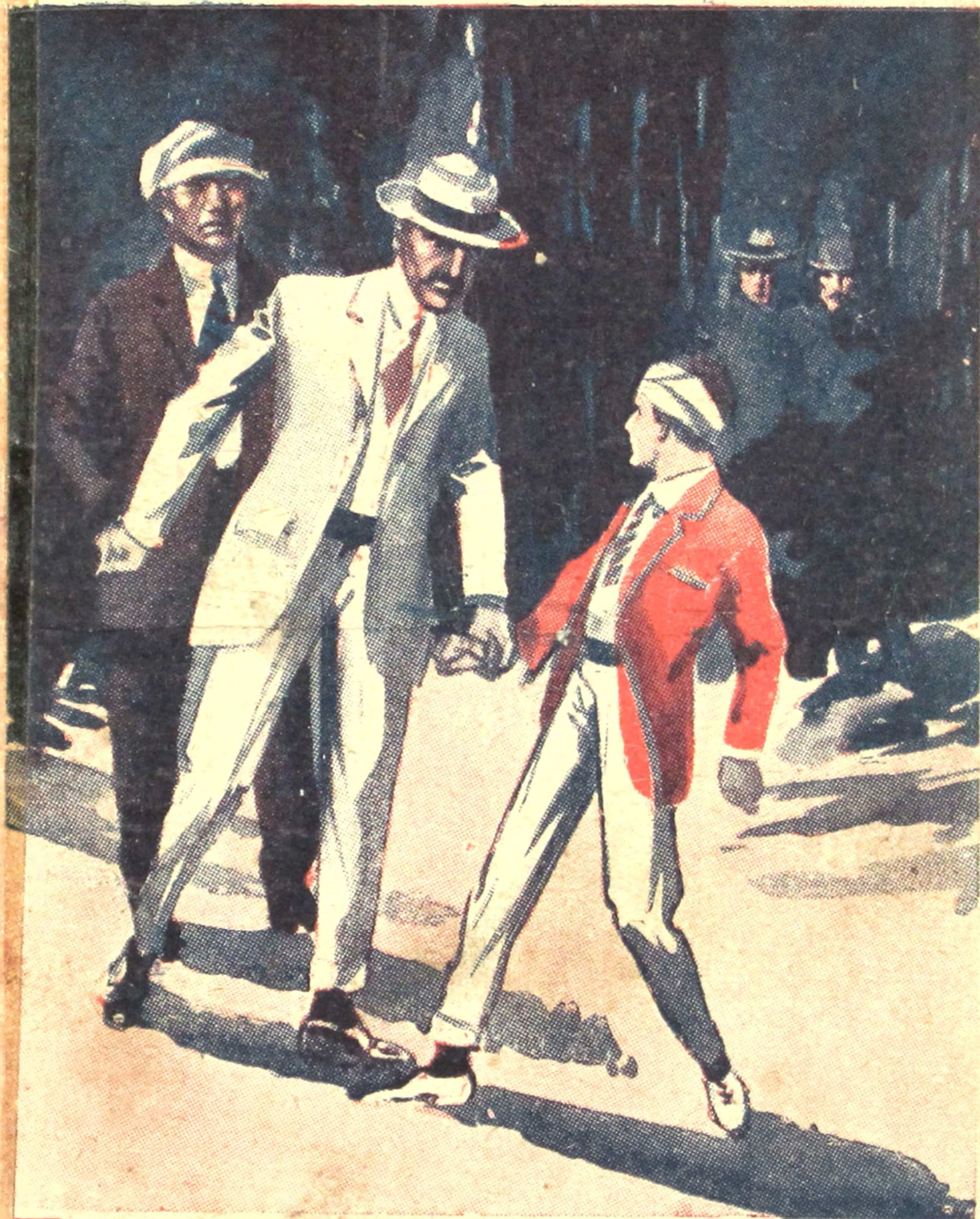


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AUTHOR'S NOTE.

Nelson Lee and Nipper are at St. Frank's College for a period of several months. Having incurred the hatred of the Fu Chang Tong, a murderous Chinese Secret Society, Nelson Lee and Nipper have been forced to adopt new identities until the time of peril has passed. Nelson Lee is a Housemaster, and Nipper a junior schoolboy. Nipper himself writes of the events which took place during his life as a member of the Remove in the Ancient House of St. Frank's.

CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH PUTS HIS FOOT DOWN.

"THE chopper's got to come down—and it's got to come down hard!"

The fellow who made that remark was Edward Oswald Handforth, of Study D, in the Ancient House at St. Frank's. And Handforth, of the Remove, when he made a remark, made it loudly.

There were quite a crowd of Removites in the common-room. I was standing over by one of the windows with Tregellis-West and Watson, my study-chums. There's no need for me to say my name, because everybody knows it, but perhaps I'd better. It'll save trouble, anyhow. I'm Nipper—known at St. Frank's as Dick Bennett, of Study C.

"The chopper's got to come down!" repeated Handforth firmly.

He looked round for support, but everybody seemed to be grinning.

"Handy, old boy, you're amusin'—you are, really!" murmured Sir Lancelot Montgomery Tregellis-West.

Handforth turned round and glared.

"Who told that chap to speak?" he demanded. "He's in Coventry!"

"Dear fellow, it's a habit of mine to speak," smiled Sir Montie. "You're not bound to answer, you know. Speakin' relieves me tremendously. An' the changin' expressions of your face are really remarkable——"

"Dry up, Montie," I grinned. "Let Handforth run on. I'm anxious to hear him jaw. The great question is—who's going to get the chopper? Who's been ruffling the temper of the mighty Handforth?"

"If those chaps weren't in Coventry," said Handforth, "I'd speak to 'em, and get 'em to help me—Bennett particularly. But they're barred by the Form. So you other fellows had better listen."

The other fellows, however, were strolling out of the common-room.

"Hold on!" bawled Handforth wrathfully. "Where are you going, you asses?"

"Out!" grinned Owen major, of Study H.

"I'm going to make a speech!" roared Handforth.

Owen major nodded.

"That's why we're going out!" he said calmly..

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The expression of the great Handforth's face was worth quids. Edward Oswald was a big chap for a Removite, and he had a curious idea that his physical superiority over the other fellows gave him the right to boss the Remove just as he liked. Unfortunately, the Remove never took Handforth seriously; they regarded him as a necessary evil, so to speak.

Handforth's voice was loud; it resembled a megaphone more than anything else. He didn't talk—he bawled. And when he whispered his voice could be heard for yards. Altogether, Handforth was burly and clumsy and domineering.

At the same time, there wasn't a fellow who disliked him. Handforth was one of the best-natured fellows in the Ancient House—as Church and McClure, his study mates, were always willing to testify. They knew exactly how to deal with him; rubbed the right way, Handforth was quite docile.

He was a great chap for throwing his weight about, and offering advice to all and sundry. Needless to say, his advice wasn't always accepted. He was generally told, politely but firmly, to go and eat coke. I had found him decent in most ways, but he wanted handling carefully.

"Look here!" he roared angrily, as the fellows streamed out of the common-room. "If anybody else goes out, I'll dot him on the nose! Do you hear, you idiots? Ain't you going to take any notice of me?"

Apparently not—for the juniors were still leaving.

"I say, don't be rotten!" shouted Handforth, changing his tone. "This is a jolly serious matter. It's for the honour of the House, you know! I've got a suggestion to make—for wiping up Fullwood and Co.!"

Several Removites halted, and others came back from the passage.

"If it's something against Fullwood, we're with you," said Hubbard readily.

"I should think you ought to be!" snorted Handforth.

Tregellis-West adjusted his gold-rimmed pince-nez.

"So the chopper's comin' down on the outertainin' Fullwood?" he drawled.

"I'm not talking to you, West!" said Handforth acidly. "You ain't a bad sort, and I like you, personally——"

"That's awfully gratifyin', dear boy."

"But you're in Coventry, together with Bennett and Watson," went on Handforth. "I can't hold any conversation with you—'tain't the thing, you know. I'd like to jaw with you, really, but it's impossible——"

"You silly ass!" yelled Griffith, "you are jawing with him!"

Handforth looked surprised.

"Well, I suppose I was," he admitted.

"It's rotten, three of the best chaps in the Remove being barred. There's some mistake or other——"

"Rats!" snored Hubbard. "Bennett half-killed Farman, and Tregellis-West and Watson uphold him in it. We don't stand hooliganism in the Remove. The beasts are outside the pale."

"I don't exactly believe that yarn about Bennett——"

"You ass, Handforth!" shouted Griffith. "I thought you were going to make a speech about that rotter, Fullwood?"

"My hat! So I was!" said Handforth.

He faced the Removites with a grim expression. The juniors, on the other hand, were grinning. Even Church and McClure, Handforth's faithful echoes in all things, were smiling. Then Handforth glared at them, and they straightened their faces.

I chuckled.

"Handforth's on the war-path," I murmured. "Things are going to happen!"

"Yes—to Handforth!" murmured Tregellis-West amusedly.

Hubbard's remark about hooliganism had left me unmoved. I'd been hearing similar remarks for three days past, and I had grown accustomed to them. I was "in Coventry," and I was to stay there for a whole month. In fact, I was shunned by the Form. And Tregellis-West and Watson, being my loyal pals, had nobly elected to share my banishment.

My disgrace was due to the cunning machinations of Fullwood, of the Remove. Ralph Leslie Fullwood was a young blackguard of the first water, and he hated me. He hated me because I had licked him in fair fight, and had ousted him from the leadership of the

Fossils—as the Ancient House juniors were called.

Only three days previously an American junior in the Remove, named Justin B. Farman, had been brutally attacked by two unknown men near to the school. By an unfortunate chance, there had been no witnesses of the assault except myself. I had rushed up, and had arrived too late to avert the attack.

The men had disappeared, but had left a stout wooden cudgel behind them. I had picked this up, and then Fullwood and Co. had come into sight, in a motor-car they had hired. So, by a stroke of ill-luck, the Nuts of St. Frank's saw me bending over the stricken boy with the weapon in my hand.

A further misfortune was the fact that I had actually been out for Farman's blood. I had been searching for him to give him a licking—because I thought that Farman had committed a particularly mean trick upon Teddy Long, of the Remove. I afterwards discovered that Fullwood was the author of the trick, but he had arranged matters so that Farman should be accused.

Farman had informed Dr. Stafford, the Headmaster, that I was quite innocent, but he refused to give any description of his real assailants. Thus, although I was publicly cleared of the charge by the Head himself, Fullwood made capital out of the American boy's secrecy.

In a great meeting in the common-room I had been put on trial. Fullwood had made himself the prosecuting counsel, and he had stated his case cunningly and cleverly. He had made the Removites believe that I had attacked Farman, and had then threatened to smash him further if he gave me away. Farman—according to Fullwood's argument—had lied to the Head because he was afraid of me.

In this way the jury had been influenced, and I had been found guilty. It was a bit of a shock to me, I'll admit. I was sentenced to Coventry for a month. And Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson, my chums of Study C, had gallantly decided to stick up for me through thick and thin.

Farman was still in the school hospital, for his head had been rather badly battered; but he would be out and about before many days had passed. When he did appear I knew that he would do his

best to straighten matters for me. But I was anxious to discover the truth for myself.

For there was a mystery surrounding Justin B. Farman.

He was a new boy, and he hailed from California. Since his arrival at St. Frank's he had been attacked twice—and the first time he had been nearly kidnapped. And yet, for some unearthly reason, he refused to say a word. He knew quite a lot, but he kept mum.

It was, of course, owing to his secrecy that I found myself in such a rotten hole. And I was determined to thrash matters out. If Farman wouldn't say who had attacked him—well, I'd find out for myself! At least, the gov'nor and I would together.

The gov'nor—Mr. Nelson Lee, the famous crime investigator—was at St. Frank's with me. He went under the name of Mr. Alvington, and he was the Housemaster of the Ancient House. He was popular, too. He was a bit upset about my disgrace, but he had told me not to worry. Before the week was out, he declared, the whole truth would be revealed.

So I was calmly awaiting the march of events. If it hadn't been for this prospect of a speedy vindication, I believe I should have jibbed. The Head, of course, had cleared me, and it was only the fellows in the Ancient House Remove who believed Fullwood's lies. Bob Christine and Co., the leaders of the Monks—the College House juniors—were openly friendly with me.

At the same time, it was utterly rotten to be shunned by my own House. The Fossils, previous to my arrival at St. Frank's, had been kept down by Fullwood and Co.—Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell, of Study A. Merrell and Co. were Fullwood's supporters, and the two studies, combined, were known as the Nuts. They were young bounders of the worst type. They smoked and gambled and broke bounds, and generally believed themselves to be roaring blades.

The Nuts had allowed the Ancient House to run to seed. Cricket and sports in general had gone stale. And I had opened my campaign by licking Fullwood and assuming the leadership of the Fossils. Naturally enough, Fullwood disliked this; he hated me like poison, and he was ever ready to trip me. Now,

by sheer force of circumstances, he had succeeded.

Just as I had commenced to make splendid headway in the affairs of the Ancient House, Fullwood had sprung his bombshell. I was barred now; nobody would take any notice of me, and all my plans for the bucking-up of the Ancient House were disorganised. Instead of being the junior leader, I was an out-cast.

And Tregellis-West and Watson, because they were staunch, shared my fate.

Now, it seemed, Handforth was bent on taking charge of things himself. He was fired with the ambition of making himself junior leader. Of course, he'd never succeed—he was too ram-headed and obstinate. But he was going to have a shot at it, and things promised to be interesting.

It was a Wednesday, a half-holiday at St. Frank's, and morning lessons were over. Dinner would be ready in about half an hour, and after that—I thought of the afternoon rather bitterly. I had planned a practice cricket match for that afternoon, but it wouldn't take place now. Fullwood had regained his old power in the Remove, and he was down on all healthy sports. The juniors were under his thumb again. I could, of course, lick him a second time, but that wouldn't do any good. I was barred by the whole Form.

Handforth cleared his throat rather noisily.

"The chopper's got to come down," he began.

"You said that before," interrupted Armstrong. "Try another tune, old man."

"Fullwood's going to get it in the neck!" went on Handforth firmly. "I've been thinking, and it seems to me we did a fatheaded thing when we sent Bennett to Coventry. Still, I'm going to abide by the sentence of the Form. Bennett's chucked out, and he's no good to us. He's banned."

"The sentence ought to be rescinded," growled Watson.

Handforth looked in our direction wrathfully, but said nothing to us. Then he went on with his speech.

"Before Bennett acted the goat he was improving the House no end," he declared. "You all know that, I suppose? He licked Fullwood, and put the rotter in his place. But now that Full-

wood's been victorious, the House ain't big enough to hold him. He thinks he's a king—a bloated aristocrat, like the rotten Kaiser, and he's making everybody squirm. Are we going to stand it?" roared Handforth. "Of course we ain't! We're going to act—and, as a commencement, I'm going to put my foot down?"

"Where?" asked Hubbard innocently.

"I'm going to lead a deputation to Fullwood's study, and I'm going to tell the beast a few things he won't like!" went on Handforth grimly. "That's the programme! A deputation—see? Who's going to volunteer?"

"Not me!" said Hubbard promptly. "Fullwood's got Merrell and his crowd in his study. Your fatheaded deputation would get wiped out, you ass!"

"Not if there were enough of us!" roared Handforth. "Look here, you ain't going to be funky, are you? I want volunteers! Who's coming to Fullwood's study with me? Three of us ain't enough."

"Three!" said Griffith. "Who's going with you?"

"Church and McClure, of course!" replied Handforth. "If they don't, they'll have to reckon with me!"

Church and McClure looked uncomfortable. But they stepped forward readily. They knew well enough that Handforth's reckoning with them, if they refused to stand by him, would be far worse than a ragging from Fullwood and Co.

"Oh, we'll go, Handy," said Church, with a weak grin. "We're dying to go!"

"Rather!" agreed McClure. "Back us up, you chaps."

"I'm not anxious to be ragged, thanks," said Hubbard pleasantly.

"Three ain't enough," bawled Handforth. "I want a dozen!"

"I'll make another," I put in, grinning.

"Count us all in, Handforth, dear fellow," yawned Sir Montie.

"Look at that!" shouted Handforth. "These three outsiders have volunteered! Ain't you all ashamed of yourselves? I can't take Bennett and Co., of course, but they've shown the right spirit. My idea is to go to Fullwood's study and create havoc generally——"

"Oh, you'll create havoc all right!" grinned Hubbard. "You'll be used to

wipe the floor with! I wish you joy, old scout!"

And Hubbard walked out of the common-room, followed by Armstrong and Griffith and Owen major and all the rest. Edward Oswald Handforth was left in possession of the common-room—with the exception of his two loyal followers, and the outcasts—Tommy and Montie and I.

McClure chuckled.

"Well, that's done it!" he said, in tones of obvious relief. "Can't have your blessed deputation now, Handy——"

"Can't I?" bellowed Handforth hotly. "I know I jolly well can! We're going by ourselves—just us three! Understand?"

"Oh, don't be a silly idiot——"

"If you don't choose to come, Walter Church, you can put up your hands!" bawled Handforth. "And you, too, McClure! I give you ten seconds to decide! Either you come with me, or get a licking on the spot——"

"Oh, we'll come, old man!" said Church hastily.

Handforth was rolling up his sleeves in a very businesslike way, and Church and McClure were nervous. Handforth had fists like sledge-hammers. He ceased his efforts, and glared.

"Just in time!" he growled. "Come on, you fatheads!"

And Handforth and Co. marched out of the common-room. They were on the war-path, and trouble was certainly hanging about for somebody. I had an idea that Handforth and Co. would find that trouble!

CHAPTER II.

FULLWOOD AND CO. ARE VERY ATTENTIVE.

SIR LANCELOT MONTGOMERY TREGELLIS-WEST chuckled.

"It'll be rather interesting—what?" he exclaimed lazily. "Seein' Handforth & Co. slaughtered will be a diversion. Suppose we go along the passage, an' join the spectators? There'll be quite a crowd, dear fellows. I'm highly amused—I am, really!"

Tommy Watson grunted.

"Handforth's an ass!" he said. "Still, he's asking for trouble, and he can't grumble if he gets it! He needs a lesson badly. Fancy thinking he can

lead the Fossils! That's your job, Benny!"

"Not at present," I said, rather bitterly. "That's why Handforth's getting busy. By Jupiter! I'll be leader again before the week's out, though!"

Watson stared at me.

"You're in Coventry for a month!" he said.

"I know that—but I can be taken out of Coventry, I suppose?" I replied. "Do you think I'm going to stand this rot for a month? Not me, my son! The truth about those blighters who attacked Farman has got to come out—then there'll be a change in things!"

"Oh, well, let's go and see the pantomime!" said Watson, with a shrug.

He didn't believe that I should succeed in getting at the truth within the week; but then, of course, he didn't know that Mr. Alvington was really the world's cleverest detective, and that I was by no means an ordinary junior schoolboy! And I couldn't explain matters.

We passed outside, mounted a few steps to the lobby, and turned into the Remove passage. Strange noises were proceeding from that direction. A buzz filled the air. Turning the corner, we discovered the cause.

Many Removites were collected in the passage, with a sprinkling of the Third and Second hovering in the background. Everybody was grinning, and looking in the direction of Study A.

The door stood just ajar, and the mighty voice of Edward Oswald Handforth floated through the crack. Handforth was evidently telling the Nuts exactly what he thought of them. And the Nuts, being patient, were listening to him. They couldn't very well do anything else. When Handforth talked he awoke the echoes.

"The band'll begin in' about two ticks!" grinned Timothy Griffith, of Study J, as we strolled up. "Hallo!" he added, glaring at us. "Who told you chaps to come here? You're barred——"

Sir Montie smiled urbanely.

"I believe I've heard something like that before, old boy," he murmured. "Bein' in Coventry, though, doesn't stop us mixing with the fellows. You see, this idea isn't half so bad, really. We can jaw just as much as we like, and we're not bored by any replies. Coventry's fairly decent, you know!"

Griffith grinned.

"You're all right, West," he said. "Pity you don't drop that cad, Bennett—"

"You're talking to those outsiders!" howled Teddy Long indignantly. "If you ain't careful, Griffith, you'll be sent to Coven— Yow! Ow-yow!"

The sneak of the Remove made several remarks which were quite unintelligible. Griffith had picked him up, and had dropped him suddenly. It wasn't likely that Griffith was going to stand any of Long's gibes.

"You beast, Griffith!" gasped Teddy, scrambling up. "I—I—"

"Want some more?" roared Griffith.

Long scuttled away, and just then something happened. The fog-horn sounds of Handforth's voice ceased with great abruptness. Other sounds followed. It seemed for all the world as though a thousand cats were having a fight in Fullwood's study.

"Handforth's putting his foot down!" chuckled Hubbard.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, it's a bit rotten," I exclaimed. "We can't leave those asses in there at the mercy of Fullwood's crowd. Let's rush in and rescue 'em—"

"You keep to yourself, you boulder!" shouted Armstrong.

Several Removites barred the passage, and it was evident that no attempt at rescue was to be made. I looked on angrily. I couldn't very well start a "mull" in the Remove passage.

In fact, I expected a master, or a prefect, to appear at almost any moment. The commotion in Study A was terrific.

Yells and bumps and crashes came floating out in quick succession. Handforth & Co. were certainly paying dearly for their cheek in visiting the Nuts in their own den. Any other fellow but Handforth would have known what such a visit would lead to—Church and McClure had known it, as a matter of fact, but they had feared their dominating leader.

Yells of laughter accompanied the other yells.

"The charmin' Nuts appear to be enjoyin' the show," drawled Sir Montie. "How unfeelin' of them! I'd like to have a look in, all the same. My fingers are fairly achin' to pull Fullwood's nose!"

"Can't be did, old chap," said Tommy. "We're only spectators."

"I say," I exclaimed suddenly. "What price the window?"

"Rh?" said Montie. "The window, dear fellow?"

I grinned.

"Of course! We can nip out into the Triangle, and get in through the window!" I said eagerly. "We wiped up Fullwood & Co. once—when they were six strong, too—and we can do it again. Must rescue old Handforth, you know!"

"Begad! It's worth tryin'," said Montie promptly. "I'm game! I'm game for anything you like, Benny boy. You lead, an' I'll follow!"

I chuckled. The windows of the Remove studies at St. Frank's were facing the Triangle, and were easily accessible from the Triangle itself. In fact, in fine weather half the juniors used the windows in preference to the doors.

But just as I was about to turn, a fearful yell sounded, then something came hurtling into the passage. Montie and Tommy and I paused. In a moment I saw that any idea of rescue was out of the question.

Handforth & Co. had been ejected!

At least, one of the redoubtable trio had; and he was now sprawling in the passage, with a crowd of fellows round him.

"Too late, dear boys," said Sir Montie. "What a pity, you know!"

We turned back, and I couldn't help grinning. The other Removites were roaring with mirth. It was Handforth who had left Study A with such force and speed. He was sitting up rather dazedly.

His face was an extraordinary sight. Soot and jam and treacle and ink had been liberally smeared over every inch of his head. His collar was a wreck, and his necktie had been stuffed into his mouth.

But Handforth wasn't beaten! Not a bit like it!

He tore the necktie out of his mouth, and emitted a furious roar. Then he leapt to his feet and simply panted with excitement and wrath.

"Is that the way you put your foot down, Handy?" grinned Armstrong.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you—you set of funks!" bawled Handforth. "Ain't you going to help me? Just look at me—"

"That's what we are doing!" chuckled Hubbard. "Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth was too indignant for words. He jerked himself round, and made a dash for Fullwood's study again. Unfortunately, Handforth didn't know when he was beaten. The great Edward Oswald was full of bulldog grit, in spite of his hot-headed obstinacy.

Under ordinary circumstances, he would have entered Study A again—and then things would have happened in earnest. But, just as Handforth was rushing in, Church and McClure were hurled out.

A collision was unavoidable.

Crash! Handforth butted into his two noble chums. They were in a similar state of jamminess and inkiness and sootiness. Church's anointed head rammed Handforth in the tummy, and Handforth staggered backwards.

The next second the three heroes of Study D were sprawling on the floor of the passage in a writhing mass. Gurgles and groans and gasps floated upwards. The Removites were shrieking with laughter.

"Oh, my Rat!" howled Hubbard. "Ain't it funny?"

"Blessed if I can see anything funny in it!" I said sharply, striding forward. "I don't mind a bit of a rag, but Fullwood's been treating these asses altogether too severely. They might be hurt——"

"Shut up, you outsider!" roared Griffith.

"Hallo! Here's Bennett!" shouted Fullwood, from the door of Study A. "What's he doing here, the cad? Let's give him a taste of the same medicine—only worse! Collar him!"

Ralph Leslie Fullwood was grinning maliciously. He was dressed as showily as ever, and his monocle was jammed into his eye. Behind him were Bell and Gulliver and Merrell and the others.

They rushed out before I was prepared for them, and grabbed me.

"Bring the giddy mixture!" grinned Fullwood.

I struggled fiercely, but four of the Nuts had grabbed me, and I was helpless. Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West had been pushed up the passage by the excited juniors and they were out of reach.

"Begad! Let me pass, dear boys!" I heard Sir Montie gasp.

"Rats!" said Armstrong. "Let Bennett have a taste!"

"Toll you what," yelled Fullwood, "let's smear that treacle all over his rotten clobber! That'll give him a job——"

"Cave!" came a furious hiss from the end of the passage.

The juniors looked round in alarm, and Fullwood & Co. released me as though I had become red-hot. Then they attempted to back into the study. But they were just a shade too late!

Mr. Alvington—the guv'nor—appeared!

He strode along the passage with a cane in his hand.

"Every boy here will remain still!" he exclaimed sharply. "Fullwood, you and your companions were about to drag this boy into your study, I believe?"

Fullwood was quite calm.

"Oh, no, sir," he said glibly. "We were just having a word with Bennett!"

"I heard some mention of treacle and clothing," went on Nelson Lee sternly. "Were you proposing to smother Bennett——"

"Oh, no, sir!"

"Good gracious!" ejaculated the guv'nor suddenly. "What is the meaning of this? Boys! Get up at once! Upon my soul, I am shocked!"

Mr Alvington had just spotted Handforth & Co. The three wretched juniors had managed to sort themselves out, and they were now sitting up. Handforth was quite winded, and in considerable pain. The passage floor was smeared with soot and jam, and other delicacies.

"Groooh!" gasped Handforth. "Just—just an accident, sir!"

"An accident!" roared the House-master. "Tell me your name, boy!"

"Handforth, sir."

"I should never have recognised you in that disgusting state," said Nelson Lee angrily. "And your companions?"

"Church and McClure, sir!"

"Go to the bathroom and clean yourselves at once!" ordered the guv'nor. "I shall not punish you, because you appear to have received punishment enough. But the authors of this outrage shall be caned severely!"

Handforth & Co., greatly relieved to get away without punishment, staggered away down the passage. Fullwood still lounged in his doorway, and the rest of the Nuts remained in the study.

"I presume it was you, Fullwood,

who treated those three boys so disgracefully?" asked the gov'nor quietly.

"No, sir," said Fullwood calmly.

"You deny touching them?"

"Of course, sir!"

The juniors in the passage gasped. Such bare-faced lying was a little beyond them. They fondly thought that Fullwood was going to escape. They didn't know Nelson Lee!

"You have told me, Fullwood, that you had no hand in this disgraceful scene," said the Housemaster smoothly. "Perhaps you will explain why your hands are showing visible signs of soot and treacle? Perhaps you will explain why your study table is smeared with similar substances?"

Fullwood scowled sullenly.

"They—they came in, sir," he replied.

"You have been lying to me, Fullwood," said Nelson Lee sharply. "You have been prevaricating in the most shameless manner. No, don't dare to utter another denial! You were about to treat Bennett in a similar fashion. Gulliver, Bell, Merrell—come out of here at once!"

The Nuts emerged with scared faces.

"I presume you all took part in this disgraceful scene?" asked Lee curtly.

"Ye-e-es, sir!" muttered Gulliver.

"It—it was Fullwood's idea, sir!"

"You sneaking rotter!" hissed Fullwood fiercely.

"Every boy who took part in this affair, with the exception of Fullwood, will take five hundred lines," said Mr. Alvington quietly.

"Is Fullwood going to be let off, sir?" asked Bell amazedly.

"No. Fullwood was obviously the ringleader, and he will be punished in a more severe manner——"

"Mr. Thorne wouldn't have done anything to us, sir," put in Fullwood boldly, naming the Housemaster who had been at St. Frank's previous to the gov'nor's arrival. "Mr. Thorne didn't interfere in our little affairs——"

"Are you suggesting, Fullwood, that I am interfering?"

Nelson Lee's tone was very ominous; I knew the sign well, and I knew that unless Fullwood was very careful he would find himself lugged before the Head for a flogging. And Fullwood himself recognised the danger signal.

"No, sir," he growled. "I—I didn't mean that."

"It is just as well that you did not," said Nelson Lee grimly. "Please understand, Fullwood, that any further hooliganism of this sort will be punished by the Headmaster. In this instance I shall punish you myself. You have lied to me, and that makes your offence all the more serious. Hold out your hand!"

"Are you going to cane me?" asked Fullwood thickly.

"Hold out your hand!" repeated Mr. Alvington with deadly calmness.

Fullwood held it out.

Swish!

"Now the other!"

Swish! Swish! Swish! Swish!

Swish!

Six cuts Fullwood received, and they were delivered with considerable force. He didn't howl, though; he just gasped, and looked unutterable things. For all his faults, Fullwood was plucky.

"That will do," panted the gov'nor. "I do not take much notice of a boyish prank, and any mild disturbance in this part of the House does not attract me. But I shall deal severely with all cases of deliberate viciousness. It is evident, Fullwood, that you treated Handforth and his companions with malicious violence, and you were on the point of taking a mean advantage of Bennett."

Fullwood, with set lips, went into his study and slammed the door.

Nelson Lee's eyes gleamed for a moment, but he didn't say anything further on the subject. He turned to me with a smile.

"Bennett," he ordered, "you will follow me to my study."

"Ye-e-es, sir!" I said meekly.

And we went along the Remove passage, leaving the juniors in a buzz of low-voiced conversation. Handforth and Co. had failed in their genial object, but Fullwood and his fellow-Nuts had certainly not achieved a triumph!

CHAPTER III.

IN WHICH CERTAIN EVENTS REMIND ME OF OLD TIMES.

MR. ALVINGTON, to call the gov'nor by his school name, led the way into his study. I was wondering why he had told me to follow him, but I wasn't at all sorry for the opportunity of having a private word with him.

The door closed, and he laid his cane down.

"Now, Nipper, what was the meaning of that disgraceful scene?" he asked sternly.

"My hat! You're not going to blame me, are you, guv'nor?" I asked. "It's all very well to keep up the master and pupil business before the other fellows, but we're ourselves here—just ourselves!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"You young rascal!" he exclaimed. "You're taking advantage of me! What would you say if I caned you?"

"It's not what I'd say—it's what I'd do!" I retorted.

"Why, you infernal young jackanapes—"

"Oh, come off it!" I grinned. "That's a fine way to talk to my House-master, ain't it? I don't care—you're the guv'nor now—Nelson Lee! Rats to old Alvy—that's what we call you in the Remove!"

"Oh, it is?" said Nelson Lee, with twinkling eyes. "Old Alvy! Well, it might be worse. I don't suppose the boys mean any disrespect."

"Of course not. The bulk of the fellows think you're a ripping House-master," I replied. "So you are, too. Only Fullwood and that crowd sneer at you, and say you're a rot— But that's sneaking, isn't it?"

"Anything you say here, Nipper, is strictly private," smiled Lee. "But I know all about Fullwood. He is an unmitigated young rascal, and I mean to keep a sharp eye on him. He was responsible for your being sent to Coventry, wasn't he?"

"Yes, he was, the Beast!" I growled. "Got the chaps to believe that I smashed poor Old Farman—"

"Yes, I know. Well, that will soon be altered," interjected the guv'nor. "In fact, Nipper, I mean to take an important step towards the unravelling of the mystery which surrounds Farman this very afternoon."

"Oh! What's on?" I asked eagerly.

"I think I told you something about it the other day," said Lee, sitting down, and filling his briar. "Our old friend, Detective-Inspector Morley, of Scotland Yard, is at present staying at Bannington—the town three miles from St. Frank's. Morley has been investigating some case or other which the local

people found a little too tough for them."

I nodded. Old Morley was about the only outsider who knew our little secret. He had helped me to get the guv'nor out of the clutches of the Fu Chang Tong on one occasion, so Lee thought it only right that he should be let into the game.

He and Dr. Stafford, the Headmaster of St. Frank's, and one of the governors, were the only people who knew the truth. Nelson Lee had told me, a day or two before, that the inspector was in Bannington, and I was quite anxious to see him. Morley would bring a breath of the outside world to us—our own particular world, I mean. The world of crime and crime detection.

"Well, what's the programme, sir?" I asked.

"It is a half-holiday this afternoon, Nipper, and you will have an opportunity of slipping off for a bicycle ride. Make an excuse to your friends, and then ride into Bannington."

"The town's out of bounds this week, sir."

"I know that—but that is all the better," replied Lee. "The Head placed Bannington out of bounds, I believe, because there is some play or other, at the theatre, which is not suitable—in the Head's opinion—for boys to see. Dr. Stafford has rather severe views, I believe. At all events, Bannington is out of bounds for all boys—seniors and juniors alike. So, when you go, there will be little fear of your being seen by any of your schoolfellows."

"Yes, that's handy," I agreed. "What am I to do?"

"Just on the outskirts of the town, on the Bellton road, there is a charming little inn—a very respectable place—named the King's Arms," said Lee. "You are to go there, Nipper."

"A giddy pub!" I grinned. "This is a fine thing, and no mistake! Telling a junior schoolboy to go pub-haunting! I'm surprised at you, guv'nor—I am, really, as old Montie would say!"

"I don't know who old Montie is, but I presume you mean one of your chums," smiled the great detective. "But there is really nothing dreadful in your visiting the parlour of the King's Arms. Mr. Morley will be there, and so shall I. We are going to hold a confab; in short, we shall make a plan of action."

"For getting at the truth of this Farman mystery?"

"Exactly."

"I suppose you've got some wheeze in your noddle?"

"I am afraid, Nipper, that this sojourn at St. Frank's is having a detrimental effect upon your speech," said the guv'nor severely. "I certainly have got a wheeze in my noddle, as you elegantly term it; but I have no intention of enlarging upon it now. Be at the inn at three o'clock precisely—that's all you have to do. And don't let any of the other boys know. That's all."

I nodded.

"And what have you had me here for?" I asked. "The fellows will ask why you wanted me in your study."

"Oh, yes." Nelson Lee rubbed his chin. "Tell them that I lectured you, as captain of the Ancient House Remove, on the subject of keeping order in the junior quarters. And I do lecture you, Nipper. I look to you to keep that young rascal, Fullwood, in hand. I can't be constantly interfering—I should make myself frightfully unpopular. Understand? I've just given you a lecture."

"Short and sweet," I grinned. But I needn't say that! I moved over to the door, and then looked back. "Three o'clock, at the King's Arms? Right you are, guv'nor. I'll be there. Fancy meeting old Morley again; it'll be like old times, at Gray's Inn Road!"

"Cut along, young 'un."

I left the study, looking very solemn, in case there were any fellows outside in the passage. As it happened, Tommy Watson and Sir Montie were waiting for me at the end, just against the lobby. As I approached them, the bell sounded for dinner.

"Just in time," I said cheerfully.

"We thought you'd gone to sleep on Alvy's sofa," said Watson. "Has he been lamming into you for anything?"

"Lecturing me," I said lightly.

"Oh, dear! How frightfully borin'," groaned Sir Montie. "Lectures, from a master, are awfully tiresome. How did you stand it, Benny boy? An' what's he been lecturin' you on?"

"Keeping order in the junior quarters," I grinned. "That row in the passage brought it on, I suppose. Wait until this cloud's rolled by—then I'll keep

order. We sha'n't be in Coventry next half-holiday, my sons!"

"Wish I could believe it!" grunted Tommy. "Come on—dinner's ready."

We went into the great dining-hall, and were soon at our places. One of the chief reasons of Mr. Alvington's popularity was the grub in the Ancient House. The guv'nor had altered things a lot since his arrival at St. Frank's, and, although the grub in the Ancient House had been inferior to that in the College House for years, it was now the opposite way about. The Monks could no longer crow about the way they were fed. The Fossils fared the best now. Bob Christine and Co., of Study Q, in the College House, were rather sore on the point.

After Handforth's discomfiture in Fullwood's study, he turned up at the dinner-table looking hot and angry, but clean. Church and McClure were equally hot and angry and clean. They'd changed into white flannels, and, except for a certain stickiness of the hair, they showed no signs of their encounter with the Nuts.

Fullwood and Co. weren't looking very triumphant. Fullwood's hands must have been smarting fearfully; he handled his knife and fork very gingerly, anyhow. And his nutty followers were faced with the lively prospect of writing five hundred lines. Certainly, Fullwood and Co. hadn't scored.

After dinner I changed into flannels myself. I was anxious to slip away without being questioned by Montie and Tommy. I couldn't tell them where I was going, of course. That made it rather awkward, and I didn't want to tell any whoppers. I didn't mean to.

When I came down from the dormitory, however, I found them waiting for me.

"What's the programme this afternoon?" asked Watson. "Lovely day, and I suggest a boat on the river. Cricket's off, owing to our being in Coventry. The Monks are playing Redlands to-day, but we don't want to watch them."

"I thought about a bike-spin," I said carelessly.

"In this blazin' heat, deah boy?" yawned Sir Montie. "Not me!"

"Well, I'm going, anyhow!"

"Dear fellow, don't be an ass!" implored Montie. "Bikin' is off to-day. Tommy's suggestion is A1. You chap"

can row, an' I'll steer. Boatin' suits me down to the ground."

"That's all right, then," I said. "You and Tommy go out on your fatheaded boat, and I'll go for a spin. I'm anxious to see the country a bit, you know. Caistowe Bay's only three miles off, isn't it?"

I passed out of the House before either of them could speak, and hurried to the bicycle shed. It was rotten, leaving them like that, but it had to be done. They'd think me a pretty sort of bounder, going out on my own—but I was compelled to act that way, under the cires.

Two minutes later I rode swift across the Triangle, and went through the gateway. I was conscious of a yell from Tommy, and I saw him waving his arms. But I pretended not to see and not to hear.

For the first five minutes I was miserable. What would they think of me? When I got back, though, I could easily smooth over the troubled waters. And the prospect of meeting Detective-Inspector Morley, and talking over old times, was very attractive.

I had plenty of time to spare, and I made a long detour, leaving St. Frank's in the opposite direction to the way I was really taking. I didn't want anybody to spot me making for Bannington.

After a long roundabout ride, I struck the Bannington road, and then ambled along leisurely. The afternoon was hot and sunny, and the roads were smothered with dust. When I came in sight of the King's Arms, I glanced at my watch. It was just one minute to three.

I had stuffed my school cap into my pocket, and there was nothing to show that I was a St. Frank's junior. The little inn was a lovely little place—really outside Bannington itself, but it was, nevertheless, out of bounds this week.

Outside the porch I dismounted, and pushed my bike behind a clump of bushes. Then I walked into the private entrance. Evidently Nelson Lee had been watching for me; the guv'nor had arrived half an hour ago. For he came out, and led me straight into the fresh-smelling parlour.

Detective-Inspector Morley was there, lolling on a sofa, smoking a cigar.

"Why, hallo!" he cried, gripping my hand. "You're looking healthier than ever—and, I'll swear, a heap cheekier!"

"You shouldn't swear, Mr. Morley—

it's wicked!" I grinned. "How the dickens are you? And how's London—and Scotland Yard—and Gray's Inn Road? I've nearly forgotten all about it."

The inspector grinned.

"No, you haven't," he said. "It's all right," he added, as I looked round. "We're quite private here. 'Pon my soul, Nipper, this is a queer state of affairs! Fancy you and Mr. Lee being at a public school! It fairly beats me, you know. Still, I reckon you're as safe as eggs down in this sleepy hole."

"You haven't seen anything more of the Fu Changs, I suppose?"

"Not a thing, youngster," replied Detective-Inspector Morley. "Oh, you've given the yellow scum the slip all right. Now, what about this mystery concerning a schoolboy? Your guv'nor seems to think it's important."

"So it is," I said. "Hasn't he told you?"

"Not yet."

"I'm going to now, however," smiled Nelson Lee. "Look here, Morley, it's this way. Before I came to St. Francis's College, the master of the Ancient House, a Mr. Thorne, disappeared under rather mysterious circumstances——"

"I thought you said a boy?"

"Exactly—this affair leads to the other," went on the guv'nor. "I'm not going to tell you the full details—now. Just a brief outline. Well, Mr. Thorne was taken down a cave in Caistowe Bay, and left there for the best part of a week without food or drink. As a consequence, he was delirious when rescued, and is, at the present moment, in a nursing home suffering from brain fever. He was only able to mutter the words 'Justin Farman'; and, a few days later, a boy named Justin Farman arrived at the school, from California."

Detective-Inspector Morley nodded.

"There's a connection, certainly," he remarked.

"Well, Farman, the American boy, has been attacked on two separate and distinct occasions," continued Nelson Lee. "Undoubtedly, the object of those attacks was to kidnap the boy and take him away. On the first occasion, indeed, the unknown assailants succeeded in carrying their victim through Bellon Wood to a motor-car which was waiting on the moor. Now, Morley, there's a

rather curious aspect about the whole affair."

"What's that?"

"Farman has positively refused to make any statement," replied the gov'nor. "He will give no description of the men who attacked him on the second occasion. This happened about four days ago. I am anxious to get to the bottom of the affair, and I want you to help me."

"Why, what can I do?" asked the inspector.

"Well, you are a representative of the official detective force—I am merely a schoolmaster," smiled the gov'nor. "I can't openly reveal myself in my true character. Nipper is similarly handicapped. You will quite understand this, my dear fellow. So we want you to take part in our little scheme."

"You've got a plan of action fixed up, of course?"

"Exactly," replied Nelson Lee. "And I want your opinion on it, too."

Well, we held a fairly long confab., and the gov'nor told us exactly what he proposed to do. I'm not going into details here, because there's no need. I'll describe the upshot of our little jaw in its proper sequence.

It seemed like old times, chatting with old Morley. I was feeling very elated, and I was pretty sure that the truth would be revealed before the end of the week. If Justin B. Farman didn't choose to tell us his blessed secret, we were going to find out for ourselves! It was necessary. The silly ass was still in danger.

And, of course, once it was positively proved that a couple of men attacked Farman, it would be clear to the whole Remove that I hadn't done the deed. And so Fullwood's little plot would fall to the ground, and his victory would be short-lived. Fullwood, in fact, would be humiliated, and I should resume my old place in the Remove.

That was a cheering thought.

It was decided that I should leave the inn half an hour before Nelson Lee did so—this was only a wise precaution. But, as it turned out, an uncomfortable incident was to occur.

I bade Detective-Inspector Morley good-bye, and then strolled out to my jigger. The afternoon was hot and sultry, and there wasn't a soul about. I hadn't any fear of seeing a St. Frank's

chap, for this spot was quite out of bounds; the whole Bannington road was, in fact.

But, as I was emerging from the porch of the inn, I got a shock.

Three boys were shooting past the King's Arms on bicycles. They glanced at me as I came out, and I heard an amazed gasp. At the same second I recognised the fellows as Ralph Leslie Fullwood and Albert Gulliver and George Bell!

They whizzed on, and I quickly jumped on to my machine and shot off towards St. Frank's. I was frowning angrily. Fullwood and Co. were breaking bounds! There was nothing particularly surprising in that, but I hadn't been prepared for it.

And they had seen me leave the inn!

I knew, in a second, that a whole pile of trouble lay in store for me.

CHAPTER IV.

FACING THE MUSIC!

AS I rode along I wondered what the dickens I should do.

It was impossible for me to give any explanation of my presence at the King's Arms, and the fellows would undoubtedly put a wrong construction on the whole affair.

Public-houses of any sort were out of bounds at all times. Any St. Frank's boys visiting an inn was in considerable danger under ordinary circumstances. Discovery meant a public flogging, at least.

I couldn't explain to the chaps that Mr. Alvington had accompanied me! I couldn't explain anything. I had been so sure of my safety that I was now a little bit startled.

Confound Fullwood and Co.!

But I was angry with myself, too; I ought to have made sure that the road was clear before leaving the inn. But I hadn't done so, and Fullwood had seen me! It was a rotten piece of ill-luck.

But had the Nuts spotted me?

Had they recognised me? I wasn't absolutely sure of that. They had been riding fast, and were evidently bent on visiting the town. That was just like Fullwood and Co. The young bounders were always breaking bounds, and defying the school rules. They gloried in doing so.

I hadn't been wearing my blue-and-

gold school cap, and I was in flannels—not Etons. It was just possible that the Nuts hadn't recognised me. I didn't count on this, but I acted cautiously, nevertheless.

I returned to St. Frank's by a roundabout route, coming in, at last, from the opposite direction to Bannington. And any hopes I cherished were quickly dashed to the ground.

For Fullwood and Co. had arrived! I had taken a fairly long while in my roundabout course, and the Nuts, presumably, had turned back after spotting me, and had come straight to the school.

They were there in force, in the Triangle, and a crowd of fellows were standing round them. I set my lips as I rode in. The storm was going to burst! I was quite sure of that!

The Nuts were pastmasters at the art of pub-haunting—everybody knew that. But I had always expressed severe views on the subject, and for me to be exposed as a pub-haunter myself was pretty serious. And I couldn't explain!

"Hallo! Here he comes!"

"The rotten hypocrite!"

"Duck him in the fountain!"

I was surrounded by a mob of angry-faced Removites, and forced to dismount from my jigger. The fellows forgot, for the moment, that I was in Coventry. They meant to get at the truth!

All the fellows were Fossils—Handforth and Church and McClure and Hubbard and Griffith, and a crowd of others. Fullwood and Co. were present in full strength. And they were grinning with huge enjoyment.

"He ain't boozed!" remarked Merrell sneeringly. "That's surprisin'!"

I looked round calmly.

"What's the row?" I asked. "I thought you asses wouldn't speak to me? Is this a meeting to tell me that I'm released from Coventry——"

"You ass! You're going to get scragged!" roared Hubbard.

Sir Montie and Watson were not there; I gathered that they were still on the river, for it wasn't tea-time yet.

"His breath niffs like a navvy's!" exclaimed Gulliver.

"Hold on!" shouted Handforth, pushing his way forward. "I don't believe this rot of Fullwood's, for one! Fullwood's a lying beast, anyhow. I don't believe Bennett's been pub-haunting! Let's give him a chance to explain."

"That's fair enough," said Armstrong. "Oh, he'll deny it, of course!" sneered Fullwood. "He'll deny that he was at the King's Arms, in Bannington, this afternoon!"

"I suppose I'm not obliged to ask you where I'm to go?" I said fiercely. "Bannington's out of bounds, anyhow. What were you doing there?"

"That's not the question," said Fullwood. "My pals and I were havin' a little blow, that's all."

"Well, I'm in Coventry, and I don't speak——"

"So you admit you went to Bannington?" bawled Handforth.

"I don't admit anything."

"That means you did go pub-haunting, then?"

"No, it doesn't," I said calmly. "I haven't haunted any pub."

"There you are!" exclaimed Handforth triumphantly. "What did I say? I knew those cads were lying!"

Fullwood and Co. pressed forward.

"Bennett's a liar himself!" declared Fullwood. "Bell an' Gulliver an' I all saw him comin' out of the King's Arms. If he denies it——"

"I don't deny it," I interjected. "I don't deny anything, and I don't admit anything. In fact, I'm not going to make any statement at all. You can all go and eat coke!"

Under the circumstances, I thought it best to assume a lofty air.

But it didn't work.

"You rotter!" shouted Handforth angrily. "I thought you were down on the Nuts visiting public-houses? And here you've been discovered doing the same thing yourself! Breaking bounds, too!"

"The beast!"

"Collar him!"

"Give him the frog's march!"

The fellows were very angry, and I knew that action was to follow. But I kept quite calm, and smiled.

"Look here, you don't understand the position," I said easily. "Fullwood's been telling you that I visited the King's Arms, in Bannington, hasn't he? Well, I can't explain my movements just now——"

"Of course not!" sneered Fullwood.

"But I can in a day or two——"

I was interrupted by a roar.

"In a day or two!" howled Griffith.

"What's the good of that? You're just

trying to sneak out of it—that's all! What Fullwood said was the truth! You've been breaking bounds, and visiting a pub!"

"Meetin' bookmakers, I suppose!" jeered Marriott. "And gamblin', as likely as not!"

"After incitin' the fellows against us, too!" shouted Gulliver. "Of all the rank hypocrites! I vote we rag him till he can't stand!"

"You ain't the chap to talk of a ragging!" put in Handforth sharply. "If it comes to that, you and your cad-dish pals need a ragging, too! If Bennett's going to be punished for pub-haunting, I know half a dozen other rotters who need a lesson——"

"Hold on!" roared Fullwood. "Our case is different!"

"How do you make that out?"

"We don't pretend to be goody-goody, anyhow," sneered Fullwood. "We like a little flutter now and again, and we ain't afraid to let the other chaps know. But Bennett's a rank hypocrite; he's been runnin' us down, an' doin' the same thing himself all the giddy time! He's worse than us!"

"That's right enough," said McClure. "I thought Bennett was a good chap, too! We live and learn, you know. Let's give him a ducking in the fountain!"

"What about prefects——"

"Rats to 'em!" yelled Handforth. "Now, altogether!"

I looked round desperately.

"Half a minute——" I began.

But I was swept off my feet, and my bicycle went flying. Then I was carried bodily across the Triangle. About a dozen fellows were grabbing me, and I couldn't do a thing to help myself.

Right up to the big fountain I was carried. This piece of ornamentation stood in the centre of the Triangle, and it wasn't working at present. In fact, it was only set going on special occasions. But there was a big pool of water all round it, about four feet deep.

I was swung up with a will.

Splash!

The spray went flying in every direction as I plunged in. A yell of laughter went up as I floundered about, trying to get my balance. To tell the honest truth, I didn't mind that ducking in the least.

I had been cycling hard, and I was perspiring freely. The afternoon was close,

and a cold bath was just what I required. I was only wearing white flannels, and it wouldn't hurt them in the least!

That plunge was delightful. I enjoyed it immensely, and actually stayed in the water longer than was necessary. When I stepped out I was grinning cheerfully, and felt beautifully cool.

"Thanks!" I said. "That was just what I needed!"

"Well, my hat! What a giddy nerve!" gasped Handforth. "I say, let's give him another——"

"Hold on! Morrow's comin' along!" said Gulliver hurriedly.

The crowd melted, and I scuttled into the Ancient House. And when Morrow, the prefect, arrived on the spot, everything was calm and peaceful.

CHAPTER V.

TROUBLE IN STUDY C.

ALTHOUGH I had accepted the ducking so cheerfully, I was not cheerful in the least, really.

Already in disgrace, this fresh affair just about finished me, as far as the Remove was concerned. All the decent fellows had turned against me more than ever. I wondered how Montie and Tommy would take the news.

It didn't take me long to change. When I came down I was in Etons, and I made my way straight to Study C, in the Remove passage. I spotted several fellows on the way, and they all avoided me.

Owen minor and Heath, of the Third, gave me a derisive jeer as I turned into the passage, and then scuttled off. But I only smiled rather grimly, and went on. The fags weren't to blame; my reputation wasn't very savoury in the House just then.

In Study C I found Tregellis-West and Watson.

They hadn't attempted to get tea ready, but were standing before the window, in the sunlight, talking. They looked round as I came in.

"Hallo, no tea?" I said cheerfully.

"We've been waitin' for you, dear fellow," said Sir Montie languidly.

"Short of tin?" I asked. "That's something fresh for you, isn't it, Montie? Still, I've got a good supply. I'll pop down to the tuck-shop——"

"Hold on," interrupted Watson

quietly. "We want to ask you something."

The ordeal was at hand!

"Well, ask away," I said lightly. "Anything important?"

"Very important," said Tommy. "Just after dinner I suggested that we should all go for a row on the river. You refused. You said you wanted to go out on a bike-ride. Where did you go to?"

"Oh, just round about," I replied, thinking rapidly.

"That's no answer," said Watson. "Montie and I decided to go with you, but you were in such a hurry that we didn't have a chance to tell you. When you whizzed out of the gates I yelled; but you took no notice. You heard me, of course?"

I didn't make any reply.

"You wanted to go alone, I suppose?" Tommy went on bitterly.

"Well, I'm not going to fake up a yarn to you chaps," I said. "I did want to go alone. I had a very good reason——"

"Of course you had!" he interjected. "You wanted to go blagging!"

"I suppose Fullwood's been jawing to you?"

"We haven't seen Fullwood, dear boy," said Sir Montie. "But all the fellows are talkin' about you. The whole Remove is interestin' itself in your shady doin's. But, bless your life, we're ready to hear the little explanation. You're the right sort, Benny—we know that."

"Thanks," I said quietly. "You seem to have a better opinion of me than Tommy has. Tommy seems to believe all he hears."

Tommy flushed hotly.

"Hang it all!" he said. "I'm going by your own actions, Bennett! You deliberately gave Montie and I the slip this afternoon. Was that a chummy action? Why did you want to go off on your own?"

"I had a reason——"

"But you're not going to tell us?"

"I can't—just at present."

Tommy Watson compressed his lips.

"The fellows are saying that you went to a public-house on the outskirts of Bannington," he said. "Fullwood and I saw you coming out. Is that true? Is that where you went this afternoon?"

"Yes," I said quietly.

"You admit it—openly?"

"I told you I'd tell you the truth."

"Begad!" murmured Tregellis-West, with a troubled look in his eyes. "I don't like to think rotten things, Benny, dear fellow; but you're makin' it frightfully hard for me to believe in you. You are, really!"

I looked at the pair of them, very seriously.

"You don't believe I assaulted Farman, do you?" I asked.

"We know you **didn't**," replied Montie.

"Well, why can't you **believe** in me now? I tell you, **truthfully**, that I haven't done a thing I **need be** ashamed of——"

"Visiting a pub, for instance?" asked Watson grimly.

"I'm not ashamed of it," I said. "I went there for a good purpose."

"I can't see any good purpose in going to a public-house in Bannington—especially as Bannington is out of bounds," said Watson, sharply. "I didn't think you were that sort of chap, Bennett. I'm not so convinced of your innocence in that Farman affair as I was——"

"You think I did smash him up, then?" I asked bluntly.

"If you're cad enough to visit a pub, you're not above committing a brutal attack upon a chap," replied Tommy deliberately. "Hang it all, Bennett, we're your pals—you know that! We've stuck to you while all the others have turned their backs. And now you slide off by yourself and visit a low-down pub! Doesn't that look rotten?"

"Yes, it looks rotten," I replied—"but it isn't."

"I suppose you interviewed a book-maker while you were there?"

"You can suppose what you jolly well like!" I retorted, losing my temper a bit. "And the King's Arms isn't a low-down pub, either. It's a very respectable country inn; a place that any decent fellow could enter. It's out of bounds, that's all. But the place itself is a charming establishment. It's not like the White Harp, in Bellton, where a lot of drinking gamblers congregate."

Watson shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm not so well acquainted with pubs as you are," he said. "You seem to know them by heart. But I know that any decent chap wouldn't skip off on his own, and go to a public-house, for any honourable purpose."

There was a short silence.

"Dear fellow, tell us the truth," said Tregellis-West, at last.

"I've told you all I can," I replied. "I went to the King's Arms, and I deliberately gave you chaps the slip so that I could do so. What's the good of denying it? I know it looks absolutely rotten, but I can't help that. It's up to you to say what you're going to do."

"There's only one course open to us," remarked Watson.

"To cut me dead, you mean?" I asked curtly. "I give you my word that I didn't do anything shady—and, in a day or two, I shall be able to give you a perfect explanation. Can't you wait?"

"Why can't you tell us now?"

"I can't—that's all."

"You mean you won't?"

"Put it that way if it pleases you."

"Begad! You're making it hard for us, Benny," said Tregellis-West, in a pained voice. "Do you think you're playin' the game? You were sent to Coventry by the Form, an' Tommy an' I stuck to you. We were sent to Coventry, too—for your sake. We ain't complainin'; but you might give us a chance to believe in you. You say you've got a perfect explanation? Dear boy, let's have it—now!"

I shifted impatiently.

"I can't say any more than I have said," I replied.

"Why can't you? Because you know thundering well that we should think worse of you than ever!" said Watson hotly. "My hat! You must think we're duffers! I know your game, you rotter. You want two or three days to pass, so that we shall cool down, and then overlook your blackguardism! But it won't work—you've either got to explain now, or we'll drop you!"

I turned to the door with set lips.

"Then I shall have to be—dropped!" I said quietly.

"You want to finish with us?"

"No, I don't," I replied quickly.

"It's you who want to finish with me."

"Dear Benny, this is frightful," complained Montie. "I'd like to believe in you, but how can I? You went to a pub, and you broke bounds. You won't say what you did there, or why you went. What's the obvious conclusion? Why, that you're afraid to——"

"Oh, rats!" I interjected gruffly. "Don't go over it all again, for good-

ness' sake! I'm not afraid, as you'll find out in a day or two. I daresay you'll be sorry later on. But I don't blame you in the least."

Watson snorted.

"You're sent to Coventry by the Form," he said, "and you're sent to Coventry by Montie and I. Understand? If you speak to us we sha'n't answer you. We don't want to have anything to do with cads!"

"That's plain enough, anyhow," I said quietly.

And I passed out into the passage. Hubbard and Owen major were passing. They sheered away from me as though they might be contaminated. The same thing happened in the lobby.

I walked out into the Triangle, and my feelings were bitter.

Things had come to a pass, indeed!

I was utterly and absolutely barred—I was alone!

CHAPTER VI.

IN WHICH I DESCRIBE THE ADVENTURES OF JUSTIN B. FARMAN.

IT was the afternoon of the day following.

Lessons had started, and the whole school was quiet. The Triangle was deserted, and the lobbies and passages were in a similar state. The hot sun shone down scorchingly.

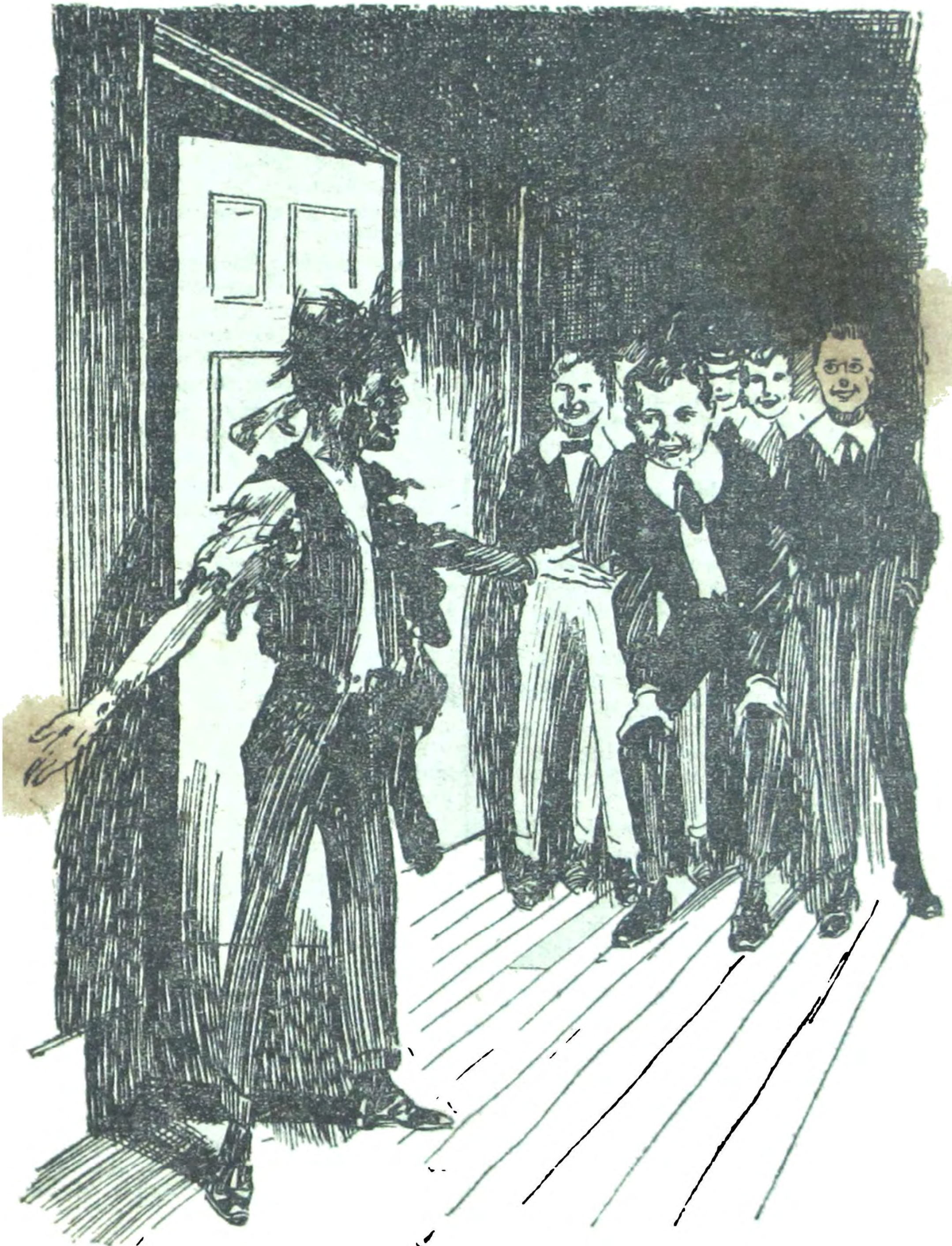
During the previous evening, and all that morning, I had led a pretty miserable existence. Shunned by everybody, my own chums included, I hadn't spoken a word to a soul, except to Mr. Crowell in class, and the gov'nor just after breakfast.

As I had told Tregellis-West and Watson, I didn't blame them. If I had been in their place, I might have acted in the same way. They had every reason to "out" me. And my only consolation was that the whole truth would come out in a day or two. At least, I hoped so. If it didn't——

But I didn't care to think of that prospect.

What I'm going to do now, is to describe the happenings of that particular afternoon—and the adventures of Justin B. Farman.

The American boy was a good-natured junior; an easy-going fellow in every way. He spoke excellent English when



Handforth puts his foot down—with painful results to himself.—
(See page 6.)

he liked; but he preferred to talk in the free-and-easy manner of Western America, as a rule.

He had been in the school hospital for several days, owing to his injury. This wasn't very serious. But his forehead had been badly bruised, and the skin had been cut. His nose, too, was a little the worse for wear.

As I wasn't with Farman during the afternoon—lessons were on—I shall have to tell of the events as they happened.

Well, Farman had been in the hospital all the morning. And when he appeared downstairs afternoon lessons were started. Of course, he wasn't taking any part in school work, and wouldn't do for some time.

He presented a curious spectacle.

His head was bandaged, the white linen-stuff smothering his forehead. And his nose was plastered all on one side. But his eyes were twinkling, and he walked with a confident stride.

In one of the deserted passages of the Ancient House he met the Head.

"Ah, you have managed to get down, then, Farman?" asked the worthy old gentleman genially. "How do you feel now, my boy?"

Justin B. Farman grinned rather twistedly—it's a bit of a job to grin when your nose is plastered up.

"Say, I'm just feeling good, sir," said Farman. "Guess I've been a guy to remain in bed so long. Say, I'm fit for anything, sir."

"I am glad to hear you speak so light-heartedly, Farman," smiled the Head. "But you must not attend lessons for some days yet. You are going out now for a walk? It will do you good."

"That's sure how I figgered, sir," said Farman. "I guess it's a lovely day—reminds me of my home State—California. Say, do I look a boob?"

"A what, Farman?"

"A guy, sir," grinned the American boy. "These bits of plaster——"

"My dear lad, you look quite all right," said the Head. "Quite all right! Have a quiet walk, and you will come back with a splendid appetite for tea. Excellent—excellent!"

Dr. Stafford passed on, and Farman left the House.

Out in the Triangle he chuckled to himself.

"Waal, this is surely fine," he murmured. "I'm feelin' gay. Say, Justin,

boy, you'd best tote around and get your lungs filled up with fresh air. Guess you're needin' a heap of it after days in that hospital."

He went out through the big gateway, and wandered leisurely in the direction of Bellton Wood. All the fellows being in their class-rooms, the lane was quite deserted and empty. The country people round about didn't use that road much. Farman had the place to himself.

Arriving at a stile, he sat upon it for some time.

He seemed to be thinking deeply, and now and again he would take out his big gold watch and look at it. Being the son of a multi-millionaire, his watch was a very expensive article.

Was he waiting for somebody?

Certainly. Farman was pre-occupied, and at times he would look up and peer into the wood. At last, however, he rose, and walked along the little foot-path which led through the wood in the direction of Bannington Moor.

He walked almost through the wood, and then sat down on a log. He remained there for half-an-hour. Then, again, he rose, and went to the end of the lane. The great stretch of the moor lay before him.

"Gee! It's as bare as the alkali lands!" he murmured.

With a shrug, Farman turned away, and then strolled back in the direction of the school.

The wood was very peaceful, and very cool. A more delightful scene for a walk could scarcely have been found, and Farman enjoyed himself immensely. He was in no hurry, and seemed to have forgotten all about tea.

For it was already past tea-time, and the sun was beginning to settle low in the sky. The shadows lengthened in the wood, and the air became slightly chilly, and a soft breeze sprang up.

Farman lounged along, occasionally touching his plastered nose with tender care. Obviously he was waiting for somebody—but whom could it be? Why should this fellow wait in Bellton Wood?

About half-way through the belt of woodland a surprising thing happened.

Farman was just negotiating a stretch of rough ground at the foot of a deep hollow. He was still deep in thought, and his head was bent. He walked

mechanically, and hummed some American air or other.

Then, abruptly, two men appeared.

They stepped from behind some bushes, and stood right in Farman's path.

"Waal, gee whiz!" gasped the American boy.

He stared at the two men with startled eyes. They were, indeed, of formidable aspect. The taller of the two was a white man—an American, presumably, for his clothes were trans-Atlantic in their cut. His hair was crisp and grizzled, and his clean-shaven face, lined and wrinkled, was set grimly.

The other man, also dressed in American clothing, was a Chinaman!

"I advise you to submit quietly, my lad," said the white man curtly. "You escaped us last time——"

"Say, what's the game, anyway?" asked Farman.

"I think you know it as well as I do," said the other. "I guess you're beyond help in this spot. You've walked just where we wanted you to walk."

"That was kinder thoughtful of me."

"Sure. Now, youngster, we sha'n't hurt you if——"

"You didn't hurt me last time, did you?" asked Farman tartly. "Guess you can see the damage."

The white man nodded.

"I'm sorry, boy," he said, with genuine regret. "That wasn't my doing. I guess you're real hurt—or you were. You've mended now. This infernal brute of a Wu Ling got his cudgel mixed up, and he hit you before I could stop him. I guess that he's had to pay for that mistake, too!" added the man grimly.

"Waal, there ain't goin' to be any more—mistakes!"

"Of course not. I am going to take you away, but you must not resist——"

Quite suddenly Justin B. Farman acted.

He acted in the most astonishing manner. From his right-hand trousers pocket he produced a small glittering revolver. With a swift movement he pointed the weapon upwards, towards the tree-tops, and pulled the trigger twice, in quick succession.

Crack! Crack!

The reports rang out sharply and keenly.

"By thunder!" snarled the man.

"You infernal young dog! Quick, Wu, catch hold of him! I'll make him suffer for this!"

In a flash the two men were upon Farman. They bore him to the ground before he could step back.

The little revolver went flying, and the American boy went flying, too. But, having fired the shots, he didn't seem to have any fight in him. He just allowed his assailants to overpower him.

Then came a different sound.

A crashing of twigs, and the awaying of leaves! Somebody was approaching—no, there was more than one!

Two forms burst from the undergrowth, and hurled themselves upon the Chinaman and his companion. In a second a fierce battle was progressing. Farman wriggled his way out, and then he fiercely helped in the attack.

He saw that one of the newcomers was a burly man, and the other elderly and refined-looking. In fact, the pair were none other than Detective-Inspector Morley, and Mr. Alvington—in other words, Nelson Lee!

How did it come about that they were in the wood just at this time?

It seemed extraordinary.

But it wasn't—not a bit!

And you'll see why, in a minute!

CHAPTER VII.

IN WHICH WE SORT OURSELVES OUT.

NELSON LEE was fighting fiercely. For that matter, so was Detective Inspector Morley, and so was Justin B. Farman. In fact, a most terrific "mill" was in progress.

Farman seemed to forget all about his injuries. He just entered the fray with all his might. He helped Nelson Lee with the big white man, while Morley tackled the Chinese.

Such a fierce fight couldn't last long.

The odds were all in favour of the trio. The American, big as he was, couldn't possibly get the better of Nelson Lee and Farman together. And Morley was miles better than any old Chinaman.

In less than three minutes there sounded a sharp click above the gasps and pants of the combatants. A pair of handcuffs had been fastened over the wrists of the struggling Wu Ling, and he was rendered helpless.

"By George!" gasped the inspector. "This is hot work!"

But it was over. The other kidnapper lay still, and the "bracelets" were snapped on without difficulty. Then, to make absolutely certain, Morley tied his handkerchief round a pair of ankles—an odd pair, for one belonged to the Chinese and the other belonged to the white man. They were unable to make any sudden dash for liberty.

"That's done the trick!" went on Morley. "My word, Mr. Alvington, you put up a good fight, too! But we've finished the brutes all right!"

"What is the meaning of this dastardly outrage?" snarled the white man. "I am an American citizen. My name is Cyrus Butler, and this lad here was having a few friendly words with me—"

The man stopped suddenly.

He was staring at Justin B. Farman with amazed eyes.

For a change had come about—a startling, extraordinary change.

The American boy was rather mauled about. His collar was hanging by one stud-fastening, his tie had disappeared, his jacket was torn, and the plaster had been knocked completely off his injured nose.

This latter was rather serious. To have the plaster torn from a healing wound is no light matter. But, amazing as it seemed, his nose wasn't injured in the least! There wasn't a scratch upon it.

Moreover, he was grinning cheerfully, and his whole expression had altered. His hair seemed to be on one side, and the bandage had dropped from his forehead, revealing the fact that he was absolutely uninjured!

What could it mean?

Cyrus Butler's eyes nearly goggled from his head.

"That—that boy!" he panted. "He—he is not young Farman!"

"I never said I was!" said the boy coolly. "You went and made a silly mistake, that's all. I'm Dick Bennett—of the St. Frank's Remove. You've been dished, my dear old buck!"

Well, there you are—that's the truth.

It was little me all the time!

Did I keep the secret all right—or did you guess it? You see, the whole business was a neatly prepared trap, concocted by old Morley and the guv'nor,

and worked out by the three of us together.

When I started out to describe Farman's adventures, I said that I wasn't with Farman at the time, didn't I? Well, I wasn't, because Farman was still snugly in his little cot at the school hospital!

Nelson Lee looked down at Butler sternly.

"It may interest you to know that this gentleman is Detective-Inspector Morley, of Scotland Yard, London," he said.

"The game is up, my friend."

"On whose authority am I arrested—"

"Now, Mr. Butler, that tone won't do," interjected Morley pleasantly. "I'll answer for what I've done. Don't worry about that. You are my prisoner, and if you take my advice you'll admit defeat. And I'd better warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence against you."

Butler didn't answer; he looked completely subdued.

Nelson Lee and Morley and I sorted ourselves out. It was a bit of a job, for the tussle had upset us somewhat. The guv'nor, of course, was Mr. Alvington—it was necessary for him to maintain his school identity. He couldn't be himself.

And I, of course, had to remain Dick Bennett. We were just a master and a scholar of St. Frank's, helping the police detective in a capture—that's all. Nelson Lee and Nipper didn't appear in the affair at all.

It was natural that we should help, too, because the case was directly connected with the school and one of its scholars.

The trap was as simple as ABC.

At the confab at the King's Arms, Nelson Lee had expressed the opinion that Farman's unknown assailants were still hanging about the neighbourhood. Everything went to prove that.

It was quite clear that Mr. Thorne had been attacked by these men, and Farman had received their attention on two different occasions. Both times the rotters had failed in their object—which was to carry Farman off.

Therefore, it was safe to conclude that they were in the district still—awaiting another opportunity to kidnap their victim. Possibly, Butler had been making plans for the trapping of the American boy.

Well, the guv'nor saw no reason why

the kidnappers shouldn't be trapped themselves. Nelson Lee had an idea that the men were hiding in the recesses of the big wood. And so an opportunity had been provided for them to capture Farman with the most perfect ease.

Farman had entered Bellton Wood alone, and had strolled about.

Actually, of course, we couldn't get Farman to do it—he didn't know anything about the affair, in fact. But I had disguised myself as the American junior, and I had taken his place for the time being.

Naturally, I hadn't been in the Form-room that afternoon. Just after lessons had started the Head had come in, and had taken me away with him. The fellows, of course, had wondered terrifically—and they were probably still wondering. The fact that I had vanished would cause much comment.

Well, everything in the garden was lovely, so to speak. I was grinning with sheer delight.

It had been as easy as winking for me to impersonate Farman. To begin with, everything was in my favour. His bandaged head, his plastered nose, and his characteristic way of speaking.

Any real disguise hadn't been necessary. The bandage and plaster hid my real features—especially as it was quite gloomy under the trees of the wood. And the American talk had been child's play. I'd had a few words practice with the Head before leaving the school, it may be remembered.

Anyhow, the trick was done—and that was what mattered.

The strangers had been in the wood, awaiting their chance—and I had provided the chance. Through the whole affair Nelson Lee and Inspector Morley had been shadowing me. They had kept me in sight, and had been on the look-out.

Those two revolver shots had been the signal—and the gov'nor and Mr. Morley had come to the rescue just at the right time. It couldn't have been worked better if we'd rehearsed it a dozen times.

Our capture proved that the gov'nor's judgment had been dead true. The trap had been a huge success, and we'd got the rotters.

But who were they?

And why were they so anxious to collar Justin B. Farman?

We were still in the dark as to those

all-important points. But we meant to get at the truth. If Butler didn't choose to speak, Farman would—when he knew that the men were in the hands of the police. Why Farman had maintained a silence about the whole matter puzzled me.

"What is to be done, Mr. Morley?" asked Lee, in a feigned, helpless kind of way. "I am merely a schoolmaster, you know. Do you intend to take these men to the police-station straight away?"

Morley scratched his left ear.

"Well, I don't know, Mr. Alvington," he replied. "It all depends upon the prisoners themselves. If Mr. Butler wishes to make a statement, he had better be taken to the school. We can deal with him afterwards. But if he refuses to speak, he'll be lodged in the cells at Bannington straight away."

Cyrus Butler looked up sullenly.

"What am I charged with?" he asked.

"With kidnapping a certain Mr. Thorne, and conveying him to a cave at Caistowe Bay," replied the inspector grimly. "Also, with treating Mr. Thorne with such brutality that he is even now in a nursing home—"

"That was an accident!" exclaimed Butler huskily.

"You admit the charge, then?"

"I guess denial is pretty useless," growled the other. "You know all about it."

"In addition, you are charged with unlawfully molesting a junior schoolboy of St. Francis's College," went on Morley. "You see, Mr. Butler, I know all about it. You can't slip out of the noose."

Cyrus Butler nodded gloomily.

"I guess my game's failed," he said.

"Say, take me to the school. I want to make a plain statement of the whole affair."

"And your companion?"

"Wu Ling? I guess he's only my paid man." Butler smiled weakly. "He's been living in this wood for weeks past—unknown to a soul. He's been on the look-out, and I have visited him every evening. I've come by car to the wood, across the moor." Say, you tricked me cleverly. I admit it."

"He hasn't been living like a rabbit, I suppose—in a hole?" asked Morley.

"No. In a little ramshackle hut, down in one of the hollows," replied the prisoner. "It was used, years ago, I heard, by some wandering gypsies. Wu Ling is

a hardy beggar—and I've paid him well. He's done things a white man wouldn't have put up with. That's why I brought him."

Butler and the Chinaman rose to their feet, and the inspector's handkerchief was removed. They couldn't escape, for they were handcuffed, and the shadows were growing deep. It was very gloomy under the trees.

As we walked off, Morley leading, I adjusted myself as much as possible, and removed the traces of my disguise.

"This is fine, sir," I remarked to the guv'nor. "This means that my term of Coventry is at an end."

"Yes, Bennett," replied Lee. "I am glad the matter is settled."

Very soon we left the footpath, and made our way to the little hut Butler had referred to. Morley wanted to see it. We understood, now, how the game had been worked. Wu Ling remained on guard, and Butler visited him once daily, with food and drink, probably. And to-day the Chinese had at once reported that Farman was wandering about alone in the wood.

Butler had eagerly seized his opportunity, and had obligingly walked into the guv'nor's little trap.

The hut proved to be a very rough place. The roof was full of holes, and the wooden walls were gaping in many places. But there was one dry corner, with a pile of dead leaves in it.

Wu Ling had been spending an outdoor life with a vengeance. But the weather was dry, and the nights had never been cold. That made the whole thing easy. Besides, he was a strong, wiry beggar.

In the middle of the wood, in that hollow, he might have remained all through the summer without having been seen by a soul. Bellton Wood was not used much by anybody. The footpath only led to Bannington Moor.

The moor, too, was a deserted waste of land.

Morley found nothing of value in the old hut, and we proceeded on our way to the school. Cyrus Butler was resigned to his fate, and he had recovered his spirits. He seemed to be almost amused. He had failed, and so he was making the best of a bad job.

"I took a big chance, and lost—I guess that's all," he said once.

Wu Ling hadn't uttered a word during the whole proceedings. I wondered if he

was dumb. Anyhow, he looked pretty badly scared now. Once or twice I caught him eyeing the guv'nor and me rather closely.

At last we emerged from the wood, and the lane was fairly light in comparison to the gloom of the trees.

"We'd better enter the school grounds by the masters' private gateway," remarked Nelson Lee. "The boys will make a rare commotion if we enter by the main gates. They'll know all about it later on."

"Have you got a telephone at the school, Mr. Alvington?" asked Morley.

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Why, yes, two or three," he replied. "There is one in Dr. Stafford's study."

"That's good. I'll be able to ring up the Bannington police," said the inspector easily. "They'll send along a motor-car with a couple of men. If Mr. Butler is sensible, he won't conceal a thing. He'll get off all the lighter."

Butler smiled at us all.

"I'm not the man to croak," he said. "I've failed, and I know it. The best thing I can do is to be straightforward."

We came to the masters' gate, and passed through. We found ourselves in the Head's private garden, and we were screened from the school grounds by high hedges. Yells and laughter told us that there were boys in the Triangle, and it was just as well to leave them in ignorance of this little drama.

The Head himself saw us from his study window, and he came to the side-door quickly.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed. "You have captured the rascals, then?"

"That's what I went for, sir," replied Detective-Inspector Morley. "Mr. Alvington and this youngster helped me well, too. The prisoners want to make a statement, and so I have brought them along."

"Ah, I understand," said the Head. "Will they be—er—safe? Do you think it will be—ahem!—advisable to bring them into my study?"

Morley grinned.

"I'll be answerable for them, sir," he said easily.

And so we passed inside. The inspector, at Lee's express request, was making out that he had engineered the whole capture. The guv'nor didn't want to appear at all. It was safer that way, under the circumstances.

Dr. Stafford was looking stern, and just a little flustered. His experience of crooks was very limited, and he felt nervous. This was probably the first time he'd ever had a brace of criminals in his study.

In a short time we were seated. The Head sat at his desk, and the two captives occupied a couch. Wu Ling seemed almost indifferent to his surroundings, and Butler was quite the opposite. There was a twinkle in his eye—a twinkle of bravado. He was quite resigned.

The gov'nor and I sat near the window, and Morley drew a chair up to the desk and fished out his notebook. Before doing this, though, he removed Butler's handcuffs. Morley didn't want to be harsh with the man. And Butler appreciated the little concession.

The inspector looked up.

"Now, Mr. Butler, I'm ready," he said crisply. "Go ahead as fast as you like."

"Well, to begin with, I'm going to make one point clear to you, gentlemen," began Mr. Cyrus Butler quietly. "I have been attempting, vainly, to get Master Justin B. Farman away from this school. I am related to him—I am, in fact, his uncle."

And that explained—much.

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. CYRUS BUTLER HAD TO TELL.

AMONG other things, the prisoner's statement explained why Farman had been so secretive. The kidnapper was his uncle! Of course, Farman had refused to give any information which would have led to his uncle's arrest—even though that rascally gentleman was attempting to abduct him.

"Oh!" said the inspector. "You are Farman's uncle? Well, go on."

"I should like to ask if he took any part in this betrayal——"

"The boy knows nothing," interjected Morley. "And it wasn't a betrayal, Mr. Butler. You were fairly caught. Farman has never said a single word which could have led to your capture."

The man smiled.

"Bully!" he said. "I guessed Justin was all right. Waal, sir, that boy don't exactly love me. I dare say he considers I'm a scoundrel, but he wouldn't give me

away. I've treated him roughly, but I never meant the slightest harm."

"No?" remarked the inspector drily.

"That's surely the truth," said Cyrus Butler, slowly stroking his grizzled locks. "To get to the root of this matter, I guess I'll acquaint you with the facts of a little family quarrel. Say, way back in California, I've had a heap of trouble with my brother-in-law—Mr. Justin Duke Farman, the railroad millionaire."

"You are the black sheep of the family, I presume?" smiled Morley.

"Put it that way if you like," was the reply. "I guess I never hit it off well with my people, and Farman kind of played it mean with me. You see, it was this way. My brother-in-law is the President of the Kingswood, Lawson, and Pacific Railroad—one of the biggest systems out that way. There was a big scheme suggested for the running of a branch line through a certain section of Arizona, forming a kind of loop, adjoining the main track further north. Waal, that proposition caused real trouble all around. I figured that the new track would run through the township of Long Gulch, where I was located, running a real estate office. Y'see, I ain't never made piles like Farman, but I was open to any chance. And I saw one right there."

"If the new loop came through Long Gulch I stood to make a whole pile of dollars. I guess my town-plots in the Gulch represented about half the ground of the whole township. With the railroad along there'd be a mighty fine boom going. Long Gulch would just about break records in the boom line. And, say, my town-sites would sell at such figures that I'd make a cool million dollars at the least. As you'll see, gentlemen, it was some proposition."

"Indeed it was!" murmured the Head interestedly.

Butler cleared his throat and lit a cigar. We were all a little surprised at his attitude. We had certainly never imagined that Farman's would-be kidnapper was such a close relative—or, in fact, a relative at all.

"That was the position of things three months ago," said Butler. "I guess I was just hugging myself with sheer delight. I was just waiting for the boom to get around. Waal, say, that boom didn't just happen along!"

"So I imagined," remarked the guy, nor smilingly.

"Say, it was a mean trick!" went on the prisoner bending forward. "Just when Long Gulch was getting ready for the big boom I heard a rumour that the new loop was to be carried through a one-horse village further south—Red Creek—and that the Gulch was to be kind of slipped. Say, there were ructions! I went right along to the big city and managed to get an interview with the railroad's president—my brother-in-law. He was real polite. He just smiled at me and told me to go to blazes. He reckoned that he was going to run his railroad proposition just as he liked. Red Creek suited him better, and so Long Gulch was wiped off the map, so far as he was concerned. Say, I argued for a whole hour; I pleaded with him; I reasoned every way possible. But Farman wouldn't budge."

"That was awkward," said the inspector, looking up from his notes.

"Sure. It was that awkward. I got riled," replied Butler grimly. "Waal, for two weeks I kept bothering the railroad, but they wouldn't take any notice of me, or of the deputation of Long Gulch citizens who went along. But I was the most interested party. The whole thing's dead clear. If I knew the loop came through Long Gulch, I became a millionaire; if it went through Red Creek I was ruined. Do you get me? I sort of saw red when I realised that the whole thing was slipping through my fingers. And maybe I acted against the law. But I don't reckon as any court would give me much of a sentence. You see, it was a family affair. The notion got buzzing around my head that if I could work some kind of lever I could force my mule-headed brother-in-law to be reasonable. It didn't matter a cuss to him which way the railroad went; he'd thwarted me just out of spite, because of a little squabble we'd had a month or two before."

"I can quite understand your feelings, Mr. Butler," said Morley.

"I am real glad of that," smiled the captive. "Say, this ain't a fake yarn I'm telling you. I don't hanker after blowing out hot air. It's just the truth, on my honour. Waal, the idea that I conceived was to get hold of my nephew. Billie was located around a scholastic layout in Southern California—Billie is

the young feller who's now in this school. To cut it short, I got the boy away in a motor-car, and carried him along to an outlying ranch. It was just a trick—say, there was nothing criminal in that, was there?

"Farman senior had no idea where his son had got to—until he received an anonymous communication telling him that as soon as the railroad corporation decided to run the new loop through Long Gulch, Billie would be restored to him. Farman guessed that I was the culprit, but there wasn't an atom of proof. He couldn't do anything to me. I had him good and proper."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"So far, Mr. Butler, your actions were only those of a keen business man—judged from an American standpoint," he said. "It is your action in this country which requires a very close explanation."

"And I guess I'll give it," said Butler quickly. "Say, I don't reckon to be a saint. I'm not. I've done things in desperation, that I'm real ashamed of. But don't lose sight of the fact that a million was at stake. Waal, Farman realised that he was the under-dog. He wanted his son back, and so he signed the contracts and gave the orders for the running of the new track through Long Gulch."

"It was a real triumph for me—until disaster came along," said Butler bitterly. "Have you ever been so riled that you can't see a yard in front of you? Guess I was fixed that way—sure! Right at the last moment some blamed detective-agency got on the track. They found Billie and took him back to his father. Waal, that just put the hat on things. The new contracts were torn up and Long Gulch was told to go to blazes."

"That was, indeed, a disaster," said old Morley, looking up.

"I should think it was!" I put in with real feeling.

"To make matters worse Farman sent his son straight off East—bound for Europe," went on the prisoner. "I got to know that his destination was St. Francis's College, Surrey, England. By this time I was raving with fury, and I began to get ideas that no honest man would have contemplated. But, gentlemen, don't you think I was justified? My brother-in-law had acted shamefully

to me, and I just meant to get my own back. Farman's a good man, really, but he's prejudiced. Waal, I knew the loop line wasn't due to be built until the Fall—I guess you call it Autumn over here. I had time to get busy. I'm a sticker, and I don't mean to knuckle under. I followed Farman junior to New York, taking this yellow beauty with me. Wu Ling's a faithful sort of fellow, and he obeyed my orders without question. We managed to get on a faster boat than the one Billie was taking, and so we arrived first—three days before the boy."

"I'm beginning to understand a little," said the guv'nor softly.

"Billie was to be met by some lawyer feller, and taken to London; then he was to come straight down here," went on Cyrus Butler. "It was my plan to get around first, and look out the lie of the land. For, to be candid, I meant to get hold of Billie just as I had done before. I'd made arrangements with the skipper of a sailing ship, and, once the boy was away from the school, everything would have been dead easy. Mind you, I didn't mean to harm him in the least degree. I was acting on the crook, I know, but I didn't mean to do a thing that could be termed violent or brutal.

"The first day was spent in scouting, and Wu Ling took up his quarters in Bellon Wood—as you know I stayed in Bellington, and I had an automobile with me—I'd rented it in London. The idea was to skip to the coast in the car as soon as I'd got hold of the boy. And then I did the first fool thing of the whole game. I acted like a real criminal—and I guess I'm so sorry I don't know how to say it. But I didn't do it intentionally. It was kind of forced on me.

"Say, Dr. Stafford, you had a master here—a hobo named Thorne?"

"Mr. Thorne was a housemaster here, as you say," agreed the Head. "So we are getting to the bottom of that mystery too? I am glad—very glad."

Cyrus Butler sighed

"Say, that was a chapter of accidents," he exclaimed, jerking the ash from his cigar. "I heard from several quarters that Mr. Thorne was a real wrong 'un. I heard that he was so hated that he was on the point of being fired."

"Fired?" repeated the Head mildly.

"Sure. Sacked—dismissed," said But-

ler. "I gathered that Thorne was a regular rascal, and I made a heap big miscalculation. One night Wu Ling and I got around, and entered Thorne's study by the window—this was two or three days before Billie arrived at the school—"

"One moment," interrupted the guv'nor. "Previous to that visit, did you go to the seashore, Mr. Butler?"

"Waal, say that's queer," declared the other. "Ling and I had just come up from a cave. But how did you know about it?"

"Some particles of seaweed were found in Mr. Thorne's study—that's all," replied Nelson Lee smilingly. "Some of the boys and myself, more by chance than anything else, found Mr. Thorne in the cave. He was in a very bad way."

"That's what I want to explain," said Butler quietly. "My idea was that Thorne would fall in with my plans immediately—he being a scallywag. We got him down to the cave without difficulty, and then I told him my proposition. I put it to him good and plain. All he had to do was to give Billie a harmless dope on his first night at the school, and bring him out to me beyond the gates. For this I offered to give Thorne a hundred pounds. You see, I had realised the impracticability of getting hold of Billie by daylight. This little scheme with Thorne made everything easy."

"He didn't agree, did he?" asked the Head in a shocked tone.

"That's just where I made a big mistake," admitted Butler. "I'd got hold of Thorne's character all wrong. As a schoolmaster he was certainly slack and bad all round. But he had a high sense of honour. And he point blank refused to have anything to do with my scheme."

"Ah," said the Head with relief. "I thought so—I thought so!"

"I was angry—furious," went on our captive. "And so I left him in the cave, helpless, to think matters over. I thought, by the next day, that he would have been terrified into agreeing. That was foolish of me. My brains had got sort of massed-up. Waal, Wu Ling went to his hut in the wood, and I decided on a trip to London. Just as I was passing through a suburb a fool omnibus got gay, and there was a pretty

little mix-up. Not much damage done, but the wind-screen of my car was smashed, and I got badly cut in the neck. See." He lifted his head, and showed us a recently healed, jagged cut. "I was taken into a hospital, and they wouldn't let me out for a whole week. It seems that my ankle was sprained as well."

"And Mr. Thorne was in the cave the whole time?" asked Morley.

"Sure. I hadn't given Ling instructions, and I couldn't act myself," replied Butler. "Say, I was that worried I nearly went mad. But at last I got out, and came straight down here again. I fetched Ling, and we carried food and water down to the cave. But Mr. Thorne was real bad, and we left, meaning to bring him medicine the next day. I was just desperate. And when we entered the cave again Mr. Thorne had gone. I tell you, gentlemen, I was glad—so glad that I breathed with relief. The poor man was in a bad way, I afterwards learned, and I was the cause of it. But it wasn't done deliberately. I'll prove that to you; the hospital people will bear out my statement."

We were all regarding the prisoner with a certain degree of sympathy. After all, he wasn't such a scoundrel as we had imagined. I clearly remembered that the gov'nor and I had visited the cliffs at Caistowe Bay one eventful night. We had seen the pair enter the cave; and the next day Mr. Thorne had been rescued. We now knew why he had been placed in that cave.

"After that I felt miserable and unsettled," continued Cyrus Butler. "I didn't exactly know how to get to work. But one night we came upon Farman by accident. He was going down the lane with some other boys, and we sprang upon them and took Billie through the woods. But, owing to this gentleman's promptitude"—and Butler nodded to Nelson Lee—"I was foiled. The next chance I had was when Billie was left on the edge of the wood by two of his chums. Say, that was another bad affair. He resisted; he said he wasn't going to be taken away, and he struggled. This fool of a chink, acting without my orders, hit poor Billie with a cudgel before I could stop him. Then, as a motor-car was coming along, we had to skip. I guess that's all, gentlemen. You know the rest. Nothing further happened until

this evening, when I thought I had got Billie properly. Say, it was cute, and I'm done. My scheme's panned out bad. Waal, I'm not sorry; I didn't hanker after crooked dealings, anyway."

Butler sat back, and regarded us quietly.

"And that's all?" asked Detective-Inspector Morley, closing his notebook.

"Sure."

"Well, my opinion of you, Mr. Butler, is higher than it was before you started talking," said Morley smilingly. "If your statements are true—and I believe they are—you won't come to much harm. But you'll have to stand your trial in the usual order of things. If it hadn't been for that affair of Mr. Thorne, I dare say you would have gone free. But I can't let you go. You will have to make your defence in a criminal-court. And, frankly, I believe you'll get off with a fine, unless, of course, Mr. Thorne's relatives like to be nasty."

Cyrus Butler stood up.

"I'm ready," he said calmly. "I took a chance and lost. A million dollars have gone clean—but I'm not sorry. I'd rather lose the money than get up to any more tricks of this sort."

Twenty minutes later Mr. Cyrus Butler and Wu Ling left St. Frank's in a closed motor-car. Previous to his departure, Butler had a few words with his nephew.

Farman was awfully cut-up, and he told his uncle that he would move heaven and earth to get him off lightly. He'd cable to his father, and would do heaps of other things.

And then, after that, I was allowed to go.

I changed, washed myself, and strolled down into the common-room.

CHAPTER IX.

IN WHICH EVERYTHING IS ALL SERENE.

SIR MONTIE and Tommy Watson were in the common-room with a crowd of other fellows. But they didn't come near me. I knew they were curious, however. Everybody was curious.

They were eager to know why I had been called out of the Form-room that afternoon, and what I had been doing since. It was nearly dark now, and I hadn't been seen for hours.

But I was joyful.

In less than half-an-hour I should be completely and absolutely vindicated. The Head, in fact, was going to make a short speech to the whole school. So far, the boys knew nothing whatever.

Since Fullwood & Co. had spread the yarn about my visiting the King's Arms, in Bannington, I had been "cut" by everybody. Needless to say, Fullwood and his precious pals had added picturesque additions to the real facts.

Gulliver was quite certain that Mike Bradmore, the shady bookmaker, had been lounging in the porch of the King's Arms. Bell declared that a cigarette had been in my lips. And Fullwood, going the whole hog, spread the story that I had been in the act of drinking whisky at the time!

I didn't wonder at the fellows despising me. Fullwood's influence was great just now, and the Removites thoughtlessly listened to him. Even Sir Montie and Tommy Watson half believed some of the tales.

But I didn't blame them. My own attitude must have seemed extraordinary to them. I had admitted that I had visited the inn, and that I had deliberately given them the slip in order to do so. It was easy for the two juniors to believe worse things of me.

There was a general glare as I entered the common-room. I had expected a studied avoidance. But the fellows regarded me angrily.

"That chap ought to be barred from the common-room," said Hobbard. "We don't want pub-haunters here!"

"You'd better bar Fullwood & Co., then!" I said pleasantly.

Ralph Leslie Fullwood strode forward.

"Do you want a raggin'?" he asked fiercely.

"I'm not going to get one," I retorted.

"Fullwood, old dear, you're going to have a very sudden fall in about twenty minutes. The fellows are going to learn that you've been lying and spreading faked yarns; in fact, I'm going to be elected leader of the Fossils again!"

"You cheeky rotter!" roared Fullwood.

"Don't speak to him," said Handforth, glaring. "He's in Coventry, anyhow!"

"I sha'n't be in half-an-hour's time,"

"What's happened, you cad?" piped Teddy Long eagerly.

I grinned. Long, I knew, had been on

the jumps for hours past. He was the "Peeping Tom" of the Ancient House, and he was fearfully cut-up because he couldn't find out what was in the wind.

His curiosity was such that he was even willing to ask me for information.

"A lot's happened, my son," I said cheerfully.

"Yes, but what——"

"You're not going to speak to the cad!" interrupted Armstrong, giving Long a cuff. "Clear out!"

"The Head's going to call the school together in a minute or two," I remarked.

Nobody replied for a moment; then Tregellis-West adjusted his pince-nez, and lounged across to me. He was looking very grave, but there was a twinkle of hope in his eyes.

"Bennett, dear fellow, I believe you're hiding something up your sleeve," he said serenely. "Are you?"

"Do you still think I'm a cad?" I asked, looking him straight in the eyes.

Sir Montie took a deep breath.

"By the Lord Harry—no!" he declared. "I'm your pal, Benny! Give us your fist, old boy! Tommy, you ruffian, come back to the fold! Benny's all right! Benny's been playin' us up!"

"Don't be an ass, Montie!" protested Tommy uncomfortably.

"I'm not. I have been an ass—but I'm not now," said Tregellis-West. "Begad! Don't you see the glint in Benny's eye? What does it mean? He's goin' to surprise us all soon!"

"That's true enough," I grinned; "I am!"

Something in my manner—the calm assurance and cheerfulness, perhaps—must have had an effect upon Tommy and Montie. Probably they saw that I was true blue. They were both keen judges of character.

"Hang it all, Benny, there's my fist!" said Tommy impulsively.

I took it warmly, and gripped Montie's arm. I felt very happy at that moment. Both my chums had come back to me before they heard the news. It was splendid. I hadn't hoped for it.

The other fellows looked on angrily.

"Well, that's settled it!" said Merrell. "Those three cads are barred completely now. I vote we give them all a Form ragging——"

"Rats!" bawled Edward Oswald Handforth. "There's something queer

about this. Blessed if I ain't beginning to believe Bennett's a good 'un, after all! Look at him! He's grinning like a door-knocker! He ain't a chap who's been doing rotten things!"

"Good for you, Handy!" roared Watson. "Come and join us!"

Handforth hesitated.

"If Bennett'll give an explanation——"

"The Head's going to do that," I interrupted. "Handy, old chap, you're an ass, but you're a jolly good ass! You won't regret it if you show these fellows that you believe in me."

"I've been thinking hard," said Handforth. "I've been thinking jolly hard, in fact. And I can't believe that Bennett's a rotter. I'm going to join him—and if I'm sent to Coventry I don't care a tuppenny dash!"

McClure glared.

"Don't be an idiot, Handforth!" he shouted.

"You're going to join the party, too—and so is Church!" said Handforth decidedly. "We'll form the 'Bennett Party.' And we'll send the rest of the chaps to Coventry! How's that? That'll take a spoke out of their wheel—what?"

Handforth strode across the common-room, and thumped me on the back. He did so with a condescending air which I couldn't possibly resent. Church and McClure followed him.

I was very pleasantly surprised, but Fullwood & Co. were bubbling with fury.

"This is all rot!" shouted Fullwood. "Bennett's in disgrace——"

The door opened, and Conroy major looked in. Conroy major was a prefect.

"You're wanted in the Big Hall," he said shortly. "Cut along!"

"Is the school being called together?" asked Watson.

"Yes. The Head's going to make a speech or something."

"What about?" asked a dozen voices.

"I don't know," said Conroy.

"You'll find out."

"Benny said the school was going to be called together," drawled Sir Montie.

"Benny's been doin' things. I don't know what, but he's been doin' 'em!"

Fullwood scowled.

"No doubt about that!" he sneered.

"And now he's going to get the sack, I expect! That's why the school's called together. It's a public expulsion!"

"Rats!"

"Shut up, Fullwood!"

The Removites were excited, and they felt that something unusual was in the wind. I left the common-room in the midst of my new friends. I was tremendously happy. The very chaps I liked the best had shown their faith in me.

In the Big Hall all the Forms were soon in their places.

The Head was talking with Mr. Alvington and two other masters. And when Dr. Stafford turned to the great sea of faces, he was smiling. There was a hush of expectancy.

"My boys, I have something to say to you which, I believe, will be welcome," he began, in his pleasant, deep voice. "One of your schoolfellows, Farman, of the Remove Form, was brutally attacked several days ago."

"Yes—by Bennett?" I heard Fullwood murmur.

"The rascals who were responsible for that attack have now been arrested, and are even now in Bannington Police-station," went on the Head. "The chief culprit has confessed everything, and Farman is no longer in danger."

There was an excited buzz.

"Then Bennett didn't do it, sir?" shouted Handforth excitedly.

Dr. Stafford smiled—and then frowned.

"I will not ask for the name of the boy who interrupted me," he said; "but I shall at once make a very necessary statement. It has come to my ears that certain malicious stories have been circulated among the juniors—particularly those of the Ancient House. It has been said that Bennett, of the Remove Form, committed the assault. I publicly vindicated Bennett several days ago—but some boys apparently considered that my statement was untrue. If I had the names of those boys I should punish them severely. Bennett is absolutely innocent. The arrest and the confession of the real culprits proves that up to the hilt."

There was another buzz; and I saw that scores of faces were turned in my direction. Fullwood & Co. were scowling and looking scared. The other fellows were rather shamefaced.

"Furthermore," went on the Head, "Bennett played a very active part in the capture of the rascals. This very evening Bennett impersonated Farman, and pluckily invited an attack. He was

accompanied on his expedition by a detective-inspector from Scotland Yard."

"Phew!"

The whole school gasped.

"Bennett led Farman's enemies into a trap, and they were captured," went on Dr. Stafford. "Needless to say, Bennett laid himself open to an attack which might well have proved serious. Throughout the whole affair Bennett has acted in the most courageous manner, and I now publicly thank him for his services. In order to prepare this trap, Bennett, at my express wish, visited the King's Arms Inn, on the Bannington Road, for the purpose of meeting Detective-Inspector Morley. Public-houses are, of course, out of bounds, but this was a very special occasion. Moreover, I trusted Bennett implicitly. He arranged matters with the Scotland Yard detective, and to-day's capture is the result. I have made these statements publicly because I think that Bennett is deserving of the highest praise. I have reason to believe that he has been shunned and avoided, owing to the false rumours which have been circulated. That injustice must not continue—"

The Head was interrupted at this point.

Tommy Watson, having thumped me on the back, was yelling for cheers.

And the cheers were given, too! They nearly lifted the roof off, and the Head waited until the commotion had subsided. Fullwood & Co. didn't cheer; they stood still, and looked sheepish.

"I cannot explain the inner facts of the case to you, my boys," concluded the Head, at last. "Farman wishes the whole affair to be hushed up, and I must respect his wishes. Certain facts will be made known at the police-court inquiry, but that will not be for some weeks. And it is no business of mine. I need only say that Farman is now well on the road to recovery, and that he will be amongst you by to-

morrow evening. And he is no longer in any danger. Owing to Bennett's courage and cleverness, the unfortunate episode is satisfactorily closed."

Not a word was said about the governor. Nelson Lee had expressly requested the Head to make no mention of his part in the affair. He did not want to appear at all.

I was literally carried out of the Big Hall.

The fellows cheered and shouted and shook my hand until it ached. They wanted to know what I had been doing, and I had to explain the impersonation and the capture a dozen times over. But I didn't say who the attackers had been, and I didn't go into details.

A terrific feed was held in my honour in Study C, and the guests overflowed out into the passage. Fullwood & Co. were ragged unmercifully by the angry Removites, and they slunk away and hid their diminished heads.

Fullwood was beaten; his victory had been short lived; and my own popularity was now ten times greater.

If the fellows had been hasty in condemning me, they made ample amends. I knew that rosy times lay ahead. I could afford to snap my fingers at Fullwood & Co., and their petty spite.

But there was one point which worried me.

It worried Nelson Lee, too.

Wu Ling, the Chinaman, had looked at us queerly several times. Was he a member of the dreaded Fu Chang Tong? He had come from Western America—and it was there that the Fu Changs were most powerful.

Had our secret been discovered?

Was Wu Ling a member of the terrible Chinese secret society—and would he inform his blood-brothers of our whereabouts?

There was only one thing to do—and that was to wait—and see!

THE END.

NEXT WEEK'S STORY will be entitled:

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TOM CRAWLEY, light-weight boxer and stoker aboard *H.M.S. Flyer*, makes his first public appearance in a contest with **Jimmy Youl**, lightning feather-weight. He wins the fight, and with the prize-money replaces his father's torpedoed fishing smack. Tom is jealous of

BOB HANDLE—who, the lad considers, is a "slacker"—on the grounds that Bob seems to find favour in the eyes of

MARY THWAITES, the pretty daughter of Fisherman Thwaites, of whom Tom is very fond.

FISHERMAN CRAWLEY'S smack is chartered as a mine-sweeper, and one day is torpedoed by a German submarine in sight of land. Old Thomas Crawley is taken prisoner and carried on board the U-boat. But the others are put afloat on a raft. They are soon picked up by a British destroyer and landed near Weathersea. Tom and Bob go to meet them, and Mary is very anxious about the fate of old Tom Crawley. Meanwhile a big boxing match is fixed up between Jerry Nelson and Tom. It is a draw, and just as the audience are about to leave the hall a whirring noise is heard. A moment later something strikes the building itself, and immediately all is confusion. The building, however, is not much hurt, and Tom is able to get his mother home. He then goes round to see Mrs. Thwaites, and is much relieved to find her cottage is untouched. Bidding her good-bye he continues his way to the harbour. Here he sees Captain Walsh, the commander of the *Flyer*, who tells him the ship will be ready to engage the enemy in a day or two.

(Now read this week's instalment.)

THE TOLL OF THE SEA.

THE Germans had done no end of damage to Weathersea during their brief bombardment, a running bombardment, for they were afraid of our British Navy from the sea.

Indeed, the full extent of the damage was not realised until the morning after, when people began to talk, and the townsfolk walked about the streets to see for themselves.

Then their exasperation burst forth in full flood.

Strangely enough, though many houses had been demolished, the number of killed and injured was, by comparison, small.

The mortuary was full, it is true, and the worst cases had been taken to the hospital, where the doctors and staff had been kept very busy. Yet all agreed that it might have been far worse.

Promoter Dan Simmons told what he thought about things in language more forcible than polite.

"I'm a fighting man, I am," he cried. "And, if I were only a year or two younger, I'd be out in Flanders helping to comb the Kaiser's hair. And I'd use a sharp-toothed comb. I give yer my word."

But Dan was tied to Weathersea, and at Weathersea he would have to stop, and he did a lot of useful war work there, too, in his way, what with war benefits, hospitality extended to soldiers and sailors, and the help he gave to the various funds.

Fritz had badly peppered the popular lodging-house quarter of the town, and the houses along the main sea front presented a very rueful appearance, some of them being roofless, others with the windows blown out, and the walls blown in.

"Not 'arf," as a cockney Tommy quartered in the town said as he promenaded to view the damage.

But, if the enemy expected to strike terror into the hearts of the people, he had made a sad miscalculation.

The seamen looked grim, the fishermen were as eager as ever to put out, the mine-sweepers and patrol boats put to sea as if nothing had happened, the air was

simply swimming with aircraft, and over there in the docks the sound of the hammer was never still a moment. Admiralty orders had to be obeyed, and the *Flyer* was being got ready for sea. Meanwhile other snake-like, low-in-the-water, grey-hulled vessels had steamed into the harbour to swell the number of the *Weathersea* patrol.

That very same day the task of building and repairing began in the town, and business as usual was the common order.

Two days later the *Flyer* went out, and Tom Crawley was aboard.

It seemed to Tom an age since he had last gone to sea in her, and yet it was a very little while ago. But things had been very different then. His father was fresh to the command of the *Dora Grey*, and had grown young again. Now the *Dora Grey* was lying on the ocean's bed, and his father was missing—dead or alive, none could tell.

Seaman Tomkins, and others of Tom's messmates, saw the change there was in Tom. The boy appeared to have changed into a man. Much of his light-hearted irresponsibility had gone, too. Tom talked about killing Germans now, longed for a chance of getting at them, and eyed the racks in which the firearms and cutlasses were set with many a wistful glance, as if his fingers itched to handle them.

The old *Flyer* proved to be as fast and as seaworthy as ever, and in her speed trials gave every satisfaction. From that moment she went to sea regularly, performing her multifarious duties with the usual high efficiency, with officers and men all dying to get at the Hun.

Yet, with all its bustle and activity, the round of many duties involved proved dull and uninteresting to the gallant men and officers aboard.

The years went on, and still the war dragged its way wearily, with the Allies slowly but surely gaining the upper hand in most of the fields of battle, and yet these brave destroyers had few opportunities of coming to grips with the enemy, while every now and then there was a swift raid from the German wasps, and the shelling of some unimportant coastside town.

The irritation of it!

Tom Crawley felt his blood boil many and many a time. The bravery of the fine fishermen of *Weathersea*, who fear-

lessly faced countless dangers, could not prevent occasional losses.

Thus, the fishing boat employed in mine-sweeping commanded by Fisherman Thwaites was shelled by a submarine, and Morgan aboard her was killed.

Tom Crawley was aboard the *Flyer*, in harbour, when the mine-sweeper came back to port in its crippled state, and like magic the news was flashed that there were casualties aboard.

Tom asked for permission to go ashore, which was readily granted, and so, when the little boat was rowed to the landing steps, with the body of Morgan aboard, he was there among the crowd to see.

While he was waiting breathless from his exertions in getting there, Mary Thwaites came and stood beside him.

The same fear gripped both their hearts, that Fisherman Thwaites had been killed.

Mary turned a white, strained face to the lad she had grown up with, and he saw her lips tremble, and tears gather in her eyes.

"Oh, Tom!" she cried, touching his arm.

"It's all right, Mary," he gulped sympathetically. "I'm sure it isn't that."

Nor was it, for they saw Mr. Thwaites seated in the stern sheets steering, as the men rowed the boat ashore.

Then there was a cry of make way there, and strong arms reverently bore the covered-up victim of Hun ruthlessness up on to the quay, and passed onward to the waiting ambulance.

"Father!" cried Mary, throwing herself into the fisherman's arms.

He strained her close, and Tom noticed that his face was set and pale and stern.

"It's poor Morgan!" he muttered. "Poor fellow! He didn't know anything about it, though, thank Heaven!"

"And the others?" she asked.

"Only slightly injured. The boat is peppered, though. But we turned the gun on the scoundrels, and they dived, scared to death."

"What's going to be done about it, Thwaites?" asked a burly fisherman, old and grizzled, looking solemnly at the stalwart seaman.

"Keep on until we get the U-boats under!" was the ringing reply. "It can be done, it's got to be done, it shall be done—we're going to win the war, mates, make no error. Only no grumbling, no

grousing, no kicking. We've got to pull together."

Then he solemnly stretched out his hand to Tom, and walked his way through the press of sympathisers, with Mary clinging to his right arm, and Tom walking by his side.

Fisherman Thwaites was as fine a hero as any of the Elizabethan buccaners whose names have been handed down to us by history. And he was only one of thousands.

England stands exactly where she did, and will stand for all time, thanks to the fine blood that is in her.

ORDERED OUT.

SUCH incidents as the shelling of the fishing boat which Thwaites commanded only served to stiffen the nerve of the men who'd got to win through at Weathersea. Dan Simmons, with the repairs still going on at his boxing hall, promptly organised a benefit for Morgan's widow.

But Tom took no part in this, for he was daily at sea, and could not leave his ship, save for brief intervals of rest when she put into port, and remained there for a brief refitting.

So the weeks passed, and still there was no news of Thomas Crawley.

Tom's mother began to talk about wearing mourning. Never a day came without her weeping silently, and Tom saw her straight back bend and her shoulders droop. She was giving way, though she made no complaint. Tom began to feel desperate, and tried by all the means that lay in his power to find out whether his father had been taken to Germany a prisoner.

He failed. No information had so far come to hand.

It was an open secret in Weathersea that many U-boats had been sunk of late, and there was a strong supposition that the pirate which had sunk the Dora Grey had gone to the bottom with her.

The uncertainty of it was nerve-racking, and the once happy home was plunged in gloom.

Mrs. Crawley had one great comforter in these dark days, for Mary Thwaites came every day, bringing with her the sunshine.

Mrs. Crawley felt that she lay under a

debt of gratitude towards her which she would never be able to repay.

It was always a joy to Tom to come home and see the pretty bright-eyed and ever cheerful lass there.

It was at such times that Tom discovered that his feelings towards Mary had undergone a subtle change.

He no longer despised girls, more especially Mary. He listened to her words, and regarded her with wondering eyes at times.

One evening, when the three of them were sitting in the little flower garden in front of the cottage, for the vegetables were all grown behind, Mary said suddenly: "Tom, do you know that Bob is about to go to France?"

The sailor boy started.

"What? Bob going to France?" he repeated. I—I—he—didn't tell me anything about it."

As a matter of fact, Tom had seen nothing of Bob Randle lately.

The grocer's son had been busy training, and no leave was granted at the camp where he was stationed, save under very exceptional circumstances.

"No," said Mary, looking far away. "I only heard this morning. He sent just a brief letter, asking me to tell you. He says he doesn't think he will get any farewell leave. They've stopped all that."

"Why?" cried Tom furiously, feeling as if he had suffered an injustice somehow.

"Oh, miles of line have been pulled up, and heaps of the rolling stock has been sent to France. They don't want any unnecessary travelling."

Tom groaned, and once again abused the Germans.

"And so, Tom, as he'll go soon—the day after to-morrow, he thinks, and he's going out with the new draft, I want you to go to the camp with me. We'll be able to say good-bye to him——"

Tom's feelings were complex. He felt his heart swell as he thought of Bob going away like that, without a chance of saying good-bye. Then he was jealous because Mary wanted to go to him. Why should she think such a lot of Bob? Next he felt proud of her, that she should ask him to go with her. Generally he was in a mental turmoil.

He figured things out.

"I think I shall be able to come,

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Mary," said he. "I'll make inquiries to-night. You can count on me, if it's possible."

It was possible. Tom made his inquiries, and was informed that he could have that day off.

"Only be back and report aboard not later than five o'clock," he was told. "For the *Flyer* may be ordered out. You never know."

And so, on the appointed day, he and Mary got into the train, and started for the distant camp, where Bob and thousands of other lusty young civilians had been instructed in the art of modern warfare and learnt how to kill.

THE PARTING.

WHAT a change there was in Bob when they saw him.

Tom Crawley would never have believed it possible.

Half of his contempt for Bob, so freely expressed while the Tommy was helping his father in the grocery business at a time when the country was howling for soldiers, had arisen from the fact that Bob had then been a narrow-chested lad, with a pale face and dreamy eyes, who seemed to shun the attention of passers-by when out for a walk.

Now he saw in place of the old Bob a fine, upstanding young soldier, not on the big side, but remarkably well turned out, with bronzed face, clear eyes, stomach drawn in and chest held well out, with head erect and carriage perfect.

Bob's manner now was serene and confident.

He greeted them both with a quiet smile, and the handshake he gave Tom was most cordial.

"We're both doing our bit now, Tom," said he. "You've been at it longer than I have, and I haven't had a chance of bayoneting a German yet. That'll soon come to me, I hope."

"When are you going out?" asked Tom.

"We entrain to-morrow."

"And they won't let you go home?" asked Tom fiercely, clenching his hands, the feeling he always had of wanting to fight other people's battles almost overcoming him.

"No. No time. Besides, it only

makes it worse, boy," and there was a mist before Bob's eyes. "For—the old folks, I mean."

It came home to Tom then that Bob loved his parents dearly, though he was a simple tradesman's son.

"I can bear it," Bob went on, bracing himself up. "I've got work to do, you see."

So they remained talking for some time.

After, they wandered about the camp, where Tom eyed everything with the keenest interest. Everything was orderly, all the men looked fit and well. Most of them were in very high spirits.

They talked of Weathersea, and of the happy days that were to come after the war. Then the moment of parting drew near, and they lapsed into silence.

At last Mary said, turning to Tom: "Tom, I—I'd like to say good-bye to Bob alone, if you don't mind."

He stared at her in surprise, and then a dull ache throbbed in his heart. What did Mary want to say good-bye to Bob alone for?

He watched them walk away, and a flash of the old ferocity made him clench his fists. But somehow he didn't hate Bob this time.

Moodily he waited, striding up and down.

They did not go very far. He saw them standing together.

Then he saw Mary suddenly break down, and saw Bob catch her in his arms, and hold her, while she sobbed violently.

Next they walked very slowly towards him, and he heard Bob say: "And that's for you to keep, Mary, in remembrance of me. You said you'd like it. The little gold locket I bought in the village. It's not what I wanted, but there wasn't much choice."

"Oh, Bob!" said Mary. And Tom saw that it was a locket containing a miniature portrait of Bob Randle which she held in her hand.

The girl looked at it, then at Bob, though she could hardly see him through her tears.

"I'll wear it, always, Bob," she faltered.

"Good-bye, Mary!" said the soldier.

She looked at his hand, but ignored it. Instead, she threw her arms about his

(Continued overleaf.)

neck, and kissed him, with Tom standing by.

"Oh, Bob, Bob, I can't bear it!" she moaned, and her heart was in the cry, as Tom saw.

"It's all right," the Tommy replied. "I'll soon be back. The war won't last for ever. And I'm going to meet your brother Fred out there. I'll give him the message you sent—"

"And you'll write?"

"I'll write regular to you and Tom, and all. Good-bye, Mary, old girl. God bless you and Tom!"

And the next moment he had gone.

"What did you want to kiss him for?" said Tom sullenly, as he and Mary began the long walk to the station together.

"I—I—couldn't help it, Tom. Don't blame me. Don't be hard—"

"Do you love him, then?" asked Tom, at war within himself.

"Yes, I—I—think I do, Tom, though I never realised it till now. I can't bear that he should go—he's so much of a man—"

Tom said no more, but for the moment he was glad that Bob had gone, glad that he would be out of the way.

He hated Bob; he felt that he hated Mary, most of all he hated himself.

Things were going all wrong with everything, somehow, and it was the war that was to blame.

How they got through the journey back he never knew. Conversation was stiff and difficult for the first time in their lives, and when at last they entered the busy streets of Weathersea both felt an untold relief.

And then, as he was hurrying along near the harbour, a party of bluejackets belonging to the Flyer came hurrying up. They stopped at sight of Tom.

"Here, you Tom, lad," they cried, "you're wanted aboard. The Flyer's going out on special service—haven't you had the call?"

Tom drew himself up, smiled, turned to Mary, and saluted in offhand fashion.

"Good-bye, Mary, lass!" said he. "I hope it's the Germans are taking us out this time—"

"Oh, Tom, Tom," cried the almost heartbroken girl, whose mind was full of dull foreboding. "Not you and Bob, too—no, no—no—"

But Tom had gone, swinging along the busy street with his mates, and Mary was left alone.

(To be continued.)

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