

"IN THE HANDS OF THE HUNS."

No. 131.]

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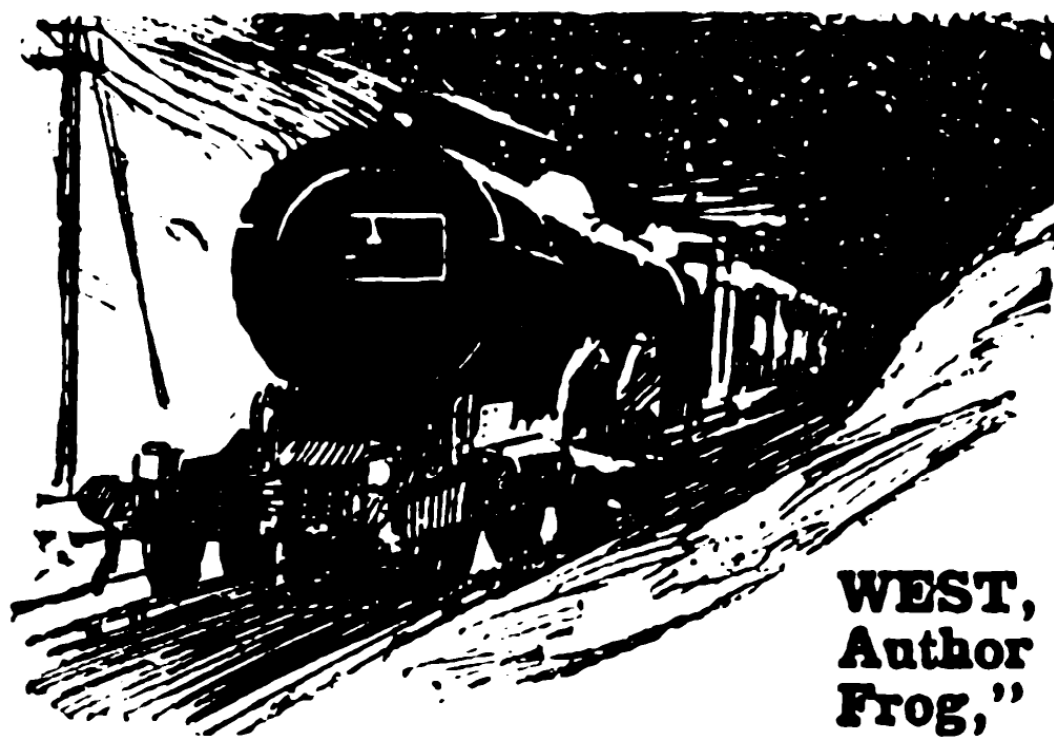
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THE HOLD UP OF THE 8-15 MAIL

Another Tale of NELSON LEE and NIPPER AT ST. FRANK'S COLLEGE. Set down by NIPPER and SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST, and Prepared for Publication by the Author of "The Problem of the Copper Frog," "The Messages of Mystery," "Fullwood's Cunning."

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.

IN WHICH AN ARGUMENT, A CYCLE RIDE, A SNOWSTORM AND A SMASH-UP PLAY IMPORTANT PARTS.

BOB CHRISTINE, of the College House at St. Frank's, waved his hand airily.

"My dear chap, it's a record," he declared. "I'm not boasting—it's just a plain fact. Talmadge, Yorke, and I created a record, and we're proud of it, too."

"No need to tell us that," said Handforth, with a sniff. "Anybody would think you'd been performing marvels. What was it, anyhow? You rode from Helmford to St. Frank's in a minute under the hour. Well?"

"It was jolly quick riding—that's all I say," replied Christine warmly. "You couldn't do it, Handforth—nor could any other chap in the Ancient House."

"Done!" I chimed in promptly.

"Eh?" said Christine, looking round. "What's done?"

"I'll take that challenge on, my son," I said coolly. "You said any chap in the Ancient House couldn't ride from Helmford to St. Frank's within the hour. I'll do the double journey, with Tregellis-West and Watson—and get back here

inside an hour and a half. That'll beat your record—what?"

Bob Christine sniffed sceptically.

"Rats!" he said. "You couldn't do it on motor-bikes!"

"It's rather a sudden shock, Benny boy," remarked Sir Montie Tregellis-West lazily. "You spring these things so suddenly, y'know. But I'm game. I'm not a fellow to throw up the sponge, begad!"

I grinned, and slapped Montie's back.

"It's a question of upholding our giddy name—the name of the Ancient House," I said. "These fat-headed Monks think that they've put up a record. That's all rot! We're going to beat their silly record."

Afternoon lessons were over, and I was lounging with my two study chums, Tregellis-West and Watson, in the Remove passage—the Form-room passage, I mean. Christine and Co., the genial leaders of the College House juniors, had been talking rather boastfully of a cycling feat they had performed the previous evening. They had gone over to Helmford, in order to arrange a football match with the junior skipper of Helmford School, and had found that they had had exactly an hour before locking-up in which to get home. They had ridden hard, and had

arrived with just a minute to spare. As this journey was looked upon as one which occupied well over an hour, Christine and Co. fondly believed that they had made a record. Perhaps they had, but I was quite ready to beat it—or try to.

The actual distance was not known, for the road was somewhat hilly and winding. But to do the double trip in an hour and a half would mean tremendously hard riding all the way. I knew very well that Tommy Watson and Sir Montie were ready to make the attempt with me.

We had strolled up the passage just as Christine and Co. were talking, and I had accepted his challenge promptly. There was no need to hesitate over such a matter. I was certainly not going to allow the Monks to beat the Fossils. As junior skipper of the Ancient House, I considered that it was up to me to "make good."

The rivalry between the two Houses at St. Frank's had become rather keen lately, and I think I generally managed to keep my own end up. Since the gov'nor and I had arrived at the famous old school things had been moving pretty speedily, and now there was a vast change in the Junior School.

Nelson Lee, of course, was Housemaster of the Ancient House, and was known as "Mr. Alvington." Incidentally, he was about the most popular Housemaster St. Frank's had ever had. I was "Dick Bennett," of the Remove.

"You've taken on a pretty stiff task, Benny," said Handforth, of Study D. "I'm afraid it'll be a bit too hefty for you. Now, if I decided to do the trip it would make a difference——"

"Exactly!" I agreed calmly. "You'd crawl back after about three hours."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth glared.

"I'm not going to ride over to Helmsford just because of these fat-headed Monks," he exclaimed warmly. "If you like to be an ass, Benny, you can be. But I wouldn't give tuppence for your chance!"

"My dear chap, I'm not asking anything for it," I smiled. "Christine stated that any chap in the Ancient House couldn't whack his record. That's enough for me. I'm going to do my best to whack it."

"When?" asked Christine.

"As soon as you like!"

"This evening?"

"No reason why we shouldn't."

"No reason at all, dear fellows," said Sir Montie serenely. "I've got a pain in my leg, an' I've got a horrid idea that the weather's goin' to change. But it ain't for me to complain. If Benny says the word, I'll start straight away! There's no stoppin' Benny once he gets goin'. He's a whirlwind, begad!"

"Let's have a look at the weather, anyhow," said Tommy Watson practically.

We passed along the passage, and emerged into the Triangle. Several other juniors came with us, for they were interested. Any House challenge was always looked upon as something of special importance.

"Lovely weather," said Christine, looking up at the sky. "Better than we had last night anyhow——"

"Rats!" I said promptly. "There was a wind last night, and it practically blew you home. That's why you did the journey so quickly."

"Look here, you fat-headed Fossil——"

"Peace, my sons—peace!" I said soothingly. "We don't want a House row now. This is a serious matter, and we're not going to muck it up at the start. Yes, I think the weather's all right. What do you say, Tommy?"

"I think it's a fat-headed idea!" said Watson flatly.

"My dear chap, you needn't come——"

"Oh, don't be potty!" said Tommy. "Of course I'll come. I'm blessed if I'm going to be whacked by old Montie!"

Sir Montie smiled urbanely, and cocked a critical eye skywards.

"There's a feelin' in the air that there's somethin' comin'," he observed sagely.

"I don't know what it'll be—wind, or rain, or snow, or somethin'."

"I think it'll be something!" I grinned.

"I don't think much of you as a prophet, Montie. The sky's glorious, and there's scarcely a breath of wind. This frost has made the ground hard, and we shall have a fine trip. Of course, we shall have to risk punctures."

"You're going to do it this evening, then?" asked Christine.

"Start at four-thirty," I replied. "That's in twenty minutes' time. We've got to get back here by six. How's that?"

"Right as rain!" said Christine. "We can take your word, of course; but how

shall we know that you've been to Helmsford? Some of the fellows might be doubtful—if you succeed in getting back by six—which is jolly questionable."

I considered for a moment.

"I've got it!" I said. "We'll take a postcard with us, addressed to you, Christine. And as soon as we get to the post-office, in the High Street, we'll shove it in the box and start home. It won't be delivered until the morning, of course, but it'll show we've been to Helmsford, won't it?"

"Yes, that's all right," agreed Christine. "We know you wouldn't try to diddle us, in any case."

"Ain't it glorious to be trusted so implicitly," murmured Sir Montie languidly. "That's the best of havin' good characters, Benny. But I've been thinkin'. We've got to start in twenty minutes, an' I'm frightfully hungry. An' what about the jiggers? They've got to be oiled up an' got ready, you know. An' we've got to change our clothes—to do all that terrific cyclin' we must be in Norfolks, dear boys. It seems to me, Benny, that we shall come a cropper before we start, begad! There ain't time to get ready!"

I grinned.

"Plenty of time," I replied briskly. "We'll get Farman and Owen and one or two other fellows to get our bikes ready while we change our clobber. Somebody else can get some tea, and we'll wolf it down just before we start. Merely a matter of organisation, Montie."

"You know best, old man," said Tregellis-West. "But I really think you've made a mistake about the tea. I shall certainly refuse to 'wolf' it down. It's shockin' bad form——"

"My dear ass, this isn't a time to think of form," I interrupted genially. "We've got to tuck some grub into ourselves, so that we shall be sustained for the great ordeal. If it comes to it, we can bung some sandwiches into our pockets, although there won't be much time for eating once we get going."

"Can't we make the start at five, dear boys——"

"No, you lazy slacker, we can't!" I interjected. "Six o'clock is quite late enough to arrive home. Don't you see, Montie, that by half-past six it'll be nearly pitch dark? We want to put on speed, and that half-hour will make all the difference. We sha'n't have to stop to light lamps or anything."

"Just as you like, Benny boy!"

I found that my watch was a few minutes fast, so I put it exactly right, and the time was then ten past four. So we had exactly twenty minutes to make our preparations. Farman and several other fellows readily agreed to get the jiggers out of the shed—to oil them, pump up any slackened tyre, and so forth.

Montie and Tommy and I hurried into the House, and rapidly changed into Norfolk suits. When it came to a matter of necessity, all Tregellis-West's languor vanished as if by magic. He dressed himself in record time, and even beat Tommy and I by a minute.

"I'm waitin', dear boys!" he said, calmly eyeing us through his pince-nez. "Begad, what a frightful time you chaps take to dress!"

We only grinned at this cheerful sally, and all hurried down to the Remove passage. In Study D we found tea all ready for us. Its cheerful owners, Handforth, Church, and McClure, had hospitably volunteered to prepare a hasty meal for us, and we found that Handforth had done everything on a grand scale, as usual. Handforth always went into anything enthusiastically. In most matters he was a bit of a duffer, but there was no denying that Handforth's heart was in the right place.

"Good!" he exclaimed, as we came in. "You've just got twelve minutes, my bucks! Hurry up with those sandwiches, McClure. That's right—make 'em into three neat parcels."

"This is jolly good of you, Handy!"

"Rats! I can stand a tea, I suppose," said Handforth, glaring. "I don't want any of your silly thanks, you duffer! Of course, I don't suppose you'll get back by six, as I'm not coming with you, but there's no telling! If anybody in the House can break cycling records, it's you, Benny. I'm not quite so sure about Watson and West. They'll muck up the whole thing, of course."

"Look here, you ass——" began Tommy wrathfully.

"No time for arguing now," cut in Handforth, shoving a cup of tea in front of Tommy. "You've got to be off in ten minutes, and you're wasting time. This is a House matter—and I've got the interests of the House at heart as much as anybody. I'd come with you if my bike wasn't punctured."

"Mine's all right, Handy," said McClure promptly.

Handforth turned red.

"I—I never ride other chaps' bicycles," he exclaimed airily. "Thanks all the same, old man. Besides, this is Benny's affair. He made the challenge—or, rather, accepted it—and he'll have to make good."

"Quite right," I mumbled, with my mouth full. "Shove some more cold milk into this tea, Church, old son. It's too hot to drink quickly."

It didn't take us long to demolish a hasty meal. It wouldn't have been wise to eat too much, in any case. On the other hand, it would have been foolish to start on a strenuous cycle ride with empty tummies.

At twenty-eight minutes past four we hastened out into the Triangle. And there, against the Ancient House steps, our bicycles were being held ready. This affair, although only a trifle, was causing quite a lot of interest. Monks and Fossils stood round to give us a good send-off. The Monks, of course, were all amused. They didn't think for a minute that we should get back by six.

As a matter of fact, I was somewhat doubtful myself. It would mean jolly hard riding, and there was no allowance for mishaps. But, in any case, I told myself that we should be able to beat Christine's record.

The road to Helmford was a twisting one, and in wet weather abominable. But the countryside was gripped by frost, and the road surface was hard, and, barring a few ruts, quite decent.

Well, Montie and Tommy and I started off prompt to the second. As the school clock chimed, we shot out between the wide-open gates. The ride was keenly enjoyable at first, and we made fine progress. After a while, however, the strain began to tell a bit, and we simply rode in silence, and in single file. I led the way, picking out the smoothest surface, and Tommy and Montie followed behind.

We got our "second wind" after a while, and forged ahead splendidly. We made such good time, in fact, that when, at last, we drew up before the post-office in the old High Street of Helmford the time was just twelve minutes past five.

"Three minutes under schedule!" I panted with satisfaction, as I hopped off and shoved the postcard into the box.

"We shall do it easily, my bonny boys.

There's more down-hill on the way back, too."

"I'm rather afraid of the weather, dear fellow——"

"Rats!" said Tommy, as we sped off again. "There's going to be no change, you ass. Just look at the sky—— My hat, it does look a bit queer, though, doesn't it?" he added, as he glanced upwards.

We had had no time to inspect the sky; moreover, until we turned, we didn't know that any sign of a change was apparent. Now, however, immediately facing us, we saw an intensely black line of clouds near the horizon. The bank was mounting steadily and ominously towards the zenith.

I didn't say anything, but I was just a little uneasy. The air was still perfectly calm, not a breath of wind stirring. For ten minutes we rode well; but Helmford lay in a hollow, and that ten minutes was spent in a long, uphill grind. After reaching the top, we should have a gradient of fully a mile to descend.

But just as we were nearing the top, a sharp puff of wind caught us, cold and blustery. And, a minute later, a perfect hurricane descended upon us, bringing with it a thin cloud of snowflakes. We were just on the brow of the hill—the stiffest piece—and were blown to a standstill.

"Montie was right," I gasped, as I fell off my jigger. "We ought to have put this trip off. We shall never be able to get home by six with a head-wind like this! There's a regular snowstorm coming!"

"Dear boys, it's hard lines!" said Sir Montie breathlessly.

He manfully refrained from saying "I told you so"—although he would have been justified in gloating a bit. But Montie wasn't a fellow of that sort.

We tried to make ourselves believe that we were only in for a slight squall. But the wind rose to a gale, and was directly facing us. Progress was slow, and we gave up all hope of reaching St. Frank's by six. To further add to our discomfort, the snow came down in blinding whirls.

A premature darkness had descended; and this, added to the snow-smother, made it impossible for us to see more than a dozen yards ahead. The storm developed with extraordinary quickness, and was about the fiercest I had ever experienced. It simply came down with

appalling strength, and it was difficult for us to keep our saddles, even on the level.

"How absolutely rotten!" growled Watson, brushing the snow from his eyes. "What fatheads we were to start! I shall always take Montie's advice after this!"

"Until the next time, dear boy!" said Sir Montie urbanely.

Being compelled to dismount for a slight rise, I glanced at my watch. It was just two minutes to six—and we were only half-way home! But we weren't worried about our failure now. It wasn't our fault, in any case. Given good weather, we should have romped home under schedule.

Our main concern was to get out of the storm. The wind blew the breath out of us, and the driving snow smothered us from head to foot, and stung our faces painfully. Already the roads were covered an inch deep.

"Some wise fellow once said that misfortunes never come singly," remarked Tregellis-West after a while. "Dear boys, I've got a sneakin' idea that somethin' shockin' will happen before long. We shall have a puncture, or——"

"That's right—be cheerful!" I grunted. "Dry up, for goodness' sake. You've only got to talk of punctures, and they happen. I'm rather superstitious on that point."

Of course, I wasn't really. But it's very curious how punctures will occur after a fellow has been talking about them. As it happened, our tyres behaved themselves, and retained their wind.

Misfortune came in another way.

Progress, as I said, was terribly slow. We plodded on, slowly but surely, literally fighting the elements. We were smothered from head to foot, and the snow was now coming down in dense clouds. The flakes were larger, and so thick that they seemed to be a solid blanket in front of us.

The wind was not so fierce, but this wasn't much advantage. Almost before we knew of it, the snow lay three or four inches deep upon the road. Darkness had descended in earnest, and we lost all account of our bearings. Montie declared that we were only a couple of miles from St. Frank's; but I maintained that we were fully three and a half. And it was soon after this little argument that the disaster occurred.

We could tell that we were mounting

a rise by the pressure we had to exert upon the pedals. To see any hill was out of the question, for we were travelling quite blindly. It was even difficult to keep to the road at all.

"Come on!" I exclaimed pantingly. "Let's rush up this hill!"

We exerted ourselves enormously, and for a moment ploughed ahead with some speed. But then the hill made itself felt severely. We put every ounce of strength forward. And then, quite suddenly, there was a loud, sharp snap.

"Oh, corks!" gasped Tommy Watson.

I just caught a glimpse of him sprawling over sideways. Montie was near by, and he couldn't steer clear in time. Tommy and his jigger crashed into the unfortunate Tregellis-West, and a series of gasps followed, accompanied by rattling of metal.

And when I dismounted and looked round, I saw my two chums lying in the snow, mixed up in a tangle, with their machines in a heap. That one glance told me that our plight was by no means improved.

CHAPTER II.

IN WHICH I MAKE A BLOOMER, AND DESCEND TO DIZZY DEPTHS QUITE SUDDENLY.

"TOMMY, boy, I don't mind you kneeling on my giddy chest, you know, or pushin' your fist in my mouth; but I draw the line at havin' piles of snow kicked down my neck. It's too bad—it is really!"

Sir Montie spoke plaintively, and, for the life of me, I couldn't help chuckling.

"What's the matter with you asses?" I asked.

"Something went!" gasped Tommy Watson. "My giddy bike busted up, I believe—fell to pieces, or something! I must have been working too hard!"

"Appallin'ly hard, Tommy," agreed Tregellis-West, sitting up. "But you weren't sporty, you know. You might have fallen the other side, begad!"

"You—you ass! I didn't want to fall at all!" roared Tommy.

They sorted themselves out with my aid, and we ascertained the damage. The personal injury amounted to nil, but the bikes had suffered severely. The cause of the disaster had been the sudden snapping of Watson's chain. To repair this on

the spot was impossible. Montie's jigger was crooked in addition. Watson had shoved his foot into the back wheel—and no wheel is made to stand that sort of thing. It was buckled so badly that it wouldn't go round between the stays.

After our exertions we were all perspiring, in spite of the cold wind. And, in any case, we were strong and healthy. The prospect which faced us was not a very lively one, however.

"It means walking," I said bluntly.

"You can ride, Benny——"

"Rot! I'm not going to leave you chaps in the lurch," I broke in. "We might as well walk together. It's over three miles——"

"No, dear boy, it's under two," persisted Montie. "Well, it's no good arguin'. We shall have our work cut out to get back before lockin' up. This is a frightful mess, dear fellows."

"This is what comes of using too much energy!" growled Watson. "That rotten chain oughtn't to have snapped on an ordinary hill like this! I shall jolly well send it back to the makers!"

That detail, however, could easily be discussed later on. We commenced walking through the deepening snow. The storm had now settled down to work in earnest. The flakes were larger, and they fell in myriads, smothering the road, the hedges, the trees, and everything exposed.

In places there were deep drifts, and we ploughed through thirteen or fourteen inches of snow. We didn't meet a soul, for this quiet country road was nearly always deserted after dark.

We were out of our bearings, for the Helmford road was seldom used by St. Frank's fellows. Bannington was the town we always visited—Bannington being bigger than Helmford anyhow.

At length we came to a sharp bend, the lane bearing round to the left. I halted in the snow, and the others halted too. Montie was glad of a rest, for he had been carrying the back part of his jigger, owing to the crooked wheel. We were taking that particular task in turns.

I peered through the thickly falling flakes.

"This is that rotten corner," I said, nodding.

"Which corner?" asked Tommy.

"That one I nearly came a cropper on, during the ride out," I replied, referring to a trifling incident which had occurred

earlier. "There you are, Montie. We're still three miles from the school."

"Benny, old boy, this ain't the corner," said Montie.

"I tell you it is!"

"We're near that old barn, dear fellow——"

"Oh, rot!" I growled. "Let's go on—and then we'll see who's right!"

We were just about to restart, when I thought of something.

"Look here," I said. "There's no need for us to go all round by this lane. If we can only get across the meadow on the left we shall find ourselves on the Caistowe road—and that'll cut off a clear mile. Shall we try it?"

"But this ain't the corner——"

"I tell you it is," I persisted. "Don't you remember, we spoke about it as we came along? Let's make certain, anyhow. If there's a meadow on the other side of this hedge, will you believe me then?"

"Meadows ain't very scarce, dear boy," said Tregellis-West mildly.

I grunted, and laid my bike against the hedge. I was going to have a look on the other side anyhow. A mile saved was a mile—er—saved. Nobody would dare to question that point. And a mile of trudging through thick snow was jolly well worth saving.

I was so smothered with snow that a little extra didn't make much difference. So I plunged straight through. Montie and Tommy waited for me to give my verdict; they weren't inclined to come through after me until I'd made sure.

Everything was pitch black in front; I couldn't even see the falling snowflakes, except those which fluttered just before my eyes. There seemed to be a little bank, upon which I was standing, and I cautiously felt my way down it. I slipped, and plunged into a drift of snow three feet deep.

"My hat!" I gasped. "Lucky it wasn't a ditch of water!"

I scrambled out, and went forward a few paces, trying to feel the nature of the ground beneath the snow. Even as I did so, I realised the hopelessness of my task. It would be better, I decided, to stick to the road after all.

But just as I was on the point of turning, my left foot seemed to plunge into space. I tried to throw myself backwards, for I didn't want to drop into another drift. But somehow my right foot slithered, and I fell sprawling.

And then an amazing thing happened.

Without the slightest warning I commenced rolling headlong down a steep, snowy slope. I gave a yell of amazement and alarm, and then my face plunged into the snow.

Down I went, with ever-increasing speed.

The sensation was extraordinary. I was absolutely bewildered. Just try to imagine what my feelings were. I had been positively convinced that a bare, flat meadow stretched out before me.

And now, all in a jiffy, I was dizzily slithering down a tremendously steep slope—down, down into blackness and unknown depths. In vain I tried to stay my progress. I just plunged down like a rolling barrel.

But after the first shock, the truth dawned upon me.

There could, indeed, be only one explanation. Steep slopes of this kind meant one thing—a railway cutting! Instead of entering a meadow, I had pushed through the hedge which bordered the well-known Bellton cutting! This was a very steep hollow, with the railway running at the bottom. High above on the one side stood Bellton Wood, and on the other open fields, with the lane bordering them. In spite of my startlingly swift descent, I couldn't help feeling a momentary twinge of satisfaction.

The Bellton cutting—the only cutting within six or seven miles either way—was only half a mile from St. Frank's. This told me that both Sir Montie and I had been mistaken in our bearings.

Of course, I didn't think of all this while I was making my headlong descent—there wasn't much time for thinking.

I hit a heavy stone with my head, and it didn't do it any good—my head, I mean. The stone wasn't hurt much. Nearly dazed, I made a frantic clutch, but only grabbed handfuls of snow.

The rest of the journey was swift and smooth. I tobogganed down flat on my back, vaguely hoping that there wouldn't be any nasty boulders at the bottom. If so, the results might be serious.

My fears were groundless, for when at last I came to a stop, I simply plunged into a deep drift of snow, and lay completely enveloped. I made a hole for myself, as it were, and the sides caved in on the top of me.

Although still dazed and dizzy from the effects of the blow, I had enough wits

left to flounder up into the open air. But when I tried to walk, I simply fell full length, and lay quite still.

I wasn't unconscious, you must understand. I was bruised and partially stunned. Curiously enough, the first lucid thought that came to me concerned Montie and Tommy. I wondered if they would fall into the same trap—if they would repeat my sensational descent.

The wind howled down the cutting fiercely, driving the flakes with relentless force. I couldn't see the track, for the darkness was pitchy. I knew that I was clear of the rails, however, and there was nothing to be particularly worried about. I knew well enough that I should be all right after a few minutes. It wasn't the first time that I had received a whack on the napper.

Just as I was making up my mind to scramble up again, I heard sundry gasps and gurgles above the howl of the wind. I knew in a moment that my two chums were tumbling down the steep embankment to my rescue.

Of course, they had heard my cry. I'd forgotten that for the moment. My yell had been significant of alarm and surprise, and Montie and Tommy had investigated. Finding no sign of me—as they informed me later on—they had become highly alarmed, and had searched carefully.

At first they thought that I had plunged into a snowdrift. But then Sir Montie had discovered the cutting—and the truth had been apparent in a second. He and Tommy had hastened downwards.

Although their descent was more sedate than my own, it soon resolved itself into a series of giddy slides. For the bank was of smooth grass, and the snow had rendered it extremely treacherous.

The pair, however, reached the bottom on their feet, and not on their backs. They arrived at a spot eight or ten yards away from me.

"Lend us a hand, old scouts!" I called huskily.

"Begad!"

Montie and Tommy came ploughing towards me, and they loomed up like two ghosts out of the darkness. I tried to sit up, but my head gave a sickening jump inside, and I lay back again.

"Great pip!" gasped Tommy. "Are you hurt, Benny?"

"Nothing to speak of," I replied pain-

fully. "Nearly brained—that's all! I believe I've left half my head somewhere up above——"

"Good gracious! You're frightenin' me, dear boy!" exclaimed Montie concernedly. "You must have come a horrid cropper, you know! Did you really leave half your head—I mean, are you hurt, old boy?"

"Caught my head a crack against a stone!" I said dazedly, sitting up. "Nothing to speak of—I shall be all right before long. Jolly good thing I didn't bust my brains out. This is the Bellton cutting, you know."

"I don't care about the cuttin'—I'm thinkin' about you," said Montie, in a worried voice. "You're makin' light of it, Benny boy—you are, really. I believe you're frightfully hurt, an' won't tell us!"

"He's worse than he makes out, anyhow," declared Watson anxiously.

"Bogad! Did you see that?" asked Montie abruptly.

Both Tommy and I looked in the direction he indicated. And there, down the line, we caught a glimpse of a tiny yellow light gleaming through the snowflakes. It was low down, apparently on the ground itself. Then abruptly it vanished.

"Somebody's there!" said Tommy with conviction.

"Of course, dear boy. Lights don't appear of their own accord——"

"I know what it is," I interrupted, holding my head in both hands. "One of those funny little platelayer's huts—you know, a kind of wooden shanty, placed in a recess of the embankment. You see lots of 'em when you're in the train."

"You're right, Benny—you always are right, bogad!" said Tregellis West. "I'm goin' along for help——"

"Rat!" I interjected sharply. "I'm all right, you ass!"

"Nothin' of the sort! You're only sayin' that to comfort us," declared Montie. "How do we know what injuries you've got, Benny? It's as black as soot, an' we can't see a thing. For all Tommy an' I know, you're torn an' bleedin', an' you may have a rib or two smashed in——"

"You—you idiot!" I exclaimed. "I've only got a bump on my napper!"

Sir Montie shook his head.

"I'm goin' along to see this platelayer anyhow," he said firmly. "He may have some—some brandy or somethin'.

Brandy's good for buckin' injured people up, I've heard. It's frightful stuff, of course; but medicine's nearly always frightful. Tommy, boy, see that Benny doesn't swoon while I'm away!"

And, although I yelled to Montie to stop, he plunged through the snowstorm in the direction of the spot where the light had appeared. In less than three seconds Montie had completely vanished. The darkness and the falling snow had swallowed him up.

"The dotty chump!" I growled. "No need for this silly fuss!"

"But you're hurt, Bennett——"

"Don't be an ass as well!" I snapped, rising to my feet. "Of course Montie is acting generously, but I told him not to go. Do you think I want brandy because my head's been bumped? And do you think he'll find brandy in a place like a hut? Look here, I'm going after him!"

"Rats! You've got to lie still," said Watson anxiously.

Just for a moment I was inclined to be angry, but then I grinned. Although my head was singing, it was nearly clear by this time. As I had told my chums, the damage was merely a little bump. And bumps aren't serious, anyway.

"No harm in going," I said. "We shall probably get a warm-up at a fire, and then we'll start for home. Don't grab me like that, you ass! Don't I keep telling you that I'm not hurt?"

Tommy was convinced at last, and we brushed one another down, and then stopped out along the permanent way—keeping well clear of the track, however. We didn't want to be caught by a passing train. It is quite easy to get killed in a railway cutting in a snowstorm if you're not jolly careful.

After we had covered about fifteen yards, we dimly made out a patch of light in the distance ahead. And at that very second a yell came to our ears—in Sir Montie's voice.

"Bogad! Oh! Help! Bega——"

Tregellis West's voice broke off abruptly, and, above the howl of the wind, Tommy Watson and I distinctly heard the thud of a door. The yellowish light was abruptly blotted out.

"What's happened?" gasped Tommy.

"Blessed if I know!" I replied, standing stock still. "But Montie was alarmed—I know that! There's something queer going on up there, Tommy!"

And, somehow, I felt strangely excited.

CHAPTER III.

(Related by Sir Lancelot Montgomery Tregellis-West, at Nipper's request.)

WHAT HAPPENED TO ME IN THE HANDS OF THE RAILWAY CROOKS!

DON'T overlook the fact that I'm telling this bit. Don't mix me up with Benny, I mean. He's asked me to set down my own stirring adventure as it happened. As it wasn't very stirring, this'll be a bit difficult. Still, I'm willing to try.

I'm always ready to oblige a fellow. It's a bore, of course, writing all this, but life's too short to grumble over trifles.

Well, what happened was a bit startling to begin with. You see, I had the idea in my head that poor old Benny was bowled over. I call him Benny because it's easier. But I knew, of course, that he was really Nipper; he'd let Tommy and me into that secret some little time before.

Taking no notice of his protests, I plunged off through the snow. I wanted to get help. A platelayer didn't seem very promising, I'll admit, but there was nobody else to go to. Exactly why a platelayer should be in the Bellton cutting at that time of night didn't strike me.

I just hurried along, searching for the hut.

The light seemed to have vanished, but after a while I came upon a little shed—just as Benny had described. It was tucked away in a little dug-out place, the back part of the roof being nearly flush with the cut-out embankment. And then I saw that a heavy piece of sacking was nailed over the tiny window.

"Begad! That piece of stuff must have blown down," I told myself. "That's why the light only appeared for a moment. Rather queer that the sackin' should be outside, but there's no tellin' what these railway fellows will get up to!"

I could faintly see a tiny chink of yellow light, and I knew, at least, that the hut was occupied. So I stumbled forward and knocked at the door. The snow was coming down tremendously, and blowing into my face in great gusts.

"Come in!" exclaimed a gruff voice.

I opened the door after a bit of fumbling, and expected to see a cheerful-looking individual with whiskers round

his chin, and an old clay pipe sticking out of his mouth. I expected to see a railway worker, attired in rough clothing, and with a red choker round his neck. I'm sure I don't know why these things are called chokers. It's ridiculous. People don't choke themselves.

I've told you what I expected to see.

But I saw something quite different—and I was surprised.

For, upon pushing open the door, a whiff of tobacco smoke puffed into my face. I'm not a smoker, or a silly ass of that sort, but I sniffed in a moment that this wasn't shag smoke, but the aroma of a good cigar.

Platelayers don't smoke cigars usually. They may do so at Christmas-time, or on their birthdays, but I don't suppose they'd be real cigars at all—they'd smell frightful.

But we're not talking about smells, are we?

This cigar-smoke wafted into my face, and at the same time I saw two well-dressed men sitting against an old box. On the box stood a lantern, and it shed a fairly bright light. The snowflakes came whirling past me as I stood in the doorway, and fluttered leisurely into every corner of the hut.

"Begad!" I exclaimed in astonishment.

It was queer to find these two men here. Their faces were grim, and I knew at the first glance that they were in no way connected with the railway. How could they be? Their attitude, too, startled me.

Both men jumped up angrily.

"What are you doing here, boy?" snapped one of them.

"I—that is——"

I paused, being quite unable to form my words at the moment. And the man who had spoken strode across and grabbed my shoulder. I don't believe I am particularly brilliant. Benny and Tommy always say that I'm half asleep. But that's a shocking libel. I'm not. And my brain worked overtime just then.

Who were these men, and why were they here? The answer came to me in a flash. It hit me with a bang, so to speak. They were crooks—as Farman would put it. They were criminals of some sort!

And instinctively I let out a startled yell. The man was hurting my arm a bit, and the look in his eyes didn't make me feel at home. I shouted out for help,

having a vague idea that my chums would rush along to the rescue.

"Confound you, boy!" snapped the man harshly.

He jerked me into the hut, and kicked the door to with a slam. Then he put his back to it, and pushed me over to the far side of the hut. This was only a few feet away, of course, for the shanty wasn't much bigger than a respectable fowl-house.

"Now, youngster, where the thunder did you spring from?" demanded the man, taking the cigar from his lips, and glaring at me. "What are you doing in this railway cutting? You'd better answer me truthfully."

"Lyin' isn't a habit of mine," I said quietly. "An', if it comes to that, what are you doin' in this railway cuttin'? That's a question two can ask, begad! It seems that we're all trespassin' on the railway's property——"

"You young rascal!" cut in the other man. "We don't want any of your infernal cheek. Get the truth out of him, Bradford. We can't waste much time on this kid. He's a confounded nuisance!"

"You're very flatterin'——"

"Come, tell me the truth!" said Bradford curtly.

I didn't answer hurriedly. Although the situation was tense, I remained calm. Bennett has often said that I'm always calm, that nothing can ruffle my urbane serenity, as he picturesquely puts it. But that's rot. I can remember getting into frightful tempers now and again. I need a considerable amount of working up, I'll admit.

Just now I thought quickly. These men had been surprised at my abrupt entry. They had been taken off their guard. I was quite sure they had no right there—not so much right as I had myself. There was some wicked game afoot.

If I told them that I had two chums within call, they would almost certainly venture out and make Bennett and Watson prisoners, too. That wouldn't do at all. But if I didn't mention them, they would probably investigate on their own account—and might be able to rescue me.

I had undying faith in Bennett. Being really Nipper, the assistant of Mr. Nelson Lee, the famous detective, he was naturally as cute as anything. He must have heard my shout, and he would be warned by it. Watson, perhaps, would want to

dash forward, Watson being an impulsive bounder.

But Bennett (I always called him Bennett) would act more cautiously. He'd guess things. He'd investigate quietly. Therefore, it was better for me to say as little as I could. It's always a bad habit to open one's mouth too wide.

"You want me to tell you the truth?" I said easily. "I don't see that I'm called upon to say anythin'. It's like your shockin' cheek to order me about, begad! Do you belong to the railway? Have you any authority——"

The man swore angrily.

"You young hound!" he rapped out. "I have only got a minute to waste, so you'd better tell the truth before I force it out of you. Now be quick about it—and remember that we shall know if you try any falsehoods——"

"There's nothin' much to tell," I said. "I was cyclin' from Helmford to St. Frank's—I belong to St. Frank's, as you'll see by my cap. Then the snow-storm came on, an' then I tumbled down the embankment. That's all!"

"How did you know this hut was occupied?"

"Why, I saw a light——"

"That's when the sacking blew down, Bradford," said the other man. "We needn't trouble ourselves about this youngster. Throw him on those sacks in that corner until the job's finished." He glanced at his watch. "Man alive! The time's getting on!"

"Don't you get worried, Chambers," said the other man. "This boy has come along at a confoundedly awkward time. But I don't suppose there's any real harm done. Oh!" He paused, and turned to me. "Was there anybody else with you?" he said sharply.

I tried to look sarcastic.

"Begad! Do you think I should leave a pal out in the snow?" I asked.

"Was there anybody else with you?" repeatedly the man harshly.

"No," I replied calmly. "I came to the hut quite by myself."

I was a little bit shocked at my own reply. But it wasn't a whopper, was it? I did come to the platelayer's hut alone—nobody could dispute that. It wasn't necessary for me to say that I had left Tommy and Benny down the cutting. Of course, if the man had put his question differently—if he had asked me if any other fellow had tumbled down the cut—

bankment—I should have been compelled to give a positive answer. Or I could have said nothing at all; but that would have been just as bad.

As it was, I hoodwinked the rascals.

"He's telling the truth," said Chambers shortly.

"May I go now—"

"No, you may not!" snapped Bradford. "Get over into that corner, and keep your tongue still. Do you hear me? We haven't any time to waste on you, and you've only got yourself to blame for what's happened. That's right."

I walked over to the corner. What else could I do? To escape was out of the question. I couldn't fight two big men single-handed, and if I had offered resistance, they would probably have bound me with ropes, or something appalling like that. It was wisdom on my part to obey without question.

The hut was cold, and I was feeling chilly myself. You can't expect much warmth to come from a hand-lantern. My two captors were both clothed in heavy coats, and seemed quite comfortable.

The pile of sacks were fairly dry, and I made myself as comfortable as possible. The corner was farthest from the door and the window, and I realised that my position was awkward.

The wind whistled round the hut shrilly. It seemed to rise to a dull roar, finally causing the platelayer's hut to shiver and shake. The very ground quivered. And then I came to the conclusion that a train had just thundered past.

I saw Bradford nod.

"That's the seven-ten," he remarked. "We've got quite a decent amount of time, Chambers. The chief will be along presently, and then we can go into final details. I thought it was him when this infernal schoolboy butted in."

The chief! Do you know, I felt horribly helpless. It was as plain as the nose on my face—and that's plain enough, goodness knows!—that a regular gang of scoundrels were at work.

The reason for my being kept a prisoner was palpable. If the men had allowed me to go, I should have given the alarm, naturally. And all their plans would have been ruined. I wasn't nervous. I didn't think for a moment that they meant to do me any harm. But

I was kept in the hut so that their plans would not be ruined.

But what of Nipper and Tommy Watson?

Wouldn't they put in an appearance soon?

I hoped so, and yet I didn't. I had a feeling that they would only make matters worse. But there was no telling how the affair would finish up. So I tried to hear what my two captors were talking about. There was, at least, a slight possibility of escape—and it would be ripping if I could take some valuable information away with me.

"Just an hour before the mail comes along," I heard Chambers say in a low voice. "Considering everything, Bradford, we got here in good time. We shall have to go along the cutting as soon as the chief arrives. We've got to mark the exact spot, so that there'll be no blunder when the 8.15 comes along."

"It will be a ticklish business," remarked Bradford thoughtfully, pulling a pipe out of his pocket and filling it. "When we go out we shall have to leave this confounded boy here. We can't let him get away until the affair's all over, Chambers. It won't matter then. It's a good thing there's a stout fastening on the door."

I listened grimly, and with growing excitement. The rascals were going to leave me alone! If my chums were on the watch, they would be able to rescue me— But I didn't allow my hopes to run too high. That's a bad mistake. Hopes aren't always fulfilled, and then things seem a lot worse.

"Now, let's get the thing clear," said Chambers. "The Duke and Earl Stornedale are in the last coach of the train—in a first-class compartment, the second from the rear. We mustn't make any mistake about that, Bradford."

"My dear man, we can't make a mistake," said the other. "The only hitch that might occur concerns the hold-up itself. If this snow doesn't let-up a bit, the driver won't see the red light. And that'll mess things up properly."

"We shall have to take the chance, of course. Personally, I think the trick will work smoothly," said Chambers. "Having stopped the train, we shall have to get to work sharply. The duke and the earl have got to be collared before they can guess things. I've got an idea that they'll prove easy fish to land."

They'll have the 'swag' with them, of course—and the job's done."

Bradford nodded.

"Quite a nice little haul," he said, rubbing his hands together. "Twenty-five thousand, roughly. By George! It's worth a bit of risk, Chambers!"

"And we're going to succeed!" said the other grimly.

I was thrilling inwardly. The man believed, of course, that their scoundrelly scheme was going to succeed. Somehow, I held a different view. The fact that Bennett and Watson hadn't made any sign or appearance, was promising. They had scented danger, and were lying low. It was even possible that they were listening outside. Not that they could have heard much with the wind howling.

These men—with some others, probably—intended to hold up the 8.15 mail train. It was a deliberately planned affair. Two noblemen were in a first-class compartment, and the object of the hold-up was to gain possession of some "swag." That's the word criminals use for stolen property, I believe.

The weather was in the villains' favour, really. They were going to stop the train by means of a red light, and then commit the robbery. It reminded me of a tale I once read about some frightful villains in America.

It was a bit startling that such things could happen in England—in peaceful Sussex.

I wondered if I could do anything. But what was the good of wondering? These men wouldn't hesitate at any violence if I tried any tricks. Although desperate, I remained calm, and told myself that it would be better to lie low.

By a sheer accident—a chance—I had got to know of the whole plot. And yet I could do nothing!

I think the men had an idea that I couldn't hear their words. They were talking in very low voices, and now and again I did miss a sentence or two. But I knew all that was necessary.

The 8.15 mail was to be held-up and robbed!

At the best, there was only myself and two other schoolboys to frustrate the scoundrels. I began to get worried. Why hadn't my chums done something? And even as I was thinking that way, Chambers glanced sharply at the door. Another train had just thundered by.

"Somebody coming!" he said, rising. "The chief, I expect!"

My heart jumped, for I had a suspicion that Bennett and Tommy—

The door opened suddenly, and a big man entered—a man in a thick overcoat, with the collar turned right up. He was smothered in snow from head to foot.

"You're here, then?" he said gruffly. "This infernal snow—Hullo, who the thunder is this kid?"

He glared at me in anger and surprise.

"Oh, you needn't worry about him, chief," said Bradford. "He's a St. Frank's youngster—slipped down the embankment by mistake; it seems. We've told him to sit there and keep quiet."

The newcomer grunted.

"He'd better keep quiet, that's all," he said gruffly. "I didn't bargain to have a boy interfering in this job. When it's all over, we'll let him go, of course—but not until then."

I didn't say anything. These men were in no mood to talk with me. It was quiet clear, from the chief's attitude, that he had seen nothing of Nipper and Watson. Where the merry dickens were they?

I was greatly worried.

This was silly of me—for I needn't have been worried at all. My two chums weren't so very far off, if I had only known!

CHAPTER IV.

(Nipper relates the narrative from this point.)

IN WHICH TOMMY AND I SEARCH FOR SIR MONTIE AND FIND SOMEBODY ELSE—MONTIE IS UNEARTHED, HOWEVER, AND I DASH OFF FOR NELSON LEE.

MONTIE has set down what happened to him in the old plate-layer's hut, just to make things nice and clear.

It's my job, now, to continue the yarn from the point where I broke off. Tommy Watson and I had heard Montie yell for help. We didn't know what had happened, but we guessed that something queer was going on.

Tregellis-West wasn't the chap to shout for help unless something very much out of the ordinary had taken place. And both Tommy and I were

strangely excited. Watson, in fact, attempted to dash off.

"Let's rush to his rescue——"

"Hold on, old son," I interrupted, my head clearing rapidly. "Montie went to fetch help for me, didn't he? Well, I'm as right as rain now, except for a young mountain on the back of my head. That's nothing to worry over."

"But—but Montie's in danger——"

"If he is, we can help him more by keeping calm," I said grimly. "We mustn't act in a hurry, Tommy. The best thing we can do is to creep forward cautiously, and see what the trouble is."

"Then, for goodness' sake, come on!" urged Watson.

We lost no time in fighting our way through the snow. The downfall had not diminished in the least, for the flakes were descending as thickly as ever. The snow lay deep at our feet, and we made no noise as we stumbled forward. The wind, dead in our faces, whirled down the cutting with biting force.

"Keep this side, Tommy," I said, pulling his arm. "You don't want to go blundering over the rails, you know. A train might come shooting down at any minute."

"Keep your hair on," growled Watson. "I'm not such a silly ass as all that. But, I say, I can't see anything of a giddy platelayer's hut. I think we must have been mistaken, Benny. Perhaps old Montie's tumbled into a snow-drift——"

"Don't jaw!" I interjected quickly. "It's my idea that there's something wrong afoot. The guv'nor and I have often had to deal with railway mysteries. There are all sorts of crooks about, you know."

"My hat, you don't think——"

"I don't know what I think—yet!" I replied. "Let's find this hut, first."

As I was speaking, I discerned a dull patch quite near by. After another six or seven feet, both Tommy and I made out a small lean-to shed, with the front edge of the roof only about six feet high.

A dim glimmer of light was coming from the little window, through a chink in a piece of cloth which seemed to be nailed over the opening. I caught hold of Tommy's arm, and dragged him round the angle of the building until we arrived at the rear.

"Listen," I muttered tensely.

From within came a dull murmur of

voices. Sir Montie's was distinguishable among them. Only now and again, as the voices were raised, was it possible to understand any of the spoken words.

"You young hound!" I heard somebody say harshly. "I've only got a minute to waste—he quick about it—try any falsehoods——"

Montie said something, but I couldn't tell what. And, after that one sentence, I couldn't understand the man's words, either. But I could easily tell that there were two men with Montie.

"Did you hear?" I whispered in Tommy's ear.

"Yes. What the dickens does it mean?"

"I don't know. But Montie's in a hole—that's certain," I replied. "That chap didn't speak as though he were a platelayer, did he? This is jolly fishy, Tommy. 'I'm blessed if I know what to do.'"

We crouched there in the snow, too excited to feel cold, and the flakes whirled about us ceaselessly.

"Can't we bust in and rescue him?" asked Watson tensely.

"My dear chap, what's the good of that?" I asked. "There are two men in there, and we should be collared in no time. No sense in running our heads into a noose. One of the rotters may go out before long, and then we can get busy. I'd like to know what's going on inside, though!"

"What about the window?"

"That's what I was thinking of," I said. "You stay here while I creep round——"

"Rats! I want to see, too——"

"If there's anything to see, I'll come and tell you," I put in. "We don't want to give ourselves away, do we? We may be right off the track, Tommy—there may be nothing wrong at all. But I'm suspicious, and I want to make sure."

"Right-ho. Don't be long."

I crept away round the angle of the little structure, and approached the window. A piece of heavy sacking was fastened right over it. By pushing it aside, I was just able to see the glass. The window itself was tiny, and too small for any human being to get through. And the glass was so grimy with dirt—on the inside—that I could only see the dull glare of the lamp. To distinguish the figures of the men within was impossible.

Realising this, I pushed the sacking back. It wasn't any good risking things by remaining in that position. And the voices of the men were not so distinct here as they had been round at the back.

So I slipped round again. It was more sheltered at the rear, for the cut-out portion of the embankment was only about two-feet away from the rough woodwork of the hut, thus forming a kind of passage. The wind roared over the top, and Tommy and I didn't receive the full brunt of it.

"Nothing doing!" I murmured. "We'd better stay here a bit, old son, and decide upon a plan of action."

Watson was greatly worried.

"Why not bust open the door——"

"It's no good being ram-headed like that," I interrupted irritably. "One of those chaps called Montie a young hound, and Montie's being kept a prisoner. That tells us, beyond doubt, that something's radically wrong."

"The rotters may be German spies," suggested Tommy excitedly. "They're going to tear up the railway lines——"

"Oh, my hat!" I groaned. "Be sensible, for goodness' sake!"

"Well, what do you suggest?"

"I'm not going to be ass enough to suggest anything," I replied. "Guessing's always a silly game, Tommy. So far as I can see, the best thing for us to do is to wait here and see how things develop. We shall get our chance later on, I'll bet."

"And what about Montie?"

"I don't suppose he'll come to any real harm," I went on. "He's told the rotters nothing about you and I, that's evident. They'd have been out searching for us if he'd let the cat out of the bag. But Montie's keen, and he's kept mum."

As it happened, we didn't have to wait so very long.

The snow had thinned a trifle, for the flakes were not coming down in such clouds. The storm, apparently, had done its worst. Fully four inches of snow had fallen; but there was much more than this in the cutting, for it had driven down with greater force at this point.

From the spot where Tommy and I were standing we could see right down the cutting. Of course, we couldn't really see a thing, for the darkness was too dense. But we should have been able

to see otherwise. I don't know whether that's clear, but I hope so.

We heard a train thundering down the gradient—for the line was fairly steep just here. We both watched with interest, there being nothing else to do. The lights of the train soon became visible, and it went roaring past like a flash, the windows of the carriages being one long blur.

And just then I grabbed Tommy, and dragged him down.

Through the wind-driven snowflakes I had seen the figure of a man trudging along the permanent way—or, rather, at the edge of it. He was quite near the hut, and the lights of the train had revealed his presence.

"Great pip! What's the matter?" gasped Tommy, as he sprawled in the snow.

"Ses-h!" I breathed. "There's another man coming along!"

"Oh, corks!"

We crouched down. The train had disappeared into the black void of the cutting, and everything was pitchy. It was quite on the cards that the man I had seen was a railway worker. But the next moment the matter was settled.

For we heard the door open, and then close. The newcomer had entered the hut! We heard him talking, but were only able to catch a few stray words which meant little or nothing.

After five minutes had elapsed there came the sound of movements. The door was opened once again, and I ventured to peep round. I had to be very careful, for the lantern had been carried outside. I saw the backs of three men, and then heard a dull thud.

"That'll be all right!" a gruff voice exclaimed. "The youngster can't get out of the window, and he'll be safe enough in here. We sha'n't be gone more than ten minutes, anyhow. It's a confounded nuisance this kid butting in just now!"

The men walked down the cutting, carrying the lamp with them, and I clenched my fists with excitement.

Montie had been left within the shed—alone! And the three men were going off somewhere down the line. They would be away for about ten minutes. Why, it was easy. We should be able to rescue Montie without the slightest difficulty!

In a very few seconds the three dim figures had been swallowed up in the gloom. The swaying lantern was just

visible; but this, too, vanished. I gripped Tom's arm tightly.

"Ripping!" I exclaimed. "This is where we come in, my son!"

"We'd better be quick about it!" exclaimed Watson. "Those rotters will be back before long——"

"We've got ten minutes! Heaps of time!" I interrupted crisply.

We stumbled round to the front, and I felt over the door. It was too dark to see the fastening. But I soon found that a heavy wooden bar was placed across the face of it, resting in two deep slots. It was a primitive arrangement, of course, but most effective. Montie, inside, could not possibly have escaped without exterior help.

That help was now at hand.

I lifted the bar from its slots, laid it down handy, and then pushed the door open. It was provided with a rough latch as well, but this was stuck and out of use. The hut was pitchy dark within.

"You there, Montie?" I asked softly.

"Begad!" There was a movement from within. "Benny boy, you're the deliverer! I shall have to shake your hand—I shall really! I knew you'd come along sooner or later."

"Are you bound up?"

"No, dear fellow," said Sir Montie calmly. "The frightful ruffians didn't know that you were near by, you see, an' they were rather careless. But I couldn't have escaped without your help. Oh, how's your head gettin' on?"

"My head? Oh, that bump!" I exclaimed. "My dear chap, I'd forgotten it. I want to know why those men made you a prisoner here?"

Tregellis-West loomed up dimly in the doorway.

"It's simple, Benny," he replied. "They're goin' to hold up the mail!"

"Hold up the mail!" gasped Tommy excitedly.

"Exactly! An' they're goin' to commit a robbery——"

"By Jingo!" I exclaimed. "I knew there was something wrong!"

"It's an appallin' business, dear chaps," said Montie earnestly. "Those three thievin' rogues mean to stop the 8.15 mail, by showin' a red light. An' then they're goin' to collar two noblemen from a first-class compartment——"

"Two noblemen!"

"A duke and an earl," explained Montie calmly.

"Great Scott!"

"It's serious, dear Benny. An' there's 'swag,' too," went on my elegant chum. "Somethin' like twenty thousand pounds——"

"Great pip!" gasped Tommy Watson. "What the dickens are we going to do? We can't fight three hulking great men! And there's not time to get to the station to have the train warned by telegraph!"

"Hold on a minute!" I said tensely. "Let me think."

I thought for about twenty seconds and then snapped my fingers.

"Now, Montie," I said quickly, "have you told us everything?"

"Everythin' that matters," replied Tregellis-West. "Those three men are a gang, you know. One of 'em's called 'the Chief.' They seem to know exactly where these two noblemen are situated in the train, an' they're goin' to stop the express an' collar the loot before any alarm can be given. It's all cut an' dried. They were discussin' it, an' I heard nearly everythin'. They've just gone to mark the exact spot where they're to stand. I expect they'll come back here to put on masks, or somethin' like that."

I glanced at my watch.

"Quarter to eight!" I exclaimed, having read the time easily on the luminous dial. "That gives us just half an hour to do things."

"Why, it'll take twenty minutes to get to the station!"

"My dear old Tommy, I'm not going to the station," I interjected. "This is a job for the guv'nor himself. Nelson Lee will know what to do——"

"But, pardon me, dear boy, I'm rather curious," said Montie languidly. "I hate havin' to interrupt, you know. But how do you propose to get to St. Frank's an' back before the mail-train comes along?"

"I don't propose anything of the sort," I replied. "If you use your brain, Montie, you'd remember something."

"That's the trouble, Benny. My brain's sluggish, you know——"

"Rot! Didn't old Alvy tell us that he was going to Dr. Brett's this evening? At least, he told me, and I told you. Nelson Lee is at the doctor's now, and I can reach the house within ten minutes."

"Don't be an ass, Bennett! You can't!" declared Watson. "Why, it's a couple of miles round to the Caistowe Road—right round by the sharp bend and the bridge!"

"You ass! You seem to be jolly dull this evening—the pair of you!" I snapped. "We're in the Bellton cutting, don't forget. If I shin up the opposite embankment, and cross a ploughed field, I shall be on the Caistowe Road at once. And Dr. Brett's house is within two hundred yards!"

"Begad! You're right!" exclaimed Sir Montie. "It's quite a habit of yours to be right, dear fellow. But why do you keep on talkin' about yourself? Ain't Tommy an' I comin' with you?"

"No; you've got to remain here."

"Look here! That's sheer rot——"

"My goodness, we shall waste all the time in jawing!" I cut in. "But these things have got to be planned, or we shall be all muddled up. Don't you see, Montie, what would happen if you came with me? Those rotters are coming back in a few minutes' time, and if you weren't in this hut they'd know that the alarm was given at once."

"So they would!" said Sir Montie mildly. "Well, I'm bothered!"

"So the best thing you can do is to hop inside again, and we'll shove the prop in position," I went on. "You won't come to any harm, Montie, and we stand a chance of collaring these train-robbers red-handed. Just think of the glory for us! Tommy will remain at the back of the hut, on the watch."

"It's rotten!" declared Watson. "I'm shivering with cold as it is. But I suppose you're right, Bennett. I'm game, anyhow."

"Good!"

There was no time to waste—we had wasted a few precious minutes already—and Montie retired into the blackness of the hut without another word. I shoved the prop into position, and had another two words with Tommy, warning him not to be too venturesome.

And then, with a deep breath, I ran across the permanent way, reached the other embankment, and commenced scrambling up the slippery bank with desperate energy.

CHAPTER V.

IN WHICH NELSON LEE ACTS PROMPTLY—
WITH ASTOUNDING RESULTS.

I DIDN'T expect to get to the top of the embankment easily, but somehow I flew up, and didn't slip once. I knew that I was right in my calculations. Previously, when on the way

home from Helmford, I had lost my bearings; but the Bellton cutting was well known to me, and also the exact nature of the surrounding country.

I found myself at the very edge of the field I had mentioned to my chums. This was all the better, for the long, straight hedge would serve as an excellent guide on the return journey.

I commenced the run across the field. This wasn't so easy as it sounds. A fresh downfall of snow was in progress, and it was whirling in dense masses. The ground was smothered, and at best the surface was frozen earth of the roughest description.

Consequently I stumbled continually, and came a cropper twice in succession. After that I realised that the old maxim—"more haste, less speed"—was suitable for the occasion. So I slowed down to a more sedate trot.

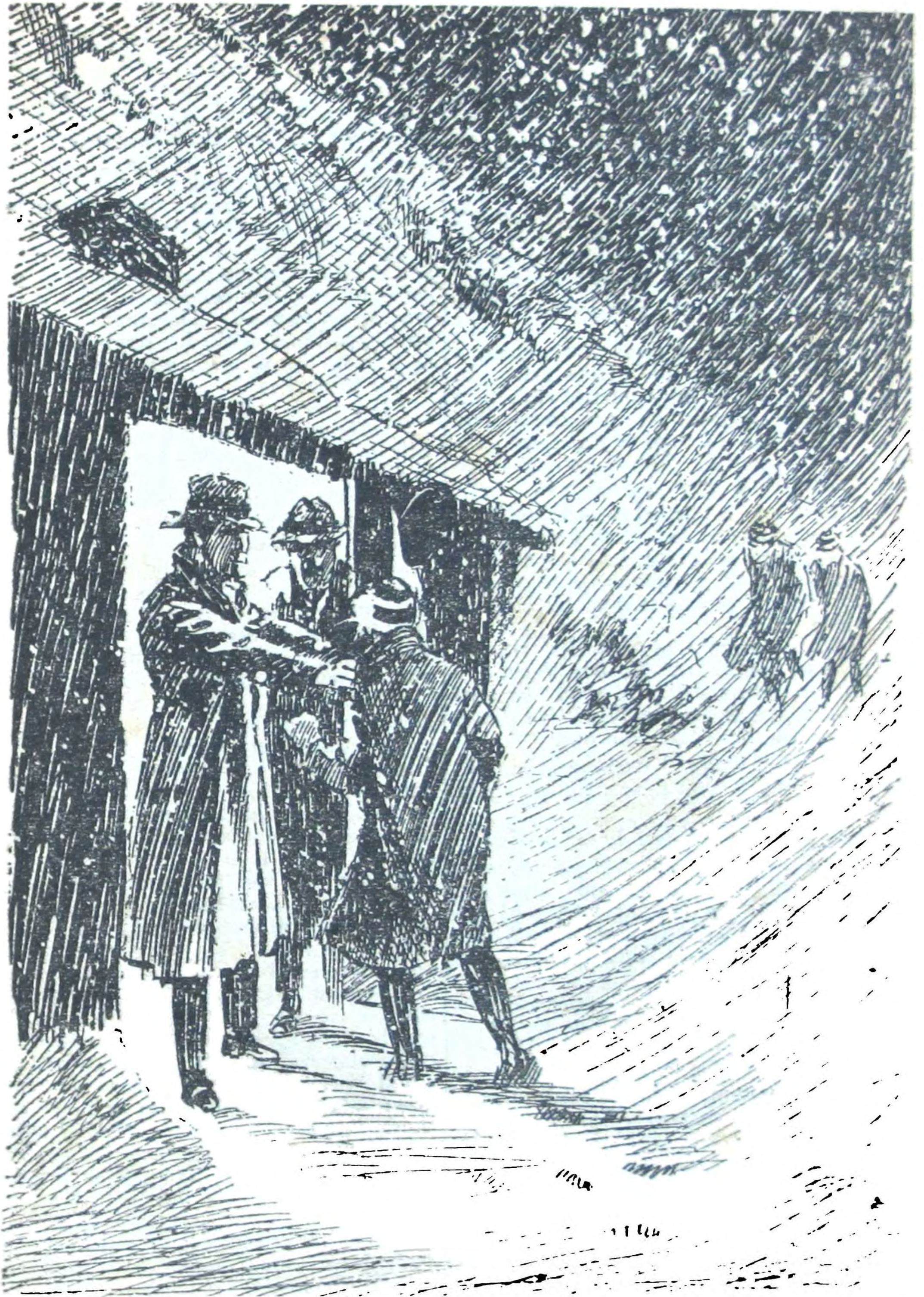
I was thinking deeply as I progressed. By leaving Montie still in the hut, the train-robbers would know nothing of our efforts. They would naturally assume that everything was going smoothly. At the last moment, however, Nelson Lee and Dr. Brett and I would plunge down to the attack. This was what I wanted, anyhow.

As Montie mentioned in his bit, both he and Tommy knew the gov'nor's real identity—and mine, too. They were my very special chums, and the gov'nor had taken them into his confidence.

Both Tommy and Montie knew that I wasn't Dick Bennett at all, that the name was merely an invention, and that I was the one and only Nipper. They also were aware that "Mr. Alvington," the House-master of the Ancient House, was Mr. Nelson Lee, my esteemed gov'nor.

This state of affairs was very satisfactory. With Tommy and Montie, at least, I could always be my own self.

It was only recently that the gov'nor had let them into the secret. They had sworn to respect the confidence, of course, and had been hugely delighted. My position at St. Frank's was greatly improved. It wasn't necessary for me to act a part continually. When I was alone with my chums I could be Nipper, and nobody else. Tregellis-West and Watson had entered into the spirit of the thing, and they fully appreciated the importance of keeping mum. They were aware that if the Fu Chang Tong succeeded in locating the gov'nor and me we should probably leave this world by an exceedingly rapid and most uncomfortable exit.



"Both men jumped up angrily . . . and the man who had spoken strode across and grasped me by the shoulder." — (See page 9.)

Under the existing circumstances, therefore, the best thing to be done was to fetch Nelson Lee down to the cutting. Dr. Brett was a youngish man, with plenty of strength. He'd give a helping hand in a scrap, and would be only too willing to. He and the guv'nor were very friendly, but, of course, Dr. Brett didn't know our secret.

I calculated the time, and felt fairly certain that Nelson Lee would be still at the doctor's. He wouldn't leave before nine, at least; and it wasn't eight yet. But, in any case, it would be a close shave.

At last, after what seemed an hour, I arrived at the other side of the field. In exact truth, I had only been away from Tommy and Montie six minutes. The lane, which was the road to Caistowe, was quiet and deserted. The snow lay thick and undisturbed upon its surface.

I noticed that a big oak-tree—a solitary one—grew just against the gap in the hedge through which I had passed. It was just as well to memorise the positions. Then I pelted down the lane at full speed.

I passed a couple of cottages, then a big house, and Dr. Brett's residence loomed up ahead. I was about to hurl myself through the gateway when I dimly saw a figure about to come out.

"Steady! Steady!" exclaimed a well-known voice. "You mustn't rush about like this—"

"Guv'nor!" I panted breathlessly.

"Upon my soul, it's Nipper!" said Nelson Lee, catching me by the shoulders. "It is just as well that we are alone. What's the matter, young 'un? Why are you out at this time in the evening?"

"There's something happened!" I gasped. "Some criminals are going to hold up the mail-train in the cutting—"

Nelson Lee shook me.

"Steady, young 'un!" he said quietly. "Let's hear the story—"

"There's no time, sir!" I interjected. "We must rush back at once!"

"My dear boy, you must tell me what has happened," persisted the guv'nor. "You can explain everything within one minute, and that minute will be well spent. Come, speak calmly and quickly."

Nelson Lee's cool tone brought me to my senses, and I told him in a few words how Tommy and Montie and I had plunged into the cutting by accident.

And then, in quick sentences, I related the story of the proposed hold-up.

"It's just eight o'clock," I finished up, looking at my watch. "By Jupiter, I didn't lose much time in getting here! What's to be done, guv'nor? The train comes by in less than a quarter of an hour."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"We have ample time," he said calmly. "Your story is most convincing, Nipper. The words which Montie overheard were strikingly significant. We can come to no other conclusion than the one you have named. The mail-train is to be stopped and robbed. We have no time to inform the police, and so we must act as we think best."

"Dr. Brett will help—"

"Of course!" cut in the guv'nor. "He will be only too eager, I am sure. I left him rather early this evening, as he is making up some medicines. And there is Thompson, Brett's chauffeur. He must come along, too."

The guv'nor bade me wait at the gateway. He ran swiftly up the short drive, and entered the house without knocking. Within thirty seconds he was back, Dr. Brett and Thompson coming after him, pulling on their coats as they did so.

"But I don't quite understand," the doctor was saying.

"I can explain as we go along," said Lee urgently. "I assure you, doctor, I am not bringing you out on a fool's errand. These junior boys, it seems, have hit upon a plot to hold up the mail-train."

As we ran the guv'nor explained the situation. I was feeling pleased, for I knew that we should arrive back in the cutting in time. We were running fast, and soon reached the oak-tree.

Plunging through the hedge, we started across the ploughed field. No words were spoken during this strenuous piece of running. At last, breathless, we stood at the top of the steep slope leading down into the cutting. Even as we stood there, we saw the weak, yellowish light of a lantern, swinging jerkily, far down on the permanent way. After the fresh burst of snow, the flakes had thinned again.

"They're right down the cutting, sir," I exclaimed eagerly. "The plate-layer's hut is just below us."

"We will go down at once, Bennett," said the guv'nor.

This embankment was not so steep as the opposite one, and we made a rapid

but easy descent. Dr. Brett and his man were greatly excited, but refrained from asking questions.

Just as we reached the track, a fast goods train swept by, and we were obliged to wait a few seconds. Then we crossed the double set of rails and found ourselves within twenty feet of the plate-layer's hut.

The lantern was still blinking dimly up the cutting.

We all realised, however, that one or two of the train robbers might be in the shed. We therefore advanced very cautiously. Just as we were getting near a dim figure loomed up, and ran to meet us.

It was Tommy Watson.

"That you, Benny?" he asked breathlessly. "My only aunt! I thought you wouldn't get back in time. Montie's still a prisoner——"

"What of the men, Watson?" asked Nelson Lee quickly.

"They've gone, sir."

"Gone!"

"Down the line, sir," explained Watson. "I've been watching from behind the hut, and two or three minutes after Bennett had gone the fellows came back."

"Well?" I put in eagerly.

"I couldn't see what they did, of course," said Tommy. "But they stopped inside the shed for three or four minutes. They didn't guess anything! Finding Montie in there, they thought that everything was O.K. And then they came out again, carrying a red lantern."

"They fastened Tregellis-West inside again?" asked Lee.

"Yes, sir."

"You mentioned a red light, Watson——"

"That's right, sir. It was red when they came out of the hut, but then they switched it to white," explained Tommy. "They've gone to take up their positions. Two of 'em are waiting a few hundred yards down, I believe——"

"You believe, Watson? Aren't you sure?"

"Not quite, sir——"

"Possibly Tregellis-West will be able to give us more definite information," went on the gov'nor crisply. "Since the men have gone to take up their positions, there is no fear of their returning. But please talk in whispers only, as I am doing. This wind may carry our voices."

"The train's due in about two minutes, sir," I said, glancing down the line.

"We'd better not waste any time, Mr. Alvington," put in Dr. Brett anxiously.

"My dear Brett, quite a lot can be accomplished within the space of two minutes," replied Nelson Lee smoothly. "And you must remember the weather. It is highly improbable that the mail train will arrive at this spot within schedule. I calculate that we have fully five minutes' grace."

The gov'nor was as cool as a cucumber. It was necessary, of course, for him to keep up his character of "Mr. Alvington,"—for Dr. Brett was not in the secret. But this was easy enough. Both the gov'nor and I were quite at home in our new identities.

We ploughed our way towards the hut, and quickly removed the wooden bar. Sir Montie walked out serenely, and I dimly saw him adjusting his pince-nez with all his customary sang froid.

"Rescue has come!" he said calmly. "Do you know, dear boys, I knew that I shouldn't be kept a prisoner long. Have you captured the frightful scoundrels? Oh, is that you, Mr. Alvin'ton?"

"It is, West," replied Nelson Lee. "Watson tells me that these would-be train robbers have gone down the line to take up their positions. Can you tell me what those positions are? It will be far better if we can have exact details."

"By what I could hear, sir, there's another man waitin' at the arranged spot," said Montie. "Three of them are goin' to spring on the train, while the other holds it up with a red light. But as the victims are in the last coach, the fellow with the light will be a good distance from the other three."

"I quite understand you, West," said Lee. "But if you can tell me the precise spot——"

"I can, sir."

"Then, my dear boy, do so! There is no time to waste."

"There's a telegraph post just behind this hut, sir," said Montie, still speaking with exasperating leisure. "The man with the light is to be just opposite the third post from here, not countin' this one. An' the three hold-up men are to crouch just opposite the fifth post."

"Exactly," said Nelson Lee. "The method is simple. When the train pulls

up, the engine will be near the third post down the cutting, while the rear coach will come, approximately, opposite the fifth. Possibly there is a little miscalculation, but that cannot be helped."

"What's to be done, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"I think we must ignore the man with the lamp," replied the gov'nor. "The chief thing is to capture the other three. This we must do by mounting the embankment, passing along in silence, and then springing down upon the rascals. In this way they will be caught in the rear——"

"My hat! The train's coming!" gasped Tommy Watson abruptly.

Far away the laborious puffing of a locomotive could be heard. The mail train was proceeding up the gradient—and was, therefore, travelling at a fairly slow speed. It was for this reason, I expect, that the rotters had chosen the cutting. It would have been a bit of a job to stop an express going at sixty miles an hour. The mail, at this spot, would hardly be going thirty.

As Tommy spoke, we saw, just along the permanent way, a red light waving to and fro monotonously. Actually, we only saw the reflection, for the face of the lamp was away from us.

"Come!" said Nelson Lee quickly. "I reply upon you, Brett, to do your utmost. Your man will give a good account of himself, I'm sure——"

"You bet, sir!" declared Thompson excitedly.

"Begad! What about us?" asked Montie mildly.

"You boys had better remain in the background until the first onslaught is over," replied Lee, as we scrambled up the embankment. "There may be danger, and I can't allow you to take such risks."

"Oh, I say——" began Tommy.

"Shut up, ass!" I whispered. "You don't think we're going to take any notice, do you? When the times comes we'll pile in with the others—don't you make any giddy mistake!"

We were soon hurrying silently along. The snow deadened our movements completely, and the night was so black that our forms were invisible. There was little fear of our presence being noticed before the moment of attack.

The whole thing was going splendidly. We passed the man with the lantern,

and saw that he was now waving the red light frantically. The head-lights of the mail train were in view. Several shrill blasts from its whistle sounded, proving that the warning light had been seen. At the same time the engine ceased to labour.

It was a close shave, all things considered.

The mail, with brakes grinding, came to a standstill just as we arrived opposite the fifth telegraph-post. And the rear coach was only twelve yards away. As the six of us charged down the slope, we saw the three train-attackers rush up to the footboard of the coach.

The light from the train—although the blinds were mostly drawn—was quite brilliant after the pitchy darkness of the cutting. The three men leapt upon the footboard, and they had not the slightest idea that we were dead on their heels.

Nelson Lee was the first to spring.

He gripped one man by the shoulders, and hurled him down, just as he was clambering up. Brett seized another, and Thompson the third. And then Montie and Tommy and I came in.

It was a terrific fight.

The three scoundrels struggled furiously, and, although we were double their number, we had all our work cut out to keep them down. The rear guard had jumped down, and came plunging towards us amazedly.

"What the thunder's wrong?" he shouted.

We were too busy to answer. I noticed, however, that dozens of windows had thudded down, and the passengers were looking out all along the train. And then, just as we were getting our men down securely, Nelson Lee uttered a great shout.

"Stop!" he panted, with amazement and annoyance in his voice. "Let these men get up—— Brett——boys! Release the captives at once!"

"What the dickens——"

"We have made an appalling blunder!" exclaimed the gov'nor, staggering to his feet. "These men are not criminals at all——"

"What!" I roared.

"They are, on the contrary, on the side of law and order!" shouted Nelson Lee. "How this mistake came about I don't know, but the men are—Scotland Yard detectives!"

CHAPTER VI.

NELSON LEE AND I EMBARK ON A "JOY-RIDE," WHICH LOOKS LIKE ENDING IN FEARFUL DISASTER—BUT DOESN'T!

I NEARLY fainted.

"Sco-Scotland Yard detectives!" I stuttered. "Oh, rot! I tell you they're crooks, Mr. Alvington! They are going to rob a duke——"

"You infernal idiots!" rapped out one of the trio. "What's the game? You'll have to answer for this——"

"You must allow me to apologise," began Nelson Lee.

"Apologise!" roared the man. "Go to the deuce with your apology! You have impeded officers of the law in the execution of their duty—and you'll have to pay dearly for it. You all right, Bradford?"

Bradford's nose was bleeding, and he mopped it savagely.

"Confounded busy-bodies!" he growled.

Sir Montie and Tommy looked at me blankly; and I glared at Montie with unjustifiable anger.

"This is your fault, you fatheaded dummy!" I exclaimed hotly.

"My—my fault!" gasped Tregellis-West. "Dear fellows——"

"Didn't you tell us the men were crooks?" I snapped. "Of all the idiots——"

"Dear Benny, how was I to know?" asked Tregellis-West plaintively. "Begad! I can't believe it! Detectives! I'm either dreamin' or there's been a frightful blunder!"

I snorted, and moved over to the guv'nor's side. I knew quite well that he had been correct. This was the first time I had seen the "crooks" squarely; hitherto they had been dark forms only. I recognised Detective-Sergeants Bradford and Chambers; I had often seen them at Scotland Yard, although I had never spoken to either of them. The other man was a stranger to me.

The latter swore under his breath.

"I'm Detective-Inspector Patterson," he exclaimed harshly. "These men are under my orders, and—— Oh, I understand now! So you are responsible for this confounded fiasco?"

The inspector was glaring at Montie.

"Begad! I'm—I'm not responsible, you know!" gasped poor Tregellis-West.

"I—I thought you were——"

"There has been a grave misunder-

standing," put in Nelson Lee quickly. "I don't think anybody is particularly to blame, as you will be ready to admit when you know all the facts. But is this a time for such discussions? Presumably, this hold-up was for the purpose of capturing some criminals——"

"It was, sir—it was!" snapped Inspector Patterson. "There are two well-known criminals on this train. Heaven alone knows where they are by this time! They have taken alarm, of course, and have fled."

As he spoke, Patterson jerked open the door of a first-class compartment. The opposite door was open, and the compartment was empty. The inspector gave voice to another elegant expression.

"Gone!" he snapped. "What else could we expect? In this snow and darkness they'll make a clean get-away. And we had them completely surprised—they were ready to walk into our arms!"

Nelson Lee and I were standing side by side, and we were both grim with the realisation of the blunder which had been made. Only a minute or two had passed since the train had been stopped, and confusion still reigned.

The guard was angrily questioning Dr. Brett, and that bewildered gentleman was scarcely capable of giving any coherent answers. The man who had been in front with the red light came running along beside the train, with the forward guard by his side. The compartment in which the two criminals had been, was, as I have explained, deserted.

Of course, the situation was exactly the opposite to what we had supposed. But we weren't to blame in any way. And while the fight had been in progress the Yard man's quarry had skipped off. By this time they were probably half a mile away.

I turned round and glanced down the line. Snow was falling again in thick clouds, and I couldn't see a yard beyond the guard's van. This was attached to the rear of the last coach, and was one of those small ones.

It stood deserted; the guv'nor and I were just about ten feet from it—nearer than anybody else.

"We must follow the trail at once," Detective-Inspector Patterson was saying. "We shall be able to follow the tracks in this snow——"

I suddenly jumped.

"Look there, sir," I gasped, jerking at the guv'nor's arm.

"What is the matter, Bennett?" asked Nelson Lee sharply, turning as he spoke.

"Why, what— Good gracious!"

"They've uncoupled the guard's-van," I shouted excitedly.

For, even as the guv'nor and I watched, we saw the van rolling slowly and silently away from the train. As the mail had been ascending a stiff gradient, it was only natural that the uncoupled guard's-van should commence running backwards.

Just for a moment everybody was transfixed.

The truth flashed into my brain in a fraction of a second. The two criminals Patterson had spoken of had not made off at all. Instead, they had taken advantage of the confusion, and the absence of the guard, to uncouple the van. They know well enough that it would descend the gradient of its own accord—and thus provide them with a certain means of swift escape. It was a cute dodge, and only desperate, clear-headed men could have accomplished it.

As though with one accord, everybody came to life, and rushed at the now moving coach. A space of over a dozen feet separated it from the train already.

Nelson Lee and I were nearest, and we rushed forward with all speed. We only thought of boarding the van before it rolled out of reach. And, almost at the same second, we hurled ourselves at the footboard.

It was a near shave.

The van was now moving with ever-increasing swiftness. Nelson Lee clutched the footboard and dragged himself on. I was still running, but I had gained a hold. For several feet I was dragged bodily, my legs trailing through the snow. But then, with a heave, I pulled myself up.

"My hat!" I gasped. "That was a squeak!"

Yells came from behind me—shouts of fury and alarm. I heard the voices of my chums raised in excited apprehension. But neither they nor the Scotland Yard men had been able to catch up with the moving coach.

Only the guv'nor and I had succeeded—and we had done so merely because we happened to be nearer than the rest.

"Oh, it's you, Nipper?" panted the guv'nor, looking at me. "You young rascal! You shouldn't have come—"

"Oh, rats!" I said breathlessly. "I couldn't let you go alone, sir. And the

others were miles behind! I say, what's going to happen now? This looks like being exciting! Quite like old times, eh?"

Lee dragged himself up until he was standing, and clutching a brass handle above. I did the same. The van was now rocking giddily from side to side, and it was highly necessary to hold fast. Its speed was increasing with every second; already we were doing close upon thirty miles an hour.

"I say, we shall get dashed to bits —"

"Not if I can help it, Nipper," shouted the guv'nor. "You stay there!"

He commenced groping his way forward to the door—and I followed close behind him. It was likely I was going to stay behind, wasn't it?

I don't think the men in the van knew that we were aboard; they fondly imagined that their ruse had been entirely successful. But they weren't to escape so easily as all that!

Nelson Lee, I instinctively knew, felt that it was "up to him" to effect a capture. A mistake had been made—largely through our intervention—and it was only right that we should set things in order.

The van roared down the gradient with ever-quickenning speed.

It rocked and swayed, and the wind howled past us, and drove the snowflakes into our faces so fiercely that we could scarcely see. I didn't care to think of what might happen if another train happened to be coming along behind!

And then, more by instinct than by anything else, I knew that one of the men had put his head out of the window. The next second there was a tiny point of red fire, and a crack.

"By James!" roared Nelson Lee furiously.

The scoundrels were firing at us! This couldn't be allowed to go on, or we should be murdered as we stood. That first shot had missed the guv'nor by about an inch. I distinctly heard it drone over my own head.

Lee whipped out his own revolver. He always carried a small automatic, even though he was a temporary school-master. I don't think there's a better shot living than the guv'nor, and his "gun" spoke nastily. There was a yelp, and I heard something bang against the footboard.

The ruffian had been disarmed at the first shot!

The gov'nor lost no time. Although the coach was swaying appallingly, he pushed forward. I followed behind him, nearly losing my hold more than once. But, at last, we arrived at the door.

A man was standing there, ready to hurl us off—to death.

Nelson Lee made no bones about the affair. He jammed his revolver through the open window, and fired. The bullet—as he had calculated—thudded through the roof. But the effects of that shot were instantaneous. The man hastily retreated to the other side of the van.

Lee wrenched the door open, and sprang inside. I was right on his heels, and I flung the door to with a crash. It was safer closed.

The interior of the van was dark. The roar of the wheels drowned all other sounds. Just for a moment the gov'nor and I stood still, panting heavily. It was a tense situation.

"You had better act sensibly, my friends." It was Nelson Lee's voice, cool and firm. "My revolver is still in my hand——"

"Hang you!" snarled a furious voice.

The next second a heavy form brushed past me, and the gov'nor uttered a gasp. Then a fierce struggle commenced. The second man had attempted to assist his friend. But I tackled him with all my strength.

We swayed to and fro.

The fight couldn't last long, that was one thing. I was quite sure that I should be unable to get the better of my opponent. He was a strong brute, and forced me back until, at length, I had my head jammed against the side of the van.

I waited, with closed eyes, for the heavy punch which I felt sure was coming. Perhaps it would be worse than a punch. And then the coach gave an extra heavy lurch, and we were all flung into confusion.

One of the men uttered a hoarse cry.

"Stop this foolery!" he shouted. "We shall all be killed—that'll be the end of it! Put the brakes on—put the brakes on! Sterndale, you fool, this madness will be the end of us! What about the curve at the foot of the gradient?"

"By Heaven!" gasped the other man. "The brakes—the brakes!"

The fight was stopped automatically. By mutual consent we ceased hostilities.

Two of us rushed to the brakes. The van was now travelling at terrific speed. I don't know for certain, but I'm pretty sure that we were travelling at over sixty miles an hour.

It was simply a mad, headlong rush.

The wheels beneath us roared and thundered. The coach swayed from side to side so violently that we could hardly keep our feet. I hadn't known that the line curved sharply at the foot of the hill. And now a cold shiver seemed to run down my spine.

Supposing we were almost upon the curve?

There'd be no deliverance for us. The van couldn't possibly negotiate a curve at such terrific speed. It would jump the metals, crash over, and we should be torn and mangled——

I shook myself, and set my teeth.

The position was so full of horror that the two criminals had no desire to continue the battle. What was the use? Although they stood a good chance of overpowering us, death would come to them in the end.

The best thing was to stop the coach—and then finish the fight!

Nelson Lee and one of our opponents worked at the brake furiously. A glorious sensation surged through me when I heard the blocks grinding upon the wheels. But then, quite abruptly, the grinding ceased, and was followed by a curious, deadened sound. The van rushed on madly.

"The brakes have smashed!" I gasped.

"No, young 'un—no!" the gov'nor said tensely. "They are jammed on tightly, and I can't quite understand—— Ah! This is deadly serious!"

"What's wrong?" asked Sterndale hoarsely.

"Release the brake, man—release it, and then apply it more gradually!" was all the gov'nor replied.

It was horrible, standing there in the dark, trying to keep my feet, and knowing that death might come at any second. I heard the wheels roar again. This was followed by a repetition of the grinding. Then, once more, came the curious dull slithering noise.

"It is useless—useless!" said Nelson Lee, between his teeth.

"Can't you stop the van?" I gulped.

"The brakes act, but they are useless!" declared the gov'nor. "Don't you understand? The wheels are locked, and

the van is sliding bodily. It is the snow and frost which is responsible!"

I caught my breath in sharply.

The truth was appalling. The van, having gained such tremendous momentum, could not be brought to a halt! The wheels simply skidded over the frosty rails. There was only one thing to expect.

We should crash to smithereens at the curve!

I heard one of the men swearing violently.

"You fool, Sterndale—you mad fool!" he cried wildly. "This was your idea—your idea! We shall be killed——"

"Shut up, hang you!" snarled the other man furiously.

I groped forward, and grabbed hold of Nelson Lee.

"What does it mean, sir?" I asked—although I knew all the time.

"My dear lad, you shouldn't have come," said the guv'nor bitterly. "There can be only one end. The van cannot possibly get round the curve in safety. We may be spared, of course, but the odds——"

He paused, gripping me tightly.

"I'm—glad I'm with—you, guv'nor!" I muttered huskily.

I heard the two criminals talking fiercely.

"Let go of me, you dog!" one of them snarled. "I'm going to jump—do you hear? There's snow, and that'll break the force——"

"You'll be killed, Duke——"

"We stand a better chance if we jump!" said the other wildly.

He staggered over to the door, and wrenched at the handle. Lee made no attempt to stop him. Indeed, I was beginning to think that a leap would be the best course. We should, at least, be clear of the wreckage——

Then, abruptly, I was flung on my face.

Down I went, with a crash. The guv'nor thudded beside me. The van swayed over jerkily, shook throughout its whole framework, and the air was filled with a strange, hissing, sliding noise.

A jar came—a soft kind of jar—followed at once by complete stillness.

My arms were bruised, and my head had hammered the flooring. But I knew that the guard's-van was stationary. I was more amazed than hurt, and I staggered up dazedly. Nelson Lee was also on his feet.

"What's—what's happened?" I gasped huskily.

"I don't know, young 'un—I can't guess," replied the guv'nor. "Are you hurt?"

"Only bruised, sir."

"My wrist is grazed, but it is a trifle," went on Lee. "I wonder if my torch has been knocked out of time by the jar? This darkness—— Ah, that's better. By James! What luck!"

He had flashed his light out. A beam shot across the van, steadied itself, and then glowed upon two huddled forms over in the corner. One of them shifted jerkily as we watched, and a bewildered face gazed at us. Blood was streaming down the man's face from a slight gash in his forehead.

"Quick, young 'un—that rope!" muttered the guv'nor.

I saw some rope near by, and I grabbed it. I knew what Nelson Lee meant in a second. The most important thing was to render our late opponents helpless while they were still dazed. We didn't want another scrap!

There wasn't time to think over our deliverance from what had seemed certain death.

We stepped across the van, and secured the dazed man's wrists and ankles. He rolled over, too bewildered to realise what was happening. The second man was quite unconscious; his head had hammered against the end of the van. But we bound him, all the same.

They had received the full force of the sudden shock, while the guv'nor and I had simply bumped down upon the floor. This, I'll admit, was a splendid stroke of luck.

"But what does it mean, sir?" I asked breathlessly.

"The van has left the metals—but nothing seems to be broken," said Lee. "Come, we will go outside."

He opened the door, and an avalanche of snow thundered into the van, completely covering our feet and ankles. The beam of light from the electric torch played upon snow—solid snow, covering the complete doorway from top to bottom.

"Great Scott!" I gasped.

Nelson Lee looked at me with shining eyes.

"Don't you understand, my boy?" he asked quietly.

"No; I'm blessed if I do, sir!"

"Yet the explanation is obvious," said

the guv'nor. "There has been a great amount of snow during the last three or four hours. The sides of the cutting are exceedingly steep—steeper at this point, perhaps, than they are further up. The vibration of the mail-train, as it thundered through, caused the snow to become loose—"

"An avalanche!" I ejaculated, staring.

"No, not exactly an avalanche—merely a severe snow-slide," replied Lee. "A full train, I daresay, would have plunged clean through it without coming to any harm. But this light van was quite unable to plough through the obstruction; the snow acted as an efficient brake. And we are saved from a terrible disaster."

I could only look at Nelson Lee with a wave of thankfulness surging through me. We had been delivered from a horrible death by the snow which had been mainly responsible for the brakes failing to act!

CHAPTER VII.

(*Nipper concludes.*)

IN WHICH THINGS ARE CLEARED UP GENERALLY, AND ALL IS O.K.

NELSON LEE smiled at my almost dazed expression.

"It's—it's wonderful, sir," I declared.

"Hardly wonderful, young 'un," he smiled. "Extremely fortunate, I will admit, but there is not much cause for wonder. Snow-slides are by no means uncommon in railway cuttings of this description. Upon the whole, I think we may congratulate ourselves."

"By gum, I should say so!" I said, getting over the shock. "We've come out with hardly a scratch, and we've colared these rotters into the bargain. They thought they were going to get away nicely—and they would have done if we hadn't jumped on board the van."

"You—you blamed busybodies!" began one of the men savagely.

"My friend, it is quite useless adopting that tone," said Nelson Lee. "You made a desperate attempt to escape, and failed. No, you can't get free from those ropes, so it's waste of time to try. The police will be here before long, I dare say."

The man glared, and said several things which needn't be put down here. Nelson Lee and I turned away and gave our full attention to the snow. I found a flat

board in the van, and improvised it as a shovel.

It wasn't such a difficult task to clear the snow away, for the bank was not thick. After a big burst of exertion on my part the snow suddenly collapsed, and a draught of icy air swept past me.

After that it was easy.

Nelson Lee and I pushed our way through, and found ourselves waist-deep in the snow. But before we left the van we made our prisoners more secure, roping them together in such a way that escape was impossible.

We ploughed through the snow laboriously, and finally arrived upon the open ground. It was then easy to see exactly what had occurred. The guv'nor had been right. A great portion of the snow which had been lying on the steep embankment had thundered down upon the up-rails. The other track was only slightly affected. There was little fear of another train dashing into the obstruction, for all signals were at danger—the mail-train not having passed through Bellton.

The line was bleak and deserted. Snow was still falling, and I could hardly realise that only twelve minutes had elapsed since I had parted company with Sir Montie and Tommy. The time, indeed, was only half-past eight. It seemed more like midnight.

"I suppose we'd better walk back——"

"My dear Nipper, that would be foolish," interrupted the guv'nor. "I expect the mail-train is even now backing down the gradient—for it certainly cannot continue its journey minus the guard's van. Besides, those in charge of the train probably think that a disaster has taken place."

A minute after Nelson Lee had ceased speaking we became aware of ghostly lights up the cutting. These resolved themselves into lanterns, and then we saw that the express was gliding slowly towards us, men clinging to the footboards, waving lanterns. Lee waved his torch in reply.

I saw the guard fling out his lamp with the light changed to red. At once the brakes were applied, and the train came to a stop.

The first persons to rush towards us were, I think, Tommy Watson and Tre gellis-West. They simply chucked themselves at me.

"Dear fellow, we thought you were done for!" gasped Montie thankfully.

"You—you rotter!" panted Tommy.

He couldn't have really meant that, for he grabbed my hand and shook it vigorously. Montie thumped my back, and, between the two of them, I was made pretty breathless. I grinned cheerfully.

"No need to go off your nappers, my sons," I said. "It was a near shave, of course, but everything's all serene. The two prisoners are trussed up like a couple of prize fowls."

"How do you do these things, Benny?" asked Montie wonderingly.

"The snow did it," I replied. "We've had a terrific time, I can tell you. Revolver shooting, a fight, and then the brakes wouldn't work. We thought we were going to be busted up on the curve, but this pile of snow obligingly got in the way, and we plunged into it. Quite simple, you know."

"Simple!" said Watson, faintly. "Oh, Caesar!"

Nelson Lee was talking quietly to the guards and the four Scotland Yard detectives. Tommy and Montie and I went closer. Dr. Brett and his men were there, too, and quite a number of passengers were crowding round.

"The whole thing was unfortunate," the guv'nor was saying. "I quite realise, Inspector Patterson, that you had excellent reasons for being incensed. But I must be allowed to say that your treatment of Tregellis-West gave rise to the whole misunderstanding."

"I don't quite understand you, sir," said the inspector gruffly. "In any case, may I be permitted to know whom I am addressing?"

"My name is Alvington. I am a master at St. Frank's College," said the guv'nor, his eyes twinkling somewhat.

"Then, apart from all else, I congratulate you upon your performance, Mr. Alvington," said the inspector heartily. "You acted in the most praiseworthy fashion in an attempt to recapture the criminals. They have, of course, eluded us—"

Lee's eyes twinkled more than ever.

"On the contrary, Mr. Patterson, you will find your prisoners within the guards' van," he said calmly. "They are both bound and helpless, and, I believe, thoroughly sick of the whole affair."

"What!" said the inspector, staring. "You have captured the men?"

"That is what I said."

Patterson turned abruptly.

"Bradford—Chambers!" he ordered.

"Go to the guards' van and see that the fellows are made properly secure."

The two detectives hurried off, both looking astonished. The inspector turned to us again, and thrust out his hand.

"You have amazed me, Mr. Alvington," he declared. "By George! I never hoped for this! Perhaps you will be good enough to tell me what happened?"

The guv'nor did so, and his listeners were all keenly interested. Lee, of course, knew Patterson slightly. But the worthy inspector had not the slightest idea that he was addressing Nelson Lee!

"You were amazingly lucky, my dear sir!" he exclaimed. "At the same time, you displayed a readiness of wit and courage which quite surprises me. The lad, too. Bless my soul! I can scarcely believe it!"

"We're not all duffers, inspector!" I grinned. "And what about that affair in the platelayer's hut? Why the dickens did you keep Tregellis-West a prisoner? We naturally supposed that there was something crooked going on."

Detective-inspector Patterson gave a little start.

"Why, of course," he exclaimed. "I hadn't looked at it in that light before. We didn't explain to the boy that we were officers of the law. 'Pon my soul, Bradford and Chambers were very much to blame!"

It struck me that the inspector was as much to blame himself, but he apparently overlooked this point.

Further conversation was rather difficult now, for the most urgent thing was to get the mail-train on its way again. Everybody was busy. It was found that the guards' van was not seriously injured; neither was it actually derailed. The loading wheels, however, were embedded in the snow, and raised a foot from the rails. One pull brought it back to the metals with a clang.

The van was coupled up again, and the train restarted. The two prisoners were still in the coach, with Bradford and Chambers in charge.

It didn't take us long to reach Bell-ton station. Here the train was again delayed, for the stationmaster had to be interviewed, and the telegraph set to work. It was necessary to send a gang to the cutting to clear the snow.

The inspector sent his men on with the train, but remained behind himself. It was necessary for him to make matters

clear without delay. And so, after the mail had left—much delayed—we found ourselves in the little waiting-room of the station, where a cheerful fire blazed.

Inspector Patterson was in a good humour, in spite of the failure of his original plans. Tommy and Montie and I were there, of course. Dr. Brett had sent his men home, and he and Nelson Lee were the only others—except for the stationmaster.

"The affair has been rather extraordinary," said Patterson, lighting one of the gov'nor's cigars. "It seems that this youngster, here, caused the whole misunderstanding——"

"Begad! That's a bit too bad—it is really!" protested Montie. "If you had explained to me——"

"My dear lad, we had no time to make explanations," interrupted the inspector. "Perhaps I'd better describe the whole circumstances."

"It would be as well," remarked Nelson Lee.

"Well, these two men boarded the train at the coast, right away in the south-west. They are well-known crooks, and they carried with them the proceeds of a particularly daring robbery."

"But you said one of them was a duke, and the other an earl," I put in quickly. "At least, that's what Montie told us. He couldn't have made such a silly mistake."

"Benny boy, I only repeated what I heard," said Montie. "I distinctly remember hearin' that 'the Duke' an' 'Earl Sterndale' were in a first-class compartment, an' that they were to be attacked——"

The inspector laughed heartily.

"Well, upon my word, I'm not surprised that you misunderstood matters, youngster," he exclaimed. "The fact is, gentlemen, these two crooks are Mike Elliott and Earle Sterndale. The 'Earle' is, of course, the man's first name. He's an American by birth, although he's troubled us in England for years past."

"But what about the duke, sir," asked Montie.

"Well, it so happens that Elliott is a bit of a swell, and he always works with Sterndale," explained the inspector. "Among his own friends and to the police he is always known as 'the Duke.' It's been his nickname for years. It was only natural that Sterndale should be called 'the Earl.' You understand?"

The pair were commonly known as 'the Duke and the Earl.'"

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"Quite simple," he said, "but rather misleading."

"I agree with you there," acknowledged Patterson. "Well, this precious pair had worked the trick with a third man. This individual was captured before the train started—some hours before. He turned King's Evidence, and 'blabbed.' As a result, Scotland Yard was at once informed, and I was given certain instructions."

"The 'Duke' and the 'Earl' had planned their escape cunningly. Two confederates of theirs were to hold up the train at some unknown spot beyond Bannington. They feared arrest upon arriving in London. The train being a non-stop, they knew that they were safe so far, and, by stopping the train, they would effect their escape easily, for their pals had a fast motor-car in readiness."

"We didn't know the exact spot where this hold-up was to occur. We could have had the train pulled up at an intermediate station, of course; but that would have been risky. The fellows would have smelt a rat at once. They wouldn't have waited for any search. They would have dropped from the train before it stopped, and made their escape in the storm."

"Considering everything, therefore, we decided that it would be better to trick them. I happened to be in Bannington with three men, and I received instruction from headquarters. In short, we planned to hold up the train ourselves—exactly as the crooks had arranged to do—but our hold-up was to occur this side of Bannington."

"Elliott and Sterndale, we reckoned, would at once assume that it was their own pals who had pulled the train up, and they would thus walk neatly into our hands. It meant extra trouble, of course, but the plan was certain of success. These fellows are very badly wanted, and it was better to go to elaborate lengths rather than take risks. The scheme would have gone through without a hitch if it hadn't been for your interference!"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"It is hardly fair to call our efforts interference, Mr. Patterson!" he protested. "We were acting in the interests of law and order, as we thought. Your treatment of Tregellis-West forced us to come to one conclusion only."

"But I don't quite understand——"

"My dear sir, there were three boys—not one," said the gov'nor. "Your men compelled Tregellis-West to remain in the hut. What he overheard, although easy to understand now, made him think very differently at the time. These other boys were near by, and when you left the hut they released him, heard his story, and at once ran for help. Tregellis-West was left in the shed so that you would not suspect anything. And we, as you already know, attacked you as you were about to board the train. I think we have a right to request——"

"Of course—of course!" agreed the inspector. "You want me to explain? Well, really, the matter is so absurdly simple that an explanation seems rather farcical. My men were suddenly confronted by this schoolboy. They were in the midst of their plans, and I consider they acted wisely."

"In keepin' me a prisoner?" asked Sir Montie.

"Exactly—in keeping you a prisoner," nodded Detective-Inspector Patterson. "I shared their view when I came in. Can't you realise, my boy, that we felt responsible for your safety? You had stumbled into the cutting in the thick of a severe snowstorm. We had no time to lead you to a place of safety, and we certainly refused to allow you to wander about in such a dangerous place. Trains were passing fairly frequently, and it is quite easy, I assure you, to get run over in a snowstorm."

Nelson Lee inclined his head.

"I think you acted sensibly, inspector," he said. "But, in my opinion, you should have explained matters to Tregellis-West, and not left him to draw his own conclusions."

"I realise now that we ought to have done so," said Patterson. "But we were busy with our plans, and had no time to waste upon a schoolboy. I intended taking him to Bellton Station as soon as the capture had been effected. I still adhere to my view that it would have been wrong on my part to send him away in such a snowstorm upon one of the most dangerous sections of the whole railway system. Indeed, it was my plain duty to detain him. As you say, it was only natural that he should put a wrong construction upon what he overheard."

"Those other fellows called you 'the Chief,'" said Montie. "That made me think that you were the head of a robber gang, begad."

Patterson grinned.

"I happen to be a chief detective-inspector," he explained. "Bradford and Chambers were curt with you, no doubt. My dear boy, they had excellent reasons for being curt. You had interrupted a most important piece of work, and you were therefore told to get into a corner and keep quiet. Your presence irritated my men, and caused them to be unduly harsh. I am very sorry."

"Begad, that's all right!" smiled Montie. "No need to apologise, sir. These little misunderstandin's will occur, you know. It's just one of life's little worries. They come an' go, an' everythin's all serene afterwards."

The inspector went into fuller details concerning the affair, and ended up by thanking the gov'nor heartily for his share in the capture. He expressed considerable surprise that a schoolmaster should have acted so smartly.

"Well, boys," said Nelson Lee at last, "we had better be making a move! I am sure I don't know what they must be thinking at the school! We must make all haste to get back."

And so we bade the inspector and Dr. Brett good-night, and trudged away towards St. Frank's. Just after we had passed through the village I remembered our bicycles. The gov'nor smiled.

"Well, Nipper, I am sure we can't go after them now," he said. "I will give instructions to have them fetched as soon as we reach the school. It's been rather exciting, eh?"

"Quite like old times, gov'nor!" I said cheerfully.

"My hat! The old times must have been exciting, then!" said Tommy Watson admiringly. "You're a wonder, sir! The way you hopped on to that guard's-van was a treat! I say, won't the chaps be blue with envy when we tell them all about it?"

"We've failed to beat Christine's record!" I grinned. "It's just a little after six, isn't it? Still, I'm jolly glad that things turned out as they did! We've had some fine excitement!"

"It's been simply thrillin', dear fellow," said Montie. "An' the most amazin' thing is that I should have put you on the wrong track. It would have been rotten if those horrid scoundrels had got away! I should have felt responsible, begad."

Sir Montie spoke in a horrified tone, and we all chuckled.

But the affair, although short and strenuous, had ended very satisfactorily.

I was a bit bruised, but I considered that the evening's entertainment had well repaid me for a little pain.

We found St. Frank's agog.

It was past bedtime, of course, but not a single member of the Remove was asleep. Prefects were making up search parties, to go and dig us out of the snow, and the Head was in a fine way. Of course, everything was explained, and the excitement was more pronounced than ever.

In the Remove dormitory Montie and Tommy and I were obliged to tell the story in full detail. The fellows listened spellbound, and were tremendously envious. Handforth warmly declared that it was absolutely rotten. We three of Study C seemed to catch every adventure which was going. And Handforth, who was simply dying to distinguish himself, never got a chance.

We didn't go to sleep until a very late hour, and the masters winked at the buzz of conversation which proceeded from the dormitory. They knew very well that they couldn't stop the talk on such an occasion as this.

I may as well add that Tommy and Montie and I came in for a big ovation in the morning. We were the most popular fellows at St. Frank's for the moment. The whole school resounded with the story of our adventures in the cutting.

Two or three days later, when the snow had cleared away and the frost was harder than ever, we rode to Helmford and back as previously arranged. And we did the trip in exactly one minute under the hour and a half. This was considered a fresh victory for the Ancient House, and Christine & Co. were obliged to sing small.

We saw Detective-Inspector Patterson once more before he returned to London. He was kind enough to commend "Mr. Alvington" and me for our prompt and drastic behaviour in the affair of the runaway guard's-van.

The worthy Scotland Yard man little realised that the simple schoolmaster was Nelson Lee, and the cheery schoolboy his assistant, Nipper!

Had Inspector Patterson known that, he wouldn't have wondered so much.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK'S STORY

Will be entitled:

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RUMOURS OF WAR.

WAR was in the air. Already Germany had thrown in her lot with Austria, and since France had announced her intention to stand by Russia in the event of hostilities between Germany and the Great Empire of the Czar, Germany had declared war upon France.

The war fever swept like a wave of electricity from one end of the German Empire to the other. The rumblings and mutterings of the coming storm made themselves heard everywhere, and the work of mobilisation was carried on swiftly, remorsefully, without a hitch.

It was the afternoon of Saturday, August 1st. The scene, the large, and well-appointed football ground of the Berlin Rovers, a team that had drawn with some of the very best of our professional League clubs, yes, and beaten a few of them, too, though the heat and tiring days of late May following upon a strenuous League and Cup Tie campaign in England, no less than the hostile attitude of the Berlin crowd, and the unfairness of the officials who controlled the game, could be cited as an excuse by the victims.

Here were to be found high and well-constructed terraces, a grand stand that would have done credit to a big London club, with dressing-rooms, offices, and everything complete.

The ground was spacious, well planned, and a striking tribute to the increasing interest Germans were taking in the game of Soccer football.

The players had gathered together for a practice game.

They had come clattering into the dressing-rooms, talking excitedly.

Most of them were young men. Their cheeks burned, their eyes flashed, their voices trembled with eagerness.

Only one subject of conversation made itself heard—it was WAR.

A group of three stood apart from the rest. They were Englishmen.

These were Ted Morris, an old International player of the past, who acted as trainer of the Berlin Rovers; George Gray, a first-class player who assisted in the training of the team, and instructed them in the art and science of the game; and Jack Gray, his younger brother, a pale-faced and delicate-looking boy, who was a football instructor, too, and played on occasion for the team.

These three listened to the talk of war in amazement, studied the faces of the excited players with wondering eyes, and found themselves utterly floored by the revelation of German psychology before them.

At last, as the senseless and eager discussion showed no sign of abating, Ted Morris stepped forward.

"Now, then, my lads," he said in his breezy way, "suppose you leave off talking war, and get into your playing things? If you want a bit of serious practice now's the time to begin."

Every German footballer present understood English, and they turned and eyed the speaker in amazement. Some of them seemed to resent the interruption.

A burly, broad-shouldered, deep-chested Berliner swung round and laughed in Morris's face.

"Oh, we'll all have something more serious to think about than playing football soon," he declared.

"P'raps we shall, sir. But meanwhile I'm trainer here, and if you want me to carry on, you must obey orders."

"We're going to play a practice match—Whites v. Stripes, twenty-five minutes each way," said Jack Gray joining Morris. "You're to play right-back for the Stripes, and I'm going centre-forward for the Whites, Mr. Brack."

At this innocent announcement Otto Brack burst into an insolent laugh.

"You're an amazing race, you

English," he said, with an indescribably contemptuous emphasis, "you think of nothing but football—you've got football on the brain; your naval and military organisations, your education, your commercial success, everything is sacrificed to your love of games. And soon," he snapped his fingers, "your great Empire will crumble into dust."

"Oh, will it?" flashed Jack, whose temper was hot and quick, though his physique was frail, "what's going to become of it, then?"

"Germany—will absorb it——"

"Not while we've got a man to fight," said George Gray, facing the sneering German.

"Bah! What's your contemptible little army worth? Germany would crack it as the crackers crack a nut. Your Navy is rotten at the core. It is all show. Our Grand Fleet would blow it off the seas. Ireland will break away. South Africa will revolt. Your Indian Empire is already tottering owing to misrule. Egypt will be taken into the Turkish Empire—your colonies will break adrift. England will sink into her proper place—as a third-rate power."

George Gray laughed.

"Which shows how little you swollen-headed Berliners know about things," said he.

But Jack went farther. With lips that trembled, eyes that blazed, and cheeks that burned, he faced the bulky German who towered above him.

"Britain has got the finest army, man for man, in the world," said he hotly. "And as for the Fleet that is gathering now in the Channel for the great review, show me a German battleship that can compare with any of it. The Empire will hold fast in spite of everything; and as for our love of games, it's taught us self-reliance, sportsmanship, control, and shown us how to take a beating in a game, in the proper spirit. As for you over here, with few exceptions, you don't know the meaning of the word sport. You cheat, and foul, and wrangle, and boast, but you can't play a game fairly——"

With a cry Otto Brack sprang at the boy, struck at him.

But the blow did not go home, for another of the German footballers, a half-back, Carl Hoffman by name, stepped quickly between them, and turned the punch aside with his arm.

"I think," said he in calm, measured tones, "we have had enough of this. Supposing we change and have our practice, for the army is mobilising for the world war, and it may be the last chance we shall get."

THE WARNING!

CARL HOFFMAN was a tall, fine-looking, fair-haired giant, a good-natured man, and a clean footballer.

He possessed most of the better qualities of his race, was self controlled and fair in all his views and actions.

His timely intervention put an end to the quarrel, and the players got themselves ready for the practice game.

A quarter of an hour later, the two sides, consisting of eleven players each, had trailed out on to the splendidly kept and level playing field, one side clad in striped football shirts, the other wearing white.

And as they made their way to the middle of the pitch Carl Hoffman dropped a kindly hand on George Gray's shoulder.

"My friend," said he, and his blue eyes gazed steadily at the Englishman, "will you take a word of advice that's kindly meant?"

"I will—from you," answered Gray.

The German footballer stooped so that his lips almost touched Gray's ear.

"War is about to be declared between Britain and Germany," he whispered. "Britain will decide to protect Belgium, and Germany, to ensure the quick termination of the war, will violate Belgium's neutrality. You and your brother must leave Berlin for England without delay. You are no longer safe here."

"But," exclaimed George Gray, aghast, "we've only just returned from a long holiday in England."

"No matter. Go. Pack up your things. Never mind about the niceties of your contract with the club. You must think of yourselves."

But George Gray smiled and shook his head.

"Britain at war with Germany—I can never believe it," said he, and Carl Hoffman realised that no argument would convince him.

"I have warned you. We are at war with France. If you remain here longer

than another day you're mad. Gain the Dutch frontier by Monday next at latest. Understand?"

Then other players came up, among them Otto Brack, and the friendly German footballer could say no more.

Five minutes later the game started, and soon the players were in the thick of it.

For the purposes of this match George Gray held the whistle and officiated as referee. Big Ted Morris and one of the minor players held the lines. Otto Brack was at right-back for the Stripes.

Carl Hoffman played centre-half for the Whites, and frail, clever little Jack Gray was the White's centre.

And as luck would have it, Otto and Jack were at the top of their form. Brack, too, played well, but with Hoffman breaking up the combination of the Stripes, and feeding Jack superbly, the game soon went in favour of the Whites.

Five minutes after the start, by means of a clever tackle, Carl Hoffman got the ball. He dribbled neatly along the middle of the ground, and at the right moment tapped the ball to Jack.

Jack took the pass cleverly, and darting onward, found himself faced by Brack. The boy's eyes flashed brightly, and secure in his skill he played the ball right on to the full-back, tapped it past him, eluded the shoulder charge, which was viciously made, and before the back could turn or recover, had shot it hard and true into the back of the net, scoring a glorious goal for the Whites.

Brack's face was lived with passion, and the heat of the day, combined with a sense of unfitness and the hot pace of the game, thoroughly angered him.

From the restart the Whites again controlled the game, and Brack, receiving poor support from his brother back and his halves, were soon overwhelmed.

To do him justice, he played pluckily. But when Jack again took the ball, and dribbled round him with ease, to race onward with nimble feet and beat the goalkeeper all ends up, Brack could stand it no more. The humiliation maddened him.

With a howl of rage he rushed at the boy, who stood smiling at the result of his handiwork, and felled him with two crushing blows in the face.

"You English dog!" he cried.

Jack fell heavily, and the ground was

hard. Silent and still he lay, and while the players rushed up shouting and gesticulating wildly, the air splitting with the echoing and guttural German, George Gray, throwing off Hoffman's restraining hold, flung himself at the cowardly full-back.

"You cur!" he shouted. "Why don't you fight a man your own size?"

Brack stood at bay, his hands raised to strike.

He was no boxer, however, and George Gray, who was mighty handy with his fists, smashed his left several times through the coward's guard, cut his face until the blood came, and then knocked him clean off his feet with a terrific right upper cut.

The game was at an end.

Round the combatants the German players swarmed, while Ted Morris, hot to help his countrymen if necessary, dared any of them to lay a hand upon George Gray.

"Let 'em fight it out man to man," he growled.

Up got Brack. Wiping his face on his hands, and smearing his hands upon his knickers, he steadied himself before renewing the contest.

At last he was ready, and with a ring of excited German footballers who hustled George Gray, and helped Brack all they could, the gallant footballer set to work to avenge his brother.

If Carl Hoffman had not been there to keep some of them from striking George from behind, Brack must soon have proved the victor.

But Hoffman was there, and the fight was soon over.

Thoroughly incensed, and with many an old score to pay off against Brack, who had often insulted the Grays, and the country that gave them birth, George hit his enemy wherever and whenever he liked, and finally knocked him out by a smashing punch on the jaw.

Down went the cowardly footballer. Round Gray the others swarmed, shouting vengeance.

"Stand back—give the man a chance!" roared Carl Hoffman, forcing a way for George to pass. Then he added in a whisper, "Get to the dressing-rooms, quick!"

George, ready to fight the lot of them if need be, was yet quick to take Carl's sound advice. So he passed through the

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howling crowd of players, and, seeing his brother standing there, pale and dazed, threw a protecting arm about him.

"Come along, Jack, old chap," said he. "I gave that cad something to remember both of us by. But it means the end of our engagement with the Berlin Rovers. They'll sack us after this."

"Ach! And a good thing if they do," growled Carl Hoffman, who paced beside them. "You'll go back to England at once then. But in any case it means an end to football for the Berlin Rovers—we are at war."

It did indeed mean an end of football as Carl stated. The incidents just narrated had put an end to the practice game, and even as the brothers and their friend left the field, with faithful Ted Morris treading on their heels, an excited messenger ran out on to the playing pitch.

The message he brought with him was swiftly given, and in a moment the players came trooping in.

While George and Jack dressed they could hear them shouting and cheering in their guttural voices, and every now and then came echoing snatches of "Der Wacht Am Rhein."

"George," cried Ted Morris gravely, as he listened, "what is the meaning of all this here?"

"I don't know. War they say. War with England—maybe."

"Eh?"

"So Hoffman says."

"And he's a truthful German," growled Morris, looking stern. "'Ere, my lads, screw or no screw, I'm going to pack my traps to-night, and I intend leaving Berlin in the morning!"

"Good luck to you, Ted!"

"You and Jack will come, too, of course?"

"Not in the morning. It's perfectly safe. We'll stay a day or two, and we'll follow you then."

Alas, many a long day was to pass ere George Gray and his brother were to follow Ted Morris home, as events proved.

As soon as they were dressed, they made for the door. In the passage outside they saw Carl Hoffman talking to a stranger in low and earnest tones. As he caught sight of them the German turned and stretched out his hand.

"Gray," he cried, "we have had many happy days together—iolly days as they

call them. Heaven knows when we shall meet again—"

"What makes you say that, Carl?"

"I have received my orders. I have been given a commission as Unter Lieutenant in the 94th Regiment. I report to-morrow."

His voice was level and unshaken, his eyes glowed coldly as he looked at George and Jack. As the former grasped his hand, he found it as steady as a rock.

"And so good-bye, my friends. Take my advice, and leave Berlin—at once!"

"We've a lot to settle up with the club—"

"Don't stay to settle—go—go! If you want money, I'll let you have it."

"No, we've plenty, thanks."

"Then use it. Make for Holland. It's safest. Good-bye."

So they shook hands again, and the three Englishmen left the football ground, and passed out into the street, to wonder at the suppressed excitement that prevailed everywhere, and the masses of flags they saw displayed as they walked onward in the blazing sunlight towards their lodgings in the heart of the City.

BRITISHERS AT BAY.

THAT night, Ted Morris, who'd packed up as he'd promised, came round to wish them good-bye. He'd had some bother about his passport, he said, but he'd already taken his luggage to the station, and was going to see about that now.

"And when are you going to start?" asked George.

"By the first train that leaves Berlin, no matter when it goes," answered the trainer, emphatically. "I never did like Germans, and I like 'em less than ever now. You ought to see the looks they give me, when they realise I'm English. You take a pal's advice, and clear out of this quick."

He stayed a minute or two to argue and persuade, and then left them with a cheery adieu.

After he'd gone George felt a little depressed and sad, but still he could not bring himself to believe that danger threatened.

As for Jack, he was a born optimist, in spite of his frail health.

(Continued overleaf.)

"It's all right, George," said he.

"Let's enjoy another week in Berlin, and see all there is to be seen before we make a start."

George Gray eagerly fell in with his brother's suggestion. He'd heard much of Germany's military might, and had seen some of it. He wanted to see more, wanted to see the whole nation spring to arms, so as to be able to tell his friends at home all about it.

And so they ate their dinner together at their lodgings in the usual way, without noticing that their landlord's manner towards them had undergone a subtle change, that he was bitter, abrupt, and ruder even than usual.

After dinner they went for a stroll through the brilliantly illuminated streets. What they saw amazed them.

Every window was ablaze. Every house flaunted flags and bunting at its windows. Crowds thronged the pavements, and surged into the roads, singing, shouting crowds of straw-hatted men, linked arm in arm, and all of them war mad.

These youths forced older men from the pavement, threw women and girls into the road; they even defied the police for once in a way.

The Unter den Linden was one seething hive of humanity.

Crowds thronged before the palace. Every open space held a meeting.

Newspaper sellers had their papers torn from their grasp, and eager eyes read the latest intelligence about the war.

The cafés were so packed that it was hardly possible to get in, or, if one got in, to get out again.

George and Jack were in the habit of frequenting a certain café much patronised by sportsmen of the capital. They forced their way into it now, and sat down in a corner to drink their usual lager beer.

This light, wholesome and harmless beverage was being drunk by the thirsty Berliners by the barrellful.

After some delay the beer was brought in, and George tendered English money in payment. The waiter grinned, and threw it down upon the oaken table.

"I must have German money," he de-

clared. "We refuse to take your English silver here."

His insolent manner brought a flush to Gray's cheeks. He was about to open his lips to reply, when he found the table surrounded by a yelling and shouting mob, amongst whom he saw their enemy, Otto Brack, whose face was covered with strips of plaster, and whose lips were swollen from the effects of George Gray's blows.

"Look at the Englishman—look at the English spies!" said the full-back mockingly.

In a moment the café was in an uproar. The newspapers that night forecasted war. The news from London was not reassuring, they stated. It looked as if England were going to throw in her lot with France and Russia, should Belgium be invaded, and the mere thought of such a proceeding was regarded as an outrage.

The anger and savage envy of the frequenters of the café was instantly turned on the two brothers.

"Down with the accursed English! Down with the spies!" they roared, and a pot came hurtling past George's head, to shiver into fragments against the wall.

George sprang to his feet, and thrust Jack behind him. He seized a chair.

"Stand back, the lot of you!" he roared in the best German he could command. "I'll stand up to any man with my fists, but if I have to fight a mob, I intend to use this chair." And he swung the chair high above his head.

His resolute attitude, and his determined expression caused the crowd to break before him. With a laugh he put the chair down.

"That's quieted them, Jack," said he. "Now let's get out of this place while we can."

He forced his way forward, with Jack by his side, and in another half minute they would have been safe in the street. Indeed, both thought they were safe.

But of a sudden an officer in uniform, a brutal-looking and powerfully built man confronted them, his sword clanking by his side.

"You are English spies!" he bellowed.

(Another Instalment of this Thrilling New Serial Next Week.)