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THE MYSTERY OF **THE PINK PACKAGE!**

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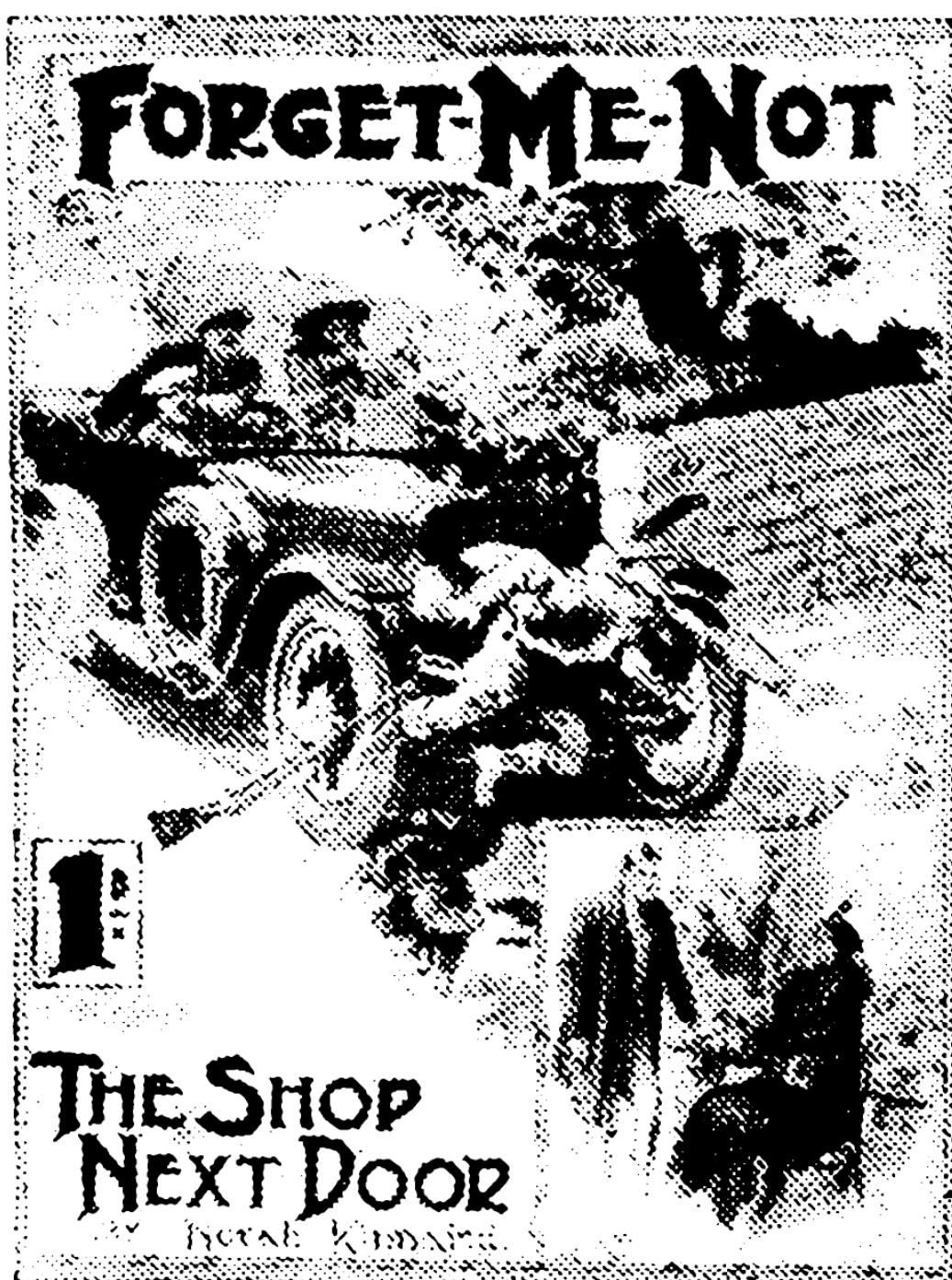
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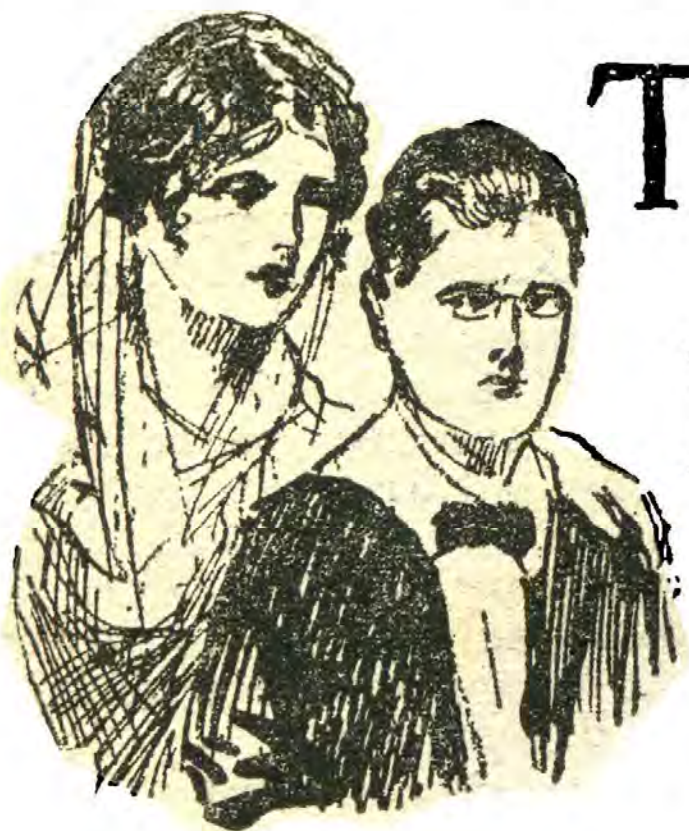


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AUTHOR'S NOTE.

Nelson Lee and Nipper are at St. Frank's College, to escape the attentions of the murderous Chinese Secret Society, the Fu Chang Tong, whose hatred they have incurred. Although living in the school in the characters of master and pupil, Nelson Lee and Nipper, nevertheless, find many opportunities to utilise their unique detective ability in various mysterious and adventurous cases.

CHAPTER I.

(Recorded by Nipper.)

WHEREIN SIR MONTIE AND TOMMY AND I
ARE MUCHLY ELATED—AND SUNDRY OTHER
YOUTHS FEEL QUITE IN THE COLD.

"LETTER for you in the rack,
Bennett," remarked Church,
of the Remove, as he passed
the door of Study C.

"For me?" I said curiously.

"It's addressed to you, anyhow," re-
plied Church, passing on. "Hope it's a
remittance, old son!"

I was just a bit puzzled, although I
said nothing. Tregellis-West and Wat-
son were with me. We were just going
down to the common-room; in fact, I had
an idea that Church had made a bloomer.

Letters didn't come for me—not in the
ordinary way, at all events. Nelson Lee
and I weren't ourselves at St. Frank's;
we were "Mr. Alvington" and "Dick
Bennett." If any friends wrote me a
line, it was always enclosed in a letter
to Nelson Lee himself; for, of course,
there were one or two people who shared
our secret.

"It's rummy," I observed, as I strolled

down the passage with Sir Montie and
Tommy. "I wasn't expecting any let-
ter to-day. I can't quite think who it
can be from. Church must be wrong
about it."

"Dear fellow, why should he be?"
asked Sir Montie languidly. "There's
no law barrin' you from receivin' letters,
is there? You haven't had any at St.
Frank's, so far as I know, but there's no
reason why you shouldn't."

I smiled, but made no reply. Sir Mon-
tie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson
were my study-mates—two of the best
fellows one could meet. They were true
blue to the backbone.

"You've got a rotten memory, Mon-
tie!" said Tommy Watson.

"Dear boy, you needn't tell me that,"
said Sir Montie. "I admit it. My
memory wants spring cleanin', or some-
thin' like that. It's really shockin' at
times. But what's the matter now?"

"Why, you said that Benny hadn't
received any letters at St. Frank's," re-
plied Tommy. "What about challenges
from other schools? Why, only the other
day Gray, the skipper of the Bannington
Grammar School juniors, wrote to Ben-
nett and asked him about a match."

"Begad! I'd forgotten that!" chuckled Sir Montie.

Tommy's words had recalled something which made us all smile. It wasn't so long since matters concerning football had reached a crisis at St. Frank's. I'm referring, of course, to junior footer.

Bob Christine, of Study Q in the College House, was the recognised skipper of the Junior Eleven. His men were chosen from the College House exclusively, and the Ancient House—my House—had been left in the cold.

Considering that I had been getting a team up of my own—and a spanking team, too—this didn't seem quite right. And so I'd had it out with Christine, and he, in a reckless moment, had allowed me to take my Eleven over to Bannington Grammar School. He fondly thought that I and my men would get "wiped up." Instead, we had beaten the Grammarians, and Christine had been forced to accept my terms. These were simple. I contended that the St. Frank's Junior Eleven ought to be made up of juniors from both Houses.

The other day I'd had a letter from Gray, the Bannington skipper, asking for a match. The request, of course, ought to have been addressed to Christine, for he was the captain of the school team. I skippered the Ancient House Eleven.

In the lobby I crossed over to the letter-rack, and searched in the "B" compartment. Sure enough, there was a letter there, and it was addressed to "Master Richard Bennett." It was for me right enough.

It was a swell letter, too, with an embossed crest on the flap.

"Posted in Bannington," I said, glancing at the post-mark. "Who the dickens can it be from? I don't remember— Oh, rats! Let's squint inside!"

"Dear Benny, a brilliant suggestion," murmured Montie.

I ripped the flap open, and took out a gilt-edged correspondence-card. There were only a few lines of writing on it, and the same crest, and the address embossed in deep blue:

"Bannington Hall,

"Bannington,

"Thursday, 24th.

"My Dear Boy.—Just a little informal invitation for you and your two schoolfellows, Tregellis-West and Watson, to attend a party which will be held at the Hall on Monday next,

the 28th inst., on the occasion of my daughter's seventeenth birthday. You will be heartily welcome, I assure you. Try to arrive by 6.30 p.m.

"Very sincerely yours,
"JAMES MASSINGTON."

I grinned delightedly.

"Not bad—eh?" I said, with satisfaction. "Monday evening, ye cripples! We shall just miss old Crowell's lecture—and we were dreading it, too! If it wasn't a compulsory lecture, our respected Form-master wouldn't get any audience at all. Thank the stars we shall be clear of his dry old rot!"

"A party!" exclaimed Tommy Watson, reading the note. "Ripping, you chaps! We shall have a high old time at the Hall. I didn't think Sir James was such a decent old sport. Won't the other fellows go green?"

"I hope not, Tommy," said Montie. "It would be shockin' if all the chaps went green, you know—it would, really! I shall have to shake Sir James's hand when I see him, begad! He's a toppin' old boy!"

We were all delighted, and not without reason.

On the Monday evening Mr. Crowell was holding one of his long-winded lectures, and the whole Remove was groaning over it in anticipation—the Ancient House Remove, at all events. Fellows thought it a bit of cheek to be forced to attend a lecture they didn't want to hear. But Form-masters can't be argued with.

A birthday-party at Bannington Hall was altogether alluring, however. I'd never seen Miss Molly Massington, but I'd heard that she was a ripping girl. And Sir James, her father, was a jovial baronet. He had presented Montie and Tommy and me with a splendid gold watch apiece—in recognition of a little service we had performed for him a month or so before.

The famous Massington gold plate had been stolen, and we had had a hand in recovering it. Of course, Nelson Lee had done it, really, but he hadn't appeared very prominently; publicity wasn't welcome in our present circumstances! Sir James Massington didn't know that "Mr. Alvington" was Nelson Lee, and that "Dick Bennett" was Nipper.

It was decent of him to remember us like this.

"Old Crows-Feet may cut up rusty!" remarked Watson reflectively. "He has

his queer moods, you know. He won't like losing a part of his long-suffering audience. Supposing he puts the ban on—"

"Oh, he'll be all right!" I cut in. "Old Alvy will give us permission to go, anyhow—and he's our Housemaster. Crows-Feet won't be able to stop us, even if he wants to—which he won't. He's a decent sort, as a rule!"

It was rather disrespectful to refer to our esteemed Form-master as "Crows-Feet," but the nickname suited him well. It was a fairly recent innovation, and the juniors had taken it up with gusto. Mr. Crowell, as long as he remained at St. Frank's, would be "Crows-Feet" to the juniors generally.

"I'll go and see Alvy before supper," I went on. "One glance at this letter will be enough, my sons. As a matter of fact, I think I'll run along to his study straight away."

"It'll be just as well, dear fellow," agreed Sir Montie. "We want to tell all the other fellows—what? And it would be rather disgustin' if we were refused permission to go. We'll keep 'mum' until we know for certain."

"My dear chap, there's no question about it," I replied lightly. "You must Tommy get along to the common-room—I'll join you in a minute or two."

I walked briskly to the Housemaster's study, and, as it happened, "Mr. Alvington" was just on the point of coming out. He smiled as he saw me, and backed into the study again. I followed him.

"You've just come at the right time, young 'un," he said, as I closed the door. "I was about to beard you in Study C. It appears, Nipper, that you and your two chums have been invited to a party at Sir James—"

"How did you know?" I asked in surprise.

"Well, you don't get all the letters that come to St. Frank's," smiled the guv'nor. "By the evening post I received a short note from Sir James Massington, asking permission for you boys to attend the party. Incidentally, Sir James intimidated that my own presence would be welcome."

"Then you're coming along, too?" I exclaimed eagerly. "That's ripping, guv'nor!"

"I haven't given you permission, yet—"

"Oh, that's taken for granted!" I grinned. "I say, it's rather decent of

Sir James to think of us like this, isn't it? Does he know Mr. Crowell?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Nipper."

"I was thinking, perhaps, that I'd invited us out of sheer sympathy. It's a tremendous relief to know that we shall miss old Crows-Feet's lecture—I—I mean—"

"Upon my soul!" exclaimed the guv'nor. "Is that what you call your Form-master, Nipper? It is not only disrespectful, but ridiculous. However, the habit is general among the juniors, I suppose, and it is scarcely a punishable offence. I tremble to think what I may be called myself!"

I grinned.

"Oh, you're 'Old Alvy'!" I replied. "If you were giving a lecture, guv'nor, the chaps wouldn't have to be forced to attend—the lecture-room wouldn't hold 'em all! But about this party, sir. Will you come?"

"I think so, Nipper—if only to keep you boys in order," said Nelson Lee, with twinkling eyes. "As you say, it is very decent of Sir James. It shows that he appreciated our slight services some time back."

A minute or two later I left the guv'nor's study, and passed along to the common-room. At that time, of course, I didn't know that this seemingly innocent party was to lead to certain events which would prove quite exciting.

"It's all right, Montie," I said cheerily as I entered the common-room. "We've got permission from old Alvy."

"Rippin'!" murmured Sir Montie languidly.

"Permission for what?" asked Handforth of the Remove. "It strikes me that you Study C chaps have all the best of it! It's rotten favouritism, that's what it is! If there was such a thing as justice, I'd be captain of the Remove—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Everybody in the common-room seemed to think that Handforth's remark was humorous. He didn't. Handforth was quite serious.

"You can cackle as much as you like," he bawled, glaring round. "Of course, you're all against me—I expected it. I've got used to the rotten injustice by this time! What about my footer? Doesn't that deserve recognition?"

"My dear chap, when you play footer, it's difficult to recognise anything!" I said cheerfully. "Football is a game, you know. You have to have a field, and

goal-posts, and the object of the game is to kick as many goals——"

"You silly ass!" roared Handforth. "Do you think I don't know?"

"It's not a question of thinking—everybody knows that your ideas of football are weird and wild, Handy," I replied blandly. "But we weren't talking about football. Tregellis-West and Watson and I have been invited over to Sir James Massington's place for Monday evening. There's going to be a birthday-party."

The Removites were much interested.

They were more than interested, in fact—they were jealous. This wasn't to be wondered at. Handforth declared that it was like our cheek to have all the fun, and wanted to know why he—the great Edward Oswald Handforth—hadn't been invited. The conundrum was stiff, and everybody gave it up.

Fullwood and Co., the Nuts of St. Frank's, sniffed disdainfully. Birthday-parties weren't in their line; they preferred card-parties. Ralph Leslie Fullwood and his precious pals were experts at gambling and "blagging" generally.

Just after Montie and Tommy and I had gone along to Study C to do our prep., the door opened, and three cheerful youths piled into the room. They were Bob Christine and Roddy Yorke and Charlie Talmadge—the three leading lights of the College House Remove.

"No time for jaw now," I said shortly. "Buzz off!"

"Rats! I want to talk about the footer," said Christine, shutting the door.

"Oh! That makes a difference!" I grinned. "I can give you just five minutes, my sons. We're going over to Bannington on Saturday, aren't we? Well, as Nation is crooked, I think we'd better have six Fossils in the team."

"Rats!" said Talmadge, frowning. "You'll want to push us out altogether before long. If you have five of your men in the team, Bennett, you'll be lucky, that's all I say!"

"Good! I'm glad you're not sayin' any more, dear boy!" murmured Sir Montie. "Strickly speakin', it's up to Christine and Bennett to arrange things. They're the junior skippers, you know."

Christine nodded.

"And I think Bennett's about right," he said. "I was going to suggest the same thing myself. Keep your hair on, Talmadge! For this match we'd better let the Fossils have the odd man."

"Well, I was thinking of Tregellis-West, Watson, Handforth, Farman, Owen major, and myself," I said. "We shall have a jolly strong team, Christine. You three chaps'll play, of course—and Oldfield and Clapson. I should suggest."

The matter having been settled, the three Monks prepared to leave.

"Oh, we shall lick the Grammarians hands down," declared Bob Christine confidently. "Their form's not up to ours, by any means. And I will admit, Bennett, that Handforth was made to shove between the sticks. He's a prize ass in every other way, but he's the best junior goalie we've got."

"We were chipping him not long ago," I chuckled. "Handy's all right, but he's got queer notions. He thinks he ought to be skipper, and play centre-forward. In that position he'd be about as much use as the giddy fireirons! But, as you say, he's first class in goal."

"Well, that's settled," said Christine, placing his fingers on the door handle. "Oh, half a minute. What's this the chaps are saying about a birthday party? You three fellows seem to be getting all the glory this term. I call it a bit rotten. The College House is left out in the cold."

"My dear chap, when I came to St. Frank's I decided that the Ancient House should forge ahead," I replied cheerfully. "We were a long way behind you Monks in everything. But by this time I rather fancy we've caught up."

"We've passed, dear boy," said Sir Montie. "The College House is a back number! We lead in everything——"

"You silly asses!" roared Christine, glaring. "We'll jolly soon show you which is cock House in St. Frank's! My only hat! Do you think you're going to boss the whole show?"

"We're not thinking, dear fellow—we're doin' it!"

"You—you fashion-plate!" shouted Talmadge. "You'd better not crow too loud! I'm not so sure that you'll go to that blessed party, after all. Things might happen!" he added meaningly.

"Things generally do happen," I said calmly. "And if you chaps try any of your silly tricks, things'll happen in a way you won't like!"

"Well, I call it rather the limit that you Fossils should have all the fun," said Christine darkly. "Look out for squalls—that's all! We'll show you which is top House!"

And, with that fearsome threat, Bob Christine and Co. departed from Study C. They departed rather hurriedly. Considering that they were in the enemy's camp, this was perhaps advisable.

I grinned at Sir Montie and Tommy, and sat down to my prep. And two minutes later the incident was quite forgotten by us.

But Christine and Co. hadn't forgotten it!

CHAPTER II.

(*Nipper continues.*)

IN WHICH WE PLAY BANNINGTON GRAMMAR SCHOOL—AND SIR MONTIE ACTS IN A VERY CURIOUS WAY.

ARTHUR GRAY, the skipper of the Bannington Grammar School Junior Eleven, grinned cheerfully.

"We'll give you a stiff fight to-day, Bennett," he said. "I've got a topping team against you, and if we don't send you away licked, it won't be for the want of hard work!"

"My dear chap, we came here for the express purpose of licking you!" I replied calmly. "This is Bob Christine, our skipper. You know him, of course."

Christine and Gray shook hands heartily.

"But I thought——" began Gray.

"When we played you last time the team was merely a House Eleven," I explained. "Christine's Junior captain, and this time we've brought all our best men. Gray, old man, you don't stand an earthly!"

"We're on the warpath," added Christine, with a grin.

The Grammarian skipper looked somewhat blank, and not without reason. If a mere House team could beat the Grammar School, what would the St. Frank's Junior Eleven do?

We had just arrived on the enemy's ground, so to speak. It was Saturday afternoon, and a glorious afternoon, too. The air was crisp, the sun was shining, and the ground was in first-class condition. And only a light breeze blew.

Everybody was in good spirits, and quite a crowd of Grammar School juniors were round the ropes. The visitors—which included myself—were all perfectly confident of success. We had come for the express purpose of show-

ing the Grammarians how football should be played.

Gray and his men hadn't had an opportunity of paying a visit to St. Frank's yet, but we meant to arrange for a return match in the near future. At present we were keen to lick the Grammarians on their own ground.

We weren't going to have an easy job. I was quite sure of that as I cast a keen eye over the home team. Gray had been keeping his men on the practice-ground continually, and they were in fine form, by the look of them. I realised that we should have a stiffer game on this occasion than we had on the last.

"Handy, old man," I said, turning to the burly Edward Oswald, "you've got to put your beef into it to-day. If I'm any judge, you'll be kept pretty busy. These Grammarian forwards look pretty hefty fellows."

Handforth waved his hand reassuringly.

"Trust me," he said. "You all know what a ripping footballer I am, don't you? As long as I'm between the posts you'll be safe! Of course, I ought to be in the forward line, really, but I'm not a chap to push in the way. One day perhaps I shall be valued at my true worth!"

Christine chuckled, and we entered the pavilion to change. When we emerged, attired in our colours, the home team was busily punting a ball about. They were quite confident, too, and as soon as the match started I found out the reason why.

Gray had improved his forward line tremendously, and his men worked together like clockwork. Within five minutes of the start Gray scored beautifully, catching Handforth totally un-awares.

"Goal!"

A delighted yell went up from the ropes, and Christine looked at Handforth rather grimly.

"We're safe—eh?" he grunted. "You'll have to do better than that, Handy——"

"My hat!" gasped Handforth. "I—I only just missed it, Christine. These chaps are jolly hot, and no mistake! You'll have to buck up, you know! Why can't your forwards do a bit?"

This was rather cool, but there was no time to argue with Handforth.

The game re-started with the Grammarians in high good humour. They

had drawn first blood, and now made the mistake of thinking that an easy victory was assured. The Saints, however, were decidedly grim.

There was a rush immediately following the kick-off. I was playing outside-left, and trapped the ball right at the start. Passing to Farman, we streaked down the field. The Grammarians were after us in a pack, but Farman wasn't to be beaten. He was running amazingly, and just as the opposing backs were upon him he centred in the most perfect manner.

The ball fell right at Christine's feet. Two half-backs were within a yard, but Christine didn't hesitate a second. He kicked hard, and the ball flew as straight as a die at the Grammarian goalie.

The leather was fisted out neatly, but Sir Montie was on the spot and he headed the ball back. For a few seconds there was an exciting scramble, but the ball went in unexpectedly from a knee-kick of Talmadge's.

"Equalised!" I panted delightedly.

It had been a surprise goal, for I had been quite convinced that the chance had been missed. The Saints worked with a vengeance after that. Again and again the home team tried to score, and Handforth was kept hard at work. He didn't allow the leather to pass him again however.

Just before half-time our forwards got away again, and on this occasion it was left to me to score. I expected the whistle to blow every second, and I kicked hurriedly but deliberately.

The ball soared high, and everybody thought that it was going over the cross-bar. The goalie had the sun in his eyes, and he jumped desperately. But he was a trifle too early, and as he reached the ground again the ball slipped in just over his fingers, and rolled neatly into the net. And then the whistle blew.

"A bit of a fluke, that!" I gasped, as Christine wrung my hand.

"Rats! It was a fine shot!" declared Christine. "By Jingo, we ought to be safe now. If we can't keep our end up during the second half we don't deserve to win!"

Gray was looking a bit dubious, and so were his men. They had been so certain of winning that the wind was rather taken out of their sails now. They promised us, however, that in the second half we should find it necessary to look out for squalls.

We did.

The Grammarians started off with a bang, but their rush tactics were frustrated by the clever playing of the visiting halves. Handforth, too, played up splendidly, and undoubtedly saved us from defeat.

Our opponents' game was rather a mistake, for they were severely fagged before the game had been re-started ten minutes. Christine and I and the other forwards in our line, on the other hand, were as fresh as paint. When the opportunity came, we pressed an attack severely—and it materialised.

Farman took the goal, and this just about settled the Grammarians' hopes. We'd scored three goals, and they had only scored one, and we were in far better condition. But, although they desperately tried to recover, they never once resorted to questionable play. It was a clean game from start to finish.

Ten minutes before the finish Handforth was again beaten, and nobody blamed him. The home team made a terrific onslaught, and simply scored a goal by sheer force. But, although this gave them some small satisfaction, it didn't avail them anything.

They attempted to equalise, of course, but we didn't allow them to organise another attack. And the whistle finally blew, leaving us victors.

It had been a splendid game in every way, and a hard fought one.

"I'm disappointed, naturally," said Gray, as we streamed off the field. "But you gave us a ripping game, and that's the main thing. When we come over to St. Frank's, we'll try and return the compliment."

Gray knew, however, that his men were not up to our form, and he did not speak with much confidence.

I looked round for Sir Montie, but remembered that he had hurried off to the pavilion the very instant the whistle had blown. My elegant chum had played a splendid game, but, just towards the end, he had slipped, and had ripped one of his stockings. Montie was sensitive, and he had hurried off to change without loss of time.

Consequently, he had finished before everybody else, and went outside to wait for us. I noticed him standing by the ropes of Big Side, watching the conclusion of a senior match.

When I emerged with Tommy Watson and the others Sir Montie was nowhere

to be seen. We were all ready to go, for we were anxious to get back to St. Frank's in time for tea. For the past half-hour dark clouds had been gathering, and everybody was expecting rain.

"Where's that prize ass of yours, Bennett?" asked Christine, looking round. "I thought he was waiting outside."

"He seems to have wandered off," I replied. "That's not like Montie, either. His bike's still in the shed, isn't it?"

"Yes; I was just going to hurry him up," replied Watson.

We all got our machines out, and there was some little delay while several tyres were pumped up. But Sir Montie was still missing when we were all ready for departure. I ran over to a group of Grammarian juniors.

"I say, did you notice Tregellis-West?" I asked.

"Chap with eyeglasses, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"I saw him about five minutes ago," replied one of the Grammarians. "He was standing by the ropes with his hand in his pockets."

"Talking to somebody?" I asked.

"No, I don't think so."

I thanked the fellows and walked back to my own crowd, where Gray and one or two other Grammar School Fourth-Formers were waiting to see us off.

"It's queer!" I remarked. "Montie seems to have cleared off somewhere. He can't have gone far, though, because his bike's still here. He evidently means to come back."

"Silly ass!" said Handforth bluntly. "That's just like the dummy! Well, I'm blessed if I'm going to be kept waiting! If he likes to play the giddy ox, he can ride home alone!"

Most of the other fellows were of the same opinion, and the whole Eleven started off for St. Frank's with the exception of Tommy and myself. We, of course, didn't think of leaving Montie in the lurch. But we were decidedly irritated and impatient.

"I can't make it out!" I said, looking round searchingly. "There's no reason for his absence that I can see. Where the dickens can he have walked off to? He was waiting for us outside the pav."

"We'll give him a jawing when he does turn up!" growled Tommy. "This will mean a soaking, I'll bet. Where is the fathead?"

The ground was nearly deserted by this time, and Tommy and I were quite by ourselves near the gate. We had our backs to it, and were looking carefully at every figure which was visible in the dusk.

"Ready, dear fellows?" asked a calm voice.

We turned round, and saw Sir Montie standing in the gateway, regarding us thoughtfully and coolly. He had evidently approached from the lane outside, and we hadn't thought of looking in that direction.

"You silly chump!" exclaimed Tommy. "What have you been doing?"

"Oh, strollin' about, dear boy!"

"Strolling about?" I demanded. "You knew jolly well that we were waiting for you. All the other chaps have cleared off, and unless we're quick we shall be soaked through before we reach St. Frank's."

"Begad, is it goin' to rain?" asked Sir Montie mildly.

"I'm not a prophet, but the sky looks threatening," I replied. "Do you know that you've kept us waiting over ten minutes? And you were ready first, too! Where the deuce have you been to?"

Montie mounted his bike thoughtfully.

"Didn't you hear me?" I asked, as we rode off.

"Hear you, Benny boy?" repeated Tregellis-West vaguely.

"You—you fathead! What's the matter with you?" I growled, as Montie looked at me with a dreamy expression. "I asked you where you'd been to. You couldn't have been wandering about aimlessly!"

"No; I suppose not," said Tregellis-West abstractedly.

I rode up close to him, and thumped him on the back.

"Are you going to sleep?" I shouted in his ear. "You've never been like this before, Montie. What the thunder are you so secretive about? You're making a mystery out of nothing. Why did you keep us waiting?"

"Waitin'? Oh, I suppose I did keep you waitin' a bit," admitted Sir Montie, as dreamy as ever. "Dear boys, I apologise. I'm frightfully sorry. It's shockin' bad form to keep anybody waiting."

Tommy Watson fumed.

"You haven't answered Benny's question even now!" he roared.

"What question, dear fellow?" asked Sir Montie vacantly.

"Oh, corks," gasped Tommy, "I didn't know you were going potty before! You're like a gramophone, you silly chump! Where did you go to when you came out of the pavilion?"

"Go to?"

"You—you——"

"Why, I went to the ropes an' looked at the senior match!" said Sir Montie, pedalling hard. "Begad, the clouds do look threatenin', don't they? We shall have to hurry if we're goin' to get home before the rain comes."

I looked over at Montie curiously. Somehow he wore a somewhat uncomfortable expression. He had very palpably been evading a direct answer to our questions. But why? I'd never seen my noble chum in this mood before.

"Look here, Montie!" I said quietly. "What's the game?"

"The game, old boy?"

"You're not going to evade an answer again!" I said grimly. "Yes, what's the game? Where did you go to, and why don't you want to answer? Don't repeat all that, but give me a square reply."

"Oh, begad," groaned Sir Montie painfully. "Ain't it frightful, dear fellow? Secrets are horrid things to keep—they are, really!"

"Secrets!" bawled Tommy. "What secrets have you got, you idiot?"

"It's nothin' much, dear boy, an' you needn't look at me so accusin'ly," said Tregellis-West, with real concern. "I just strolled off, you know. Please don't ask me any more questions. I can't answer them if you do. An' refusin' to answer questions is an appallin' thing."

"Does that mean that you're not going to tell us anything more?" I asked.

"Bennett, old man, it's imposs."

"You mean you don't want to——"

"I do want to, but—but I can't. What?" said Sir Montie inexplicably. "I'd rather not say any more just at present. Later on, of course, I'll tell you everythin'. It's beastly awkward, an' I'm sorry."

He pedalled ahead deliberately, plainly showing that he did not want the subject to be continued. Tommy and I looked at one another in sheer astonishment. It wasn't at all like Sir Montie to be secretive.

Something quite out of the ordinary had happened. But what could it have

been? Sir Montie had said that he would "tell us everything" later on. Everything! I was not only puzzled, but worried.

And we continued the ride to St. Frank's in almost complete silence.

CHAPTER III.

(*Nipper continues.*)

IN WHICH SIR MONTIE CONTINUES TO RE-HAVE IN AN EXTRAORDINARY MANNER.

SIR LANCELOT MONTGOMERY TREGELLIS-WEST was in a brown study.

He sat staring at his teacup in a very absent manner, and was quite oblivious to everything else that went on. He had been in the same state for over ten minutes, and Tommy Watson and I could make nothing of him.

We were in Study C at St. Frank's, and were partaking of tea. It was dark outside, and a cold wind rattled the window-panes now and again; but within the study a cheerful fire blazed, and our tiny kettle sang on the hob.

Sir Montie had said very little since we had arrived home, and his strange behaviour filled Tommy and me with speculation and doubt. During the time I had been at St. Frank's, Tregellis-West had never once showed me this side of his character. Hitherto he had always been smiling and cheerful and urbane.

It was something new to see a thoughtful frown upon his brow and a deep, far-away look in his good-natured eyes.

"I can't make out what's come over the ass!" said Watson, as he poured out some more tea. "He's been staring into that giddy cup for over ten minutes, and has allowed his tea to get cold. Just look at him!"

I looked and grinned slightly.

Sir Montie was sipping the tea gingerly, as though it were boiling hot. It could only have been luke-warm, and Montie hated tea that wasn't steaming hot. Apparently he was quite unconscious of its real state.

"Something's happened—that's certain," I remarked. "Yet I can't see what. He wasn't away from the Grammar School ground for more than a quarter of an hour, after all. It's his secretiveness which puzzles me most."

Tommy grunted.

"Well, I don't like it, if you ask me," he said flatly. "I think we'd

better have it out with him, Benny. Suppose we threaten to pour tea down his neck?"

I chuckled.

"I don't believe he'd say anything even then," I replied. "Let's leave him alone for the present, Tommy. He'll come round before long, I dare say, and then it'll turn out to be a silly trifle, I'll bet."

Montie had been sitting quite still during this little dialogue. He'd heard it all, of course; he couldn't help hearing it. But I was quite sure that he hadn't taken a single word of it in. He was completely abstracted.

It was really an extraordinary state of affairs, and I didn't quite like it. On one occasion, I recollected, I had found it necessary to be secretive with Sir Montie and Tommy, and they had quite misunderstood me. We'd had a row, and had been at loggerheads for some little time.

Now Sir Montie was doing exactly the same thing!

I was quite determined, however, to have no upset over this little business. Both Tommy and I trusted Montie implicitly, and knew that there must be some reason for his strange attitude. We were quite sure that it would turn out to be an absurdly trivial reason. We weren't angry, but rather irritated.

"I'm going to wake him up, anyhow," said Tommy, as he placed his tea-cup down. "It's rotten like this! The silly ass will be putting the salt in his tea next! He's terrifically absent-minded!"

Tommy leaned across the table and thumped his fist down.

"More tea, Montie?" he shouted.

Tregellis-West gave a start and looked up. His eyes were dreamy behind their pince-nez, and he smiled slightly.

"Begad, she's got lovely eyes!" he murmured absently. "Lovely eyes and a rippin' smile! Er—er—— Great Scott!"

Sir Montie came to himself abruptly, and looked at Tommy and me with a face which had gone as red as a beetroot. He was completely confused, and we looked at him with sheer astonishment.

"What's the matter, dear boys?" he asked hastily. "I—I was thinkin', you know. Begad, this tea's frightfully cold! Didn't I ask you to pour me out some more, Tommy, a minute ago?"

"A minute!" shouted Tommy. "Ten minutes, you mean!"

"Oh, don't be silly, old fellow!"

"Silly!" roared Watson, glaring. "It's you who's silly! What's the matter with you—mooning about like this? I think you're going off your silly rocker! And what's that you said about somebody's lovely eyes?"

"And a ripping smile," I added, with a chuckle.

Sir Montie turned beautifully pink again.

"I—I must have been dreamin'," he said lamely.

"Day-dreaming!" I exclaimed. "I'm beginning to understand, Montie. My only hat, you've fallen in love!"

Tregellis-West stared at me in horror.

"In—in love!" he gasped. "Oh, don't be foolish, Benny!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tommy Watson, doubling up.

"Watson, you cacklin' idiot——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Sir Montie glared around him angrily, and did his utmost to hide his confusion, but both Tommy and I were chuckling hugely. Montie's words had been very suggestive, and they implied a lot.

The mystery was explained. Poor old Montie had succumbed to the charms of some unknown damsel, whom he had probably seen while waiting for us at the Grammar School. Of course, he had followed her, and that explained his mysterious absence, and now he was dreaming.

"Dear boys, this is utterly preposterous!" he protested. "Pray don't be such silly asses! You're making me wild, begad!"

Tommy Watson wiped his eyes.

"Oh, Montie, you'll be the death of me!" he gasped. "This is just about the limit—you being in love! Ha, ha, ha!"

Tommy went off into a fresh outburst, and I joined him. Tregellis-West deliberately adjusted his pince-nez, and regarded us with cold disfavour.

"I look upon this absurd merriment with the utter disdain it deserves," he said bitingly. "I'm pained, dear fellows. I'm shocked. I thought you had more sense—I did, really! I'm not in love, and it's simply rotten to hear you cacklin' in this unseemly fashion! If you persist, I shall retire!"

I'd never heard Sir Montie speak like this before, and it was even funnier than that which had already passed; but I didn't want to upset his serene dignity, and assumed a solemn face at once. Incidentally, I kicked Tommy's foot under the table as a hint for him to follow my example.

"All right, Montie," I said, keeping a straight face with difficulty. "We won't keep up the unseemly cackle if it displeases your lordship."

"You sarcastic idiot——"

"Look here, Montie, it's all your own fault!" broke in Tommy. "What did you say a minute ago? You murmured that 'she's got lovely eyes and a ripping smile.' What did that mean? Tell us, for goodness' sake!"

Tregellis-West sniffed.

"You have put a wrong construction on my words," he replied stiffly. "They weren't meant for your ears, anyhow. Dear boys, I don't want to say anythin' more. Please pass the teapot, Benny."

"Oh, lor'!" I groaned. "You're still keeping it up, then?"

Sir Montie made no reply, but frigidly poured himself out another cup of tea. The meal was finished in almost complete silence, but every now and again Tommy and I exchanged a quiet grin.

After the table had been cleared, Sir Montie sat looking into the fire with a frown. At last he looked up, and his expression was very serious.

"Benny—Tommy," he said quietly, "I want you to promise me somethin'."

"Anything in reason, old scout."

"Well, I don't want you to repeat to the fellows what I said a little while ago," remarked Tregellis-West uneasily. "Be sports, you know. The chaps would simply yell. They'd make a laughin'-stock of me, begad! And it's wrong—quite wrong. I assure you, dear boys, that there's nothin' to worry over."

"Then why can't you explain instead of being so mum?" demanded Tommy.

"I will explain——"

"Good!"

"But not now, Tommy boy," concluded Sir Montie calmly.

And that's all we could get out of him. Argument was useless, and so we gave it up. We were quite sure that there was nothing whatever alarming in Sir Montie's symptoms. Before bedtime he would probably tell the whole story.

A few minutes afterwards Owen major put an excited face in at the door.

"Coming, you chaps?" he yelled. "There's a row in the common-room—Fullwood and Co. are scrapping with two chaps, and we're going to the rescue. Buck up, if you want to see the fun!"

Tommy and I sprang up at once, and hastened out. But by the time we had reached the end of the passage we

realised that Sir Montie was not with us. We didn't think it necessary to go back for him.

The scrap with Fullwood was most interesting. We found that the cads of the Ancient House had got a couple of Third Formers in the common-room, and were amusing themselves by twisting their victims' arms, and indulging in other delightful practices which they specialised in.

The ensuing proceedings were lively and entertaining. Entertaining from our point of view, and lively from Fullwood and Co.'s. The bullying Nuts were put to the rout, with ruffled hair and rumpled collars.

At one time of day Fullwood and his precious pals had held sway in the Ancient House, but those rosy times had long since passed. Fullwood and Co. were finding it more and more necessary to check their blackguardly habits. Occasionally, however, they would break out.

"Pity Sir Montie didn't see the fun," I remarked breathlessly, as Watson and I returned to Study C. "I suppose he's still mooning."

"Silly ass!" commented Tommy cuttingly.

But when we arrived at Study C we found it empty. The electric light was full on, but Sir Montie was conspicuous by his absence. So Tommy and I sat down to our prep., and were soon busy with our work.

After half an hour had passed I glanced at the clock, and remembered that Sir Montie was still away.

"I wonder where he's got to?" I said reflectively. "He won't have time to do his prep. unless he's careful. I'll just go and have a search round for him. He can't have gone out—it's drizzling miserably."

My search for the elegant swell of the Remove proved to be a vain one. He was nowhere to be found. As a last resort, I went into the cloak-room. And there, to my astonishment, I found that Montie's overcoat and cap were missing.

"He's gone out!" I announced, as I entered Study C again.

"Gone out?" repeated Tommy. "Where to?"

"Blessed if I know. His overcoat and cap are missing, so he's evidently scooted off somewhere," I replied. "It's raining like old boots, too. He must have broken bounds. Tommy."

"Rats to him!" growled Watson. "I'm fed up!"

"Well, so am I, if it comes to that. But we can't let him go on in this fashion, you know. When he comes in, we'll get the truth out of him. I can't think he's really in love, Tommy. Montie's not an ass of that sort."

Watson shook his head sagely.

"You never know," he said. "Chaps do funny things!"

We settled down to our prep. again, but Montie hadn't turned up by the time we'd finished. And there was no sign of him until five minutes before supper-time.

And then he opened the study door and strolled in, trying to look unconcerned. But his collar was crumpled and damp, his boots were muddy, and there were numerous splashes upon his elegant trousers.

"I've missed prep., dear boys. It'll mean lines to-morrow—on Monday, I mean—but I can stand it bravely," he exclaimed quietly. "Begad! You're lookin' at me very queerly, Benny."

"Where have you been?" I asked.

"Oh, dear!" he complained. "Are we goin' to start it all over again?"

"Look here, Montie, don't you think we've had enough of this fatheaded mystery?" I said. "I give you credit for being a sensible chap. That was all rot about your being in love—you're not such an ass. But there's something unusual in the wind. What is it?"

"I'd rather not say, Benny boy. In fact, I can't say."

"Can't?" growled Tommy, half angrily. "Look here, Montie, we shall have a row with you before long. We three don't have secrets. Why the dickens can't you let us into the know? You wouldn't go out in the rain for hours together unless you had a thumpin' good reason."

"Watson, old man, I did have a thumpin' good reason."

"Well, what was it?"

"The reason?" asked Sir Montie. "It was a thumpin' good one."

"You—you ass! You just said that!" roared Tommy. "Why can't you give a proper answer, you babbling idiot?"

"I wasn't aware that I was babblin'," said Tregellis-West mildly. "You're doin' all the babblin', old fellow. You're makin' a frightful fuss over nothin' at

all, and I'm pained. I'm ashamed of you——"

Tommy Watson nearly choked.

"Ash—ash—ashamed of me!" he stammered. "You're pained! Why, you—you——"

"Dear boy, don't get excited," interrupted Montie, with perfect serenity. "Your face is goin' red an' your eyes look ferocious. The fact is, Benny an' Tommy, I want you to trust me."

"To trust you?" I repeated curiously.

"Exactly." Sir Montie came across and looked at us both squarely. "I want you to trust me just for a little while. You see, dear boys, it's a difficult position. I've been doin' things that seem queer to you. I know that—I admit it. But they ain't queer, really. An' there's nothin' wrong. I haven't been meetin' bookmakers, or visitin' pubs. It's just a little affair which I can't explain—now. Be sports, you know, an' leave it over for a day or two. Is it a go?"

I couldn't help grinning.

"My dear Montie, you needn't have told us all that," I said. "We don't suspect you of anything wrong, you ass. We only thought it a bit off-side that you should do this thing—whatever it is—in secret, without taking your chums into your confidence——"

"Benny, it's rotten," admitted Montie, in a pained voice. "I'm just longin' to tell you everything, but I've pledged my word to keep mum. So what's a fellow to do? You wouldn't have me break a promise, would you?"

Tommy Watson thawed.

"Oh, if that's the case, we won't press the matter," he said. "Goodness knows what rot you've been up to, though. I suppose we shall learn about it one day. Benny and I are jolly curious, but we'll say nothing more at present."

I nodded in agreement, and Montie looked relieved.

"You're sports—you are, really!" he declared. "D'you know, I was expectin' a frightful rumpus, begad! Thank goodness, you've turned up trumps! I'm worried, an' I'm just burstin' to ask your advice—especially yours, Benny. You're a clear-headed chap, an' you'd know what to do in a tick. But I'm on my honour, you see? Things'll have to stand as they are."

And, for the time being, they stood.

But Tommy Watson and I were admittedly very curious.

CHAPTER IV.

(Set down by Sir Lancelot Montgomery Tregellis-West.)

TELLING JUST WHAT HAPPENED AT THE FOOTBALL MATCH—AND DESCRIBING THE FRIGHTFUL FACTS WHICH LANDED ME IN A DEUCEDELY QUEER PREDICAMENT.

BEGAD!

I don't know whether that's the right way to begin, but I've put it down in sheer desperation. When I sat down to write I thought it would be frightfully easy to get a start. But now I find it's frightfully hard.

Still, I've got the ball rolling, and that's one thing.

If things get a bit mixed, it won't be my fault—it'll be because I'm a rotten hand at writing. But I'm going to do my best. I'm going to do wonders, in fact. Benny's goaded me on to do it, so if you want to blame anybody, blame him.

A minute ago a big doubt was creeping into my mind as to whether I could set down anything at all. But I'm gaining confidence now. I'm feeling more secure. And so I'll get right on the job before I forget what I've got to write about.

Dick Bennett and Tommy Watson had been a bit wild with me—and I didn't blame them. It's rotten to have secrets. But, begad, what the deuce could I do? I was in a shocking predicament.

If they'd known all about it, they wouldn't have been curious. But that's obvious, isn't it?

The whole thing was rather queer. It all began, to tell the truth, just after the football match at Bannington. So I'd better start at that point. As Benny has described, I was dressed before anybody else, and stood waiting at the ropes until the others came out.

Of course, I'm writing this a good long while after this particular affair happened—that must be clear to everybody—and I know a lot more about things in general now than I did then. That's clear to everybody, too—or it ought to be clear. I want it to be.

Well, I was standing by the ropes, taking no particular interest in anything, when I felt somebody gently tap my sleeve.

"Ready, dear fellows?" I asked, turning. "I was just watchin'— By gad!"

I broke off abruptly confused and

astonished. Instead of a St. Frank's chap, as I had expected, I saw a jolly pretty girl of about eighteen or twenty! She was small and dainty, but dressed in rather a plain style. She was looking at me earnestly, and I raised my cap hastily.

"Did—did you want to speak to me?" I stammered. "I—er—that is—"

"Oh, I am so sorry to trouble you," the girl interrupted quickly. "Is your name Sir Lancelot Tregellis-West?"

"Yes, I'm Tregellis-West—"

"I want to speak to you, please—"

"Begad! That's what you are doin'!"

"Oh, but I mean alone—privately!" said the girl earnestly. "I will go out into the lane, through the side-gate. Will you follow me in a minute's time? Please, please say that you will! I—I want you to help me!"

I hardly knew what to do.

"Of course, if it's really urgent," I began, "I'll come—"

"Oh, thank you—thank you so much!"

And before I could say anything more she had turned, and was walking towards the side-gate she had referred to. I gazed after her amazedly. I was quite incapable of thinking clearly for the moment.

"Well, I'm bothered!" I murmured to myself.

Who was the girl? Why had she spoken to me—by name, too? What on earth could she have meant by saying that I could help her? I looked round anxiously, but breathed freely after a second.

The St. Frank's chaps were still in the pavilion, so they hadn't seen the incident. And the Grammarians—the few that remained on the ground—were all watching the senior match, which was just ending.

Without quite realising it, I turned towards the little gate, and walked across the playing-field. The girl, of course, had easily gained admittance. The public could come in and see the school matches if they chose. But, as a rule, only one or two strangers were to be seen. Schoolboy football didn't interest the outside public very much.

Almost before I knew it, I found myself out in the lane. And there, quite hidden from everybody else behind the evergreen hedge, stood the girl. She smiled gratefully as I approached her.

"I—I say, you know!" I began. "The chaps will wonder—"

"Oh, I sha'n't keep you above a minute—really!" the girl exclaimed. "I want you to help me—to make me a promise, Sir Lancelot——"

"Begad! I'm called Sir Montie, you know!" I protested. "'Sir Lancelot' reminds me of the Middle Ages, an' drawbridges, an' lonely castles! I wish you'd tell me what you want—I do, really. I'm in a fog. I'm quite bewildered!"

The girl placed a hand on my arm.

"It is in your power to do me a great service—a wonderful service!" she said quietly.

"In—in my power?" I repeated wonderingly.

"Yes. Oh, I can't explain everything now," she went on. "My name is Doris Martin, and I live with my crippled father just on the outskirts of Bannington. Oh, it isn't money I want—please, please don't think that. I am in great trouble—terrible trouble—and you can help me."

I was rather red and confused. Her eyes looked at me deucedly steadily, and her voice rang in an appealing kind of manner.

"I can help you, Miss—Miss Martin?" I said, adjusting my pince-nez. "Begad! I'll do any old thing I can, of course. I'd be delighted. But I can't quite see where I come in, you know."

"It isn't possible for me to explain now," replied Miss Martin quietly. "But you can help me—really you can. And I want you to promise to come to my father's cottage this evening. He will explain everything to you. And then, of course, you will have to do as your judgment tells you. I only want you to promise, now, to come to Bannington this evening."

"But—but what for?" I asked amazedly.

"Oh, my father will explain how you can help us," the girl said quickly. "Will you promise—Sir Montie? Will you come?"

She pressed my arm tightly.

"Please come!" she pleaded. "Oh, say that you will?"

Dash it all, what was a fellow to do? I was in a jolly queer position—a frightfully awkward one, in fact—and there wasn't time for me to think of everything. I just nodded confusedly.

"Of—of course I'll come, Miss—Miss Martin," I stammered.

"Oh, thank you! Thank you ever so

much!" she exclaimed, with relief in her voice. "I am sure you will not regret having given me your word. And now you must go back, or your friends will miss you."

I nodded.

"I wish you could tell me what the trouble is," I said quietly. "I've promised to come over this evening. But couldn't you tell me now? It would save time, and a few minutes won't matter——"

"Oh, but I can't tell you!" interrupted the girl. "I can only say that it is connected with your visit to Bannington Hall on Monday."

"By Jove!" I murmured.

"My father and I live at Rose Cottage, just beyond the King's Arms, on the road to Bellton," she went on. "You can easily find it, for it stands back from the road by itself, and is quite a small cottage. There is a rustic arch, with rose-trees climbing over it."

"Yes, I've noticed it," I nodded. "I know the place, Miss Martin."

"Oh, that's splendid! Can you come at about seven o'clock?"

"A rippin' time," I agreed, although my mind was still in a horrid whirl. "I'll be there at seven o'clock sharp."

Miss Martin smiled gladly.

"I am sure you will do what I want," she said, holding out her hand. "Thank you ever so much, Sir Montie! And you won't breathe a word about this to anybody, will you? Please keep it quite a secret."

I took her hand mechanically.

"I won't tell a soul," I promised, "an' I shall be only too pleased to do anything I can. But I'm hanged if I can see where I come in, you know!"

"You will see to-night," replied the girl. "Good-bye, and thank you so much!"

She turned and walked away quickly, and I stood looking after her. Her trim, neat figure turned the bend, and I breathed rather hard.

"Begad!" I muttered. "Begad!"

Just at that moment I couldn't think of anything else to say, but after a bit my mind cleared, and I realised that I had let myself in for something very much out of the usual.

I had been practically compelled to give my word. How could I have refused? And what was more, I had pledged myself to say nothing. I didn't quite realise how awkward matters would be.

Somehow I was a bit doubtful. The

girl was pretty, and she had seemed very sincere. But it was such a rummy business that I hardly knew what to think. How the deuce could I do anything to help the girl?

I must have stood in the lane for quite a while, and then I suddenly realised that Tommy and Benny and the others would probably be waiting for me. So I walked briskly down the lane, reached the road, and went to the main gate. This wasn't the gate of the school, for the Grammar School playing-grounds were some little distance away from the school itself.

As you know, I found Bennett and Watson there, and it was then that I realised how awkward the whole matter was. I'd never had any secrets. The thought of keeping anything from my chums had always appalled me. And now I was pledged to be silent. Oh, it was rotter! And afterwards, while we were having tea at St. Frank's, I must have been very absent-minded.

I was, of course, thinking about the girl. She certainly did have nice eyes, but it was frightfully silly of me to say so aloud. Benny and Tommy naturally got a wrong idea into their heads, and I felt rotten.

I was anxious to start out for Bannington, so that I should get to know the truth of the matter, and I was rather glad when Owen major put his head in at the door, and said that there was a row in the common-room.

It was just about time for me to start, and so, as soon as Bennett and Watson had gone, I slipped down to the cloak-room, got my overcoat and cap, and went out into the gloomy Triangle.

I felt horribly guilty. I was sneaking out on the quiet, and I began to regret that I had ever made a promise at all. And my spirits weren't improved when I found that a nasty, cold drizzle was coming down.

Without making any noise, I went to the bicycle-shed, got my machine out, and slipped out by the master's private gate. This wouldn't be locked until supper-time, and so I reckoned I should get back all right.

It wasn't quite seven when I dimly saw the rustic arch in front of Rose Cottage. The ride had been a beastly one, for the roads were in a shockingly muddy condition. But I'd arrived, and now I wanted to get the whole business over.

As I wheeled my bike up to the porch, I felt nervous. I don't know why. As a rule, I'm rather cool, I believe, but now

I was simply shaking with uneasiness. But I tapped at the door boldly.

After about ten seconds it was opened, and I saw the figure of Miss Martin outlined against the lamplight which streamed into the darkness.

"Oh, you have come!" she exclaimed softly. "Thank you, Sir Montie. Will you please come in?"

I left my bike in the porch and stepped across the threshold. Having wiped my boots on the mat, I passed down the tiny passage and turned into a doorway. Miss Martin was standing just within the room, having preceded me down the passage. She was dressed in a simple blouse and skirt, and I could now see that she was a little older than I had at first supposed. She was probably twenty-four or twenty-five, although she dressed younger.

A small fire blazed in the old-fashioned grate, and seated in a high chair was an elderly man, with grey hair and beard. He looked round as I came in, nodding his head and smiling.

"It is good of you to come, sir," he said wheezily. "Please take a seat. Doris, close the door."

I sat down on the edge of a chair, holding my cap in my hand, and Doris closed the door and sat down on a couch. The room was only small, and was furnished very plainly.

"I'm rather in a muddle, Mr. Martin," I said quietly. "I came here because your daughter asked me to, but I really don't see how I can help you. I'm only a schoolboy."

"You can, at least, attempt to perform a very valuable service for us, sir," said the crippled old man shakily. "Ah, if you only knew what it meant! Not so much to me, but to my little Doris. Before making our request, I should like to tell you, in brief, what has led up to it."

"Yes, that would be as well, I suppose," I remarked.

"Well, I'm afraid I shall have to tell the young gentleman everything, Doris," said Mr. Martin, looking across at his daughter. "We are going to make a big request of him, and we must be quite open."

"Of course, father!" said the girl at once. "Please tell Sir Montie everything. I don't mind at all. But I think I had better leave you to yourselves for a little while. You'll call me when you want me, won't you?"

I was rather mystified, but I said

nothing. Doris got up and left the room, and then her father bent forward in his chair.

"I don't suppose you want to hear the story in full, sir," he said as the door closed. "It all concerns my little girl. Just a year ago she behaved in a somewhat foolish manner. I can speak more freely now that she is out of the room. But Doris is a very sensible girl really, and you must not misjudge her. She was not so foolish as incautious."

"But I don't quite follow!"

"You will in a minute, sir," said the old man gravely. "The trouble started when Doris first met Mr. Howard Massington, the nephew of Sir James Massington, who lives at the Hall. He fell in love with my little girl, and made many advances——"

"Begad," I ejaculated, "but this is private!"

"Not at all—not at all," went on Mr. Martin quickly. "Doris believed that Mr. Massington's advances were sincere, and she wrote him several letters—letters which were quite simple in themselves, but were full of affection and love. It was after this that my little girl found out that Mr. Massington was a rascal of the first water, and she dismissed him at once."

"A rascal!" I repeated, frowning. "That's rather strong, Mr. Martin. I can't quite believe that Sir James Massington's nephew would be——"

"He is not a rascal in the sense that the police could possibly touch him," interposed the old man smilingly. "Oh, no, sir! His rascality consisted of making love to my daughter for the mere sport of it. The young hound had no serious intentions. He is, moreover, a mean, despicable fellow."

"It's rather queer!" I remarked thoughtfully.

"My dear young sir, you don't know the world as I do," said the old man, shaking his head. "This Mr. Massington is quite a good fellow outwardly. If you met him, you would say that he was a splendid man. It is only when he is put to the test that his bad qualities come out. Fortunately my little girl is sensible, and she soon realised her mistake. This, you will understand, took place a year ago. Doris had quite forgotten the affair, for it was a mere trifle."

"If it was only a trifle, then——"

"Ah, but you have not heard all yet!" interrupted Mr. Martin. "Just recently my little girl has become engaged to a

young lieutenant in the Army—a splendid, upright fellow in every way. They are to be married before long, and will, I am sure, be perfectly happy."

"That's rippin'!" I commented.

"But there is a dark cloud which threatens to bring misery," continued the old man quietly. "Mr. Massington has learned of Doris's engagement, and he is angry at the supposed slight. In short, sir, he has threatened to show my little girl's incautious letters to her fiancé."

"Begad, that would be caddish!"

"It would, indeed. But Massington is a cad, you must understand. He will be at the Hall on Wednesday next, and will then strike this blow—a blow which will wreck my little girl's happiness. You, if you choose, can avert the disaster."

"I?" I said in astonishment. "Really, Mr. Martin, I'm in a maze. I'm bewildered. I can't quite get the hang of things. An' if this lieutenant was a decent sort, he wouldn't take any notice of a few silly letters."

"You are inexperienced, Sir Montgomery," said the old man, shaking his head. "You don't know the meaning of jealousy. Upright as Doris's fiancé is, he would misunderstand the matter. No; the only way out of the trouble is to recover those letters some time between now and Wednesday next. Doris can then burn them, and there will be nothing to fear. The great difficulty is that neither she nor I can possibly find access to them."

"Begad," I exclaimed, "are you suggestin' that I should recover the letters? Good gracious! What can I do, Mr. Martin?"

"I will just tell you how easily you can get hold of the letters," replied the old man gravely. "Please realise, my dear young sir, that the happiness of two people rests solely upon your attitude now. If you consent to do as I ask, all will be well; but if you refuse, you will be responsible for the wrecking of two lives!"

"Oh, I say! That's rather too bad to make me responsible——"

"Please don't think that I meant the words literally," interrupted the old man quickly. "I assure you I did not. I only meant that our only hope lies with you. These letters are tied in a little pink package—a small chocolate-box, I believe it is—tied with blue ribbon. This package, Sir Montgomery, is safely in Sir James Massington's keeping. In his safe, I think."

I looked very serious.

"But, dash it all, I can't burgle the safe!" I protested in dismay. "This is a bit steep, you know, Mr. Martin! I'm willin' to do anything in my power, but I must draw the line somewhere, begad!"

"Doris and I have learned that you will be at the Hall on Monday," continued the girl's father. "Now, Sir Montgomery, can't you manage to do this little service for us—for my daughter? She will be everlastingly grateful, I assure you. I only want you to promise to do your best. You have opportunities of looking into the safe. You could ask Sir James to show you the Massington jewels, for example. This packet, remember, merely contains a few silly love-letters. Your act would not be a wrong one; it would be an act of mercy."

I scratched my head absently.

"It's a tall order, you know—it is, really!" I murmured. "Still, it ought to be possible, under certain conditions. But, candidly, I don't feel up to it. Can't you think of some other method? I'm afraid I can't promise——"

"You will—you will!" interrupted the old cripple. "Oh, I am sure you will! Doris! Doris!"

The door opened after a moment or two, and the girl entered. By the look of her eyes I judged that she had been crying, and I felt pretty rotten.

"I have told the young gentleman everything. I have explained how he can help," said Mr. Martin, "but he is doubtful, Doris. He doesn't think he can do as we ask."

The girl caught her breath in sharply, and then came to my side.

"Oh, Sir Montie, you will help me, won't you?" she pleaded tearfully. "If you cannot do what we want, then my future happiness will be wrecked. Everything depends upon what you do. Please—please will you try?"

She looked at me appealingly, and I simply couldn't hold out any longer. Besides, Mr. Martin's story had interested me a lot, and I was quite curious to act in the matter.

"Yes, Miss Martin, I will attempt to gain possession of the pink package," I said quietly. "Mind, I can't promise anything positively, but we'll just talk it over and see what we can arrange."

"Heaven bless you!" said the girl, in a whisper.

Well, after that we talked for a bit,

and then I realised that I should have to get back to the school pretty quickly, or I should miss supper. Somehow, I felt shockingly guilty as I rode through the drizzle. Again, it was impossible for me to tell Bennett and Watson anything, for I had renewed my promise to keep the whole thing a secret.

But they were real sports, and consented to trust me. On Monday, of course, they'd know everything; but until then I should have to keep my own counsel. The task I had taken on seemed a pretty stiff one, but it was in a good cause, after all. That was one consolation.

I only hoped that everything would turn out all right.

CHAPTER V.

(Nipper resumes the narrative.)

IN WHICH BOB CHRISTINE AND CO. NEARLY BRING OFF A COUP—NEARLY, BUT NOT QUITE!

EDWARD OSWALD HAND-FORTH snorted.

"I'm blessed if I see any reason why we shouldn't all go!" he declared warmly. "Favouritism! That's what it is—rotten favouritism! Sir James Massington ain't much of a chap, anyway!"

"Mean old screw!" put in Teddy Long, with a sneer. "If he'd been a good sort he'd have invited decent chaps—like me!"

"I pity St. Frank's if you're a sample of a decent chap!" said Hubbard. "You shut up, Teddy. You weren't asked to speak!"

"Oh, don't be an ass, Hubby——"

"My dear chaps, what's the good of this wrangling?" I put in calmly. "Sir James knew what he was about. The result is that Tregellis-West and Watson and I are going over to the giddy birthday party. So what's the good of jawing? If you like you can all come along and see us to the door, but that's as far as you'll get!"

Sir Montie and Tommy grinned, but the rest of the fellows didn't seem to find much humour in my remark. As a matter of fact, they were all feeling decidedly fed-up.

It was Monday evening, and my two chums and I were just on the point of setting out for Bannington. We were



Sir Montie hands the Pink Package to the girl!—(See page 22.)

In the lobby of the Ancient House, and a crowd of other Removites were regarding us gloomily. Before long they were booked to attend Mr. Crowell's detested lecture, while we were off for an evening's outing. I'll admit that it was a bit rotten for the other chaps. But we can't all have the best of it.

The gov'nor was going along, too. He was going with us, and we were all cycling over. The evening was fine, and frosty, with a glorious moon. By all appearances, we were going to enjoy ourselves a lot. And we were now waiting in the lobby for Nelson Leo to appear.

Sir Montie was not quite so absent in manner as he had been through Sunday and nearly all Monday. He seemed to have cheered up a bit, and both Tommy and I were glad. Montie hadn't been himself since Saturday afternoon, and it would be a relief when he resumed his old state of genial langour and good-humour.

"I'll tell you what," said Handforth suddenly, and with a gleam in his eye, "I'm going to ask old Alvy if I can go along, too. He ought to give me permission. I'm the most important chap in the Remove——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Does anybody deny that statement?" bawled Handforth, glaring. "The most important chap in the Remove, I say. That's me! Don't you forget it!"

I grinned.

"We're not likely to forget it while you're about, Handy!" I chuckled. "But what you think, and what we think, don't tally——"

"You're jealous," replied Handforth. "It's nothing else but rank jealousy. I'm skipper of the Remove, really—only nobody will recognise me. And if I go to old Alvy and tell him that I want to go to this party, he'll give me permission in a tick!"

"You mean he'll give you a kick!" said Tommy Watson. "And what about when you get to Bannington Hall, my son? How do you reckon you'll get in without an invitation?"

Handforth smiled pityingly.

"My dear kid, you seem to have no sense whatever!" he said loftily. "When I get to Bannington Hall I shall just hand in my card—I—I mean I shall give my name, and—and—— Well, there you are."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And there you'll be, dear boy!" murmured Sir Montie. "You'll be there all right—on the doorstep! Sir James doesn't admit wandering vagrants——"

"Vagrants!" he bawled. "Why, you——you——"

Fortunately Handforth was not prepared to continue, otherwise he might have broken a blood-vessel. For, at that moment Len Clapson, of the College House, looked in at the main door.

"Oh, you haven't gone yet?" he exclaimed briskly. "Good! Christine wants a word with you three chaps about the footer."

"Can't stop now," I said. "We're just off to Bannington——"

"That's why Bob wants to see you," Clapson explained. "Gray's going to be at the party, isn't he? He's the Grammar School Junior skipper, and Christine wants a message taken to him. You've got time to run across, haven't you?"

"We'd better go," remarked Tommy. "It'll only take us two ticks, and it'll save Christine writing. It's about the match, I suppose."

"That's it, I believe," agreed Clapson. "Come on, my sons!"

Montie and Tommy and I passed out across the Triangle. The moonlight was rather weak at present, but it would become much stronger later on. Our return journey from the Hall promised to be quite enjoyable; for cycling on a frosty, moonlight night is always quite pleasant.

In the College House we passed along to Study Q, preceded by Clapson. He flung open the door, and we marched in. I was rather surprised to find that the Monks were there in force. Christine and Yorke and Talmadge were smiling pleasantly, and Clapson's two chums, Oldfield and Nation, were chatting with Freeman and Turner.

"What's this—a party?" I said cheerfully. "Haven't got time to stop, my bucks. You want a message taken to Gray, I believe, Christine?"

"That's it," said the junior skipper, nodding. "But, you see, I'm going to take it myself. You and Tregellis-West and Watson will stay here."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the other Monks loudly.

I looked round with a start.

Clapson and Freeman had their backs to the door, and Montie and Tommy and I were quite surrounded. All the College House juniors were grinning with great relish.

"Begad!" gasped Sir Montie, in alarm. "Dear fellows, it's a trap!"

Usually Tregellis-West was quite calm at such moments, but now he seemed almost excited.

"A trap!" roared Tommy Watson.

"Exactly!" grinned Christine.

"That's just the right word, my dear old scout. Allow me to inform you that you're all three prisoners of war. Monks and Fossils are at war, aren't they? Well, this is a coup—and you're prisoners!"

I breathed hard.

"You scheming bounder!" I exclaimed grimly. "So that's the wheeze, is it? Look here, you ass, you'd better not try to detain us—"

"We're not going to try—we're going to do it!" exclaimed Talmadge sweetly. "How do you like the idea of spending the evening under this hospitable roof?"

"You—you rotters!" panted Watson hotly.

"My dear kid, what's the good of getting excited?" asked Christine, with exasperating calmness. "We've been plotting things—savvy? Three of our chaps are going over to the party instead of you. We've drawn lots, and Yorke and Oldfield and I are going. Meanwhile, you'll remain here under close guard!"

I banged the table impatiently.

"You silly ass!" I shouted. "How the dickens do you think you're going to gain admission to the party? The invitation was for us—not for you. Sir James knows us all, and he'll twig you in a tick—"

"We're not quite such messers as that," interrupted Bob Christine easily. "The idea, my dear Benny, is simple. We shall explain, quite truthfully, you chaps have been unfortunately detained, and that we have taken your places. See? What will Sir James do?"

"Hoof you out, of course!" roared Watson fiercely.

"Not a bit like it!" grinned Christine. "He'll let us stay, and won't ask many questions, either. We sha'n't tell any whoppers, of course—there'll be no need to. The chances are a hundred to one that we shall be allowed to attend the

party. That's the wheeze. What do you think of it?"

My chums and I looked at one another helplessly. We were neatly trapped, and there was no sense in denying it. The Monks' little wheeze was perfectly scund. We should be kept prisoners in Study Q till supper-time—and Christine and Yorke and Oldfield would be enjoying Sir James's hospitality at the Hall!

"Why, you awful rotters!" I exclaimed furiously.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's a smart dodge, I'll admit," I went on. "But you're not going to have everything your own way, my bucks. We've got fists, and even if we can't escape, we'll jolly well send you to Bannington with black eyes!"

"And thick ears as well!" roared Watson hotly.

Without waiting for further details of the plot we charged. The Monks were scarcely ready for such an abrupt attack, and they reeled. But, of course, the odds were all against us. We were gripped by many hands, and held secure. And just at that moment there came a tap at the door.

"Who's that?" bawled Talmadge pantingly.

"May I come in, boys?" came a pleasant voice.

There was a sudden breathless silence in Study Q, and the Monks looked at one another with scared faces.

"Old Alvy!" hissed Christine. "Oh, my only hat!"

I chuckled, and looked triumphantly at Tommy and Sir Montie. The guv'nor, of course, had learned from the chaps in the lobby that we had gone across to Christine's study. And so he had come for us! I'd clean forgotten that we had arranged to go with him until this moment.

"Rescued!" gasped Tommy joyfully.

"Oh, you rotters," muttered Yorke.

"You'd arranged this beforehand—"

"Rats! We were surprised!" I said.

"This is just chance. You didn't know that Mr. Alvington was going with us, did you? He's come for us—that's all!"

"Oh, corks!" groaned the Monks.

Christine had gone round, and he opened the door hurriedly. Nelson Lee stood in the doorway smiling benevolently.

"Are you ready, my boys?" he asked.

"Handforth told me that you had come

over here, and as time is getting short I came across——"

"We're waiting, sir," I said calmly. "Awfully sorry to have caused this trouble. The fact is, we were having a little argument with these College House rotters—ahem! These chaps here!"

"Quite an interestin' argument, sir," smiled Sir Montie.

The guv'nor remained oblivious of the ruffled collars and untidy jackets. He saw it all, of course, but he didn't dream of making inquiries. It wasn't "old Alvy's" way to interfere in junior squabbles.

"Come along, boys," he said. "We must be going."

Sir Montie and Tommy and I left the study, grinning.

"Fare thee well, sweet ones!" I warbled. "So sorry you can't come!"

Christine and Co. looked after us with expressions which were positively baneful, and said nothing. Their feelings were too deep for words. It is said that "there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip"—and the Monks had slipped badly.

CHAPTER VI.

(Sir Lancelot Montgomery Tregellis-West resumes the narrative.)

I PERSUADE TOMMY AND BENNY TO ENTER A LITTLE PLOT, AND EVERYTHING GOES BEAUTIFULLY.

BANNINGTON HALL was a ripping old place.

Not so good as Tregellis Castle, my own noble abode, of course, but it was a splendid pile.

I've started again, you see. I'm getting the hang of it now, and I'm feeling quite at home. Benny says that I can write as well as he can; but as Tommy and I have often told him that his writing is rotten, this isn't much of a compliment. In fact, it's shockingly insulting. We'll let it pass, though.

We had arrived at the Hall, and Sir James Massington had greeted us cordially. Mr. Alvington was in splendid spirits; he had kept us smiling and cheerful ever since we had started out from St. Frank's.

Everything was bright at the Hall, including Miss Molly. She was a jolly nice girl, and it wasn't surprising that

her father was giving her such a ripping party. She seemed particularly pleased to see us, and made an awful fuss of the little service we'd performed for her father—recovering the Massington gold plate, I mean. But it was Mr. Alvington and Bennett who had earned all the praise. Tommy and I had just looked on. That affair had happened a month or two back.

We saw other people, too.

There were several chaps from the Grammar School—seniors mostly. But Arthur Gray, the junior skipper, was there. And we didn't give him Christine's message! We didn't know what it was. Christine hadn't been capable of telling us!

I wasn't so merry as the others. There was something on my mind. You'll guess what that was. Somehow or other, I had to get hold of Miss Doris Martin's love-letters. Begad! What a task for a schoolboy!

Still, I had given a promise, and I had to keep faith. I was a little more confident now, for I had got a plan in my mind. It was a glorious scheme. It couldn't fail—if everything went all right!

I'd arranged certain things, too. But at about half-past seven, after we had been joining in the general fun, I got Tommy and Benny to themselves. Then I forged the final link in the chain. That sounds rather well—what?

"What's the idea of this?" asked Bennett curiously.

"I've got a wheeze, dear fellows," I replied, smiling, and adjusting my pince-nez carefully. "I want you to help me. Will you do it?"

"You haven't told us what to do yet," said Watson. "What are you so jolly mysterious about, you ass? Is it connected with the other affair? Is this something to do with the 'secret' you couldn't tell us?"

"Dear Tommy, it is!" I replied serenely. "I'm not going to explain——"

"Oh, I thought you were going to let the cat out of the bag," grinned Benny.

"Not yet, old boy," I said. "That'll come later on. It's just half-past seven now, and at eight o'clock I want you to do something."

"We're game, as long as that 'something' isn't too villainous," said Bennett cheerfully. "We can't run off with Sir

James's silver-plate, you know, or kidnap the beautiful damsel——"

"Pray don't be preposterous, dear fellow," I interrupted. "This is a serious matter. There's a lot to be done—a shocking lot, in fact. Your part in the job is to kick up a thunderin' row."

"A what?" gasped Tommy.

"A row, Tommy," I explained calmly. "Shout, you know—shout and kick, and fight one another if necessary——"

"He's mad!" said Watson, staring. "Benny, he's gone potty!"

"Sounds like it, anyway!" grinned Bennett. "What's the joke, Montie?"

"It's not a joke," I explained patiently. "I'm deadly serious, and I'm not off my rocker, either. At eight o'clock exactly I want you to be outside the door of Sir James's library."

"That's easy enough," said Dick Bennett.

"An' when you're there you've got to make a shockin' noise," I went on. "I'll leave that to you—how to make the noise, I mean. Anyhow, the idea is to get Sir James out of the library for a minute."

"Oh, I see! It's a kind of decoy," smiled Bennett. "You're not so mad as Tommy thought, old son. I suppose you've got a good reason for asking this?"

"A strong reason, Benny."

"That's all right, then. We'll do it."

"Look here, I'm not going to kick up a beastly row in Sir James Massington's house!" declared Tommy flatly. "It's like your blessed cheek——"

"Let's humour him!" interrupted Bennett good-naturedly. "There's something queer going on, Tommy. Montie wouldn't act like this for nothing; the thought of making a row in his host's house would appal him usually. It must be something extra special to overcome his scruples in this way. It'll be easy enough to kick up a bit of a dust."

"Silly rot!" growled Watson.

But he agreed, and we parted a moment or two later. I had arranged that the "row" should start at a given signal from me. I was going to give an extra-loud cough, with an imitation sneeze at the end of it.

Events fitted in with my plans splendidly.

I found Sir James in the billiard room, chatting with Mr. Alvington, and, for some time I hovered about in the hope of catching Sir James by himself. And

at ten minutes to eight my opportunity came.

"You'll excuse me now, Mr. Alvington, won't you?" asked the baronet genially. "I just want to run off to the library. A few letters for the post, you know."

Things couldn't have been better!

As Sir James was going out I went up to him.

"I'm awfully cheeky, Sir James," I said, feeling nervous. "Begad! I—I hardly like to ask you——"

"Ask me what, my boy?" smiled the baronet.

"Didn't I hear you saying to Mr. Alvin'ton that you were goin' to the library, sir?" I asked. "I—I was wonderin' if you'd show me the Massin'ton jewels? They're in your safe, ain't they? I'd like to see them——"

Sir James laughed.

"Why, of course," he exclaimed. "Come along, Tregellis-West. We shall have five minutes to ourselves. Just a private little chat, as one baronet to another—eh?" he added smilingly.

I could have hugged myself. Everything was going swimmingly, without a single hitch.

We passed along the brilliant corridor and entered the library. Sir James switched the lights on, and closed the door.

"I—I suppose you think it's frightfully nervy of me——"

"Nonsense, my boy—nonsensical!" said my host. "I am only too delighted to do as you ask. Lady Massington is, of course, wearing her own jewels. But you want to see the old family heirlooms—eh?"

"That's it, sir."

Sir James pulled out a bunch of keys, and crossed to the big safe. In less than half a minute it was open, and I stood behind him. My heart jumped. There, on a little shelf, stood the pink package in the blue ribbon! It was even then within my reach!

I decided to waste no time; my chance might be gone in another minute.

So, quite abruptly, I coughed and sneezed.

"Hallo! A cold coming on?" exclaimed Sir James, looking at me through his glasses. "You'll have to wrap up—— Good gracious! What on earth can that be? Upon my soul!"

The baronet turned and gazed at the door.

My heart was beating rapidly. From the passage outside there came the sound of bangs and thuds, followed by a crash on the door of the library itself. Sir James strode across the room and flung the door open.

I watched him eagerly.

He passed outside, and the door swung nearly to. In less than a second I had taken the pink package out and had slipped it into my pocket. And I pulled a bundle of papers over so that they covered the spot where the package had been. This was so that Sir James wouldn't notice the absence of the love-letters.

"Begad! I've done it!" I gasped.

Then I hastened to the door, and found Sir James talking to Bennett and Watson.

"Just a little bit of fun, Sir James," Bennett was saying. "Did we bang against the door? I'm awfully sorry. Watson and I were trying a new wrestling trick. We'll wait until we get to St. Frank's to finish it."

The baronet laughed heartily.

"Things are free and easy to-night," he said. "You can wrestle, if you wish. But don't pull the house down, will you? It's the only one I've got, remember; and houses are difficult to procure in war-time!"

And, with twinkling eyes, Sir James came into the library again. He called Tommy and Bennett in after him, and I gave them a serene nod. And after that we were permitted to see the Massington heirlooms.

They were ripping, of course, but I wasn't particularly interested. My subterfuge had been successful, and that was all that mattered. My chums had done their part well; and I hadn't done mine so badly, either.

I was fearfully afraid that Sir James would see that the package had vanished; but he didn't notice anything, and after we had seen and admired the Massington jewels we took our departure.

"Just a moment, dear fellows," I murmured.

And, before Bennett or Watson could stop me, I had hurried off towards the big hall. Without letting anybody see me, I went up to the first floor. There was an unused study here, and it did not take me a minute to pass through it and so on to the balcony outside the French window. The moon was fairly high now.

"Oh, is that you, Sir Montie?" murmured a soft voice.

"Begad! I thought you hadn't come!" I said, peering over the rail into the black shade beyond. "I've been successful, Miss Martin."

The girl gave a little gasp of relief.

"Oh, how splendid!" she exclaimed eagerly. "Have you got the package here, Sir Montie?"

"I can't stop now; I can't stop a second!" I muttered hastily. "Take this, Miss Martin!"

I thrust the pink package, which I had just taken from my pocket, into her hand. It was a bit of a stretch, but I managed it. I had, of course, arranged beforehand for her to be waiting at that particular spot. Then I cleared off, and rejoined the others.

I felt highly satisfied, and chuckled over the way in which I had achieved my object. In fact, if I had been capable of such a physical effort I should certainly have patted myself on the back.

CHAPTER VII.

(Nipper picks up the thread again.)

IN WHICH SIR JAMES GIVES US A STARTLING SURPRISE—BUT MONTIE CAPS IT A LITTLE LATER ON.

TOMMY WATSON looked at me rather queerly.

"What the dickens is o'd Montie up to?" he asked, with an uneasy note in his voice. "I tell you, Benny, it's a bit rotten. The ass has been engineering some game or other, and there's no telling what trouble he'll get himself into!"

I shook my head.

"Don't you make any mistake, Tommy," I said. "Montie may be an easy-going chap, but he's got his head screwed on the right way. If we find out that he's been playing some fat-headed game I shall be surprised. Montie's always struck me as being keen, in spite of his languid airs."

Tommy and I were in the hall. We were wondering where Tregellis-West had gone to, and were more mystified than ever. We didn't know why he had asked us to create a din outside the library; we didn't know anything, in fact.

And just as I was going to the door, it opened, and Sir Montie came in, look-

ing serenely cheerful. His eyes gleamed behind their pince-nez, and he almost walked with a swagger.

"Dear boys, let's go an' find some refreshments," he said genially.

"Hold on!" I exclaimed. "We're going to get the truth out of you first, Montie. We've had enough of this blessed mystery. What's the game?"

Tregellis-West smiled exasperatingly.

"There's no game," he replied. "It's all over, Benny. The thing's done!"

"What thing's done?" demanded Watson, warmly.

"Why, the thing I had to do!"

"You—you dummy!"

"Compliments are rather borin', old man," smiled Sir Montie. "You'll only have to wait a little while longer——"

As it happened, we hardly had to wait any time at all, for just then we heard Sir James Massington's voice raised in alarm and anger. And he came into the hall with the guv'nor.

"Ah, here you are, Tregellis-West," said Nelson Lee crisply. "Sir James is in trouble, and you may be able to throw a little light upon the matter. Please come into the library at once. Yes, you may as well all come."

Sir Montie smiled slightly, and followed Sir James and Nelson Lee. We went with him, and very soon we found ourselves in the library. Sir James was pacing up and down with agitated strides.

"I can't understand it; it is a mystery!" he declared. "The thing was in the safe only ten minutes ago, Mr. Alvington; I saw it there myself. And now it has completely vanished."

I gave Sir Montie a sharp glance, but he looked as urbane as ever. A suspicion had entered my mind, and I could not get rid of it. Why had he asked Tommy and I to kick up a row? Why had he wanted to be alone in the library for a certain time?

"What's the trouble, Sir James?" asked my elegant chum calmly.

"The trouble, my boy?" repeated the old baronet. "The trouble is terrible. Is it possible that you know something of it? When I opened the safe to show the heirlooms there was a package lying just on the shelf—a package wrapped in pink paper, with blue ribbon round it. Did you see it?"

"Yes, I saw it, sir."

"Then it is extraordinary—uncanny," declared Sir James. "I did not leave the safe for a moment after you boys had

gone, and yet the package is now missing."

"Was it valuable, sir?" I asked interestedly.

"Valuable!" he repeated. "My dear boy, that package contained a dozen uncut rubies, valued at fifty thousand pounds!"

Sir Montie gave a quick, loud gasp.

"Begad!" he ejaculated. "Oh, oh, begad!"

He looked over at me with a curiously tense expression in his eyes, and I realised that he knew quite a lot about this affair. But he seemed in no way uneasy. But, then, it was always impossible to judge Montie's feelings by his looks. If he had been terribly worried he would have kept a cheery aspect. That was just Montie's nature.

"Fifty thousand pounds!" he exclaimed softly. "Oh, whoever would have thought it?"

Nelson Lee looked at Montie sharply.

"What do you know of this matter, Tregellis-West?" he asked. "Sir James tells me that you were left in the library for a short time by yourself. Have you been playing a practical joke, my boy? We sha'n't blame you seriously if you have, but, really, it was hardly the thing——"

"I've been playin' no joke, sir," interrupted Montie. "But I think I know somethin' about that package."

"You mean you saw it?" asked Sir James quickly.

"I know where it went to, sir."

"You—you know!" gasped Sir James. "How do you know?"

"Because I took it, sir!" replied Montie serenely.

"Upon my soul! Then it was a joke, after all," said the baronet, with great relief. "You young rascal. How dare you play such tricks with me?"

Sir Montie smiled.

"The—the fact is, sir, I've been made a fool of—at least, I believe I have," he explained. "I was led to believe that the pink package contained nothin' but a few love-letters——"

"Love-letters!" echoed Sir James amazedly. "Who put such nonsense into your head?"

"You'd better tell us the whole truth, Tregellis-West," said the guv'nor sharply.

"Come, my boy, this matter is serious. We must know all the facts without delay."

"Well, you see, sir, I arranged to

take the package out to somebody who was waitin' for it——"

"Good heavens!" said the baronet huskily. "Let us get to the truth of this at once—at once! What foolery has been perpetrated? You don't realise the gravity of the situation, Tregellis-West. Tell us the truth!"

Sir Montie sat down calmly.

"I hope you won't blame me, sir," he said. "I suppose it's my good nature that's at fault. If there's anythin' seriously wrong. I shall have to make it good, of course. Fifty thousand pounds is a big sum, ain't it? Still, I suppose I could even make that good, if I had to. My uncle might jib a bit——"

"Tut-tut! You mustn't talk in that vein, Tregellis-West," interjected Nelson Lee sharply. "There's no question of your making good any loss. If these jewels have vanished, we must recover them, that's all. But let us know the facts. You are taking everything very calmly."

Tommy Watson snorted.

"That's his way, sir," he said. "He exasperates Bennett and I terrifically now and again. If the house fell on top of him he'd still be smiling! Fifty thousand pounds! Oh, my hat! And he's given the jewels to somebody!"

"Tommy boy, you mustn't be hasty," Sir Montie said, taking off his pince-nez and polishing them. "It's all come about because of my own silliness. But what could I do? Miss Martin pleaded so strongly, you know."

"Tregellis-West, I shall be angry with you before long," said Nelson Lee sternly. "Let's have no more of this absurdity."

"I'm sorry, sir," said Montie, becoming grave. "But, you see, it was like this."

And, then and there, he told us all about the meeting with Miss Doris Martin at the football match, and the events which had taken place subsequently. We all listened with growing surprise and indignation.

"I had to get those love-letters, sir—I'd promised to," concluded Montie. "And so I arranged with Bennett and Watson to make a noise so that your attention would be distracted. I took the package out of the safe myself. Then I hurried out into the garden to see Miss Martin, who was waiting there."

Sir James nearly choked,

"And you gave her the package?" he asked, hoarsely. "Oh, you foolish boy! It is quite evident that this matter is far deeper than it seems on the surface. You have been victimised, Tregellis-West. You have given away some of the finest rubies which ever came into England!"

"I didn't know the package contained rubies, sir."

"Didn't know—didn't know!" fumed Sir James. "That is no argument at all. You removed the package from my safe, and I must say you have acted in a most foolish manner all along. I don't suppose I can blame you—you are only a boy. By now the jewels are far away. I may never recover them!"

"Begad! If you'll wait a minute, sir——"

"We must inform the police at once," put in Nelson Lee. "There's nothing to be gained by holding a discussion now. Tregellis-West has fallen a victim to a scoundrelly device of professional crooks. He has been used as a tool. In his inexperience, he did not realise quite what he was doing."

The gov'nor and Sir James talked together quickly and earnestly, and Tommy and I dragged Montie across the room. In spite of the tremendously serious nature of the situation, he had taken everything with serene calmness. His cool smile nearly drove me frantic.

"What's the matter, Benny boy?" he asked.

"What's the matter?" I hissed. "Oh, oh, you—you born idiot!"

"You fatheaded blockhead!" added Tommy Watson, furiously.

"You are speakin' very sweetly, my dear fellows——"

"Look here, Montie, we don't want any more of that rot!" I interjected.

"Why the dickens couldn't you have taken us into your confidence? Why the thunder didn't you ask our advice? You've made a fearful ass of yourself."

"Have I, Benny?" asked Tregellis-West mildly.

"Oh, you're the limit!" I gasped. "You calmly give away fifty thousand pounds, and then ask me if you've made an ass of yourself!"

"You're—you're a burglar!" panted Watson, almost in alarm. "There's no telling what'll come of this. You actually pinched that package out of Sir James's safe—and made Benny and I

parties to your rotten scheme! Oh, you chump. Why couldn't you have told us all about it?"

"But I made a promise——"

"You shouldn't have made a promise of that sort." I cut in indignantly. "Not long ago I was telling Tommy that you were keen. But over this business you've shown yourself to be as thick-headed as—as old constable Sparrow, over at Bellton! He's got more sense than you've displayed."

Sir Montie looked pained.

"Benny, you can't mean that!" he protested. "Don't you trust me?"

I felt like yelling.

"Trust you!" I said, breathing hard. "After this? Why, you silly idiot, nobody but a born lunatic would have believed such a tissue of lies. My dear chap, it was obviously faked—that story about love-letters was nothing else but a yarn."

Sir Montie nodded.

"Of course it was a yarn," he agreed.

"I know that—now. But you won't let me say anythin'. I've got somethin' to tell Sir James——"

"Hold on!" I said, grabbing Sir Montie's arm. "You can talk to Sir James in a minute. I want to tell you what a cracked idiot you are."

"I'm not anxious to hear that——"

"But you're going to hear it, all the same!" I declared grimly. "Wasn't your brain capable of grasping the obvious-fact that you were fooled? Who was the girl—this Miss Martin? Who was her father? Why, they're a couple of professional crooks—and they've been working on your sympathies."

"Dear boy, they tried to——"

"Tried to!" growled Tommy. "They did!"

"I've never been so wild before!" I went on, hotly. "I'm disappointed, too. I thought you had more sense, Montie. Anybody with a grain of intelligence can see that the story of the love-letters was merely a ruse. These crooks wanted to get those rubies, and so they thought of an easy way of handling them. You did all the work, Montie, and now they're skipping off with the loot!"

"I don't think they'll have skipped far, Benny."

"That's not the question. You've been an absolute idiot; you've been stuffed up with a yarn which was clearly a string of lies."

"Be fair—be sportin'! These crooks were jolly clever, you know," said Sir Montie. "They did everything so genuinely. The old man looked just like a cripple, and the girl spoke piteously. They got round me, begad! I didn't know then that the package contained rubies, and they spoke so sincerely that it all seemed true—the yarn about the love-letters, I mean."

"But you knew jolly well that Sir James hadn't got a nephew——"

"I didn't know it——"

"Well, your common sense ought to have told you," I snapped.

"The fact is, Montie, you're mad!" said Tommy flatly.

"Now, boys, you mustn't wrangle," put in Nelson Lee, coming across. "I want you to tell me what these people are like, Tregellis-West. They can't have got far away by this time, and there is every chance of capturing them before it is too late. You have been very foolish, but I don't altogether blame you——"

"I think the boy is greatly to blame," interposed Sir James angrily. "He has no excuse—none whatever. He ought to have known that a bundle of absurd love-letters would not be kept locked in a safe. And, in no circumstances, was he justified in removing a sealed package without my knowledge. The boy is a fool!"

Thegellis-West smiled.

"Boy—boy!" cried Sir James. "You will make me furious in a moment. You have performed this almost criminal act, and yet you have the audacity to smile! Do you realise the enormity of your offence?"

"I was thinkin', sir, that everybody has been a bit too hasty in judging me. I don't profess to be keen, but I'm not a fool, begad!" said Sir Montie quietly. "I've got just a few brains, you know, an' I pride myself that I can use 'em—when it's necessary. It was necessary this evenin'——"

"How dare you say that you have used your brains?" rapped out Sir James.

"It is hateful to be angry with you, but you have acted in an incredibly stupid manner, and this defence on your part is simply a waste of time."

Sir Montie sighed.

"I'm not defendin' myself, sir; I'm tryin' to explain," he said patiently. "But you won't give me a hearin'—you won't really. Bennett and Watson are

just as bad. You've all given me a shockin' character. I'm rather pained. I think you might have waited just a little bit."

"But, my dear boy, we are wasting time," said Nelson Lee gently. "What is it you wish to say, Tregellis-West? We know that these scoundrels were very plausible, and I, for one, can quite understand how you were duped. You were only to blame in taking the package from Sir James's safe without his knowledge, and in handing it over to 'Miss Martin' without even examining it——"

"But I didn't, sir."

"You ass! You didn't what?" roared Tommy, forgetting himself.

"I didn't hand it over——"

"But you said you did——"

"I beg your pardon, Sir James," interrupted Montie serenely. "It was you who said that. I've been tryin' to get to this point for a long while. Is this the package you missed from your safe?"

And Montie, quite calmly, produced from his pocket a little parcel, wrapped in pink paper, and tied with blue ribbon!

We all stared at it in sheer astonishment.

CHAPTER VIII.

(*Nipper concludes.*)

IN WHICH SIR MONTIE EXPLAINS, AND PROVES THAT HE ISN'T SUCH AN ASS AS HE LOOKS!—AFTER THAT NELSON LEE AND I TAKE PART IN A CAPTURE.

NELSON LEE remained quite calm, but Sir James Massington grabbed the package from Montie's hand, and hastily examined it.

"Upon my soul—upon my soul!" he exclaimed. "Yes, these are the rubies. What on earth can it mean? What game have you been playing, my boy?"

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

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Tommy.

"You see, dear fellows, I wasn't quite so simple as you gave me credit for bein'," remarked Sir Montie languidly. "We're not wastin' time, an' there's no need for anybody to hurry. Hurryin' is a bore!"

Nelson Lee placed a hand upon Montie's shoulders.

"I am sorry, Tregellis-West," he said quietly. "I think we all owe you an apology. We took it for granted that

you had been duped, and that you had fallen into the trap unsuspectingly. Obviously, we were quite wrong."

"That's all right, Mr. Alvin'ton," said Sir Montie coolly. "I was a bit shocked, of course, but I'm strong enough to stand it. I can stand nearly anythin'. But I hope you won't misjudge me——"

"Montie, old man, I'm awfully sorry!" I put in. "But, hang it all, it's your own giddy fault! You only told half your story—and I believe you did it on purpose! You just wanted to give us all a surprise, you bounder."

Tregellis-West grinned.

"Not exactly that, Benny," he said.

"But Sir James was so wild, and you were so excited, that I didn't have a chance of tellin' you the real truth. I've only told you that story about Mr. Martin and his daughter, an' how I agreed to help them. It was Sir James who said that I'd given the rubies away."

The baronet took Montie's hand.

"That was wrong of me, my boy," he said quietly. "I am afraid I have been more to blame than anybody else. But you must remember that I was greatly worried, and never expected for a moment, that you had something more to tell us. But even now I am quite in a fog."

"Well, you see, sir, it was this way," explained my noble chum. "After my visit to Rose Cottage on Saturday evening, I had quite a lot to think about. Begad! My brain was whirlin'! I'd given a solemn promise, an' it was up to me to carry it out. An' I'll confess that, at the time, I didn't suspect anythin' wrong. I swallowed the yarn whole. But it had been told so convincin'ly that I don't think I'm much to blame. It was later on, when I had time to think it all over, that I suspected a trick of some sort."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"That is usually the case, Tregellis-West," he agreed. "While you were actually talking with these people, you were deceived—and I don't blame you in the least. The fact that you suspected knavery afterwards is clear proof of your shrewdness. Well, my boy, what did you do?"

"I argued an' argued with myself until I felt like searchin' for chunks of ice to cool my head!" explained Sir Montie. "An' I came to the conclusion that it was up to me to think out a counter-plot. Begad, it was awful! But

at last I got the idea, an' prepared everything. It struck me that Sir James wouldn't keep a bundle of love-letters in his safe—especially letters which belonged to a nephew, who didn't seem to exist at all!"

I grinned.

"That was a piece of pretty clear reasoning, Montie," I observed.

"Dear boy, please don't be sarcastic," drawled Tregellis-West. "As I said, I didn't like the look of things. But I couldn't back out because of my promise, an' I thought of a wheeze to make all things safe before goin' too far. I prepared a little pink package in advance, an' tied it with blue ribbon. Of course, I couldn't copy it from the original, but I guessed what it would look like. An' it was this package which I gave to the girl."

The guv'nor nodded slowly.

"I see," he said. "I am afraid, Tregellis-West, that your ruse will be only half successful. These crooks will certainly have taken alarm, and will have disappeared by this time. That, of course, is not of very much account, since the jewels are safely in Sir James's possession. But it would have been very satisfactory if we could have laid them by the heels."

"That's what I want to do, sir," said Sir Montie. "But I haven't finished yet."

"My hat! Another dodge?" I gasped, staring.

"Benny boy, I'm full of dodges," grinned Sir Montie. "Chokin' with 'em, in fact. I never thought I could think of so many at once, begad! You see, I placed a note inside the package. I just said that I would go along to Rose Cottage in about half-an-hour's time, bringin' the real package with me. I thought they might suspect a few things, an' so I added that my reason for doin' this was that my promise had been to Mr. Martin, an' that I wanted to place the package in his own hand."

"That was very astute of you," exclaimed the guv'nor approvingly. "I don't think these crooks will have taken any alarm. On the contrary, they will be eagerly awaiting your arrival with the rubies."

"That was my idea, sir. I suppose we can go an' collar 'em now?"

Nelson Lee stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"We must have the police with us," he replied. "We cannot do a thing of this sort upon our own initiative. Sir James, it is necessary for us to thank Tregellis-West for having frustrated a very clever plot. These scoundrels tried to make a fool of him, but failed because of his shrewdness. They were foolish enough to think that he was an easy-going simpleton. They came to Bannington to obtain those rubies, and they would probably have succeeded in their object—quite apart from Tregellis-West's part in the affair—if they had had their way."

Sir Montie beamed.

He was as cool as ever, and I could not help admiring his nerve. The reason why he had not taken Tommy and I into his confidence was quite plain. The tissue of lies which had been told to him had been invented so as to work upon his feelings. But Montie, in spite of his langour, had proved himself to be a shade smarter than the professional crooks themselves.

He had, in fact, turned the tables neatly, and he carried off the whole thing with an ease and assurance which filled the guv'nor and me with real admiration. We were both sure that Montie had the making of a fine detective in him.

"It's a pity about that girl, you know," said my elegant chum. "She's not bad lookin', although she's older than she appears at first sight. I rather liked her at first, but when she started cryin' and sobbin' it seemed to me that there was a note missin' somewhere. It was like a piano out of tune, you know. I began to guess things."

"And we went for you like a ton of bricks!" I grinned. "We called you names, and thought horrible things, Montie. I say, I'm jolly sorry—"

"Oh, dear! Don't go over it again, Benny," complained Montie. "There's no need to say you're sorry, you know. I know it. Or, at least, I know you ought to be. So what's the good of talkin'?"

Sir James was just on the 'phone, and talking with Inspector Jameson, at the police-station.

"Yes, that will do nicely, Jameson," Sir James exclaimed. "We will meet you at the square in about ten minutes' time. Yes, the matter is quite urgent. You had better bring a man along with you, if you don't mind."

The baronet turned from the 'phone.

"The inspector and a constable will meet us," he said crisply. "I don't quite see what we are to do, but perhaps Jameson will formulate a plan."

I grinned.

"A fat lot of plans he'll formulate!" I murmured to Montie and Tommy. "Old Jameson's got about as much sense as that giddy fender! It'll be old Alvy who'll do the trick."

In a very few minutes we were all ready to start out. Of course, the party had been going on merrily all this time, and although our absence was noted, nothing had been said. And now we were too full up with the pink package affair to think of such trivialities as dancing and eating delicacies.

The moon was shining brilliantly as we stepped out down the road. The hall was some little distance out of the town, and a quarter of an hour had passed by the time the square was reached. Here we found Inspector Jameson waiting with a police-constable.

"Good-evening, Sir James!" said the inspector deferentially. "I understand there has been some trouble. Just tell me the facts, sir, and I will soon get to the bottom of the matter. Ah, good-evening, Mr. Alvington."

The inspector shook hands with the guv'nor and Sir James, but didn't take much notice of Montie and Tommy and me. He bestowed a somewhat unwelcome glance upon our august persons.

"Er—is it necessary for these boys to be here?" he asked severely.

"Quite necessary, inspector," replied the guv'nor promptly. "It is solely owing to Tregellis-West's shrewdness that this capture has been made possible. Even now we have no actual proof of the complicity of Mr. Martin and his supposed daughter."

The inspector tapped his heel impatiently.

"I don't understand, Mr. Alvington," he exclaimed. "Please be lucid, sir. My time, as you will readily comprehend, is of some little value!"

"Quite so," said Nelson Lee sweetly. "We are all sure, Inspector Jameson, that your time is of some little value!"

I don't know whether the guv'nor did it on purpose, but it seemed to me that he put a certain amount of emphasis on the "little." And the inspector blew his nose noisily.

"Please tell me what has occurred," he said importantly.

Nelson Lee explained in a few words.

"By what has happened it is quite clear that a pair of clever crooks are attempting to gain possession of the rubies. It is our task to secure evidence against them, and I think it can be done fairly easily."

"How?" asked the inspector shortly.

"Well, we will allow Tregellis-West to enter this cottage, as he arranged in his note. He will hand it to Martin, and request that it shall be opened in his presence. Under the circumstances, he will have a right to demand that. Martin's subsequent attitude—for he dare not open the package—will be clear proof of guilt. We, of course, will be watching outside, and we shall be able to step in and catch the scoundrels red-handed. Quite a simple plan, but a good one, I believe."

"H'm! Perhaps so!" acknowledged Jameson grudgingly. "At all events, we will try it. There is no time to lose, in any case."

We walked quickly, and after a while Sir Montie went on ahead, and Tommy and I walked by ourselves. Thus we arrived at Rose Cottage just after Montie had been admitted.

The little garden was in dense shade, for the moon was on the other side of the house. Without wasting a second, Tommy and I crept up to the front window and peeped in. The blind was drawn, and we couldn't see much. But through the thick curtain we just distinguished the movements of those within. We saw Sir Montie standing before an old man who seemed to be crippled.

The guv'nor and Sir James had come up by this time, and were also looking in. Inspector Jameson brusquely pushed Tommy aside, and occupied his place, much to Tommy's indignation. The constable was despatched to the back door to guard it.

The whole thing was over very quickly.

I saw Sir Montie take out the real package and hand it to the old man. It was quite impossible to hear anything that was said. A young woman was seated on the other side of the table, looking on intently. We could just distinguish the outlines of the three forms through the strip of curtain.

And then we heard Sir Montie's voice—raised purposely.

"I must insist upon the package bein' opened, Mr. Martin!" he declared firmly.

"I have a right to see these letters——"

"No, you——not see——"

The old man was evidently refusing.

"I shall not leave this cottage until——"

Montie got no further, for at that moment the man rose from his chair with a savage oath. We heard that quite distinctly. He came round the table with amazing agility, considering that he was a cripple, and the next second he had grasped Sir Montie and had whirled him out of the room.

The front door opened with a bang, and the unfortunate Tregellis-West hurtled into the porch.

"You have done what we required, and now you can go!" snarled the man. "If you had not been so impertinent I should have rewarded you——"

"Begad!" gasped Sir Montie, picking himself up.

And, at the same second, the gov'nor and Inspector Jameson stepped quickly forward out of the shadows. Martin was gripped on both sides and held tightly.

"I think we want you, my friend," said Nelson Lee calmly.

"You will consider yourself under arrest!" added the inspector. "The

charge which will be made against you will be one of conspiracy and theft——"

"Hang you!" gasped Martin hoarsely.

He was quite helpless, and the handcuffs were on his wrists in a moment. And a minute later shrill cries from the rear told us that Martin's accomplice was safely in the hands of the constable. She had been neatly caught trying to escape by the back door with the package of rubies in her possession.

Well, that's all.

The crooks were fairly caught, solely owing to Montie's keenness. Their astute trick had failed. They had probably got their information regarding the rubies from one of Sir James's servants. Quite lately a thieving valet had been dismissed by the baronet.

Inspector Jameson did not know the criminals, but the gov'nor at once recognised them as two clever London crooks. And Jameson was in high good humour. He fondly imagined that all the credit of the capture was due to him.

As a matter of fact, the plot had been frustrated by Sir Lancelot Montgomery Tregellis-West. And, needless to say, Montie received no end of compliments from everybody. In fact, he painfully declared that he was quite fed-up.

And so the affair ended serenely.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!—(See p. iv of cover.)

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BEGIN THIS THRILLING SERIAL TO-DAY!

The Boxing Sailor

A STORY OF THE RING AND LIFE IN THE NAVY.

By ARTHUR S. HARDY.

Read this first!

The Principal Characters in this Story are:

TOM CRAWLEY, *light-weight boxer, and stoker on board H.M.S. Flyer, who has been captured by the Germans, and has met his father at Antwerp,*

BOB RANDLE, *who has been sent to France with his regiment; and*

MARY THWAITES, *daughter of old Fisherman Thwaites, with whom both Tom and Bob are in love. Bob is also at the prison at Antwerp, and when Tom is ordered to be shot for fighting one of the guards, he and Crawley take up their positions by his side. The order to fire is just being given when the sound of gunfire is heard. A British air raid is taking place!*

(Now read on).

THE AIR RAID.

A MURMUR rang from the lips of the assembled prisoners.

The Hun soldiery, exchanging glances, lost countenance. Many of them had been in the firing-line, and knew well enough what the coming of enemy aeroplanes meant. They dreaded British airmen as the plague.

Antwerp had hitherto been immune. What did this mean? Was it a true bill or a false alarm?

The commandant had the command to fire trembling on his lips when of a sudden he saw several specks high above him, and observed a flotilla of aircraft flying in perfect formation.

The eyes of the firing-party were directed skywards, too. The sights of their rifles were no longer set upon the breasts of the doomed three.

"Bah!" said the commandant, after watching the bursts of high explosive and shrapnel which seemed to puff all round the aeroplanes. "There is nothing to be frightened of! They are ours! The

shells are exploding short. It is merely a manoeuvre——"

Yet the words were scarcely out of his mouth ere he became conscious of a peculiar whizzing sound, as of something heavy dropping at an incredible speed through the air.

Crash!

A blinding sheet of flame and a deafening roar told too plainly that a bomb had dropped.

It struck the heavy roof of the gaol, and sent the masonry and slates flying far and wide.

Consternation reigned supreme. Some of the Huns involuntarily broke their ranks and fled for cover.

The commandant was hurled off his feet, and fell heavily to the ground.

Whir! Crash!

Thomas Crawley, young Tom, and Bob were hurled down, and the firing-party was scattered, some of them to lie in mangled frightfulness upon the concrete of the yard.

The second bomb had fallen clear of the building, and had carried death and destruction to those assembled in the yard.

The German commandant rose, bleeding from many cuts upon his face.

"Take cover!" he cried, and the men scattered far and wide.

Whir—whir! Crash! Crash! Crash! Crash!

Bomb after bomb fell, while the air was made hideous by the savage barking of the air-defence guns.

The prison—a large and prominent building, which must have looked like a barracks to the airmen above—was struck again and again.

Some parts of it were blown away entire, so that the ruined walls gaped hideously. Bombs fell outside the prison, blowing in the massive doors, and leaving the way to the streets open to any prisoner who might care to make the essay.

Fisherman Crawley gathered himself

up. Dust covered him. He felt sick and ill and stunned, but found he could walk all right, and he was not conscious of any serious injury.

He looked down, and saw his son scrambling to his feet.

He helped him, for his hands were free, the lightly tied handkerchief having been blown away, and held him close.

"Tom, my dear boy, are you hurt?" he asked brokenly.

"No, dad. I've suffered worse in a knock-down in the boxing-ring. Where's Bob?"

The father freed the son's hands, and then saw Bob Randle standing before him, with his clothes rent in places, and blood streaming from a cut in his cheek.

"I'm all right, Mr. Crawley," said Bob quickly. "What an escape! Do you realise those bombs saved our lives, sir?"

"Yes, Bob."

The corporal glanced swiftly round him. Not a Hun remained within the yard, and the guns were still barking viciously, and the aeroplanes were coming back.

A bomb dropped not a hundred yards away.

Most of the prisoners had vanished, too. A door yawned at the top of a crumbling stairway.

"Come along, sir!" said Bob quickly. "It's nearly dark! Let's try our luck!"

He led the way at a run, for his nerves were sound. Tom and his father followed.

As they reached the top of the stairs, and were about to enter the prison, another bomb dropped sheer into the yard, hurling cement and rubbish flying, blowing out the few sound windows of the prison that remained, and tumbling down the tottering brickwork in a deadly shower.

The shock almost blew them forward, and they groped their way amid the hovering dust, feeling for the walls, until they saw ahead of them a mass of ruined masonry and piled-up brickwork.

Beyond was the street, with the lamps still alight—a street with the purple and black of dusk creeping rapidly up.

Not a soul could be seen. They might have been in a deserted and ruined village in France for any sign of life they saw.

They paused, gasping in amazement.

A miracle had happened. Their prison was a prison no longer. Here lay the gateway that led to freedom!

What if Antwerp were in the possession

of the Huns! There were thousands of citizens in the place who hated the Germans with an undying and deadly hatred. There was a chance—a distinct chance—of their getting away! And Thomas Crawley guessed that already some of the unhappy prisoners had taken it.

Above, the aeroplanes were still circling, unharmed in spite of the deadly guns. There seemed a large number of them, and bombs were still falling on the big buildings which were occupied by enemy troops.

They all knew the Huns. They wouldn't reveal themselves while there was a chance of being injured.

"Come on!" said the fisherman, as he struck bravely out, and scrambled among the piled-up ruins. "Quick—quick! It means death if we remain and are retaken! Quick! Quick!"

IN THE STREETS OF ANTWERP.

EAGERLY they followed him sometimes falling as a treacherous brick or piece of masonry rolled over to the touch of their feet.

Dust covered them, until the clothes they wore were hardly distinguishable.

And so at last, breathless and trembling with excitement and hope, they gained the street.

Here they paused, flashing a glance up and down the deserted thoroughfare and back at the prison.

The latter presented an appalling spectacle. It looked as if hardly a single foot of the tremendous structure had been left undamaged.

Its roofs gaped to the sky. Its windows and doors had gone. Its iron railings were twisted into grotesque shapes, or had else been blown completely away.

And, to add to the terrific sight, flames were now soaring and leaping among the torn and ruined walls. The remains of the prison were on fire.

Under the shadow of a wall the three crouched, to gain breath and plan the next move.

None knew where he was. The city of Antwerp was like a sealed book to them.

"Let us go this way!" said Bob Randle, pointing, and they took their chance.

On they blundered, and occasionally they could see men and women fleeing, panic-stricken, while the patter of the

shrapnel and falling pieces of shell-case fell around.

They experienced no sense of fear. Death had grinned at them too often for them to mind him now. So they blundered onward through the streets, turning this way and that, and making their way towards the poorer quarters of the town, which they imagined would afford them the better chance of escape.

They passed deserted market-places, and houses whose doors yawned open. Now and then a frightened citizen would thrust his head out, and then, as he heard the boom of the guns, as rapidly withdraw it again.

"We must strike the river soon!" growled Thomas Crawley, "and if only we can find a small boat, we can try and drop down the river to the sea."

"England's a long way off, dad!" observed Tom.

"True, boy! And the adventure would be risky. But I'd rather die out there on the sea I love, in an effort to get back to the land I love, than be shot down here by these scoundrels of Huns!"

"If we can steal a boat, let's chance it!" growled Bob. "Or, better still, dad, there's Holland, and a neutral soil, not over-far away. If we could only reach it——"

Crawley shook his head.

"No chance!" he observed. "After the raid, the German guard will be doubly vigilant. They'll be watching for escaped prisoners. No; I'm for the other plan, if we can only find a boat."

The sea was Crawley's element, and naturally swayed his decision.

Bob Randle didn't mind. They had escaped death, and for the moment they were free. The providence which had hitherto protected them might stand their friend still.

So they wandered on, until of a sudden they heard the steady tramp, tramp, tramp of nail-studded boots, and knew by the rhythm of the echoing sound that a body of troops were coming their way.

They fell back in alarm, taking shelter in a recessed doorway, in which they crouched. It was a deep doorway, which held impenetrable black shadows, which concealed from them the fact that the door yawned open, and that a man stood behind them.

Bob Randle, peering out, saw the flash of steel, and observed a mass of troops marching in fours, coming towards them.

"They're the cursed Huns! Lie close,"

he whispered, "for if they catch sight of us we're lost!"

So they drew back, and the tramp, tramp of the heavy feet came nearer and nearer.

Soon the enemy were within fifty yards of them—then thirty—then twenty—then ten—— And then:

"Who goes there?" roared a sharp-eyed officer, who fancied that he saw figures crouching for protection in a doorway.

"We're lost!" muttered young Tom. "It's all up, dad!"

AN UNEXPECTED ALLY.

AS the German officer came to a halt and sent his ringing challenge echoing into the night, Tom Crawley, Bob Randle, and the Weathersca fisherman gave themselves up for lost. They had been seen, and however ready they might have been to make a fight of it ere surrendering to their enemies, they knew that they would not have even a dog's chance.

"It's all up, Tom boy," whispered Bob Randle hoarsely in the boxing sailor's ear.

"Dashed 'ard lines!" growled Tom.

And then he felt his arm seized, and he was whirled, while an exclamation of dismayed surprise was yet trembling on his lips, into the darkened passage of the house behind him.

Bob Randle in turn was taken by the arm and drawn irresistibly backward, and Thomas Crawley heard someone whisper in his ear "Silence! I will save you."

Then out on to the pavement stepped a shadowy figure of a man.

He was only just in time to intercept the German officer in command of the patrol as the latter sprang towards the house.

"Your obedient servant, commandant," said the stranger in German as he swung his hand to the salute and brought his heels together with a click, that showed he had undergone military training at some part of his career.

"Who are you? What are you doing there?" The questions were rapped out sharply, and the German officer's eyes searched the face of the man before him as if he would read into his very soul.

"My name is Hermann De Jong. I am a Dutchman——"

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

"Ah! What is your business here?"

"I live here. It is my home."

"Your profession?"

"I am a Dutch fisherman. I ply between Antwerp and Rotterdam. I bring and fetch cargoes."

"H'm! I should like to see your credentials."

De Jong's hand strayed to his pocket, and he produced a leather case. Out of this he extracted a paper, which he handed to the German officer, who, making use of an electric torch, examined it carefully.

"It is in order," muttered the latter, apparently disgusted to find that it was so. "The permit is franked by the governor of the occupied city. But," with a flash of suspicion, "you were not alone just now. You had others with you."

"No, commandant; merely my daughter. She has gone upstairs. She was afraid when she saw the flash of the bayonets. I did not show a light, because it is not permitted by the regulations."

This was true. However, the officer still seemed unconvinced.

He took a step forward. "I must have a look here," said he, and he flashed his torch into the doorway, and then into the passage beyond.

He saw nothing but an empty hall, panelled in dingy oak, and a stairway leading to the upper rooms of the old-fashioned house.

And why? Because Fisherman Crawley, his son Tom, and Bob Randle, who had listened to the interesting conversation with an ever-growing sense of security, had thought it expedient some moments before to creep along the passage and conceal themselves behind an angle of the stairs, which here swung down into a musty and evil-smelling basement.

The officer tramped along the passage, while the hidden fugitives held their breath. Fisherman Crawley braced himself for one last desperate effort, should it be necessary. He determined that, should the German turn the end of the passage, he would seize him by the throat and crush the life out of him, no matter what the consequences might be. He did not intend to be taken alive.

Fortunately, having looked up the stairs, and along the level to where they turned downwards, the officer appeared to be satisfied.

He strode to where De Jong stood calm and reserved, and handed him back his papers.

"They seem in order; but in future"—and he glared sternly at the Dutchman—"I should advise you not to stand near the open doorway. We have had the cursed English over the city with their aeroplanes to-night. You might be shot as a traitor."

De Jong again saluted.

"I will give it attention," he replied. "But I was about to make my way to the docks. I am about to sail."

"Be careful, then."

So the officer strode again into the street, called a command to his men, took his place beside them, and the whole swung onward with measured steps, their bayonets glistening in the rays of the rising moon.

The Dutchman stood and watched them until they turned the corner, and then, raising his clenched fist, he shook it after them.

"Cursed tyrants," he cried; "soon you will be hurled from Belgian soil, every one of you. The British have already given you notice to quit. Curse you all!"

His face was convulsed, but the outburst appeared to relieve him.

Then, after casting a glance up and down the street, he entered his house and closed and locked the door. As they heard the bolt shot home, Fisherman Crawley, Tom, and Bob came out of their hiding-place. Their saviour struck a match, and, grinning at them, gave them greeting.

"I was only just in time," he cried, in good English.

"We owe you our lives," said the grizzled Weathersea fisherman, casting a questioning glance at the Dutchman.

The other shrugged.

"I saw you come along the street. I recognised your uniforms," he explained. "I was told that the prison had been blown to pieces. When I heard you whisper to one another I knew you were English. I am a Dutchman. I hate the Germans. I am for the Allies. It was the least I could do, and I require no thanks."

Then, with a nod and a reassuring smile, he added, "But come upstairs. You are not out of the wood yet, and we must see what can be done to get you safely away from Antwerp."

(Continued overleaf.)

A PLAN OF ESCAPE.

THEY followed him as he led the way to the upper regions of the house. Here he ushered them into a room whose windows were so heavily curtained that not even the smallest ray of light could be seen from outside.

The windows were shut tight down, and the room was musty and warm. A fire smouldered in the hearth, and a girl was seated in a big arm-chair, knitting.

She sprang erect, with a low cry, as they entered, and glanced fearfully at the strangers, then raised her questioning eyes to the Dutchman's face.

De Jong gave her a reassuring glance. "It is all right, my dear; they are Englishmen, and friends," said he.

A cry burst from the girl's lips, and she sprang towards them, her eyes suffused with tears, her pale cheeks aglow, her lips parted in a trembling smile.

"And you are—friends?" said she.

"An English girl!" cried Fisherman Crawley in surprise.

"Who are you?" the girl questioned.

"We are prisoners of war—escaped from the prison to-night," answered Crawley. "And a close shave it was, my lass. I marvel that we were not all killed."

The Dutchman strode to the girl's side, and laid a kindly hand upon her shoulder.

"Yes, she, too, is English," he explained. "Before the war she was a governess to a Belgian family, here in Antwerp. She had no time to escape when the Huns came. Ever since I have protected her. My wife, who is now in Holland, but who is afraid to come back, passed her off as her daughter. She is

fair, and in the clothes she now wears she looks sufficiently Dutch."

The three fugitives saw now that the girl was clothed after the Dutch fashion.

"Mr. De Jong has been very, very kind to me," faltered the girl. "I should have been lost without him. He passed me off as a Dutch girl, and so I have been registered. But he could not get me past the frontier, because the risk was too great. So I remain locked up here, afraid every day that someone will betray me."

"She is nervous. I would not allow them to take her," explained the Dutchman.

"Ah, but if they found out, they would kill him!" said the pretty girl. "And I would have his death upon my conscience all my life."

De Jong smiled, and shrugged his broad shoulders.

"After all I have seen I do not place such a great value on life," he declared. "Lives are cheap; but now I have four to save."

They studied De Jong closely in the warm light of the oil lamp. He was a man standing six feet in height, and was broad in proportion. His rugged face, seamed and lined, and beaten by the weather, was undeniably handsome, of its type. His hair was curly and touched with grey; his eyes were blue, and had that fearless, open expression that almost every seaman acquires, whilst chin and upper lip were concealed by a growth of moustache and beard, somewhat carelessly trimmed.

He wore a reefer suit of heavy blue serge, a blue sweater, and boots that reached almost to the knee.

(To be continued.)

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