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AUTHOR'S NOTE.

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

CHAPTER I.

(Recorded by Nipper.)

IN WHICH BOB CHRISTINE AND CO. ARE
VERY MYSTERIOUS—A DECISION.

"THERE'S something on!"

I made that remark in the Remove Form-room during afternoon lessons, and I addressed it to Tom Burton, who sat next to me. He looked up from his work with a smile upon his jolly, good-natured face.

"Something on, Benny?" he repeated in a puzzled whisper.

I nodded.

"Just have a squint at Christine and Co., I murmured. "They're hatching up some plot, I'll bet. They've been putting their heads together during the whole lesson. It's a wonder old Crowe-feet hasn't spotted 'em."

"Silly swabs!" whispered the Bo'sun—as Burton was called in the Remove. "Talkin' ain't allowed in class——"

Mr. Crowell looked up severely from his desk.

"Somebody is speaking!" he exclaimed severely.

"Souise me! That's done it!" muttered the Bo'sun, as he stood up. "It was me, sir," he added, ungrammatically.

"You will take fifty lines, Burton," said Mr. Crowell. "You must under-

stand that talking in class is not permitted."

I jumped up with a sigh.

"It wasn't Burton's fault, sir," I said. "I spoke to him, and he just answered. I'll take the fifty lines, if you don't mind. Burton wasn't to blame."

"You have acted commendably in owning up, Bennett, but since you have admitted that the fault is yours you will also write me fifty lines," said Mr. Crowell tartly. "Burton has no excuse in saying that he merely answered you. I will insist upon having quietness—— Christine—Talmadge!"

Mr. Crowell rose, and his voice rose with him.

"Yes, sir?" said Bob Christine and Charlie Talmadge together.

"You were talking!"

"Were we, sir?" said Bob Christine meekly.

"You were talking even whilst I was in the act of admonishing other boys for the same offence!" exclaimed the Form-master angrily. "You will each write me one hundred lines, and if there is any more talking this afternoon, the whole class will be detained for half-an-hour."

The Remove, as a whole body, glared at Christine and Talmadge, and the Bo'sun and I. They didn't fancy being detained for half-an-hour on account of

our sins. We sat down, and the lesson proceeded.

It was some consolation to know, however, that Christine and Talmadge, who had been the chief offenders, had received the heavier imposition. I grinned at them sweetly, and received black looks in reply.

For the Fossils and the Monks were at war. The Fossils, I may as well explain, were the Ancient House juniors, and the Monks resided in the College House. There was a keen rivalry between the two sections of juniors at St. Frank's. And, if the truth be told, this rivalry extended to the seniors, only in a more sedate form. And it was some source of satisfaction to me to know that I had been the cause of this healthy spirit of friendly antagonism which pervaded the school. When I had arrived at St. Frank's the spirit had been dead for years, and one of my first objects had been to revive it. I had been so successful that there were minor House rows of some sort twenty times a day!

And, as I remarked to the Bo'sun, something was "on" amongst the Monks. Not only in class, but for a day or two past, Bob Christine and his merry men had been observed in solemn conclave on many occasions. They all appeared to be supremely contented, and there was a feeling rising in the Ancient House that the Monks were concealing something up their sleeve.

Bob Christine was a jolly decent fellow, and the skipper of the College House Remove. I, as you probably know, was the skipper of the Ancient House Remove. And, naturally, the fellows looked to me to get busy. That's one disadvantage of being a leader; you are expected to do miracles, almost. And if you don't do 'em, you're in danger of being cast aside ignominiously. Junior schoolboys aren't in the habit of making allowances.

After lessons the Remove streamed out noisily, and I joined my study chums, Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson.

"Silly ass!" remarked Watson candidly. "What were you jawing about?"

"Fifty lines, my dear chap, are a trifle," I replied. "I was only calling the Bo'sun's attention to Christine and his lot. Those beggars have been knocking their heads together for days. There's something brewing. I'll bet a quid they're plotting some big jape or other. It's up to us to get wind of it before

they strike. We can't let them gain a victory, that's certain."

"It strikes me you're slacking, Bennett," declared Handforth, who was standing near. "It ain't good generalship to allow the enemy to steal a march on you. You'll have to wake up, or there'll be a new captain in the Ancient House!" he added darkly.

"Dear boy, if you can name a better fellow for skipper, pray do so," said Sir Montie Tregellis-West languidly. "Name him, Handy, old boy. Bennett's the only chap, to my thinkin'."

Handforth smiled.

"Well, I wouldn't mind naming him," he said. "But I'm a modest sort of chap, and I don't want to swank about myself —"

"Yourself?" said Tommy Watson. "We weren't talking about you, ass!"

"Didn't West ask me to name a new skipper?" demanded Handforth.

"Well, instead of naming him: you started talking about yourself, you chump!"

"My dear, innocent chap," I put in. "Handy was too retiring to speak in plain terms, but I don't mind speaking for him. He meant to say that he was perfectly willing to take up the reins if I threw 'em down."

"That's it!" agreed Edward Oswald Handforth. "You've put it neatly, Benny."

"Handforth—captain of the Remove!" gasped Tommy Watson.

"Why not?" roared Handforth aggressively.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tommy Watson doubled himself up. This wasn't exactly complimentary to the famous leader of Study D. Church and McClure, Handforth's inseparable chums, were grinning from ear to ear. But, as they caught Handforth's eye upon them, they became almost preternaturally grave. They had trained themselves to accomplish this rapid manoeuvre through long association with their hasty leader. Handforth's fists were formidable, and he was quite impartial in their use; friends and foes alike had often felt their weight.

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

"You—you ain't sure!" bawled Handforth. "There ain't anything to cackle at! If Benny left St. Frank's, who'd

have to be skipper? That's what I ask you—who'd take his place?"

"Well, you'd do, of course," I said thoughtfully.

"Do! I'm glad you recognise——"

"Providing, of course, that everybody else in the Remove refused the job," I went on genially. "I dare say you'd last a week, Handy. After that, of course, you'd be too sore to continue your duties."

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled McClure incautiously. "That's just about right—ahem! I—I mean you're talking out of your hat, Benny!" went on McClure, as he found Handforth's eagle eye upon him. "I—I ain't sure that Handy wouldn't be a better skipper than you, after all."

"You—you ain't sure!" bawled Handforth.

"Ye-yes, I am sure, of course!" gasped McClure. "Quite sure, old man!"

"Well, this argument seems to be rather pointless," I said. "There's no question of me dropping the reins, Handy, so you won't have the chance to become skipper."

"I give you fair warning," declared Handforth, "if Christine and Co. score over us, it'll be your downfall, Bennett. Don't say I haven't told you! You'll come a frightful cropper, and will be relegated to—to insignificance!"

And, with that dire threat, Handforth marched off, evidently under the impression that he had created an effect. Undoubtedly he had, for everybody was grinning broadly.

"It's a disease with him," remarked Owen major. "He can't help it, poor chap. But, seriously, Benny, something will have to be done, you know. Christine and Co. are planning some wheeze."

"It's all very well for you chaps to talk," I said. "The game can't always be one-sided. You seem to think that the Ancient House ought to score every time."

"Well, so it ought," said Hubbard grimly.

"Rats! It's not possible," I declared. "But, if Christine and Co. score against us, we've got to avange it promptly by scoring a lot heavier. I'll admit that it will be better to nip their little game in the bud, but it can't always be done. If you leave things to me, I won't let the House down. I suppose you can trust me? I haven't proved a failure up to now, have I?"

"You've done wonders, Benny," said Conroy minor. "Nobody denies that. And I'm willing to trust you, for one."

"Hear, hear!"

"Leave it to Bennett!"

My little speech had done some good, for the fellows were unanimous in their sentiments; they were all ready to "leave it to me." There was some satisfaction in doing this, for it left them without responsibility. I didn't mind, for I was quite sure that I could whack Bob Christine at his own game.

At the same time, I was a bit worried. I didn't want the Monks to spring a surprise. I strolled out into the Triangle with several other fellows, and found Christine and Co. chatting under the chestnuts.

"Let's go and question 'em," I said. "They won't answer us, of course, but we shall be able to tell by their manner how the land lies. If there's something big on, they'll be sweetly innocent—and that's just the clue we want."

"Begad! I should never have thought of that, you know," said Sir Montie mildly.

We lounged across, and Christine and Talmadge and Yorke at once commenced talking in loud voices about football. This, to begin with, was quite satisfactory.

"No larks!" said Bob Christine. "We don't want a House row now, my dear chaps. Just talking about football," he added carelessly.

"Yes, I heard you," I replied. "But, my dear chap, football ain't very important just now, is it? What's the idea? What little wheeze are you preparing for us? What plot are you concocting?"

Talmadge and Yorke looked rather dismayed.

"Why, how the dickens did you know——"

"Shut up, you fatheaded ass!" hissed Christine, treading forcibly on Talmadge's foot. "Plot?" he went on, as though he had never heard the word before. "Who's talking about a plot? Dreaming, or what?"

"No, I'm not dreaming," I replied cheerfully. "I thought, perhaps, you'd settled rather a sore point, Christy, old man. Some of the chaps on our side say that you're planning a large-sized jape, and I, as skipper, am naturally curious. It's rot, isn't it?"

Christine and Co. laughed.

"Some chaps do get queer ideas at

times," remarked Christine. "Just fancy thinking of such a thing! A jape? My dear kid, we haven't any idea of a jape—not the slightest. We've got something better to do."

"Ha, ha! Rather!" chuckled Yorke.

"Oh, there is something, then," I said grimly. "But it's not a jape?"

"Yorke doesn't know what he's talking about!" said Talmadge fiercely. "It's sheer piffle to think that we're concocting a kid's jape. It's nothing so trivial—I mean, we wouldn't demean ourselves—"

"Is that a pun?" asked Watson, with a sniff. "If so, it's rotten!"

"Oh, rats!"

And Christine and Co. strolled off carelessly. I stood watching them with a grin of satisfaction.

"There you are, my sons!" I said. "We know now!"

"Bust my scuppers! What do we know?" asked the Bo'sun.

"A fat lot, don't we?" growled Tommy Watson.

"Not exactly a fat lot, but a good deal," I replied. "For example, we know that Christine and Co. are planning something or other. It isn't a jape, but something bigger. Therefore we've got to prepare accordingly."

"Begad! That's rather vague, ain't it?"

"Well, it has to be vague at present, Montie," I replied. "There's no need to worry ourselves. We've got the clue we want, and now it's up to me to make investigations."

"In—investigations?" repeated Owen major blankly.

"Leave it to me," I said, waving my hand.

And, for the time being, the matter was dropped. The fellows went in to tea, and Sir Montie and Tommy and I wended our way to Study C, with a similar object in mind. But there was no getting away from the fact that a certain uneasiness prevailed in the Ancient House.

Bob Christine and Co. were acting mysteriously; they had got into the habit of strangely disappearing for hours at a time. Fellows going across to speak to Christine, or one of his chums, came back empty-handed, so to speak. And nobody seemed to know where the Monks had got to.

The wheeze, whatever it was, seemed

to be of big dimensions. And Christine and Co. were taking very particular precautions to keep the secret. Teddy Long, the Paul Pry of the Ancient House, had tried in vain to probe the mystery. And if Teddy Long couldn't find anything out—well, things were pretty hopeless!

But Long's system of prying wasn't to be commended. I meant to go to work in another way. One thing was settled in my mind. Bob Christine and Co. were certainly not going to "put one over" on me.

I meant to start investigating straight away.

CHAPTER II.

(Nipper continues.)

IN WHICH I INDULGE IN A LITTLE DETECTIVE WORK, AND DISCOVER MUCH.

"WAR is a game of ups and downs!" I remarked impressively. "We can't always be victorious—it's not reasonable to suppose that we can be. But it's something to be prepared in advance. And, if we're slick, we'll diddle the Monks yet!"

Tommy Watson took a bite out of a ham sandwich.

"That's all very well," he said, as he chewed. "But I'm blessed if I can see how we're going to diddle 'em. If they were in this House, it would be a different thing. But the College House is quite separate from this one, and if we show our faces there we shall be simply wiped up! We can't do any real scouting in the enemy's lines!"

"Dear fellow, that's just what I'm thinkin'," said Montie, as he sipped his tea. "We're at a shockin' disadvantage. There's no gettin' over the fact, begad! The Monks can do just as they like on the other side of the Triangle, an' we can't see anythin' of it. It's a frightful state of affairs—it is, really!"

"I don't see that," I observed. "The same applies to us, Montie, don't forget. There's nothing to prevent us getting up some scheme, and keeping it mum."

"Then let's do it!" said Tommy promptly.

"Ah, but that wouldn't be a wise move," I went on. "The chief point is to discover Christine's little game first. Once we know that we can get to work in the right way. See? And I suppose

we all agree that we're at war with the Monks?"

"It's a deadly conflict, dear Benny!" nodded Sir Montie.

"Then it's quite fair and above board for us to do some scouting," I declared. "Not spying, you know. We don't want to nose about in a mean kind of way—that ain't allowable. Scouting's different—and I've got a wheeze."

Tregellis-West smiled serenely.

"I was waitin' for it!" he exclaimed. "I knew it would come before long, Benny. When haven't you got a wheeze? I'm as comfortable as anythin'—with you at the helm, dear fellow; there's nothin' to fear."

"I'm not going to get up and bow, Montie," I grinned. "As a matter of fact, the wheeze isn't worth it. Anybody could have thought of it. All we've got to do is to post ourselves in the Triangle after tea. It'll be cold, I know, but that won't matter a toss. It's just a preliminary move, you understand? I don't suppose we shall find out much, but there's no telling."

Accordingly, as soon as tea was over, we put on our overcoats, and sallied out into the dark Triangle. That's not quite right, though, because we did our prep first, so as to allow the darkness to completely descend. It wouldn't be any good hanging about in the Triangle while we could be seen.

It was a cold job, for an East wind was blowing rather severely. After half an hour Tommy Watson declared, in no uncertain terms, that my idea was absolutely a dud. Tommy was chilled through, and I couldn't blame him much. But, just after he had spoken, we were rewarded by seeing three Removeites leave the College House quickly, as though afraid of being seen. They made their way round towards the rear of the College House, and disappeared.

Two minutes later another group appeared and went off in the same direction. Then a window opened—a window of a Remove study—and five or six Monks piled out and slipped away into the gloom.

"Patience rewarded!" I murmured.

"Nice kind of reward, ain't it?" growled Tommy, beating his gloved hands together. "We don't know any more now than we did before!"

"We know that there's something on round at the back of the College House.

anyhow!" I replied. "Come, we'll slip round in that direction ourselves!"

Like shadows we crossed from the old chestnut trees where we had been standing. I had high hopes of discovering the truth at once. But, just as we were passing the angle of the rival House, a low whistle sounded.

The next moment seven or eight dark forms loomed up.

"Who goes there?" whispered a tense voice.

"Begad!" ejaculated Sir Montie in sheer surprise.

"Fossils!" came a sharp hiss.

Montie's unmistakable voice had given the game away, and we were simply whacked. The group of dark forms came at us determinedly, and we didn't stand a chance. We were just hurled back by sheer weight of numbers, and left in a dishevelled, muddy heap. And when we scrambled up the enemy had vanished.

"My—my hat!" gasped Tommy Watson dazedly.

"Where are they, dear fellows?" asked Sir Montie. "Begad! I can't see anythin' in this darkness! I'm in a shockin' state of disorder! Suppose we rush to the attack again?"

"No good!" I whispered. "Christine has taken more precautions than I counted upon. There must be sentries posted all round the College House—standing there, guarding the way, so to speak. Our only chance would be to make a charge in numbers—and we couldn't do that without giving the Monks warning. They'd see us concentrating for the attack."

We retired as gracefully as possible, and returned to Study C. Here, having dusted ourselves down, we reviewed the situation.

"This secret, whatever it is, is being safeguarded very strictly," I said. "Scouting is out of the question. But I'm not done yet, my sons! By breakfast time to-morrow I'll know the giddy truth, I'll bet!"

I had decided upon a plan. Sir Montie and Tommy were not very enthusiastic when I told it to them, but I was quite satisfied myself. And the fact that rain commenced to fall very shortly afterwards gave me more satisfaction still. Rain, at that time, was just what I wanted. It was only a sharp shower, and that made it all the better.

I went to sleep in the Remove dormi-

tory that night with a fixed resolve in my mind. That resolve was to wake up at six o'clock. The gov'nor had trained me to do this little trick, and it wasn't often I failed. Nelson Lee was, of course, at St. Frank's with me—he was "Mr. Alvington," the master of the Ancient House.

The time was just five to six when I woke up, and the weak light of the new day was streaming in at the window. The sun was just shining, and the air struck chill as I slipped out of bed. All the other fellows were soundly asleep.

I didn't dress properly, and in a few minutes I was ready to slip down. In the passage downstairs I met several surprised domestics. It was nearly an unheard of thing for a junior to get up before rising-bell; but there was no rule against such a move, and I couldn't get into a scrape.

Out in the Triangle I walked sharply across to the College House. Everything was extraordinarily still, and the effect was quite strange. But it was just what I wanted, for I was bent upon doing a little detective work. After participating in scores of Nelson Lee's intricate cases, this business was a mere trifle. I met with success at once, and grinned with satisfaction.

My object was to follow the tracks made by Christine and Co. the previous night. As the fellows had all gone in the same direction, they naturally made quite a conglomeration of footprints, and I could have followed the trail blindfolded, almost. The shower of the previous evening helped wonderfully, for it had taken place before the return of the mysterious party.

Without the slightest difficulty I followed the tracks right round the College House until I arrived at the old monastery ruins. I was grinning now, for the truth was becoming apparent.

There was an old vault under the ruins, as I had good reason to know. I had visited the place under more exciting circumstances than these. And when I found all the footprints converging upon one doorway, my suspicions were verified.

I took out my electric torch, switched it on, and swiftly descended the rough, circular stairs which led down into the crypt. And here I found much enlightenment. The vault had obviously been occupied by many persons just recently.

Candles were lying about in niches everywhere, and up one corner I found numerous bundles of paper.

Upon examination these turned out to be actor's parts for a play—written on exercise-paper by Christine and Co.! I chuckled hugely as I glanced through them. The play was nothing more nor less than a new and improved version—improved, mind you!—of "East Lynne"! I could easily guess how Bob Christine and Co. had dramatised Mrs. Henry Wood's famous story!

There was also a big play-bill, half completed. It was done really beautifully in coloured paints by an unknown genius of the College House. The announcement was interesting, for it stated that the play would be produced on the following Saturday evening by the College House Junior Dramatic Society.

I had probed the great secret!

And, although I chuckled, I was a bit worried. If produced, the Monks would score a distinct success. They had taken the precaution to keep the whole thing secret in order to spring a big surprise on their rivals.

Well, the surprise wouldn't come off!

I left everything as I had found it, and went straight back to the Remove dormitory in the Ancient House. And when the rising-bell went, I sat up in bed with the rest, yawning and rubbing my eyes.

Tommy Watson snorted as he looked at me.

"I knew what it would be!" he exclaimed. "I've heard chaps talk about getting up early before!"

I merely grinned and said nothing. It was a Wednesday that day, and a half-holiday. I kept my own counsel until after lessons. Then I gave the tip to a dozen fellows that there was to be a meeting in Study C immediately after dinner—a council of war, in fact.

Everybody turned up, and the study was crowded. My chums and I were there, naturally, and the others included Owen major and Farman and Canham of Study H; the Bo'sun and Conroy minor of Study F; Sessue Yakama and Kemp of Study I; and Handforth and Church and McClure of Study D. It was quite a meeting of the strong men of the Remove.

"Some wheeze, I suppose?" asked Handforth, trying to look important.

"Well, this meeting is to decide upon a plan of action," I replied briskly. "The

Monks mustn't be allowed to spring a surprise on us—and they won't!"

"But we haven't found out what they're up to yet!" said McClure.

"Yes, we have!" I replied calmly.

"At least, I have!"

"Souise my scuppers!"

"Rats!"

"Don't swank!"

"My dear chaps, I do think while you're lying in bed," I went on coolly.

"Long before the rising-bell went, I was up and doing. I found out exactly what Bob Christine and Co. are up to—and that's why this meeting has been called."

"By old Glory! You don't say!" exclaimed Justin B. Farman, the boy from California. "You're sure a bright boy, Bennett. Say, we've been mussin' around like a lot o' boobys, an' you've been gettin' busy, playin' a lone hand. Gee!"

I grinned.

"The fact is," I said, "the Monks are producing a play!"

"By hokey!"

"A play!"

"'East Lynne' to be exact."

"Oh, my only hat!" gasped Handforth. "That's a bit steep, ain't it? We've had Shakespeare at St. Frank's before now, but 'East Lynne' is the limit! It's a dirty trick to turn a serious play into a screaming farce! The Monks'll simply turn the thing inside out!"

"They'll make hay of it, sure!" agreed Farman. "Them guys don't know a thing about play-actin'. Say, it's one over on us, though."

"We must unquestionably put a stop to this excruciating performance," murmured Sessue Yakama smilingly. "It is impossible that we should permit the honourable Monks to give a presentation of their august and amazing play."

"Look here, Jappy, I've got nothing against you personally," remarked Handforth, "but if you're going to take part in the discussion, we sha'n't get done until tea-time! Your chief fault is that you say about a hundred words when two would do. What you want to do is to condense—be brisk and concise!"

"Somethin' like you, dear fellow—what?" drawled Sir Montie.

Handforth turned red. He probably realised that he'd been using far more words than were necessary. Handforth, in fact, came a good second to Yakama in this respect.

"Well, I don't know about mucking up Christine's play," I said thoughtfully. "That would be rather tame, wouldn't it? And it wouldn't be a very nice thing to do. We don't want to be spiteful."

"What about producing a play ourselves?" asked Canham.

"My dear chap, there's not time," I replied. "The Monks must have been preparing this thing for weeks. We couldn't get a play all ready for presentation by Saturday night. Besides, there'd be nothing original in that; it would just be a copy of Christine and Co."

"Then what the dickens are we to do?" asked Handforth bluntly.

"I've called this meeting so that we can decide," I said, looking round.

"Ain't you got a wheeze?"

"Not yet."

"Well, there's a fine thing!" snorted Handforth. "You drag us all in here —"

"If you ain't careful, Handy, you'll get dragged out—and locked out!" I threatened. "There is something we can do—something terrific—but it'll require some money. Still, we might be able to club together, and the thing we shall buy will last for months, and provide constant amusement."

"What! A giddy musical-box?" roared Handforth.

"Your imaginative powers, my dear old chap, are altogether novel," I chuckled. "A musical-box! Ye gods! What a suggestion! No, the thing's something quite different, and it'll cost us about twelve quid!"

Tommy Watson fainted; at least, he sank into Sir Montie's arms, and gasped for breath.

"Twelve quid!" yelled Conroy minor.

"Bust my mains'!" grinned the Bo'sun. "That's nothing, messmates! It won't take us long to rake up a sum like that."

The Bo'sun was sarcastic; but Justin B. Farman and Sir Montie pulled out their purses.

"I've got five, dear fellows," said Tregellis-West.

"And, say, I can add another four right now!" declared Farman.

"I sha'n't need all that!" I exclaimed. "I can add a fiver myself. But, of course, it will be just as well to have a surplus. I think it's ripping of you to offer your money without knowing what it's for. Now, just have a look here!"

I pulled from my pocket a copy of the "Bannington Gazette."

"It's to-day's, I said. "And there's an advt. in it that a chap doesn't often see. Have a squint!"

I pointed out the advertisement, and all the juniors crowded round. Several gasps went up, and just as many snorts of impatience.

"You—you ass!" roared Handforth. "What's the good of that? How the dickens could we fix things——"

"Nothing easier, my son!" I put in. "Just listen to me a minute, and I'll explain fully. If we can do it, it'll knock the Monks' silly plans into little bits!"

And I lost no time in explaining the whole thing in detail. The meeting listened with great attention, and, at last, they were all tremendously enthusiastic. There wasn't a single objector—except, perhaps, Handforth, who continued to shake his head dubiously.

"It might be all right," he said, "but it's my opinion we shall be taking on more than we can chew. Besides, what about asking permission? We can't do a thing like that without the beaks knowing about it."

"Leave it to me," I said cheerfully, and with perfect confidence, "I'll pop along and jaw at old Alvy. I can get round him in a tick!"

"Yes, I've noticed that before," growled Handforth. "Blessed if you don't seem to be favoured, somehow! 'Taint quite fair to my mind. Still, if you can work this, it'll be ripping!"

I rushed off and had a short chat with the gov'nor, and returned victorious. A collection was then made. I contributed four pounds, Sir Montie four, Farman three, Yakama two, and another two from various slimmer pockets. This gave us some surplus money for odds and ends.

A trip to Bannington was then undertaken, not on bikes, but by the afternoon train. We didn't return until after dark. St. Frank's was glowing with lights when we turned in at the gates, and there wasn't a soul to be seen in the Triangle. This was quite satisfactory.

Practically every fellow with me—and I, myself—carried bulky and mysterious parcels. We wended our way round to the big paddock at the rear of the Head's garden. Passing down the pathway laboriously, we arrived at a big, gloomy old building. And here we left our goods and chattels.

Then, feeling that something good had been accomplished, we hurried into the Ancient House to tea, knowing that we had thoroughly earned it. But what was the secret? If you haven't guessed it, you'll have to wait a bit. Anyhow, I'm not going to write any more of this particular narrative of events. It'll all be done by the poor author-chap who has to wade through my stuff!

CHAPTER III.

THE PROWLERS OF THE NIGHT—FULLWOOD AND DE VALERIE SEE THINGS.

THE Remove dormitory in the Ancient House was black and still. But, as ten-thirty boomed out, six beds creaked, and six forms sat up. A chuckle, in Nipper's voice, sounded.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he murmured. "Blessed if you're not all awake!"

Nipper was certainly surprised. On other occasions, when a late jaunt had been arranged, the juniors had been sound asleep at the appointed time. Now, however, they were excited, and sleep had not overtaken them.

The six forms slipped out of bed and commenced to dress. They were Nipper and Sir Montie and Tommy Watson; and Justin B. Farman, the Bo'sun, and Sessue Yakama. Handforth and Co. had been allowed to sleep—which was perhaps as well. The lumbering Handforth would undoubtedly have awakened the whole dormitory.

As it was, two other fellows were alert. Right at the other end of the dormitory, Cecil de Valerie and Ralph Leslie Fullwood, the scamps of the Remove, were bending over towards one another in the beds.

"It's Bennett and his lot!" murmured Fullwood in surprised accents. "What's the little game? Are they startin' in the bounds-breakin' line? I'll bet they're off to the White Harp, the dashed hypocrites!"

"Somethin' of that sort," whispered De Valerie. "My hat! What a show-up if we could catch 'em at it! Always preachin' to us, an' bein' goody-goody, an' they're off on the ran-dan themselves!"

"Might be a jape against the College House."

"Rats!" They wouldn't get up for that!" whispered De Valerio. "Look here, let's slip our clothes on quickly, and follow 'em! They won't spot us in this darkness."

And so, a moment later, Fullwood and De Valerio were rapidly dressing themselves. They were greatly experienced in the art of dressing in the dark, and they raced Nipper and Co. easily. As their beds were near the door, they lay upon them, and drew the quilts over their fully-clothed bodies.

The six other juniors, stealing out, had no idea that the two Nuts were very much on the alert.

The very instant the dormitory door closed, Fullwood and De Valerio slipped off their beds. Then they ventured out into the corridor, and were just in time to see Nipper and his chums descending the stairs.

It was a novel experience for Fullwood and the Rotter to be shadowing their sworn enemies at this time of night. It wasn't late, of course, and the masters were still up. It was necessary, therefore, to be very cautious. The mysterious party all went into Study C, and the door was closed. De Valerio, creeping up, heard the window being pushed up.

"They're goin' out!" he murmured. "They're off on the razzle, I'll bet!"

The two cads liked to make themselves believe that Nipper and Co. were off on some blackguardly pleasure, and they chuckled immensely at the thought. As soon as they emerged into the Triangle, however, by means of another study window, they were somewhat astonished and disappointed to see their quarry making off round the Ancient House towards the Head's garden.

They skirted this sacred precinct, and took the wide pathway leading into the paddock itself to a big old stable building at the bottom. The ground wasn't forbidden to the juniors, so Nipper and Co. were not breaking bounds so far—except, of course, in the fact that the dormitory door was the limit of bounds after lights-out.

"By jingo, I've got it!" murmured Fullwood. "They're goin' to have a smokin'-party in one of the old harness-rooms—card-playin' and all that, I expect. I'll bet they've been at the game for weeks!"

"We'll show 'em up!" muttered the

Rotter. "By George! What a cone down for the beastly little cads!"

The pair were quite certain, by this time, that they had hit upon the truth. They followed stealthily, and, at last, reached the old building.

It was quite spacious, and covered a large piece of ground. There were several stables and one or two coach-houses; but all were disused. More convenient out-buildings had been erected near the school, and so this place had fallen into disuse. Fullwood and De Valerio were somewhat surprised to find that Nipper and Co. had entered the end stable, and had then made their way up to the big loft. This loft ran over the stables and coach-houses, and was a huge, empty place, quite as large as the big lecture-hall itself. It was reached by means of a substantial staircase, with a huge trap-door at the top. On the other side there were big double-doors, opening out upon a grass bank. As this was much higher than the ground in the front, it was possible to walk straight out of the loft into the adjoining meadow.

Fullwood and De Valerio were nonplussed. They couldn't very well believe that the six juniors had gone up to the chilly loft to hold a card-party. And, a few minutes later, the unmistakable sound of brooms getting to work made them look at one another in astonishment.

"What the deuce——" began De Valerio.

"Let's nip round to the other side," suggested Fullwood. "We might be able to see in through the crack of the doors."

It didn't take them long to hurry round, for it was only necessary to go to the end of the building, scramble up the steep bank, and work their way round through the long grass. A chink of light showed here.

Many voices were heard within, and the pair outside found that they could gain a clear view of the interior through the chinks in the woodwork of the doors. Fullwood had a look first, and he looked for quite a minute.

"Well, I'm dashed!" he murmured in sheer surprise.

"What are the asses up to?"

"Have a squint for yourself."

De Valerio had a "squint." He saw Nipper and Co. terrifically busy unpacking parcels. He saw other things as well, and he grinned.

"It's not what we thought, anyhow," he whispered. "Still, we know the silly secret, Fully. I say, we shall be able to get a bit of our own back with this. But it's no good doing anything to-night. We should only get ourselves wiped up for our trouble."

They remained watching for fully twenty minutes until, in fact, they became so cold that the game was no longer worth the candle. Nipper and Co. within the loft, were quite unconscious of these attentions.

Having thoroughly satisfied themselves as to the cause of the tremendous energy within the loft, Fullwood and De Valerie crept away until they reached the end of the paddock. They were now just against the lane, for only a hedge divided it from them.

Fullwood shivered as the East wind cut across the meadows.

"Oh, rats! Let's get back to bed!" he muttered, hunching himself up.

"Well, I was thinking——"

"Thinkin' what?"

"We're out now, so why not go for a jaunt to the White Harp?" said De Valerie. "Might as well do something now we've taken all this trouble. What do you say, Fully?"

"I say no!"

"Oh, don't be dotty!"

"You know jolly well I haven't got any tin!" growled Fullwood. "Bradmore took the last quid I had, because that rotten horse didn't win last Monday! I shall be stony until the end of the week!"

"It was your own fault," said De Valerie calmly. "I told you to put your money on 'Black Bess' and you wouldn't. I raked in a fiver myself, and you could have done the same if you'd been sensible——"

"Oh, don't rub it in!" grunted Fullwood savagely. "What's the good of talkin'? I'm stony, an' I'm not goin' to sponge on you. Let's get back to bed!"

But De Valerie was obstinate.

"Rot!" "I'll lend you a quid," he urged. "Might as well make a night of it now we're fully dressed. I'm blessed if I'm going to crawl back into bed tamely! There'll be some good sport at the Harp to-night!"

"I tell you I ain't goin' to sponge on you!" said Fullwood obstinately. "The last time you lent me a quid you kept worryin' me for days. Keep your money, and blow you! I'm jolly cold!"

De Valerie chuckled.

"Just as you like," he said. "I'll go down to the Harp alone!"

"Don't be a silly fool——"

"I'm not going to offer you that quid again," said De Valerie. "But, look here, if you're going back to the dormitory, you might as well do me a favour. Hunch my pillow up in the bed, so that those cads won't notice anything when they go back. So long!"

De Valerie, without another word, pushed his way through a gap in the edge, and commenced walking briskly down the lane. He had paid several visits to the White Harp since his comparatively recent arrival at St. Frank's, and he was already well known to the shindy frequenters of the disreputable inn. The landlord, Mr. Jonas Porlock, always welcomed the Nuts, for they generally spent a good deal of money in his establishment.

And De Valerie, on this present visit, was greeted warmly. Mr. Porlock and several kindred spirits were quite effusive. De Valerie was soon playing a game of billiards with Mike Bradmore, the village bookmaker. Bradmore was a regular rascal, and a renowned billiard-sharp. The game, of course, was for money; to the minds of the players it wouldn't have been worth while otherwise.

De Valerie was a good player, and he won the first game—and a "quid" with it. Bradmore winked at the landlord, and the second game commenced. De Valerie wasn't so successful this time, although the stakes were doubled. He lost, and had to hand back his winnings with another pound as well.

He threw down his cue, and lit another cigarette.

"Can't stop for more to-night!" he declared. "I'll whack you the next time, Bradmore. Must have my revenge, you know!"

"Quite right, sir—quite right!" said the bookmaker genially. "You had 'ard luck during the last half-hour, an' no mistake! But don't be goin' just yet. I can put you in the way of makin' a nice little bit next Monday. You drew a fiver off me last week, you remember!"

Bradmore was a burly, coarse man, with a bloated kind of face. Exactly why De Valerie should care to share his company was puzzling, for the Rotter was a

fellow with somewhat refined tastes, generally.

"Well, I don't mind riskin' a quid if you've got something good, Bradmore," he said.

They talked for some little time, and a bet was booked. Mr. Bradmore was quite satisfied, for he had succeeded in getting three pounds out of De Valerie instead of the original one.

"I suppose you'll be comin' down on Monday night to see how things went with the race?" suggested Bradmore.

"You stand a chance of clickin' a nice fat little sum, Master De Valerie!"

The Rotter nodded.

"Couldn't you manage to meet me before supper-time?" he asked. "I could easily slip out into the road; or, I'll tell you what, if you'll come to the bottom of the paddock, I'd meet you there. It's only divided from the lane by a hedge."

Mr. Bradmore considered.

"Well, my time's valuable, as you may know," he said thoughtfully. "Still, seein' as you're a particuar pal o' mine, I don't mind goin' to a little trouble. I could be up at the school at eight or nine, if that would suit you."

"Right-ho! That'll do fine!" said De Valerie. "Be there at nine, Mr. Bradmore. No, we'd better say eight, an' then it won't interfere with supper. I'll be waiting for you, so you won't be kept hardly a minute."

"Good enough, young gent," said Mr. Bradmore. "I'll be there at eight prompt. But, mind, I sha'n't wait no longer than ten minutes if you don't turn up."

"I'll be there," said De Valerie. And the appointment was settled.

Cecil De Valerie, as he hurried back to St. Frank's, little imagined what that arrangement was to lead to!

If he could have had an inkling of the terrible after-consequences, he would have sacrificed his pocket-money for a whole year rather than allow the appointment to stand!

CHAPTER IV.

TWO SURPRISING ANNOUNCEMENTS AND A SCORE FOR THE FOSSILS.

SATURDAY turned out to be a bright, crisp day. Whether it was the weather (no pun intended!), or something else, it was an undoubted fact that the juniors of both

Houses at St. Frank's were in a state of brisk expectancy.

Christine and Co., and the College House juniors generally, went about with superior kind of smiles upon their faces. They were somewhat troubled to see answering smiles upon the visages of Nipper and Co, but set this down to lofty indifference on the Fossils' part. Certainly, they did not suspect the truth.

It was a day which was long remembered in the old school, not because of the incidents which took place on that day but because it was really the starting-point of something totally different.

Nothing happened until after morning lessons.

Then, just before dinner, a dazzlingly brilliant poster, in five colours, was discovered in the middle of the Triangle. It was pasted on to a board, and the board was hung to one of the chestnut-tree.

Nobody knew exactly how it had been placed there; but a crowd of Monks had been observed on the spot shortly before. Hubbard, of the Remove, was really the first to see it, and his excited yells brought others to the spot. Only a few select members of the Ancient House Remove knew the secret, and the announcement came as a big surprise to most fellows.

"Great pip!" gasped Griffiths. "A-- a play! That's what those Monks had been cackling about! Oh, crumbs! This'll make the Ancient House sing, small, and no giddy error!"

"'East Lynne,' too!" yelled Hubbard. "The silly fatheads will make a frightful muddle of it! It'll be simply a scream!"

"We'll go and boo the rotters!"

"Rather!"

"We'll buy up all Mrs. Hake's squiffy eggs!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Fossils found some little consolation in the anticipation of giving the play a very hot reception. They were naturally disappointed, for Bob Christine and Co. had certainly won a point. To produce and present a play was quite an achievement. What the play itself was like was merely a detail.

Handforth and Co. strolled up, and grinned hugely.

"Jolly fine poster, anyhow!" remarked McClure admiringly. "That's Clapson's work, I'll bet! He's always messing about with paints."

"Rats to the poster!" roared Marriott. "Where's Bennett now? Fine kind of leader, ain't he?"

"You wait, my buck!" grinned Handforth mysteriously. "Just you wait a bit. Then you'll see—er—what you will see!"

"Go hon!" answered Marriott.

The excitement grew, and Nipper and Co. came out to have a look on. They were quite serene, and examined the poster with great interest. It was, indeed, cleverly executed, and ran something like the following:

TO-NIGHT! TO-NIGHT! TO-NIGHT!
The College House Junior Dramatic Society will present an Entirely New and Up-To-Date Version of the Famous Play:

"EAST LYNNE."

There will be Six Splendid Acts, and Twenty-Five Gorgeous Scenes.

Robert Christine as Archibald Carlyle.

Charles Talmadge as Francis Leveson.

William Nation as Constable Bullock.

Leonard Clapson as Lady Isobel.

Harry Oldfield as Barbara Hare.

Roderick Yorke as Miss Cornelia.

And Many Other Characters Altogether Too Numerous to Mention.

FULL DETAILS OF CAST AND SYNOPSIS OF SCENERY ON PROGRAMME.

At 7-30! At 7-30! At 7-30!

The Above Magnificent Play Will be Presented in the

COLLEGE HOUSE LECTURE-HALL.

Admission:

6d., 1s., and 2s.

All Proceeds to Go in Their Entirety to
THE BANNINGTON RED CROSS FUND.

TO-NIGHT! TO-NIGHT! TO-NIGHT!

"I'll bet the poster's the best part of the whole show!" grinned Tommy Watson, as he gazed upon its glory. "Oh, corks! Old Clapson as Lady Isobel!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Christine and Co. themselves, were nowhere to be seen. Possibly they were too modest to show themselves; or they may have feared that they would be chipped unmercifully by their jealous

rivals. It was universally acknowledged that the Monks had a terrific "nerve" to produce such a drama as "East Lynne." But the very cheek of it was proof that Christine and Co. were daring and original. They were out to gain glory.

Everybody decided to go, of course. A good many seniors were heard to mention, in a casual kind of way, that they might drop in, just to see how "rotten" the kids could be.

For quite two hours Christine and Co. were absolutely wallowing in notoriety and fame. Great activity was proceeding in the College House, in preparation for the stupendous show. It so happened that there was no football fixtures for that afternoon, and the Monks were foregoing practice. The Fossils, too, did not feel much like footer. A considerable crowd hung about in the Triangle, round about the poster.

And then, in about three minutes, the glory of Christine and Co. faded into insignificance, and a new sensation stirred the juniors.

Doyle, of the Remove, happened to notice two box-kites ascending from the playing-fields. They went up beautifully in the stiff breeze, and climbed high into the heavens. In the middle of Little Side Nipper and Co. could be seen manipulating the strings. Kite-flying was not a new pastime at St. Frank's, but it was generally confined to the Second and Third Forms. And there were many grins when the kites were observed in the air. But as they mounted higher into the sky, it was seen that a large bunting streamer was floating out proudly in the wind. There was writing upon it, and a crowd of juniors rushed to gain a clearer view.

And there the words stood out clearly—red upon a white background:

THE ST. FRANK'S CINEMA!

Opens To-Night at 7-15!

TWO HOURS OF CONTINUOUS ENTERTAINMENT!

Drama. Comedy. Travel.

For Particulars, See Small Bills!

There was a general gasp of amazement as the banner was read. Fellows looked at one another wonderingly, as though they couldn't believe their eyes.

"St. Frank's Cinema!" roared Hubbard. "Rot! There, ain't a cinema

nearer than Bannington! This must be some silly joke!"

"Who's got the small bills?"

"Where is the cinema, anyhow?"

"Who's done it?"

Scores of inquiries were flung at the juniors, who hadn't the slightest idea of what it all meant. But, presently, Nipper and Co. and three or four other juniors strolled up cheerfully, each carrying a bundle of bills. They were properly printed, and very neat, and they simply went like wildfire. In less than ten minutes practically every junior in the school had seen the announcement:

"To-night, at seven-fifteen, the superb St. Frank's Cinema will give its first exhibition of pictures," the bill proclaimed. "It will not be a toy affair, but a real, genuine cinematograph display. The promoters of the enterprise, Messrs. Bennett, Tregellis-West & Co., Ltd., have much pleasure in announcing that the first exhibition will consist of a splendid Feature Drama in Three Reels, supported by numerous Comedy and Travel subjects. Far better than Amateur Theatricals! Entertaining, instructive, and elevating! The St. Frank's Cinema is situated at the bottom of the Paddock, and patrons will find good accommodation at modest prices. All proceeds from the show will be handed to Mr. Alvington, for presentation to the Bannington Red Cross Fund."

The bill said a lot more than this, and it was got up in the most business-like manner. Mr. Alvington, it appeared, would be present during the opening, and the enterprise had his entire support.

This fact, alone, proved positively that the project was not a "swank" one. And the juniors completely forgot "East Lynne" in their new excitement. The Fossils, particularly, chuckled hugely with delight. Nipper hadn't failed them, after all! He had gone one better than Christine!

The Monks were filled with utter dismay. The news of the picture-show took all the wind out of their sails. For, without question, the Ancient House, solid, would attend the cinema—and there wasn't the slightest doubt that a great many Monks would attend as well! Amateur theatricals were nothing new at St. Franks's—but an Amateur Cinema was!

A great many fellows positively refused

to believe that there would be anything to see except a magic-lantern show. They couldn't quite credit that Nipper and Co. were capable of handling a cinematograph outfit. And, although the bills stated that "Dick Bennett" would be "Chief Operator," this didn't create a big impression. At the same time, a packed house was assured. The fellows would go merely for the novelty of it, if for nothing else.

As a matter of fact, the whole thing had been done properly. Nelson Lee, with great good nature, had worked hard with Nipper and his chums at the preparation. The projecting machine wasn't one of the most elaborate type: on the contrary, it was a small affair, such as is used in hospitals, and so forth.

Nipper had seen an advertisement in a local paper to the effect that a moving-picture outfit was for sale at the very modest sum of twelve pounds. It was second-hand, of course, and the films which were sold with it—some eight or nine reels—were of considerable age. But they had been kept in good condition, and were quite excellent in every way.

The installation had been used for electric light, a powerful incandescent electric lamp supplying the illuminant. Nipper had discovered that a wire was run to the old stables, and Lee had easily lengthened this so that electricity could be used in the loft, both for showing the pictures, and for ordinary illumination. It had been quite a simple job.

Nipper and Co. had set the machine, and had done everything else in connection with the show. The screen had been bought with the outfit, and was, of course, a small one. The seating accommodation in the "Cinema" was naturally somewhat limited, but the juniors wouldn't mind standing in the least.

Nelson Lee had not raised any objection to the idea, for the projection light was an enclosed one, and therefore safe. Thus, at a comparatively small outlay, Nipper and Co. were able to fit up a really practicable cinema.

There was a record crowd waiting for admission as early as six o'clock—as soon as tea was over, in fact. The fellows were quite eager to pay their money, for, after all, it was in aid of a deserving war charity.

Conroy major, of the Sixth, an Ancient House prefect, had consented to take the

money. He rather regretted that he had been so good-natured, for he was kept busy until the loft was practically packed.

There were a good many seniors, as well as juniors, among the patrons. The place was a loft, and couldn't be anything else, and so Nipper and Co. had merely tidied it up, and had made no attempt to add decorations.

But this was only a detail; it was the show itself that mattered. A considerable number of College House Removites had paid their admission money in order to create a disturbance—their feelings were very sore—but the presence of "Old Alvy" and two or three prefects made this programme impossible.

Moreover, when the show started, they became so interested in the pictures that they forgot their war-like intentions. Nipper, as operator, did wonders. He manipulated the machine like an old hand at the game, and there was no doubt that an excellent programme was presented.

About an hour after the exhibition had commenced, Bob Christine and Co., looking very subdued, put in an appearance. Their natural curiosity had overcome their anger. It was a sad blow for the great men of the College House Remove. For, it turned out afterwards, only a dozen fellows had shown up for "East Lynne"!

It was obviously impossible to play to such a small "crowd." In consequence, the performance was postponed until the following Tuesday evening. Christine and Co. were compelled to admit that they had been outclassed by the astute Fossils.

And when the affair was all over and the juniors had returned, fully satisfied, to the school itself, Christine waxed wrathful. He was hardly to be blamed for this, considering all the circumstances.

"Just you wait!" he threatened darkly, addressing a crowd of his rivals in the moonlit 'Triangle. "The Monks ain't beaten yet! We'll have our revenge—we'll show you which is cock-house at St. Frank's!"

"Begad! There's no need to show us, dear fellow," murmured Tregellis-West. "We know already—what?"

"Ha, ha! Rather!"

"You're properly whacked, Christy, old son!"

"Go and rehearse your silly old play!"

"I'll have my revenge!" roared Christine, shaking his fist. "I'll make you

chaps shrivel up with envy before long! I've got nothing against Bennett personally—he's a jolly decent sort—but he's not going to swank over me!"

"My dear chap," grinned Nipper, "I haven't swanked——"

Bob Christine snorted, and went off to the College House in high dudgcon. And so the day ended, with complete success for the redoubtable Nipper and Co. But a startlingly unpleasant discovery was made by Tommy Watson on the Monday morning.

He had gone to the loft just after breakfast, before lessons, for some slight object. He came running back red with excitement and fury, and met Nipper and Sir Montie on the Ancient House steps. Handforth and Church and McClure, and two or three other juniors, were lounging about.

"I—I say!" gasped Watson pantingly.

"Tommy boy, you're lookin' shockin'ly upset!" exclaimed Tregellis-West, eyeing the enraged Watson through his pince-nez. "Is anythin' the matter, old man? Begad! Don't make faces like that!"

Tommy Watson scarcely seemed able to speak.

"The—the howling rotters!" he roared, in a sudden outburst. "Oh, the spiteful, vindictive cads!"

"I hope you're not referrin' to me——"

"Dry up, Montie!" interrupted Nipper sharply. "Tommy's quite wild about something. What the dickens has happened, Thomas?"

"Didn't—didn't Christine threaten to have revenge?" choked Watson wildly.

"When? On Saturday night?" asked Nipper. "Yes, Christine did say something of that sort. But he was a bit waxy then——"

"The rotter meant it!" howled Watson. "Two of our films are cut to bits—cut into little bits! Busted up till they're no good for anything! I didn't think Christine and Co. could be such frightful hooligans!"

"By George!" said Handforth, coming down the steps. "By George!"

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie mildly.

"It couldn't have been anybody else," went on Tommy, boiling with wrath. "You remember what he said, don't you? I vote we wipe 'em up straight away! I've never heard of such a spiteful thing!"

"Hold on," said Nipper. "We don't want to be too hasty——"

"Rot!" bawled Handforth. "The thing's as plain as daylight! Hallo, there's Christine over there now—Christine and Yorke and Talmadge! Come on, you chaps—we'll duck the three of 'em in the fountain!"

"Hear, hear!"

Handforth and Co., followed by Tommy Watson and Owen major and Farman and the Bo'sun, pelted off across the Triangle. Christine and Co. were simply overwhelmed. They found themselves caught in the overpowering wave of Fossils. Yelling and struggling, they were borne towards the fountain.

"I don't believe he did it!" declared Nipper warmly. "By jupiter, they'll be in the fountain in half a tick, Montie!"

Nipper rushed off, followed at a more leisurely pace, by the elegant Tregellis-West. Nipper arrived just in time to stop the ducking. Probably no other junior at St. Frank's could have calmed the indignant Fossils at that moment. But Nipper had a compelling way with him which was quite irresistible.

"Chuck it!" he shouted angrily. "Hang it all, give Christine a chance to speak! Nobody ought to be punished unheard!"

The juniors turned upon Nipper hotly.

"Rats to you!" bawled Handforth. "We're going to——"

"Look here, Christine, these chaps believe that you or your chums have destroyed two of our films," said Nipper quickly. "Personally, I don't think you're capable of it, and I'm only asking so that these fatheads may be satisfied. They'll be ready to take your word, one way or the other!"

Christine was frankly amazed.

"I don't know what you're jawing about!" he said warmly. "Do you think I'd touch your silly films? Besides, we don't do those rotten tricks in the College House! You'd be nearer the mark if you questioned those beastly Nuts of yours—Fullwood and his pals!"

"Didn't—didn't you do it?" gasped Tommy Watson.

"Of course we didn't!" yelled Talmadge. "Why, look there! Look at Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell! They're cackling like old hens!"

The Fossils transferred their attention to Fullwood and Co. Those three rascally youths were standing over by the corner

of the Ancient House, and they were grinning broadly. Their very attitude was significant; and, with the hastiness of youth, the Fossils rushed upon them.

Fullwood and Co. attempted to escape, but it was too late. Terrible punishment would have descended upon them had it not been for the timely intervention of a prefect. As it was, they were bumped very severely.

Christine and Co., with indignant snorts, walked away towards their own House.

About the only two calm juniors were Nipper and Tregellis-West. They looked on with their hands in their pockets, grinning.

"What about those films?" demanded Tommy Watson. "You don't seem to care a jot!"

"My dear chap, it's no good making a fuss," said Nipper serenely. "That won't join 'em together again, will it? I believe in taking things calmly. Besides, that second-hand place in Bannington is going to send a boy over this evening with those two other films that weren't ready last week, so we shall have our full programme again all right. Don't worry, my sons. Worrying's a silly game!"

But even Nipper, in spite of his consistent cheeriness, would have worried if he had been permitted the privilege of peeping into the near future. For the coming of the boy with the two films was to be attended by strange and catastrophic events.

So far, the "St. Frank's Cinema" had been a matter for general amusement in the school; but it was soon to become a byword for all that was sinister and disastrous.

CHAPTER V.

IN WHICH CECIL DE VALERIE UNWITTINGLY ENTANGLES HIMSELF IN A DEADLY NET.

EIGHT o'clock boomed out from the old tower in the main school building, and Cecil de Valerie stepped out of the Ancient House into the moonlight of the Triangle. The evening was quite a perfect one, except for a coolish breeze which rustled the branches of the old trees.

The Rotter appeared to be in no hurry. He strolled about under the elms with his hands in his pockets. The truth was, he was in one of his "solitary

De Valerie was a fellow who had queer fits; sometimes he would go for a whole day without speaking a word to a soul; at other times he would be full of sneering talk. And, just at present, he wanted to be alone.

He glanced at his watch, and compared it with the school clock.

"Another hour before I've got to meet Bradmore," he murmured. "Might as well stroll about the Triangle until then. I shall escape those silly fools of Study A, anyhow!"

Fullwood and Co., doubtless, would scarcely have been complimented had they heard those words. But De Valerie was just that sort of character; he was quite ready to chum with the Nuts, but had a very poor opinion of them at the same time.

The Rotter was quite oblivious of the fact that he was already overdue for his appointment. To tell the truth, he had made a mistake. For some reason or other, he had got it firmly fixed in his mind that Bradmore was not to arrive until nine o'clock—whereas, in reality, the time fixed had been eight. It was probably due to the fact that there had been a slight argument regarding the time of the meeting. At all events, the misunderstanding had arisen. That misunderstanding, seeming so trivial, was of terrible significance.

At about five-past eight a small boy appeared at the gates. Warren, the porter, was there, and De Valerie saw him directing the newcomer to the Ancient House. Then Warren went into his lodge, and the visitor came across the Triangle lugging a small, but apparently heavy, parcel.

"Those fatheaded films, I suppose!" thought De Valerie.

He had heard the matter discussed in the Common-room earlier in the evening, and knew that the boy was expected. And a queer kind of grin overspread the Rotter's features. He saw no reason why he should not employ his idle time by a little pleasant amusement.

He lounged over towards the boy with the films, and stopped him in the shadow of the Ancient House building.

"Got those films, I suppose?" he remarked pleasantly.

"Yes, sir, an' tidy heavy they are, too," said the youngster.

"What's your name, kid?"

"Binnson, sir."

"Oh, 'Arry Binnson, is it?" said De Valerie pleasantly. "All right, 'Arry, bring the parcel along this way, will you? No, you can stick to it a little longer. I'll give you a bob for yourself."

"Thank you kindly, sir. Are you Master Bennett?"

"No, I'm not Master Bennett, but I'm one of his particular friends," said De Valerie calmly. "Trot along with me to the gorgeous picture-palace!"

The pair made off towards the paddock. De Valerie hadn't any particular idea in mind, but he was in a mischievous mood, and decided to think out a little wheeze on the way to the loft building. Anything "up against" Nipper was extremely pleasant to the Rotter. And he saw no reason why he shouldn't have a joke at this lad's expense.

De Valerie chuckled as the idea struck him. He would make Binnson pack up all the other films, and take them away with him. There was no point whatever in the ill-natured joke, but De Valerie was rather curious to witness the humorous spectacle of Binnson staggering along under the weight of seven or eight reels of film. Besides, Nipper would receive quite a shock when he found out.

The loft was reached, and De Valerie switched the lights on. They went up the stairs, and found themselves within the cinema itself.

"Now, kid, you've got to pack up all these other films, and take them away——"

"Take all them?" asked the boy in dismay. "You're—you're jokin', sir!"

"I don't want any of your infernal cheek!" snapped the Rotter. "Get busy!"

But he had reckoned without Master Binnson's shrewdness.

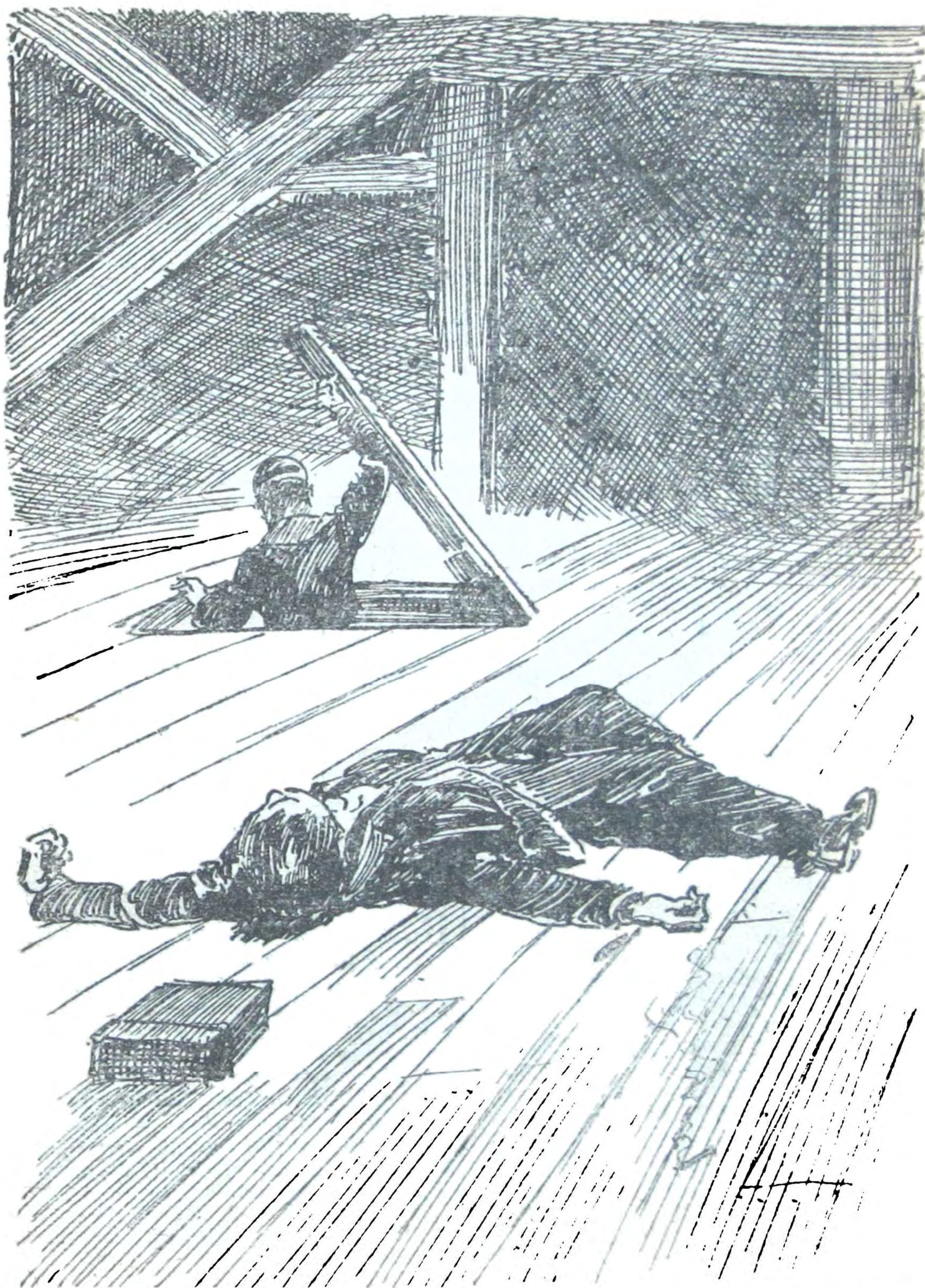
"I didn't 'ave no orders to take any parcels back," he said suspiciously. "Besides, you ain't one of Master Bennett's particular chums, are you? Least-ways, you weren't with 'im when 'e took the machine away last week——"

De Valerie scowled.

"Pack up those films!" he ordered curtly. "If I have any more of your sauce, I'll clip your confounded ear for you!"

Binnson was a lad of spirit.

"Oh, would yer!" he exclaimed, his temper rising. "Just you try it an' see! I'm jolly sure you ain't one o' Master



The boy lay perfectly still upon his back. De Valerio reached ... pulled the trap door into position.—(See page 18.)

Bennett's friends! Tryin' to 'ave me on, ain't you? You can pack up the films yourself!"

And the lad turned towards the staircase.

"No, you don't!" snarled De Valerie, angered by the failure of his little scheme.

He reached out and grabbed the boy fiercely by the shoulder. Binnson swung round, and nearly toppled over backwards. And, while he was in that helpless position, De Valerie viciously pulled his ear.

"You 'ulkin' great coward, you!" shrielled the boy painfully.

He showed his pluck, for he charged at De Valerie regardless of the fact that he was years younger and much smaller. For the moment the Rotter was taken off his guard, and he received a punch which made him gasp.

"By gad! You young worm!" he snorted furiously.

His fist swung round with full force, and his clenched knuckles caught Binnson a full blow upon the forehead. It was a vicious, caddish act. The boy toppled over backwards without a cry, and lay perfectly still upon his back.

De Valerie regarded him with panting breath.

"Shammin'!" he sneered. "I'll teach you to hit me, you little gutter-brat!"

He gave the helpless boy a kick, and then commenced descending the stairs. Just as his head got below the level of the loft floor an idea struck him. He reached up, and pulled the heavy trap-door down into position. The bolt was shot home aggressively.

"Now, you young cad, you're a prisoner," he muttered. "If you get out of that within an hour you'll be jolly lucky!"

In his sudden temper De Valerie had bolted the boy in the loft; and he meant to keep him there until supper-time—when he would give Nipper a hint to the effect that a visitor was awaiting him in the loft. The Rotter had only himself to blame for the whole affair, but he didn't seem to consider that point at all.

Binnson couldn't possibly escape without assistance from outside. The double doors in the loft were secured by a heavy wooden bar on the exterior, in addition to the inside bolts. These doors, of course, had been partially open during the show on Saturday evening. But

now they were securely fastened, inside and out.

De Valerie chuckled ill-naturedly as he paused at the foot of the stairs, and took a cigarette-case from his pocket. There was no reason why he shouldn't have a smoke in this secluded spot. He lit the cigarette, and threw the wax vesta down viciously.

"Cheeky young hound," he muttered to himself as he switched off the light and went outside. "It'll serve him right to be locked up for an hour."

As he closed the stable door he turned swiftly, and gazed into the darkness. Just for a second he thought he had heard a low whisper. But, as he stood there, peering towards the lower hedge, only the sigh of the wind reached his ears.

"Queer!" he muttered. "I thought I heard— Oh, rot! It couldn't have been anything. Bradmore's the only chap who'd be about here, and he's not due for half-an-hour."

And Cecil De Valerie, puffing leisurely at his cigarette, strolled again in the direction of the Head's garden. As he did so, he thought it rather remarkable that Harry Binnson hadn't raised an outcry yet. But he only shrugged his shoulders and walked on.

It was a thousand pities he didn't turn back when the impulse seized him!

CHAPTER VI.

THE CATASTROPHE.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH was apparently quite insane.

Nipper and Sir Montie Tregellis-West and two or three other juniors were passing through the lobby on their way to the common-room when Handforth came rushing into the House like a maniac.

"Have you seen it?" he shrieked wildly. "Have—have you—"

"Great Scott! What's the matter with you, man?" exclaimed Nipper, startled by the extraordinary appearance of Handforth. "What's wrong, you ass?"

Handforth gulped heavily.

"The—the—the cinema!" he gasped, with difficulty.

"The cinema? What about it?" demanded Tommy Watson. "What the dickens is the matter with you? What are you standing there gaping like a dying fish for, you fathead?"

"It's—it's on fire!" roared Handforth, finding his full voice.

"What's on fire?" Nipper paused. "The cinema—the loft?" he went on quickly. "Do you mean to say the loft is on fire, Handforth?"

"Haven't I been telling you so for the last minute?" bawled Handforth, dancing with excitement. "The place is blazing like a torch!"

"Rats!"

"Oh, rot!"

"Don't try to be funny, Handy!"

"Go and look then!" bellowed Handforth desperately.

He turned as he spoke, and dashed out into the Triangle. As the others raced after him they saw other juniors rushing from the College House, and the air was filled with excited shouts. And there was no doubt that Handforth was correct in his seemingly wild statement. For from the paddock came a yellow glare, which flickered incessantly and grew brighter. The old stable building, was, to use Handforth's own term, "blazing like a torch."

There was wild excitement among the juniors. A mad rush started towards the paddock, and by the time the boys arrived the rotten old wooden building, dry as tinder inside, was crackling and blazing in a manner which plainly told that it was doomed. If a fire-engine had been on the spot it couldn't have done much good. The fire had developed with astounding ferocity.

And the explanation was not far to seek. In the stable itself was a great pile of straw and wood shavings. This had burned rapidly, and the loft floor had caught alight within the first minute. On the top of this the terribly inflammable celluloid films had gone off almost like an explosion; so fierce were the flames that they roared tremendously, and the roof itself was blazing in a dozen different places.

Fortunately, the wind was blowing the sparks out upon the open fields, and there was no real danger to anything. The old building was of no particular use; indeed, the governors of St. Frank's had discussed the question of pulling it down and building a large swimming bath. So the fire could not be called actually serious.

Nipper and Co., however, felt that it was quite serious enough! Their splendid cinema was finished with, their whole outfit was completely demolished in the

flames. They didn't rave about it, because raving was useless. But they were keenly disappointed and concerned.

Nipper, as soon as he had seen the glare, rushed off to Nelson Lee's study. He had the schoolmaster-detective out in less than a minute, and they hurried to the paddock together. They found Mr. Crowell and Mr. Stockdale and Mr. Suncliffe all there, gazing helplessly at the blaze. Prefects were keeping the juniors back.

Excitement reigned supreme.

"This is most appalling, Mr. Alvington—most appalling!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell nervously. "I feared what would happen, with those dangerous films upon the building. Dear, dear! What a terrible occurrence!"

"Do you know how the fire started, sir?" asked Penton, of the Sixth, the captain of St. Frank's. "It seems to have spread with terrific rapidity."

"Really, Penton, I haven't the slightest idea," replied Nelson Lee. "I shall, of course, make a searching inquiry."

"There are fire hoses within the school—"

"My dear Mr. Crowell, we may as well save ourselves the trouble," interrupted Nelson Lee quietly. "Nothing can save the building now, and it will be burnt out within fifteen minutes, I should say. It was only a light structure, after all. It is fortunate there are no other buildings near."

The flames lit up the darkness over a big radius. The Head, having been assured that the fire was not really serious, watched it from his study window. Everybody was watching it, in fact. Practically every boy in the school, senior and junior, stood within or round the paddock, watching the conflagration.

There were other onlookers, too. People from the village had hurried up the lane, and a dense crowd packed the roadway near the field. There was some talk of bringing up the village fire brigade, but this was abandoned.

And, as the flames began to die down, and the old building remained nothing but a blazing heap, Nelson Lee commenced his inquiries. He looked at Nipper and Sir Montie and Tommy Watson very gravely.

"Now, boys, what do you know of this affair?" he asked.

"No more than you do, sir," replied

Nipper. "Handforth was the first to spot it, I believe."

Handforth, who was standing near, nodded.

"That's right, sir," he said. "I saw the fire first—I generally do manage to be the first in the field, you know, sir. It ain't much my eyes miss, I can tell you. I was just crossing the Triangle from the gym. when I saw the glare. Nobody else seemed to notice it until afterwards."

"And where were you boys?" asked Lee, looking at Nipper and Co.

"In the lobby, sir."

"And when did you visit your 'cinema' last?"

"Begad! We haven't been near it for hours an' hours, sir," said Sir Montie. "Not since this mornin', sir."

"Do you know if anybody else went there—any of your friends?"

Nipper wrinkled his brows.

"I'm blessed if I can understand it, sir," he said. "I've been trying to puzzle it out, but I can't. We were all indoors—every fellow of the Remove, I believe. I can't think of anybody who'd go to the old barn at that hour. It couldn't have been through anything we did—we were always tremendously careful."

"And you hadn't been near the place for hours?"

"That's right, sir."

"I think, then, I can exonerate you from blame, my boys," said Nelson Lee. "The matter must, however, be sifted to the bottom. The fire had some origin, that is certain. It is rather strange that the guilty party has not come forward. It was obviously an accident——"

"Beg pardon, sir!"

Lee turned, and found that Warren was at his elbow. "The porter had been very busy, and he was red-faced and perspiring. But he looked uneasy for some reason or other."

"Well, Warren, what is it?"

"Beggin' your pardon, sir, I was going to ask if you'd found out who set the old place afire," said Warren.

"No, Warren, I have not ascertained the truth, so far," said the detective. "Do you know anything about it?"

Quite a crowd had collected round, and all eyes were upon the porter. His uneasiness seemed rather significant.

"My only hat!" murmured Owen

major. "It was old Warren who did it!"

"Bust my mains'!"

Warren turned a deeper red than ever.

"You impudent young rascals!" he exclaimed angrily. "I 'ad nothin'—Beg pardon, sir, I'm sure, but these 'ere young gents fair make me riled now and agin. Just as if I'd set the place afire! But I shouldn't be surprised if it was done by that dratted young boy wot came with the fillums!"

"What!" ejaculated Nipper quickly. "A boy with some films? Why, we'd been expecting him! When did he come, Warren?"

"About twenty minutes afore the fire started, I reckon, roughly speakin'," replied Warren. "He asked me which was the Ancient 'Ouse, an' said he come with some fillums for Master Bennett. I was a wonderin' if he'd done anything."

Nelson Lee looked keen.

"This boy came twenty minutes before the fire started!" Nelson Lee exclaimed. "Didn't he come into the Ancient House, Bennett?"

"We didn't see a sign of him, sir."

"He didn't come there at all, sir," put in Owen major. "I was in the lobby with two or three other chaps for a good half-hour, and we didn't see any strange kid. My hat! He must have gone to the old loft himself."

"That's what I was thinkin', sir," put in Warren. "Mebbe he went to the loft, an' met with some haccident. There's no telling what them young rips'll get up to," he added, shaking his head.

Nipper was looking rather-startled.

"I say!" he exclaimed. "Perhaps the chap tried to stick a film into the machine or got messing about with matches, or something! Anyhow, sir, nobody here knows anything about the fire. It must have been that kid."

"Begad! Dear fellow, I'm gettin' quite anxious!" exclaimed Sir Montie.

"Yes; where is the chap?"

"What's become of him?"

Quite a chorus of inquiries went up. The excited looks of the juniors vanished, giving place to strangely uneasy glances. The whole affair of the fire had abruptly changed its aspect.

Matters were looking serious.

Nelson Lee lost no time in instituting a prompt search. But, although the school grounds were scoured high and

low, there was no sign of young Binnson, the lad who had brought the films from Bannington.

Warren, moreover, definitely asserted that Binnson hadn't taken his departure.

To clinch matters, it was learned that Binnson had come on a bicycle from Bannington, and the machine was found, still standing outside the school gates! If the boy had fled, frightened by the result of his carelessness, he would certainly have gone off on his bicycle.

Nelson Lee had now become extremely grave.

"Heaven above! Is it possible that the poor lad perished in the flames?" he asked. "Certainly the fire was so fierce that he would have had little chance of escape. And the whole building is so completely consumed that a search for the lad's remains would be useless."

Nipper and several others shivered.

"It's—it's possible, sir," muttered Nipper huskily. "Just think what would happen if some of those films were set alight! Why, Binnson must have been enveloped in a second—he couldn't have had a chance! There have been film fires before, haven't there, sir? Lots of people have been killed——"

"Time after time, my boy," said Nelson Lee grimly. "I am terribly afraid that we have arrived at the appalling solution. Indeed, there is no other explanation to account for the sudden conflagration. And the entire absence of Binnson is terribly significant!"

By this time the fire had died down to a mere red glow. The ruin was utter and complete. As Nelson Lee had said, the boy must have been completely consumed in that raging furnace.

He had just vanished!

The news spread throughout the school like lightning, and, although there was uncertainty to begin with, at the end of an hour not a single person had the slightest hope. From the Head down to the smallest fag, the whole school knew that there had been a tragedy at St. Frank's.

It had been no mere triviality, as it was originally supposed; the unfortunate lad who had started the fire, obviously by accident, had perished in the all-devouring flames. He had simply been wiped out.

It was a ghastly affair, and the whole school was inexpressibly shocked. Telephone messages to Bannington only

served to confirm the dread suspicions. Binnson had not been seen by a soul since passing within the school gates.

The mystery of the awful business only made it worse. Nobody seemed to know how Binnson had started the fire, or why he had gone to the old loft by himself. The matter was a complete puzzle to nearly everybody.

But, in the whole of St. Frank's, there was one boy who knew!

Cecil de Valerie, of the Remove, was in a state bordering upon insane terror. He had locked himself in his study, and stared before him unseeingly. His face was pallid, his eyes burning with unnatural brightness.

For quite a long while the Rotter had been alone; while everybody else had stood outside, he occupied Study M. Nobody thought of him, and nobody seemed to care about him.

But De Valerie knew!

"He's dead!" muttered the Rotter, staring at his reflection in the mirror. "He's dead—and I—I—— Oh, it was an accident—an accident! What a fool I was to lock him in—what a mad, raving fool!"

For De Valerie knew more than anybody else in the whole school. He had been to the loft, and he was under no false impression as to the cause of the fire. Binnson hadn't done it—Binnson was a poor, innocent victim!

It was De Valerie himself who had caused the outburst of flames. As soon as he knew that the loft was burning he guessed the truth. After leaving the building he had strolled away towards the playing-fields, and had only become aware of the disaster when it was too late to do anything.

Rushing to the paddock, De Valerie had seen, at once, that no good would come of his telling the truth. Binnson was dead by that time—dead—burnt to a cinder! And he—De Valerie—had been the cause!

"It was that cigarette!" muttered the wretched boy, breathing hard. "I must have been mad to throw that match down there! But I remember doing it—I remember it as clearly as anything!"

The Rotter recalled to mind how he had lit the cigarette upon descending the stairs; how he had flung the flaming vesta aside without even looking to see where it went. He had passed out of the stable and had closed the door.

But that blazing match had evidently fallen upon the dry shavings. A burst of flame had followed a minute of smouldering, perhaps. And then—

Of course, the flames had leaped up with savage fierceness; they had licked the dry wood of the upper flooring, and had set it on fire in next to no time. Then the films had flared up!

And Binnson, up in the loft, had no means of escape—indeed, De Valerie suspected now that the poor lad was partially stunned. He hadn't been shamming—he must have caught his head upon a projection in the floor. And, even if he had been conscious, what hope was there for him?

None!

The double doors were secured upon the outside, and the heavy trap leading below was bolted. Binnson had been caught hopelessly. Suffocated by the smoke, blinded and terrified, he had staggered about until death came to him.

And De Valerie was guilty—De Valerie had caused the lad's death!

"Oh, I can't think of it—I daren't try to think of it!" muttered the Rotter, almost wildly. "What can I do? What can I say? Oh, what a mad fool I was to lock him in there!"

For a time De Valerie paced up and down his study like a person demented. Then, at last, he sank upon a pile of cushions. He was stunned—staggered. The realisation that he was guilty held him in a vice.

And he daren't speak—he was afraid to breathe a word. Whichever way he looked, a police-court loomed before his eyes; a criminal-court and a judge—prison!

De Valerie's nerves were in rags, and his state of mind was so awful that he had not one clear, connected thought beyond that certain fact—that dreadful knowledge.

He had killed Harry Binnson!

CHAPTER VII.

MIKE BRADMORE PLAYS HIS TRUMP CARD—
IN THE NET.

THREE days had passed.

For the bulk of the boys, three rather exciting but gloomy days.

For De Valerie, three days of hidden terror.

The boy had nursed his secret, and, thanks to his calm nature, he had

managed to conceal the terrible emotion which filled him.

As the time had passed, he had become more settled in mind—more firmly convinced that complete silence was his better course. Indeed, he dared not speak. The knowledge of what would follow a confession sealed his lips.

By this time the tragedy had lost its first horror. The boys of the school were settled to the fact that Binnson had died in the fire. There was no doubt left upon that point, for the boy had not been seen or heard of since.

It was some slight consolation to know that the poor youngster had only a drunken father to care for him—a Bannington loafer. Young Binnson, it appeared, had practically earned his own living as errand boy, for his father was an utterly worthless fellow. He didn't care a toss when informed of his stunning loss. He only indulged in heavier bouts of liquor.

All this, however, although slightly comforting to most people, had no effect whatever upon De Valerie. He only knew that he had been guilty of unwarrantable viciousness and criminal carelessness. He realised it now—he made no attempt to excuse his own conduct.

The tragedy, indeed, had brought home to De Valerie the fact that he was well deserving of his school nickname. A film seemed to unfold from his eyes, and he saw himself as he actually was.

His fellow Removites noticed the change in the Rotter. He had become silent and morose, and a curious light shone constantly in his eyes. Fellows were afraid to speak to him, for he was snappy and ill-tempered. Even Nipper did not connect this change with the affair of the fire. It was generally supposed that De Valerie had met with deep failure in his shady money matters, or that he had received a stiff letter from his father.

Time after time he told himself that the whole matter was over; it was no good speaking now, anyhow. He couldn't do any good to a soul. Nothing but disaster would follow the revelation of the truth—dire disaster for himself.

But the wretched youth could not forget. His life was a misery. He was always haunted by the vision of the boy he had unwittingly killed.

And then, one morning, De Valerie re-

ceived a letter. It was on the fourth morning after the fire, and the letter was from Mike Bradmore. The Rotter had completely forgotten the bookmaker, and he snarled with impatience as he read the short message. Bradmore urgently wanted to see his young friend.

At first De Valerie decided not to answer the summons. But in all probability, the bookmaker had a sum of money to hand over. De Valerie didn't even know how Monday's race had gone—he didn't care.

But as soon as afternoon lessons were over that day he went straight out and walked to the village. Bradmore was awaiting him against the bridge. He smiled genially as De Valerie approached.

"That's not the way to look, young gent!" he exclaimed, in a breezy, beery voice. "My goodness! You look as if you'd 'ad a shock o' some sort! Pull yourself together, my young pippin!"

"What do you want?" growled De Valerie sullenly.

"Just a little talk with you—that's all," replied Mr. Bradmore. "Just a little privit talk, my boy. S'pose we stroll along by the towin'-path? There won't be nobody to interrupt us there, an' we can 'ave quite a little chat—a reely confidential talk, as you might say!"

"Don't talk rot!" snapped De Valerie. "I don't feel in the mood for a confidential talk now, Bradmore. Besides, that's not the way to describe our little dealings—if you've got some money for me, hand it over. If you haven't, I'll get back——"

"'Old on, young gent—no need to 'urry," said Mr. Bradmore smoothly. "Speakin' strictly, I'm after a bit o' monecy myself. Now, be reasonable—let's go for a little walk."

They strolled away towards the towing-path until they were quite by themselves and beyond any possibility of any chance listeners. The Rotter was impatient and irritable, but Mr. Bradmore remained serenely calm.

"It's about that little flutter, I suppose——"

"Not exactly, Mr. De Valerie," said the bookmaker genially. "The 'orse won, an' you've got a few quid due to you. But, just for a change, I'm goin' to keep 'em myself. See?"

"No, I don't see!" snapped De Valerie angrily. "You confounded swindler——"

"'Old on—'old on!" interposed the man gently. "Bless me, you're always in such a 'urry! Now, talkin' about our little arrangement for Monday night. Why didn't you turn up?"

"You know jolly well that there was a fire at the school!" said De Valerie. "At nine o'clock the paddock was crowded with fellows. Besides, I forgot all about it once the fire had started. The appointment went out of my head."

"I ain't surprised—I ain't surprised at all!" said Mr. Bradmore significantly. "At nine o'clock—eh? So you thought that our little arrangement was for nine?"

"Well, it was, wasn't it?"

"There was some little talk about it, now I come to recollect," replied the bookmaker, pausing to light a cigar. "But we fixed the time, in the end, at eight. An' wot's more, I was waitin' for you agin the hedge at five-past eight—and I stood there for twenty minutes."

De Valerie stared.

"Confound it!" he exclaimed irritably. "You're right, Bradmore; it was eight o'clock. And I lounged about, thinking you wouldn't turn up, till nine. You were there at five-past eight, you say? Then—then——" De Valerie paused, and caught his breath in. "Then you saw the start of the fire?" he asked abruptly.

"You bet!" declared Mr. Bradmore. "I saw everythin'—right from the very start. Quite an interestin' little drama it was, too. I'll tell you about it just brief-like, seein' as you're in a 'urry."

There was something about Bradmore's tone—something of a gloating nature—which caused De Valerie to shiver. Vaguely he was beginning to realise that a net was closing about him.

"What—what did you sec?" he asked huskily.

"Well, for some minits I stood agin the hedge fumin'," explained the other, falling into his leisurely walk again and puffing at his cigar. "I was a-callin' you all manner o' pretty names, Master De Valerie. Then I see you comin' down the paddock with somebody else. I see you go into the old buildin', and I 'eard you 'avin' high words."

"Well?" De Valerie's tone was tense.

"A reg'lar squabble, it was," continued Mr. Bradmore. "Then, arter that, I 'eard somethin' go down 'eavily, like a body fallin'. It fair made my flesh creep, an' no horror! Then a door

slammed the trap-door leadin' up into the loft, I reckoned—an' a bolt was shot home."

"Good heavens!" muttered De Valerie aghast.

"No need to get flustered, young gent!" smiled Mr. Bradmore. "You needn't be afeared o' me. I saw you come out with a cigarette, an' I whispered to you, but you didn't take no notice."

"So it was you I heard!" exclaimed the Rotter, staring. "Why the deuce didn't you call louder, you fool?"

"No names, young 'un—no names!" said Mr. Bradmore severely. "I didn't call no louder because a couple o' fellers were passin' along the lane, an' I didn't fancy them findin' me hidin' in the 'edge. By the time they'd got by you 'ad disappeared. Pretty sort o' young villain, ain't you?"

De Valerie nearly choked.

"What—what do you mean?" he demanded hoarsely.

"Seein' as you know as much about it as I do—mebbe a sight more—there ain't no need to ast questions o' that sort," replied the bookmaker. "You know wot I mean well enough, my fine young shaver. Didn't you come out o' that there stable, leavin' a lighted match a-burnin' inside? Didn't you bolt that poor nipper up there in the loft so's he couldn't escape?"

De Valerie was struck dumb with a sudden burst of understanding. This man—this scoundrelly bookmaker—knew all the facts. The Rotter felt as though his brain must burst. He could only stare at Bradmore dazedly.

"You don't need to tell me no lies," went on Bradmore grimly. "Lies won't 'elp you. You bolted that boy up in the loft, you set fire to the place, an' you walked right away. But you didn't know as there was a witness to it all, did you? You didn't know as the murder was seen —"

"The—the murder!" panted De Valerie wildly.

"That's wot I said—the murder!" exclaimed Bradmore. "It wasn't nothin' else—an' my evidence, in a criminal-court, would make any jury bring in a death sentence agin you! The thing wasn't no accident—"

"It was—it was!" gasped the Rotter. "I'll swear—"

"There ain't no need for swearin'," cut in the bookmaker.

"Why, you young fool, just think o' the facts! You bring a boy to the loft, you bolt 'im in, an' then steal away. Less than a minit arterwards flames burst out in the stable! You ain't got a leg to stand on, my fine young feller!"

"It was an accident!" breathed De Valerie tremblingly.

"Well, we'll let that be as it is. I ain't a one to argue," said Mr. Bradmore easily. "Let me finish wot I was a-goin' to tell you. You went away, an' while I was thinkin' of hurryin' arter you I saw the flames burst out in the stable. My goodness! They spread something crool!"

A great rage surged through De Valerie.

"Why didn't you rescue the chap?" he asked furiously. "Why didn't you get him out of the place? I know I set the place on fire—I threw a match down—but it was all an accident!"

"That's easy talkin' now!" sneered Mr. Bradmore. "These 'ere kind o' things generally are accidents—arterwards! It won't do for me, young gent! An' you want to know why I didn't pull the pore nipper out? I rushed up to the stable, an' tried to git in; but the flames burst out, an' I didn't see no reason why there should be two deaths."

"You—you crawling coward!" exclaimed De Valerie huskily.

"Don't you be a young ijit!" snapped Bradmore. "I couldn't do anything, although I tried me best. A fearful burst o' flames came from the loft, an' then I 'eard young Binnson's cries. They was awful—shockin'! But they died down arter a while, an' the pore kid fell into the flames an' perished. Seein' it was no good my stayin', I just walked away. I was reely unstrung."

For several minutes nothing more was said. The two paced on slowly. And at last De Valerie turned a deadly-white face towards his companion.

"What are you going to do?" he asked. "Why didn't you come and tell me this before?"

"Well, I thought I'd give you time to get over the chief shock, so to speak," explained Mr. Bradmore. "You won't find me a 'ard man, Master De Valerie—we're pals, we are. If I chose to be narsty an' went to the police—why, there'd be shockin' trouble for you!"

"They—they couldn't do anything to me!" muttered the Rotter.

"Ho, couldn't they?" said the man sneeringly. "Don't you make no blamed error! If I was to tell all I know you'd be arrested within a 'arf hour—you'd be tried for murder! I ain't spinnin' a yarn—murder's the word I said, an' I mean it! With a witness like me agin you——"

De Valerie clutched at the bookmaker fiercely.

"You're—you're not going to tell?" he whispered.

"That all depends," said Mr. Bradmore calmly. "It ain't nothin' to do wi' me, strictly speakin', but I've got a mighty 'igh sense o' justice, an' my conscience wouldn't be quiet unless I squared things up some'ow. You're a friend o' mine, young gent, an' I shouldn't like to be 'ard on you. Now, couldn't we come to some nice little arrangement?"

"Do you mean money?" said De Valerie hotly.

The bookmaker nodded.

"Just between you and me, like," he said.

"It's—it's blackmail——"

"That ain't a nice word to use!" snapped Bradmore sharply. "If you don't want nothin' to do with it, just say the word. It don't matter to me which way, only if you don't fall in wi' my views you'll be took up for mur——"

"How—how much do you want?" gasped De Valerie.

"There ain't no fixed amount—just as much as you'll 'and over," said Bradmore. "Come on, now, be sensible. I'll keep your secret as firm as anythin'—it's just a little affair between you an' me!"

"It—it was an accident," said De Valerie between his teeth. "They can't arrest me for an accident, can they?"

Mike Bradmore shrugged his shoulders.

"Leave it to the police if you choose—I'm agreeable," he said. "Personally, I ain't got no doubt as to what the result'll be. The cause is plain as daylight. It ain't any good tellin' 'em the real truth, because it looks so black agin you. An', bein' a conscientious man, I'd be compelled to tell everythin'—'ow you quarrelled, 'ow you knocked the young feller down, 'ow you set fire to the place, an' all the rest of it. But I thought, mebbe, that you an' me could come to a nice little arrangement. I'll be doin' you a

good turn, an you'll be doin' me one. Don't you foller my argiment?"

De Valerie took his pocket-book out and handed over three pound notes and two ten-shilling ones.

"Will that do?" he asked bluntly.

"'Ardly, young gent, 'ardly! Is it all you've got?"

"Yes, except for a few shillings."

"Well, this'll do for the present," said Mr. Bradmore, pocketing the money complacently. "I'll see you agin later on in the week. An' you needn't be afraid that I shall blab; you can trust me like your own father!"

De Valerie walked away without a word. His mind was all in a state of chaos. He couldn't quite realise the dreadful fact that his secret was no longer his own—that it was shared by a blackmailing scoundrel who would press his advantage to the utmost limit.

De Valerie was in Bradmore's power—he knew that quite well. The man had seen the whole occurrence, and if he spoke he would get the boy into terrible trouble. For, undoubtedly, the police would not let the matter rest.

Bradmore, too, knew how powerful was this lever he wielded. He chuckled with delight as he stuffed the four pounds into his pocket and walked back towards the village. He had met with greater success than he had even hoped for.

His plot was working with delicious smoothness. De Valerie had fallen into the trap unsuspectingly.

For Mike Bradmore was playing a cunning game.

It was, in fact, nothing more nor less than a deliberate plot to force money out of the boy. In actual truth, Harry Binnson was very much alive! Bradmore and the boy's own father were the only people who knew it. The explanation of the affair was astonishingly simple.

Bradmore, of course, had been in the paddock as he stated. But the rest of his story was a pure invention. He had heard Binnson's cries, and became aware that Binnson was hammering frenziedly upon the big double doors of the loft.

Bradmore had hurried up the grass bank and had pushed the cross-bar away, rescuing Binnson in less than a minute. Even as he was in the act of doing so a seemingly wild scheme entered his cunning brain.

He secured the doors again, and hurried the frightened boy away from the

spot. Binnsion wasn't even scorched, and the bookmaker had got him away without a soul being aware of the fact.

The scheming bookmaker realised at once, that he would be able to make quite a large amount of capital out of the terrified De Valerie. For the Rotter was always possessed of large amounts of cash. Bradmore knew enough about human nature to be quite certain that De Valerie would say nothing about the trapped boy in the loft. There had been a chance, of course, that De Valerie would speak—but everything had gone exactly as Bradmore had anticipated.

Having left Binnsion in a place of security, Bradmore's first step had been to hurry into Bannington. He was acquainted with the lad's father, having met him in several of the Bannington public-houses.

He sought this man out, and told him of the fire—he told him that everybody believed that young Harry had perished in the flames. A sovereign had won Binnsion senior over completely, and he consented to remain silent. The boy was safe enough, and he didn't particularly care what happened to him for a few days—especially as there was a prospect of receiving further sums from Bradmore.

This state of affairs accounted for Binnsion senior's indifferent attitude when told of his son's "death."

And thus the matter stood. There had been no tragedy—only villainy. And Mike Bradmore was fully determined to give De Valerie no rest until he was "sucked dry." Afterwards, when the truth came out, De Valerie's lips would still be sealed, for, for his own sake, he would not dare to breathe a word.

And so the trump cards were all in Bradmore's hands—he meant to play them cunningly.

The first trick, indeed, was already won!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GHOST OF LOWER MARSH—DE VALERIE'S TERROR—NELSON LEE IS VERY SUSPICIOUS—CONCLUSION.

RALPH LESLIE FULLWOOD came to a halt in the Remove passage. His two chums, Bell and Gulliver, were with him, and they were all wearing their overcoats and caps.

It was well after tea, and a bright moonlight night, with a crisp breeze and

a slight frost. Fullwood came to a halt because he saw De Valerie emerging from his study door.

"We were just coming for you, old man!" said Fullwood cheerfully. "Put your things on and trot along with us. We're just off to the village for a jaunt. Toppin' night for a walk!"

"No thanks, I'd rather not," said De Valerie shortly.

Fullwood stared at him.

"What's wrong with you lately?" he asked. "Blessed if you seem the same chap, De Valerie! Had bad news from home, or what?"

"Yes—some rather rotten news," replied De Valerie calmly, noticing that several other Removites were within hearing. "I can't explain, Fullwood, because the matter's very private. It's—it's awfully serious, and I'm sorry if I've been off colour lately."

The Rotter spoke so sincerely and openly that the fellows who heard his words fully believed that they had arrived at the explanation of the little mystery. De Valerie had merely seized the opportunity which Fullwood's question had provided.

"That's all right!" exclaimed the leader of the Nuts. "Bad news from home usually upsets a chap. But you needn't mope about, my son! A trot to the village would do you good. Come on!"

De Valerie hesitated for a moment, and then nodded.

"All right; I'll join you!" he said.

He thought it just as well to agree with Fullwood and Co. For one thing, he wished to be himself as much as possible; the talk of his fellow Removites had become rather too marked for comfort. Besides, if he remained on good terms with Fullwood and the other Nuts, he might be able to borrow some money—if necessary. And De Valerie grimly realised that it would almost certainly be necessary!

In a few minutes the four juniors set out across the Triangle. They went by way of the playing-fields and along the towing-path. It was a little nearer than the lane, and quite safe in the moonlight.

Fullwood and Co. talked animatedly as they walked. Their conversation was by no means elevating, turning mainly upon such subjects as horse-racing and billiards and card-playing.

Somehow or other, Bradmore's name

kept cropping up, and De Valerie became impatient at last. He was constantly being reminded of his dread secret, and his nerves were by no means in a sound condition.

"Shut up about Bradmore!" he snapped. "Let's talk about something else!"

"What's wrong with Bradmore?" demanded Gulliver. "You oughtn't to speak against him, anyhow—you've drawn a nice few quids off him since you've been at St. Frank's! Blessed if you don't always seem to pick the winners, De Valerie!"

"Oh, hang him!"

Gulliver sniffed, and muttered to his chums that irritable people were better in their own company. De Valerie didn't hear the remark, or he might have parted with the trio.

They went on until they came to Lower Marsh. This was really no place at all—only one or two marshy meadows near the village. They were practically deserted at all times of the day and night. A low-built cottage stood near the river, surrounded by willows. The cottage had been deserted for months, although there had been some talk of doing it up and making it habitable.

The boys walked towards it, for the towing-path led straight past the front gate. They were talking noisily as they walked.

"Rotten, lonely place, this is!" exclaimed Bell. "Always gives me the creeps, somehow! We'd better come back by the road——"

"Afraid of spooks?" sneered Fullwood with a grin.

"Oh, don't talk rot!" growled Bell. "I don't care a hang about—— Why, look—look! Good heavens!"

Bell came to a sudden stop, his voice rising shrilly. His chums, completely startled by his tone, halted, and looked in the direction he was pointing. And there, pressed against the glass of the front window of the cottage, was a white, ghostly face!

It vanished abruptly, seeming to melt into the darkness.

"It—it was—that kid!" panted Gulliver between his chattering teeth.

Cecil de Valerie stood transfixed with unutterable horror for just two seconds. Then, with a wild, screaming cry, he twisted round and fled. That scream of his startled Fullwood and Co. far more

than the strange face had done. Their hearts jumped into their mouths, and they were sent all a-shiver.

"Great Scott!" gasped Fullwood. "What's the matter with him?"

"What—what was it?" asked Gulliver hoarsely.

Neither of the others answered; and, with one accord, they turned and ran after De Valerie. The latter was running towards the school as though a thousand demons were after him.

"I—I say," muttered Bell, as he ran, "that face looked like Binnson's, didn't it?"

"Rot! It couldn't have been," said Fullwood. "Binnson's dead! An' why should his ghost be in that cottage?"

Although they tried to comfort themselves the Nuts were greatly unnerved. But their fear was as nothing compared to the blind terror of Cecil de Valerie. The wretched boy was completely maddened by fear.

Only this very morning Binnson's photograph had appeared in the local paper, and his features were familiar to Fullwood and Co. The pale face at the window of the deserted cottage had seemed to be exactly like Binnson's.

But it had been ghastly—unreal. Perhaps the gloomy surroundings, the weak moonlight, and the knowledge that the cottage was deserted, had served to make the incident more spectral.

At all events, De Valerie lost his last shred of nerve. He believed that Binnson's ghost had appeared to haunt him; he was positive that the appearance had been unreal and supernatural.

And his only thought was to flee from the spot as quickly as possible. Utterly terrified, he rushed along until at last he staggered across the Triangle and made his way into the lobby.

The awful fear had left him now, and he began to realise that his action had been extraordinary. And he wanted to get to his study before anybody saw him. This plan, however, was impossible, for Nipper and Fregellis-West and Watson, and two or three other fellows, appeared from the common-room.

"Hallo!" said Nipper, in surprise. "What's up?"

"By George!" said Handforth. "Been seeing ghosts, De Valerie?"

"Begad! He looks like one himself!" The juniors crowded round De Valerie.

"Let me go," snarled the Rotten.

gasping for breath. "Hang you, let me get away!"

His tone was harsh, and the Removites were not likely to take any notice of him. They only pressed round closer. De Valerie was practically exhausted; it was obvious to all that he had been running with every ounce of speed possible. His chest heaved, and his breath was drawn in with great gulps.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Nipper concernedly. "Don't be so confoundedly ratty, De Valerie. Is anything wrong—"

"By Jove! Here he is!"

It was Fullwood who uttered the shout, and he and his two chums came hurrying in from the Triangle. They, too, had been running hard.

"Souise me! More of 'em!" said the Bo'sun wonderingly.

"I sure guess there's been somethin' doing," remarked Farman of the Remove. "Say, we're just dying to locate the trouble."

"We've — we've seen Binnsion's ghost!" panted Bell huskily.

"What?"

"Binnsion's ghost," repeated Bell.

"We all saw it plainly——"

"Rot!"

"Piffle!"

"Rubbish!"

A perfect roar of derisive jeers went up. Cecil De Valerie's eyes blazed, and he faced the juniors with defiance.

"It's true!" he shouted passionately. "We saw Binnsion's ghost as plainly as you see me! I'm not a funk as a rule, but I was absolutely unnerved. I just ran for my life!"

"I say, this is a bit thick, isn't it?" asked Nipper curiously. "There ain't such things as ghosts, you ass! You must have seen something else—some of those silly Monks playing a game, perhaps."

"Dear Benny, Christine and Co. wouldn't play a low-down trick of this sort," objected Sir Montie. "De Valerie is in a shockin' state, begad! Somethin' has happened, it's very certain."

"It was Binnsion's ghost," muttered the Rotter. "You needn't believe me—Fullwood and these other chaps know, anyhow."

"It looked like Binnsion," admitted Fullwood. "And it was horribly ghostly—a face pressed against the window of that lonely old cottage by the

river. We know it's deserted, an' I'm beginnin' to think that De Valerie was right!"

"Tell us all about it, Fully!"

It wasn't often that Fullwood found himself in the centre of so much attention. And now he proceeded to explain all the facts with great satisfaction. The fellows listened wonderingly.

Meanwhile, De Valerie had gone to his study, agitated and terribly uneasy. Never for a moment did he suspect that Binnsion was alive; he convinced himself positively that the unfortunate lad's phantom had appeared.

Nipper, who wasn't so easily convinced, didn't say much, but he thought a lot. There was a mystery about the whole business—and Nipper meant to probe it until he got to the bottom.

Nelson Lee walked along briskly.

He had been visiting the village post-office, and was now returning to St. Frank's. The famous detective had been very busy lately in connection with the recent fire. He had no reason to doubt the seemingly established fact that Harry Binnsion had perished in the roaring flames.

The tragedy had been so obvious that there was no room for any speculation regarding Binnsion's fate. It was a matter of great comfort to "Mr. Alvington" that Nipper had been in no way responsible for the disastrous fire.

It had been a most unfortunate incident, but, if any blame could be attached to anyone, young Binnsion himself was obviously responsible. He had visited the loft, and had met with an accident. As he had no business there, he had only himself to blame for what had occurred.

It was only natural that Nelson Lee should be thinking about the matter as he walked.

"Poor lad, he paid very dearly for his carelessness," the detective told himself. "We must be grateful that no further disaster occurred. The school, however, has come in for unwelcome attention."

This could not be helped, however, and Lee was quite sure that the local excitement would blow over after a short while.

He was walking along in the shade of the high trees which bordered the lane. And, quite suddenly, Lee saw a small form emerge from a gap in the hedge.

The newcomer was in the full moonlight, whilst Lee remained in shade. Thus, while the detective was hidden, the boy could be plainly seen.

Instinctively, Nelson Lee came to a halt. He had seen, in the first second, something which considerably startled him, and sent his thoughts into momentary chaos.

For the lad was Harry Binnsion!

There could be no mistake whatever—Lee was convinced of the fact at once. And in spite of his amazement, he remained quite still. The detective had no wild thoughts of spectres. This boy was flesh and blood.

The boy commenced walking swiftly up the road, and Lee followed, taking care to render his movements noiseless. He instinctively felt that there was some unexplained mystery. The boy was alive! That little fact brought up a whole host of puzzling questions.

Binnsion walked quickly, and turned down a small side lane—a mere track—some time before reaching the school. And here, against a gateway, the youngster met a burly individual in a thick overcoat. Nelson Lee crept up with extreme caution, all his detective instinct on the alert.

"Anybody see you?" he heard the man say.

"No, Mr. Bradmore, not a soul."

"Good! Follow me, kid!"

The two walked away down the track rapidly, and Nelson Lee followed them. Owing to the moonlight he was forced to display extreme caution. But he succeeded in shadowing the pair to the gate of a small farmhouse without attracting attention.

They passed inside, and Lee crouched against the hedge.

"We don't want any more affairs o' that sort!" he heard Bradmore exclaim. "It's a good thing them boys took you for a ghost. Careless young brat, you! I'll see that you don't git no chance to show yerself 'ere!"

"I'd—I'd rather go home, Mr. Bradmore!" exclaimed the boy.

"You'll just do as you're told—an' shut your lip!"

The pair passed into the farmhouse, and the door closed with a bang. Nelson Lee stroked his chin very thoughtfully

as he surveyed the old place. Bradmore's last words had proved enlightening.

"So young Binnsion isn't to have another opportunity of showing himself," mused Nelson Lee. "That is rather significant. I shall certainly have to probe deeply into the matter. It appears that Mr. Bradmore is indulging in quite an ambitious piece of villainy!"

Nelson Lee was very suspicious, but he did not make the mistake of acting hastily. The affair required very careful attention.

Hurrying back to St. Frank's, Lee lost no time in finding Nipper. He visited Study C, and found not only Nipper, but Sir Montie and Tommy Watson.

"Do you boys know anything about a ghost?" he asked quietly.

"Well, I'm jiggered," exclaimed Nipper. "That's queer, sir! How do you know anything about it? De Valerie came in not long ago, swearing that he'd seen the ghost of that poor chap who got killed in the fire."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Tell me all about it, young 'un," he said.

And Nipper related the facts. Nelson Lee listened, but did not offer any particular comment. And he kept silent regarding his own experience. For the time-being he wished to keep his own counsel.

He suspected, however, that there would be a great deal of work for him in the near future—detective work in earnest.

Nelson Lee was quite right in his surmise.

Before many days had passed he was provided with a mystery case after his own heart—a case which he elucidated with all his old acumen and shrewdness.

Needless to say, Mike Bradmore's plot was brought to an ignominious end, and Cecil De Valerie was released from his hateful bondage. Nelson Lee scored a complete triumph—but it is quite impossible to relate the full facts of that history here. It is sufficient to say that the mystery was cleared up to the last detail.

Skill was to triumph over cunning!

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!—(See p. iv of cover.)

BEGIN OUR NEW SERIAL TO-DAY!

In the Grip of the Huns.

A Magnificent Tale of Thrilling Experiences in Germany.

By CLEMENT HALE.

NOTE.—As the title "In the Hands of the Huns" has already been used, we have altered the name of our Serial to the above.

The Chief Characters in this Story are:

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

OTTO BRACK is a scoundrelly German member of the team. But another German, named **CARL HOFFMAN**, is friendly, and advises the Englishmen to leave Germany, which they refuse to do. They are arrested and sent to a camp at Oberhemmel. One of the guards ill-treats Jack, and George goes to his rescue, knocking out a gaoler named Kutz. He and his brother are then put in separate cells. Another gaoler is more friendly, and informs George that his brother has recovered from his ill-usage.

(Now read on).

A FRIENDLY HUN.

GEOERGE felt grateful to the gaoler for his information, which he might have withheld if he'd wished. It gave him immeasurable relief.

"And is there no food for me?" he asked in a gentler voice. "I'm starving, and my throat is cracking from thirst."

"There will be no rations handed round till morning."

"Do they intend to starve me, then, the inhuman brutes?" hissed George through his clenched teeth. "I haven't tasted food since we left our former prison, or drink either."

To the gaoler, no doubt, the pale face and wild aspect of the prisoner, whose face was stained with dried blood, which had run from the wound in his head, for he'd been flung into the cell without having received any attention, made some appeal, for he uttered a grunt, and turned away.

"It is against the orders," he observed. "But if you pledge me your word that

you will not attack me when I open the door, I'll fetch you a jug of water and a hunk of black bread."

"I give you my word," said George eagerly, for this seemed an honest and gentle sort of fellow enough.

The man hurried away. A minute later George heard his heavy tread echoing in the stone corridor. He reached the cell door, turned the key, shot the bolts, and swung the portal open.

One critical glance at the prisoner he gave, then, reassured, entered, placing the jug and bread upon the floor.

"It is the best I can do, Englishman," said he, blocking up the door, his eyes fixed on Gray's face with a pitying stare.

"And I thank you," George replied, choking. "It is something to find a German with some feelings of humanity in him."

The gaoler shrugged.

"Ah," he exclaimed, "I am sorry the war has broken out. It ought never to have been. I have lived in England, and I love the English. Yet I must serve the Fatherland now that the war has come, and give my life for her, if need be. I have two sons and four nephews in the army. They have already gone to the front. Heaven alone knows if they will ever return."

"I hope so. And now, can you tell me how it is with Kutz?"

The German smiled grimly, and studied George's face intently.

"You shook him up, Englishman," he cried. "And he made the most of it. You will be brought before the governor, of course, and—they are very strict in the prison. They'll be stricter than ever now that we are at war. I'm afraid you will be punished."

"How punished?"

"Ah, that I cannot say. I do not

know what punishments will be inflicted upon the interned prisoners of war."

George Gray looked hard at the man, and it struck him then that he purposely refrained from mentioning the punishment that would most likely be inflicted upon the insubordinate prisoner.

The gaoler then withdrew, wished George a good night's rest, shut, bolted, and locked the door, and turned to pacing his corridor again.

The footballer, feeling more resigned to his fate after this proof that all Huns are not the same, then fell upon his black bread, which was appetising enough to a famished man, ate it ravenously, swallowed the copious draught of water, and then lay down, feeling stronger and better, and tried to sleep.

THE SENTENCE OF THE COURT.

IT seemed to the weary prisoner that he had hardly dozed ere the cell door was opened, and food was brought.

The breakfast consisted of coffee, bread and butter, and some thick gruel. He ate it all, and his drooping spirits revived. The prison was all astir. Bustle and confusion seemed to prevail everywhere.

Presently the prisoners were turned out, and after having been inspected and numbered off, were set to sweep and turn their cells out.

Then coarse mattresses stuffed with straw were flung in for them to lie on at night. For these slight attentions they felt sufficiently grateful.

Only a few of their number, George afterwards learned, had been privileged to pass the night in the cells. The rest had been herded like sheep in the cellars and vaults below, where they'd slept upon the brick floor, while a strict guard and watch was kept upon them.

George asked that his head might be attended to, and the officer to whom he appealed jeered at him; however, he was taken under escort to a washing place, where he was permitted to cleanse the wound with cold water. He felt cleaner and better after that.

They took him back to his cell, and he languished there for an hour or two, when there was a commotion outside, and the door was flung wide.

He was at once ordered out, and took his place between two stalwart armed

guards. Three men marched in front of him, and three more behind. All had their bayonets fixed. A non-commissioned officer commanded the men.

Through the prison he was hurried, along corridors, up stairs and down stairs, to what appeared to be a sort of trial room or court.

Here the governor of the prison and his subordinates were seated.

The door was guarded, the corridor outside was guarded. The court itself was in the safe-keeping of four-and-twenty soldiers armed to the teeth.

George was brought in and set face to face with the tribunal or court.

The governor looked hard at him, and then referred to papers set before him. For a quarter of an hour George was kept standing there, and then the case against him was investigated.

Kutz, his enemy, entered the court.

He took his stand at some distance away from George, but the prisoner saw and recognised him instantly. And as his eyes rested upon the villain's face a smile curved his lips, and his eyes danced in triumph.

Well they might, for Kutz's face was so battered and discoloured from the blows George had dealt him as to be hardly recognisable.

His lips were swollen, there were lumps upon his cheeks and chin. His eyes were blackened, and he looked a meaner rascal than George had ever known him.

"Prisoner George Gray," said the governor, "you are accused of having made a murderous attack upon our devoted and loyal servant, Frederick Kutz, over-gaoler of this prison. What have you to say?"

"I admit it, sir," answered George calmly. "But he goaded me into it by insulting me, and by his brutality to my younger brother."

"How? What brutality?"

In hot and passionate tones George told the governor how he had come to attack Kutz; and harking back from that point told of the rascal's treachery in Berlin.

"My brother and I have always treated the rascal well," he exclaimed, hardly able to speak, "and if it had not been for him, we should have been able to leave Berlin and gain the frontier before war was declared between Britain and Germany. But I would have overlooked all that if the cur had not insulted my brother, and drenched him

with water as he lay unconscious at my feet."

The governor questioned George closely, sharply, bending his stern eyes upon him the while.

Kutz was then called upon to give his version of the affair.

And how he lied!

George stood like a man stricken to stone, hardly able to comprehend that any human being could so pervert the truth as this lying hound did then.

Kutz declared that he had every reason to believe that George Gray and his brother were spies in the pay of Britain: nay, he had proof of it, and it was for this reason that he, acting as a true patriot, had denounced them to the authorities and so prevented their return to London.

He deposed that when George Gray bore his brother into the guardroom, where he was seated the night before, he had openly insulted the German flag, reviled the Kaiser, and threatened him with personal violence unless he fetched food and water instantly.

"I went for the water because I am humane and hate to see a fellow-being suffer," whined the hypocrite. "I intended to give the famished boy a drink, but the prisoner"—and he pointed at George, though he dared not look into the footballer's eyes—"snatched the pail from my hand, and threw it over his brother instead. He then tried to brain me with the rifle, but I dodged the blow, and the butt was shivered on the floor. Then he attacked me—with the violence you see."

The officers of the court studied the battered face, uttering grunts of sympathy, and George felt that the ground was slipping away from under him.

"It's all lies," he cried. "Every word that blackguard utters is a lie."

Then those who had accompanied George Gray and his brother to the guardroom, were examined.

The soldiers and the sergeant were sullen and sulky. Each bore marks of Gray's prowess upon his face, and perhaps for that reason said nothing to help the prisoner, though they on the other hand would not expose Kutz's lies.

"The prisoner had shown great violence," they deposed. "He had attacked them, sending them flying; oh, yes, and his blows had hurt. It was a mercy some of them were not killed. But then the prisoner was a great footballing

English brute, whose constant study was brutality.

"Had the sergeant or either of his men seen the water throwing?" asked the governor.

They, lying, declared that they had not.

And so the governor and his under-officials made up their minds.

The conference between them was of the briefest.

George Gray was told to stand at attention. He drew himself stiffly up.

"It is the unanimous opinion of this court," declared the governor, eyeing him fixedly, "that you are guilty of the series of cowardly assaults and the attempted murder with which you are charged. We believe that the Overwarder Kutz behaved with every consideration. And since it is necessary to maintain a rigid discipline in our internment prisons and camps during the war, a severe example will have to be made. If this were any other but a first case, we should order you to be shot. As it is, even acting with the greatest leniency, we cannot order a lesser sentence than that you be taken back to your cell, and that at the hour of four-thirty in the afternoon you be conducted to the parade ground, and there triced up. Your fellow-prisoners will be assembled to see the sentence carried out, and the justice of the case will be met by the administration of one hundred lashes with the cat—"

A hoarse cry burst from George Gray's lips.

"The cat! Would you dare to use the cat on me?" he shouted furiously.

"Remove the prisoner."

"It's a vile injustice. It's a blackguardly shame," roared George in a frenzy, making as if to leap at his judge.

But the soldiers closed in on him. He was roughly seized, and in spite of his frenzied struggles rendered powerless.

"Kutz," he shrieked as they bore him none too gently away, "one of these days I'll have your life for this!"

And then he was forcibly flung along the corridors, and up and down the stairs, back to the cell from which they'd taken him, and hurled roughly into it.

The door clanged to, the key was turned, and the bolts shot home, and he was left to his bitter and agonised reflections.

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

BITTER REFLECTIONS.

THE agony of mind which George Gray suffered after the court-martial was almost unendurable.

He had been tried, convicted, condemned, and was about to be punished owing to the lying of Frederick Kutz, as despicable and low-down a scoundrel as ever lived.

When he visualised the brutal face of the man, with its thin, cruel lips, unfathomable and small, cunning eyes, the stalwart footballer wondered, as he paced up and down his cell, up and down, how he had ever come to trust the rascal. Such a face, had it belonged to an Englishman, would have put most men on their guard; but when it belonged to a German—

George Gray groaned aloud at his stupidity in the past. Envy, hatred, malice, revenge, injustice, and an unmeasurable meanness made up the scoundrel's character, and on this man's sworn testimony he was to suffer the humiliation of a public flogging. What Kutz had done mattered not at all. His brutality to Jack Gray was ignored.

George paced his cell, rent with an impotent fury that was worse than torture to him. If only he could lay his hands upon the villain again—if only he could! He would be almost content to die if only he could take the rascal with him to eternity, and fling him down to the bottom of the flaming pit to which the rascal was assuredly doomed.

When he had walked until he had exhausted himself, Jack flung himself down on his plank bed and buried his face in his hands, a feeling of utter dejection succeeding the rage that had consumed him.

His loneliness became almost unbearable. If only there were someone he could talk to! If only they would let him see his brother Jack!

Moody and sullen he sat for a long while, then started to his feet, and, going to the door, kicked it savagely.

Thud, thud, thud, thud! his boots rang against the strong, iron-sheeted door until at last a warder came hurrying up and slid the grating back.

Two glinting eyes glared at George.

"Ach, thunder and lightning!" roared the owner. "Will you stop that noise? If not, I'll see that you have another hundred lashes added to the dose that's

going to be served out to you in the yard!"

"I don't care a straw what punishment is given me," answered George recklessly. "If I don't talk to somebody, I shall go mad!"

"What you want, eh?"

"To be treated like a human being—not like a dog!"

The German grinned.

"You are a prisoner of war. We Germans are thorough—thorough in our love as well as in our hate. It's our duty to hate all enemies of the Fatherland. I can't help you. I don't know that I would if I could."

"How many men like that blackguard Kutz are there at the gaol?"

The warder frowned.

"You mustn't talk like that!" he protested. "Kutz is an over-warder, and —"

"I don't care a straw for his rank! He's a worse blackguard than your Kaiser! I know the villain. He denounced me and my brother Jack, who were always good to him, so that he could steal our luggage. And even when we're confined here, and he's set in guard above us, the coward is scared to death of us!"

The German glanced fearfully about him, then said in a whisper:

"Ah, none of us like Kutz! But what would you have? It is our duty to obey orders. Take my advice, Englishman, and submit to the discipline of the prison. You'll get better treatment if you do."

George's heart swelled within him.

"Better treatment?" he howled. "We are treated like dogs—all of us!"

"As you English treat our Germans in England!"

"On my life, no! We play the game! We have a code of honour in Britain. I wish that every German would copy it!"

"Well, well, I can't stay here talking to you! I should be punished if they caught me at it. I'm sorry for you, Englishman. I know that Kutz deserved what he got. I'd save you from the flogging if I could, but——"

He shrugged his heavy shoulders, nodded with a Sphinx-like smile at George, and then snapped the wicket to. George stood stock-still, listening to his retreating footsteps until he could hear them no more, and then walked back to his bed, on to which he flung himself,

(Continued overleaf)

torn with a tumult of emotions that threatened to overwhelm him.

But gradually he quieted down. His brief conversation with the warder, which went to prove that all Huns are not the same, and that some spark of humanity exists in the composition of certain units of the hated race, served to calm him, and presently he sank into a peaceful doze.

AT THE FLOGGING BASE.

GEORGE was awakened by the tramp of iron-shod boots in the stone corridor, the sound of voices, the ringing of a German command, the thud of rifle-butts upon the stone floor, the shooting of bolts and the turning of the key within the lock.

He knew what the sounds meant. The military escort had come to take him to the place of punishment; and, starting erect as the cell door swung wide, he braced himself to meet his fate.

An officer swung into the cell, followed by four soldiers in field-grey, bearing rifles with bayonets fixed.

There was scarcely room for them all.

"Remove the prisoner!" commanded the lieutenant, scowling at George.

They did not give him time to leave the cell of his own accord, but one of the men flung him violently forward by the simple expedient of seizing him by the scruff of the neck and jerking a knee violently into the small of his back.

Losing his balance, George tumbled against the officer, who struck him a savage blow in the face, accompanying the punch with an oath.

Thrown again off his balance, the unfortunate prisoner lumbered against another of the guards, who sent him staggering into the passage, at the same time driving the butt-end of his rifle against George's ribs.

The footballer saw red. Murder was in his heart and flashed from the fire in his eyes.

With a cry, he prepared to hurl himself at the callous brutes, but somehow or other he was not given the chance.

He was jerked round, swung to the centre of the corridor; the guards took their places beside, before and behind him, and the word to march was given. In a moment they were swinging onward, to the ring of the measured boot-strokes, and George had no option but to accompany them.

Did he deviate so much as an inch from the place allotted to him, he was brought to order by rifle-butt or bayonet. And, worse than all, he had to endure the malicious and self-satisfied smile of the officer in command of the escort.

Not to be able to retaliate, that was worse than all. With an effort at self-control, he strode onward with head set back, and shoulders squared, with firm step, and unflinching mien. And so they passed out of the prison building, swung down a flight of steps, and reached the parade ground, or exercise yard.

The late afternoon was warm. The sheltered space seemed to hold the heat of the day. As he emerged from the semi-darkness of the building into the open George looked about him.

(To be continued.)

NEXT WEEK'S STORY

Under the Title of

"A TERRIBLE LESSON; Or, SKILL AGAINST CUNNING!"

Will deal with another Adventure of NELSON LEE
and NIPPER AT ST. FRANK'S COLLEGE.

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