astonished!" exclaimed Sir Montie. "I was ready to back anythin' that the real T. T. was the lunatic. He is certainly an extraordinary specimen of humanity."

CHAPTER IV.

Very Humorous!

Timothy Tucker, the new boy in the Remove Form at St. Frank's, walked slowly and thoughtfully along the towing-path beside the River Stowe. His hands were clasped behind him, and he seemed to be far away in dreamland.

At all events, at the bend of the river he was on the point of walking gracefully into the water when he pulled himself up with a start. Had the bank been sheer he would have plunged in; but it sloped somewhat, and T. T. was warned in the nick of time.

Practically everybody in the Remove knew Tucker as "T. T." by this time. He was such a queer specimen that he deserved a queer nickname.

It was a half-holiday, and as the afternoon was extremely fine the majority of the juniors were out and about—some cycling, some playing cricket on Little Side, and others taking walks.

Tucker continued his stroll along the towing-path. As he progressed he occasionally drove his right fist into his left palm, as though ramming a point home. He seemed to be preparing a speech, or something of that kind. At all events, he did not act as any other junior would act.

"The position is this—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Timothy Tucker looked up with a start.

He had not been aware of it until that moment, but three Removites were standing on the landing-stage, near the school boathouse. Tucker had practically reached the spot, and he saw that the three juniors were Handforth and Church and McClure, of the Ancient House.

"Admitted!" grinned Handforth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors were apparently amusing themselves by repeating the expressions which were already famous in the Remove. T. T. seemed to have a set of particular phrases, which he trotted out on every occasion.

"H'm! H'm!" he exclaimed, blinking at Handforth & Co. through his blue-tinted spectacles. "I must admit that I am impressed. Quite so!"

"What's the idea?" asked Handforth.

"The position is this—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to see the reason for laughter," exclaimed Tucker mildly. "The position is this, my dear sir. I was hoping to obtain peace and solitude, in order to think out the great problem— H'm! H'm!"

"That's a jolly queer problem!" remarked McClure. "You didn't come out to admire the scenery, I suppose?"

"No, my dear sir, I cannot say that I did!" said Tucker. "I cannot say that I did. Admitted—admitted! At the same time, I must remark that the scene impresses me, now that I give it the attention it undoubtedly deserves."

"Did you notice that sheet of ice just round the bend?" asked Church.

"The sheet of ice, my dear sir?"

"Yes. Didn't you notice it?"

"H'm! Let me think," said T. T. "Let me think. It is quite possible that I noticed the ice—quite possible. In fact, there is no doubt whatever that I actually did notice the ice—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Handforth & Co.

"Really—"

"You silly, absent-minded ass!" yelled Church. "There's no ice anywhere—it hasn't been freezing for months—not this season, in fact! Not freezing enough to form ice on the river, anyhow. I only said it to pull your silly leg!"

Tucker looked at Church severely.

"You'd better continue your walk in search of sheets of ice," suggested Church. "You wouldn't think this river was only three inches deep, would you?"

Tucker looked astonished.

"Is that so?" he said mildly. "Three inches! Dear me! How extraordinary—how extraordinary! Only three inches! To look at it I should certainly imagine it was somewhat deeper!"

Handforth & Co. howled.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It is the easiest thing in the world to pull your leg, T. T.!" chuckled McClure. "You believe everything that's said. One of these days you'll come an awful cropper if you're not careful. You mustn't believe what everybody tells you."

"Admitted—admitted, my dear sir!" said Tucker. "I am beginning to gain a keener insight into human nature. Since my arrival at St. Frank's I have come to the conclusion that boys are terribly deceitful. It is astonishing how cunning you youngsters can be—"

"Youngsters!" snorted Handforth. "I'm as old as you are!"

"Admitted!" said T. T. "In years, my dear sir—in years. But in knowledge you are a mere infant. In knowledge you are a mere infant. Allow me to inform you that your face sends a cold shiver down my spine—"

"Does it?" roared Handforth. "Perhaps that'll send a cold shiver down yours!"

Handforth lunged out, with the genial intention of sending Tucker flying. But the new boy wasn't there when the blow arrived; he had dodged neatly. Handforth, carried forward by his own rush, toppled over, and finished up with his head and shoulders overhanging the river bank.

"Great pip!" he gasped. "I nearly went in!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Church. "Ahem! I—I mean—"

"Collar the ass!" yelled Handforth. "I'm going to smash him!"

"Rats!" said McClure. "You can't blame him for dodging. I suppose. Let's get that boat out, and go for a row. I can see a crowd of other chaps coming, and they'll pinch all the boats if we're not careful."

Handforth picked himself up, and glared at T. T.

"Well, as a matter of fact, he's not worth bothering about," he said loftily. "He's only a harmless lunatic."

"Admitted, my dear sir!" said Tucker absently. "That is to say—H'm! Yes, quite so!"

"Glad to think you know it!" grinned Church.

The chums of Study D entered the boathouse, and soon reappeared carrying a neat little boat, which they dropped into the water. De Valerie and Somerton and Hart came along just then, whistling cheerfully.

"Going for a row, T. T.?" asked Hart, grinning.

"Well, the position is this," said Tucker. "As a matter of fact I was not thinking of going for a row, my dear sir. I was thinking of something far more important. Rowing undoubtedly is an excellent exercise."

"Fat lot you know about rowing!" said Handforth, with a sniff.

"I'll bet you couldn't row across a ditch!"

"Is that so?" said the new boy. "Possibly you are right, my dear sir—possibly you are right. But one is always ready to learn. However, it is just possible that I may be able to row—it is just possible. Exactly."

"Perhaps you'd like to have a try now?" suggested Church.

"The position is this—" began T. T.

"I'll tell you what!" interrupted Handforth. "Let's push the ass into the boat, and send him out into the current. I'll bet he'll drift away until he's rescued. Why, he couldn't manage a toy!"

Timothy Tucker, in spite of his protests, was hustled on to the jetty. He seemed to be quite alarmed. But his protests made no difference. He was pushed into the boat forcibly, and he sat down with his back to the stern.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors gave the boat a huge shove, and it surged out into the stream. Tucker floundered about wildly, turned round, and then slithered to the edge. His foot rose in the air, the boat heeled over, and the next second T. T. was in the water, and the boat was bottom upwards.

"Good heavens!" shouted Hart hoarsely.

"You—you ass, Handy!" gasped McClure. "The chap might drown!"

"We must get out another boat—quick!" shouted Handforth frantically.

They rushed into the boathouse, and another craft was pushed into the water at lightning speed. But this time Tucker had appeared, and he was floundering towards the bank, apparently quite unharmed.

It was not necessary to rescue him, for he stalked out of the water with quite a show of dignity.

"The position is this!" he exclaimed, with chattering teeth. "I shall find it necessary to run indoors, in order to change. Handforth, allow me to tell you that you are a rotter. Allow me to tell you that you are a rotter. You appear to think that I am unable to row—"

"Why, you dummy, you don't know a thing about rowing!" snapped Handforth. "Giving me a fright like that! I thought you were drowning, or something. I'd row a two-mile race with you any day, and give you a mile as a present!"

Tucker nodded.

"Is that so?" he exclaimed. "You surprise me, my dear sir! I am quite willing to accept that challenge."

"What?"

"Furthermore, I will accept it on my own terms," said Tucker.

"There is no reason why it should be unequal. We will start at the post, Handforth—both of us—both of us. It is arranged."

"You—you row a race with me—two miles?" demanded Handforth.

"That is so," said Tucker.

"You—you fat-headed ass!" exclaimed Handforth. "It'll simply be a farce!"

"If you stand there jawing you'll die of pneumonia within a week!" put in Hart sharply. "You'll catch a terrible cold if you don't rush about and keep your circulation going!"

"Admitted, my dear sir!" said T. T. "I will lose no time!"

And, assisted by Handforth & Co., Timothy Tucker hastened away towards St. Frank's.

CHAPTER V.

Fullwood's Sporting Offer.

"Rot!" said Reginald Pitt.

"But it's a fact, my dear chap!" exclaimed Hart. "Tucker has actually accepted the challenge, and Handy only made it in fun. Of course, they're both duffers, but Tucker is hopeless."

"I should think so, too," said Pitt. "He's about the last fellow in the world to row a boat."

"You'd be more ready to say that if you'd seen him," said Hart. "Why, he doesn't know a thing! I don't suppose the race will go for more than ten yards. It'll be a farce all through."

"I don't suppose it'll come to anything at all," remarked Pitt, smiling. "It's a lucky thing Tucker got out of the water safely. He seems to be all right, too. Does the House matron know?"

"No," replied the other junior. "Tucker wouldn't let us tell her. He said he doesn't want to be kept in bed for the rest of the day; and I don't blame him, either."

There was considerable amusement in the Remove over the affair. Timothy Tucker was unharmed by his ducking; he hadn't even caught a cold. And when Handforth told the story of Tucker's "handling" of the boat, the juniors roared. They knew that T. T. was useless, in any case. He was about the last fellow in the world to know anything about sport.

"But it can't be serious, surely?" said Nipper, the Remove captain. "You don't mean to tell me that Tucker has really accepted Handforth's dotty challenge?"

"That's what everybody is sayin', dear old boy," said Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "It seems positively absurd, I know. But there you are. These chaps will do ridiculous things."

Fullwood & Co., the Nuts of the Remove, were grinning to themselves. Fullwood was quite keen about the race, and Gulliver and Bell were amused.

"I'll give you ten-to-one on Handforth," said Fullwood. "Handy's my favourite, my sons! I'll lay ten shillings to a bob that Handy wins! Any takers?"

Gulliver grinned.

"Not likely!" he said. "I'm backin' Handforth, too!"

"Who'll have a little flutter?" said Fullwood, going into the crowd. "Look here, I fancy Handforth for this race. I'm willin' to put down five quid to five bob that Handy romps home. That's a sportin' offer—a twenty-to-one chance!"

"No takers, thanks!" said Merrell.

"Not likely," said Marriott. "Handy's a dead cert."

"The best thing you can do, Fullwood, is to stop acting the fool!" said Nipper sharply. "If you want to do any betting, do it among your own precious pals, not in the Common-room."

"Oh, rats!" said Fullwood. "There's no harm in havin' a little flutter—but there isn't any sportsmen among you. That's the only trouble!"

"Our money's safer in our pockets, thanks!" chuckled Bell. "A twenty-to-one chance is all very well when there's a likelihood of clickin'. But I'm not anxious to lose five bob!"

"But I stand a chance of losin' five quid!" said Fullwood.

"Oh, yes—a fat chance!" exclaimed Gulliver. "About one in five million!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I must acknowledge that I am greatly impressed," said Tucker.

"Your faith in me is remarkable. It is quite remarkable. However, betting is a bad business, and we must say no more!"

The juniors did say some more, however, and there were quite a few laughs during the evening. By bed-time it was generally believed that in the morning the contest would be called off.

Some of the fellows believed that Handforth would decline to continue with the absurdity. But this was not likely. Handy was always ready to obtain a little glory—even if it happened to be cheap.

At bed-time Tucker was clipped somewhat, but he took it all in good part. It was quite impossible to upset him. Many juniors had attempted to do so, just out of sheer devilment. But Timothy Tucker was a boy who apparently had no temper. Nobody could "get his rag out."

Nipper was one of the first to get to sleep in the Remove dormitory. He had the knack of going to sleep when he liked; and the voices of the other juniors had no effect upon him.

It seemed only a short while, however, before he was awake again.

He glanced up at the windows, and saw that the moon was shining brightly through the clear glass. By this fact he knew that an hour or two had elapsed, for the moon had only just been rising at ten o'clock.

Nipper judged the time to be about midnight, and for a moment or two he wondered what had caused him to awaken.

Then he ceased to wonder.

Somebody was moving about in the dormitory.

Nipper was about to speak when the figure moved into the moonlight for a moment, and Nipper saw that it was Timothy Tucker. The new junior was dressing as rapidly as possible.

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

The school clock chimed the hour of midnight just then, and Nipper wondered still more. What on earth was T. T. doing? Why was he dressing at the witching hour of midnight?

Obviously, he was contemplating breaking bounds. For such a mild and meek junior to venture forth in the dead of night was astonishing. Nipper could hardly believe that Tucker's errand was a disgraceful one. He was not the kind of junior to follow Fullwood's example and go out "on the spree."

Nipper was rather anxious about Tucker, and he decided that he would venture out immediately after the new boy had gone. It wasn't Nipper's nature to pry, but he certainly wanted to prevent Tucker getting into mischief.

It struck him that one of the other fellows might have prevailed upon T. T.'s simple nature. If so, Nipper would nip the scheme in the bud. Tucker had plenty of money, and it was quite on the cards that some greedy junior was after it.

Fullwood & Co. were all sleeping, so they were not the culprits. Tucker slipped to the door, and silently passed out on to the landing. Nipper was out of bed in a second, and he shook Tregellis-West's shoulder.

"Begad!" muttered Sir Montie. "What the—"

"Get up—quick!" murmured Nipper. "There's work on hand, Montie!"

Sir Montie sat up.

"But, dear old boy——"

"It's midnight—Tucker's just gone out!" breathed Nipper. "We're going to follow him, and see what his game is. Understand? No questions, Montie—get your clothes on like lightning!"

Tregellis-West, for all his dandified nature, could dress as quickly as anybody when he liked. And he knew when a matter was urgent. He threw his clothes on at lightning speed, and even raced Nipper.

"Ready, old boy?" he asked.

"Yes," said Nipper. "Good man! I didn't think you'd——"

"When the matter is important, dear fellow, I always act swiftly," said Tregellis-West. "Are you coming?"

"Yes," said Nipper briskly. "This way!"

They tiptoed to the dormitory door, and slipped out into the corridor. There they paused for a couple of moments to slip their boots on. They were just against a window, and Nipper uttered a low exclamation as he glanced out into the bright moonlight.

"There he goes," he murmured softly.

"Eh?"

"Tucker—look!" breathed Nipper.

Montie looked. T. T. was out in the Triangle. The new fellow was making his way towards the gate which led into the playing-fields. He was moving cautiously, and there was no mistaking his direction.

"Dear fellow, where is he goin'?" asked Sir Montie.

"Blessed if I know!" said Nipper. "The pavilion, perhaps. Anyhow, it's lucky we spotted the ass. We can nip down, and dodge across the Triangle in no time. We're bound to see him again in this moonlight!"

They lost no time in getting downstairs.

Entering Study C, they quickly crossed over and emerged into

the Triangle by means of the window. They had seen Tucker's direction clearly—he had been making for the playing-fields. But they had no idea of his ultimate destination; they could not imagine why Timothy was prowling about after midnight.

"Keep to the shadow as much as possible," advised Nipper softly.

They hurried along near the Ancient House wall, but were then obliged to cut across a patch of bright moonlight. However, they reached the gate without any alarm being heard, and stared across Little Side.

Right on the opposite portion of the big field a form could be seen moving. It disappeared behind a clump of trees.

"Seems that he's making for the towing-path," said Nipper. "What's the idea, I wonder? Surely the ass isn't thinking about having a moonlight bathe? The weather's a bit too cold for that kind of pastime!"

They hurried across Little Side, both rather puzzled. The night was certainly a perfect one—clear, brilliant with moonlight, and still. There was more than a touch of frost in the air.

Arriving on the towing-path, Tucker's pursuers spotted their quarry walking briskly along in the distance. He certainly had no idea that he was being shadowed, and he seemed to be walking along with a set purpose in mind.

At last he arrived at the boathouse, and, to the surprise of Nipper and Sir Montie, he opened the door and entered. The two juniors halted, and took cover behind a clump of bushes near by.

Nipper uttered a low chuckle.

"I've got it!" he murmured.

"Eh?" said Montie. "You've got what, old boy?"

"Don't you see the idea?" grinned Nipper. "Tucker's trying to steal a march on old Handy. That's the wheeze, as sure as a gun. He's out for a bit of practice—all on his own!"

"Begad!" grinned Montie. "So there's nothin' frightfully excitin', after all! Perhaps we'd better get back to bed, dear fellow!"

"It'll be just as well to stop here and keep our eyes on this giddy lunatic," remarked Nipper softly. "Don't forget what happened to him before. He might fall into the water again—and we might as well be on the spot to yank him out!"

"Perhaps you're right, dear fellow!"

A minute later Timothy Tucker appeared with a light rowing-boat. He pulled it down the little slipway into the water. Then he slipped aboard and pushed off. Nipper and Tregellis-West watched him with interest.

And they were considerably astonished when they saw T. T. ship his oars, and row away up-river with quite commendable skill. There was very little splashing, and the rowlocks were almost silent.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" muttered Nipper. "The ass can row, after all!"

"An' he can row decently, too," said Sir Montie mildly.

The two juniors realised that Tucker had had no chance during the afternoon; he had been pitched into the boat by Handforth, and had floundered about helplessly. Because of this, the onlookers had assumed that T. T. was useless.

Certainly, Tucker had stated that he could row, but the juniors had not believed him. His acceptance of Handforth's challenge was regarded as farcical. Nipper and Montie now knew that T. T. was a bit of a dark horse.

He was obviously out for practice—a perfectly fair procedure. There had been no conditions in the challenge, and Tucker was quite within his rights in putting in an hour on the river.

"The artful bounder!" whispered Nipper. "No wonder he took old Handy on, and refused to accept the mile start! He'll beat Handforth to fits! Look at him! He's rowing splendidly!"

Tucker certainly was. He did not proceed far up the river, but turned soon and came back. It was his intention, apparently, to practice up and down the wide stretch of water opposite the boathouse.

He was not exactly an expert—Nipper himself could have shown Tucker how to row in earnest—but at the same time he was far from being a duffer. He could handle a boat, and he could pull well.

Nipper chuckled again as he and Montie watched.

"My son," he breathed, "that race will be worth watching tomorrow!"

"Begad! It will!" said Tregellis-West.

CHAPTER VI.

Twenty-to-One Against Tucker.

"Any takers?" asked Fullwood genially.

"Eh?"

"Twenty-to-one, that's what I'm offerin'!" said Fullwood. "Who'll take me on? Twenty-to-one against Tucker is my price. Five quid to five shillings!"

"Oh, don't be funny!" said Gulliver. "You won't find anybody to accept, Fully. It's a dead cert win for Handforth. He simply couldn't lose——"

"I don't want any of your beastly betting," interrupted Handforth grimly. "Everybody knows that I shall win, but that doesn't make any difference. Betting's a rotten game!"

The Remove was dressing, the rising-bell having dinned out its unwelcome song five minutes earlier. Nipper and Tregellis-West had told nobody of their little expedition. And Timothy Tucker himself was getting dressed with his usual careless manner. He didn't seem to mind how he attired himself as long as he got his clothes on. He took no pride in his personal appearance.

"Feeling fit, old son?" grinned De Valerie.

Timothy Tucker looked up.

"The position is this," he said. "Handforth and I will row the race very shortly, and I do not think there is any advantage in discussing it beforehand. The winner will be the best man."

"There won't be any winner!" put in McClure.

"Is that so?" put in T. T. mildly. "Are you suggesting a draw, my dear sir?"

McClure yelled.

"A draw!" he shouted. "You dotty ass! There won't be any race! You'll fall out of the boat after you've gone ten yards up the river!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

T. T. did not seem to be at all offended. Nipper and Sir Montie chuckled to themselves with great enjoyment. It would please them greatly to see the new boy win the race, for he certainly deserved it after the ridicule he had received.

Quite a crowd of juniors went down to the riverside. The sun was shining with unusual brilliance, and there could not have been a better morning for the event.

"Buck up!" said Pitt briskly. "It'll be all over within two minutes, I suppose. It's up to you, Handy, to show us what real rowing is like. If you win by half a length the Remove will be proud of you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You ass!" said Handforth, with a snort. "I shall win by two miles!"

"That means to say that Tucker will stay at the post all the giddy time!" grinned Hart. "I expect he'll manage to flounder a yard or two."

Everybody grinned, and the proceedings were not taken at all seriously, except by the competitors. Handforth was serious because he was determined to show the Remove something in the rowing line. And T. T. was equally determined to do precisely the same thing.

Ralph Leslie Fullwood was evidently trying to secure the five shillings.

"It's the last chance!" he said. "Twenty-to-one on Handforth! Who'll be a sportsman? Five quid to five bob! It's not much risk!"

Nipper, who was standing by, nudged Sir Montie.

"Just a minute, old son!" he said softly. "I'll have a chat with Fully."

Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson were rather surprised, but they followed their leader over to Fullwood's side. It happened that they were by themselves at the moment; no other fellow stood near by, with the exception of Gulliver and Bell.

"Twenty-to-one, did you say?" asked Nipper smoothly. "You'll bet five pounds to five shillings that Tucker loses the race?"

"Yes," said Fullwood; "but you can mind your own business. Bettin' doesn't interest goody-goody chaps of your sort—"

"Well, this interests me," said Nipper grimly. "I'm willing to take you on."

Fullwood & Co. stared.

"What!" exclaimed Fullwood blankly.

"I'll accept that bet of yours," said Nipper.

"Begad!" breathed Montie, horrified. "You must be mad, dear boy—"

"Leave this to me, Montie!" interrupted Nipper. "Here's my five bob, Fullwood, and I want to see your five quid. We'll get somebody to hold the stakes."

Fullwood couldn't quite understand it.

"I suppose you're bluffin'?" he sneered.

"I'm quite serious," said Nipper.

"Good! I'm always pleased to see a convert!" exclaimed Fullwood briskly. "I suppose you've been tempted by the long price I'm offerin'?"

"You'll lose your five bob, you ass!" grinned Bell.

"Dry up!" exclaimed Fullwood. "I'm jolly pleased to see that Nipper is comin' round to sportin' views. I say, Merrell!"

Merrell, of the Remove, looked round and strolled up.

"Just a little bet," exclaimed Fullwood. "We want you to hold the stakes."

Merrell was handed Nipper's five shillings and Fullwood's five currency notes. He received them with some astonishment. It was certainly an extraordinary thing for Nipper to indulge in betting.

"That's all right!" said Nipper, with a nod. "Don't jaw about it, you know; just keep it quiet. There's no reason why everybody should be told."

"Trust us!" said Fullwood. "Good for you, Nipper! I didn't think you were such a sport. After this you won't be able to grumble at me any more for bettin' on horses, because this amounts to the same thing."

Fullwood & Co. strolled off, quite pleased with themselves. And Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West seized Nipper firmly, and glared at him.

"You awful ass!" said Watson wrathfully. "You must be mad! What do you mean by taking on Fullwood's rotten bet?"

Nipper was quite calm.

"It's all right, my children!" he said. "I'm not mad, and I'm not a blackguard. Just leave it to your uncle, and everything will be all serene. Hallo! They're just on the point of getting off."

Sir Montie and Tommy had no further time to argue the point, for the competitors in the race were already in their boats, and Pitt, who was acting as starter, was getting ready to give the word. The bank was lined with grinning juniors.

Handforth was looking quite serious, and T. T. seemed as absent-minded as ever. Somebody predicted that he would row in the opposite direction when the word was given to start.

But this was not the case.

"Go!" roared Pitt. "On the ball, T. T.!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth commenced pulling strongly, but nobody watched him. All eyes were upon Timothy Tucker—all eyes were waiting to see him flounder about, and finally come to grief. But the onlookers received a bit of a surprise, for Tucker started off in fine form, and rowed cleanly and energetically.

"Great Scott!" yelled Pitt. "Look at him! He can row!"

"My hat!" said McClure blankly.

"Eh? What's that?" gasped Fullwood, with a peculiar expression on his face. "I thought Tucker was hopeless—By gad! Look at him! He's rowin' as strongly as Handy! It's a rotten swindle—"

Fullwood broke off and watched the competitors with great anxiety. His supply of cash was at stake, and he realised, with an abrupt shock, that there was a possibility of the bet being lost.

Handforth was as surprised as anybody. He had reckoned upon having an easy row up the river. But, to his dismay, Tucker remained alongside, and was rowing strongly and with determination.

The fellows on the bank ran along the towing-path in a crowd, keeping pace with the boats. They were all very much surprised, but quite delighted, too. They suddenly came to the conclusion that the race was not a farce, after all, but a serious business.

Handforth was quite certain of this after five minutes had elapsed. There was no doubt in his mind whatever, for T. T. was leading. Tucker was actually a length ahead!

Handforth put all he knew into his rowing, and that did not amount to a great deal. He was not exactly a duffer, but he was certainly not an expert. Tucker was probably the more skilled of the two, for he dipped his oars with greater precision, and far more cleanly. But he lacked Handforth's great strength, and the chances were about equal.

After the course had been half completed, Handforth was leading again, owing to bulldog strength and determination. But T. T. was now on his mettle, and he was putting every ounce of his skill into his task.

Foot by foot he crept up, and half a mile from the winning-post, which happened to be a peculiarly-shaped willow-tree—he was rowing abreast. For some few hundred feet the two boats remained in the same position.

And then Tucker edged a foot or two ahead. His lead increased, in spite of all Handforth's endeavours, and at last T. T. swept past the winning-post, leading by a clear length.

The duffer of St. Frank's had won, and a roar went up.

"Hurrah!"

"Good old T. T.!"

Merrell, of the Remove, grinned as six juniors approached him at the double in groups of three. Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell were

the first to reach Merrell's side. Nipper & Co. came up a second later.

"Hand over that five of mine!" panted Fullwood breathlessly.

"It's Nipper's!" said Merrell. "You've lost, Fully!"

"Rot! I wasn't serious——"

"Yes, you were!" interrupted Nipper.

"Dash it all, he's right, Fully!" said Merrell.

"I don't care whether he's right or wrong!" snarled Fullwood.

"I'm not goin' to lose five quid like that! Nipper doesn't believe in bettin'. He's grumbled at me scores of times. Give that money to me, you fool!"

But Merrell had handed the stakes over to Nipper.

"You rotten hypocrite!" exclaimed Fullwood thickly. "After all your preachin', you stand there an' take my money——"

"You needn't yell!" said Nipper contemptuously. "If you want to know the truth, I did this just to teach you a lesson, Fullwood. I wouldn't touch a farthing of your rotten money—not for my personal use!"

"What—what do you mean?" panted Fullwood huskily.

"Simply this," said Nipper. "To-night you're going to invite the whole Remove to a feed. You're going to write out a notice, and stick it on the board in the lobby. In the notice you will say that you have much pleasure in inviting the Remove to a spread, and you will expend the sum of five pounds on the feed, the five to be given into the charge of De Valerie and Somerton and Hart to lay out."

"You—you silly fool!" snarled Fullwood. "I won't do anythin' of the sort!"

"You will!" snapped Nipper. "If you don't I'll let the whole Remove know about this affair, and the money will be taken by force. You've lost the five, but I won't touch your beastly cash. I'll be content if you invite the Remove to a spread. It's up to you to choose. If you do it, you'll get the credit for it. If you refuse, the Remove will know everything, and you won't get any credit at all."

There was a good deal of astonishment that day. The Remove had hardly got over its surprise concerning Timothy Tucker before another came along. A notice in Fullwood's handwriting was found on the board. Nobody believed it at first. The fellows thought that Fullwood was trying to be funny.

The feed was a great success. Fullwood, accepting the inevitable, pretended that he was standing the feast out of sheer good-nature, and he rose many points higher in the estimation of the Remove.

CHAPTER VII.

A Hamper for T. T.

Jimmy Little, the fat boy of St. Frank's, wandered out of the Ancient House with his hands thrust deeply into his trousers-pockets. Morning lessons were over, and it wasn't dinner-time yet.

"Stony!" murmured Fatty. "Stony, and I'm simply starving!"

He certainly didn't look as though he were starving; but, as he had often explained, it wasn't wise to judge by appearances. Little had eaten nothing since breakfast-time, which was something of a record for him.

"Starving!" he repeated disconsolately. "And I sha'n't get another remittance until the end of the week. I shall be dead before then!"

He walked about the Triangle gloomily, and he wondered if it would be possible to obtain anything from the school tuckshop on "tick." After a few moments of thought he decided that he wouldn't attempt it.

Mrs. Hake would probably oblige him; but he realised that when

his pocket-money did arrive, it would all be accounted for. And Fatty hated debts. So he mouched about, longing for the dinner-bell to ring.

He was just wondering if something had gone wrong with the feeding department, when two juniors entered the wide gateway, and came into the Triangle. They were Reginald Pitt and Jack Grey, of the Remove.

"Oh, we're in time all right!" said Grey, with a smile. "Dinner can't be ready, or Fatty wouldn't be out here!"

"Something must be wrong!" said Little. "It's a minute past the time, and the bell hasn't gone yet. I'm starving! I'm nearly faint from want of food! You chaps don't know what it's like to be really hungry!"

Pitt grinned.

"Neither do you!" he retorted. "Considering that you eat enough for four normal human beings, it's a wonder you have any hunger at all. There's something down at the station which would interest you, if it had a different label on it."

"What are you getting at?" demanded Fatty.

"Well, there's a hamper down there."

"Great pickled herrings!" ejaculated Fatty eagerly. "A hamper! For me?"

"No, not for you, you greedy ass!" said Pitt. "Didn't you hear me mention something about the label? This hamper—a whacking big one—is for T. T."

Fatty Little snorted.

"What's the good of that to me?" he growled. "A fine check, a hamper coming for a dotty ass like T. T.!"

Grey chuckled.

"Timothy Tucker has got just as much right to a tuck hamper as anybody else," he said. "You'd better get on the right side of him, Fatty, then you might be able to sample some of the good things in that hamper."

Little shook his head.

"Not much chance for me," he said glumly. "The ass is bound to share it between his study-mates. I shan't get a look-in!"

"Never mind! You'll have a hamper of your own one day," said Pitt. "Here's T. T. now. We'll tell him about his good luck. He'll probably be interested to know about that little package."

Timothy Tucker had wandered out of the Ancient House, and was strolling in an absent-minded manner across the Triangle. He walked with his head on one side, and appeared to be deep in thought.

"Just a minute, T. T.!" called Pitt.

Tucker looked round.

"Did you call me, my dear sir?" he asked.

"Yes; I want you a minute."

Tucker came up, and he stood beaming at the three juniors in his usual amiable fashion.

"The position is this, my dear sir!" he exclaimed. "I'm out here for the purpose of enlarging upon my ideas with regard to the origin of cloud matter—"

"Never mind cloud matter now. You're generally up in the clouds, anyhow!" said Pitt. "We thought you might be interested to know that a big hamper is waiting for you at the station."

"Is that so?" said T. T., elevating his eyebrows. "Dear, dear! I hardly expected it to arrive so soon. Of course, it is possible that my people sent it off earlier than I expected. The railways are very slow nowadays—very slow nowadays. Admitted! I must admit that I am impressed by your news."

"Good!" said Pitt. "We didn't bring the hamper up, because we had some other things to carry. I suppose it contains a lot of good things, eh?"

"Exactly—exactly!" said Tucker. "Admitted, my dear sir! The hamper certainly contains an abundant supply of very good things indeed. I have not the slightest doubt on that point—not the slightest doubt."

"Cakes and pastries and jam?" asked Fatty longingly.

"Really, my dear sir, I cannot give you the exact details of the articles the hamper contains, since I have not seen inside it," said T. T. "But I can assure you that it is full of good things."

"I suppose you'll fetch it at once?" asked Little.

"Admitted—that is to say, no," replied Tucker. "There is no immediate hurry, my dear sir. I will go to the station as soon as afternoon lessons are over. Perhaps you will come with me, Pitt?"

"Certainly—if you like," said Pitt. "We shall be back in time for tea, so it'll be all serene."

The three juniors went in together—they shared Study E—leaving Fatty Little out in the Triangle. The dinner-bell rang at that moment, and Fatty did not give any further attention to Timothy Tucker and his tuck hamper. There was other business—business of immediate importance—to attend to.

Dinner over, Little was still feeling hungry. It was very seldom indeed that he did not feel hungry. He was satisfied to a certain extent, but by tea-time he would be famished, and there was the awful prospect of going in to tea in hail!

The Trotwood twins, who shared Study L with Fatty, were both somewhat short of cash, so it seemed that tea was likely to be a very frugal meal.

Little could not keep his mind off the hamper. The knowledge that it was there, waiting in the parcels' office, came to his mind again and again. It was a hamper full of tuck and good things, and Fatty wouldn't even get a look in! It was a galling thought, and Little wondered if it would be possible to get hold of the hamper in any way. He reckoned that he required the food far more than Timothy Tucker, who seemed more interested in books and papers than eatable articles.

But would it be possible to raid the hamper?

Fatty Little decided to seek advice on the point. There had been no raid at St. Frank's since his arrival and he did not know the exact procedure.

Fatty got hold of De Valerie, just as afternoon lessons were about to start.

"Is it playing the game to raid another fellow's tuck?" asked Little, rather anxiously. "I mean, would it be looked upon as a rotten thing if one chap boned another chap's grub?"

"Well, it all depends," said Valerie. "If you're going to take anything from an Ancient House fellow, it's not the game. No Ancient House chap raids another Ancient House chap. But it's always possible to raid a College House study, or vice versa. There hasn't been much of it lately, but when the fellows get a chance they get busy on the job."

"Oh, I see!" said Fatty. "So that's the idea? I mustn't touch anything belonging to a chap of my own House?"

"Of course not! It wouldn't be the thing."

"Thanks! I know now."

"Why, what's the idea?" asked De Valerie curiously. "Have you decided to try the raiding stunt, Fatty? It's pretty risky, you know. If you're collared on the job you'll get scalped!"

"That's all right," said Fatty. "I sha'n't come to any harm."

He moved off, and paced about for some time, thinking deeply. It seemed that it would be impossible for him to touch Timothy Tucker's hamper, for both juniors were members of the Ancient House.

And it wouldn't be playing the game to raid a hamper belonging

to Tucker. Fatty wished that T. T. boarded in the College House; then it would be quite allowable for him to help himself to the hamper, providing he raided it fairly and squarely.

Fatty considered the point for some time—during afternoon lessons, in fact. He was so occupied with his thoughts, that when Mr. Crowell asked him a question relating to English history, Fatty replied that tuck hampers were few and far between. This reply cost the fat boy fifty lines.

But when the afternoon lessons were over, there was a grim light in Fatty's eye. He had thought of a way out of the problem, he had come to a decision. There was just a chance that he would be able to raid the hamper, after all.

CHAPTER VIII.

Fatty's Wheeze.

"Come in!"

Mr. Nelson Lee, the Housemaster of the Ancient House, called out that invitation as a somewhat timid tap sounded on the panel of his study door. The door opened, and the large figure of Fatty Little entered.

"Well, Little, what do you require?" asked Lee, laying down his pen.

"I—I want to know if I can transfer over into the College House, sir," said Fatty bluntly.

The Housemaster looked rather astonished.

"Why, what is wrong, Little?" he asked. "What is your idea of wishing to change Houses? Are you not content here that you want to go over into the College House?"

"It—it's not exactly that, sir," said Little, rather nervously.

"I—I just fancy the College House, sir, that's all. I'm sure I can find a study all right, and Mr. Stockdale won't have any objection, will he?"

"I don't suppose Mr. Stockdale will concern himself in the matter at all," smiled Nelson Lee. "Permission to change Houses is not generally granted, Little, unless a boy has a very particular reason for wishing to transfer. It seems that you have no specific reason at all."

Fatty Little looked rather sheepish.

"Some—some of the chaps told me that there's some grub—ahem!—food, sir!" he stammered. "There's more food over there—"

"And you naturally wish to partake of it?" said Nelson Lee. "Well, Little, you have my permission to transfer, and you had better come to me again, after you have made arrangements with regard to your study."

"Oh, I thank you, sir!" said Little joyfully. "Can—can I regard myself as a College House boy now?"

"Certainly, if you wish!"

"Oh, good—I—I mean, thank you, sir!" said Little.

He left the study, his face flushed and rather excited. He hurried off without delay to Study 'L, in the Remove passage. It was occupied by the Trotwood twins—Nicodemus and Cornelius. These two fellows shared the study with Little.

"I wondered where you were, Fatty," said Nicodemus, as Little entered. "You're not usually absent at tea-time—"

"Sorry, you chaps," said Little, "but we're to part soon."

"Part!" repeated Nicodemus curiously. "Are you going away?"

"Well, I'm not going far—only into the College House," said Fatty. "You see, I'm transferring. I've got permission, and everything."

The two Trotwoods regarded Fatty curiously.

"You're transferring to the College House?" repeated Nicodemus. "But, my good Fatty, you must be dotty! What's the idea?"

"I'll tell you that later," said Little. "But I can give you my word that it'll only be a temporary arrangement. I shall change back before long. But I'm a College House chap now."

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Nicodemus. "I didn't think you'd desert us like that, Fatty. But what does it mean? Can't you explain, you ass?"

"Not now. I'll explain later."

"My dear Nicodemus, what is all this talk about?" asked Cornelius mildly. "I must confess that I am quite in the dark. Pray explain!"

Cornelius was deaf, and he nearly always missed everything.

"It's all right, Corny!" shouted Little. "Can't stop to explain much now, but I'm a College House fellow now! I'm a Monk!"

"What for?" asked Cornelius. "What are you going to bunk for?"

"Bunk!" roared Fatty. "I didn't say anything about bunking, you ass! I said that I'm transferring to the College House."

"I've seen nothing of a mouse—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Nicodemus.

"I said house, you deaf ass!" shouted Little. "It's no good talking to you; you're hopeless, Corny. Nick will explain everything after I've gone."

And Fatty fled from the study before Cornelius could say anything further. He passed out into the Triangle, but made certain beforehand that Pitt and Timothy Tucker had not yet left for the station.

"I'm leaving you chaps presently," remarked Fatty, as he encountered Handforth & Co. in the dusk.

"Really?" said Handforth. "That's awfully sad! We shall weep salt tears of sorrow, Fatty!"

"Oh, don't rot!" said Fatty. "I sha'n't be goin' far, that's one thing. I've got permission to transfer into the College House."

"What?" said Handforth & Co.

"It's a fact. What are you glaring like that for, Handy?"

"I'm glaring at a traitor!" said Handforth warmly. "Isn't the Ancient House good enough for you, you fat bounder?"

"It's not that—"

"Then what is it, you elephant?" demanded Handforth. "Why are you transferring into that old barn of a place they call the College House?"

"Well, you see, I've a little idea of my own," said Fatty vaguely. "You'll know all about it soon, Handy. I think it's rather a good dodge, and I may as well tell you that I'm now a Monk!"

Handforth turned to his chums, and to two or three other juniors who were standing by.

"Did you hear that?" he asked. "Fatty Little is now a Monk—he is now a member of the College House. That's right, isn't it, Fatty?"

"Yes," said Little.

"And what do we usually do to Monks who come straying across to our side of the Triangle?" asked Handforth grimly.

"Bump them!" said McClure.

"Hard!" said Church, grinning.

"That's what we're going to do with this Monk," said Handforth. "We'll show him how we treat our giddy rivals. And he can't grumble, because he's deserted the fold."

"Here, steady!" gasped Fatty. "Leggo, you fatheads! Yaroo!"

Fatty Little was seized by at least half a dozen juniors. It really

wasn't possible to bump him in the ordinary way, for his bulk would not allow of that. As Church remarked, a crane was required to bump Fatty properly.

However, the fat boy was bowled over in the mud of the Triangle, and he sat down very abruptly. As soon as he rose to his feet he was bumped down once again.

"Yaroo!" he roared. "Ow—yow! You—you——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go over to your own side!"

"You're in the enemy's country now," said Handforth.

The juniors did not seriously believe that Fatty Little had transferred, but they were always ready for a little joke.

But Fatty's troubles were not over yet.

He arrived over at the College House, and was just marching in to the lobby when several shouts went up.

"Look out! Here's a Fossil!" roared somebody.

"Collar him!"

"Grab the bounder!"

"Hold on!" yelled Fatty. "I—I—— Yow-ow!"

The fat boy was bumped over once again, and he fell to the floor with a thud which fairly shook the place. The College House juniors were not to be blamed for taking this drastic step, for they naturally assumed that Fatty Little was a "Fossil." He had had no chance to explain.

"Give him another!" said Christine, grinning. "Two more, in fact!"

"We'll teach these bounders to come wandering over into forbidden territory," said Yorke warmly. "But we shall need some help; five or six of us ain't enough to deal with a chap like this?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Fatty Little thought otherwise.

He was bowled over two or three times, for the odds were heavily against him. Under ordinary circumstances, Fatty was capable of dealing with four or five juniors with ease; but just now he didn't want to offer resistance. It would not be policy to start scrapping with Christine & Co.

"Hold on, you duffers!" gasped Fatty. "I—I—— Yow! Yaroooo! I want to explain—— Great cocoanuts! I—I—— Ow!"

Bump!

Fatty went over again.

"Now I think you can crawl away!" remarked Christine pleasantly. "And perhaps it'll teach you a lesson not to walk into the enemy's country again."

Little sat up and gasped.

"You—you hasty asses!" he roared. "You've been bumping one of your own chaps! I'm a Monk!"

"Eh?"

"I belong to this House——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He's been dreaming!" grinned Talmadge. "Either that, or he's going dotty. Clear off, Fatty, before you're hurt! I'll bet you came over here nosing after some grub. You can buzz off!"

"But I'm a College House chap!" roared Little. "I've transferred!"

"You've—you've done what?" gasped Christine.

"I've left the Ancient House, and I've transferred to this side—got permission from the Housemaster and everything," explained Little warmly. "And all you can do is to bowl me over——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Sorry!" grinned Christine. "You ought to have explained earlier, and then everything would have been all right. But are you really serious, or simply trying to pull our legs?"

"I'm serious, you fathead!"

"Then allow me to congratulate you!" said Christine. "I didn't think you had such a large amount of sense, Fatty. Everybody knows that this House is miles ahead of that fossilized place across the Triangle!"

"But what about a study?" put in Yorke. "We're rather full up over here—three fellows in each study already. Nobody will care to take three more."

"Three more?" repeated Christine.

"Well, look at him!" said Yorke. "Isn't he equal to three?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, really——"

"Yes, I suppose there'll be a bit of a difficulty in that way," remarked Christine. "Nobody will be particularly anxious to take Fatty into the fold. It'll have to be left to Mr. Stockdale. He'll fix it, and the luckless study will have to make the best of it. You'd better go along and see the Housemaster, Fatty."

"Can't be done!" put in Talmadge. "Stocky's out—won't be back until seven."

Fatty Little looked relieved.

"Oh, that's all right!" he said. "I can do without a study until seven. I—I'm going out now!"

He marched out of the College House, very pleased with the way events had gone. Mr. Stockdale was out, and by seven o'clock the raid would be over, and Fatty would be able to transfer back into the Ancient House.

His scheme was certainly a cute one. He wanted to be a College House chap for an hour or two, in order to make it permissible for him to raid Timothy Tucker's hamper. After the deed had been committed, he would be free to go back into Study L. So Fatty Little was feeling quite content.

CHAPTER IX.

The Lone Raider.

Timothy Tucker marched into the little station at Bellton with Reginald Pitt. They had gone to fetch the tuck hamper. It was quite dark and cold. The evening was fine, however, and the ground underfoot was fairly dry.

The two juniors entered the parcels' office, and were soon in possession of the prize—a fairly large hamper, well packed, and of considerable weight. The Removites grasped a handle each, and walked off through the village.

"H'm! I must admit that I'm impressed," remarked Tucker. "This hamper is of considerable weight, my dear sir—is of quite considerable weight!"

Pitt nodded.

"It's the jam, I suppose," he said. "Pots of jam and marmalade are always pretty heavy."

"Admitted—admitted!" said T. T. "Pots of jam are certainly heavy; but somehow I do not believe that this hamper contains much jam. Its contents are of a different nature—choice things, admitted, but of a far better character than jam."

"Good!" said Pitt. "We shall be well supplied in Study E for a week or two, by the look of it. If we weren't a bit short to-night, we might have let the cart bring the hamper in the morning."

They walked on, and at last left the village behind, and made their way up the dark lane, past Bellton Wood, to the school. They were quite unaware that a large form was lurking in the hedge some distance farther along.

Fatty Little, in short, was on the watch.

As a College House junior, he had the right to raid an Ancient House hamper, and he was intent upon raiding this one while he had the chance—while he was a Monk. And he waited in the hedge, hungry and impatient.

At last he heard the sound of footsteps, and then came voices. He listened eagerly, and had no difficulty in recognising the tones of Reginald Pitt and Timothy Tucker. Fatty hugged himself.

"Oh, ripping!" he murmured. "I shall do the trick, after all!" But even now he was not quite satisfied. The awful thought occurred to him that the juniors had not brought the hamper with them, after all. So he listened more intently than ever, and strained his eyes in the darkness.

"It's getting heavier," he heard Pitt exclaim. "The blessed thing seems to be double the weight now, T. T.! I can't make out what the dickens your people packed into it. Perhaps the cakes are heavy!"

"The position is this, my dear sir," said Tucker. "The cakes, I believe, are conspicuous by their absence. But there are many other things in the hamper which will fill you with delight—when you behold them. They will fill you with delight. They cannot fail to do so, in fact."

"That's good," said Pitt. "I'm feeling tremendously peckish!"

Fatty's last fears were at rest. The hamper was here, and he only had two juniors to deal with. Exactly as he had anticipated, the raid would be an extremely simple matter.

And he felt hungrier and hungrier as he waited. Each second seemed to be a minute; but at last the two juniors grew level with him. He had no compunction whatever in committing the act; for it was an old custom at St. Frank's for juniors to raid tuck hampers.

With one bound he leapt from the hedge, and landed in the centre of the road. Pitt was bowled over with ease, and Tucker staggered back as Fatty grabbed at the hamper. But Tucker did not release his hold.

"Dear, dear!" he exclaimed, in his shrill voice. "This is most remarkable! What do you mean by this, my dear sir? You're ruining me—ruining me! How dare you attack me in this manner? Go away! Your face frightens me!"

Pitt jumped to his feet.

"Hold tight to that hamper, Tucker!" he roared. "We'll soon deal with these bounders! Monks, I expect——"

"But, my dear sir, there is only one——"

"Fatty!" roared Pitt. "Well, I'm blowed! You—you oversized burglar!"

"Leggo that hamper!" shouted Fatty. "I'm raiding it——"

"Rats!" said Pitt. "You can't raid the property of an Ancient House chap!"

"Can't I!" roared Fatty. "I'm a Monk now. I've transferred!"

"Oh, my hat!"

Pitt could hardly help grinning, and he fondly imagined that he and Tucker would be able to deal with the raider quite easily. But he was to find out that when Fatty Little fairly took the war-path, he did so thoroughly.

"I'm a rival now, and raiding a tuck hamper is allowable," said the fat boy. "I'll soon show you whether——"

"Go for him, Tucker!" yelled Pitt. "Charge!"

He charged while he was speaking, and both he and Tucker hurled themselves at the fat boy of the Remove.

They might just as well have charged a brick wall.

Fatty hardly budged an inch, and both the juniors rebounded violently. Then Fatty let himself go. He took the offensive, and rushed at Pitt. Pitt could not stand against that rush.

He went over like a ninepin, and rolled in the road. Tucker was toppled over backwards, too, and Fatty grabbed the hamper, and made off down the road as fast as his fat legs would carry him.

And, despite his size, he was capable of running with really astonishing speed, for he was agile and active. His object in running down the road instead of towards the school was quite a cute one.

Pitt picked himself up dazedly.

"Beaten!" he panted. "Oh, goodness! Beaten by a fat ass like Little! After him, you duffer!"

"Dear, dear!" exclaimed Tucker. "This is distressing—quite distressing! My dear sir, Little has actually made off with my hamper! I must admit that I am greatly annoyed—greatly annoyed!"

"What's the good of being annoyed?" roared Pitt. "We'd better rush after the fat burglar. Within five minutes he'll have scoffed all the tuck!"

"I fancy not," said T. T. "I certainly fancy not!"

Meanwhile, Fatty Little had reached the stile which led into the Bellton Wood. He lost no time in tumbling over it. He kept to the footpath for a few yards, and then turned aside into the wood itself.

He soon found a quiet place—a spot where there was little chance of him being seen. His pursuers, at all events, might search the whole wood before coming across their quarry. It was intensely dark, and well-nigh impossible to see a hand before one's face.

But Fatty didn't want to see; seeing wasn't necessary.

He yanked out his knife, and quickly cut the strings of the hamper. Then he pushed back the lid, and his fingers encountered straw. Chuckling to himself, he pushed the straw back, and felt for something more solid.

He found it.

He took something from the hamper which puzzled him for a moment. It was square and flat, with sharp edges. For a second he thought it was a box, probably containing chocolates. Then, in a flash, the truth dawned upon him.

The object was a book!

"Great pickled bloaters!" gasped Fatty.

He fumbled hastily about, diving deeper into the hamper; and he found nothing but books—books galore! There was not an ounce of eatable substance in the whole package!

"Oh, my goodness!" murmured Fatty, a feeling of utter faintness coming over him. "It ain't a tuck hamper, after all! I've changed Houses, and raided a couple of decent chaps for nothing! Oh, chutney! What a rotten swindle!"

The fat boy of St. Frank's was certainly "done," and as he crouched there in the wood, with that hamper full of books before him, his feelings were too deep to be described in real words.

CHAPTER X.

Retribution.

"Silly ass!" said Nicodemus Trotwood, with a sniff. "It's the last thing I thought of Fatty. I never dreamed he'd change Houses."

The Trotwoods were at tea in Study L—a somewhat frugal meal, it must be admitted. Funds were low, and nothing was provided except bread-and-butter and tea—the tea being rather weak, owing to a shortage in the canister.

"I fancy he'll have some trouble in the College House, too," went on Nicodemus. "He'll have tremendous difficulty in finding a study, and before the evening is out he'll come back here."

"The bread-and-butter is somewhat stale, but I prefer it to partaking of tea in hall, my dear Nick," observed Cornelius mildly. "Somehow, we miss Fatty; but it is just as well for him to be away to-day, otherwise there would be practically nothing for you and me to eat."

"Fatty would scoff the lot!" grinned Nick.

"That is the only point in his favour," said his brother.

"Eh?"

"I thought you observed that the tea was nice and hot."

"Blow the tea!" shouted Nicodemus.

"Exactly! That is what I am doing," said Cornelius, blowing into his cup. "I should like you to pass me the bread-and-butter."

"I'll pass you half of it," said the other junior. "There's only one slice!"

"No; I must say that the bread-and-butter is not very nice, Corny. But everybody occasionally passes through a lean time, and this is one of ours. It is rather unfortunate that Fatty is so hard up."

"He's always hard up," said Nick. "As soon as he gets some money he spends it in grub. He's generous when he gets it. I'll admit. He'll bring piles of stuff in here, and we can eat as much as we like. Come in, Fatty!"

A tap had sounded on the door, and it opened.

"No, we haven't got any bread to spare," said Nicodemus, without looking round. "We're short of butter, and jam is unknown within these walls. And we don't lend crockery, on principle. It generally comes back in pieces."

"Ahem!" coughed the new arrival.

Trotwood senior looked round—Nick was about half an hour older than his brother—and then he grinned.

"Oh, it's you, Tubby!" he said. "What's that you've got?"

Tubbs, the Ancient House pageboy, was carrying a large box. He set it down on the floor.

"It came this morning, Master Trotwood," he said. "But Warren took it into his lodge and overlooked it, I believe. So I've brought it along now."

"So I see," said Nicodemus. "What is it?"

"A box, Master Trotwood."

"I can see that, too, you ass," said Nick. "Who is it for?"

"It's addressed to Master Little, Study L. Ancient House, sir," said the pageboy. "I thought maybe it was full of something to eat."

"Good business!" exclaimed Trotwood briskly. "All right, Tubby, you can leave it here. I haven't got any change just now, but I'll give you a tip on Saturday."

"That's all right, Master Trotwood!" grinned Tubbs.

He retired, and the two Trotwoods looked at the box with interest. It was quite a big one, and of considerable weight. Nick examined the label, and then he bent down and sniffed at one of the cracks.

"I can distinctly smell cheese!" he said.

"Keys?" echoed the deaf junior. "What do you want keys for? It doesn't unlock!"

"I said I can smell cheese!" roared his brother.

"Oh, I understand!" said Corny. "Why don't you speak louder? You can't expect me to understand when you mumble like that. Cheese! I simply love cheese, and it is rather a pity that Fatty isn't here——"

"Great Scott!" roared Nick suddenly.

"Dear me! What ever is the matter?"

"We're going to open this box; we're going to spread the good

things out on the table, and have a royal tea!" said Nicodemus briskly. "Gimme the poker, my son. We'll soon have the lid off!"

Cornelius looked rather shocked.

"But, my dear brother, I cannot consent to such an act," he said. "It would not be—well, playing the game. Fatty is not here—"

"You don't seem to realise the position!" grinned Nick. "Fatty doesn't belong to this study any more; he said so himself."

"That is all the more reason—"

"Rats!" said Nick. "Fatty has transferred into the College House, and we're his rivals. Don't you get the hang of it? It's perfectly allowable for us to raid this box!"

"Dear me!"

"Fatty is a College House chap now, and he can't say a thing if we scoff at his grub," went on Nicodemus, with a chuckle.

"Hand over the poker!"

Cornelius obliged, and the box was soon unfastened. Then Nicodemus proceeded to bring out a dazzling array of choice things—cakes, pastries, pots of jam, tins of sardines and salmon, and potted meats, condensed milk, tea, sugar, and a four-pound tin of biscuits.

"This is what I call a prize worth having," said Nick genially. "I'll tell you what. We'll invite some of the other fellows to the spread—Nipper and Watson and Tregellis-West, and a few more."

Nicodemus lost no time in hurrying out.

The juniors were only too willing to accept his invitation, and he arrived back in Study L presently with half a dozen guests. Corny had by this time laid the table with appetising neatness.

"My hat!" said Nipper. "This looks pretty good. Who's standing the spread?"

"Fatty Little."

"Oh! But he isn't here!"

"Exactly!" grinned Nicodemus. "Fatty has transferred into the College House, and this tuck-box arrived for him a few minutes ago. We've raided it, you see. It's always permissible to raid a College House feed!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "This is rather rich—it is, really!"

The juniors sat down to tea, and were soon partaking of the good things with great gusto. There was no lack of supplies and there would still be enough grub left over to provide first-class teas for Study L for the remainder of the week.

And, in the middle of the festivities, the door opened, and a fat face looked in.

"I say, Nick," began the face. "I just want to——"

Jimmy Little paused and gasped.

"Great jumping pancakes!" he exclaimed, his eyes growing round. "I—I——"

"Come in, Fatty!" said Nick genially. "Hungry?"

"By pepper, I should think I am!"

"All right; you're welcome to join us!" grinned Nick.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You're quite welcome," put in Nipper, with a chuckle. "You may be a College House chap, but you're welcome."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's jolly decent of you," said Fatty, sitting down at the table. "Oh, my hat! I've been starving for hours. But I thought you chaps were stony?"

"So we are," said Trotwood. "But this box arrived."

Little did not inquire into further details, for he was too busy partaking of his own grub! The situation was undoubtedly rich. Little had forsaken his own House in order to raid Timothy Tucker's hamper. He had gained nothing and, during his absence, a big supply of food had arrived for him. It had been raided in turn, and Fatty was a guest at his own table!

"Your people sent this, I suppose?" asked Fatty, with his mouth full.

"No," said Nicodemus. "I might as well explain, Fatty. This grub was sent by your people!"

The fat boy gasped.

"By—by my people?" he gasped.

"Exactly!"

"But—but I don't understand!"

"It won't take a minute to explain," grinned Trotwood. "You see, you're a College House chap now, and when the box came for you we decided that we should be justified in raiding the tuck."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Great doughnuts!" gasped Little.

He saw in a flash how his own scheme had recoiled on his own head. He could not possibly be angry, for he had used the same argument himself. He simply stared at his study-mates in blank astonishment.

And the other juniors roared.

"I—I only transferred to the College House to raid a hamper of Tucker's," said Little, with a deep breath. "And after I'd raided it I found that it contained nothing else but rotten books!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And while you were on the job your own study-mates were raiding this box!" chuckled Nipper. "Well, it's your own fault, Fatty. You shouldn't be such a scheming bounder. Take my advice, Fatty, and stick to the Ancient House!"

Fatty Little nodded.

"By chutney," he declared, "I will!"

And after the feed was over, Fatty lost no time in going to the Housemaster's study and admitting that he had made a blunder, and he was allowed to remain with the Trotwood twins in the Ancient House.

As for Timothy Tucker's hamper, it was found to contain many heavy, scientific volumes which interested nobody except T. T. himself.

Certainly they didn't interest Fatty Little!

CHAPTER XI.

A Secretary in Distress.

"Is it true?"

Nipper & Co., of St. Frank's, halted. They had no option about the matter. A middle-aged, well-dressed man of heavy build placed his body in front of them as they were returning to the school.

"Is what true?" demanded Nipper.

"Is it true—quite right?" repeated the stranger excitedly.

Nipper looked significantly at Watson and Tregellis-West, his chums, and nodded solemnly.

"I don't think you're quite right," he said slowly. "Try the addition of a little water, my good sir; you will find it has less effect."

"Oh, my goodness!" groaned the man. "I ask you a simple question: Is it true?"

Nipper nodded again.

"Quite true," he said. "I was told that water, when mixed with—"

Nipper stopped. The man groaned again.

"Pray don't be absurd, young man!" said the stranger hastily. "Can you not see that I'm greatly distressed?"

"That's why I tell you to try—" began Nipper.

"Half a jiffy, old thing," said Watson quietly. "What's the matter, sir?"

The man fumbled in his pocket and drew out a large red handkerchief, and proceeded to wipe his forehead. It was a sharp, cold morning in early January; but it was not the weather which was responsible for the perspiration on the man's forehead.

"I'm seeking Mr. Nelson Lee."

"Oh, why didn't you say so before?" demanded Nipper.

"Didn't I ask you that?" murmured the man. "Dear me! I'm all of a fluster!"

"You are!" said Nipper emphatically. "But if you want Mr. Nelson Lee, let me tell you you're unlucky."

"Indeed, I am! Indeed, I am! I'm in a terrible mess!"

The irrepressible Nipper looked searchingly over the man, surveying him from head to foot without so much as a glimmer of a smile on his lips.

"You don't look too bad," murmured Nipper. "Your trousers could do with a brush, perhaps!"

The man turned to Sir Montie Tregellis-West appealingly.

"Your young friend is apparently joking," he said. "Won't you please answer a question for me?"

"With pleasure!" said Sir Montie, and turned a frowning face towards his leader. "Shut up, Nipper, there's a good chap!"

Nipper, with a soft chuckle, shut up.

"I'm dreadfully keen on finding Mr. Nelson Lee," said the stranger distressfully. "I'm in an awful hole. You see, I'm secretary of a slate-club in Bannington, and the funds were to have been distributed to-night, but they've gone!"

Nipper looked serious at once.

"My hat! Do you mean somebody has hoofed it with the cash?" he asked quickly.

"Indeed, they have!" said the secretary, with another groan. "Dear me! What shall I do?"

"That's rotten luck, sir!" said Nipper slowly. "Unfortunately, Mr. Nelson Lee is not at St. Frank's."

"I was told I could find him at the school," said the secretary. "That's why I stopped you young gentlemen. I knew by your caps that you belonged to St. Frank's."

"I see," said Nipper quickly. "And when you asked us if it was true, you were referring to Mr. Nelson Lee being at St. Frank's?"

"Exactly! I fear I'm frightfully distressed, young gentlemen, and asked you before you knew what I really wanted to know."

"Mr. Lee hasn't gone for good," explained Nipper. "He's been called to London on an urgent case. He may be back any day. But, look here! We chaps know something of the game. You see, I'm Nipper."

"Ah!"

The secretary's eyes lighted up hopefully.

"You know the detective well, I believe?" he said hastily. "Ah—yes, indeed! Of course, I've read of you in the newspapers." Nipper flushed.

"Ahem! Of course, that's all rot!" he said warmly. "Now tell us something about it. I'll promise to tell Mr. Lee the instant he arrives."

Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Watson looked at one another eagerly. They had had a dull afternoon in Bannington, and were returning to St. Frank's thoroughly fed-up with doing nothing.

"Toppin'!" said Sir Montie quickly. "Begad! Just what we wanted—somethin' to do!"

"Rather!" agreed Watson.

"Then, pray, where can we talk?" asked the secretary. "As you can understand, I am not anxious for the public to hear that the money has gone. There would be a raid on the club's premises in less than ten minutes!"

"Of course!" said Nipper. "We'll walk back with you to Bannington—then to the premises of the club. We might be useful in case of a rush."

"Thank you," said the secretary fervently. "Thank you again and again! I was indeed fortunate to run up against three such nice boys!"

"Don't mench!" said Sir Montie laconically.

The secretary told them his name was Brown—Augustus Montague Brown; that he was thirty-five years of age, and single. He probably told them his age in case he was taken to be fifty. He looked it.

Beyond expressing his great distress, however, Brown told them nothing of what had happened at the club. He was, as he had said, anxious not to let it get abroad that the money had gone.

"I thought you always shared out at these clubs at Christmas-time," said Nipper, as they walked quickly along. "In fact, I remember seeing it in the local paper that over two thousand pounds had been distributed amongst the club members two days before Christmas."

"Exactly!" said Mr. Brown. "I handed out the money, as a matter of fact. But our club has always been run on somewhat different lines from other clubs of the same nature. We distribute two-thirds of the money before Christmas, and the remaining third later in the year."

"I see," said Sir Montie, with a chuckle. "You give your members so much to spend, and then let them get into the state known as 'stony' before relieving their minds by dishing out another sum?"

"That's the idea!" said Brown, with a short laugh. "Two thousand pounds have been distributed. There was to have been another thousand odd pounds handed out to-night. But it is gone!"

The secretary fell to muttering distressfully under his breath. Sir Montie thought he was a very conscientious secretary and felt his position very keenly.

The party arrived in Bannington, and went straight down the main street to the last house. Here was displayed a notice-board informing all and sundry that therein was the headquarters of the Bannington Slate Club.

Into this office Augustus Brown led the way.

Nipper glanced round the office as soon as he entered. There was little difference between that office and any other he had seen. There was linoleum on the floor, and three roll-top desks occupied three of the corners. They were shut when the juniors entered.

Sir Montie and Watson evidently expected to see the ruins of a massive safe, for they both spoke at the same moment.

"Where's the safe?"

"Was the money in a safe?"

Brown rubbed his hands, and smiled delightedly for a moment. The next, and the smile was gone, and the old look of distress once more appeared.

"That's the secret of this office, young gentlemen," said Brown. "At least, I thought it was a secret. But somebody must have known all about it, because the money was stolen from the safes."

"But where are the safes?" asked Nipper impatiently.

"I'll show you," murmured Brown, after a moment's hesitation.

He went over to the roll-top desk which occupied the corner

farthest away from them, and pushed it. It slid away easily, on well-oiled castors, as Nipper was quick to note.

Behind the desk was a small wooden packing-case, but nothing so substantial as a steel safe. Sir Montie's face expressed mystification.

"Begad, you don't mean to say you kept the money in that old box!" he exclaimed.

Brown laughed shortly, and kicked the box. It rang hollow.

"Nothing in that," he said. "Notice anything peculiar about this desk?"

Nipper & Co. looked at it intently. There was nothing about it that appealed to them as being different from any other desk they had seen.

It had three drawers on either side of the centre. There were two flaps—one on either side—which pulled out above the top drawers.

"Nothin' remarkable!" said Sir Montie.

Brown did not reply. He gave the desk another heave, and it swung about.

"Now?" he asked.

"It's been cleaned recently," said Nipper at once. "I should say that the back is kept cleaner than is the front. No dust."

Brown bit his lips, and glanced sharply at the junior from St. Frank's.

"That's about it," he said slowly. "That is the safe."

Nipper dropped on one knee and examined the woodwork of the desk. But he could find nothing in the way of locks or bolts. A smile twisted at the corner of Brown's lips as he saw the look of disgust on Nipper's face when he rose to his feet.

"Don't you think it better to explain, instead of leaving us to find out everything?" asked Nipper impatiently. "If you want me to see Mr. Lee when he returns, he'll want to know all about this business right away. Nothing like saving time."

Brown again glanced sharply at the junior. Nipper had turned everything he had said at their meeting into a joke. But the junior looked far from being in a humorous mood at that moment.

"Mr. Lee taught you much?" he asked, and it seemed to Sir Montie that there was anxiety in his tones.

"Lots. But get to the horses!" exclaimed Nipper.

Brown slipped his hand under a ledge which projected from the centre of the desk—where the top part was screwed to the lower portion.

There was a faint click, and the wooden backs of the desk fell to the floor with a clatter.

"My hat!"

"Begad!"

"Jumping Jehoshaphat!"

Brown smiled slightly at the amazed expressions on the faces of the juniors.

"Bit of a surprise, young gentlemen—what!" he exclaimed. "You wouldn't expect to find a safe in that place, would you?"

The front of the drawers was false, for there was but one single cavity to either side. There, standing on either side, was a small safe. The doors were unlocked and slightly open.

Nipper stared hard at them.

"Do you mean to tell me that some ordinary giddy burglars found these safes?" he asked abruptly.

"Alas! It's too true!" said Brown, with a groan.

"Then there's only one or two things possible—theories, Nelson Lee calls them. One, you've been watched—"

"Impossible! The blinds are always down; besides, the thief

or thieves couldn't see through the desk whilst I was at the back!"

"Secondly, somebody in the office worked the oracle——"

"Nobody but myself knew about the safes, or where they were. When the money was paid in, it was piled up in tin boxes, and then left for me to put away. I live just above this office. I might mention."

"Thirdly, you did it yourself!" said Nipper, who was apparently taking no notice of what the secretary was saying. "Ahem! Blessed if I knew——"

"I! Me! Stole the funds!" hooted Brown excitedly. "You fool!"

Nipper & Co. started.

"Eh?"

"That's the worst of saying anything to children!" shouted Brown. "Do you think I should have gone for Nelson Lee if I had taken the money?"

"Who said you had?" demanded Nipper.

"You did! My goodness! I'll sue you for slander!"

"Rats! I didn't mean anything. I merely theorised."

"My hat! There's a word for you, Montie!" murmured Watson.

"Begad! Must look that up when we get back to the school," whispered Sir Montie.

Brown did not take any notice of the two juniors. He was glaring at Nipper. He seemed speechless with rage.

"Go!" he panted at last. "Go and fetch Mr. Lee—— Oh, dear me! You came to mock me in my distress! Dear me!"

Nipper & Co. looked at one another, hardly knowing what to do.

"Better hop it!" murmured Sir Montie. "Begad! Look at the chap!"

Nipper turned quickly. Brown was sitting on the packing-case, and his face was buried in the red handkerchief. The secretary was crying!

"My hat!" ejaculated Nipper, hastening to his side. "Here! What on earth is the matter now?"

Brown looked up slowly.

"I'm sorry! Forgive me—I'm all nerves!" he murmured.

"I'm sorry, too!" said Nipper earnestly. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. Look here, we'll go out and have some tea, and come back and see you again later on in the evening. I suppose you've made some excuse, and postponed the paying-out?"

"Yes; I've pretended sickness, and the share-out has been altered till to-morrow night. Oh, I do so hope Mr. Lee will come and recover the money by then!"

"Anyhow, we'll hop back and see if he's at St. Frank's. We won't come back until to-morrow, unless anything exceptional happens!" said Nipper, changing his mind. "So-long, Mr. Brown—and cheer up!"

And with a nod and a smile, Nipper & Co. left the office, and returned to St. Frank's.

CHAPTER XII.

Handforth Knows.

"There's underhand work!"

Thus Handforth, of the Remove Form at St. Frank's. He was sitting before the study fire, and with him were Church and McClure, his study-mates.

Church was reading, and he did not like being interrupted.

"There'll be some over-arm work in a minute!" he said darkly.

"With a cricket-stump against a silly fat carcass!"

"That will not dispose of the fact that there is underhand work!" went on Handforth severely.

McClure and Church looked at their leader in amazement.

"Very bad?" asked McClure.

"Where do you feel the pain?" asked Church.

Handforth swung round, and with his clenched fist struck the arm of his chair.

"I tell you there's underhand work going on!" he said, raising his voice. "Don't you fatheaded chumps know when your leader is serious?"

The "fatheaded chumps" grinned.

"When you're to be taken seriously, my dear chap," said McClure, "the world will end suddenly!"

"Very suddenly!" supplemented Church.

Handforth began to get excited. He did not like having his leg pulled, even by his own chums.

"You burbling chumps! You—you—oh, you dummies! Haven't I just come in?" he shouted.

Church looked at McClure, and the latter looked at Church. They nodded, and simultaneously made a move towards Handforth. Two pairs of hands grasped Handforth very suddenly by the legs, and the study leader was jerked on to the floor.

"And now you're just going out!" said Church grimly. "I wanted to read—"

"Ow—ow—ow!"

"So did I!"

"Yarrah!"

"You stopped us!"

"So out you go!"

"Lemme get up, you dummies! Ow! Yow!"

Church and McClure were not very gentle with their leader. They pulled him along the study floor as they spoke, jerked him round the corners of the table, and against them.

Handforth yelled, as much in rage as in pain. But Church and McClure paid no heed to his yells.

They opened the door, and dragged Handforth into the Remove corridor. Their intention was to deposit Handforth in the passage, and return to the study and close the door.

But Church decided not to follow out that plan.

"Drag him along to Study C!" he said, with a chuckle.

"Certainly!" said McClure gravely. "I'm always ready to oblige a chap in dumping worthless stuff in a dustbin!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Church.

"Yow—ow—ow!" howled Handforth. "I'll give you—yow!—worthless stuff! Lemme get at you—"

Study C was the one in which Nipper, Tregellis-West, and Watson were usually to be found. It was quite a distance from Study D, and Handforth suddenly found that there was an unusually large number of bumps in the passage floor.

He yelled every time his back encountered one, but Church and McClure, each grasping an ankle, dragged him along mercilessly.

"Here's the dustbin!" said McClure, with a chuckle. "We'll sling the talkative chump in, and then hunk!"

Church grinned, and nodded. They were pretty sure they would have to hunk.

Nipper & Co. would very probably object to their using Study C as a dustbin.

Church opened the door of Study C, and Handforth was rushed into the study. They expected to be greeted by wrathful cries from Nipper & Co.

But Nipper & Co. were not there.

"So much the better!" grinned Church. "We'll tie this fathead who calls himself a leader to a chair. I believe he's still alive!"

"You wait!" said Handforth furiously. "I'm alive all right."

Church and McClure looked down at their leader pityingly. "I'm afraid you won't survive Nipper & Co.'s wrath!" said Church solemnly. And shook his head sadly.

"Such a pity—and one so young!" murmured McClure, with a wealth of sympathy in his tones.

There was a patter of footsteps in the passage, and the cheery laugh of Nipper could be heard. The expressions on Church and McClure's faces changed suddenly.

"My hat! This has done it!" murmured Church, in dismay.

"What-ho!" said Handforth delightfully. "You'll get it in the neck now."

Nipper & Co. appeared in the doorway, and they stood on the threshold to stare in surprise at their rivals.

Handforth was still on the floor, and Church and McClure still grasped an ankle.

"Hallo!" said Nipper grimly. "What are you chaps doing here?"

"Ahem! We thought—that is to say, Handforth thought——" began Church.

"Oh, rats!" said McClure sharply. "What's the good of beating about the giddy old bushes? If you chaps want to know what we came here for, it was to leave this bundle of rubbish here."

"Oh, did you now! That was most kind of you!" said Nipper.

"Begad! How pleased we are!" said Tregellis-West grimly.

"And you expect us to like our study being used as a dustbin?" asked Watson sweetly.

Church and McClure grinned. Handforth struggled to release his legs; but, almost unconsciously, his chums held them tightly.

"Let me get up!" said Handforth, between his teeth. "Can't you idiots see that——"

Whether Handforth was going to tell his chums that Nipper & Co. were going to rush them, cannot be said. But that was what happened.

"Rush them!" shouted Nipper suddenly.

Sir Montie and Watson needed no further bidding. They went for their rivals, and McClure and Church were bundled on top of Handforth.

Handforth got the worst of that little scrap. He was not touched by Nipper & Co., but his own chums fell on top of him. He gasped and panted for breath as first Church and then McClure collapsed under pressure from Nipper & Co.

"Biff the cheeky bounders!" roared Nipper.

"No! Better still, tie them up!" said Watson quickly.

"Good!" said Sir Montie.

Handforth was useless in the scrap. All the breath had been knocked from his body by his falling chums. String appeared from apparently nowhere, and Church's right leg was tied to Handforth's left, and McClure's left leg was tied to Handforth's right.

That done, Nipper & Co. stood, panting for breath, gazing down at their helpless rivals.

"You fatheads!" growled Church. "We'll pay you back for this little lot!"

"What-ho!" groaned Handforth. "Oh, my hat! I feel as if I'd been through a mangle!"

"Now we'll take 'em back to their sty!" said Watson cheerfully.

"Grab McClure's leg, Montie!"

"Look here——"

It was not a bit of good Handforth blustering. Nipper seized both his legs—to which was tied one of Church's and one of McClure's—and Sir Montie took McClure's free leg, whilst Watson grabbed Church's.

Then the three were dragged along the corridor in the same

way in which Handforth had been dragged to Study C. And Church and McClure did not like this any more than had Handforth.

"Leggo!" hooted Church. "Ow!"

Handforth & Co. were dumped in their study, and Nipper & Co., still grinning, left them on the floor, with a final word of advice about not visiting other people's studies or treating them as dustbins.

"That's that!" said Nipper.

He went off to see if Nelson Lee had arrived back at the school, for he had to see him about Mr. Brown's case. But Nelson Lee was not back.

Nipper returned to Study C, where he found Sir Montie was comfortably reading.

"Not in—Hallo!"

Nipper broke off as the door, which had just been closed, opened, and Handforth appeared on the scene. Close behind were Church and McClure.

"Haven't you had enough?" demanded Nipper warmly.

"Pax!" said Handforth. "The fact is—"

"We want your help!" said McClure.

Nipper & Co. stared. It was not like Handforth & Co. to come to their rivals for help of any kind.

"My hat! In trouble?" asked Sir Montie quickly.

"No. Here, it's pax, isn't it?"

Handforth glared at Watson, who was tucking back his cuffs in a business-like manner.

"Yes, rather!" said Nipper. "Come in and make yourselves at home!"

Handforth & Co. soon found comfortable chairs. The leader from Study D looked unusually serious, and Nipper conjured up all manner of possible troubles the rival Co. had got into.

"Well?" said Nipper impatiently.

"I happen to know—Of course, what I'm going to say is in confidence, you chaps!" said Handforth cautiously. "If we're wrong, we don't want to eat too much humble-pie—understand?"

"Blessed if I do!" said Watson laconically. "But we're mum all right, Handforth!"

"Well, I happen to know that there was supposed to be a share-out of the Bannington Slate Club this evening—"

"My hat!" ejaculated Nipper incredulously.

"Begad!" gasped Sir Montie.

Watson remained silent, too overcome to speak.

Handforth & Co. looked at them sharply.

"Nothing wrong in that, is there?" asked Handforth.

"N-n-n-no!" stammered Nipper. "Go on!"

"Well, there won't be a giddy share-out, because some rotter has scooted with all the giddy funds!" went on Handforth, speaking quickly. "Now, what we want you chaps to help us in is this. Unless that rotter is caught some poor families in Bannington are going to suffer!"

"Y-y-yes!" murmured Nipper.

"We know Nipper is mighty hot in these detective stunts," pursued Handforth. "So we came to ask him to help us find the beast."

"Up against something stiff, aren't you?" asked Nipper quietly.

"Y-y-yes," admitted Church. "That's why we've come to you!"

"Thanks for the compliment!" said Nipper. "But how did you know about this business?"

"Heard a whisper in Bannington before I came back to St. Frank's," explained Handforth. "I was trying to tell these fat-headed chums of mine about it, when they collared me. The rest you know."

"Yes; and, in strict confidence, we know all about the affair," said Nipper quietly. "We've——"

"My hat!"

"You don't say!"

"Yes. We met the secretary of the club; he was coming to see Mr. Nelson Lee. We saw him instead, visited the club, saw the safes from which the money was taken, and came back to wait for Mr. Lee."

Handforth & Co. stared in surprise. They thought they were the only ones who knew anything about the robbery at the club. But Nipper & Co. apparently knew more than they did.

"But—but, if only for the sake of the poor people who will be dished, diddled, and done," said Handforth, "we must get to work and try to find something for Mr. Lee to go on when he tackles the case."

Nipper hesitated.

"I think we might do that," he said slowly. "I said we wouldn't go back unless something exceptional turns up. Do you call this exceptional, you chaps?"

He turned to Sir Montie and Watson as he spoke.

"Begad! I think so!" said Sir Montie briskly.

"Blessed if I can see what we can do!" said Watson. "We can't find giddy clues like Mr. Lee manages it!"

"That's so!" admitted Nipper. "But we'll go."

CHAPTER XIII.

The Swindler.

"Down here!"

It was Nipper who spoke. The two Co.'s, rivals at St. Frank's, but friends in the common purpose, turned down the main road in Bannington.

"How do you propose starting?" asked Handforth eagerly.

Nipper stopped.

"Blessed if I know!" he said slowly. "No good going on until we've made up our minds, either."

The juniors gathered round in a little group. They were about a hundred yards from the Bannington Slate Club offices.

"As a matter of strict fact," said Nipper, "I don't believe anybody knew anything about that safe."

"You think——"

"Brown knows more about the business than he cares to admit," said Nipper emphatically. "You see——"

"But—but the poor chap——"

"All bluff!" said Nipper curtly. "Just to cover his tracks."

"But the man wouldn't be fool enough to ask Nelson Lee to investigate the case," said Sir Montie. "Begad, that's a bit too thick!"

"Don't ask me to explain why I think so," went on Nipper.

"But—but I suppose it's instinct. For one thing, I can't see anybody not acquainted with the office knowing anything about the safes. They were cunningly hidden, you know."

Nipper had told Handforth & Co. of their little visit to the offices in the afternoon, but he failed to convince his companions that Brown had anything to do with the robbery. The secretary's distress had been so keen, as Sir Montie was quick to point out.

"Well, I'm going to have a look round the giddy rooms above the offices," said Nipper firmly. "We'll get into them somehow—call on the secretary and spin a yarn. You chaps keep him occupied while I spy round."

Handforth did not like the idea, and said so.

"We've nothing to be suspicious about. We've every reason to

think he's straight, since he was calling in Mr. Lee," he said, with a frown. "I don't like poking my nose in other people's business."

"Everybody is a suspect until the right one is found," said Nipper shortly but practically. "Mr. Lee will tell you the value of working on that."

"Well, I don't like it, and that's flat!" snapped Handforth.

"Then perhaps you'll say how you intended setting about the business?" said Nipper calmly.

Handforth flushed in the darkness. He was helpless. He could not think of anything that would help them. His heart was willing, but his brains wouldn't help him.

"Follow out my plan, then we'll see if Mr. Augustus Montague Brown is O.K.," said Nipper. "That'll get one suspect out of the way. It's those safes, so cunningly hidden, that I can't get over."

Nipper's mind was made up, and there was not one junior present who did not know how useless it was to try to persuade him to act otherwise.

"All right," said Handforth sullenly. "But if you're right I'll eat my giddy hat!"

"I'll not eat mine if I'm wrong," said Nipper decisively. "I'm not certain of my ground. I'm stepping cautiously. But I'll know where not to look if Brown's playing the straight game."

"That's so," agreed Sir Montie Tregellis-West, and Watson nodded agreement.

Thus it was settled. But their plan was destined not to be put into execution. Just as they moved away from the spot where they had stopped, a man came hurrying past.

At the precise moment of meeting the juniors from St. Frank's, the man passed under a lamp. Nipper gave a cry of joy.

"Mr. Lee!"

The man turned sharply. It was Nelson Lee, the Housemaster detective.

"Nipper!" he ejaculated. "Watson! Handforth! Bless my soul, what are you hanging about here for?"

Nipper explained quickly and breathlessly. Nelson Lee waited until he had stopped before he made any remark.

"That's rather funny," he said. "You see, I'm after Brown myself."

"Hurrah!" yelled Nipper, and turned triumphantly to his chums. "What did I tell you?"

"My hat!"

"Who'd have believed it?" said Handforth, convinced at last.

"No time to waste now," said the detective. "I'll explain a few things to you boys later on. In the meantime— My goodness!"

The Form-master broke off. A car came round the corner by the Slate Club offices and dashed past the group. It was a big car of the touring type, and was rushing along at fully thirty miles an hour.

Inside the car there was no light. But the light from the street lamp sent a glimmer into the interior, and Nelson Lee saw Brown lying back in the corner.

"That's Brown, sir!" said Nipper quickly.

"Yes, I know it," said Nelson Lee grimly. "And that's a swindler escaping with his plunder."

But fortune smiled upon the detective, and certainly not upon the fleeing swindler; for a powerful motor-cycle swept round the corner.

Accustomed to thinking quickly, Nelson Lee sprang into the path of the oncoming machine. With an ejaculation of alarm, the rider shut off the engine and put on his brakes.

"Important!" snapped Nelson Lee. "Lend me your bike, please!"

"I'll see you hanged first!" growled the man.

Nelson Lee did not argue. He tossed the man out of the saddle and leapt in his place. Nipper, not to be outdone, sprang on to the carrier.

The next moment the juniors were staring after the Form-master and junior as they raced after the car, already far in the distance. The owner of the cycle picked himself up from the road and dashed, shouting hoarsely, after Nelson Lee.

He came back when he realised the hopelessness of trying to catch them, and recovered somewhat from the comforting information that the man who had tossed him from the machine was Nelson Lee, Form-master at St. Frank's, and the famous detective.

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee and Nipper were whirling after the car. Neither spoke, for it needed all Nelson Lee's skill to drive the powerful machine over the rough and broken roads, whilst Nipper found his work cut out to hold on.

But they were overhauling the car easily. The most powerful car has not much chance of escaping a very speedy motor-cycle.

"Catching 'em!" shouted Nipper delightedly.

The detective did not answer.

It appeared to Nipper that the Form-master detective was not trying to get nearer than half a mile to the car so long as the road was straight. Only when the car disappeared round a corner did Nelson Lee open the throttle to its full extent.

"Helmford!" said Nipper suddenly.

The lights of the town drew near, and the car in front slackened down. Nelson Lee followed suit, and when the car drew up at an hotel Nelson Lee was two hundred yards away.

But Brown looked round and saw him, and Nelson Lee fumed as a headlight of a passing car lighted up his face. Brown ran into the hotel, hesitated a second, and dashed out back into the car.

But it did not move. Nelson Lee, knowing that he was discovered, drew up by the kerb, and sprang off the machine, leaving Nipper to prop it up. At the same moment Brown leapt out of the car and dashed into the hotel.

Nipper had one glance of the white, fear-stricken face before the swindler disappeared in the hotel, with Nelson Lee hard on his heels.

Inside the building all was commotion. Brown darted straight up the steps, through the hall, and up the stairs.

"Stop him!" shouted Nelson Lee.

Nipper was left to look after the machine. He knew that Brown was as good as caught.

But Brown made a fight for his liberty. Nipper saw him appear on the roof of the building not five minutes after he had disappeared into the hotel.

"Jacques!"

Nipper heard Brown shriek the name out. Jacques was the chauffeur of the car, and he was fumbling with the starting-handle. An instant later the engine hummed, and Jacques sprang into the driving-seat.

Nipper, throwing caution to the winds, dropped the motor-cycle and sprang forward.

At the same moment, when the car was directly beneath Brown, the swindler leapt out.

Bang!

With a mighty thud, Brown struck the hood of the car, and it darted forward. Nipper, wild with excitement, leapt up, caught the swindler by the leg, and, with a heave that jerked him off his own feet, dragged Brown to the ground.

Brown lay where he had fallen, completely knocked out, and a moment later Nelson Lee came dashing out of the hotel.

"Good!"

That was all he said to Nipper as he took in the situation at a single glance. But Nipper did not want words of praise.

Half an hour later Brown was in the police infirmary, the bicycle had been restored to its owner, a description of the car sent over a hundred wires, and a merry party of juniors was on its way back to St. Frank's.

With them was Nelson Lee, and he told them the story as he walked by their side.

"I was asked to go up to London by the Chief at Scotland Yard," said Nelson Lee. "The main object was to investigate a big slate-club swindle in London. Brown was involved in the London affair as well as the one at Bannington. After the big scoop in town we missed him, but eventually traced him here.

"He did not know I was engaged on the case, and, in beseeching my aid, he apparently thought to throw dust in the eyes of the police."

"My hat!"

"Brown, obviously, was going to make much of the fact that he had asked me to take up the case when the inevitable discovery was made that there would be no share-out. For some reason he got alarmed, and decided to bolt to Helmford, there to wait and see how the wind blew. The rest you know."

The juniors' eyes shone with excitement, and if there was talking for hours after the lights had been turned out in the dormitory who can blame them?

There had been underhand work, as Handforth had said; but he did not eat his hat because Nipper had been proved correct in his theory that Brown was not playing a straight game.

Nipper very kindly let him off!

CHAPTER XIV. A Chance for Study C.

"Rotten!"

Nipper, leader of Study C, in the Remove passage at St. Frank's, made that remark in a very disgusted tone. Nipper was not in high spirits.

Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Watson, the other members of the study, were looking just as cheerful as was Nipper. And that was not saying much.

It was a Saturday afternoon, and there was no match. There was not even a senior match which Nipper & Co. could honour by their presence. Moreover, it was raining hard.

"I agree with you," said Sir Montie, looking up as Nipper spoke. "Begad, I feel bored almost to tears!"

"I am!" grumbled Watson morosely.

"Handforth & Co. are in the same cart," said Nipper. "I wish we could think of something jolly good in the way of a wheeze. I should just love to rag Study D!"

There was silence in the study for five minutes. Then Nipper rose and went on to the window to peer out in the Triangle.

It was still pouring with rain, and Nipper's hope that it would be fine enough for them to go into the village disappeared.

"Rotten!" he murmured. "Can't think of any decent thing."

Watson and Sir Montie jumped.

"My hat!" exclaimed Watson.

"Begad!" ejaculated Sir Montie.

Nipper stared at his chums in surprise.

"What's biting you?" he demanded warmly.

"Nothin'!" answered Sir Montie. "But, Nipper, I'm——"

"Have you thought of a wheeze?" asked Nipper eagerly.

Sir Montie shook his head.

"Don't talk to me, Nipper!" he said severely. "I'm done with you!"

"I shall have to change studies, I suppose," murmured Watson. "I'm rather sorry, because we're pretty comfortable here, you know."

"I know something else, too!" snapped Nipper. "I know you're a pair of silly dummies!"

"Worse and worse!" murmured Sir Montie.

Nipper flushed, and clenched his hands.

"Look here, you chumps!" he said fiercely. "What's the giddy game?"

Sir Montie shook his head sadly, and Watson wiped an imaginary tear from his eye.

"Nipper! Oh, Nipper!" murmured Sir Montie distressfully.

"What's the matter, you chump?" shouted Nipper excitedly.

"I'll punch your napper in a minute, Montie!"

"Violence will not improve matters," said Sir Montie calmly.

"I should have to submit to it, I suppose, as I couldn't lay my hands upon you."

"You'd better not try!" growled Nipper.

He flung himself down into his chair, and stared again at the fire. He did not see the wink which Sir Montie and Watson exchanged.

But he heard a little groan that escaped Watson's lips.

"Look here!" he said furiously. "You dummies are pulling my giddy leg instead of Handforth & Co.'s! Can't you think of anything else, you fatheads? I can't think of anything decent enough——"

Oh, begad!"

"There he goes again!" said Watson.

Nipper began to get cross. He did not know what was the matter with his chums.

"You dummies——"

"Nipper, let me give you a word of advice," said Watson seriously. "If you can't think of anything decent, you must try and keep your mind a blank. I know there's not——"

That was just as far as Watson got. With a howl of wrath Nipper flung himself on top of his chum, and bumped Watson's head on the rug.

"Ow! Yow!" roared Watson. "Drag him off, Montie! Yow!"

"You chump! You fathead!"

Nipper bumped Watson's head on the rug by way of emphasising each remark. Sir Montie, striving to keep from laughing, grabbed Nipper by the shoulders, and pulled him off Watson.

"Let him alone!" he said. "He's quite right!"

"My hat! I'll—I'll—— Oh, merciful Aunt Sempronia!" gasped Nipper. "If you chaps don't explain, I'll biff you both all over the giddy House!"

"Keep calm, then!" said Watson, ruefully rubbing the back of his head. "You said you couldn't think of anything decent, you big, fatheaded chump!"

"I meant anything decent—new—original—great—in the way of a wheeze, you burbling jackass!" hooted Nipper excitedly. "My hat! I'll——"

"Then why didn't you say what you meant, chump?" growled Watson. "You've busted my napper!"

"I'll bust it again if you pull my leg like that any more," warned Nipper. "You silly chumps! Just as I meant——"

Nipper, seething with indignation, resumed his seat without completing his remark. Sir Montie and Watson, chuckling, also sat down.

Silence once more reigned supreme, but not for long. Nipper simply could not remain still that afternoon.

"Any cricket in the local paper?" he asked.

"Yes, rather!" said Watson. "Toppin' match at Helmford on Wednesday. The paper is on the table—under my books."

Nipper left his chair, took up the paper, and went back again. Sir Montie and Watson were glad that Nipper had something to do at last. It kept him quiet.

But it was not long before Nipper again jumped up.

"Chaps," he exclaimed delightedly, "here's the greatest wheeze of the giddy year!"

"Eh?" murmured Sir Montie sleepily.

"Wake up, you chump!" shouted Nipper. "Wakey-wakey! Hi, hi! Get up, Watson!"

Sir Montie and Watson, probably realising that it would save trouble if they did as Nipper asked, sat up and took notice.

"Have you seen this announcement?" asked Nipper, holding the local newspaper before his chums' eyes.

It was an announcement under the heading of "Marriages," and read thus:

"HANDFORTH—LLEWELLYN.—At Bannington Parish Church, Tuesday, the 24th inst., Edward Handforth, youngest son of Herbert Handforth, to Marjorie Dora, eldest daughter of John Robert David Llewellyn, of Swansea."

"Now turn to this little lot!" went on Nipper excitedly.

He turned the pages as he spoke, and folded the paper so that one paragraph stood out.

"A very pretty wedding took place at the Parish Church, Bannington, on Tuesday last. The bridegroom, who looked exceedingly young to accept the responsibilities of a husband, was Edward Handforth, and the bride was the charming eldest daughter of Mr. John Robert David Llewellyn, of Swansea."

There was some more matter referring to the bride and bridegroom, but Nipper declared all that was totally unnecessary—as far as they were concerned.

"You've read that?" he asked quickly. "Come on, then! Get your giddy caps! I've thought of the greatest wheeze of my life! Coats, you chumps! Come on, down to the jolly old village!"

CHAPTER XV.

Nipper Explains.

"Look here——"

Sir Montie stopped suddenly as the chums strode out towards the village.

"Kim on!" said Nipper. "We haven't much time to waste!"

But Sir Montie obstinately refused to budge.

"You're going to explain before I move another yard!" he said firmly.

"Hear, hear!" assented Watson.

Nipper started.

"Can't you guess?"

"Begad, no!"

"Our Handforth has been married to a Swansea lady!"

"Eh?"

"Rot!"

"But you saw it in the paper!"

"That wasn't our Handforth, you chump!"

"Ah, but how do we know that?"

And with that question Nipper stared, with twinkling eyes, into the amazed faces of his chums. They saw the wheeze on the instant, and burst into a roar of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha! You mean——"

"We're going to help Handforth celebrate his wedding!" chuckled Nipper. "My hat! What a chance!"

"Ha, ha, ha! But what—— Oh, my stars!"

Watson broke off. He simply could not talk for laughing.

"We're going to buy a nice little lot of confetti," went on Nipper, chuckling gleefully. "Then I think a little rice——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Watson. "What a joke!"

The confetti was obtained in Bannington without much trouble. The shopkeeper eyed the juniors seriously as he handed over the paper.

"A wedding at St. Frank's?" he asked.

"Well, not exactly," said Nipper cautiously. "We only want the confetti for one chap, you see."

The shopkeeper nodded as if he understood, but the chums knew perfectly well that he did not. They left the shop, chuckling with joy. Handforth was in for a warm time.

The rice was the next item to be secured, and they had some little difficulty in getting it. The provision merchant said that they were not allowed to sell rice for weddings, and Nipper jumped.

"Who said anything about a wedding?" he demanded warmly.

"Well, you've confetti in your hands, young sir," returned the man. "I suppose you're not going to make a pudding with it?"

Nipper flushed, and tucked the paper bags hastily into his pockets. But Sir Montie had to take some of it, for the juniors had purchased a large quantity. They did not believe in doing things by halves.

The rice was at last handed over, and Watson tucked it away in his coat-pocket.

"Now for the giddy flower merchants!" said Nipper, with another chuckle.

"There you are—right opposite!" said Watson, pointing across the road.

The juniors hurried across the road to the shop, and asked the assistant if she had any flowers or buttonholes two or three days old.

The lady stared, hardly believing her ears.

"Did—did you say two or three days old?" she echoed.

"Yes, certainly!" said Nipper cheerfully.

"Well, dear me, that is a most peculiar request!" she said quickly. "But—but I'll see what we have at the back of the shop."

The young lady disappeared behind a door, to return a few minutes later with four buttonholes, all of which were in a state far from fresh.

Nipper selected the one that looked the worst, and the one that smelled the worst, and paid over the required threepence. Then the juniors returned to St. Frank's.

There was no sound from Study D, and Nipper chuckled again.

"To think," he said solemnly, "that an hour ago we were sitting here like a lot of asses, trying to think of something to do!"

"Or somebody to do!" said Sir Montie, with a laugh. "Begad! I'm getting quite excited!"

Nipper held up his hand, and wagged a finger warningly at his chum.

"Don't go and give the game away," he said, "or I shall jolly well punch your head, my son!"

Sir Montie smiled.

"Now, what we want to do is to take some of the confetti up and put it in Handforth's boots!" said Watson, in a low voice.

"And, what's more, keep our voices down! Handforth & Co. might hear us, and then the fat will be in the fire!"

That was sound advice, and Nipper and Sir Montie nodded assent. The three juniors went up into the dormitory, which was, fortunately, not occupied by any other juniors.

Handforth's boots were filled with rice and his trouser-bottoms with confetti. When they had finished, the juniors looked at one another and smiled.

"A little surprise for Handforth when he comes up this evening!" said Nipper, with another chuckle. "I guess he will wish he'd never been born by the time this jape has petered out."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now we'll go and see the merry bridegroom," went on Nipper. "Gentlemen, the fun commences!"

Nipper knocked upon the door of Study D; there was no reply.

"Walk in!" whispered Watson.

Nipper turned the handle, and three juniors from Study C walked into their rivals' study.

Handforth was curled upon the rug before the fire, fast asleep. McClure was in the easy-chair, and Church was lying across the table. They, too, was fast asleep.

"Hi!" roared Nipper. "Wake up, my giddy infants! Hi, hi!"

Handforth woke with a start, and jumped to his feet.

"Hallo, hallo!" he said sleepily. "Is there a fire?"

"No," said Nipper, with a chuckle. "But, Handforth, I'm surprised at you!"

Handforth stared.

"Gone off your dot?" he asked pleasantly.

"Not at all," answered Nipper coolly. "But we think you might have told us something about it, Handforth!"

"What the dickens are you talking about, you silly chump?" demanded Handforth, rising to his feet and facing the trio from Study C.

"Your marriage!" said Nipper calmly.

"That's it—the wedding!" said Sir Montie. "Begad! We thought you'd tell old friends, Handy—"

"M-m-m-my marriage!" stammered Handforth.

McClure and Church got to their feet as if somebody had jerked a red-hot needle into a soft part of their bodies.

"Yes, you artful dog, your marriage!" said Nipper, waving his forefinger at Handforth remonstratively. "We didn't know anything about it until we saw it in the local paper!"

"You—you—you hurbbling asses!" stuttered Handforth furiously. "You're talking out of the back of your neck, you idiot, Nipper! M-married!"

"M-m-my hat!" ejaculated McClure. "You're not serious, are you?"

"Rather!" said Nipper. "You look in the paper and see for yourselves!"

McClure and Church made one bound for the bookcase, where the local paper could be seen lying on top. They opened it feverishly at the "Marriages" column.

"M-m-my only topper!" gasped Church suddenly.

"Jumping rattlesnakes!" panted McClure. "Handforth, you long fathead! And—and you didn't tell us— Oh, my hat!"

Handforth emitted a roar like an infuriated bull, and rushed at his chums. Church was bowled over to the floor, and McClure was sent sprawling on to the table. The paper dropped to the floor, to be promptly seized by the indignant Handforth.

It took him about three seconds to find the notice which had first attracted Nipper's attention. His face, as he read, went positively white.

"I—I—I wasn't there!" he stammered at last. "M-m-my hat! Nipper, you surely don't think this—this refers to me, do you?"

"Certainly!" said Nipper calmly. "Who else would the young bridegroom be?"

"Oh dear!"

"If it had said a handsome bridegroom, then I might have thought there was another Edward Handforth," went on Nipper seriously.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth, always an impulsive youth, did not stop to hear anything else that Nipper might say. He rushed from the study.

Church and McClure, their faces flushed with excitement, picked up the paper Handforth had dropped, and hurriedly scanned the paragraph referring to the wedding.

"M-m-my hat!" ejaculated McClure. "The silly young ass!"

"The absolute dummy!" hooted Church. "Come to think of it, Handforth went out on Tuesday morning—got a special pass to go into Bannington for some reason or other."

"That must have been to get married," said Nipper at once. "Well, we'll leave Handforth to you chaps; but, all the same, I really think he might have let us know something about it!"

"M-m-married!" exclaimed Church dully. "The—the husband! Oh, my only Aunt Sempronia!"

"I wonder if it was the girl in the flower shop?" murmured McClure. "I know old Handforth has turned the beaming smile on her once or twice when we have passed? Or perhaps the girl in the fish-shop?"

"We can't say!" said Nipper. "I expect Handforth will own up now that he knows he is discovered. The artful dog—keeping it quiet like this!"

And Nipper & Co. left the study. Not until they reached their own study did the serious expression leave their faces. Then they looked at one another, smiled, and jumped to bury their heads in a cushion so that their laughter should not be heard by Church or McClure.

They remained in that position for some few minutes.

"M-m-my only bonnet!" gasped Sir Montie. "Begad! Toppin'!"

"That's a good start!" said Nipper, wiping the tears of merriment from his face. "I guess this is one to us—but there's more to come!"

Nipper was right.

CHAPTER XVI.

Poor Old Handforth!

"Hallo, Handforth, how's the wife?"

It was Nipper who asked the leader of Study D that question. Handforth did not appear to like being asked at all. His face reddened furiously as he ran towards the cool junior from Study C.

"You rotter!" he hooted furiously. "I'll punch your head!"

Nipper frowned.

"Don't call me a rotter!" he said hotly. "By Jove, I'm only asking you a civil question, aren't I?"

Sir Montie and Watson seemed to have difficulty in keeping from smiling. They had accompanied Nipper up to the dormitory when the bell had rung for bed.

Handforth glared at the rival leader.

"You chaps know jolly well I'm not married!" he shouted.

"Hallo!"

"What's that, Handforth?"

"Married?"

Juniors who had come up to the dormitory early stopped in their undressing to look round as Handforth blurted out.

The junior's discomfiture increased as the word was passed round that Handforth had said something about getting married.

"I didn't!" roared Handforth, as Church mentioned the newspaper report. "M-m-my hat! I'll squash you, Church!"

Handforth rushed for his chum, and in a moment the two were locked together in close embrace. Handforth's face was flushed and furious, whilst Church looked almost dully towards Nipper as they swung round.

"T-take the dummy away!" cried Church. "Here, Mac! Rescue! Ow! Yooop! Groo——"

Crash!

The two juniors crashed to the floor, to the shouts of encouragement from the juniors, who had quickly gathered round.

But Nipper & Co. separated them. There would have been a master or a prefect up had they not done so. And the arrival of those gentlemen generally signified a few hundred lines being ladled out.

"Gerroff me chest!" gasped Church.

Nobody saw Watson suddenly leave the party and thrust his hand for a second into Handforth's coat, which he had tossed carelessly on to his bed.

"Steady, man!" said Nipper quietly. "What's the good of making a fuss now that everything is known? Stand up, and receive the congratulations of all your chums!"

"I don't want your dashed congratulations!" howled Handforth.

"Holy smoke! He must have a nagging wife!" said Peel, in surprise. "Marriage doesn't improve your temper, does it, Handy?"

Handforth collapsed on to his bed. He simply could not have stood up any longer. He was done, bewildered, too amazed to express his feelings.

The juniors left him at last, and proceeded with their undressing. But not for long.

Hardly had they ceased discussing the incident than there was a shout of surprise from Handforth's end of the dormitory.

"Confetti!"

The cry was taken up on all sides, and there was another rush for Handforth. The leader of Study D was standing in the midst of a thousand pieces of scattered confetti!

He had thrown his coat across the bed to the chair that was by the head of his bed, and there had suddenly appeared the confetti.

Nipper looked quickly at Sir Montie, who shook his head slightly to indicate that he did not know how the confetti came to be in Handforth's pocket. But Watson nodded coolly when Nipper glanced at him.

Nipper and Sir Montie could not restrain their laughter as they looked at Handforth's face. Handforth was not smiling—he was staring dully at the confetti, and from the scattered pieces of coloured paper to his coat.

"My hat!" ejaculated Nipper. "That does it, Handforth!"

"You put it there!" shouted Handforth furiously. "I'll——"

"I certainly didn't!" said Nipper calmly. "Honour bright!"

Handforth hesitated. Even in his wild state of bewilderment he would not doubt Nipper's word. Nipper would not say "honour bright" if he was pulling Handforth's leg.

"Oh, well——" he began.

He broke off disgustedly, and proceeded with his undressing, without so much as a glance towards Tregellis-West or Watson.

The lights were turned out very shortly after Handforth had tucked himself in his bed, and for a time there was silence. Then someone started singing "The Bells are Ringing for Me and my Gal!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The rest of the juniors roared with laughter. But Handforth did not laugh. He crept out of bed, and crawled along the floor to where the junior was singing.

The song was cut off very sharply.

"The Bells are Ringing for—' Ow! Yow! Yoop!"

Crash!

"Jumping rattlesnakes!" ejaculated Nipper. "What on earth's happened?"

It was Fullwood who had been entertaining the juniors with the song. He proceeded to entertain them to quite another tune when Handforth reached him.

Handforth dragged him out of bed by his feet, and he met the floor with a crash.

"Yow! Take him off, somebody!" he yelled. "The man's a married chump! Yow—ow! Leggo my ear!"

"I'll pull the blessed thing right off!" said Handforth sulphurously. "Take that, you nutty beast!"

And Handforth, with a final pull of the luckless singer's ear, went back to his own bed. After that Handforth was let severely alone by the Remove.

It was not quite light when the rising-bell went, and one of the early-risers turned on the lights. They showed Timothy Tucker, the latest addition to the Remove Form at St. Frank's, fully dressed and approaching Handforth.

"Ah, my dear sir!" said Tucker. "The position is this—"

"Rats!" snapped Handforth. "Buzz off!"

"But I have purposely left my bed at an earlier hour than is necessary!" persisted Tucker. "I wanted to speak to you, my dear sir. I wanted to speak to you—"

"Well, you've spoken, you tame lunatic!"

"Admitted, sir—admitted. But the express purpose of my getting up early was to talk to you on the subject of marriage—on the subject of marriage, my dear sir. The position is this—"

"Shut up, you frabjous dummy!" howled Handforth. "If you mention marriage again, I'll—I'll biff you black and blue!"

"Violence, my dear sir, is totally unnecessary. I repeat—"

Handforth dropped his towel, and made for the junior. T. T. did not turn a hair.

"Admitted, my dear sir, marriage is a very happy state—admitted! But for one so extremely young—" he went on.

Handforth reached him at that moment, and the leader of Study D closed with Timothy Tucker, hugging him like a long-lost brother.

"You burbling chump!" panted Handforth, as they struggled to and fro. "I'll—I'll spifficate you!"

"I hope your wife does not have to—to put up with this—this, my dear sir!" gasped Timothy Tucker. "The position is this—"

Tucker and Handforth went down to the floor with a bump, and the juniors crowded round to watch them.

"Handforth doesn't scrap badly for a married man, does he?" said Nipper seriously.

"Perhaps he has a sparring partner in his wife," observed Watson.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go it, Handforth!"

"Stick it, T. T.!"

But Nipper, as captain of the Remove, thought it time to interfere. It was Sunday morning, and there would be trouble if a master or a prefect came up to the dormitory to stop the row.

He seized Handforth by the scruff of the neck and jerked him off Tucker. Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Watson assisted the new junior to his feet.

"Rough—very rough, my dear sir!" said Timothy Tucker, as soon as he regained his breath. "The position is this. If Handforth really got married, I think we ought to make him a present. We ought to make him a present."

"A thoroughly sound proposition," said Nipper. "But, on the other hand, I propose Handforth brings the bride to meet us."

"Hear, hear!"

"Bride!" shrieked Handforth. "Bride! I haven't got a blinkin' bride, you dummies! I'm still single——"

"But you can't be!" said Nipper, in surprise. "How can a married man be single?"

Handforth could say no more. He was speechless with rage. He turned and went to his bed, his face the colour of a beetroot. But his troubles had not ended yet.

As soon as he put on his trousers confetti literally poured out of the turned-up bottoms. There was a shriek of laughter from the juniors.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Did Mrs. Handforth get as much as you, Handy?" asked Church.

Church was Handforth's study-mate, and Handforth was not going to stand that. In a moment Handforth had seized his chum, and the two were waltzing down the passage between the beds.

"I'll give you Mrs. Handforth!" panted Handforth furiously.

"I don't want her!" gasped Church. "Who wants your wife—Ow!"

Biff, biff!

Church was getting his head punched, and once again Nipper had to go to the rescue. He pulled Handforth away from his chum, and Church glared.

"You dummy!" he said hotly. "I'm a jolly good mind to——"

"Lemme get at him!" roared Handforth, struggling in Nipper's grasp. "Just lemme get at him, and——"

"Steady, Handy!" said Nipper warningly. "It's Sunday, you know."

Handforth, with a defiant glare at the juniors round about him, turned and resumed his dressing. There was no further interruption from Church!

The juniors by this time were quite sure that Handforth had been married. The newspaper report was known to most of them by heart through constant reading. There was also the confetti knocking about the dormitory that had come from Handforth's clothes.

In fact, Handforth was so bewildered that he almost believed he had been married himself.

Nipper & Co. had merely seen the notice in the paper. Any other junior might have seen it, and started the story that he was no longer a junior at St. Frank's, but a married man with responsibilities.

He went over to Nipper when he had dressed, and the two juniors went down to the dining hall for breakfast.

"Here, I say, Nipper!" said Handforth plaintively. "You—you surely don't think I'm married, do you?"

Nipper nodded his head sadly.

"I'm afraid I cannot help but think it," he said slowly. "You see, there's the report in the paper, and there's the confetti."

They were too early for breakfast, and Nipper went to Study D with Handforth.

"I don't know!" said Nipper, striving hard to keep from laughing. "I must go to my study now. See you later!"

Handforth nodded, and went slowly into his own study.

There were little groups of Remove juniors to be found after breakfast, talking of Handforth's "marriage."

Timothy Tucker was keen on getting up a subscription to make a suitable presentation to Handforth. But he could find few sympathisers for the moment. The juniors wanted to know more about the affair from Handforth himself before they parted with their money.

"The position is this, my dear sirs," said Tucker, for the hundredth time that morning. "We want—"

"We want you to buzz off!" growled Grey, of Study E. "Hop it, T. T.!"

Tucker could not get a hearing. He admitted many things in five minutes, and made many attempts to outline the position. But the juniors simply would not listen to him.

Church and McClure were much perturbed over the whole business. Despite the fact that Handforth was more often than not punching their heads, there existed a great liking between the three juniors.

Handforth had not returned with them to the study after church, and the two juniors made their way to their study.

"Where's he gone now, I wonder?" said Church. "To see his wife, do you think?"

McClure shook his head.

"Blessed if I know!" he said. "He hasn't come back. My hat! Can you smell anything, Church?"

Church sniffed. There certainly was a peculiar smell in the study.

"Must be a dead mouse!" said McClure, looking round the study.

Suddenly he stopped, and stared at that portion of the bookcase usually occupied by Handforth's books. There were no books there at the moment, but in their place was a faded buttonhole.

"M-m-my hat!" ejaculated Church. "That—that proves it!"

He had followed the direction in which McClure was looking so amazedly.

"It does!" said McClure, in dismay. "Oh, Handy!"

McClure sat down into the chair with a groan. The buttonhole was the last straw. Handforth must be a married man, and would have to leave St. Frank's.

Handforth himself came into the study at that moment; but he did not heed his chums. He dropped heavily into the nearest chair, and buried his face in his hands.

He remained in that position for fully ten minutes before he looked up.

"I can hear nothing else but 'How's your wife?'" he said bitterly, and added, angrily: "I haven't got a blessed wife—at least, I don't think so!"

"You—you don't think so!" echoed McClure and Church, in amazement.

"No; I'm sure I don't know anything!" said Handforth miserably. "I—I don't think I'm old enough to be a married man, do you?"

Church and McClure looked at one another significantly. Handforth was evidently feeling his way to announcing the truth. He wanted to know what his chums thought about it before he said anything.

That was how Church and McClure looked at it. But they were saved the necessity of answering the question.

Nipper & Co. arrived at that moment. They looked solemnly at Handforth & Co. as they closed the door behind them.

"On behalf of Study C," began Nipper seriously, "I'm asked to present this little recognition of our regard, Handforth."

He dropped a small parcel on the table as he spoke, and backed towards the door as Handforth rose furiously to his feet.

Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Watson slid out of the study, and Nipper, still watching the exasperated leader of Study D, followed, and closed the door.

"I'd like to be able to lick Nipper!" said Handforth, between his teeth. "I'd—I'd— Oh, I dunno what I'd do!"

"Aren't you going to open the parcel, old man?" asked Church softly.

"Hang the parcel!" snapped Handforth, resuming his seat.

"Shall I open it?" asked McClure. "I think it's usual to display all presents at a wedding."

"Do what you like with it!" growled Handforth. "And I shall jolly well punch your blessed heads if you talk to me again to-day!"

Church and McClure looked at each other, and the former nodded. McClure opened the parcel.

At first their faces expressed amazement as they took sheet after sheet of paper from a small article that was carefully wrapped up.

But when they saw what Nipper & Co.'s present was, their amazement turned swiftly to incredulity, to be quickly followed by shrieks of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, hold me up! Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth looked up quickly. His chums had collapsed into the nearest chairs, and were holding their sides. Tears of merriment streamed down their faces.

"You fatheads!" shouted Handforth angrily. "What are you laughing at now?"

"The—the present!" stuttered Church. "Look!"

Handforth, more than ever bewildered, looked down at the table, where the parcel had been dropped.

It was a piece of cake, burned brown. Accompanying it was the following note:

"You take the cake, and have been done brown!—Nipper & Co."

That was all. But it told Handforth all he wanted to know. But he didn't laugh. He left that to his chums.

With one furious glance at his almost helpless study-mates, Handforth rushed out to see Nipper & Co. He came back a few minutes later considerably dishevelled.

"That's that!" he said, with a sigh of relief. "It was Nipper's blessed wheeze! He took the chance when he saw the name in the paper. But it's all over now!"

There Handforth made a great mistake. It was weeks before he heard the last of his "wedding"!

CHAPTER XVII.

Handforth's Latest.

"Gurrrgh!"

From behind the locked door of Study D in the Remove passage at St. Frank's came the sound of an unearthly groan. At least, it was more like a groan than any other sound; it was mysterious and uncanny.

Along the passage study doors opened, and their occupants, startled by this strange sound, poked out their heads.

"Gurrrgh!"

Nipper came out of his study, followed by Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson.

Nipper looked rather anxiously at his chums.

"Wonder what on earth's the matter?" he said. "Sounds as if that ass Handy is murdering someone!"

"Never know," said Watson. "Handy's such a strange beast!"

The Duke of Somerton, De Valerie, and Augustus Hart, of Study M, came along the passage towards Nipper and his chums, and a moment later a few other fellows, curious to see what was the matter, had joined the group.

"Are you chaps sure it came from Handy's study?" asked De Valerie.

"Positive!" said Nipper. "Besides, his is the only study here with a light on. All the other fellows have gone down to the Common-room."

"That's so," admitted Somerton. "We had our prep to do——"

"So had we," said Nipper.

"Gurrrgh!"

The crowd in the passage jumped as that unearthly sound came from behind the locked door of Handforth's study.

"G-good heavens!" stuttered Reginald Pitt. "What on earth is it?"

"P'r'aps Handy's killing Church or McClure?" suggested Tommy Watson.

"Rot!"

"More likely some ass in there is trying to frighten us all!" chuckled Hart.

"He wouldn't have the light on then, fathead!"

"H'm! I suppose not!"

The crowd of juniors looked at one another in surprise. Then they looked at Nipper. Nipper, being captain of the Form, they looked upon it as being up to him to do something.

"Best thing we can do is to knock at the door," said Nipper.

And he gave the study door a hearty bang.

Thump!

No answer came from the other side of the locked door. It seemed as if there really was something the matter.

Thump!

"If he doesn't answer I'm going to break in the door," said Nipper anxiously. "It might be serious, you know!"

Thump!

Gurrrgh!"

"Good gracious!"

"Break the door in, Nipper!"

"Hold hard!" said Hart quickly. "Our key fits Handy's door; we locked him in once with it."

And he rushed off to Study M. In a second he was back with the key. Nipper fitted it in the lock, turned it, and flung the door open.

The juniors entered in a crowd; then they staggered back.

"My hat!"

"What the dickens——"

In front of the study mirror stood Edward Oswald Handforth. His face was red, and queerly contorted. From his twisted mouth came a weird and awful sound.

"Gug-gug-gurrrgh!"

Handforth showed no signs of having even heard the group in the doorway; all his attentions were fixed on the mirror.

"Poor old Handy!" said Nipper softly.

"Collar him before he can resist!" breathed Hart. "He might get dangerous!"

Silently Nipper, Watson, Sir Montie, and Hart crept behind the leader of Study D. Then, together, they sprang upon him, and brought him heavily to earth.

Bump!

"Yaroogh!"

Edward Oswald let forth a yell that would have awakened the Seven Sleepers.

"Shush!" said Nipper.

"Lemme up! Gerrof!" howled Handforth.

He struggled frantically, but it was of no avail. Nipper had one knee firmly planted on his chest, while Pitt sat on both legs.

Handforth's face was red still, but red with rage.

He let forth a yell like the bellow of a bull, and struggled so fiercely that Nipper had to clutch the leg of the table to keep his seat.

"Shush!" said Nipper soothingly. "You'll be all right in a minute!"

Somehow, this did not have the effect of soothing Handforth. He spluttered in incoherent rage.

"You—you—Gerrup—"

"Stuff a hanky in his mouth, quick!" urged Somerton, from the doorway. "He might bite off his tongue!"

Nipper drew forth a dirty handkerchief, and endeavoured to force it between Handforth's locked jaws. Pitt, who had hold of Handforth's arms, gripped that worthy's nose between his forefinger and thumb. It was a question whether Handforth was to be gagged or suffocated. He wisely chose the former course.

Like the sound of a bursting tyre he opened his mouth. Nipper rammed home the handkerchief.

"It won't keep in like that!" grinned Pitt. "Take off his tie and bind it round his head!"

Nipper obeyed quickly, and in a moment Handforth was trussed up like a Christmas goose. He was breathing heavily and noisily through his nose. His eyes glittered angrily, almost feverishly.

"Someone get some water!" ordered Nipper.

Somerton ran off down the passage.

"Poor old Handy!" sighed Nipper.

"I've seen it coming for a long time," Pitt remarked compassionately. "It was lucky Church and McClure weren't in the study. Handy might have killed them."

Handforth was still struggling frantically, and his eyes gleamed threats that his mouth could not express.

There was a noise in the passage, and Somerton came rushing up with a pail of water. Behind him were half a dozen or so of the Remove. Church and McClure, Handforth's study-mates, were there, and they pushed their way to the front.

"Good heavens! Poor old Handy!" said Church, with a sorrowful shake of the head.

"I've seen it coming for a long time!" sighed Church.

Handforth looked daggers at them. If looks could kill, Church and McClure would have fallen dead.

"Stand clear, you chaps!" said Nipper. "When I say 'Go!' all jump clear, and you chuck the water over him, Somerton!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

To Cool Enthusiasm.

Handforth kicked and struggled furiously. Apparently he knew what was coming.

"Now," said Nipper, "are you ready? Go!"

Swish!

As Handforth's captors jumped clear, Somerton hurled the pail of water full in Handforth's fiery face.

"Yuggghh!"

Handforth sprang to his feet, and struggled frantically with his gag.

In half a second it was off. Taking a deep breath, he gave one bull-like bellow of rage, then rushed at his well-meaning friends.

The group of juniors jumped back to the open door. But they were too late. Handforth's flail-like fists were among them.

"Ow!"

"Wow!"

"You rotters—you—you—" spluttered Handforth.

"Coliar him!" gasped Nipper. "He's mad!"

A combined rush on the part of six angry juniors forced Edward Oswald on the floor.

"You maniacs!" he shrieked. "What's the game?"

"Shush!" urged Nipper. "You're ill!"

"Ill?"

"Shush! Don't get excited!"

"You fathead! I'm not ill! Wait till I get up, that's all! Lemme up!"

Nipper & Co. stared doubtfully at the leader of Study D. Either he had recovered, or they had been labouring under a misapprehension. For Handforth seemed sane. At any rate, not more mad than usual.

"Make it pax!"

"Pax!" growled Handforth reluctantly. Against such odds he stood no chance.

He rose to his feet, a forlorn sight. Water oozed from every part of him; it trickled from his hair, and all round him were little pools.

Several juniors began to chuckle, and Handforth clenched his big hands.

"Pax!" chuckled Nipper. "But you do look funny!"

"Poor old Handy!" said Church.

"You silly fatheads! You burbling chumps!" hooted the incensed Handforth. "Can't a fellow practise ventriloquism in his study without having a silly lot of lunatics come bungling in?"

"Ventriloquism?"

Nipper & Co. looked at one another in surprise.

"V-ventriloquism?"

"Yes," hooted Handforth. "Ventriloquism!"

Church walked over to the table and picked up the red-covered book that lay there. He handed it, still laughing, to Nipper.

Nipper, in some surprise, looked at it.

"My hat!" he gasped, looking at the title. "'Ventriloquism in Two Days!'"

"What!" shouted Pitt.

The crowd in the doorway gave an astonished gasp.

"Do you mean that you were ventriloquising, then?" demanded Hart, with some interest.

Handforth beamed.

"My dear chap, I'm a jolly good ventriloquist!" He stared loftily at the grinning crowd in the doorway. "All right, you grinning asses, I'll jolly well show you!"

Nipper & Co. watched him in amazement. Handforth was not a youth greatly noted for his intellectual powers; in fact, he was rather dense. He had a pair of powerful fists, which he used to drive his arguments home, but that summed up his assets.

"Listen!"

Handforth screwed his face into an expression of intense agony.

The juniors stared and waited.

"Gurrrh!"

Nipper & Co. jumped, and stared suspiciously at Handforth. But the leader of Study D looked quite pleased with himself.

"You heard that?" he asked.

Nipper & Co. blinked at him. It really looked as if at last Handforth had "gone off the rails."

"I've seen it coming for a long time," said Church sorrowfully. Handforth frowned.

"When you've finished talking drivell, you grinning ass, perhaps you'll answer my question. Listen!"

"Gurrrh!"

Handforth beamed proudly at the group of juniors in the doorway. And the group edged back nervously.

"Did you hear that?" roared Handforth.

Nipper & Co. began to think that perhaps Handforth was, after all, a little bit mad.

"Humour him!" whispered Hart, nudging Nipper.

"Y-yes!" said Nipper. "We heard it. Wonderful!"

"You're not such an ass as I thought," said Handforth graciously.

"Thank you!" stammered Nipper.

Handforth held up his hand, and once again performed feats of extraordinary skill in the contortionist line with his face.

"'Ere I am!"

The crowd in the doorway gasped. Handforth was under the impression that that sounded as though it had come from up the chimney, whereas it was obvious to all present that it had emanated from Handforth's own twisted lips.

"There you are!" exclaimed Handforth triumphantly, and not a little breathlessly. "What do you think of that?"

"Wonderful!" gasped Nipper.

"Marvellous!" echoed Pitt.

And that was the general opinion. Handforth laboured under the impression that they regarded his ventriloquial efforts as marvellous and wonderful; but he was wrong. Nipper & Co. meant that it was marvellous that anyone could be insane enough to think that the horrible squeak had come from the chimney.

"How do you do it?" asked Church admiringly.

"Brains," replied Handforth, with a lofty smile. "Brains. People seem to think that ventriloquism is a gift. That's utter rot! Now, any fellow with brains can do it."

"I—I see," said Nipper. "Then we could do it?"

"I said a fellow with brains!" retorted Handforth severely. "Now, a chap like me can do anything. Of course," he added modestly, "I don't want to boast, but it's no good getting away from facts. I can do practically anything. You see, with my brain I should be able to do anything that I really wanted to. I can play cricket——"

"Can you?" asked Watson.

"Yes, I can, fathead!" hooted Handforth. "As a matter of fact, if it weren't for jealousy, I should be in the team. But, of course, you're all frightened that I shall show you up when I begin to play——"

"Oh!"

"It's only because I'm intellectual. If it weren't too much fog, I could easily come out at the head of the list each term."

"You could——" stuttered De Valerie.

"Yes, I could!"

"Oh!"

The Removites were quite overcome. How on earth Handforth, the greatest duffer in the Form, could imagine that he was intellectual was a mystery to them. Handforth was the worry-

of Mr. Crowell's life, and that little speech would have pleased the master of the Fourth—perhaps!

"If you fellows care to stop a little while, I'll give you a demonstration——"

But the Removites had vanished; they were fed up with Handforth. And the leader of Study D was left to waste his sweetness on the desert air.

CHAPTER XIX.

Quite a Good Idea.

There was much chuckling that night in the Remove dormitory. Many of the fellows hadn't heard Handforth ventriloquise, and they wanted to see him at it.

"I hear you're a ventriloquist, Handy," said Gulliver serenely.

"I am," said Handforth.

"Good man! Give us a show, will you?"

Edward Oswald beamed.

"It's really quite easy," he remarked. "Now, listen. I'm going to make a voice come from behind that washstand."

The Removites who were undressing stopped, looked, and listened.

"Hallo!"

"By Jove! Topping!" grinned Bell.

Handforth glared at him.

"You silly chump, that was me! I ask the chap if he's there, and he replies from behind the washstand."

"Oh!" murmured Bell. "I see!"

"Hallo!"

Edward Oswald performed gymnastics with his features.

"'Ere I am!"

"Yes, I know," said McClure. "I can see you."

"Oh, you ass!" growled Handforth, in a tired voice. "That wasn't me; that came from behind the washstand."

"Oh!"

"Listen!"

Just then the door opened, and Morrow of the Sixth poked his head in. It was his duty to see that the Removites were all in bed. He didn't greatly appreciate the task, and was eager to get back to his study.

"'Ere I am!"

Morrow jumped, and stared blankly at the leader of Study D.

"What on earth's the matter?" he asked anxiously. "Got a pain in your neck, Handforth?"

Handforth snorted.

"No, I haven't. I was just showing these kids some ventriloquism, that's all."

"Oh, that's all? Well, you can just hurry up and get into bed. If you're not in bed by the time I come back, there'll be trouble, my son."

"Yes, Morrow."

The prefect went out of the dormitory, presumably to fetch his ashplant.

Handforth hurriedly undressed. Most of the other fellows were now in bed.

Ralph Leslie Fullwood, the cad of the Remove, sat up in bed and chuckled.

"I say, Handy!" he murmured.

"Yes?"

"When Morrow comes in, make your voice come from the cupboard. Bark like a giddy dog, or meow like a cat, then Morrow will chase an imaginary cat round the dorm."

Handforth chuckled. And so did the rest of the Remove. They knew that it would be Handforth the prefect would chase, and not an imaginary cat, and they were amused.

"Don't be a fathead!" grunted Pitt. "Can't you see that Fullwood's pulling your silly leg?"

"Rot! Do you think I'm the kind of chap to have my leg pulled, Reginald Pitt?" demanded Handforth.

"Born for it," murmured Pitt.

The door opened once more, and Morrow came in, with a stout ashplant in his hand.

"What, not in bed! You cheeky young imp!"

Edward Oswald sat on his bed, and screwed up his face.

"Gug—bow-wow—gug-gug—bow-wow-wow!"

Morrow's jaw dropped, and he let his ashplant slide to the ground.

"Good heavens!" he stuttered. "Poor kid! What's up?"

"Gug-gug—bcw-wow-wow—gug!"

Sounds of smothered laughter came from the beds near Handforth's.

Morrow's face became grim.

"I say, Morrow," said Handforth, "did you hear that dog barking?"

He asked the question with perfect innocence, and turned upon the prefect a smile that was childlike and bland.

The smothered chuckles became laughs.

Morrow strode forward, picked up his ashplant, and took a firm hold on the back of Edward Oswald's neck.

"Ow!" gasped Handforth. "Leggo!"

Swish, swish, swish!

Morrow did not believe in sparing the rod, and he laid it on heavily. Handforth squirmed and yelled.

"Now get into bed, and let me have no more of this," said Morrow. "Handforth is too big a fool to know the difference between right and wrong. You fellows put him up to this, and you can take the consequences. I shall expect a hundred lines from each one of you by to-morrow."

And Morrow strode angrily from the room.

Edward Oswald sat on his bed groaning. The rest of the Remove sat up in bed and glared at him.

"You fathead!"

"You silly coon!"

But Handforth only groaned.

"It was Fullwood's fault, really," said Nipper. "He put Handy up to it. I reckon Fullwood ought to do all our lines!"

"Hear, hear!"

"You fellows gave the game away!" snorted Handforth. "If you hadn't have laughed Morrow would have thought there was a dog; but, of course, as soon as you silly clowns started laughing he knew that it was only a rag!"

"You silly cuckoo!" hooted Watson. "Do you mean to say that you really think you're a ventriloquist?"

"Yes. Haven't I just shown you? Didn't I take Morrow in? I tell you I can throw my voice anywhere!"

"Throw it out of the window, and yourself after it!" grunted Pitt.

"Look here, Reginald Pitt! If you want a thick car——"

Snore!

"Are you listening?"

Snore!

There came a chuckle from farther down the dormitory, and Edward Oswald Handforth, in deep indignation, resigned himself into the ready arms of Morpheus.

CHAPTER XX.

T. T. Has an Idea.

Tap!

Timothy Tucker tapped on the door of Study D.

"Come in!" came Handforth's booming tones.

Timothy Tucker entered.

"Well?" said Handforth gruffly.

Handforth did not exactly approve of Timothy.

"My dear Handforth, I have just come to put before you a suggestion that I feel sure will appeal to you. The position is this. Last night Morrow, the prefect, had the rudeness to impose a hundred lines on all the members of the Form——"

"Yes, fathead, we know that!" growled Church. "If you'd only use your blinkers a little more you'd see that we're doing the beastly lines now!"

"Dear me, so you are! However, as I remarked before, the position is this. It occurred to me that Handforth, with his remarkable gift of ventriloquism——"

"It's not a gift; it's merely a matter of brain-power!" grunted Handforth. "A fellow with my brain-power——"

"Consider that as said, my dear sir," went on T. T. hurriedly. "I acknowledge that you are an extremely—ahem!—remarkable ventriloquist——"

"Thank you!" beamed Edward Oswald.

Church blinked at McClure. Could T. T. be really pulling the great Handforth's leg? Surely not! The great Edward Oswald seemed to have been born into this world to have his leg pulled—but by T. T.!

"And it seemed to me that if you went to Morrow, and, in Mr. Crowell's voice, requested him to excuse this imposition which——"

"Great pip!"

"My hat!" ejaculated McClure.

"That's a jolly good idea!" agreed Handforth. "I'm busy now, but it shall be done!"

He waved his pen loftily, and T. T. left the study, still with the same serious look on his face. His expression when he was outside would have surprised Edward Oswald. For Timothy Tucker danced a kind of war-dance, what time he chuckled with great glee.

Luckily, Handforth remained in ignorance of that little fact.

"I say, Handy!" murmured Church.

"Well?"

"You—you're not going to do as T. T. suggests, are you?"

"Yes. Why not? Jolly good idea! You see, I shall go into Morrow's study, and start talking to him for a bit; then I shall throw my voice into the passage, in imitation of Mr. Crowell's voice, and Morrow will think that it's Crowell speaking."

"He will, will he?" said Church faintly.

"Yes, fathead! And we sha'n't have to do these lines."

"But—but——"

McClure found it rather difficult to explain to his chum that Morrow would guess what was the matter directly Edward Oswald screwed up his face. It would be rather difficult to explain, and Handforth was inclined to be hasty tempered. On second thoughts McClure deemed it wiser to keep silent. And he gave Church a look of hopeless resignation.

Edward Oswald strolled out of the study to make his way to the Sixth Form passage.

Church and McClure followed him out, then called to some more Removites, and hurriedly explained.

"Do you mean to say that he's gone to work off his ventriloquism on old Morrow?" shouted Pitt.

"Yes."

"Great pip!"

"Poor old Handy!"

And that was the general opinion. "Poor old Handy!" Half the Form went along to pick up the pieces. Morrow was inclined to be hasty tempered at times, and it was extremely probable that when Handforth made his extraordinary request Morrow would not be pleased. It was really quite on the cards that he would be very bad tempered.

In that case, Handforth's little display would be well worth watching.

In consequence, quite a crowd of Removites trooped up to the Sixth Form passage. Luckily, there was no one about. The Sixth Form passage was sacred to the prefects and to their fags. Matters might have been unpleasant had some prefect chanced to look out into the passage and seen that little crowd.

But luck was with the Removites, and they had the good sense not to make a noise.

Ahead walked Edward Oswald Handforth, all unconscious of the fact that his Form-fellows were in the rear of him. It was seldom that he lacked confidence, and now, under the impression that he was really a very clever ventriloquist, he tapped on Morrow's door without the slightest tremor of any kind.

"Come in!" called the prefect.

Handforth entered.

"Well?" demanded Morrow. "Got the lines?"

"Ahem! Not exactly. You see——"

"Well, hurry up and say what you've got to say, and then clear out!"

"Ahem!"

Edward Oswald was at rather a loss to know what to say. He had to say something before starting the ventriloquial stunt.

"Lovely day——" he stammered.

Morrow dropped the book he was reading, and stared blankly at the leader of Study D.

"What the dickens!" he ejaculated. "Do you mean to say that you came here to tell me that it's a lovely day?"

"Nunno. You see, as a matter of fact, I——"

"What is it, fathead? I'm beginning to think that you've gone off your head! You've been a bit strange lately. And now you come here on a pouring wet day just to tell me that it's a lovely day! You'd better see a doctor!"

Handforth flushed, and from the passage came the sound of a chuckle.

It was now or never, and Handforth put his hand to his lie nervously. Then he assumed his ventriloquial grimace.

"Morrow," he squeaked, "I hear that you have given the boys in my Form an imposition. I should be much obliged if you would cancel this; I have something for them to do to-day."

Handforth started this conversation in a very faint squeak; until, towards the end of the short speech, his ill-used throat became a little tired. Naturally, Morrow stared.

"By Jove! Did you hear Mr. Crowell from the passage?" asked Handforth.

Morrow's jaw dropped, and he stared limply at the leader of Study D.

From the passage came the sound of another smothered chuckle. "You—you'd better see the doctor," said Morrow faintly.

He stretched his hand for the poker, and, gripping it tightly behind him, commenced to sidle to the door.

Handforth watched him in amazement.

Reaching the door, Marrow made a sudden spring, tore it open, and rushed outside.

Bump!

Reginald Pitt sat down with a terrific bump as the prefect knocked him over.

"Yow!"

"Quick!" gasped Morrow. "Get a doctor! Handforth's gone mad. Who'll come in with me?"

He turned heroically to the door, then jumped in surprise as the crowd of Removites burst into unrestrained laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ho, ho, ho!"

"Oh, dear!" gurgled Nipper. "This is too funny for words!"

"Ho, ho, ho!" roared Church. "He—he's not mad! It's ventriloquism! Ho, ho, ho!"

"What!" shouted Morrow, taking a firmer grip on the poker.

"A—a ventriloquist!" sobbed Pitt. "Poor old Handy thinks he can throw his voice!"

Edward Oswald came to the door.

"You rotters!" he shouted fiercely. "You bounders giving me away! You—you—Yowp!"

He had not meant to call Nipper & Co. "Yowp!" but at that precise moment Morrow's poker had taken a violent and active part in the conversation.

"Now"—swipe!—"perhaps this"—swipe!—"will teach you—to come ragging"—swipe!—"in my study"—swipe!

At last, breathless, Morrow threw down the poker, and Edward Oswald limped off, a sadder and a wiser ventriloquist, followed by the chuckles of the Removites.

CHAPTER XXI.

"The Best-laid Schemes——"

A few days had passed since Handforth's display in the Sixth Form passage, and the leader of Study D had almost forgotten that little affair. He had in his mind another idea that he intended to work off on Mr. Crowell. It was too good to keep to himself, so he confided it to his chums, having first bound them to secrecy.

"You—you're what?" stuttered Church, when the marvellous idea was explained to him.

"I'm going to ask old Crowell—in the Head's voice, of course—to let us have the afternoon off."

"You fathead! And what do you think he'll do?"

"Do! Why, what would he do if the Head gave him an order? Obey it! And that's what'll happen this afternoon. It's quite a decent afternoon, and I'm fed up with lessons."

"So am I," said McClure. "But——"

"Oh, you're all butts, like a blessed goat! Didn't I tell you what's going to happen? When old Crowell hears the Head's voice asking him to let us off for the afternoon, he'll do it."

"Oh!" said Church. "He—he'll do it?"

"Yes. I must say you're a bit dense, Church."

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Church faintly. And McClure gave vent to a hopeless sigh.

The three took their places in the Form-room, and his chums attempted to dissuade Handforth from his great idea. But Handforth was, as he put it himself, as firm as a rock. Church said that he was as obstinate as a silly mule. But, firm as a rock, or obstinate as a mule, Handforth was not to be lightly dissuaded from putting his bright idea into practice.

Mr. Crowell entered the Form-room. His face wore a heavy frown, and the Remove shifted uncomfortably in their seats. They knew that frown. When the master of the Remove frowned like that there was trouble brewing. As a matter of fact, he had been having a discussion with the Head on politics, and there had been a slight disagreement, which had hardly improved Mr. Crowell's temper.

Church and McClure noted this danger-signal, and nudged their leader.

But Edward Oswald ignored their warning. No sooner had the master taken his seat than Handforth, screwing his face into an expression of intense agony, gave vent to a ventriloquial cough.

"Ahem!"

Mr. Crowell looked up, and his frown grew deeper.

"Sir!" said Handforth meekly.

"Well?" snapped Mr. Crowell.

"Shall I open the door?"

"What?"

"Sh-shall I open the door? Someone is outside. Didn't you hear a cough, sir?"

Without waiting for permission to be granted, Edward Oswald strode to the door, and flung it open.

"Good-afternoon, Dr. Stafford!" he said.

Mr. Crowell stared at Handforth. And the Fourth stared at both.

"Mr. Crowell, will you excuse Handforth, Church, and McClure all lessons this afternoon, please?"

Handforth spoke in his famous ventriloquial voice.

Mr. Crowell blinked at the broad back of Edward Oswald, unable to believe his ears. Then he sprang to life.

"That any boy could have the nerve to ask, almost demand, the afternoon off took the master's breath away.

But Handforth, all innocence, turned round and smiled at the frowning master.

"May we go now, sir?" he asked. "The Head said so—"

"The Head!" spluttered Mr. Crowell. "Boy, are you mad?"

"I—I—"

"What do you mean, eh? What d'ye mean? First you open the door, then you have the cool effrontery—yes, sir, effrontery—to stand there and request leave of absence. I have never heard of such a thing—never, never, never!"

"I—I—I—" stammered Handforth.

"Are you mad, boy?"

"Nunno—"

Like a flash the explanation dawned upon the master of the Remove.

"Boy! Dolt! How dare you play ventriloquial tricks in the Form-room! How dare you! How dare you, I say!"

"I—I—"

How on earth Handforth could have imagined that his voice appeared to come from the passage was a mystery to Mr. Crowell, but it in no way tended to diminish his rage.

"You utterly ridiculous boy, come here!"

A rather forlorn-looking Handforth shuffled up to the Form-master's desk. Edward Oswald realised at last that something must be wrong with his ventriloquial voice. And he was right.

Mr. Crowell grasped his intellectual pupil by the collar, and belaboured him with the pointer.

"Now"—swipe!—"any more"—swipe!—"of this foolery"—swipe!—"and I shall take you"—swipe!—"straightway to Dr. Stafford"—swipe!

He released his hold on the luckless Removite, and Handforth

slid to the ground. He arose painfully, and limped back to his place.

Church and McClure gave him compassionate looks. Some of the Form chuckled. Both both compassionate looks and chuckles disappeared when Mr. Crowell rapped his desk with the pointer. Mr. Crowell was a mild little man as a rule, but at the present moment he was more like a tiger than a Form-master, and the Remove resolved to be very, very good.

After lessons Church and McClure tried to be sympathetic, but Handforth was too fed up even for sympathy, and he shut himself up in his study, and, like old Rachel of old, mourned, and would not be comforted.

In Study D, Church and McClure soon found that to mention ventriloquism meant a blackened eye or other painful equivalents, and they wisely kept silent.

Now Edward Oswald Handforth scorns the idea of ventriloquism. He maintains that he always thought it a mug's game. To whisper the word in his ear is like dangling a red rag before a bull. And the results are as painful.

Several fellows came to ask Handforth if he could give them an example of his ventriloquial powers, but somehow Handforth was not pleased. In point of fact he was cross—very cross—and, in consequence, there were many bleeding noses and black eyes among the Removites.

But it was Timothy Tucker who came in for the worst of it. In all innocence he went into Study D to inquire of the leader of that notable study what had happened with regard to Handforth's ventriloquial display in the Remove Form-room, T. T. having been out of the room at the time. T. T. had another suggestion for the utilising of Handforth's peculiar gift.

T. T. smote the cold and unsympathetic linoleum with a dull, sickening thud, and then sadly bent his weary way to his study.

As far as Edward Oswald is concerned, ventriloquism is off, and no more is heard of Handforth's latest.

And Timothy Tucker is rather more careful now, too.

THE END.

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