

No. 132.—ENTHRALLING MYSTERY AND SCHOOL NOVEL!

1^{D.} THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY 1^{D.}



THE MYSTERIOUS SCHOOLBOY!

(Introducing The "Circle of Terror.")

Another Tale of NELSON LEE and NIPPER AT ST. FRANK'S COLLEGE. Set down by NIPPER and NELSON LEE, and Prepared for Publication by the Author of "The Problem of the Copper Frog," "The Affair of the Pink Package," etc.

THREE GRAND ROLLYING YARNS

By Famous Authors

APPEAR IN

NOTE!

THIS
IS
THE
MARVEL'S
FIRST
XMAS
NUMBER.



£500
IS ALSO
OFFERED
IN EVERY
FOOT-
BALL
COMPETI-
TION.

Introducing

The Old Favourites at Calcroft School,

JACK, SAM, and PETE;

And TOM SAYERS and JACK ROGERS.

— — — — —
Get it To-day!



THE MYSTERIOUS SCHOOLBOY!

Introducing The "Circle of Terror."

Another Tale of **NELSON LEE** and **NIPPER** AT **ST. FRANK'S COLLEGE**. Set down by **NIPPER** and **NELSON LEE**, and Prepared for Publication by the Author of "The Problem of the Copper Frog," "The Affair of the Pink Package," and other Detective Tales.

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.

(Set down by Nipper.)

IN WHICH CECIL DE VALERIE MAKES A MOST DRAMATIC APPEARANCE ON THE ICE, AND IS VOTED TO BE THE RIGHT SORT.

"HA, HA, HA!"

It was Edward Oswald Handforth, of the Remove Form at St. Frank's, who gave voice to that uproarious laugh. He had reason to. In fact, Tregellis-West and Watson and Church and McClure, and several other fellows, joined in the merriment.

Personally, I couldn't see anything to grin at.

We were on the ice, only I happened to be in a different position to the others. They were on their feet, and I lay flat on my back. I'd just fixed on my skates, and had sprung up briskly.

The fact that I slithered over was due to a lump on the ice, which had unfortunately escaped my notice. Ice, as a rule, is hard, and sudden contact with it isn't exactly pleasant. At least, I didn't find it so.

"Anything funny going on?" I asked sarcastically.

"Not now!" grinned Tommy Watson. "You went over beautifully, Benny—the neatest thing I've seen this season.

Handforth'll beat it before long, I expect."

Handforth's grin vanished.

"You ass!" he said witheringly. "Do you think I'm going to fall about like that? It may not be generally known, but there's not a skater on the ice who can touch me when it comes to real fancy work! I'll show you something before long! You just wait!"

"That's what we are doin', dear fellow," murmured Sir Lancelot Montgomery Tregellis-West. "We're waitin' patiently an' with consumin' curiosity. Begad, when you start off——"

"It's jealousy!" declared Handforth bitterly. "I never seem to get fair play, somehow! Everybody knows what my skating is like!"

"Exactly!" grinned Tommy Watson. "That's just what we do know!"

Edward Oswald glared, and continued the task of fastening his skates. By this time I had picked myself up and brushed myself down cheerfully.

There's no need for me to say who I am. At St. Frank's, of course, I was known as Dick Bennett, but that wasn't my name any more than "Mr. Alvington" was the guv'nor's.

It was a half-holiday—Wednesday afternoon—and the winter sun shone down from a sky of clear blue. The whole

countryside lay in the grip of a very severe frost—a keen, hard frost, which had been continuous for days past.

There had been much snow lately, but this had quite cleared off, and left nothing but fine weather and intense cold behind it. Everything was frozen. Small ponds had long since had a sufficient coating of ice to warrant skating. But it was only to-day that the Head had pronounced the River Stowe to be safe.

The Head, of course, was cautious. Other people had been skating up and down the Stowe for a day or two, but the St. Frank's fellows had not been allowed this enjoyment until the ice was thoroughly thick and set. I suppose Dr. Stafford was well advised in keeping the river out of bounds until now, for many fellows had been eager to try the ice prematurely.

Football, of course, was important, but there was no pressing junior match on this afternoon. Accordingly, the Stowe was crowded with fellows from every Form. There had been much bustle during the last day or so.

New skates had been arriving by parcel post in batches, and the stocks at the local shops had been completely exhausted. A good many fellows, of course, raked out weird and rusty articles from dusty corners, but everybody who could afford it purchased new skates.

The fags of the Second and Third had patronised a tiny pond in the corner of the playing fields for a day or two past, but the Remove and higher Forms had rightly considered this beneath their dignity. This afternoon's skating was, therefore, the first taste we had had during the season.

Naturally, a few fellows were shaky—even those who were expert. One requires to find one's "feet" before launching out boldly. That's where I'd made a bloomer. I'd been a bit too confident, and had paid for it.

I started off again easily, glided down the river for a hundred yards, and then turned. By that time I felt full of confidence, and came back to the spot where the fellows were fixing on their skates. I came back with a rush, and did a little fancy business at the finish.

"The ice is ripping!" I said enthusiastically.

"Begad, you can skate, dear boy!" said Sir Montie, with mild interest.

"Who said I couldn't?"

"Well, judgin' from your openin' performance——"

"You mustn't judge too quickly, my son!" I grinned. "How much longer are you going to be with those silly straps? Lend him a hand, Tommy, for goodness' sake!"

"Dear Benny, I'm all ready," said Tregellis-West, rising.

He and Tommy were soon skating about easily, and we warmed ourselves up in next to no time. We were just about to start off for a run down to the old bridge when Owen major gave us a hail.

"I say, you chaps, don't forget that squiffy piece of ice near the bend!" he shouted. "They're going to shove a board up, I believe, but there's nothing there now. It's near the left bank."

"Do you think we want to peg out, you ass?" asked Tommy Watson. "We know all about it—thanks all the same! It's rummy why the ice should be unsafe just there, and firm everywhere else!"

Handforth sniffed.

"Silly rot!" he said. "All you've got to do when you come to a squiffy place is to go over it quickly! There's no danger, then! It's when chaps bump over that they go through the ice."

"You stand a good chance of going through, then!" grinned Owen major.

"Do you think I'm going to bump over?" bawled Handforth, glaring.

"Well, judging by your skating last winter, I reckon you ought to be prohibited from skating at all!" said Owen candidly. "Didn't you crack the ice in six different places?"

Handforth turned red.

"A chap can't help a pair of dud skates, can he?" he growled. "This time I've got a brand new pair—a present from the pater. Look at 'em! I'll bet there's not another pair as good on the ice!"

Handforth lifted up one foot proudly, in order to display his skates to better advantage. Unfortunately, his other foot seemed strongly disinclined to remain in one spot. It was very anxious to join its fellow.

Handforth shot forward about two yards on one foot, made several wild gyrations, and then sat down with great suddenness.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth looked round him with pained surprise, and seemed quite bewildered.

"By George!" he gasped. "How—how the dickens did that happen?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Is that the way you don't bump over?" grinned McClure.

"Look here, Arnold McClure! I don't want any sarcastic remarks from you!" roared Handforth, springing to his feet. "If you think it's funny to— Whoa! Ah, great pip!"

Handforth always did things thoroughly. On this occasion he jumped to his feet so thoroughly that he forgot for the moment the perils of hastiness. His legs sailed away from one another, and he went down a second time. By way of a change, he fell on his stomach.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Begad, ain't it amusin'?" chuckled Montie.

"There's a ripping slide in the Triangle, Handy," I said sweetly. "The fags are having a splendid time! If I were you I'd take those skates off and join in the fun. The fags might object, of course——"

Handforth nearly choked.

"It ain't fair!" he howled. "You know jolly well I was showing you my skates—that's why I went over! I'm blessed if I'll stay here to be cackled at any longer! Come on, you chaps! Let's buzz down the river!"

Handforth was on his feet now, squarely, and he addressed his two study chums, Church and McClure. Their broad grins vanished as they found their great chief eyeing them severely.

"I—I say! Hadn't I better take your arm, old man?" asked Church nervously.

"Why, ain't you feeling steady yet?" said Handforth kindly.

Church sniffed.

"I was thinking of you, Handy."

"You—you idiot!" roared Handforth, as everybody else chuckled. "Do you think I want your fat-headed help? I'll soon show you what I can do! I'm going to try a lot of figure-skating before long—going on one foot, and all that sort of thing. You just watch me!"

"It'll be interestin'," murmured Montie. "No, dear fellows; don't start just yet! Let's watch Handforth doin' fancy stunts. Begad, what a shockin' word! That's what Farman says, ain't it?"

"I'll bet Handforth will show us some stunts we've never seen before, anyhow!" I grinned. "Handy's all right, but he's too confident. He can skate decently,

but that's about all. My hat, there he goes!"

Handforth, disdaining the anxious arms of his two chums, was striking away down the river in excellent style. As I had remarked, he could skate fairly well; but I had my doubts as to the fancy part of the business.

"Oh, come on!" said Watson, banging his gloved hands together.

"Look at Handforth, dear boys!" said Montie. "Ain't it pretty?"

Handforth was turning rapidly. He went round in a wide swing, lifting one foot from the ice as he did so. Unfortunately, Starke, of the Sixth, came swinging down the river just at that moment.

If Handforth had completed his curve, all would have been well. But his left foot seemed to be fixed, and his right ran away with him. He left the curve, and shot off in a strange line towards the bank, making frantic efforts to keep his equilibrium.

It was a hopeless task.

His right foot shot skywards, and Handforth continued his journey to the bank on his back. A howl of laughter went up. Starke, sailing easily, suddenly became aware of his peril. He tried to swerve, but it was too late. Handforth's charging bulk slithered towards him, and the next second the pair were careering along together, Starke apparently having the idea that his face would serve excellently as an auxiliary skate. As Tommy Watson pointedly remarked, his nose was sharp enough, at all events!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's the way Handy shows us what he can do!" grinned Owen major. "He told us to watch him, didn't he?"

"I don't think we'll wait for any more," I chuckled. "There's going to be trouble down there, my bonnie boys! Starke's a bully, and poor old Handforth will get it in the neck! We can't go to his rescue! Laying hands on a prefect ain't allowed. It was Handy's silly fault, anyhow."

I caught a glimpse of Starke staggering to his feet, and the unpopular prefect's voice was raised in anger. He couldn't very well adopt any of his bullying tactics, however, for Mr. Crowell, the Remove master, was within sight.

So Tommy and Montie and I started off on our own jaunt towards the village. Most of the fellows were skating on the other part of the river, and we found that we had the ice practically to ourselves.

We were all fairly good skaters, I think, and we glided down the river arm-in-arm. For days past we had been fearing that the frost would disappear, but the Fates had been kind. As a rule, a thaw comes just when people are beginning to congratulate themselves upon the excellent skating prospects. By the appearance of the weather now, the frost looked like holding for weeks.

"We'll have a race coming back," I suggested cheerfully. "I think we're all pretty evenly matched, and it'll be a decent bit of sport. Let's keep to the right bank along here," I added, as we turned a bend. "I don't think much of Handforth's idea of whizzing over the 'wonky' places."

There was a straight stretch ahead of us, with a sharp curve some distance away. It was just at this curve that the uncertain patch of ice was situated. As Owen major had said, the dangerous spot was near the left bank.

Along this bank ran the towing-path, which was generally used by the St. Frank's fellows as a short cut to the village. Just at the bend itself I saw a man striding along briskly. He seemed to pause as he caught sight of us; and then, without further ado, he stepped on to the ice.

"My hat! That's the dangerous place, isn't it?" asked Tommy Watson.

"I don't suppose he knows it," I said. "He spotted us, and concluded that the ice was safe. We'd better shoot down and give him a hail."

"Begad!" gasped Sir Montie suddenly.

As he spoke, a crackling kind of smash sounded, and the stranger simply disappeared through the ice, feet first. Just for a second his face appeared above the water. Then this, too, vanished.

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed breathlessly.

"We must fly, dear boys—we must fly!"

We were quite a distance from the spot, but we obeyed Montie's injunction, and flew. We had no fixed idea as to how we were to effect a rescue; the main thing was to reach the spot with as little loss of time as possible.

But then, before we had completed half the distance, we saw a boyish figure dart round a clump of bushes which grew close against the bank. Without pausing a second, the new-comer plunged straight into the icy water.

"By Jingo, that was smart!" I exclaimed tensely. "Not one of our chaps,

either! He wasn't wearing a St. Frank's cap, anyhow."

As we skated down the river, we saw the boy come to the surface. His long hair was streaming over his face, but he brushed it aside and dived a second time. The affair looked like being a tragedy.

By this time we were comparatively near, and we all three saw that the hole in the ice was within a yard of the bank.

"There's no sense in us smashing through," I said quickly. "We'd better get ashore, and help from the bank. The ice won't stand our weight, anyhow. And we can pull a part of that fence down!"

I nodded towards a rickety line of wooden palings which divided one meadow from another. Just at that moment we were gliding towards the bank at a spot where the ice was still firm.

As we scrambled on to the frozen grass, we saw two heads appear above the water, and a gasping cry came to us. We simply floundered over the grass with all speed, our skates hampering us seriously.

"Don't bother about the palings!" I gasped. "We can reach!"

I was first on the spot, and I flung myself down full-length, with my head and shoulders overhanging the bank. This was only about a foot high, and the edge of the hole was just about three feet away. To this clung the young fellow we had seen. He was panting heavily, and he supported the unconscious form of the man he had rescued from certain death.

"Hold tight!" I said crisply. "We'll have you out in a jiff!"

"Take—take this chap first!" gasped the other, with chattering teeth.

I stepped upon the ice close against the bank, and found that it would bear half my weight. Then, with Montie and Tommy hanging on to my other leg, I leaned right over and took a firm grip on the man's shoulders.

"Heave away!" I said. "Pull like the dickens!"

Montie and Tommy pulled, and this assisted me greatly. The fellow in the water, too, heaved at the man's body, and between us we succeeded in dragging him up on to the grass.

It was only a minute's work to pull the boy out, and he stood, shivering and shaking, before us.

"Is—is he all right?" he asked huskily.

"I don't think it's much," I replied, after a quick inspection. "He's breathing regularly, anyhow. Just a swoon, by the look of it. I say, you acted

splendidly, you know! You saved his life!"

The boy nodded.

"I believe I did," he said. "I—I was coming along the towing-path from the village, and spotted him just as he fell through. Lucky thing I was near by. We'd better take him to the school, hadn't we?"

"By Jove! Are you the new fellow for the Remove?" I asked curiously, looking at the boy with renewed interest. "I heard there was a new chap coming into the Ancient House——"

"That's right," replied the other. "I'm De Valerie—booked for the Fourth Form, I believe. Cecil de Valerie. By Jove! I'm freezing! Can't we get this chap up to the school somehow? He's worse than I am, and we can't leave him here."

"Do you know the man?" asked Tommy curiously.

"No more than I know you," replied Cecil de Valerie. "Never set eyes on him till I saw him plunge through the ice—— Ah! Some other fellows are coming!"

He was looking up the river, and we saw six or seven seniors speeding to the spot. I knew at once that the problem was solved. In a very few minutes De Valerie and the unconscious man would be on their way to St. Frank's.

Sir Montie and Tommy and I looked at one another with satisfaction. This new boy had started jolly well. There wasn't the slightest doubt that he was the right sort—just the sort we wanted in the Ancient House at St. Frank's.

CHAPTER II.

(*Nipper continues.*)

IN WHICH IT IS UNANIMOUSLY VOTED THAT CECIL DE VALERIE IS DECIDEDLY THE WRONG SORT!

NELSON LEE opened the door of Study C, in the Remove passage, and looked in. He found Tregellis-West and Watson and myself standing before the fire. It wasn't quite tea-time, and we had been discussing the exciting affair on the river, which had taken place an hour or so before.

"Hallo, sir," I said genially.

"I thought, perhaps, you would be interested in the rescued stranger, my

boys," said the guv'nor, entering the study and closing the door. "I understand you played an important part in his rescue——"

"Not exactly, sir," I interrupted. "It was De Valerie, the new chap, who saved the man's life. We just gave a hand at the finish. I hope he's not in a bad way, sir."

Nelson Lee shook his head.

At St. Frank's, of course, he was "Mr. Alvington," the Housemaster of the Ancient House. But both Tommy and Montie were in the know. They had been aware of our little secret for some time, and were to be trusted implicitly. There wasn't another fellow at St. Frank's who knew the truth—except the Head himself. And he can't exactly be called a fellow; it wouldn't do to refer to the reverend Head in that way.

"No, Bennett, the man is not in a bad way," said the guv'nor, using my school name, as he nearly always did. "His name, it appears, is Mr. Howard Dale. Although he is weak, he has regained consciousness."

"I suppose he'll stay the night here, sir?" asked Watson.

"Well, my boy, we could hardly be so inhospitable as to send him away in his present condition," smiled Nelson Lee. "Dr. Stafford, indeed, was only too pleased to extend to Mr. Dale an invitation to stay just as long as he pleased. That, of course, will mean merely a day or two—until he has recovered from the chill."

"Who is he, sir—and how did he come to fall through the ice in such a silly way?" I asked interestedly.

"I really know nothing beyond the fact that his name is Dale, and that he was visiting some friends in the district. He declared that he was upon his way to the station, when he foolishly ventured upon the ice. A mere whim, my boy. He has had to pay rather dearly for his rashness."

"He's in this House, isn't he, sir?"

"Yes; in one of the spare bedrooms," nodded the guv'nor. "I am very pleased with De Valerie. He displayed great courage in plunging into that icy water. He is, apparently, not in the least affected, and positively refuses to be put to bed. I believe he is in the junior common-room even now."

"Begad!" exclaimed Sir Montie mildly. "I must hurry to the common-room, dear fellows. There is a duty to

perform. I must shake De Valerie's hand I must really!"

"Well, I feel like that myself," I said heartily. "Why, I thought he'd be in bed for a day or two. He must be a hardy bounder!"

Nelson Lee smiled, with his hand on the door knob.

"I only saw De Valerie for a moment or two," he said. "I must commend him for his conduct later on. Oh, by the way, you might tell De Valerie that he will find a place in Study M, with Kemp. Kemp is alone at present, and will be rather glad of a study mate, I should imagine."

"Right-ho, sir," I said cheerfully.

It was rather decent of the gov'nor to pop in to give us this information. Not that we were interested in the unfortunate Mr. Howard Dale in the least. In all probability we should never set eyes on him again—and we dismissed him from our thoughts.

With De Valerie, however, it was different. He was a new fellow for the Remove—that is, for the Ancient House section of the Remove. Being skipper of that section, I was naturally keen. I wanted to congratulate De Valerie on behalf of the whole Form.

I wasn't quite pleased with the gov'nor's decision to place the new boy in Study M, with Kemp. But, of course, it wasn't my place to raise any objection. Kemp was a decent enough fellow, although very quiet. He was regarded in the Remove as being a "softy." He was studious and rather weak. De Valerie struck me as being a fellow who would like a brisk, cheery study-mate. However, these little matters would soon adjust themselves.

Montie and Tommy and I put aside all thoughts of tea for the time being, and went along the passage to the common-room. It wasn't quite dark yet, for the evening was clear and cloudless. But the electric lights were going strong, and as we turned down the half-dozen steps which led to the common-room, we heard a confusion of voices coming from that noisy apartment. The other fellows, apparently, had put tea aside for the moment.

"I'll tell you what, we'll invite De Valerie to tea with us," I said, as we marched into the common-room. "I reckon—— Why, what the dickens——"

I paused abruptly, for Handforth was facing Cecil de Valerie, and glaring at

him in a manner which nobody could possibly call friendly.

"That's all very well," Handforth was saying. "But you're jolly well not going to shove on airs while I'm here! Understand?"

"What's the trouble?" I asked.

"Gas!" said Handforth fiercely.

"Gas?" I repeated wonderingly.

"That's what I said," exclaimed Handforth. "Gas—yards of hot-air, as Farman would say! Gas, gas, and nothing else but gas! This new chap seems to think he's the most important person——"

"Oh, chuck it!" I said impatiently.

"You don't mean to say that you've picked a quarrel with the new kid already? That's just like you, Handy! You seem to take a special delight in getting a fellow's back up——"

"De-de-de-delight!" gasped Handforth. "Why, you ass——"

I shouldered Handforth aside, and approached Cecil de Valerie with outstretched hand.

"I haven't had a chance of speaking to you properly yet, old man," I said genially. "How do you feel? You look all right, I must say. I'm Bennett—skipper of the Remove in this House."

De Valerie nodded calmly.

"I met you before, didn't I?" he said. "If you'd like to oblige me, you'll refrain from calling me 'old man!' I'm a bit particular, you know!"

I coloured somewhat.

"I'm sorry," I said shortly.

"Begad! I suppose everybody's got his little ways," remarked Montie, adjusting his pince-nez and eyeing De Valerie interestedly. "Dear fellow, I'm delighted to meet you—I am, really. I've met you before, of course, but only when you were drippin' wet——"

"No need for this song," interrupted De Valerie superciliously. "And, if you'll allow me to point out the fact, I don't like to be called 'dear fellow.' It seems to be a habit at this school to adopt a rather insolent familiarity——"

"I say, you'd better not talk like that!" I interjected sharply. "It's only Tregellis-West's way, after all. I suppose you'll soon get used to things, De Valerie."

"Or things will get used to me," he said calmly.

I eyed him with a certain amount of pardonable curiosity. He was rather a striking-looking fellow, and not

exactly to my taste. His figure was very much like Sir Montie's — slim and elegant. His clothes fitted him to perfection, and were of very high quality.

But I didn't quite like his eyes. They were extremely dark—so dark that it was quite impossible to distinguish any decided colour. They struck me as being foreign-looking, and the expression which lurked in them seemed to be a half-smiling sneer. His hair was nearly black, and was brushed right back from his forehead, and plastered down. It was of an astonishing length.

His face was very pale and sallow, and his nose was slightly aquiline in shape. I couldn't help noticing that he kept his lips parted in a half-smile, revealing two rows of perfectly even teeth.

"I'm a chap who believes in plain speaking," I said quietly. "I don't altogether like your tone, De Valerie. But I daresay you'll shake down before long. And you mustn't expect to have everything you like at St. Frank's. You behaved jolly decently this afternoon, and every fellow here admires you for it."

Cecil de Valerie nodded.

"That's only right," he said calmly. "I saved that man's life at the risk of my own. I nearly went under during the struggle with him. But I do things properly when I start—and I expect everybody to realise my full value. You'll probably understand that I'm not the same class as you, and I don't propose to make any particular friends. As a matter of fact, there's nobody at St. Frank's who's worthy of being on friendly terms with me—"

De Valerie's extraordinary utterance was interrupted by a growing growl of indignation. By the remarks which the fellows candidly gave voice to, I understood that De Valerie had been boasting about his rescue from the very moment he had come down. Naturally, the Removites had lost patience.

They had all been prepared to make a great fuss of the new fellow. But for him to brag and take on airs was a little above the limit. Nobody wanted to quarrel with him, and the majority melted from the common-room, and proceeded to their studies. Handforth departed with a snort.

"It's not my business to criticise you, De Valerie," I remarked. "But I can give you a word of advice. If I were

you, I'd adopt a little less haughtiness—"

"If you were me," interrupted De Valerie, "you'd do exactly as I'm doing. You'd better understand that I'm going my own way. In fact, I'm not going to stand any interference—from anybody."

"Look here, you rotter—" began Watson hotly.

"We don't want any squabble," I interrupted. "You'd better come along to the Remove passage, De Valerie. There are one or two things I want to tell you, and I'll show you your study, too."

De Valerie nodded, and followed us out of the common-room. We went straight to Study C, and I closed the door rather grimly. I had decided, in fact, to give the new fellow another word of advice—in spite of the rebuff I had already received.

"Not so bad," he said, looking round him critically. "The fact is, I'm rather disappointed with St. Frank's. These passages and studies remind me of a rotten workhouse."

"Begad! Did you expect to find Turkey carpets, an' rich tapestries?" drawled Sir Montie mildly. "An' did you expect to have a couple of footmen to wait on you, dear fellow? Pardon me, that's my mistake. I didn't mean to say 'dear fellow.' You're not anythin' of the sort!"

Sir Montie managed to put quite a large amount of sarcasm into his tone. But it was so quiet and languid that it was not in the least objectionable.

"No, I didn't expect that," said De Valerie, taking out a gold cigarette-case, and calmly opening it. "But I certainly thought that there'd be decent studies here—and not poky holes of this sort. By Jove! The walls are only distempere'd—like a confounded infirmary! It strikes me that St. Frank's is a low-down place altogether. Don't you think so?"

Montie still smiled, but his eyes were gleaming. Tommy Watson seemed to be on the point of exploding; and I only kept my temper with difficulty. We were fast realising that the new-comer was far from being "the right sort." On the contrary, he was most decidedly the wrong sort!

His habitual sneer got on our nerves. His unpleasant manner of speaking, and his disparaging remarks concerning St. Frank's, were all calculated to set our

backs up. I began to feel quite kindly towards Handforth.

To add to our rising anger, De Valerie coolly proceeded to light a cigarette. Tommy and Montie looked on with scandalised eyes—but I acted promptly.

After the first puff, I jerked the cigarette from between the fellow's lips, and flung it into the fire.

"You're not going to start those games here!" I said angrily. "This is my study, don't forget, and I don't allow anybody to pollute it with rotten cigarette smoke. It strikes me, De Valerie, that you're going the right way to work to make yourself unpopular!"

The new boy's eyes flashed, but he still smiled.

"That cigarette cost three-halfpence," he said quietly. "Perhaps you'll pay up?"

I couldn't help grinning.

"If you light another one, it'll make threepence, won't it?" I said. "You stand as much chance of getting paid as you do of reaching the moon! Now, look here! I'm not going to waste any words. To be quite plain, De Valerie, I'm fed up with you! You acted bravely this afternoon, but all that's done with. You'll oblige me by leaving this study at once! You'll find your quarters in Study M, farther down. Housemaster's orders," I added curtly.

De Valerie eyed me steadily.

"You owe me three-halfpence," he said evenly. "It's not the amount I'm thinking about—it's the principle. You've destroyed some of my property, and I don't allow that!"

"You don't allow it, eh?" I said pleasantly. "That's rather amusing. Montie, old man, open the door, will you? Now, De Valerie, are you going to walk out quietly, or do you prefer to make your exit on your face?"

I spoke smoothly, but my tone was unmistakable. De Valerie laughed in a very curious way, and lounged out of the study without a word.

Montie closed the door, and breathed a sigh.

"Do you know, dear boys, that chap makes me uneasy," he confessed. "I don't know why, but I have a sort of feelin' of repulsion. He makes me long for the open air, begad! Ain't the air a lot sweeter now?"

"Hang the chap!" I said irritably. "Let's get tea ready!"

We didn't discuss Cecil de Valerie any further until we were sitting down to a

comfortable meal. Now and again fellows would put their heads into the study and make remarks concerning the new boy in the Remove, and nobody had a good word to say. In spite of De Valerie's splendid start, he was already regarded by the whole Remove as an utter bounder.

Just before tea was over, Owen major and Justin B. Farman, of Study H, kicked the door open and grinned in at us.

"Heard the latest?" asked Owen major.

"What's happened?" I said. "Some startling change in the Government? Have they abolished all red tape—?"

"You ass! That'll never happen in this world!" said Owen. "I was talking about De Valerie. He's paid Kemp out of Study M."

"Paid him out?" said Watson, staring.

"Sure!" replied Farman. "I guess that black-haired boob is just flingin' his money around in a real dandy way! You'd smile! He sure has a heap of dollars lyin' loose."

"I don't know what you're getting at," I said shortly.

"Waal, I guess De Valerie has paid Kemp twenty-five dollars to quit Study M good an' quick," explained Farman. "Say, it was a cinch. Kemp was right there. He just toted along to Study I like a lamb."

I frowned.

"De Valerie's paid Kemp to clear out of the study?" I repeated. "I say, that's against the rules, you know. Still, if Kemp's ass enough to do it, that's his look-out. There's only two fellows in Study I, so it doesn't much matter. And you say that De Valerie gave him five quid?"

"Yanked it out as calm as you like," said Owen major. "He's got Study M all to himself now—and he's welcome! He's a jolly mysterious bounder! Even Fullwood and Co. are fighting shy of taking him into the nutty fold."

I was a bit surprised at that. I had been expecting to hear that Fullwood and Co., the Nuts of St. Frank's, would welcome the new fellow with open arms. He seemed to be just the sort to appeal to Ralph Leslie Fullwood.

Just for a moment I thought of having a word with Kemp with the idea of persuading him to return to his own study. De Valerie hadn't the slightest right to turn him out. But as it had been quite

a voluntary exit on Kemp's part, I couldn't very well say anything.

But it was like De Valerie's cheek to assert himself to such a degree on his very first evening at the school. Upon the whole, however, it was just as well that he had got a study to himself.

He was quite different from any other fellow in the Remove. Owen major had used the right word. Cecil de Valerie was certainly mysterious. I can't exactly say how, but everybody had this impression. And he was distinctly disliked. Somehow or other, he created a feeling of repulsion.

We were soon to be surprised even further by the new fellow's conduct. Study M, of course, was furnished after a style. There was a table and a chair and a bookcase, and there was linoleum of a nondescript pattern upon the floor. The cosiness of a fellow's study largely depended upon the additions of furniture he could afford. Study C, for example, was one of the cheeriest in the whole passage. Sir Montie had squandered quite a lot of money on easy-chairs and rugs, and I'd bought several other things. Tommy, whose pocket-money was limited, had been excused.

De Valerie wasn't exactly the fellow to put up with bare tables and cold linoleum. Before a week was out, I anticipated, he would have a cartload of luxurious furniture on the spot.

But the new boy had no intention of waiting.

Less than an hour after tea I discovered that De Valerie had been making a round of the studies—even approaching those in the Fifth-Form passage. He had purchased all manner of articles for spot cash—rugs, mats, bookcases, easy-chairs, and so forth. For all these articles their respective owners had demanded prices hugely in excess of their worth. They had expected to get about half what they asked. But Cecil de Valerie had paid up in every case without question. No matter how exorbitant the price, he had raised no protest.

In fact, De Valerie had been throwing his money about amazingly, and scores of the fellows found quite a number of things they were anxious to dispose of. But, having furnished Study M to his satisfaction, De Valerie sought nothing further except one particular brand of article.

For some reason, he seemed to have a passion for cushions. The Removites

were astounded, and practically every cushion in the whole passage found its way into Study M. And there was great satisfaction among the youthful tradesmen.

Having obtained all he required, De Valerie retired into his study and closed the door. Teddy Long ventured to peep in, but he was subjected to such a cuffing that he rushed to the common-room, demanding instant reprisals. But as Long was the sneak of the Ancient House, nobody felt inclined to sympathise with him for having received a well-earned rebuff.

"I can't make the fellow out," said Hubbard, shaking his head. "Paid me ten bob for that rotten old rug I had. It wasn't worth two! I only asked him ten for a lark!"

"He seems to have pots of money," remarked Gulliver. "He ought to make a jolly good addition to the Co. when he's shaken down."

"Dear boy, I really fail to see how there can be a good addition to your Co.," said Sir Montie languidly. "A bad addition, if you like, but not a good one. I've got an idea that De Valerie will steer clear of Study A."

"You can keep your ideas to yourself," sneered Fullwood, who was chief of that ill-famed apartment. "We'll get hold of De Valerie before long. We'll make him follow our lead in everything!"

"I don't think so!" said Cecil de Valerie smoothly.

He had entered the common-room so silently that everybody turned in surprise.

"Blessed if you don't glide about like a rotten snake!" growled Handforth.

De Valerie looked straight at Fullwood.

"I think you said that you would get hold of me?" he exclaimed softly. "Believe me, you won't! I stand alone. There is nobody in this hole who is worthy of becoming friendly with me!"

"You think a lot of yourself, don't you?" sneered Gulliver.

"I do," said De Valerie. "I think so much of myself that I prefer to keep aloof. I have come here to tell everybody that Study M is forbidden. I don't allow any intruders. Is that thoroughly understood?"

The Remove gasped.

"It isn't thoroughly understood!" I said grimly. "It seems to me, De Valerie, that you've stuck yourself on a

pedestal. You'll soon get knocked off it; that's all. As for Study M being private, that's rot! No junior study is private. If I want to come and speak to you about anything—and that's not likely—I shall come. You'd better understand that we're not going to put up with any nonsense."

De Valerie looked at me calmly.

"Study M is private," he insisted. "I have my own ways of living, and I want to be undisturbed. Visitors will be unwelcome. In fact, should anybody disturb me when I am in private, I shall at once compel them to leave the study!"

And De Valerie, without another word, turned on his heel and left the common-room. It was, perhaps, as well that he did so, for had he remained he would have been subjected to a perfect chorus of abuse. The Removites were in no humour to put up with any more of his rot. As Handforth forcefully remarked, the fellow was above the limit.

"It's no good making a fuss," I said, smoothing the troubled waters. "He's a queer chap, and he's best by himself. If he tries any silly games, he'll be put in his place. Talk doesn't hurt anybody."

"I'm blessed if I'm going to be dictated to like that!" declared Handforth determinedly. "Huh! Study M forbidden! That's likely, ain't it? Not going to allow any intruders! My only hat! I'll knock the rotter's face into next week!"

"Don't be an ass, Handy——"

"I suppose you're not going to dictate to me, Bennett?" bawled Handforth. "This chap's got to be shoved in his place! I'm going up to his study now, and I'm going to march right in!"

"Hear, hear!"

"We'll come with you!"

I could see that the Removites were taken up by Handforth's idea, and, in a way, I was quite in favour of it myself. As Form captain, I considered that it was my place to lead the party—or, at least, to go with it.

When the fellows made a move for the door, therefore, I took care to be among the first out in the lobby. Montie and Tommy were close beside me. Handforth stalked on ahead, with a very fixed expression on his face.

Study M was soon reached.

"You'd better knock," I said. "It's only right——"

"Knock be blowed!" snorted Hand-

forth, grasping the handle and turning it.

He evidently thought that the door would open, for he made as if to walk into the study. The door, however, remained closed, and Handforth's rather prominent nose flattened itself against the woodwork.

"Yow!" he gasped. "Oh, my hat!"

"Your nose, you mean, Handy boy!" murmured Sir Montie.

"Locked!" said Handforth furiously. "I'll—I'll show him!"

A voice came from within.

"Go away!" it said testily. "Go away, confound you!"

"By George!" hissed Edward Oswald. "By George!"

When Handforth was thoroughly aroused, there was no stopping him. As his study chums had repeatedly complained, he simply went off his rocker if any other fellow dared to thwart him. As this happened several times daily, it struck me that Handforth was a likely candidate for the nearest lunatic asylum. But Church and McClure always exaggerated.

"You're bothering me!" came De Valerie's voice irritably. "Go away!"

Handforth simply glared at the door with enough intensity to bore a hole through it.

"Bothering him!" he gasped. "Oh, my only topper!"

Without any further ado, Handforth charged. I was just about to tell him to chuck the thing up for the time being. But Handforth wasn't to be stopped. The lock of Study M wasn't a particularly good one. All the studies, in fact, were only provided with flimsy locks; there was no necessity to have massive ones.

Crash!

Handforth's shoulder struck the door with a thud, and the lock gave way at once. The door opened so suddenly, in fact, that Handforth blundered right into the study before he could pull himself up. I was immediately behind him, with three or four other fellows.

"Now then, you rotter——" began Handforth furiously.

But he paused quite abruptly, and his eyes bulged.

"Great Scott!" he gasped. "What the—what the dickens——"

I think I was just as astonished as Handforth himself, for a most surprising sight met our gaze. Cecil de Valerie was squatting before a glowing fire. His

touch consisted of a pile of cushions, among which he reposed luxuriously. The new fellow was attired in a flowery silk dressing-gown, and a curious-looking cigarette was between his lips.

The electric-light was not on, and the only glow in the room was that of the fire. A haze filled the air, and there was a strong smell of Egyptian or other Eastern tobacco from the cigarette.

De Valerie leapt to his feet with a noise which sounded like a snarl. His cigarette was thrown into the fire, and he stood before us, a queer figure in his luxurious dressing-gown.

"How—how did you get in?" he demanded, his voice low with passion.

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

"Go from this study! Go from it at once!" exclaimed De Valerie furiously.

"I will have privacy, do you hear? Privacy!"

"Let's get out!" I said bluntly.

Handforth's anger had gone, and we all filed out of the study, strangely subdued. The extraordinary behaviour of De Valerie filled everybody with amazement. The fellow was mysterious. He seemed out of place at St. Frank's.

Needless to say, he was almost the sole topic of discussion among the juniors. They didn't know what to make of him. Before bedtime he had procured a stout lock from somebody—taken from a box, I believe—and this he fastened to his door. But he and I were destined to have another little exchange of words before bedtime came.

During the interval, however, the gov'nor had a somewhat surprising adventure; and as I wasn't with him at the time, he has consented to put it down in his own words.

CHAPTER III.

(Recorded by Nelson Lee.)

A REALLY SURPRISING ADVENTURE.

BELLTON post-office closed at seven o'clock sharp, and as the time was seven minutes to the hour, I walked down the lane briskly. My errand was a very simple one—I wished to purchase a dozen penny stamps, and post a letter.

The evening was very dark, and the frost was harder than ever. The road beneath my feet was hard, and glittered

in the flare of a match when I paused to light a cigarette.

Not long before I had visited Mr. Howard Dale in his bedroom. The man seemed weak and exhausted, but I was satisfied that he would show great improvement by the morning. In my opinion he was far more nervous than hurt.

Undoubtedly his life had been saved by De Valerie, the new boy in my House. I had seen very little of De Valerie, and had heard less. Nipper had had no opportunity of chatting with me.

I must acknowledge, however, that a vague doubt was in my mind. De Valerie had acted with splendid courage; nobody could deny that. But there was something about his eyes which I did not exactly care for. Perhaps I was wrong—perhaps my impression had been a false one. Yet I seldom make mistakes of that kind. I determined to seek Nipper's opinion regarding the new boy.

Just outside the post-office I paused for a moment, in order to dislodge some caked snow from my boots. The old High Street of Bellton was dark and gloomy. Here and there a dim glow came from the village shops, but the lights were very subdued.

The post-office, perhaps, was the brightest of all, for a lamp was fixed over the doorway, and cast a direct light downwards—clearly illuminating the patch immediately in front of the door, leaving all else in gloom.

I was just about to step forward when I paused. A man was emerging from the post-office, and the doorway, I judge, had been constructed by a builder who laboured under the erroneous impression that all people were thin. There was certainly insufficient room for two normal people to pass one another between the doorposts.

I looked at the man carelessly, my thoughts dwelling on other matters. But then, in a flash, I gave my full attention to the study of this stranger's face. I don't think I started, but my heart beat more quickly.

He was counting some stamps he had just purchased, and paused for a moment or two in the full light of the overhead lamp. I, of course, stood in the darkness outside the radius. This, although I could see him clearly, he knew nothing of my presence.

"By James!" I murmured. "Can it be possible?"

It is idle for me to beat about the bush. As a clear matter of fact, I believed that I had recognised the fellow as an agent of—the Circle of Terror! The thing seemed almost too absurd for serious thought.

And yet, in that moment, I recalled a certain police raid. My friend, Detective-Inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard, had acted upon certain information which I had been able to supply. The raid had been a success, although one or two Circle of Terror agents had escaped.

This man, who now stood in the doorway of Bellton post-office, was one of the criminals who had succeeded in eluding the police. I did not know his name, but his face was very familiar to me. I don't think I make many blunders regarding faces. True, the man wore a moustache now, but that made very little difference.

While I was still startled, he moved away and walked briskly up the High Street. I did not pause a second—I followed him. I don't know exactly why I did so; except, perhaps, that my instinct bade me take this course.

My mission to the post office was quite forgotten. The mere suspicion that Circle of Terror agents were in a quiet spot such as Bellton, made me strangely uneasy. I tried to convince myself that the whole idea was preposterous; that I had been deceived by a chance resemblance. But no; my better judgment told me to follow this stranger. For that he certainly was. A stranger to Bellton, but not a stranger to me.

It was quite an easy task to shadow the man. He was unsuspecting, and never once glanced back. Even had he done so, he would have seen nothing to arouse his fears. Shadowing is not so easy as it sounds, but I had had very considerable practice. This statement, I believe, is rather unnecessary.

As I walked my brain was busy.

I thought of the matter clearly and rationally. I tried to discover any reason for a member of the Circle of Terror being in Bellton. I tried in vain. Of course, the fellow may have been taking a brief holiday—but that was thin. Nobody would come to Bellton for a holiday, especially at that time of the year.

I reviewed in my mind the events connected with my own campaign against that vast criminal organisation, with Professor Cyrus Zingrave at its head,

which had styled itself the Circle of Terror.

At the commencement of its "run" the Circle of Terror had met with disquieting success. Their coups had been vast and successful in nearly every case. After many perils, and much hard work, I had discovered—with Nipper's assistance—the fact that Professor Cyrus Zingrave, the master criminal, was at the head of affairs.

Many adventures had taken place. On more than one occasion Nipper and I were within an ace of going under. Invariably, however, we managed to come out on top. At last I had deemed it advisable to take Scotland Yard into my full confidence, and I had revealed the fact that the Circle was under the leadership of Professor Zingrave.

The great criminal society was in secret possession of an island off the coast of Scotland. Cathrey Island, as it was called, was merely a bare rock—seemingly barren and desolate. In reality, however, the place was a veritable underground fortress. Huge caverns had been transformed into workshops, and the whole place was bristling with machine-guns.

In conjunction with Scotland Yard, I had planned a great raid. As a result, Cathrey Island was captured intact, with over a hundred of the Circle's most valuable men. A vast amount of booty had fallen into the hands of the police, and Professor Zingrave had been forced to seek safety in flight.

The Island Stronghold had been smashed, and the Circle's power was diminished to a very large extent. Several police raids had been successful, and Scotland Yard fondly believed that the danger was practically over.

I, however, held the view that the Circle's inactivity was a mere lull. So long as Professor Cyrus Zingrave remained at liberty, there could be no end to the Circle. Sooner or later, I was convinced, the infamous society would become active again.

Before I could give my attention to further work in connection with the Circle, I was commissioned to go in pursuit of a forger, Huntley Ferrol by name, who had fled to South America. I had traced this man northwards until, ultimately, I found myself at Snake City, in the Western States of America. It was here that I fell foul of the Fu Chang Tong—the murderous Chinese Secret

Society which was, in a way, far more dangerous than the Circle of Terror itself. Dangerous, that is, so far as my own personal safety was concerned.

Nipper and I, in consequence, were at St. Frank's College. Rather to my surprise and relief, we had not been traced; and were, indeed, keenly enjoying the new mode of life. And we had managed to take part in several exciting affairs which kept us well in touch with our true profession.

My friend Lennard, of the Yard, was one of those who knew my secret; and he had kept me well posted up with information regarding the Circle's activities. Very little had occurred, and Lennard intimated that it was generally believed that Zingrave had acknowledged defeat, and had fled from the country.

Personally, I was doubtful. Was that actually the case, or was the Circle gathering its strength for another series of onslaughts?

And what did the presence of this agent in Bellton portend?

Was he still actively engaged upon the Circle's work, or—— But I brought my thoughts up sharply. Conjecture was useless.

The man appeared to be leaving the village completely behind. He was going in the direction of St. Frank's, and before long passed the massive gates of the old school. He went right past, and I fell to wondering what his destination could be.

So far as I knew there was only one house in that direction before the bleak expanse of Bannington Moor was reached — with the exception of a few labourer's cottages. This house was an old deserted place known as the Mount. It had been empty for month's past, and was locally reputed to be haunted. This, of course, was absurd—a mere villagers' tale.

Curiously enough, some words which Dr. Brett had said to me a day or two earlier, now impressed themselves on my mind with a new significance. At the time I had scarcely given the matter a thought. Dr. Brett was the village medico, and a good fellow in every way.

I recollected now that he had casually remarked that the Mount had been taken by some strangers from London. I had not thought anything at the time; but now my mind was busy.

This Circle of Terror agent—as I

believed him to be—was undoubtedly making for the gloomy old house on the edge of the moor. He was quite unaware of my presence, and when the gateway of the Mount was reached he turned into the untidy drive, and walked round the path to the rear.

I paused irresolutely at the gateway.

The old house was in total darkness, and seemed, indeed, to be as deserted as ever. Trees grew thickly in the grounds, almost surrounding the house. I did not feel surprised that the old place should have such an unsavoury reputation. It looked grim and forbidding against the dim skyline.

What should my next move be?

I didn't quite care for the idea of tamely retracing my steps. This matter deserved careful investigation. Although, temporarily a schoolmaster at St. Frank's, I was nevertheless just as keen as ever to pursue my campaign against the infamous Circle of Terror.

My common-sense told me that the Mount had not been rented for mere pleasure purposes. It seemed to me that the Circle was planning some operation in the district. In that case, I felt justified in looking into the matter.

Gently pushing open the gate, I stepped within the grounds. The night was so dark that there was a little risk of my being seen. I had no fixed idea, beyond the fact that I would have a general look round.

When I arrived at the rear I saw that one of the lower windows was illuminated. A dark green blind completely obscured the light, and there was little hope of being able to see anything within.

Nevertheless, I crept silently towards the spot. There might possibly be a crevice through which I could catch a glimpse of the interior. Perhaps I was foolish to venture so close.

At all events, my luck was quite out.

I had just reached the wall, and was sliding along it in order to reach the window, when my outstretched hand hit something hard. My knuckles were grazed, and I instinctively felt that the obstruction was toppling over. I made a desperate attempt to save it, but failed.

The next second there was a hollow thud—quite loud, and I stumbled forward, tripping over something which rolled before me. The noise created was most alarming. Just for a moment I wondered what I should do.

And then I heard a voice.

"Somebody outside!" it said sharply. "Go round to the front, man, and I'll —"

I heard no more, but I knew well enough that the alarm had been given. My only means of escape was by traversing the side path to the front gate—and this, it seemed, was cut off. Before I could get clear one of the occupants of the house would encounter me. If possible, I wished to avoid this.

The yard in which I stood was surrounded by a high wall. There may have been doors or gates leading elsewhere, but the darkness was so intense that I could not distinguish anything. And so, as a sudden idea came into my head, I adopted it without the slightest hesitation.

Hesitation, indeed, would have been fatal.

I knew that the obstacle into which I had blundered was a light barrel. It was empty, of course, or it would not have toppled over so easily. I felt down with my hands and found that the barrel was on its side.

Even at that moment I heard a rear door being swiftly unbolted.

With a heave I lifted the barrel clean up, holding it by the top edges. Then, carefully, I lowered the barrel over my head and body, fervently hoping that it would be large enough to accommodate my bulk.

My hope was justified. By bending my legs I was able to lower the barrel until it touched the ground. I, of course, crouched within, completely concealed. The appearance of the yard was quite unaltered—except that the barrel was now upside down. Would this be noticed?

The thought struck me that it might have been upside down all the while; I wasn't sure. If so my chance of eluding discovery was even greater. Under the circumstances, however, I felt that I had acted in the best way possible.

Through the chinks of the barrel I caught a glimpse of a light, and heard footsteps. Somebody passed quite near to me, and then came to a halt. As he did so other footsteps sounded.

"Queer!" I heard a voice exclaim. "There's nobody here. You must have been mistaken——"

"Nonsense! You heard the row yourself."

"A cat or a dog, probably——"

The pair had moved off a little way, and I was only able to catch a word here and there. After about three minutes the two men gave up the search, and made for the rear door. I smiled grimly to myself as I heard their retreating footsteps.

And then, at that moment, a sudden thrill ran through me. Two words had come to my ears with singular distinctness—just two words from a whole sentence. In short, I heard one of the men exclaim: "Boy De Valerie."

Then the door closed and bolts were shot.

Without losing a second I slipped from beneath the barrel, leaving it bottom upwards, and hastened round the house. I ought to have congratulated myself upon my lucky escape. The danger, of course, had been slight, but the consequences might have been serious had I, "Mr. Alvington," been found upon such an errand.

But I did not congratulate myself; my thoughts were too busy in another direction. What did those two words imply? De Valerie! He was a new boy at St. Frank's, and I could not help coming to the conclusion that some plot was afoot concerning the new arrival at the school.

The Circle of Terror had engineered the affair—and that meant that it would be done thoroughly. But was I right? Was there a plot against Cecil de Valerie?

As I walked back to St. Frank's I was very thoughtful.

I little suspected the events which were to follow!

CHAPTER IV.

(Nipper picks up the thread again.)

IN WHICH DE VALERIE MAKES ME WILD—
I VOW VENGEANCE, AND THEN SOMETHING
UNEXPECTED HAPPENS!

THE common-room was fairly crowded.

Most of the Remove fellows were crowding in groups in the vicinity of the big fire. It was close upon bedtime, and the fellows were having a little discussion.

The subject, of course, was Cecil de Valerie.

Everybody seemed to be talking at once, but Handforth's voice sounded megaphone-like above all the others. Sir

Montie Tregellis West and Watson and I were listening at the present moment.

"The fellow ain't natural!" declared Handforth. "He—he's mysterious!"

"You said that before, Handforth—"

"Haven't I had reason to?" demanded Handforth. "I bar chaps who smoke rotten cigarettes, and sit on cushions and loll about in silk dressing-gowns! The chap's queer—I believe he's escaped from a giddy asylum!"

"You ought to know, anyhow!" remarked Hubbard casually.

"What do you mean by that, you ass?"

"Well, you speak as if you've met De Valerie before," explained Hubbard. "Your mention of a lunatic asylum explained matters. Perhaps he was one of your pals there before you were released—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth glared round him speechlessly for a moment.

"Did—did you imply that I'm a lunatic, Arthur Hubbard?" he roared at last.

Hubbard looked surprised.

"That ain't news to you, is it?" he asked. "Why, everybody knows it, Handy. That's why we treat you so kindly. Lunatics have to be humoured, you know. You can't say you ain't humoured, Handforth—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Who says I'm a lunatic?" bawled Handforth, glaring round.

"I do!" replied every fellow in the room with one accord.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth's fury faded, and he shrugged his shoulders.

"What else can a fellow expect?" he asked bitterly. "I've had nothing but sneers ever since I've been at St. Frank's. Just because I happen to be brainier than anybody else! That's the reward of genius!"

"You've been getting a lot of rewards that ain't yours!" grimed Tommy Watson. "Handy, old chap, you're all right in the main, and we can stick you at a pinch. But you mustn't—"

"Sti-sti-stick me!" stuttered Handforth. "Why, you thundering fathead—"

Words failed him, and he commenced slowly and deliberately to roll up his sleeves. When Handforth felt that argu-

ment was useless, he invariably resorted to fistic force. Being a burly fellow, this kind of argument generally succeeded where mere words failed.

"Don't be an ass, Handforth," I said grinning. "I never knew such a chap for wrapping. You'll get bumped if you're not careful—"

At this moment the door opened and Cecil de Valerie appeared. He lounged in unconcernedly, his well brushed black hair glistening in the electric light. His very walk was calculated to annoy the fellows. He seemed to consider that he was a being apart—somebody far superior to all others.

"I suppose it's getting near bedtime?" he asked casually.

Nobody answered him, and this was rather good. He had evidently expected that everybody would speak at once. A scowl passed over his face for a second, but then vanished.

"Manners are evidently unknown at St. Frank's!" he exclaimed pleasantly.

"I'm not surprised, judging by what I've seen of the place. I certainly expected to find a decent school, and not a place like a reformatory—"

"You seem to be familiar with reformatories, don't you?" asked Sir Montie laughingly.

De Valerie flushed.

"What do you mean?" he asked fiercely.

"I was only judgin' by your own words," answered Tregellis West with perfect serenity. "You were comparin' St. Frank's to a reformatory, you know. That's as much as sayin' that you're well acquainted with those excellent places, for—"

De Valerie scowled.

"I suppose you think you're funny?" he asked sneeringly.

"Begad! You needn't accuse me of bein' funny!" protested Montie. "I wouldn't dream of darin' to joke with you—I wouldn't really. I'm only a common fellow—a mere baronet—an' it would be shockin'ly presumptuous on my part to take such a liberty with a fellow of your high standard!"

There were many chuckles, and De Valerie quite understood that the urbane Montie was making fun of him. He deliberately turned his back.

"I just want to tell everybody here that I want privacy—that I mean to stand alone," he said evenly. "It's a

confounded shame that I should be put into a rotten kid's form in any case——"

"A what?" roared a dozen voices.

"A rotten kid's form, I said——"

I stepped forward.

"Look here, De Valerie," I said curtly. "If you can't speak civilly, you'd better not speak at all! You're going the right way to work to get yourself severely ragged—and I expect you know what that means. We're not going to stand just as many insults as you like to concoct."

"I can say what I like!" said De Valerie sourly.

"Oh, no you can't!" I cut in. "The Remove isn't a kids' form, and it's not a rotten form. And as for your wanting privacy—well, you'll get that all right. You won't find many fellows who are willing to associate with you. Even Fullwood and Co. will draw the line at such an outsider as you!"

De Valerie smiled pleasantly.

"And who the deuce are you to jaw at me?" he demanded.

"I am captain of the Ancient House Remove—that's all," I replied. "And I'm not speaking personally—I'm speaking for the whole form."

"Hear, hear!"

"Good for you, Benny!"

"It's no more than I expected," said Cecil de Valerie calmly. "But I'm going to finish what I had to say. Study M is my private room, and there's only one kid who will be permitted to enter it."

"Yourself, I suppose?" asked Montie leisurely.

"No, not myself!" rapped out De Valerie, clearly understanding Montie's meaning. "Nobody but Heath, of the Third, will have permission to go into Study M. I'm going to have a proper lock fitted, and he'll have a duplicate key."

"An' why is young Heath to be so amazin'ly privileged?" asked Tregellis-West, adjusting his pince-nez. "Why should a mere Third Former share the most exclusive study at St. Frank's, an' enjoy your shinin' company?"

De Valerie sneered.

"Because Heath is my fag," he replied tartly.

"Your which?" asked a dozen voices.

"You heard what I said!"

"Well, I'd like to hear it again," I exclaimed. "Did you say 'your fag,' De Valerie?"

"I did!"

"Perhaps you're not aware of the rules?" I went on. "The Remove is a junior Form, and we're not allowed to have fags. The very idea is preposterous. Why, even the Fifth aren't allowed fags."

"That's nothing to do with me," said De Valerie calmly. "I've arranged to pay Heath, of the Third, ten shillings a week to do all my fagging. He'll get tea ready for me, and tidy up my study——"

There was a general roar of indignation.

"You rotter!"

"It's against the rules!"

"Begad! It's simply shockin'!"

I set my teeth firmly.

"Hold on, you fellows!" I said angrily. "Now, De Valerie, we'd better settle this matter at once. Were you joking, or were you serious, when you said that you were going to pay young Heath to fag for you?"

"I never joke!" said De Valerie acidly. "The thing is arranged."

"Well, it's going to be disarranged!" I declared. "You're in the Remove, De Valerie, and I'm skipper of the Remove. But this isn't a question of my opinion—every fellow in the Form is with me and backs me up. You won't be allowed to have a Third-former fagging for you. And the very idea of hiring a kid is too steep. If I find Heath doing anything for you to-morrow I shall report the matter to the Housemaster!"

De Valerie regarded me balefully.

"You sneaking worm——"

"My hat! Smash him, Bennett!"

"Sneaking be blowed!" roared Handforth. "There's no question of sneaking about it. If you don't tell Alvy, Benny, everybody else will! My only topper! The sauce of it! His first day at St. Frank's, and arranging to have a fag!"

"It ain't going to be allowed, that's all!"

"Rather not!"

Everybody was of one voice. Even Fullwood and Co. joined in the general protest. They wouldn't have drawn the line at having fags, if such a thing had been possible; but as it wasn't possible, they felt that they were safe in being justly indignant.

De Valerie's dark eyes blazed.

"What business is it of yours?" he snarled. "It's my money, and if Heath



Cecil de Valerie was squatting before the fire. His couch consisted of a pile of cushions, among which he reposed luxuriously. He was attired in a flowery silk dressing-gown, and was smoking a curious-looking cigarette.— See page 11.)

likes to work for me, that's his affair—and mine! You can all go to the dickens! I don't care a hang for you! I'm going to have a fag——"

"You're not!"

"Bump the rotter!"

"Rag him!"

De Valerie stepped back, his hands in his pockets, and eyed the angry juniors calmly and sneeringly.

"Dear fellows, ain't this a time for action?" asked Sir Montie quietly. "This genial feller requires a hidin'—he does really. I'm willin' to oblige you know. I'm a most obligin' chap. Who'll hold my coat an' glasses?"

"Don't be an ass, Montie," I said sharply. "We're not going to fight the cad." I turned to the others. "Am I speaking for the Form?" I asked.

"Yes!"

"Well, then, De Valerie, I'll say that you're ignorant of the school customs—that's putting it mildly," I exclaimed quietly. "But you'd better understand, once and for all, that no fagging is allowed. I'll see Heath before I go to bed, and tell him that he's not to go near your study——"

"You interfering hound!" snarled De Valerie.

I clenched my fists.

"I'll give you one second to take that back!" I exclaimed in a low voice. "Just one second, and then——"

Cecil de Valerie's eyes seemed to blaze with appalling fury. His face distorted itself to such an extent that he became almost hideous. And then, in a moment, he flung out his hands and pitched me with terrific force against Sir Montie. Naturally I had been quite unprepared for the attack.

I went over with a crash, taking Montie with me. The other Removites were so startled that they didn't move. De Valerie stood smiling and calm. His fury had lasted scarcely a couple of seconds.

"I don't stand any interference!" he exclaimed silkily.

He turned on his heel and left the common-room before I could regain my feet—and before any of the other fellows could stop him. But as the door closed an angry uproar arose. I was simply boiling with anger.

"The—the cad!" I gasped.

"Begad! The shockin' ruffian!" said Sir Montie mildly. "Just look at my

clothes, dear fellows! I'm horribly dusty, an'——"

I didn't wait for Montie to finish. With several other Removites I dashed out of the common-room. This was a case for instant action. De Valerie must learn that he couldn't give way to such violent fits of passion with impunity. We dashed out into the lobby—and then paused in dismay.

For the new boy was calmly talking to Morrow, the head prefect of the Ancient House.

"Your bedroom?" Morrow was saying. "Yes, I'll show you, young 'un. It's just bed-time, anyhow. Now then, you noisy kids, what's the matter?"

"We want to scrag that rotter!" roared Handforth.

Morrow frowned.

"You'd better clear off!" he said, with unwonted sharpness. "It's not the game to rag a new kid on his first night. You know that well enough. This way, Valentine!"

"My name's De Valerie!" said that cheerful youth haughtily.

Morrow regarded him curiously.

"Oh! is it?" he asked. "I knew it began with a 'V.' And you'd better modify your tone, kid. Come on!"

The prefect went off with De Valerie. This, I realised, after a moment's thought, was just as well. It would be far better to settle with the new fellow in the morning. But neither Sir Montie nor I were going to allow the insult to pass unheeded.

Just then, too, the bell rang for bed. And the Remove trooped upstairs, talking excitedly and indignantly about the "nerve" of Cecil de Valerie. Tommy Watson was particularly indignant.

"I'm blessed if I'd wait till the morning!" he exclaimed warmly, as we were walking upstairs behind the rest. "I vote we three teach De Valerie a lesson to-night. It's our study that's been insulted, don't forget!"

"We'd better not have any ragging!"

"Rats!" said Tommy indignantly. "My idea is to lie awake till about eleven o'clock, and then creep to the new chap's bedroom. We'll take a sponge of cold water with us, and squeeze it over his beastly face!"

I nodded thoughtfully.

"It's not such a bad wheze," I admitted. "He deserves it, anyhow! The rotter badly needs a lesson!"

"Dear Benny," murmured Sir Montie, "I approve."

"Nothing more need be said!" I grinned.

And so, in that brisk manner, the matter was decided upon. We didn't guess what the result of that late escapade was to be!

There was a buzz in the dormitory as the Removites undressed. Many fellows wanted to know what I proposed to do.—how, in Handforth's elegant language, I meant to "slaughter the rotten outsider." I made vague replies, but assured the chaps that De Valerie wouldn't be allowed to escape punishment.

Several juniors bemoaned the fact that it was the rule for a new fellow to sleep in a separate bedroom on his first night. If De Valerie had been in the dormitory, he would have received a very severe ragging.

I meant to have mentioned this before, but overlooked it. It was customary at St. Frank's to allow a new boy to occupy a separate bedroom on his first night at the school. I had slept in it myself when I arrived. It was a comfortable little apartment at the end of the long passage, and was generally known as "the new kid's bedroom." After the first night, a new-comer was, of course, allotted a bed in the dormitory. This custom was well known to everybody, and had been in vogue for many years.

Some of the Removites didn't drop off to sleep until ten o'clock, but by a quarter past everybody slumbered—everybody, that is, with the exception of myself, for Tommy and Montie—the lazy beggars!—had dozed right off.

As eleven o'clock boomed out, I slipped from my bed and quickly shoved a dressing-gown on. It was freezing like the dickens, and I called Tommy Watson all sorts of pretty names; but we had decided to carry out the idea, and it wasn't my custom to abandon any project.

I awoke my chums quietly, and was somewhat indignant when Watson sleepily suggested that we had better give up the idea! Considering that he had thought of it, this was rather steep! I just yanked the clothes off him, and lugged him out.

"That's the way, dear boy," murmured Sir Montie. "Tommy, you lazy-bones, why can't you follow Benny's noble example? He's a wonder—that's

what he is! He keeps awake, an' gets up in this freezin' cold, an' doesn't quiver an eyelid. Begad, ain't it shockin'ly chilly?"

"I—I say!" mumbled Tommy, hugging his knees. "That was a rotten idea of mine——"

"Perhaps you'd like the sponge instead of De Valerie?" I said grimly.

Watson, who had got back on to his bed, hopped off hastily, and two or three minutes later we stole out of the dormitory. Our first objective was the bathroom, in order to procure the sponge.

There was one tiny electric-light glowing in the passage. This pointed to the fact that all the masters were not in bed, and so it was necessary to be cautious. But just as we were turning the corner, I drew back quickly.

"Sh-ssh!" I hissed.

A door had just opened. Peeping round the corner, we all three received a surprise, for the stranger who had been hauled out of the river—Mr. Howard Dale—had just emerged from his bedroom! This was queer! We thought that the man was too weak to move out of bed! But here he was, in dressing-gown and slippers, out in the passage!

And his next movement was even more surprising, for he crossed to the door a little way down, opened it with extreme caution, and entered. Mr. Dale had deliberately gone into Cecil de Valerie's bedroom! And the very manner in which he had done so pointed to a desire for secrecy.

"My hat, that's rummy!" I murmured. "What's the chap gone into De Valerie's bedroom for? That's spoilt our little game, anyhow. I say, I don't quite like it! It looks fishy!"

"Fishy, dear boy?"

"Well, what do you call it? Why should this man leave his bedroom at this hour and crawl into De Valerie's? They're strangers! At least, De Valerie said so. And didn't you spot the way he crept along on tiptoe?"

"It does seem rather funny!" remarked Tommy Watson thoughtfully.

"Look here! I'm going to tell the guv'nor," I whispered. "I expect he's in his bedroom by this time, and it's only just along the passage. Let's go and see, anyhow. Are you game?"

Sir Montie declared that he was game for anything, and we hurried along until we came to Nelson Lee's door. Tommy lost one of his slippers on the way, and

made a slight clatter about it, too. The guv'nor's bedroom was in the main corridor of the Ancient House, which ran at right angles from the other. A light from beneath the bedroom door told us that "Mr. Alvington" was within.

We tapped, and in a moment Nelson Lee appeared, fully dressed except for his coat and collar and tie.

"Dear me! Why are you boys out of your beds at this hour?" he asked, eyeing us keenly. "You know, Nipper, this won't do——"

"There's something queer happened, guv'nor," I whispered.

"Come inside, boys."

I rapidly told the guv'nor of what we had seen. Nelson Lee gave a slight start, and looked alert in a moment. I don't know why, exactly.

"So Dale went in De Valerie's bedroom?" he asked. "You are quite sure of this, Nipper?"

"Saw it with my own eyes, sir."

"Then I shall certainly investigate at once!" said the guv'nor briskly. "Come!"

We left his bedroom and passed along to the other passage. Lee entered De Valerie's room without preliminaries, and Montie and Tommy and I hovered about the doorway in silence. The room was totally dark, and Nelson Lee switched on the light.

We waited for about a minute, and then the guv'nor came out.

"You must have been mistaken, boys," he said softly. "De Valerie is in bed and asleep, and there is nobody else in the room. But I will just look into Mr. Dale's apartment to make positively sure."

Without waiting for us to reply, he entered the man's bedroom, but returned almost at once.

"Mr. Dale is in bed and asleep, too," he remarked. "I think you must have been dreaming——"

"Begad, we weren't, sir!"

"Of course we weren't!" I said quickly. "Mr. Dale must have gone back again—that's all! Perhaps he was only shamming sleep. Tommy, you ass, you dropped your shoe in the passage, and made a noise. That must have warned him——"

"My dear boys, don't make a mystery out of nothing!" interrupted the guv'nor. "There is no reason for you to upset yourselves. Get back to your dormitory at once! And, by the way, why were you out of it?"

I grinned.

"Oh, just a little recreation, guv'nor," I said easily.

"You young rascals!" said Nelson Lee. "Get off to bed! I won't press you for details, so you may consider yourselves lucky. Good-night, boys!"

"Good-night, sir."

We hurried back to the Remove dormitory, the sponging of De Valerie being allowed to slide. But Montie and Tommy and I were puzzled. I was rather uneasy, too. Somehow I couldn't convince myself that the incident had been of no importance.

It was left to the guv'nor to make further discoveries.

CHAPTER V.

(Nelson Lee resumes the narrative.)

THE LIGHT FROM DE VALERIE'S WINDOW— AN ASTOUNDING ENCOUNTER!

I WAS rather amused as I returned to my bedroom after sending Nipper and his chums back to their dormitory. I guessed that the boys had been up to some trick or other, but didn't want to be inquisitive.

Their story about the movements of Mr. Howard Dale was rather puzzling. To all appearances, the man was fast asleep when I entered his bedroom. Moreover, I had been given to understand that he was far from well.

Had the boys imagined the incident?

I could hardly credit this, for Nipper is a shrowd youngster. He, at least, would not make any such mistake.

I undressed leisurely and donned a dressing-gown over my pyjamas. Then, lighting my pipe, I sank into an easy-chair before the fire. The latter was blazing cheerfully, and I hardly cared to get into bed yet awhile.

For some few minutes I thought of the matter which had brought Nipper to me. In any case, why should Dale wish to enter De Valerie's bedroom? What possible reason could he have had? Had there been some previous arrangement?

I did not overlook the adventure I had had that evening at the old house on the edge of the moor. From the few words I had overheard, it seemed possible that some plot was afoot concerning Cecil de Valerie. I had therefore been on the alert when Nipper informed me of Dale's suspicious movements. I had thought it conceivable that there was a connection somewhere.

My prompt inquiries, however, had proved the opposite.

Perhaps Dale was not so ill as he pretended to be. Perhaps he had heard Watson drop his slipper, and had taken alarm. Perhaps he had feigned sleep when I looked into his room.

But, then, it was mere conjecture on my part. In any case, the matter didn't seem to be worthy of much thought.

So I picked up a book and was soon comfortably reading. I was disinclined for sleep, and lolled before the fire, smoking and reading, for fully two hours. It was just after one when at last I rose and stretched myself.

Yawning, I knocked out my pipe and laid it on the mantelpiece. Then I kicked my slippers off, discarded my dressing-gown, and switched out the light. It was a habit of mine to raise the blind before getting into bed, and so I jerked it up and opened the window a few inches farther. Fresh air is a fine thing.

I was just about to turn when I noticed a chink of light coming from a window round the angle of the Ancient House building. Every other window was black. I was just a little curious, for the time was between one and two.

And then, with a start, I saw that the window was that of De Valerie's bedroom! Why had the new boy got a light in his room? There might be a dozen trivial explanations. At the same time, I could not help remembering Nipper's story concerning Dale, the stranger who had been rescued from the river.

And, on the impulse of the moment, I determined to look into the matter.

Pulling my blind down again, I switched on the light, and donned my dressing-gown and slippers once more. The school lay quiet and still; the passages were dark and empty. I made no noise as I walked, and arrived outside De Valerie's door in a few moments.

Just as I was about to place my hand upon the knob I paused.

Voices were coming from within! So there was something in Nipper's yarn, after all! The voices were low, but in the stillness of the sleeping building I caught several distinct words.

"Dangerous?" De Valerie was saying, in a questioning tone.

"Of course not!" replied a voice which I recognised as Dale's, although now it sounded strong and firm. "No danger—any sort to you. We have done splendidly. Not a soul—know anything."

Dale's voice was so low that I could not catch every word. But I heard quite sufficient to arouse my suspicions. What was this talk of danger? And what had been done splendidly?

This was essentially a matter for prompt measures.

I tapped on the door and turned the handle. But the door refused to budge, and I heard a quick gasp from within.

"Who—who is there?" came De Valerie's sleepy voice.

"Why is your door locked, De Valerie?" I asked. "It is I—Mr. Alvington. Open the door at once, my boy! I saw a light——"

While I was speaking, the key turned in the lock, somewhat to my surprise, and the door swung open. Before me stood Howard Dale. He was attired in his dressing-gown, and looked apologetic.

"This is most unfortunate, Mr. Alvington!" he said sincerely. "I can never forgive myself for having disturbed you. I am afraid you will think that I am abusing your great kindness in allowing me——"

"Your condition seems greatly improved, Mr. Dale," I interrupted quietly.

"It is, indeed," he said. "I must crave your pardon. I awoke a few moments ago, feeling unaccountably thirsty, Mr. Alvington. Finding no water in my own carafe, I ventured to come here. I knew that this brave boy was sleeping in this apartment. He saved my life, you must remember, and I am grateful."

"I've only been awake two minutes, sir," put in De Valerie, who was sitting up in bed. "Mr. Dale just came in."

This, I felt sure, was a deliberate falsehood. The man must have been within the bedroom for a considerable time. The explanation given was plausible, and had I not overheard the few words outside the door, I should probably have been deceived. But there was another matter which needed explanation.

"I must speak to Mrs. Poulter in the morning," I said smoothly. "It was most careless of her to neglect to fill your water carafe, Mr. Dale. But may I ask why it was necessary for you to lock this door?"

Dale shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

"Mere force of habit, Mr. Alvington," he said. "It was foolish of me, of course——"

"And may I also inquire why it was necessary for you to bring these things

into De Valerie's bedroom?" I went on with grim calmness.

I pointed to the man's left pocket. Several tools were protruding—although he had made every effort to conceal them. Just for a moment his eyes glittered; for he knew quite well that I suspected far more than I had intimated.

I was hardly prepared for the next move.

Although on the alert, I did not suspect that he would act with such drastic ferocity.

For, in a second, he threw all pretence to the winds. His hands went up like lightning, and one fist came swinging towards my face. I just dodged in time, and we closed. The next moment we were struggling fiercely, Dale hitting out wildly and desperately.

De Valerie sat up in bed, startled and alarmed. But he made no attempt to take part in the struggle. I was considerably astonished. Dale, I had assumed, was weak and ill. But on the contrary, he possessed great strength and vitality. Try as I would, I could not gain the mastery over him. I knew well enough that he had been shamming at the time of his rescue from the river. He was as hardy and wiry as a trained athlete.

"Hang you!" he snarled out hoarsely.

He made a great effort, and we swayed about the room wildly. I could feel that I was gaining the upper hand. He knew this quite well, and the expression of alarm in his eyes was unmistakable.

It was then, practically at the moment of success, that misfortune overtook me. There was a loose mat lying upon the polished linoleum. As I drove Dale forward, I stepped upon this mat. It slid away and carried my foot with it.

The whole thing happened in a second. Off my balance I was at a momentary disadvantage. I lost my grip, and Dale's fist crashed into my face with a thud. Already half falling, I now sprawled over with my head singing dizzily.

For the space of five or six seconds I lay partially dazed. Then I staggered to my feet, with my teeth set and my eyes blazing. Dale was at the window, and the sash shot up with a bang. Even as I dashed across the room he took a clean leap out into the darkness.

"Good heavens!" gasped De Valerie.

He thought, of course, that the man would be injured by the fall. I knew differently. Although on the first floor,

the bedroom was only a few feet from the ground—owing to the fact that the rooms beneath were a few feet below the ground level. Immediately below the window lay a paved area, but this would naturally be cleared by any ordinary leap. Dale, therefore, had alighted upon the grass beyond—for this window looked out upon the Head's garden. The rooms below were merely domestic offices.

All was black as pitch as I stood at the window. But my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom after the first second or two, and I saw my late opponent pick himself up from the grass and dash away, limping heavily.

Without hesitation I followed his example and jumped out. Had the lawn been soft no injury would have resulted. But the ground was frozen as hard as a rock. I landed squarely, but fell on to my side. Somehow my left arm doubled beneath me, and was bruised and numbed in consequence. Indeed, the agony was simply appalling for a moment.

But I set my teeth and jumped up. Dale was still within sight, limping across the wide lawn. I ran with all speed, the cold air whistling round the legs of my pyjamas as my dressing-gown flapped. Dale knew that I was coming; he knew, moreover, that he had no chance of escape.

So he turned at bay and met my rush.

Perhaps I was too impulsive. At all events, I overlooked the "crooked" state of my left arm. When the struggle commenced I discovered, with a shock, that I was hopelessly handicapped. My arm was numb, and I could not even use it as a guard. The fight, it must be remembered, took place immediately after my fall.

"You—you busybody—you confounded —"

"You had better surrender!" I panted. "You had better stop this nonsense!"

For reply, Dale fought with renewed energy. His dressing-gown came off in the struggle, and revealed the fact that he was fully dressed. As the garment came off he caught it up in both hands, whirled it round, and flung it over my head.

I strove desperately to free myself from the heavy gown, but the pain in my left arm had increased, and I was at a great disadvantage. When at last I threw the dressing-gown from me, Dale had completely vanished.

"Confound it!" I panted huskily.

For a moment I thought of pursuing the chase—of searching the garden. But I soon abandoned this idea. I was already icily cold below the knees, and one of my slippers had vanished. I was scarcely attired in a suitable fashion for chasing across country on such a freezing night.

I gathered up Dale's discarded gown—it was really the property of Mr. Crowell—and prepared to return to the school. But my eye caught something white upon the grass, and I picked it up. It seemed to be a portion of a letter, by the shape of it.

I screwed it in my palm and hurried towards the house. I found that De Valerie had descended, and had opened the side door. He was standing there when I approached.

"Has—has he escaped, sir?" he asked huskily.

"He has, De Valerie," I replied. "Go back to your room and wait for me there. I wish to question you further upon this extraordinary matter."

For a second he hesitated, but then turned on his heel.

I closed the door, bolted it, and then switched on the electric light. I glanced at the paper in my hand quite casually. I required the light to see exactly how much my arm was injured, and was not at all interested in the paper.

But as I looked at it I caught my breath in sharply.

It was only a mere scrap, and upon it were one or two curious scroll-like characters. I recognised them in a flash. They were two words written in the secret shorthand of the Circle of Terror!

CHAPTER VI.

(Nelson Lee continues.)

I INVESTIGATE AND MAKE A STAGGERING DISCOVERY—THE HEAD'S NEWS.

SOMEHOW I was not greatly surprised.

I knew now, for certain, that I had made no mistake regarding the identity of the man I had followed to the Mount. I knew, also, that the man who called himself Howard Dale was, in reality, an emissary of the dreaded Circle.

But what could it mean?

The two shorthand characters were of no import, for they merely read "not fail," and were useless in themselves.

But they had given me the certain information that the Circle of Terror was engineering some deep plot in connection with the very school itself.

The thought rather startled me.

After all my dealings with the Circle of Terror, it was singular that the criminal society should commence operations at the very place where Nipper and I had sought sanctuary.

But in some way I was greatly elated. I thrilled at the thought of another encounter.

And De Valerie? What part was he playing in the plot? He was the son of a rich landowner, and his family, to the best of my knowledge, was one of unimpeached character. De Valerie himself had been taken from a big public school in the midlands, and had been sent to St. Frank's by his parents. I wasn't aware of the reason, but I was almost positive that the lad himself was not in league with the Circle of Terror.

The whole thing was rather extraordinary. I had originally suspected that the plot was developing against De Valerie. But that, of course, was out of the question. Dale and the boy were not the strangers they wished everyone to believe. It was a mysterious business, and I determined to get to the bottom of it.

As for my arm, that useful member was paining me much less now. My shoulder was severely bruised and strained, and would not be right for at least a week. But the injury was only trivial, although it had caused me such agony at first.

I walked upstairs and found De Valerie in bed. He seemed quite calm and curious; for he questioned me as soon as I entered his bedroom.

"What does it mean, sir?" he asked eagerly. "Why did the man fly at you like that?"

"I thought that you might be able to answer that question, De Valerie," I replied quietly.

"I, sir? What should I know?"

"What was that man doing in this bedroom?" I countered sternly.

"Why he came for a drink of water," replied De Valerie, lifting his dark eyebrows in surprise. "That's all, sir. He told you so himself."

"Quite so, De Valerie—quite so."

I spoke smoothly, and knew that I had allayed his suspicions. The boy was uneasy in spite of his affected calmness.

Four times within a minute he glanced over at the head of his bed. I appeared to take no notice. Why was De Valerie so concerned? What interest was there at the head of his bed?

I thought it unwise to pursue the matter then, and told the boy to get to sleep as quickly as he could. I then retired to my own room, and had a prolonged spell of deep thought. At last I slipped between my own sheets.

In the morning I reported the affair to Dr. Stafford, without making any mention of my suspicions regarding the Circle of Terror. There was no necessity to worry the Head unduly. I merely told him that Dale had left his own bedroom in the middle of the night, and that I had found the man in De Valerie's. I described how Dale had fled across the lawn.

"A most curious affair, Mr. Lee," said the Head. "Do you think it possible that this man was intent upon theft?"

"I hardly know," I replied. "I don't think it was that, Dr. Stafford. There is, I believe, more in the affair than meets the eye. In any case, I don't think it would be wise to inform the police. After all, the man committed no criminal act—so far as I know—and a police inquiry would mean unwelcome publicity."

"You are quite right, Mr. Lee—quite right!"

The Head merely told the other masters that Dale had taken his departure, and went into no details. I saw De Valerie myself before he came down. The boy eagerly agreed to say nothing of the night's affair to his school mates. He was, indeed, a trifle too eager. I could see that he was anxious to keep the matter quiet. And he was relieved when I intimated that the matter was done with.

Nipper, of course, would have to know—I had no secrets from my young assistant. But the matter was not over and done with by any means.

For while morning lessons were proceeding, I took the opportunity to pursue my investigation. I went to De Valerie's bedroom and found that the maids had already performed their duties. The little apartment was spick and span. I closed the door, lit a cigarette, and surveyed the room thoughtfully.

"Now, let me see," I mused. "Nipper

saw Dale entering this bedroom just after eleven last night. I dismissed the matter, and thought no more of it until just after one—over two hours later. The probability is that Dale returned before eleven-thirty. In that case he must have been with De Valerie for an hour and a half. Why? And for what purpose had he brought the tools?"

It had been difficult for me to distinguish the nature of those tools. They had vanished, thus proving that Dale must have transferred them to his other clothing during his run across the lawn. One article, I believe, had been a long, fine auger. I searched the room carefully, mainly as a matter of routine, but found nothing. I then turned my attention to the wall at the head of the bed. De Valerie had appeared anxious—and he must have had some reason.

Pulling the bed aside, I examined the wall with great thoroughness. It was, in reality, a heavily-built partition, with ornamental panels. The whole thing was quite artistic, but afforded excellent material for the cutting of a hole without the latter being visible.

A plain wall would have presented difficulty, but here there were many corners and crevices in the moulding. But try as I would I could discover nothing whatever. I was by no means certain that a hole had been made. It was merely a theory, based upon the glimpse I had caught of the auger. I thought, perhaps, that a tiny spy-hole had been made. For what reason this should be done I could not imagine.

At last I decided to transfer my attentions to the neighbouring room—which, I knew, was merely a deserted box-room.

Here I met with instant success.

The little apartment was considerably lumbered with trunks and boxes, and these had not been disturbed since the beginning of the term. The wall which received my attention was, of course, similar in appearance on this side—with the exception of the ornamental paneling. An old picture with a cracked glass hung from a nail in the centre of the space.

My first action was to shift this picture out of place. And there, protruding from the woodwork, I beheld a most curious object. At first sight it looked like the bulb from a scent spray, but was considerably smaller. The rubber was secured into a polished brass seating, with a short length of tube—also of

brass — protruding. The whole thing was fixed very tightly.

"Upon my soul!" I murmured. "What on earth can this be?"

Before touching it I measured its position with my eye, and then returned to the bedroom. Closely observing the painted woodwork at the approximate spot—the spot corresponding to that where the bulb arrangement was placed—I presently detected a tiny circular hole. It was at the very back of a crevice in the moulding; and without the aid of my electric torch I should never have seen it.

But now I saw that the tiny hole had been carefully trimmed at the edges, and that a fine metal tube—at least the end of it—showed itself. This tube appeared to me to be a kind of nozzle, with a fine hole in the centre.

"Dear me! This is most singular," I told myself. "A spray! The brass tube is run right through the partition, and by pressing the bulb on the other side a spray of some kind is projected into this room. By James! When the bed is in position the bulb's contents would necessarily be sprayed over the very pillow itself!"

I was becoming somewhat grim. Vague thoughts were taking shape in my mind. I replaced the bed and then turned my full attention upon the strange contrivance behind the picture in the box-room.

With great care, I unscrewed the bulb from the projecting tube. Carefully taking it to the window, I looked at it closely. It was not particularly heavy, and there was no sign of moisture; but covering the little exit was a flimsy film of some material. This, of course, would break the very instant that pressure was brought to bear on the bulb.

This precaution seemed to point to one conclusion—that the liquid within the bulb was dangerous to handle. I did not indulge in guesswork, but made my way at once to the school laboratory in order to make an analysis.

The laboratory was empty, as I had known. I was glad of this, for I wished to be quite to myself while making such an experiment.

Removing the protective tissue, I discovered a small quantity of almost colourless liquid. For a few seconds I sniffed at it and tested it, and then I recognised the stuff.

"Heaven above!" I muttered, staring before me.

Amazing as it seemed, the liquid was a deadly poison! I am considered to be something of an expert in poisons, and, without undue bombast, I believe my reputation in that respect is well deserved. For years past I had made a very special study of poisons, well known and obscure.

This particular venom was comparatively unknown in England, but I knew its properties well. That small bulb of poison, sprayed over the head of a sleeper in the bed in the adjoining room, would have caused certain death. No escape would have been possible.

The invisible spray would have formed itself into a vapour, and would have been breathed in by the sleeper. Death would have been the result, and not the slightest trace would have been left!

I was quite startled.

The whole arrangement was devilish—and clever. I felt that it was a child of Professor Zingrave's own brain. The master criminal himself—an amazingly clever scientist—must have conceived this foul plot.

I was shocked at the nature of the scheme. It was far more sinister than I had at first supposed. What was most puzzling was the doubt as to who the poison could be intended for.

Certainly not for De Valerie. It would seem that these preparations had been made for the reception of another new boy. But why? And I had heard no mention of another new arrival for the Ancient House.

But, although De Valerie was in no personal danger, I was convinced that he was implicated in the plot. By all appearances, it was his task to press the bulb at the right time.

The Circle of Terror had this affair in hand. That was certain. And it was equally certain that they were working upon definite information. The Circle did not do things by halves. They took no chances. Having decided upon a plan, that plan was carried out systematically and deliberately.

And chance work, in such a matter as this, was not to be thought of. The poison had been prepared for one certain person. That person could not be at St. Frank's at present, for the bedroom was reserved for the sole purpose of accommodating a new arrival at the school in mid-term.

De Valerie was the only new arrival. I know of no other. I would, however, question Dr. Stafford without delay.

The Circle agents had easily obtained their information, for the custom of a new boy sleeping separate was a time-worn one at St. Frank's. Any servant would have given such knowledge.

But then, of course, inquiries of that sort had not been necessary, for De Valerie himself had supplied the information needed. The Circle's emissary had gained access to the school by a trick, and he and De Valerie had faked up the arrangement during the night.

I set my teeth grimly as I set about the task of removing every trace of poison from the bulb. By chemical action I purified the little cavity until it was sweet and clean. Then I substituted pure water and replaced the protective tissue.

This done, I hurried back to the box-room and screwed the bulb into position again. Everything was now exactly as it had been, except for the all-important fact that the contrivance was now absolutely harmless.

I reserved careful thought until I had interviewed the Headmaster. This I did at once, finding him busily at work in his study. It was now close upon time for morning lessons to finish.

"May I have a few words with you, Dr. Stafford?" I asked.

"As many as you wish, Mr. Lee," smiled the Head, as I closed the door. "You are looking unusually grave. Doubtless the life at St. Frank's is palling upon you after your strenuous——"

"By no means!" I interrupted, sitting down. "On the contrary, Dr. Stafford, St. Frank's is providing me with quite a number of interesting problems. I wish now to ask you one or two questions."

"My answers are already given!" smiled the Head.

"Well, do you know if another new boy is shortly arriving at the school?"

The Head nodded.

"Why, yes!" he said at once. "Did not you know?"

"No. I have heard nothing to that effect," I said. "May I inquire if this boy is destined to enter my House?"

"That is the case, Mr. Lee. It has all been arranged, and Yakama will enter the Fourth Form—that is, the Remove—and will board in the Ancient House. He will arrive I think, in three or four days' time."

I was not surprised; I had expected to hear this news.

"I think you said Yakama?" I remarked questioningly.

"The youngster is a Japanese boy," nodded Dr. Stafford. "His full name, I think, is Sessue Yakama. He is the son, I imagine, of a wealthy Japanese nobleman. That gentleman's agents in London arranged everything by letter. I fully intended mentioning the matter to you, but I suppose I overlooked it. In any case, I should have done so this evening."

I stroked my chin thoughtfully.

"A Japanese boy will be somewhat novel for the other juniors," I smiled. "Won't there be difficulties regarding language?"

"Oh, no! I have been given to understand that Yakama speaks English perfectly—practically without an accent," interjected the Head. "He will take his place in the school just like any other lad. I think, however, that I shall permit him to sleep alone for a full week, at least."

I rose to my feet.

"Thank you, Dr. Stafford," I said. "In all probability I shall have something further to tell you with regard to this matter later on. But just at present I find it necessary to remain silent."

"Dear me! You speak as though the coming of this Japanese boy was some startling event!" said the Head, raising his eyebrows.

"You must forgive me if I seem secretive at this juncture," I replied quietly. "As a matter of fact, something rather startling has occurred. I want you to trust to my discretion, and to give me a free hand."

"My dear sir, I agree unconditionally," said the Head without hesitation. "I must admit, however, that you have aroused my curiosity. Doubtless you will at your own time permit me to share the secret?"

I readily assented, and made little further comment. I did not think it wise on my part to mention anything of the developing plot, for, to tell the truth, I feared that Dr. Stafford would hesitate to have the Japanese boy in the school. He would deem it inadvisable to risk any possible scandal.

But that, I judged, would be fatal. The Circle of Terror had planned to murder the Japanese boy. The reason for this crime was obscure. But if Yakama's coming to St. Frank's was

cancelled, then the boy would be done to death elsewhere, and there would be no one to protect him in his hour of peril.

At St. Frank's, however, I was on the spot. I had already discovered something of what was toward, and I should make it my duty to probe the secret to the very bottom. So, for the time being, I held my own counsel.

Only Nipper should share my thoughts.

CHAPTER VII.

(Nipper concludes.)

IN WHICH THE GUV'NOR AND I PREPARE OURSELVES FOR BATTLE.

MORNING lessons were over.

The Remove fellows were all talking about De Valerie, and I was as much surprised as anybody else. It had been confidently prophesied that the new fellow would show up very badly in the Form-room, and that he would put on airs to an insufferable degree.

The exact opposite had been the case.

Mr. Crowell, our Form-master, was extremely pleased with his new pupil. De Valerie was well up in most subjects, and was able to take his place among the best in the Remove. He had, moreover, treated Mr. Crowell with extreme respect throughout the whole morning.

The majority of the fellows were rather disappointed. They had been hoping to see the haughty De Valerie cheek the Form-master, and "get it in the neck" in return. But De Valerie had been irreproachable. Montie was about the most polite fellow in the Remove, but the new fellow had out-Montied Montie himself!

"He's a rotter, anyhow!" declared Handforth firmly. "Rotters are barred at St. Frank's, and we'll show De Valerie what we think of him!"

"He's dropped that rot about having a fag, anyhow," I remarked. "It's a good thing for him he did, or there would have been big trouble. But I've got to make him sit up for that affair last night."

"A fight!" said Owen major, with a relish.

"Certainly, if necessary," I agreed. "But I don't believe De Valerie will fight. He'll slip out of it somehow or other."

"I'm willin' to lick the bounder," said

Montie languidly. "It's not in my line, you know, but I think I could do it all right. An' lickin' De Valerie would be rather a pleasure, begad."

"Well, let's go and find him," I said briskly.

De Valerie was easily found, for he was strolling in the sunlit Triangle. Bob Christine and Co., of the College House, were holding a debate in their own porch. I strongly suspected them of planning a rag, for a "new kid" of the rival House was always considered fair game.

I hadn't had a chance of speaking to De Valerie before lessons. He had conveniently kept out of the way. I think he guessed that he would have to answer for his outburst of passion in the common-room—when he had thrown Montie and me over.

Quite a crowd of us marched across the frozen Triangle towards him. He saw us coming, and turned leisurely. The grim expressions upon our faces gave him a strong hint as to our intentions.

"Look here, you hot-tempered bounder——" began Handforth.

"Shut up, ass!" I interrupted. "I'm doing this!"

De Valerie looked at us calmly.

"I suppose it's about that affair last night?" he asked.

"You suppose right," I said grimly. "I'm just going to point out to you, De Valerie, that you only escaped a severe ragging by the chance of Morrow being in the lobby. You've got to answer——"

Cecil De Valerie smiled.

"I'm very sorry for what I did," he said quietly.

"Eh?" I stared. "You're—you're sorry?"

"Exactly!" went on the new fellow. "I was quite in the wrong, and I apologise sincerely. That's good enough, I suppose?"

I was rather taken aback, for I had not expected this admission from De Valerie. He spoke, however, in a cold, cynical voice. I knew at once that his apology was a mere matter of words; there was no sincerity in it whatever. It was obvious, indeed, that he had only apologised for the mere sake of escaping a ragging.

But I couldn't very well ignore the thing.

"Of course it's good enough!" I said shortly. "You've apologised, and there's an end of it."

"Good!"

And De Valerie walked away with his hands in his pockets. The Removites stared after him indignantly. They had been disappointed a second time. If not a fight, they had certainly been anticipating a rag.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" exclaimed Handforth bluntly.

"Might as well let the matter drop," I said. "It's no good keeping it up, anyhow. He didn't mean it, of course; but seventy-five per cent. of apologies are insincere. Come on, you chaps!"

Montie and Tommy strolled with me back to the Ancient House. Just on the steps we met Nelson Lee.

"Ah, I was looking for you, Bennett!" he said, with a nod. "Come with me to my study, will you? I want to talk to you on one or two matters."

Sir Montie and Tommy looked rather disappointed, but I winked at them and followed the guv'nor to his study. When the door was closed, he lit a cigarette, and stood with his back to the fire—a position he had assumed times without number on our comfortable hearthrug at Gray's Inn Road.

"I should have preferred your chums to be present, too, Nipper," remarked Nelson Lee thoughtfully, "but I am afraid such a thing would have caused unwelcome comment. You will, therefore, inform them of what I tell you later on. We shall probably need their help in the near future."

I looked at the guv'nor curiously.

"Why, has anything happened, sir?" I asked.

"A great deal has happened, young 'un," replied Lee. "First of all, I'll spring the bombshell. We are once more up against our old enemies, the Circle of Terror!"

I stared in bewilderment.

"The Circle!" I gasped. "Here—at St. Frank's?"

"Here, at St. Frank's," replied the guv'nor. "I first became aware of the fact only last evening, and received ample corroboration during the night."

And in his usual crisp, concise way, Nelson Lee told me of his adventure at the Mount, when he had narrowly escaped being discovered by the two Circle agents. I was hugely interested and inwardly excited.

But the most startling piece of news was to come. For the guv'nor went into all the details of his adventure during the night, and of the investigation he had made while I had been at lessons.

I sat in my chair amazed and almost staggered.

"Poison!" I said huskily. "Oh, guv'nor! What on earth can it mean? Do you mean to say that the Circle of Terror is planning to murder this new Japanese kid?"

"There can be no doubt about the matter, Nipper—not a shadow of doubt," replied Nelson Lee. "The fact is gravely obvious. As I told you, I have rendered the contrivance harmless. But Yakama's peril is in no way ended by that fact."

"But De Valerie!" I muttered. "Great Scott! I know he's a rotter, but to have a hand in a thing like this is terrible—horrible! And he must be a member of the Circle of Terror!"

"You mentioned that De Valerie was a rotter, Nipper," said the guv'nor quietly. "What did you mean by that?"

"He's a mysterious chap, sir," I replied. "Ever since he came he's been sneering and showing off airs. The fellows simply detest him already. But I didn't think that he was capable of —"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"No, Nipper, you must not assume that," he said quietly. "I don't believe for a moment that De Valerie is implicated in this plot."

"But you said—"

"It is my opinion, young 'un, that De Valerie knows nothing whatever of the Circle of Terror, and that he has been falsely informed regarding the contents of that bulb. It is monstrous to suppose that he could be knowingly connected with a murder plot. He is merely an innocent tool; and the Circle is using him for their own ends. That, at all events, is my impression."

"He ought to be sacked, anyhow," I grunted.

"My dear boy, that would put the Circle men on their guard at once," said the guv'nor. "Besides, De Valerie has been duped. He does not realise the nature of his wrong-doing. It is far better that he should remain here, and that we should keep a strict watch upon him."

I took a deep breath.

"What you've told me has solved a puzzle, anyhow, guv'nor," I declared. "I've been wondering how the dickens a rotter like De Valerie could have rescued that man from the river. Of course, it was a put-up job."

"Obviously, my boy," agreed Lee. "Dale had arranged everything with De Valerie beforehand. The scheme was somewhat drastic—but one has to be drastic if one is determined to gain a certain end. The end in view in this instance was to get Dale lodged in the school for the night."

"That's it, sir," I said. "The chap pretends to be unconscious and weak. Instead of that he was hardly hurt. I don't suppose the water was deep at that place, either. They just stood on the bed and bobbed their heads under. My hat! What a piece of fakery! And De Valerie allowed the rotter to fix up that thing in the bedroom while the whole house was asleep."

"Excepting myself, Nipper," nodded Nelson Lee. "It is a wonderful piece of luck that I was awake. Otherwise the Japanese boy would certainly have been killed in his sleep. But if we get to the root of things, I think the credit must go to you, my boy."

"To—to me, guv'nor?" I asked, surprised.

"Precisely! It was you who informed me of the fact that Dale had entered De Valerie's bedroom," said Nelson Lee. "Had it not been for that warning, I should have put very little significance upon the light burning in De Valerie's room. I should, indeed, have turned in without making any inquiry."

"Oh, rot, sir!" I said.

"It is little things which count, Nipper—don't forget that," said the guv'nor. "Indirectly you and your chums brought this plot to light. It is a very queer affair—a sinister business altogether."

"And what are we going to do?" I asked eagerly.

Nelson Lee tossed his cigarette-end into the fire.

"I hardly know," he replied slowly.

"At all events, we can do nothing until the arrival of Sessue Yakama. He will be here early next week. That gives me

time to make plans. It will be as well, I think, to take the youngster into my confidence, and to lay a trap."

"By Jingo!" I said with sparkling eyes. "There's going to be excitement!"

"Excitement and peril, Nipper," was Nelson Lee's grave reply. "We have had many tussles with the Circle of Terror, but I did not anticipate an encounter down in this peaceful spot. However, we are prepared—and that is half the battle."

"And how about those rotters at the Mount?"

"They are, of course, connected in some way with the mystery," said Nelson Lee. "This present affair is over and done with. We have outwitted the Circle's first stroke—although the enemy is serenely unaware of that fact at present. We can do nothing now except wait and watch."

Later on I told Montie and Tommy all about it—in strict confidence, of course. They were tremendously interested, and vowed that they would do everything in their power to help.

At present, however, there was "nothing doing."

Before the week was out Cecil de Valerie was universally referred to in the Lower School as "The Rotter." It was his acknowledged nickname—and unless he changed his ways it was a nickname which would stick.

Ultimately, of course, we defeated the Circle of Terror altogether—in this present enterprise, I mean. We saved Sessue Yakama from the Circle's clutches, and squared things up all round.

But it's impossible for me to go into all the details of it here. The complete account of all that took place will be set down by me in due course. Others, naturally, will chip in here and there.

At present we were following Nelson Lee's advice; we were waiting—and watching.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK'S MAGNIFICENT STORY, Entitled:

"THE JAPANESE SCHOOLBOY,"

Will introduce a new Character, SESSUE YAKAMA.

NELSON LEE and NIPPER have an exciting case to deal with, for The "CIRCLE OF TERROR" is involved. How Nelson Lee once more deals a blow at the "Circle" is splendidly related in

THE JAPANESE SCHOOLBOY.

OUT NEXT WEDNESDAY.

PRICE ONE PENNY.

BEGIN OUR NEW SERIAL TO-DAY!

In the Hands of the Huns.

A Magnificent Tale of Thrilling Experiences in Germany.

By CLEMENT HALE.

The Chief Characters in this Story are:

TED MORRIS, GEORGE GRAY, and his brother JACK, who are the English staff of the Berlin Rovers, a football club in Germany.

OTTO BRACK is a German member of the team. But another German, named

CARL HOFFMAN, is friendly. He advises the three Englishmen to leave Germany at once, as war is imminent. Ted Morris is the only one who takes this advice. The Grays go to a café, and as they are about to leave a German officer steps up to them.

"You are English spies!" he says.

(Now read on.)

A NEAR THING.

WITH a laugh the officer drew his sword, and made a pass at George.

The footballer's face changed colour, and his eyes grew misty with anger.

"Stand back, sir!" he cried. "Don't point that sword at me. I'm no German slave. I'm a true born and free born Britisher!"

The officer understood English perfectly, and the words maddened him.

A bully from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet, brave because he was backed by a thousand countrymen, who, he knew, would stand by him no matter what he did, he drove the point of his sword through George Gray's coat, waistcoat, and shirt, pricking him on the chest.

It was not a serious wound, for the footballer stepped nimbly back, but it might have spitted him had he not been smart.

A roar of laughter echoed through the café, led by the bully who had committed the outrage.

"So much for the English dog," said he. "I will spit him on my toasting fork."

Flesh and blood could not stand the insult and the outrage.

Had there been a million enemies there, George Gray would not have hesitated or held his hand. Like a flash he snatched up a stool that stood ready to his hands, and with a downward sweep struck the bullying officer to the floor.

Then with a roar of rage every man within sight of him came at him, led by the full-back, Otto Brack.

Never in his life had George Gray found himself in such an exciting situation, in such a position of peril.

Already he had received clear evidence that the war fever had driven the Berliners mad. As the roar of the angry patrons of the café swelled into a denunciation of the English spies, then died away, to rise again with increased violence, he could hear a hoarse murmur from the street where the promenading and singing crowds hustled one another in a spirit of mad intoxication.

Sometimes the Englishman had tried to convince himself that the Germans were a harmless people. As he looked at the infuriated faces before him, saw the glint of their wild eyes, and watched them surge towards him, he knew that he had made a mistake. Though they numbered fifty to one, these men would strike him and his brother down and trample them under foot like the veriest canaille.

That he did not intend to submit to. Perhaps, at any other time, he might have stayed his hand; perhaps he regretted that he had felled the officer who was just rising to his feet, still too dazed to take any part in the proceedings. Yet he had little time for such reflections. Brack—the cause of all the trouble, he guessed—was leading the enemy on, and they meant murder.

"Stand by, Jack!" George shouted hoarsely. "Get behind me, and arm yourself with a chair! The only chance

"we have of getting out of this is for us to fight our way out!"

Jack Gray—pale, a little afraid, perhaps, but prepared to fight to the death—acted upon his brother's suggestion. He seized a chair, and raised it by its back. Then he saw his brother lift a similar missile, and hurl it with terrific force at the straw-hatted and bellowing Brack. George's aim was true.

The chair struck the German footballer on the head, and felled him like a log.

George had gone too far to draw back. Another chair he flung among his enemies, and a third, and a fourth.

Missiles came flying at him—bottles, mugs, trays, even knives—but the enemy hampered one another, and their aim was poor.

Jack shielded his face with his chair. George ducked and dodged, and laughed the crowd to scorn.

"Clear the floor!" he cried contemptuously, "and I'm willing to fight the lot of you if you'll let me take you one at a time!"

The tables were in the way. George formed a barrier by drawing them close together, while his eyes roved towards the exits.

If only they could get out! If only they could! But the waiters, with their white aprons, barred every exit, and stood their shrieking for the police.

Then the officer, recovering his senses, and with them the power to act, flourished his naked sword.

"The English have insulted the Kaiser's uniform!" he shouted. "Leave me to deal with them! For Gott and Fatherland!"

The pompous fool advanced, and thrust at George over the tables. The sweep of the naked sword-blade came perilously near at times, and with a shout of triumph some of the patrons of the café pushed the barrier of tables towards the wall, forcing George and Jack backwards.

Some of them went down on their hands and knees, and tried to crawl beneath.

With set teeth and serious face, George realised that a crisis had been reached.

"Jack!" he muttered hoarsely.

"Yes, George?"

"We must fight our way out. That madman with the sword will spit me if we're not careful. While I fight him, strike him down, and then we'll cleave a way through."

"All right, George!"

"Now, come on!"

The German officer, regarding victory as certain, laughingly called upon the crowd to watch him cut the Britishers down.

He advanced and swept a blow at George's head. George had ducked, seized a chair, and, with this held to protect body and head, he parried a succession of wild blows, while the chips and splinters of wood flew in a shower.

But he felt himself weakening. He knew that he could not last much longer against such odds. Jack knew it, too, and so the boy darted forward, and, at the risk of receiving a death-stroke, brought the chair he wielded down upon the officer's head, felling him for the second time.

"Bravo, Jack! Follow me! This way! Over the tables, and at them!"

The men who were crawling beneath the tables plucked at George's ankles. He kicked wildly at them, ran sideways, and did a handspring over a marble-topped table. After him went Jack. Then, striking at every face near them, they rushed for the door, and had got half-way across the café when the lights were suddenly turned out, plunging the place in darkness.

For a moment George argued ill of the change. He clutched his brother's arm.

"That you, Jack?"

"Yes, old man."

"Come on, then!"

They pushed onward, and a hand suddenly seized George Gray by the elbow.

"It's I—Carl Hoffmann!" said the well-known voice of the Berlin Rovers' half-back. "I got Heinrich, the waiter, to switch the lights off. It was the only way to save you. Quick—quick!"

He dragged George onward, and George in turn pulled Jack towards the door. Then somehow the door swung open, and they sprang into the street, to find the starlit heavens above them and the crowd swarming everywhere.

They would have paused a moment, but Hoffmann entreated them to waste no time. So they followed him, and left the main streets, and threaded their way through the byways until they arrived at their lodgings. Here Carl came to a stand.

"There will be no end of a stir over this!" said he, with a serious shake of the head. "It does not do to insult the

uniform! Ah, why did you do it, George?"

"Were you there? Did you see?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Then wasn't I justified?"

"Perhaps. I think so, but it was rash. And now, leave Berlin at once! Remember my warning! Escape before the declaration of war between Britain and Germany is made, for after——"

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled grimly.

"Thanks, Carl!" said George Gray, with more seriousness than he would have thought he could possibly have shown an hour ago. "I thought your warning all moonshine, but I see these Germans hate us Britishers. We'll take your advice and go."

"Pack up now! Leave your lodgings by daybreak! The police will be given all information. Brack will see to that. You are in great peril!"

So their friend again left them, and they, after pausing for a moment to watch him out of sight, mounted the steps and tried to open the house door with their keys.

The door was chained and bolted on the inside, however, and they had to ring and knock until their landlord came down to open the door—a circumstance which struck George Gray as being suspicious.

At last the door was opened, and their landlord stood before them.

The glance he gave them was not a kindly one. He'd served his time in the army—this man Kutz—and had fought during the Franco-Prussian war.

"Did you want to lock us out, Kutz?" asked George, with a laugh.

"There are many strange people abroad on the streets to-night," answered Kutz non-committally.

They entered, passed along the passage, and were making for their rooms upstairs when George made up his mind to confide in this man. After all, he and Jack had always treated Kutz very generously, and the German had sworn eternal gratitude to them.

"Kutz," said the footballer, "I want a word with you."

"We'll talk in the morning," said the landlord gruffly. "I'm tired. I want to go to bed."

"Oh, we sha'n't keep you a moment! And to-morrow won't do."

Kutz hesitated, and then led the way into a private room.

George paid out two five-pound notes and some English gold upon the table.

"That's to settle our bill to date, old fellow," he explained, "for the war's put an end to football in Berlin, and as the International situation is growing more critical every hour, we've been warned it would be better to leave the country."

"Oh, yah!" growled the landlord, fixing them with a beady stare.

"And so we are going upstairs to pack now, and shall leave in the morning."

Kutz frowned.

"Is it necessary to be in such a hurry?" he inquired.

"Perhaps it isn't. I don't know, only—well, look here! I'm going to trust you, old man! Fact is, we've got into a row in a café. Otto Brack was there, and a German officer. After Brack had denounced us as 'spies'—and you know how the Berliners take fire at the word 'spy' just now—insulted me. I knocked him down. Then they came for us, and there was a free fight. Jack half killed the officer by driving a chair at his head, and if Carl Hoffmann hadn't been there to turn the lights out and help us, we'd have been torn to pieces."

Kutz raised his hands in dismay.

"You haf strook a Sherman officer! That iz unfortunat!" he cried. "The military never forgive! Were you mad?"

"No; as sober as a judge," answered George. "And I'd do it again, given similar provocation. I'm no spy, old friend, as you know. But you will see the absolute necessity of our leaving Berlin at once?"

Kutz nodded vigorously. His set face betrayed no emotion. Yet they knew that his brain was at work. He was an odd character, was Kutz, the landlord.

"And so you are going to back your packs?" he cried.

"Yes—at once!"

"H'm! You should be able to leave the country before the declaration of war."

"Think there will be another war, then?"

"Yes. Englant will fight!"—and the beady eyes dilated and glowed.

"Then, begad, we're going back to fight for her!" exclaimed George, with enthusiasm. "All the more need for us to get back to London right away, old fellow."

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

"Ah, yes! Shoost so! You will be two more soldiers to fight for Englant. And you will tage bag a lot of news mitt you."

"Just a little, friend Kutz."

"Did the officer recognise you?"

"Didn't know us. But Brack did, of course! He'd tell."

"And he knows where you lif," said Kutz, his face betraying a sudden alarm, "and will say you are both spies. Yes, yes! You must pag your packs pefore the morning, and leafe the house while you are save."

"That's what we intend to do, old sport! We've paid our bill. We're awfully grateful for the way you've treated us, Kutz. And we sha'n't forget to write once we cross the border into Holland."

Kutz laughed. It was a hollow, mirthless laugh. George offered to shake hands, and this Kutz did effusively. Then George and Jack went up to their respective bedrooms, and saw to their packing without a moment's delay. In a couple of hours everything had been got ready for departure, and then—and not till then—did the brothers undress and prepare for sleep.

They felt tired. The many and varied incidents of that never-to-be-forgotten day had left their mark.

Yet sleep did not come easily. For one thing, the cafés were still open, every one of them filled with a crowd of revellers. From distant parts of the city came the strains of music well played, mingled with the shouting and cheering and singing of the war-stricken populace. Now and then shrill women's voices echoed in the street outside as merry-makers, with no thought of the future, made their way home.

Taxi-cabs went clattering by, hooting and whirring, and from all came the echoing shout of "Deutschland Uber Alles!"

Later, as George's eyelids drooped and that sweet, drowsy feeling stole over him, he fancied he heard the street door open and shut.

Was it so? Could he be sure?

Day was breaking. Had he gone to the window, he could not have failed to have seen Kutz making his way stealthily along the street and have marvelled at the landlord's caution. Kutz evidently did not want to make a noise.

But George was cosy in bed, and did

not go to the window. Instead, he went to sleep.

It was his brother Jack who called him.

"Get up, George, old man!" said he, shaking his big brother by the shoulder. "Don't forget we've got a lot to do to-day. And, I say, I've already seen the paper. They pretend that things are all right, but the Kaiser's armies are going to invade Belgium, and that will mean war!"

"Of course it will, Jack!" said George, swinging himself out of bed, his face flushing hotly. "And if the beasts did that, by George——"

He clenched his fists, and, glancing into the mirror, was startled at the expression of his face.

George had left out his shaving tackle. For him to wash, dress, and shave was the work of half an hour, and when he had finished he went to the window, threw it up, and, hearing the echo of the distant cheering, cried:

"There they are! At it again, Jack! These Germans love war just as much as we love peace. Listen to them! That's because they think they're going to smother France."

"I hate to hear it, George. I don't think I like Germans. They're not a nation of gentlemen!"

George laughed.

"You've just hit it, Jack!" he cried. "They've got one or two among their bigger men, but not many. They've been brought up all wrong. Their education's been neglected. But what's the use—— Hallo, what—— Ah!"

The footballer's eyes had strayed down to the street, and as he looked he saw a file of policemen and a sergeant clustered about the door.

And in front of them, talking in whispers and gesticulating expressively, stood the landlord, Kutz!

George Gray's heart leapt into his mouth.

"Jack," he cried, beckoning to his brother. "come here! Look down cautiously! See? Do you know what that means?"

"Treachery, George!"

"Yes. That double-dyed blackguard Kutz has betrayed us. Would you believe it? And after all the gay times we've had together, after all his boasted friendship, after the way we got that subscription up for him when his wife was ill,

(Continued overleaf.)

and the confidence we reposed in him last night!"

"But he's a German, George, and they're all alike!"

"Hush, Jack! Remember Carl!" cried George, as he sprang from the window.

He swept everything of value he possessed into a handbag he'd reserved for the last moment. He asked Jack if he had all his money with him, and as the boy answered in the affirmative he said gravely:

"Then we shall have to sacrifice our luggage, old man. We must escape as best we may if we wish to retain our liberty!"

Out on to the landing they dashed, and as they reached it they heard the door below open and the measured footfalls of the police echo in the hall.

"Quick!" hissed George.

He swung himself on to the rail of the balusters, and slid noiselessly down to the landing below, Jack following him.

A bedroom door stood open there. It belonged to Kutz's room.

Into this George dashed, pulling his brother after him. Once inside, he set the door to—only just in time!

Kutz and the police were already on the landing below.

"They are on the top floor," George heard Kutz say as he held his breath.

He heard the police go by, saw them through a chink of the door; and no sooner were they on the landing above than he rushed out, calling upon Jack, in a whisper, to follow.

Down to the hall, two stories below, they rushed, and found the street door open before them. Beyond the open door was the street and liberty. George dashed to it, and then saw that a policeman had been left on guard.

As George appeared, the man turned.

"Good-morning," said he in German.

George responded in kind, but the ring of his voice, his slight accent, betrayed him.

"Ach! You are English—I must detain you!" said the policeman, dropping a hand on George's shoulder.

George looked desperately up and down the street. It was clear. There was a chance! He took it.

"Don't put your hands on me!" he cried, dashing the policeman's arm away.

And then, with as neat an upper-cut as man ever dealt, he hit the officer clean off his feet, and leapt wildly into the street.

For the second time within twenty-four hours he'd insulted the German uniform!

"Come on! Quick, Jack!" he panted, as he tore along the street. "Run! Run!"

(To be continued.)

Don't Forget Tommy and Jack!

WHEN you have read this Story, hand in your copy of THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY at the nearest Post Office, and you will help to give some Soldier or Sailor a pleasant hour. It costs you nothing, and you will be repaid by the knowledge that you have shared your enjoyment with another—perhaps many others.

Order your Copy in Advance in order to make sure of obtaining it; and

Don't Forget Tommy and Jack!