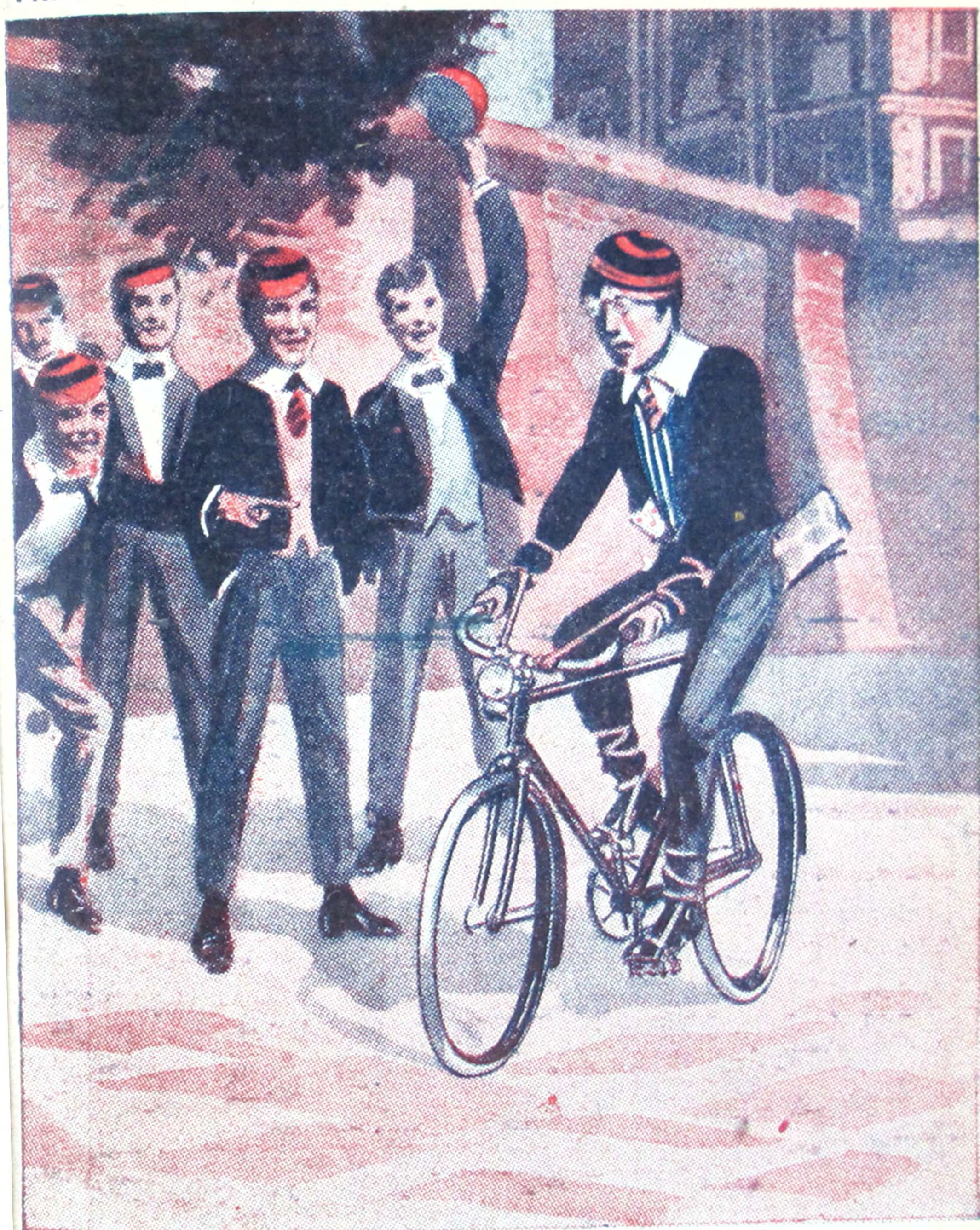


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THE CLUE OF THE FANCY VEST!

A Tale of NELSON LEE and NIPPER AT ST. FRANK'S. Specially written by the Author of "A Terrible Lesson," "The Lighthouse Prisoners," "The Sign of the Purple Circle," etc., etc. *March 30, 1918.*

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THE CLUE OF THE FANCY VEST

A Tale of NELSON LEE and NIPPER AT ST. FRANK'S. Specially written by the Author of "A Terrible Lesson," "The Lighthouse Prisoners," "The Sign of the Purple Circle," etc., etc.

AUTHOR'S NOTE.

Nelson Lee and Nipper are at St. Frank's College, to escape the attentions of the murderous Chinese Secret Society, the Fu Chang Tong, whose hatred they have incurred. Although living in the great 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.

SIR MONTIE'S RESOLVE—THE HON. AUBREY DE VERE WELLBORNE AND CO. TAKE A HAND—AND MONTIE FEELS HIMSELF GREATLY TIED.

TOMMY WATSON fainted.

He intended to do so gracefully into Nipper's arms; but Nipper, for some unforeseen reason, moved at the exact moment, and Tommy only just saved himself from falling over the armchair by a supreme effort. His recovery from the faint was really remarkable.

"You—you ass, Benny!" he gasped. "Can't you see that I'm just on the point of losing my senses?"

Nipper grinned.

"Nothing new in that, my son!" he replied calmly. "You lost your senses ages ago, didn't you?"

"Begad! That's rather good, you know!" chuckled Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "In fact, it's distinctly good, Benny!"

Tommy Watson glared.

"You silly chumps!" he shouted wrathfully. "I meant that I was fainting—and it's a wonder you ain't in the same state, too, Benny!"

Nipper regarded his chum critically.

"I suppose your dinner agreed with you, didn't it?" he asked. "You don't usually act like this, Tommy!"

"I was fainting at that!" roared Watson, pointing a quivering finger at Sir Montie.

The astonished Tregellis-West started, adjusted his pince-nez, and regarded Watson with a very severe expression. He could see no reason why Tommy should fall into a fainting fit simply because he—Montie—had just entered Study C.

"I think you are aware, old boy, that I hate bein' rude," said the swell of the Ancient House mildly. "But, really, I should like to inquire into this matter—I should, really. I wasn't aware that I was such a shockin' spectacle!"

Nipper grinned.

"Well, it's a bit startling, Montie," he observed critically.

"Begad, I fail to understand——"

"That waistcoat!" shouted Watson, pointing out the offending article of apparel accusingly. "I should like to know what the dickens you mean by coming downstairs wearing half a dozen rainbows?"

Sir Montie suddenly became dignified.

"Dear fellow, I have nothin' to say," he exclaimed frigidly.

"I should think not," growled Watson. "The blessed thing speaks for itself!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm pained," protested Montie sorrowfully. "I'm pained more than I can say, dear boys. I always had an idea that you fellows possessed good tastes. An' if you can say that this waistcoat is starin'—well, begad, I pity you! I chose it out of a selection of two dozen, an' it cost two guineas!"

"My hat!" said Tommy Watson. "What a disgraceful waste of money!"

Tregellis-West lifted his nose into the air, turned round, and surveyed himself critically in a looking-glass. To be quite truthful, he had had just a few qualms concerning the fancy vest himself. It was really a gorgeous article, but in no way "loud." True, the pale blue stripes were rather prominent, and, as Nipper afterwards remarked, they could be seen a mile off, but as a whole the waistcoat was a work of art.

Sir Montie was always dandified in his attire, but this was something special; and, not unnaturally, his chums wanted to know the reason for such splendour.

It was a half-holiday at St. Frank's. The sun was shining gloriously, and the whole countryside was looking bright and green in the outburst of spring. Dinner was over in the Ancient House, and the juniors were mostly in their studies, making various arrangements for the fine afternoon.

"Anythin' more to say?" asked Sir Montie coldly, as he turned back to his chums.

Dick Bennett—otherwise Nipper—chuckled.

"My dear old fathead, we were only chipping you," he said. "The waistcoat is simply ripping. Bless your life, we shouldn't mind if you walked about with red, white, and blue stripes all over you!"

Sir Montie looked horrified.

"Pray don't be so shockin'ly absurd, Benny boy," he protested. "The very idea is appallin'!"

"But, what's the meaning of this grandeur?" demanded Watson. "My hat! You haven't fallen in love, I suppose? Who's the lucky girl?"

"Begad, I shall lose my temper in a moment—I shall, really!" said Sir Montie, breathing hard. "There ain't a fellow in the Remove so easy-goin' as I am; but there's a limit, Tommy!"

"Well, if it isn't a girl, what is it?"

"You are makin' a ridiculous fuss over a trifle," said Tregellis-West. "As a matter of fact, I have decided to cycle over to Bannington that's all. I'm goin' to buy a camera, and several books on photography——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Really, dear fellows, I can't see anythin' funny in buyin' a camera."

"There isn't," grinned Nipper. "But there will be something funny in the way you'll take photographs, Montie. I've been expectin' this for days; all this week you've been jolly on photography. Still, if you like to buy a camera, I'll show you how to work it."

"That's very nice of you, dear boy; but I should prefer to teach myself," said Tregellis-West stiffly. "You have treated the whole matter with ridiculous levity, an' I couldn't dream of acceptin' any assistance."

Nipper winked at Tommy Watson.

"Of course not," he said genially. "And, by the way, didn't you say that you were going to bike over to Bannington?"

"Yea."

"In that waistcoat?"

"Begad, I shall lose my temper in a minute!"

"Keep your giddy hair on!" grinned Nipper. "I was only going to ask you, as politely as possible, why you're not wearing your Norfolks? Cycling in Etons isn't particularly comfortable. And you're rather particular as a rule."

Sir Montie nodded.

"Dear fellow, exactly!" he agreed. "Surely you remember our last trip to Bannington? Weren't we caught in the rain?

And didn't my Norfolk suit get shockin'ly muddy and crumpled? It's bein' cleaned and pressed at the tailor's——"

"But you've got a dozen other suits, ain't you?" put in Tommy.

"I'm not a clothes-hog, dear boy," interrupted Montie tartly. "I have, as a matter of fact, one other Norfolk suit; but there's a button missin' from the jacket, and I simply couldn't think of venturin' out in that shockin' state."

And Tregellis-West, to avoid further argument, retired from Study C in a most dignified manner. He strolled into the lobby, and then stood upon the Ancient House steps surveying the Triangle. It was at this moment that he received quite a considerable shock.

A very elegant junior was strolling across the Triangle from the direction of the playing-fields. In many ways he was even more dandified than Tregellis-West himself—for Cecil De Valerie, of the Remove, was Montie's only rival. Fullwood, of course, paid great attention to his dress, but he never succeeded in looking well dressed, although his clothing probably cost more than Montie's. There are some fellows who simply cannot wear good clothes properly.

De Valerie was not one of them, for his elegance was a byword at St. Frank's. But Sir Montie was not shocked at this—he was well accustomed to it. The reason for his dismay was obvious to the duller eye.

"Begad!" he murmured in consternation.

He gazed at De Valerie's fancy vest in a fascinated kind of way. It was a wonderful creation—and it had blue stripes! For anybody to be wearing a waistcoat which clashed with Sir Montie's was a real calamity. And here was De Valerie—popularly known as the Rotter—strolling about in blue stripes.

Tregellis-West stood rooted to the spot, fully expecting the other juniors on the Triangle to roar with laughter. For some remarkable reason, however, the juniors didn't seem to notice anything unusual whatever. Handforth and Church and McClure continued chatting against the window of Study D. Burton and Farman were having an argument within three yards of Sir Montie—and they noticed nothing! A crowd of lags were playing "touch" under the elms totally oblivious of the awful state of affairs.

Possibly the other fellows were not quite so sensitive as Sir Montie on the subject. And when De Valerie came quite close, Tregellis-West's horror was slightly tempered. For he now saw that the Rotter's waistcoat was of a totally different pattern to his own. The only similarity lay in the blue stripes—and even these were in quite another style. Viewed closely, the two fancy vests were not even distant relatives; but from a distance one would easily take them for twin brothers.

Sir Montie breathed again.

"How relievin'!" he murmured fervently.

De Valerie passed him whistling cheerfully,

and strode into the Ancient House. And Sir Montie, feeling that life was worth living once more, proceeded on his way to the bicycle shed. His magnificent machine was all ready for use, and he wheeled it out and started on his journey to Bannington.

Nipper and Tommy Watson would probably have accompanied him, but they were due on Little Side for practice, and Nipper was keen upon getting his men into fine fettle for the coming cricket season. Montie, of course, was included in the team, but he wasn't needed this afternoon.

He pedalled away leisurely, and, under the influence of the genial weather, he smiled indulgently at the memory of his chums' disparaging remarks concerning the fancy vest. After all, it wasn't to be supposed that they should understand the matter as he did.

But Tregellis-West's trip was destined to be marred in the most appalling fashion before so very long. Soon after he had turned into the Bannington Road he espied three schoolboys lounging against the stile which terminated the footpath from Bellton Wood.

Instinctively Sir Montie pedalled with a little more dignity. For he had recognised the boys as Hogs—that is to say, pupils from the River House School, otherwise known as Dr. Hogge's Select Academy. There were quite a number of fellows belonging to this school who were thoroughly decent, but it had to be confessed that the majority were prigs and upstarts of the first water.

The trio who lounged against the stile were the pick of the prigs, so to speak—the elders of the set who were pleased to call themselves the Honourables.

The name was quite suitable, for the three River House boys were the Hon. Aubrey De Vere Wellborne, the Hon. Bertram Carstairs, and the Hon. Cyril Coates. Without a doubt they were three of the most insufferable snobs in existence.

The River House School hadn't been opened long, and at first the Honourables had attempted to chum up with Sir Montie, he being considered worthy of companionship with them. Tregellis-West, who had ideas of his own, was on far more friendly terms with the grocer's boy, considering, rightly, that that amiable youth was more fit for his companionship. Needless to say, Wellborne and Co. did not take this as a compliment. They probably hated Sir Montie worse than anybody else at St. Frank's. To be scorned was a deadly insult, and the Honourables were always anxious to wreak vengeance.

What happened next was almost inevitable.

The recognition was mutual, and Wellborne and Co. at once became active. As Sir Montie was riding past they aroused themselves from their customary lethargy and sprang out upon him. Tregellis-West, who was half anticipating the move, pedalled like fury. But for the fact that a parcel-carrier was fitted to his machine, he would have escaped. As it was, the Hon. Bertram just succeeded in grasping the rear bar of the carrier. He was dragged along forcibly

for some yards, but his weight told, and in the end Sir Montie was pulled to a standstill.

"You—you frightful rotters!" he gasped, leaping from his machine. "If you're askin' for a scrap, I'm perfectly willin' to oblige! If you touch me——"

"Collah him!" shouted Wellborne excitedly.

In a stand-up fight Sir Montie could easily have accounted for the three weedy River House fellows. But luck was dead against him just now. He was hampered by the presence of his bicycle. Coates viciously flung his cap into Montie's face, and his aim was true. It didn't hurt a bit, but Tregellis-West was forced to take a step backwards. His foot fouled one of the pedals of the bicycle—and the next second he and the machine collapsed into a heap.

"On him!" roared the Hon. Aubrey triumphantly.

The three cads piled on to the unfortunate Sir Montie before he could even attempt to rise, and, between the three of them, they held him down with very little difficulty. Carstairs found some string in his pocket, and it was rapidly used for the purpose of tying the prisoner's ankles and wrists.

Although the binding process was hurried, it was, nevertheless, effective, and Tregellis-West couldn't hope to fight his attackers under such circumstances. They stood round him, straightening their ruffled clothing, and surveyed him with unalloyed joy.

"Bai Jove! I nevah hoped for such luck as this, dear boys," said the Hon. Aubrey in his absurd, affected drawl. "We'll make the rottah sit up—we'll put him through the bally old mill! The very chap we wanted, too!"

"You frightful——"

Sir Montie found it rather difficult to proceed with his remarks, for the Hon. Bertram, without any regard for Montie's respiration, had sat himself upon the latter's face. This was not only drastic, but decidedly effective.

"That silenced him!" grinned the Hon. Aubrey.

"Mind he doesn't bite, old chap!" said Coates.

Carstairs jumped up hastily, and then caught his breath in.

"There's a trap comin' along!" he said quickly. "We'd better not be seen in the road, you know!"

"Bai Jove! Rathah not," agreed the Hon. Aubrey. "Drag the rottah ovah the stile, deah boys. We'll decide what to do with him latah on. We couldn't dream of lettin' him go yet."

In less than two minutes the unfortunate Tregellis-West was hauled over the stile, and his bicycle was then rescued from the middle of the road. Finally, the precious Honourables dumped their victim into a little hollow a hundred yards from the road. Trees surrounded the spot, and their movements were quite concealed.

"What's goin' to be done?" panted the Hon. Cyril.

Wellborne adjusted a monocle, and considered.

"Well, I don't see why the beast should intahfeah with our little gamble, deah boys," he said, after a few moments. "Supposin' we keep him with us while we have a hand at bankah? It will be rathah amusin', bai Jove! We can think of somethin' to do with him latah on."

Sir Montie found his voice. He was lying full length in the grass, still bound and helpless, and he literally trembled with indignation and fury. As a rule, Tregellis-West kept his temper under the most trying circumstances; but just now he fairly boiled.

"Are you goin' to keep me here while you play at rotten cards?" he demanded hotly.

The Hon. Aubrey nodded.

"You've hit it first time, deah boy," he said coolly. "Trot out the fags, Bertie. Perhaps the visitah would care for one?"

Montie snorted with disgust while the trio lighted cigarettes and puffed at them with pretended enjoyment. After that a pack of cards was produced, and the three young rascals sat down to a game of banker. They were, unfortunately, blessed—or, perhaps, cursed—with plenty of cash, and they gambled with all the carelessness of professional card-sharpers.

As Wellborne was well aware, this exhibition was gall and wormwood to the helpless Sir Montie. He loathed gambling of all varieties, and to be a compulsory spectator was more than disgusting to his refined tastes. Tregellis-West was philosophic, however; he could not escape, so he resigned himself to his fate.

The Honourables apparently forgot their victim, for it was not until the cash belonging to the Hon. Cyril had been transferred to the pockets of his successful companions that a move was made.

"I'm finished!" growled Coates, who was a bad loser. "I'm fed up with the rotten game. What about this beastly St. Frank's chap? Shall we let him go now?"

"Rathah not!" exclaimed the Hon. Aubrey. "I've been thinkin', deah boys. A toppin' ideah has occurred to me. The rottah is too goody-goody to like this sort of thing, ain't he? Why shouldn't we send him back to St. Frank's with cigarettes and cards stickin' out of his pockets? An' I've got a sportin' papah heah which would add to the jolly old effect, don't you know?"

"Oh, don't be potty!" snapped Coates crossly. "The ass would pull the things out of his pockets before he got to the school! Your ideas always were fatheaded, Wellborne!"

"Well, this one isn't!" went on the Hon. Aubrey, whose temper was singularly good—mainly owing to the fact that nearly all the Hon. Cyril's cash was in his pocket. "It's a stunnah, deah boys—a regular stunnah! We'll send the cad back to St. Frank's as I said, an' he'll cause a sensation when he arrives."

"But he'll chuck the things away, I tell you!" roared Coates.

The Hon. Aubrey grinned.

"Not if his feet are tied to the pedals and his wrists to the handle-bars!" he said coolly.

"Oh, my hat!"

His chums stared at him admiringly.

"See the ideah?" went on Wellborne. "What can the rottah do if he's bound to his bally machine? He can't touch his pockets, an' he can't jump off; an' if he stops he'll come a frightful croppah! He'll be simply bound to pedal on, bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

By a great effort of will Sir Montie preserved silence. Threats and appeals would only make matters worse. And he wisely decided that it would be more dignified to maintain an air of indifference.

And, without further ado, the three River House cads carried out their plan.

It was an easy matter to hold Montie's feet while they were securely bound to the pedals, and his wrists were next fastened to the handle-bars. He could not move them an inch. Once set going, it would be vitally necessary for him to continue his ride.

And, as the Hogs were well aware, Montie would naturally ride straight to St. Frank's. The fellows would understand there; but if he appealed to strangers to set him free, they would get different ideas.

Several playing cards were stuffed into a waistcoat pocket; an open packet of cigarettes was displayed in another pocket; and a sporting paper proclaimed its character from still another pocket.

And then, willy-nilly, Sir Montie was forced towards the road. It was necessary to wheel him through a gap in the hedge, as the stile was too difficult to be negotiated. With a push Tregellis-West was set going, and, to save himself from a nasty fall, he was compelled to pedal.

"Good-bye!" grinned the Hon. Aubrey genially. "A safe journey, deah boy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A roar of hilarious laughter came to Sir Montie's ears. Nearly dying of shame, he pedalled with all his strength. His one desire now was to reach St. Frank's with all possible speed.

Poor Sir Montie little realised what unfortunate results were to follow this ill-natured jape!

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER—AT THE RACE-MEETING—DE VALERIE'S RUSE.

"WHO'S that chap?"

Nipper asked the question in a low voice. He and Tommy Watson were just about to emerge from the Ancient House, en route for the playing-fields. Sir Montie had been gone for some little time, and his chums were now bent upon commencing their cricket practice on Little Side. Nipper, of course, was the skipper of the Ancient House Remove, and it was highly necessary for him to be present.

"Looks a miserable old boy, anyhow!" remarked Tommy Watson critically.

The object of their attention was a somewhat shabbily dressed individual, who was slowly crossing the Triangle with the obvious intention of entering the Ancient House. As the stranger came nearer, Nipper and Tommy Watson saw that he was somewhat bent, and that his face was of a curious, swarthy hue. A thin, straggly, grey beard adorned his chin, and a drooping moustache almost hid the shape of his mouth. He looked up quickly, as though conscious of the gaze from the two juniors. His eyes were piercing, but they seemed to possess an almost blank expression.

With deliberate footsteps he entered the Ancient House porch, and made as if to pass inside. Nipper, always obliging, stepped in front of the stranger.

"Anything I can do, sir?" he asked cheerfully.

The man walked on unheeding, as though deaf.

"Do you want anything?" shouted Tommy Watson, looking back.

Still the man made no reply. He walked across the lobby, and turned into one of the passages. Nipper and Watson eyed one another wonderingly, and went to the corner to see what the intruder was doing. But the passage was empty; the mysterious individual had passed right into the interior of the house.

"Well, I'm blessed!" exclaimed Tommy Watson. "The old chap must be deaf—come into the wrong place by mistake, I expect."

"Queer-lookin' merchant—what?"

Cecil De Valerie had joined the pair, and he eyed them amusedly, with his customary smile of bold composure.

"Do you know who he is?" asked Nipper, turning to De Valerie.

The Rotter shook his head.

"Haven't the slightest idea," he replied languidly. "I spotted him as I was coming out of the cloakroom just now. One of Alvington's pals, perhaps."

"Rats!" said Nipper promptly. "Alvy wouldn't have a pal like that."

"Oh, well, I don't know who the rummy individual is," said De Valerie. "And, if it comes to that, I'm jolly certain I don't care!"

He passed out into the Triangle briskly, and walked towards the bicycle shed. He, too, was bent upon a trip, and he left Nipper and Tommy Watson to puzzle over the mysterious stranger themselves. Not that they puzzled much; after a few remarks the pair hurried away to the playing-fields.

Cecil De Valerie, meanwhile, was intent upon something very different from cricket practice. He was already on his bicycle, and within a few minutes he was pedalling swiftly and easily in the direction of Bannington.

He saw nothing of the unfortunate Tregellis-West during the journey, for when he passed the stile Sir Montie was a helpless

spectator of the little game of banker in the hollow. De Valerie looked rather determined. As a rule, he was one of the most happy-go-lucky fellows at St. Frank's. During his first few weeks in the Remove he had earned for himself the unenviable name of "The Rotter." Since then, however, De Valerie had improved in many ways, and he was not quite so deserving of the unkind sobriquet.

His expression was now firm, as though he were journeying to Bannington with a very set purpose. He cycled right through the town, where for some reason there was an unaccustomed air of bustle and liveliness.

The explanation was simple, for, just outside the town, a race-meeting was being held. The course was rather crowded, even for Bannington, and the scene was one of great animation and subdued excitement.

De Valerie left his bicycle at a small shop, after paying the modest sum of threepence, and paid for admission into the enclosure. Here he looked keenly about him for a few moments, and then nodded to himself.

Two minutes later he was talking freely and easily to Mr. Josh Nickson. This gentleman was probably the most disreputable bookmaker within a radius of fifty miles. He was a big, bloated individual, with a coarse voice, and he was a very questionable character for De Valerie to keep company with. At present Mr. Nickson was in an excellent humour, for he had done well over the first two races of the afternoon.

Probably no other junior at St. Frank's would have had the tremendous nerve to attend the race-meeting as De Valerie was doing. Horse-racing and betting were looked upon at St. Frank's as the most heinous of all crimes for a schoolboy to commit—or nearly so. Several seniors had been publicly expelled for betting on horses.

For De Valerie to boldly go upon the course in this fashion was almost breathless in its audacity. But, then, De Valerie was not like other juniors. He was utterly daring, and his cool cheek nearly always saw him through.

At the same time he was fairly convinced that his action would not come to the notice of the reverend Headmaster. It was most unlikely that anyone in authority at St. Frank's would be in the vicinity of the Bannington racecourse. Furthermore, Cecil De Valerie kept his eyes well open.

It was just as well that he did, for scarcely five minutes had passed before he suddenly started. He hastily thrust some money into the open hand of Mr. Josh Nickson, and then turned into the crowd.

The cause of his sudden alarm was sufficiently serious. The enclosure was surrounded by a fairly high wall. De Valerie had therefore considered himself perfectly safe from the eyes of anybody passing along the road beyond.

But the Rotter had overlooked one factor. Bannington possessed a motor-omnibus. True, it was a ramshackle affair; but it managed to rattle along admirably, and it

pelled between Bannington and several neighbouring villages.

This public vehicle came thundering past now—and, by all that was unlucky, Mr. Crowell, the Remove Form-master at St. Frank's, was seated upon one of the upper seats!

It was the fact that Mr. Crowell stood up that had aroused De Valerie's probable anxiety to leave the spot. He had been seen! Mr. Crowell had spotted the well-known school-cap!

"Confound it!" muttered De Valerie. "What an ass I was!"

He had thought about wearing an ordinary cloth cap for the occasion, but had neglected to do so. And now the fat was in the fire!

He reached a safe corner almost at once, and he vaguely hoped that he had not been recognised. Mr. Crowell in all probability only knew that a St. Frank's junior had been within the enclosure—it wasn't likely that he had recognised the boy.

The distance between Mr. Nickson's stand and the motor-bus was quite considerable, and De Valerie hoped for the best. He slipped out into a side lane, walked rapidly down several turnings, and finally emerged into the High Street. The motor-bus was nowhere to be seen, neither was Mr. Crowell.

"By George!" murmured De Valerie, taking a deep breath. "I wonder if I'm safe?"

His next move was to redeem his bicycle from the little shop, but he hesitated before doing so. An idea had just struck him—and it was one which caused him "furiously to think," as the French put it.

The fancy vest!

It was quite distinctive, and, since Mr. Crowell had seen the cap, it was only natural to assume that he had seen the waistcoat. And it was a direct clue—the clue which would probably lead to De Valerie's undoing as soon as he arrived at St. Frank's.

The Rotter, for all his coolness, was dismayed. He whistled softly to himself, and realised that his daring had landed him into a grave difficulty at last. What was to be done? Mr. Crowell would certainly be on the look-out for a boy wearing a fancy vest such as he had seen.

"Silly idiot!" grunted De Valerie.

He was smiling now, for a very simple solution to the problem had occurred to him. There was no certainty that it would get him out of his trouble, but the chances were that a very simple ruse would succeed.

He walked along the High Street for a short distance, and turned into a big outfitter's establishment. Here he purchased a new fancy vest, of a totally different colour and pattern, which could not possibly be mistaken for his other one, and donned it in the shop. Then, with his old waistcoat in a parcel, he sallied forth once more—feeling far more confident.

It was the work of a few moments only to obtain his bicycle, and then he set off back to the school, fully prepared to face the

consequences, if necessary. De Valerie was not the fellow to fight shy of facing the music.

He arrived in the Triangle while the majority of the fellows were still upon the playing-fields.

The afternoon sun was warm, and De Valerie was in a gentle perspiration. He stowed his dusty bicycle away and then lounged elegantly towards the Ancient House. By a curious chance Mr. Crowell entered the gates at that very moment.

"Now for it!" murmured De Valerie to himself.

Most fellows would have hurried away with all possible speed; but De Valerie had his own ideas. If trouble was to come, it might as well come at once. There was no sense in delaying matters. He deliberately turned and walked straight towards Mr. Crowell.

The master of the Remove looked at him as he passed, and De Valerie smiled coolly.

"Rippin' afternoon, sir!" he remarked casually.

"Quite so, De Valerie, quite so!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell, with a nod. "A really splendid afternoon. I should be better pleased, however, if I saw you taking healthy exercise upon the playing-fields."

Mr. Crowell passed on, and Cecil De Valerie grinned contentedly to himself. The trick had worked—he had not been recognised! He was quite sure, however, that if he had been wearing the tell-tale waistcoat he would have been dropped on at once.

"So that's all serene!" murmured the Rotter comfortably.

And he made his way to the playing-fields—not because Mr. Crowell had advised him to do so, but his own inclination took him that way.

He was too late to participate in any cricket practice, however, although he was anxious to do so. Although a queer fellow in many ways, Cecil De Valerie had his good points. He was a great lover of cricket, and it was his one ambition to be given a place in the Form Eleven.

Nipper and his merry men were just coming off Little Side, highly pleased with the afternoon's work. Nipper, with a bat tucked under his arm, was wondering what had become of the absent Sir Montie—for it was quite time that he returned from Bannington.

Nipper wasn't to wonder for long!

For, even as he and several other juniors entered the Triangle, Sir Montie came right in at the gates. As he did so he let out a gasping hail of joy. His chums were in sight!

"Dear fellows, pray come to the rescue!" he shouted desperately.

He cycled towards them, and they stared at him in wonder. Handforth and Co., who were also near by, stared too. They couldn't quite see where any rescue work was required.

"Hold me, dear boys!" called Sir Montie frantically.

"The chap's dotty!" declared Handforth. "What the dickens does he want to be held for? By George! That looks like a sporting paper sticking out of his pocket! And—yes, it is!—a packet of cigarettes!"

Handforth concluded with a roar of indignation. Nipper and Tommy Watson stared with amazement. Tregellis-West was cycling round and round in circles, making no attempt to dismount. There was some excuse for the juniors in supposing that the luckless Sir Montie had taken leave of his senses.

"What's the matter with you, ass?" roared Watson anxiously.

"Rescue, dear fellows!" panted the cyclist. "I can't get off, you know—I can't, really!"

"Can't get off!" echoed Nipper, astounded, gazing after his chum as he cycled past.

"Why, what the thunder——"

"I'm bound on, you know!"

"Look at his feet!" roared McClure suddenly. "Oh, my only topper! He's tied to the jigger, hand and foot!"

There was a general gasp—and then a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was certainly unfeeling of the fellows, but the situation was altogether too ludicrous to be taken seriously. The spectacle of the dandified Sir Montie cycling round and round the Triangle, unable to dismount from his machine, was too rich for words.

So the fellows didn't attempt any words—they yelled. And again the old Triangle resounded with laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER III.

HARD LINES FOR MONTIE—THE HONOURABLES ARE NOT HONOURABLE.

RALPH LESLIE FULLWOOD, of the Remove, laughed mockingly.

"Look at the pattern this noble youth is settin' us!" he grinned. "Sportin' papers stickin' all over him, cigs. fallin' out of his pockets, an' I don't know what else. By gad, what a giddy showin' up!"

"Rather!" said Gulliver heartily—"the crawlin' hypocrite!"

A fist was suddenly shoved under Gulliver's nose, and Gulliver saw the grim features of Edward Oswald Handforth behind the fist.

"See that?" roared Handforth.

"Oh, don't be an ass!"

"If you call Tregellis-West a crawling hypocrite again, I'll turn you inside out!" threatened Handforth wrathfully. "You know as well as I do that the poor chap has been japed by somebody!"

"That's only his silly yarn! Ow—yow!"

Gulliver sat down upon the ground with great abruptness. Handforth, always hasty, had landed out with full pressure. Fullwood and Bell, and one or two other members of the noble order of Nuts, moved off hurriedly. When Handforth rolled his sleeves up it generally meant trouble.

Sir Montie Tregellis-West had just been

released from his bicycle. His indignation at the uproarious merriment of the Removites was reduced by the sympathy he received from Nipper and Tommy Watson when he told his story.

"It was a frightful position, dear fellows!" complained Montie breathlessly. "Tied to my jigger, begad! An' just look at my hands—they're shockin'ly dirty. I must wash myself at once—I must, really!"

"Who were the rotters who collared you?" asked Watson.

"Why, those beastly Honourables——"

"Yes; but which ones?"

"Dear boy, we'll discuss all this later on, begad!" said Sir Montie. "I'm simply flustered by all this excitement. It ain't good for me, you know. My heart ain't very strong——"

"Rot!" grinned Nipper. "Buzz inside and get washed. You'll have to tell us the whole yarn at tea-time."

"With great pleasure, old man," said Sir Montie obligingly.

He was glad to get away. His ankles and wrists still smarted from the chafing of the tightly-bound ropes; and the handling he had received from the Honourables had crumpled his elegant clothing sadly, and he was grimy with dust.

His adventures on the way home had been few, for he had met only a couple of country labourers, and these hadn't noticed anything unusual in the schoolboy. But Montie paled to think of what would have happened if he had chanced to encounter the Head himself!

He felt glad that he had been enabled to escape the evil eyes of masters and prefects. The juniors didn't matter so much—although it had certainly been extremely galling to see them roaring with merriment whilst he rode round and round the Triangle, unable to dismount.

Montie was not the fellow to keep things up, however; now that he was free, he could easily see the point of the joke himself. And he grinned slightly as he ran into the Ancient House and hurried to the stairs.

A wash was what he needed. His thoughts came to an abrupt standstill, for, descending the stairs, was Mr. Crowell! Sir Montie paused in dismay. To be seen in such a shocking condition by his Form-master was positively agonising to the sensitive Tregellis-West.

He turned to flee, but Mr. Crowell stopped him.

"Tregellis-West!" he rapped out sharply.

"Really, sir, I beg of you not to detain me now!" appealed Sir Montie plaintively. "I have been havin' a frightful time, you know, and——"

"What is that sticking from your pocket, Tregellis-West?"

There was nothing of the usual kindness about Mr. Crowell's tone. It was sharp and icy, and Montie gave a little start as he realised that the Form-master was pointing to the Hon. Aubrey's sporting paper. In the flurry Montie had quite forgotten to throw the hateful thing away.

"Begad!" he gasped. "It's—it's nothin', sir! That is to say, it ain't mine, sir. Oh, dear! I'm gettin' into a shockin' mess—I am, really!"

"I am not surprised, Tregellis-West," said Mr. Crowell tartly. "Hand me that paper!"

"But, really, sir——"

"Hand me that paper!"

Sir Montie passed it over resignedly. The master merely glanced at it, and then stuffed it into his pocket. He was now looking very grim indeed.

"Where were you this afternoon, West?" he asked.

"Why, I went to Bannin'ton, sir—that is to say, I started goin'," replied Sir Montie. "But I—er—met with a shockin' mishap, sir, an' couldn't get to Bannin'ton after all——"

"That will do, Tregellis-West! Come with me!"

Sir Montie stared.

"Begad! Where to, sir?" he asked.

"I intend to take you to the Headmaster's study."

"Oh, my goodness!" gasped Sir Montie.

"What for, sir?"

"I think you understand well enough, Tregellis-West," replied Mr. Crowell grimly. "I am more pained than I can say that I should be compelled to take you into the presence of the Headmaster. I had always regarded you as a boy of irreproachable character. But after what I saw this afternoon——"

"Begad, what did you see, sir?" gasped Tregellis-West faintly.

Just for a moment he suspected that Mr. Crowell had seen him with the Honourables, and had assumed that he had been taking part in the game. But that wasn't a feasible suspicion at all—Mr. Crowell couldn't possibly think such a thing.

"I shall tell the Headmaster what I saw, Tregellis-West," said Mr. Crowell sternly. "And you have not improved matters by fabrication!"

"Fab—fabrication, sir!" panted the elegant junior.

"We will not continue this discussion on the stairs," went on the master. "Come with me, Tregellis-West."

"Begad! But I—really, you know——"

"Silence, you wretched boy!"

Sir Montie followed Mr. Crowell in a dreamy kind of fashion. He couldn't quite get the hang of things yet. However, by the time the Headmaster's study was reached Tregellis-West was completely composed and serene.

Being perfectly innocent of any wrongdoing, he felt quite comfortable. There was some misunderstanding, of course. Mr. Crowell wasn't a harsh man by any means, and his present tone pained Sir Montie more than he could say. The Form-master had never spoken to him in such a way before.

The Headmaster was alone in his study when the pair arrived, and he adjusted his glasses inquiringly as he sat back in his chair.

A somewhat concerned expression had appeared upon his kindly old face.

"Dear me! I trust you have not brought this boy to me for punishment, Mr. Crowell?" he asked. "Tregellis-West has always been a model of good conduct."

"I am very sorry, sir, but I am afraid that Tregellis-West is deserving of not merely ordinary punishment, but a public flogging——"

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie, in consternation.

The Head frowned with perplexity.

"Please explain, Mr. Crowell," he said quietly.

The Form-master placed before the Head's startled gaze a newspaper, the character of which could not be ignored.

"That disgusting journal was protruding from one of Tregellis-West's pockets, sir," said the Form-master grimly. "I cannot imagine what has come over the boy. He even had the audacity to walk about the House with that paper exposed to view."

"Upon my soul!" ejaculated Dr. Stafford.

Sir Montie smiled.

"If you will permit me to explain, sir——"

"You will have a chance of defending yourself later on, Tregellis-West," interrupted the Head kindly. "I must hear what Mr. Crowell has to say at once. If you are innocent of any wrong-doing, you may be sure that you will receive no punishment."

"That's splendidly comfortin', sir," beamed Sir Montie.

"It would be comforting to me, too, if I could only believe that Tregellis-West is as guiltless as he appears to be," said Mr. Crowell, with a slight frown of perplexity. "But, really, sir, the facts are so glaringly significant—so absolutely obvious—that I can do nothing but accuse the boy of a disgraceful breach of school rules."

"What has he done, Mr. Crowell?" asked the Head gently.

"As you know, sir, I visited Bannington this afternoon," said Mr. Crowell. "Whilst there I had occasion to make use of the motor-bus which runs through the town. This afternoon a race-meeting was being held just beyond the town—on the Bannington racecourse."

"Well?" queried the Head.

"While the 'bus was passing the race-course enclosure I distinctly saw the cap of a St. Frank's junior schoolboy among the crowd," continued Mr. Crowell grimly. "He apparently saw me also, for he lost no time in making himself scarce."

"And you recognised Tregellis-West?" asked the Head sternly.

"Begad! Surely not, sir?" muttered Sir Montie.

"No, I cannot positively say that I recognised the boy," replied Mr. Crowell slowly. "It would not be fair on my part to say that I did. At the same time, I have every reason to believe that this lad is the culprit."

"But how can you be so confident?" asked the Head. "You have admitted yourself

Mr. Crowell, that you did not recognise the boy."

"I did not catch a fair sight of his face," said Mr. Crowell. "The sun was slightly in my eyes, and I could not swear to the boy's features. Even at the time, however, I thought of Tregellis-West, but dismissed him from my mind. The boy I saw was wearing a fancy vest of a decidedly distinctive pattern," went on the Form-master quietly. "The main colour seemed to be brown, whilst blue stripes, of a fairly wide design, were most noticeable of all."

"Oh, Jupiter!" murmured Sir Montie in dismay.

The Headmaster's gaze was fixed upon the junior's striped waistcoat. He could not fail to observe that it corresponded exactly to Mr. Crowell's description. It seemed hardly likely that another boy would be wearing a fancy vest of exactly the same pattern.

And while the Head was thinking thus, Sir Montie himself had other thoughts. He was well aware of the fact that Mr. Crowell hadn't seen him on the Bannington race-course—for the simple reason that he hadn't been there.

Mr. Crowell, therefore, had seen somebody else. Who? A junior belonging to the Ancient House Remove—and there was only one boy who could possibly fit in with the circumstances.

"De Valerie!" Montie told himself quietly. "Begad, this is what comes of wearin' waistcoats with the same kind of stripe. The awful rotter—attendin' a race-meetin'! But there's nothin' to worry about."

Tregellis-West had suddenly remembered that he had a perfect alibi—his innocence could be proved at any moment he liked. Of course it was impossible for him to sneak—to inform against De Valerie. If the Rotter escaped punishment, he would be lucky; but Sir Montie would have no hand in his downfall.

"You imply, of course, that the boy you saw was Tregellis-West?" asked the Headmaster slowly, raising his gaze to Mr. Crowell's face. "This waistcoat tallies almost exactly with your description, Mr. Crowell."

"Was I not right in bringing the boy here, sir?" asked the Form-master. "I met him upon the stairs, and almost the first thing I saw was that racing paper protruding from one of his pockets!"

"Most significant—most significant!" declared the Head grimly.

Sir Montie grinned.

"Begad! If I'd attended that race-meetin', sir," he inquired blandly, "do you suppose I should have come back with sportin' papers stickin' out of my pocket?"

"H'm! Rather a pertinent question, certainly," exclaimed the Head, stroking his chin. "I do not accuse you, Tregellis-West—neither does Mr. Crowell. He has simply brought you to me that this matter may be cleared up. Personally, I believe there is some misunderstanding."

"I hope so, sir—I sincerely hope so!" said Mr. Crowell.

"It's a frightful misunderstandin', sir," said Sir Montie calmly. "It couldn't have been this waistcoat you saw at Bannin'ton, because I haven't been to the town all this week."

"Indeed?" said the Form-master coldly. "Didn't you tell me, some little time ago, that you went to Bannington?"

"No, sir," was Montie's firm reply. "If you'll remember, sir, I said that I started on the trip, but met with a shockin' mishap. I'd rather not explain exactly what happened—"

"I fail to understand you, Tregellis-West," put in the Head.

"Begad! It's rather difficult," complained Sir Montie. "I met three of the River House fellows, you know, an' there was quite an argument for a while. Nothin' much, of course, but I—ahem!—I decided to stay behind with the chaps, an' didn't go to Bannin'ton at all."

The Head raised his eyebrows.

"How long were you with these boys?" he asked.

"From about half-past two until half-past four—two hours, sir, at least."

"Are you telling the truth, Tregellis-West?" demanded Mr. Crowell sharply. "The hour was soon after three when I saw you—or somebody remarkably like you—on the Bannington racecourse."

"I was with the River House chaps then, sir, miles from Bannin'ton."

"Then there is no need for us to pursue this inquiry—so far as you are concerned," smiled the Headmaster. "You could scarcely be in two places at once, eh, Tregellis-West? I think we'd better let—"

"Please do not be hasty, Dr. Stafford," put in Mr. Crowell quickly. "Are you suggesting that we should take Tregellis-West's bare word?"

"Certainly. I believe him to be a truthful boy."

"Thank you, sir," said Montie quietly.

Mr. Crowell coughed.

"I am afraid my attitude will give you the impression that I am unduly harsh," he said. "But, really, I find it very hard to believe Tregellis-West's statement—although, to be just, I must say that I have always found him to be veracious and honourable. I would swear to that waistcoat, however—and the sporting paper! Honestly, I am unable to decide. You will notice, sir, that Tregellis-West's alibi lies upon the evidence of three boys belonging to another school."

"Quite so," said the Head. "You would have no objection to a detailed inquiry, would you, Tregellis-West?"

Sir Montie hesitated.

"No, I—I suppose not," he said uncomfortably.

"Dear me! Your manner is somewhat strange!" exclaimed Dr. Stafford, with sudden acidity. "You suppose not, my boy? What do you mean by that?"

"Well, I don't want to get the chaps into trouble—"

"Who were they—their names?" cut in Mr. Crowell.

"They were River House School fellows, sir."

"Yes, yes—but their names?"

"Wellborne was one," replied Sir Montie, gazing thoughtfully at the ceiling. "Wellborne and two other frightful rotters—ahem! I mean chaps, sir. Coates and Carstairs, I believe."

"Then it would be as well to settle this affair straight away," said the Head, reaching for the telephone. "It will be far more satisfactory, both for the boy himself and for us, to obtain the evidence of the River House boys. There can then be no dispute whatever."

Sir Montie felt rather insignificant. His word was not sufficient. The Head and Mr. Crowell needed the evidence of others. But, upon due consideration, Sir Montie understood the position. Mr. Crowell had seen a boy on the racecourse, and Montie was wearing a waistcoat almost exactly the same—and he had been found, later, carrying a sporting paper about with him.

A boy who would attend a horse-race would probably possess no qualms about the gentle art of lying. It was almost unthinkable to imagine that Tregellis-West had taken the wrong road; but it was as well to be on the safe side.

Within five minutes Dr. Stafford had finished his telephoning. He had spoken with Mr. Hogge himself, and the latter gentleman had promised to send the three boys up to Mr. Frank's, in the charge of an under-master, without delay.

"This is far the best course to pursue," said the Head, as he drummed lightly upon the desk with his fingers. "It is hateful to doubt your word, Tregellis-West, but it is essential that the matter should be sifted to the bottom."

"Yes, sir. I—I suppose so," murmured Sir Montie.

The unfortunate Removito was feeling inwardly alarmed. Wellborne and Co., of course, would clear him at once; but they would naturally assume that Montie had deliberately sneaked. And the very thought of being stigmatised as a sneak caused Sir Montie to shiver.

His very obvious perturbation was not noticed by the Head and Mr. Crowell; they could see that Tregellis-West was labouring under some distress. And it was only natural that they should put a wrong construction upon his attitude—especially in the light of the events which immediately followed.

The wait was a short one, for presently Tabba, the page-boy, announced the arrival of "Mr. Wragg and three young gents from the River 'Ouse, sir."

The visitors were at once brought in.

Mr. Wragg was looking almost defiant. He was a mean, lording master, who winked at the misdeeds of Wellborne and Co. And now, believing that his three favourites were to be hauled over the coals for something, he was prepared to be as nasty as possible—as the occasion demanded.

"Ah, Mr. Wragg, I am glad you have brought the boys over," said the Head, rising to his feet. "There are just one or two questions I wish to put to them. I don't think it will be necessary to detain you long."

The Hon. Aubrey and his two precious chums were quaking in their shoes. The looks they cast at Sir Montie were killing, and it was quite evident that they were prepared for the worst. They believed that Montie had sneaked.

"Now, boys," said the Head slowly. "Tell me your names."

The three juniors answered sullenly.

"They are the names you mentioned, I believe, Tregellis-West?"

"Yes, sir," said Sir Montie huskily. "These are the chaps."

"Quite so—quite so," said the Head. "Now, Wellborne, please consider yourself spokesman. Were you, and these other two boys, with Tregellis-West between the hours of two-thirty and four-thirty this afternoon? Much depends upon your answer, my boy. Was Tregellis-West with you or not?"

The Hon. Aubrey grinned slightly.

"Tregellis-West ain't a friend of ours, sir," he said coolly. "As a matter of fact, we generally cut him dead—don't we, dear boys?"

"Oh, rather!" declared Carstairs and Coates.

"Begad, you frightful——"

"Be quiet, Tregellis-West," ordered the Head. "And you have not answered my question, Wellborne. I have no wish to learn of your private differences. Was Tregellis-West with you this afternoon?"

"Why, of course not, sir!" declared the Hon. Aubrey, in a tone of mild surprise. "Who the deuce said he was?"

The Head and Mr. Crowell exchanged glances.

"What!" exclaimed the Head. "You deny having seen Tregellis-West this afternoon?"

"We haven't seen the horrid rotter for days, sir!" said Wellborne glibly.

"Not once this week!" added the Hon. Bertie, with a sniff.

"Rather not!" chimed in Coates.

There was a dead silence in the Head's study. The Hon. Aubrey de Vere Wellborne and Co. had given the lie to Sir Montie's statement!

CHAPTER IV.

SIR MONTIE'S PREDICAMENT—TO BE PUBLICLY FLOGGED—KIPPER IS DETERMINED TO GET BUSY.

SEVERAL seconds elapsed before any body spoke.

Poor Sir Montie was practically struck dumb. His coolness and serenity deserted him abruptly, leaving him with a pale face and eyes which gleamed with fury and indignation.

The lie direct!

Wellborne and Co. had denied seeing Sir Montie that day—they had all three conspired to make it appear as though Montie's own statement was a sheer fabrication. The trio of precious young rascals were thinking of their own skins—and they decided that the only safe course was to deny having seen Sir Montie.

Of course the Honourables were suffering from a delusion. They believed that Montie had informed, and that they had been brought here, to St. Frank's, so that inquiries could be made regarding their smoking and gambling.

Tregellis-West found his voice at last.

"Begad!" he panted, starting forward. "You—you horrid——"

"Silence, Tregellis-West!" snapped Mr. Crowell. "I will not have you abusing these boys in the presence of your Headmaster!"

"But they're tellin' lies, sir—whoppin', thumpin' lies!" gasped Sir Montie desperately. "I was with them this afternoon for over two hours. How they can stand there an' deny it beats me—it does, really!"

"I never set eyes on you to-day—until now!" sneered the Hon. Bertie.

The Headmaster snapped his fingers impatiently.

"Dear, dear! This is most unseemly!" he exclaimed. "Either Tregellis-West is deliberately lying, or these other boys have a reason for denying——"

"Pardon me, sir, but I can answer for the absolute veracity and honour of my boys!" put in Mr. Wragg acidly. "You will oblige me by refraining from casting any doubts upon the statements made by these three pupils."

The Head compressed his lips.

"If I think the boys are telling falsehoods, Mr. Wragg, I shall certainly say so," he exclaimed coldly. "But there could be no possible reason for them to join in a concerted lie on this occasion—so far as I can see. It is too painfully evident that Tregellis-West himself is the culprit."

"I'm not, sir!" said Sir Montie steadily. "I've told the perfect truth. It's these fearful bounders who are lyin'."

"May I inquire why my boys were wanted?" said Mr. Wragg.

"The reason was perfectly simple, Mr. Wragg," replied the Head. "This junior made a statement to the effect that he was with your lads between the hours of two-thirty and four-thirty. Mr. Crowell had a slight suspicion that the story was a made-up one in order to throw dust in our eyes. I am grieved to find that Tregellis-West descended so low——"

"Bai Jove!" murmured the Hon. Aubrey.

"What is the matter, Wellborne?"

"Oh—er—nothin', sir!" said the Hon. Aubrey—"nothin' that mattahs!"

To tell the truth, the Honourables were just beginning to realise that Sir Montie hadn't sneaked at all. Their presence at St. Frank's was merely required to clear up a doubt; there had been no mention of their own "gay" doings.

Wellborne and Co. were by no means grate-

ful to Sir Montie for having kept silent. They merely considered themselves rather lucky to get out of a scrape. And it was now too late for them to back out of their statements without proclaiming themselves to be liars of the first order.

Moreover, they were only too delighted to see Tregellis-West in dire trouble. If they could contribute to his woe, all the better. They considered that any act of despicable meanness was permissible.

"I do not think it will be necessary for me to detain you any longer, Mr. Wragg," said Dr. Stafford coldly. He didn't like the crawly under-master of the River House, and was at no pains to conceal his attitude. "Good-afternoon, sir!"

Mr. Wragg bowed stiffly.

"Come, boys," he said, waving a bony hand towards the door.

The quartette passed out. Sir Montie half started forward. It was in his mind to knock Wellborne down upon the spot. But such a proceeding would have been highly disrespectful, when accomplished in the Headmaster's study. Montie would have plenty of other chances.

The position had to be faced—and it was an ugly one.

Montie had denied being on the racecourse, and had stated in his defence that he had spent the afternoon with Wellborne and Co. Those precious youths had now made it appear as though Montie's story was an entire invention, suggested for the sole purpose of deceiving the masters. The Head assumed that Montie had not calculated upon an investigation being made.

The clue of the fancy vest, too, was well-nigh conclusive. True, Montie himself could have cast some light upon the subject, for he had seen De Valerie's waistcoat; but he breathed no word.

"Tell me, Tregellis-West," said the Head slowly, "why did you go to the races?"

"I didn't, sir," replied Sir Montie steadily. "Those chaps were lyin'; I was with them the whole afternoon, sir. They were just bubblin' with joy to see me in hot water."

"Upon my soul! Are you still daring to deny that you are guilty, Tregellis-West?" snapped Mr. Crowell. "I saw you distinctly, boy. You were talking to some disreputable bookmaker, and I even saw you pass him some money."

"Begad, it's wonderful, sir!" said Sir Montie calmly.

"Ah, you admit your guilt, then?"

"I couldn't do that, sir, because I ain't guilty," exclaimed Tregellis-West. "But it's wonderful how you could see me doin' all those things when I wasn't there! Begad, it's simply amazin'!"

"Enough of this nonsense, my boy," said the Head quietly. "I have done my best to believe in you, and I am intensely grieved to be forced to the conclusion that you are guilty. Hitherto your character in the school has been splendid in every way, and it is for that reason that I am so shocked and disgusted."

"I'm awfully sorry, sir," said Montie quietly. "I've done nothin' that I'm ashamed of, an' there's no need for you to be disgusted. I respect Mr. Crowell very highly; but, if it ain't impertinent, I should like to repeat that he has made a shockin' bloomer—ahem! I mean a frightful mistake, sir. I've told you nothin' but the truth—"

"I find it impossible to believe that statement, Tregellis-West," interrupted the Head angrily. "Bearing in mind your good character, I will allow you to remain at St. Frank's—although many boys have been expelled for a similar offence. You will be flogged in the morning, in the presence of the whole school!"

"A—a public floggin'!" gasped Sir Montie blankly. "Oh, gad!"

"And you may consider yourself very fortunate!" said Mr. Crowell grimly. "Dr. Stafford is very lenient, Tregellis-West, and you should appreciate his kindness of heart. Why cannot you own up—"

"There's nothin' to own up to, sir," interrupted Montie quickly. "Before the mornin' perhaps somethin' fresh will have come to light. Perhaps the fellow who really visited the racecourse will be discovered."

"You may go, Tregellis-West," said the Head coldly.

Montie went, and his chief feeling at the moment was one of regret that Dr. Stafford could entertain such base thoughts. Montie had always regarded the Head as a gentleman of great intelligence, kindness, and justice.

Just now, however, the swell of the Ancient House could not help a tiny feeling of bitterness entering his breast. However, Montie scarcely ever worried over anything; and even a public flogging was not appalling enough to upset his nerve.

By rare good fortune he succeeded in reaching the bath-rooms unobserved. Here he washed himself thoroughly, and then changed his collar and tie. It was quite tea time now, and practically all the juniors were in their studies.

Pushing into Study C, Montie found his two chums just sitting down to a cheerful meal. They looked up at their noble chum, and nodded.

"I should think so, too!" remarked Nipper genially. "You've been long enough, I should hope, Montie. What's become of that racing paper? Fullwood had the sauce to request the loan of it not long ago."

Sir Montie seated himself at the tea-table, and beamed.

"A rippin' spread!" he remarked. "Yes, I'll have some of that anchovy paste, Tommy boy."

"I spilt a little dry tea into it," remarked Watson, as he pushed the pot across. "Still, that'll improve the flavour a bit—if that's possible. The giddy stuff's been in the cupboard for a couple of days, and anchovies generally niff even when they're first opened."

"Dear fellow, that's the beauty of anchovy paste," smiled Sir Montie. "One little morsel

is sufficient to flavour a whole slice of bread-and-butter, begad! By the way, there's goin' to be a little excitement in the mornin'."

"Oh!" said Nipper, who was making a piece of toast. "What sort of excitement?"

"A floggin'!"

Tommy Watson paused whilst pouring out the tea.

"A flogging!" he repeated. "Phew! Who's been getting it in the neck?"

Tregellis-West sighed.

"Life's full of horrid misunderstandin's," he said resignedly. "You wouldn't believe it, old fellows, but I was makin' bets with a frightful bookie this afternoon, on Banninton racecourse!"

His two chums stared at him rather concernedly.

"Going dotty?" asked Nipper, buttering his piece of toast.

"I am merely repeatin' the assertions of our highly esteemed Form-master," said Sir Montie calmly. "Mr. Crowell saw me, so there can't be any mistake. An' the Head was lenient. Instead of sackin' me, I'm goin' to be publicly flogged—"

"You!" roared Tommy Watson, dropping the teapot in his excitement. "Do you mean to say— Yow! Ooooooh!"

"No, dear boy, I don't mean to say that!" smiled Sir Montie.

The teapot had fallen into Watson's lap, and the hot liquid had poured down the junior's leg rapidly. It was some few moments before order was restored in the study. And even then Tommy Watson persisted in declaring that he was horribly scalded.

"Blow your troubles!" snapped Nipper. "You've caused enough commotion as it is, with your fatheaded teapot! Look here, Montie," he added, turning to Tregellis-West. "If you were joking with us—"

"Dear boy, I was frightfully serious!"

"You're going to be flogged in the morning?"

Montie bit into a slice of bread-and-butter, and nodded.

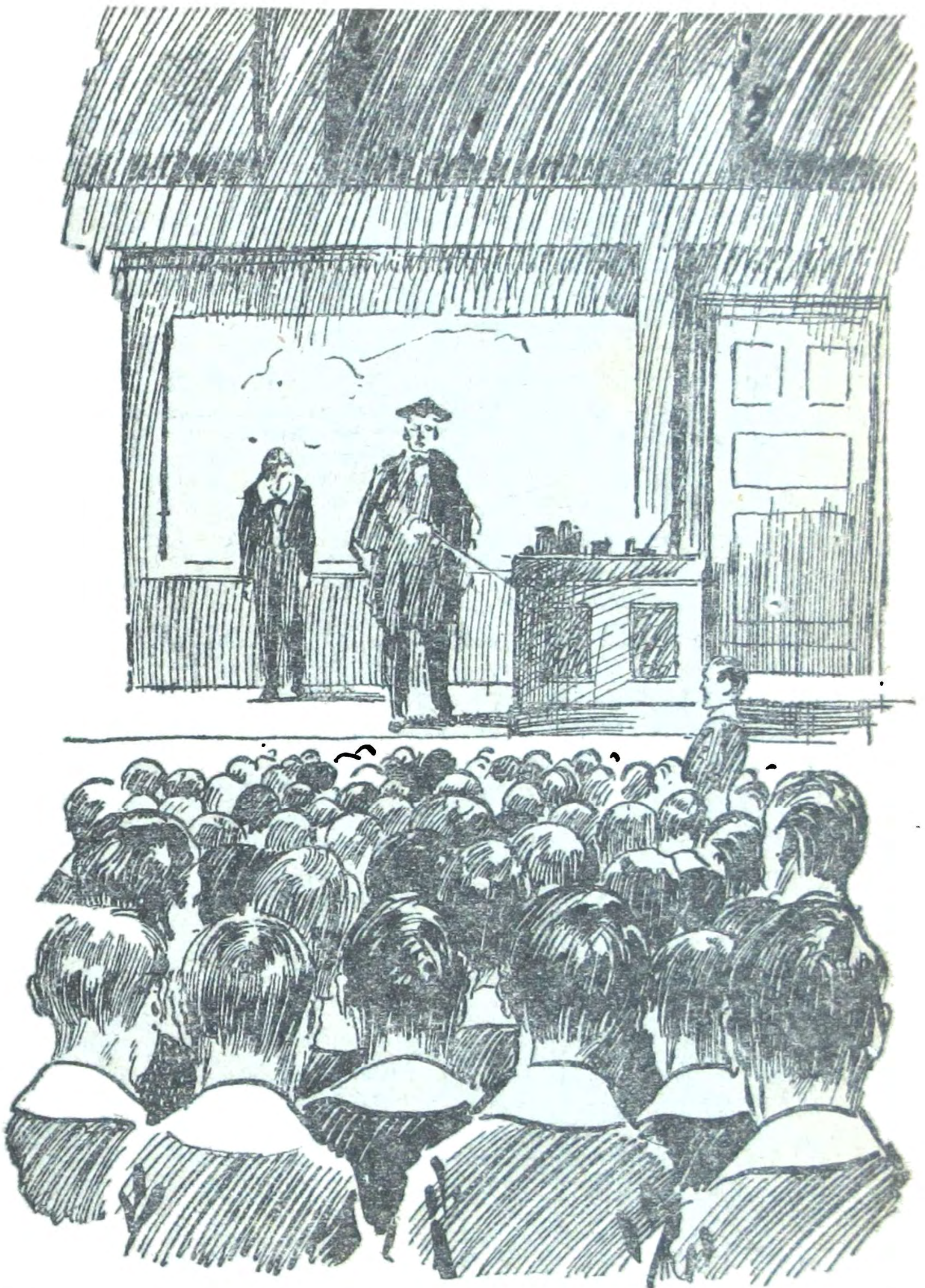
"You seem jolly calm about it!" shouted Watson, who nearly always became exasperated at his noble chum's serenity under difficult and disturbing circumstances. "I don't believe you're going to be flogged at all!"

"Let's hear the yarn, my son!" said Nipper briskly.

Sir Montie lost no time in going into full details of the affair. He explained how Mr. Crowell had taken him utterly by surprise on the stairs; how he had gone, bewildered, to the Headmaster's study; and how the River House cads had maliciously "let him down."

"Oh, the rotters—the howling bounders!" exclaimed Watson wrathfully. "And do you mean to say the Head believed 'em? I didn't think he was such a silly old duffer!"

"Pray refrain from speaking with such disrespect, Tommy boy!" exclaimed Sir Montie, in a shocked voice. "The Head isn't a duffer by any means. I can quite understand his point of view, you know. The



"I must call upon another member of the Fourth Form to stand forward," went on Dr. Stafford. "Come to the platform, De Valerie!"
(See page 21.)

case looks fearfully black against me, really——"

"Rot!" snapped Nipper. "Black he jiggered! The Head was too jolly hasty, and old Crowfeet seems to be a lot worse—a precious pair of muddlers, that's what they are! Do you think we're going to see you flogged in the morning, Montie?"

"Dear fellow, I suppose you will see it—unless you close your eyes!"

Tommy Watson snorted.

"And you sit there as cool as ice!" he growled. "I don't believe you care twopence whether you have the flogging or not!"

"Oh, I'd rather not; I care that much, old man," smiled Tregellis-West. "But what's the good of makin' a fuss? A floggin' ain't goin' to kill me, an' all the chaps will understand——"

"All the chaps won't!" declared Nipper grimly. "As soon as this yarn gets about, Montie, a certain number of fellows will make a dead-set against you—you mark my words! And the only way to act in a case like this is to put things straight."

"Find the real culprit, you mean?"

"Of course."

Nipper looked at his two chums squarely.

"The culprit won't need much finding, either," he went on. "I'll bet a penny to a pound that it was De Valerie."

Sir Montie nodded.

"That's what I was thinkin'," he said calmly.

"Oh!"

"Of course, old boy. Wasn't De Valerie wearin' a fancy vest that looked like mine? Hasn't he attended race-meetings before? It's only necessary to put two an' two together, begad!"

"You may look a languid sort of ass, but there's sense in that giddy brain-box of yours," said Nipper approvingly. "Of course it was De Valerie. An' there's another thing—a jolly significant matter, too. I spotted De Valerie just before tea; and he wasn't wearing that striped waistcoat then."

"Perhaps he'll be decent," remarked Watson thoughtfully. "I don't suppose he knows anything about the flogging yet, but when he learns of it it'll be up to him to confess. De Valerie's a queer bird, though, and there's no telling what he'll do."

His chums nodded. Cecil De Valerie, of the Remove, was certainly very queer in his habits. Since his arrival at St. Frank's he had performed some very despicable actions—he had proved himself to be a thorough rotter. At other times a different spirit had been manifested in him; he had shown Nipper that he possessed quite a considerable amount of decency.

"I'm not sure of him, exactly," said Nipper. "The worst of it is we haven't got any real proof. If he doesn't confess, poor old Montie may get it in the neck, in spite of everything."

Nipper jumped to his feet.

"I'm going along to Study M, anyhow," he went on. "I'll tax De Valerie with the subject, and see what he's got to say. Don't

you worry yourself, Montie. Leave everything to your kind uncle."

Tregellis-West yawned.

"Dear fellow, there's nothin' to worry over," he said lazily. "And I shouldn't bother about interviewin' De Valerie—I shouldn't, really. He'll only tell you some frightful whoppers——"

"Rats!" interjected Nipper. "I'm going to investigate this case."

And he opened the door and passed out into the passage. Nipper knew quite well that Montie was ready to stand the racket, if necessary; but it was only right and just that Cecil de Valerie should reap the reward of his sins.

CHAPTER V.

FULLWOOD'S LITTLE GAME—NIPPER GETS AN IDEA—THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER AGAIN.

STUDY M, in the Remove passage, was locked when Nipper arrived. Other study doors stood half-open, pointing to the fact that most of the fellows had finished tea, and had passed along to the common-room, or other places where juniors generally congregated.

Nipper had no positive evidence that De Valerie was guilty, but he had very strong suspicions. And he meant to put the matter to the test without delay. He found the Rotter lounging before one of the windows in the common-room. Quite a number of fellows were outside, for the evening was fine and mild.

"Just a word, De Valerie."

The Rotter turned.

"Hallo! What do you want, Bennett?" he asked, eyeing Nipper languidly. "You're lookin' surriskyly grim over something or other."

"Do you know what's happened to Tregellis-West?" said Nipper quietly.

"I'm afraid I'm shockin'ly ignorant of his fate——"

"It's all very well to bluff like this, De Valerie," interjected Nipper. "Even if you didn't know for certain, you must have suspected. Sir Montie has been hauled before the Head on a charge of attending a race-meeting at Bannington this afternoon."

"Poor chap! That's awkward, ain't it?"

"Mr. Crowell recognised him; or rather, he recognised a fancy waistcoat which Montie was wearing," added Nipper grimly. "You know as well as I do that Tregellis-West was mauled about by those River House cads. But when old Wragg brought them up here they lied like Cabinet Ministers, especially to get poor Montie into trouble. He's booked for a flogging in the morning."

De Valerie yawned.

"He has my sympathy, I'm sure," he remarked carelessly. "It'll be rather painful, probably. What are you starin' at?"

"I'm staring at a chap who isn't really a cad, although he acts like one sometimes,"

replied Nipper steadily. "You know as well as I do, De Valerie, that Montie wasn't on the Bannington racecourse. And you know as well as I do who was."

"Do I? Who was it?"

"You were there yourself, you rotter!" declared Nipper hotly.

"That's very interestin'."

"It was you whom Mr. Crowell saw——"

"One moment," interjected De Valerie easily. "How are you going to prove all this?"

Nipper breathed hard.

"You admit that——"

"I don't admit anythin' at all," replied De Valerie. "An' yea'll oblige me, Bennett, by attendin' to your own business an' not to mine. I hate bein' rude, but it's necessary to speak out now an' again."

And the Rotter strolled across the common-room with his hands in his pockets. Nipper didn't follow him; he knew well enough that further argument would have been useless.

But he was extremely determined upon one point. De Valerie was the culprit, and De Valerie should receive the punishment. Clearly, the Rotter was living up to his nickname again. He calmly intended to let Sir Montie take the blame and the punishment for his own misdeed.

It was a cad's trick—a mean advantage to take of the situation. But one was never sure of De Valerie. He performed the most surprising actions almost every week. The fellows had ceased to wonder at the Rotter's vagaries.

Nipper was aware of one thing. If De Valerie kept silent, nothing could save Montie from the flogging in the morning. Even if Nipper told the Head all he knew it would be really useless. For there was no positive evidence which pointed to De Valerie as the culprit.

Suspensions were useless, and Nipper decided to obtain positive evidence without delay. An idea had already occurred to him, and he hurried away to Study C with the object of telling his chums of his decision.

Turning into the Remove passage, however, he received a surprise.

The wide corridor, in the vicinity of Study C, was packed and crowded with juniors. Jeering voices were plainly heard, and Nipper caught his breath in sharply. What could be the meaning of this demonstration?

He strode nearer and pushed his way through the juniors. The study itself was crowded, and Sir Montie, with a face which expressed complete serenity, stood gazing at Fullwood and Co.

"My only hat!" shouted Nipper furiously. "Who the dickens told you to crowd into this study, you cads? Clear out Fullwood—buzz off, you rotters! What do you think you're trying to do, anyhow?"

Fullwood stared at Nipper insolently.

"Nobody asked you to come buttin' in!" he sneered.

"I don't need permission to enter my own

study!" snapped Nipper hotly. "You do, Fullwood, and I'll bet you never got permission to crowd in here. What's all this excitement about, Tommy?"

"Why, about Montie," snorted Tommy Watson. "The silly ass went and told some chaps all about that flogging affair, and it's all over the House by this time. These beasts crowded in before we could stop 'em!"

"Who'll help me to chuck 'em out?" asked Nipper, looking round.

"Hold on!" bawled Handforth, pushing his way forward. "If there's anything in what we hear, Tregellis-West jolly well deserves a ragging. Attending race-meetings, by George! But I don't believe it!"

"Thanks awfully, Handy, old man!" murmured Sir Montie. "It's simply rippin' to know that the terrific weight of your opinion is on my side. Knowin' that, I feel that I can face the world bravely."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth nodded.

"Nothing to laugh at, that I can see," he said, looking round with a frown. "Of course I stick up for Montie. There's a fist here for anybody who says that Tregellis-West really attended that race."

Nipper pushed his way forward impatiently.

"I dare say you mean well, Handy," he exclaimed, "but turn off the tap, for goodness' sake! I can't understand what you're all jawing about. Who started the affair—that's what I want to know."

"I led the chaps here," said Ralph Leslie Fullwood calmly.

"Oh, did you?" said Nipper. "What for?"

"Well, chiefly to let them see the biggest hypocrite at St. Frank's!" sneered Fullwood.

"That's what you came for?" asked Nipper.

"Yes."

"To let the chaps see the biggest hypocrite at St. Frank's?" went on Nipper. "My dear chap, there was no need for you to go to all that trouble. We all know you're a hypocrite—nothing new in that. It's far-famed——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And I'm blessed if I can understand why you led them here," went on Nipper, in a puzzled kind of way. "There's far more room out in the Triangle——"

"You—you idiot!" snapped Fullwood, turning red. "You know jolly well that I was referrin' to Tregellis-West. Ain't he goin' to receive a floggin' in the mornin'?"

"Not that I know of!" retorted Nipper grimly. "Somebody will, I expect; but not Montie. There's been a silly mistake."

"Very nice, ain't it?" jeered Gulliver. "It's likely the Head would make a mistake of that sort, I don't think. A two-faced hypocrite, that's what Tregellis-West is! Pretends to be horrified at the thought of smokin' an' horse-racin' an' he's spotted on a giddy racecourse himself."

"The crawlin' worm!" jeered Fullwood.

Sir Montie adjusted his pince-nez calmly.

"I suppose all these remarks are addressed to me?" he asked. "I don't take any notice of what Fullwood says, an' he'll get punished for it, anyhow. But what about you other chaps? Are you all against me?"

"Rather not!"

"Good old Montie!"

There was a perfect chorus of approval, and Sir Montie beamed. Fullwood and Co., having failed in their efforts to stir up an agitation, felt that their position was somewhat precarious.

"Well, we'll be goin'," said Gulliver, with a yawn.

"Might as well," agreed Fullwood carelessly.

"Just a minute, dear fellow," said Sir Montie, reaching out and grasping Fullwood's shoulder. "You owe me an apology, I believe?"

"Oh, do I?"

"You called me a crawlin' worm——"

"That's what you are, ain't you?" said Fullwood calmly. "A measly cad who pretends to be a saint, and who gambles an' bets an' smokes——" Fullwood paused abruptly. "Hi! What the—— Yow!"

Smack!

Sir Montie's fist shot out in a leisurely fashion; at least, it seemed as though Tregellis-West was in no particular hurry. But his knuckles lost no time in reaching Fullwood's nose. And the leader of the Nuts staggered back with a roar.

But once Montie had started, he saw no reason why he shouldn't continue. Punching noses was not so very difficult, after all. Tregellis-West's arms shot in and out like energetic pistons. Gulliver and Bell and Merrell each felt the weight of those elegant fists.

"Oh, by gad!"

"Hold him, somebody!"

"Yaroooooh!"

Fullwood and Co. were frantic in their attempts to vacate Study C. If they had possessed an ounce of pluck they would have stood up to Montie boldly; but Tregellis-West's abrupt activity had taken them by surprise.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Serve you jolly well right, Fullwood!" roared Handforth.

"Yes, rather!"

"There's nothing wrong with old Tregellis-West."

"It's only a few cads who believe that yarn about Bannington!" exclaimed Nipper wrathfully. "Practically every chap here knows as well as I do that Montie was kept the whole afternoon by those beastly Hogs. I suppose Fullwood tries to make out that Montie tied himself to that jigger—just for fun!" added Nipper, with biting sarcasm. "The fact is, there's been a bloomer made——"

"Dear fellow, it ain't worth discussin'," protested Sir Montie, adjusting his glasses. "Mr. Crowell made a mistake, an' there's

nothin' more to be said. He mistook some other chap for me, an' I'm goin' to get it in the neck. Dear boys, it won't kill me, an' if I ain't grumblin', why should you?"

"You always were a philosophic sort of idiot, Montie!" exclaimed Handforth. "But that sort of thing won't do. Whom did Mr. Crowell see, if it wasn't you?"

"Why, somebody else, of course, old boy."

"You—you ass! Of course it was somebody else——"

"Handy, old man, there's no need for you to butt in just now," interrupted Nipper smoothly. "The flogging isn't coming off until the morning anyhow—and quite a lot may happen before then."

It was some little time before Handforth could be made to understand that his absence was more desirable than his presence. He was finally hauled away by Church and McClure and one or two other fellows. And Study C, being quiet once more, resumed its normal aspect. All the visitors had departed, and the rightful owners were in sole occupation.

"Well, Fullwood's little game failed, didn't it?" remarked Watson comfortably.

"What little game was that, dear boy?"

"My dear ass, Fullwood and his nobby pals were trying to get up a huge demonstration against us—and if they'd succeeded you would have been ragged unmercifully. So you ought to consider yourself lucky."

"Oh, I'm lucky—frightfully lucky," agreed Sir Montie. "It'll be rippin' in the mornin'—being flogged, I mean!"

"You won't be flogged, Montie," exclaimed Nipper briskly. "It was De Valerie who visited that racecourse. I taxed him with it, and asked him if he was going to own up. He calmly told me to mind my own business."

"Just what the Rotter would do," grunted Watson.

"He thinks he's safe," went on Nipper, with a determined shake of his head. "He thinks that he's only got to keep quiet and he'll escape punishment. The awful cad! He's going to let Montie take a flogging for something he didn't do. I didn't think De Valerie was such an outsider."

"Well, what's to be done?" asked Watson.

"We've got to get proof—evidence," replied Nipper. "If we can only find out for certain that De Valerie was in Bannington this afternoon we shall be on the right track. And don't forget that fancy waistcoat! De Valerie was wearing it when he left the school, but not when he returned. He'd changed it—why? Simply because he had spotted old Crowell. It isn't likely that the Rotter carries another waistcoat about with him, is it?"

"Hardly, dear boy."

"Well, then, our job is to make inquiries at the outfitters' shops in Bannington," said Nipper shrewdly. "And, what's more, we're going to start off at once. We're going to make some investigations."

"Good! Any old thing you like, old man," drawled Montie.

He was quite ready for the adventure,

although he appeared to be as languid as ever. Montie, after all, was not particularly anxious to receive a thrashing in the morning. It would be far more comforting if the real culprit received his due. And there was practically no doubt at all regarding De Valerie's guilt. The Rotter's offence was greatly intensified by the fact that he was content to allow another to be punished for it.

Before starting out Nipper dodged along to Nelson Lee's study. But "Mr. Alvington"—to give the great detective his school name—was not at home. His study door was locked.

"I was only going to ask him if there was anything to be bought in Bannington," remarked Nipper, as he and his chums went away. "Never mind."

They went out to the bicycle shed and got their machines ready. Just as they were starting, however, Nipper saw a somewhat bent form moving near the ruins of the old monastery. The dusk was growing deep, and there were not many fellows in the Triangle. Nipper paused and stared.

The figure was that of an elderly man, with a swarthy face and a straggly grey beard—the mysterious stranger who had appeared in the Ancient House in the early afternoon. Who on earth was he?

"I don't quite like that chap dodging about," said Nipper critically. "He's got no right to roam over the school in this way."

"Oh, rats to him!" said Watson. "He's some relative of one of the masters, I suppose. No need for us to interfere. Besides, we shall be late for the shops unless we start off at once."

"Oh, all right," said Nipper, accepting the good advice.

They started off to Bannington without delay, and their trip was uneventful in every way. By the time they reached the old town darkness had completely descended, and subdued lights were gleaming in the various shops.

"Now what do we do?" asked Watson, as they dismounted.

Nipper soon showed him. He strode straight into a big outfitters' establishment and made inquiries concerning De Valerie. After a few moments he was satisfied that the Rotter had not paid the shop a visit.

"Drawn blank," he remarked to his chums, as they strode out. "Better luck in the next shop, perhaps."

But the proprietor of the next shop professed complete ignorance of Cecil de Valerie, and went so far as to add that he had no fancy waistcoats in stock. That statement clinched matters.

"Never say die," observed Nipper cheerfully.

He led the way across the High Street to another big establishment. It was on the point of closing, and Nipper dodged in while Sir Montie and Tommy looked after the bicycles. The pair decided to wait outside.

"Another frost, of course," growled Watson. "Potty idea, I call it."

Three minutes later Nipper emerged—beaming.

"Victory, my bonny boys!" he exclaimed joyfully. "Our giddy investigation has provided the necessary proof that De Valerie is the horrid culprit, and that the noble Sir Galahad Montgomery is innocent of ye awful crime."

"Pray don't be ridie——"

"Have you discovered anything, then?" asked Watson quickly.

"All that's necessary," replied Nipper. "A St. Frank's chap went into this shop this afternoon and bought a fancy vest—and was most particular that it should be a check and not a stripe. He put it on in the shop, and had the ~~one~~ he had been wearing wrapped up."

"Was the chap De Valerie?"

"Of course he was, you ass!" said Nipper genially. "The shopman remembered him well—a slim, elegant boy, wearing the Ancient House colours. Rather foreign-looking, with dark eyes and black hair. Fits De Valerie all over."

The juniors were very pleased. For this evidence was conclusive. The Head, in the face of such information, would never flog Sir Montie without having made a searching inquiry—and such an inquiry would mean the exposure of De Valerie.

Nipper didn't think it would come to that. It was his intention to face the Rotter boldly and force him to confess. De Valerie apparently did not possess enough decency to own up voluntarily.

"Home now," said Nipper briskly, "as fast as we can pedal!"

"I shall decline to scorch, dear fellow—Oh, begad, look there!"

Sir Montie stood stock still and stared down the High Street. Nipper and Watson, surprised by their chum's tone, looked too.

"What's the matter, fathead?" asked Tommy Watson curiously. "I can't see—Why—Great Scott! That—that old josser!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!" muttered Nipper, in a tense whisper.

For, walking steadily along the opposite pavement, a familiar figure was visible. The mysterious stranger! The curious man, with the swarthy face, who had been twice seen by Nipper and Co. at St. Frank's.

Who could he be?

"There's something queer about the chap," said Nipper grimly. "Look here, my sons! You take charge of my bike for a little while. I'm going to follow this rummy merchant!"

"Shadow him?" breathed Tommy Watson.

"That's the idea—a little bit of detective work," nodded Nipper. "I don't suppose he's anybody in particular, but his movements seem rather fishy, to my mind."

"Dear boy, but what about us?"

"You'd better follow on behind—just keep me in sight," replied Nipper, as he started off across the road.

He couldn't quite satisfy himself as to why he was venturing upon this little expedition.

It was probably mere curiosity and detective instinct. The bent old man had acted very queerly, and Nipper was quite keen to follow his movements more closely.

The man had been at St. Frank's at the time of Nipper and Co.'s departure—and they had cycled quickly. How had the stranger arrived in Bannington so soon afterwards? Possibly the thing could be very simply explained; but Nipper was keen.

He shadowed the bent figure without difficulty, and noticed that his two chums kept well in the rear with the bicycles. The vicinity of the High Street was left behind, and a quiet road, leading to the open country, was entered upon.

Big houses, each set in its own garden, bordered the pavements—for this was the select residential quarter of Bannington. Nipper's quarry turned down a small side lane—probably a mere alley—and Nipper quickened his pace.

He turned the corner sharply, judging that the bent man was already some little way ahead.

Crash!

"Why, what— Oh, corks!" gasped Nipper.

He stared up at the swarthy-faced stranger in utter consternation. The man had been standing there—just round the corner—waiting for his shadower! Nipper, well accustomed to this work as he was, stared in complete bewilderment.

"Well, boy?" demanded a harsh voice in level tones.

"I—I was just walking——"

Nipper paused, realising the utter futility of attempting any explanation.

"Why are you following me?" asked the old man angrily.

Nipper was helpless. The mysterious stranger's eyes glittered, and his whole bearing told of his fury. How had he known of Nipper's attentions? The lad was a past-master at the difficult art of shadowing, and yet this queer old man had been aware of the fact from the start!

"Why—why was I following you?" repeated Nipper confusedly. "Oh, I—I— Here, I say! What the dickens——"

Without the slightest warning the stranger's hands shot forward. Nipper found himself grasped in an iron grip. He was picked up like a feather; his struggles were futile.

And then, kicking and wriggling, Nipper was hoisted to the top of the fairly high wall. His head and shoulders went over—and a push sent him flying into the unknown darkness beyond.

"Oh, Jupiter!" gasped Nipper.

He had landed in tall grass, and wasn't hurt in the least. Scrambling up hastily, he flew at the wall, grasped the top, and hauled himself over. But the lane was quite empty and deserted.

The mysterious stranger had completely vanished!

CHAPTER VI.

(Set down by Nipper.)

IN WHICH THERE IS MORE MYSTERY—DE VALERIE MAKES ME FURIOUS.

YOU will notice, to begin with, that I am now telling the yarn personally. I must do a bit of work for my living occasionally, you know.

Well, to begin in the correct style, I am discovered in the dark side lane at Bannington—sadly bewildered, I'll admit, but indignant as well. I had been handled in the most undignified fashion.

Pitched over a wall! Slung into somebody's garden like a sack of rubbish! And by whom? Who was the unmentionable scoundrel who had committed the frightful outrage? Who was this queer old man, with the fierce eyes and the swarthy complexion? I was not only puzzled, but positively enraged.

I felt diddled, so to speak. My little game had been spotted—and I had been summarily dealt with. And while I was standing in the lane, trying to collect my wits, Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson arrived.

"What's the fatheaded game?" asked Watson sarcastically. "Are you going to keep us hanging about all night? Where's the old man? What have——"

"Oh, dry up!" I growled. "He twigged the little game."

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "Did he really, old boy?"

"Turned on me, and pitched me over this rotten wall," I went on furiously.

Tommy Watson grinned audibly.

"Anything to cackle at?" I snapped, glaring.

"I thought you were a giddy detective?" said Watson pleasantly. "I thought the assistant of Mr. Nelson Lee was a marvellous shadower——"

"I don't know about that," I interrupted darkly; "but he's handy with his fists!"

Watson wisely decided to chip me no further. I don't think he feared my fists; but he wasn't anxious for a dust-up in the street. And the three of us mounted our bicycles and pedalled for St. Frank's.

On the way home I recovered my temper, and told my chums all about the little incident at the corner of the lane. They were interested, and our perplexity was mutual. Who on earth was the quaint old fellow?

By good luck we managed to arrive at the school just before locking up. Having put our bicycles away, we strode towards the Ancient House. It was my intention to interview Master De Valerie without delay. I looked forward to that interview with great satisfaction. De Valerie was done—he would have to cave in.

And then we received a shock.

Just as we were about to enter the House I spotted a figure over by the gymnasium. It seemed familiar, somehow. I caught my breath in, and paused. The next second all doubt was dispelled.

There, walking towards the College House, was the mysterious stranger!

"Great Scott!" I gasped in amazement.

My chums had seen him, too. The thing was becoming a positive nightmare. We had seen the man before starting for Bannington; we had seen him in the town itself; and now he was back again at the school!

There was no question about it. The bent figure was unmistakable. It was simply astounding, and I clenched my fists with determination.

"Come on, my sons!" I muttered fiercely.

We simply pelted across the Triangle. But when we arrived at the College House the old man had disappeared into the gloom. I came to a halt, panting. Over by the fountain I fancied I saw a movement.

"Begad! It's fairly amazin'—"

I didn't wait to hear the rest of Montie's remark. The fountain was reached, but it was deserted. And all was silent in the Triangle. The queer stranger had done the trick again—he had eluded us. It was the most exasperating affair I had experienced for weeks and months.

I just boiled with helplessness and irritation.

"Confound it!" I exclaimed. "Hang it! Bust it! Blow——"

"Steady, dear fellow," remonstrated Tregellis-West. "You'll be sayin' somethin' strong if you let yourself go——"

"Where's that old man?" I demanded fiercely.

"Dear Benny, I haven't got him in my pocket, you know."

"He's like a ghost—a will-o'-the-wisp!" I went on. "And he can't be a visitor at the school. Visitors don't slink about—— Look here, I'm going to speak to the guv'nor about it!"

"Oh, don't bother Old Alvy," said Watson. "He wouldn't understand. Besides, he's out, isn't he?"

"I'm going to his study, anyhow," I declared.

And, having hung my coat and cap in the cloakroom, I hurried along the passage to Nelson Lee's study. Sir Montie and Tommy went to Study C for prep.; they were not so interested in the matter.

I tapped on the door and entered. Nelson Lee was standing on the hearthrug, lighting a cigarette. He smiled as I entered, and threw aside the paper he had been reading.

"You are looking excited, Nipper," he observed amusedly. "Anything wrong?"

"Not exactly wrong, sir," I replied; and without delay I told him of the strange old man who had been practically haunting me all day.

Nelson Lee listened carefully, nodding occasionally.

"Coincidence, Nipper," he said at last.

"Coincidence, sir?" I repeated crossly.

"Who is the fellow, anyhow? Why is he hanging about the school now? What business has he here? Do you know anything about him?"

Nelson Lee yawned.

"My dear lad, I should advise you to cease

worrying yourself," he said. "By what I can understand, the old chap is quite harmless. He pitched you over a wall, it is true; but you were not hurt. And, speaking honestly, you had no right to follow him in Bannington. He was justified in taking drastic action."

"You—you uphold him, guv'nor?" I gasped.

"Not exactly," smiled Nelson Lee. "Now, Nipper, I am busy——"

"Reading the paper!" I cut in. "Look here, guv'nor, I'm not going to be diddled like this. You know something about this old man."

"Do I?" chuckled Lee.

"Yes, you do!" I retorted. "Ain't you going to tell me anything?"

"Certainly. I tell you to dismiss the matter——"

I glared at the guv'nor angrily.

"All right," I said, moving towards the door. "I believe you know all about the chap, and won't tell me. I'll jolly well find out for myself—that's all!"

"Bravo, young 'un!"

"And I'll show you that I'm not helpless!"

"Splendid!"

I felt that I should burst something if I remained; so I retired from the study, banging the door after me. The guv'nor, I was sure, knew a lot more than he admitted. I badly wanted to hit somebody or something—anything to relieve my feelings.

And it struck me that it was an opportune time to beard De Valerie in his den. I was just in the mood for him. But when I arrived at Study M it was locked—De Valerie always locked his study, for some unearthly reason.

I found the Rotter in the common-room. He was chatting with the Bo'sun and Owen major, and he grinned slightly as I entered. I knew well enough that he was expecting something from me—and he was keeping in the common-room deliberately.

It was impossible to talk to him in front of the other fellows—and he knew it. Right until bed-time he took good care to remain among the rest of the Removites. Never for a moment was he alone—the artful boulder!

"Never mind!" I told myself. "I'll have you in the morning, my beauty!"

I knew that he was "nailed"; there was no escape for him. When he knew that I had obtained convincing evidence of his guilt, and that I intended to produce it, if necessary, he would crumple up. He would go to the Head and confess. In fact, he couldn't do anything else, I decided.

In the dormitory, Fullwood and Gulliver and Long and several other Nuts attempted to "git gay," as Farman expressed it. In other words, they tried to start a rag, with Sir Montie as the victim.

Of course, I wasn't standing any of that nonsense, and I called upon the other fellows to lend me a hand. To my surprise, De Valerie assisted nobly in the gentle process of squashing the rag. He punched Fullwood's nose in the most artistic manner, and Gulliver's ears were quite swollen when the Rotter had finished with them.

De Valerie apparently was quite content to allow Tregellis-West to take the flogging; but he barred a ragging. I must admit that my anger subsided somewhat; perhaps the Rotter would listen to reason in the morning.

I went to sleep with a grim resolve for the morrow. And when I awoke, with the clang of the rising-bell in my ears, I jumped out of bed briskly. Cecil De Valerie was already up, for his bed was empty.

It wasn't long before I was washed and dressed. And then I hurried down with the express intention of getting hold of De Valerie by himself. Possibly he was mooching about the Triangle.

I found him, however, in his study. He was standing by the window, and when he turned at my entrance I saw that his face was a trifle pale. But his customary calmness had not deserted him.

"You've cornered me at last, then," he remarked coolly.

I closed the study door.

"Yes, I've cornered you," I said. "I want to have a little chat, De Valerie."

"Go ahead."

"What are you going to do about Tregellis-West?" I asked quietly. "Don't raise your silly eyebrows; you know what I mean. Montie is booked for a flogging this morning, after prayers."

"He has my sympathy," yawned De Valerie. "I hope it won't hurt much."

I glared.

"Are you going to let him take the flogging?" I asked hotly.

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Why shouldn't you?" I retorted. "Because you're the culprit—that's why. It was you whom Crowell spotted on the Bannington racecourse; it was you who wore that fancy striped waistcoat."

"Was it?" drawled the Rotter calmly. "You seem to know a lot, Bennett."

"Are you going to own up?" I demanded. De Valerie eyed me steadily.

"No!" he replied.

"You caddish rotter!" I burst out. "You ought to be hoofed out of the school!"

"Thanks!"

"I thought you were improving," I went on indignantly. "Instead of that, it seems to me that you're a bigger rotter than ever. A chap who can stand by and see another fellow punished for his misdeeds is a cad of cads."

"He's worse than that," agreed De Valerie. "He ain't fit to touch."

"Well, that's what you're thinking of doing," I said. "But I'll see that your rotten game is spoilt. I came here to reason with you, De Valerie. If you've got a spark of decency in you——"

"But I haven't, have I?" he interrupted. "So what's the good of talkin'?"

"If you've got a spark of decency in you," I repeated, "you'll go straight to the Head and tell him that Tregellis-West is innocent. You'll tell him that you were the chap

Crowell saw, and that you want to take the flogging."

"But I don't want to take it; I hate floggin's."

"You—you howling rotter!" I shouted, exasperated by his coolness. "Are you going to own up or not? Yes or no?"

De Valerie sank into one of his luxurious chairs.

"As they say in the House of Lunacy—I mean the House of Commons—the reply is in the negative," he smiled. "In plain, good English—no!"

I breathed hard.

"You'll have yourself to thank for what happens, then!" I said fiercely.

"You're going to sneak—what?" he sneered.

"No, I'm not going to sneak!" I roared, standing over him. "It's not sneaking in a case like this. I'm going to expose a scoundrelly rotter! I'm going to save Tregellis-West from punishment which he hasn't earned. Is that clear?"

"Painfully clear, old man."

"Don't you call me 'old man'——"

"Sorry," he said calmly. "I meant 'young man.' Don't burst a blood-vessel, will you? It wouldn't do you any good, you know."

I realised the futility of getting angry; and, by sheer force, I compelled myself to remain calm. I sat down, and eyed De Valerie steadily.

"You're a queer chap," I said. "In some ways, De Valerie, I admire you. Hang it all, there's plenty of decency in you if you'll only let it come out. Why the dickens can't you do the right thing?"

"That's what I am doin'."

"You think that you're safe, don't you?" I went on grimly. "You're not! I've got positive proof that you were in Bannington yesterday—that you bought a fancy vest in a big shop during the afternoon, and that you put it on in the shop. What will the Head say to that?"

"He'll call you a spyin' young bounder, probably."

"Spying isn't a habit of mine," I retorted. "Look here, De Valerie, you'd better realise that you're in a hopeless position. If you don't own up I shall inform. I'm skipper of the Remove, and it's my duty to see this thing through. I'll ask you for the last time—will you go to the Head and confess?"

"No, I won't!" said the Rotter languidly.

"I'll show you up before the whole school——"

"That'll be excitin', won't it?"

I glared at him, at a loss for words.

"So the little argument's finished—what?" he remarked, rising to his feet. "I'm glad of that, Bennett. I don't like havin' rows with you. You're a thoroughly decent chap, an' I like you. You've got such a polite way of speaking, you know. You won't stand any nonsense—eh?"

"I shall give you away, you sneering rotter!" I said hotly.

De Valerie opened the door.

"My dear chap, you can do just what you like," he replied, walking out of the study. "Don't mind me, you know. I don't count. Just please yourself—an' you can be satisfied that I shall approve."

He strolled down the Remove passage, and I stared after him. His coolness was almost too much for me. And he was going to bluff it out! He was going to let poor old Montie take the flogging.

"You cad!" I muttered fiercely. "You won't be smiling for long!"

I was quite determined. It wasn't a matter of sneaking. I was "down" on sneaking hot and strong; but this affair was something bigger—something which called for drastic action.

Cecil De Valerie had committed a grave breach of school rules by attending a race-meeting—many fellows, in fact, had been sacked for the same offence during the course of St. Frank's history. And De Valerie, finding that the blame had been placed upon the innocent shoulders of Sir Montie, was content to let it rest there. He was content, also, to let Montie take the punishment.

But I wasn't content—and, what was more to the point, I intended putting a spoke in the Rotter's wheel. I had given him fair warning—and he would have to take the consequences. I was sick of his caddishness.

Try as I would, though, I couldn't help liking the chap. That may sound queer, but it's a fact. De Valerie, with all his faults, had a certain "way" with him one couldn't quite resist. His very coolness was worthy of admiration.

I met Sir Montie and Tommy soon after the "scene" in Study M, and I told them all about it. They were highly indignant.

"You're goin' to speak out, Benny?" asked Tregellis-West.

"Yes," I said grimly.

"It'll be rotten if it comes to that," remarked Watson in a dubious voice. "Some of the chaps will accuse you of sneaking—"

"Let them!" I snapped. "What do I care? Do you suppose I'm going to stand by and see poor old Montie whopped for something he didn't do? Not likely!"

Sir Montie sighed.

"It's shockin' worryin', old boy," he complained. "I'm causin' a frightful amount of trouble—I am, really. Begad, I'd rather take the flogging' an' done with it. The pain won't last long, will it? I ain't made of gingerbread, you know—I can stand a whoppin' all right."

"It's not that, Montie," I said. "You could stand a dozen thrashings if necessary, I daresay—"

"Oh, begad! I hope it won't come to that!"

"It's the principle of the thing which I'm jibbing against," I went on. "De Valerie's

guilty—and he'll have to suffer. It's only just."

And that's all I would say. Later on, when the school assembled in the Big Hall, my determination was as strong as ever. I waited grimly for Sir Montie to be called out. All the school knew what was coming, of course. A notice, in the Head's handwriting, had been posted on the board the previous evening, to the effect that Tregellis-West, of the Remove, was to be flogged in the presence of the whole school, immediately after prayers.

At last Dr. Stafford appeared on the platform. He stood gazing at the vast crowd of boys for a few seconds and then cleared his throat. He was looking almost cheerful.

"Boys," he said in his deep voice, "you are all fully aware of the reason for this gathering. You have been called together to witness the punishment of Tregellis-West, of the Fourth Form, for a very serious offence."

He paused, and I got ready to walk forward.

"It therefore gives me great pleasure to announce," went on the Head, "that there will be no flogging this morning. I have learned that Tregellis-West is quite innocent; and I take this opportunity to express my regret that I should have suspected the lad of wrong-doing. Tregellis-West, you must forgive me," added Dr. Stafford gently, and speaking with much feeling.

"I—I— Begad!" gasped Sir Montie. "Yes, of course, sir—rather! Thank you awfully, sir. It's—it's rippin' of you—it is really!"

The Head smiled—and I listened in a dazed kind of way.

"I must, however, call upon another member of the Fourth Form to stand forward," went on Dr. Stafford. "Come to the platform, De Valerie."

"Certainly, sir," said the Rotter.

He glanced at me as he passed—and I simply stared. De Valerie's expression was one of amused carelessness. I couldn't understand things at all.

CHAPTER VII.

(Nipper concludes.)

JUST LIKE DE VALERIE—I RECEIVE A HUGE SURPRISE, AND THE GUV'NOR THEN GIVES ME AN ITEM OF NEWS WHICH DOESN'T EXACTLY PLEASE ME.

C ECIL DE VALERIE stood upon the platform and faced the school as calmly as though he were about to receive a prize for good conduct. The cheek of the chap was something colossal. And as he looked in my direction I positively saw him wink at me.

"Tregellis-West was to have been punished for attending a race-meeting at Bannington yesterday afternoon," explained the Head,

quite regardless of the fact that everybody in the whole school knew it. "Both Mr. Crowell and myself were convinced of Tregellis-West's guilt, and it is to our discredit that we were so ready to believe the worst of the lad."

Mr. Crowell didn't look exactly comfortable, but Dr. Stafford was famous for his plain-speaking. The fellows respected him all the more for admitting himself in the wrong when such was the case; and he did not lose an atom of dignity by so doing.

"This morning, however, before the rising bell awoke you all, I was somewhat surprised to receive a visit from De Valerie," continued the Head. "This lad came to me and told me the whole truth. It was he who visited the Hannington racecourse, and he requested me to punish him as he deserved. Needless to say, I cannot speak too highly of De Valerie's conduct in openly confessing when he could have remained silent."

I looked at Sir Montie and Tommy helplessly.

"The awful bounder!" I gasped.

De Valerie had been simply laughing at me up till now! When I had visited him, and had taxed him with the matter, he had already confessed to the Head! No wonder he had refused to own up—no wonder he had said that he was doing the right thing—because he'd already done it!

It was just like Cecil De Valerie. It was never possible to know what he would be up to next. He had led me on—he had let me threaten him, knowing all the while that everything was all serene. Of course, I couldn't be angry with him. In fact, I felt the opposite.

"You will all think, no doubt, that De Valerie should receive the flogging which Tregellis-West has so narrowly escaped," went on the Headmaster. "The circumstances, however, are rather exceptional. De Valerie, it seems, visited the racecourse for the sole purpose of paying off an old debt to a scoundrelly bookmaker. I do not think it is necessary for me to pain this lad by reminding you of certain delinquencies of his in the past. He received punishment at the time, and I have every reason to believe that he is doing his utmost to live down the past. I have also positive information that De Valerie refused to do further business with this bookmaker, although he was pressed to do so. The lad has—well, turned over a new leaf, shall we say—and I wish to give him every chance to succeed. I think you will all agree with me that a public flogging would be hard and out of place."

"Rather, sir!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Good old De Valerie!"

Quite a number of Remove fellows gave voice to the latter shout, and I distinctly saw De Valerie flush. That unexpected call had moved him more than anything. He was known as the Rutter, and, in a cynical kind of way he had grown indifferent to it. To

he called "good old De Valerie" was something quite new to him.

"Bravo, De Valerie!" I shouted enthusiastically.

I couldn't quite help myself. The chap was certainly a bounder in some ways, but he had done the right thing now. And not because of my threat, either—for he had already spoken to the Head before I uttered a word. I was tremendously glad of that, for it showed me that the Rutter had been moved by motives of genuine decency. It had been a gradual process, but Cecil De Valerie was certainly "making good."

The Head raised his hand for silence.

"Under the circumstances, boys, De Valerie will be allowed to step down from this platform unpunished," he exclaimed. "There is just one thing more I wish to state. Three boys belonging to the River House School deliberately lied to me in order to blacken Tregellis-West's character. I have already communicated with Dr. Hogge, and the three boys in question are to be severely punished."

"Good!" went up a roar from the Remove.

"Three groans for the Honourables!"

After that we were dismissed, and I don't think many fellows were dissatisfied with the Head's decision. Fullwood and Co., of course, were greatly disappointed. They had been looking forward with huge satisfaction to the prospect of seeing Tregellis-West squirm under the birch.

De Valerie was grinning all over his face when I collared hold of him.

"You deceiving bounder!" I exclaimed warmly.

"My dear chap, you shouldn't take things for granted," he replied coolly. "I meant to tell the truth all along—although I don't suppose you'll believe that. But I'm a queer chap, and I do things in my own way. I'm turning over a new leaf, you know," he added, with a grin. "Startin' life afresh—what? Let's hope I don't take the crooked path again, Bennett."

I gripped his hand tightly.

"I'm jolly glad, De Valerie," I said. "I'm hanged if I know whether to take you seriously, though."

"Oh, I'm deadly serious," he said languidly. "I've finished with all that rottin'—honour bright."

And, somehow, I felt that De Valerie was sincere.

I left him with a crowd of other chaps, and hurried away to Nelson Lee's study. I was rather anxious to "make up" with the gov'nor. I had parted from him in a bit of a huff the previous evening, and I wanted to set things right again.

Arriving at his study, I tapped upon the door and entered. And then I received a double-barrelled shock. Standing before the window, as bold as you please, was the mysterious stranger with the swarthy complexion!

"Well, I'm blowed!" I gasped amazedly.

The old man turned round quickly.

"Who told you to come in here, boy?" he demanded harshly. "Go-go at once. Do you hear me?"

I stood my ground firmly. The infernal cheek of it! He—an utter stranger, ordering me out of Nelson Lee's study!

"Look here," I said warmly. "If you think I'm going to take your orders, you're jolly well mistaken. I don't want to be disrespectful, but—"

"Enough!" he snarled, turning to me. "You young cub! I shall inform Mr. Alvington, as soon as he comes back, of your outrageous conduct. I know you—you are Bennett. I have heard much of you. The laziest, cheekiest youngster in this school!"

"You—you—"

"Don't dare to interrupt me, boy!" he went on furiously. "I shall make it my duty to go to the Headmaster at once, and if my influence is of any use, you shall be expelled from this school this very day—"

He paused, and his face broke into a smile.

"Pon my soul!" he chuckled. "I can't keep it up any longer—your face is most remarkable, my dear Nipper. Indignation and anger were striving to obtain first place—but now I think amazement won the day!"

I jumped about three feet into the air.

"Guv'nor!" I gasped faintly.

The mysterious stranger nodded.

"I take it as a great compliment, Nipper, that you did not penetrate my disguise," he exclaimed softly. "We had quite a little adventure last night, eh? I trust you were not hurt when you tumbled over that wall?"

I was altogether too astonished to reply. The queer old man was none other than Nelson Lee himself! What a blockhead I was not to have jumped to it before. The previous evening, of course, he had rushed indoors and had just managed to doff his disguise by the time I appeared.

"My hat! It's too much, all at once!" I panted, sitting on a corner of the desk. "What's the idea, guv'nor? Why in the name of all that's wonderful have you rigged yourself up in this fashion? It's simply marvellous—I should never have recognised you."

Nelson Lee patted me on the shoulder.

"The fact is, Nipper, I'm going away," he said quietly.

"Go—going away!" I stammered. "You—you ain't serious, sir?"

"I am, young 'un," he replied. "I can't explain the whole matter to you, for I am pledged to secrecy. I promise you, however, that you will not be kept in suspense."

"But what's happened, sir?" I asked amazedly.

"Well, to be brief, I have accepted a special commission," Nelson Lee answered. "I have decided to leave St. Frank's for a short while. I am acting for the Secret Service Department of His Majesty's Government—and it was necessary that I should meet a special envoy in Bannington last evening. I considered it much safer to do so in the character in which you now see me. Rather mysterious, eh, Nipper?"

"Mysterious ain't the word for it, guv'nor," I said, completely flabbergasted by this great surprise. "Can't you tell me what it all means?"

"Not just at present, lad," was the guv'nor's quiet reply. "But there is no occasion for you to worry yourself. I shall be quite all right, and will communicate with you at intervals."

"Then—then you'll be away for a long while?"

"I hardly think so. My absence may extend over six weeks—perhaps longer—but, in all probability I shall be back in my old position at the end of three or four. It is just possible that this special work may be accomplished in a fortnight—but I hardly think so."

"It'll mean a couple of months, in the end," I said gloomily. "And who's going to take your place, guv'nor?" I went on. "How are we to manage in the Ancient House without a Housemaster?"

"It won't be necessary for you to manage without one, Nipper," he replied. "I shall leave St. Frank's this afternoon—but a new Housemaster will arrive early in the evening. He will take up my duties for the time being."

It had all been so sudden that I couldn't quite realise what it meant. The guv'nor was going away—and we should have a new Housemaster. It seemed queer—almost unnatural.

But I little realised then what this change was to mean. If I had only known it, there were some very exciting times in store for the Ancient House at St. Frank's!

THE END.

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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 illtreats Jack, and George goes to his rescue, knocking out a gaoler named Kutz. He and his brother are then put in separate cells. Some days afterwards all the prisoners are called out and formed up in the square. The new governor, Von der Klutz, is going to make a speech. He tells them that they are to leave the barracks and be put in an outdoor camp. The next day this removal takes place. The hours seem very long till a friendly warder gives them a football. Two sides are quickly made up; one side, wearing their waistcoats, is called Blacks, while the other, in shirts, is named Whites. Then play begins. The game is interrupted by Kutz coming on to the ground and attempting to seize the ball. He is knocked over, and an officer appears and lays his hand on Kutz's shoulder. "What's the meaning of this?" blusters Kutz.

(Now read on.)

GEORGE GOES BACK TO PRISON.

"**Y**OU are under arrest, my friend, and serve you right," was the immediate answer. Kutz grew livid. Under arrest! Was this his reward for his zeal in furthering the interests of the Fatherland?

Was he to be punished for his attempt to instil proper order among a crowd of British hooligan prisoners of war? If so justice must be dead in Germany.

He began to plead, but a stroke on the back from the butt of his own rifle warned him that he had better submit with a good grace.

Well, well! he would have his chance when he appeared before Commandant Von der Klutz. He would, at any rate, see that justice was done.

And so, with hanging head, and accompanied by a mob of jeering townsmen, he was marched along the broad highway that led to the gates of the town.

Meanwhile, George Gray, delighted at the complete triumph he had achieved over his enemy, and laughing still, pumped out and tired though he was, as he recalled the utter mess he had made of his enemy's face when he had urged the football against it, had in his turn fallen into the hands of the Philistines.

The officer motioned to two of his men to approach the prisoner, at the same time issuing a sharp command. He then stepped up to the good-looking full-back.

"You are under arrest," he cried.

"What for?" demanded George.

"You have grossly assaulted a German soldier. It is a crime that, in war time, may be punished by death. You will be tried by the commandant. March."

George resisted, digging his heels into the ground and threatening to hand the soldiers off.

"Wait a moment," he cried. "It was the man's own fault. I question whether Commandant Von der Klutz will approve of his entering the camp and interfering with the prisoners."

"You were playing football——"

"And why not? Is there any order issued against it? The football was given us by one of the men of the prison. Why shouldn't we have used it? What right had Kutz to take it upon himself to stop the game?" George spoke swiftly and in the German tongue.

The officer smiled enigmatically.

"All that is a matter for the Governor to settle," he cried. "Meanwhile, you are under arrest. If you offer resistance it will be the worse for you. Now, march."

"You'd better go, George," advised Wilson. "Don't put yourself in the wrong. There were hundreds of witnesses. Even these men saw what happened. Insist that some of us be called upon to give our version of the affair when you are hauled before the Guv'nor. If there's any justice left in this land, you ought to come out all right."

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

George had already begun to march between the armed guards. He waved his hand as he went.

"All right," he cried. "Good-bye, old man. So long, Ahlolt. Don't worry about me, Jack. Keep your pecker up, boys, I'll soon be back amongst you. And don't worry about me, think of Kutz."

They cheered him loudly, flocking after him to the very bars of the wires. A company of armed soldiers guarded the exit from the camp. Beyond them were the eager staring crowd.

One of the soldiers, at a command from the officer, had picked up the football, and this he now carried by means of the lace.

And so they swung out of the camp, and in their turn took their way along the road. And after them also followed a curious crowd of men, women, youths, and girls from Oberhemmel.

Strange to say, in this instance they did not jeer; but, then, George Gray, with his fine physique, handsome face, and utter fearlessness, was a figure to inspire respect in any one.

SET AT LIBERTY.

AND so George Gray was escorted back to the prison which he had left but a short time ago. In spite of his natural cheerfulness and indomitable courage his heart fell as he passed through the gloomy portals and once more strode the echoing corridors of cold grey stone.

A cell was opened for him, and into this he was thrust, a crowd of curious soldiers clad in military undress flocking to have a peep at him.

During his passage through the gaol he saw on every hand signs of a complete reorganisation of the interior. Most of the cell doors had been removed, and inside mattresses were placed for the accommodation of the troops. Only a few cells were "lock-ups," and into one of these he was driven.

He sat down and lost himself in a whirl of reflections.

Was he to be for ever getting himself into trouble like this, and, if so, how would it all end? George entertained no illusions with regard to the thoroughness of German frightfulness. He guessed, and afterwards learned, that many an Englishman had been brutally used and treated with the vilest severity for less than he had offered.

If his affair with Kutz had not been witnessed by so many of the citizens of Oberhemmel, he would have been even more concerned as to what the result was likely to be, but as so many had looked on and knew the truth of the matter, he hoped to escape with mild punishment.

But, at any rate, here he was in a cell again, and only scantily clad, for he had not been permitted to don all his clothes. The stone walls struck a chill into his bones, and presently the want of food made itself felt.

He was left to feed upon his own reflections, as had happened before. It was not

until night had fallen, as a matter of fact, that some soup and bread were brought him.

His gaoler proved to be a man he'd met before in the prison, and when George demanded to know what his fate would be the fellow grinned.

"Ach!" he replied, "I do not think you will be badly punished this time. Kutz is der lausink stock of der down."

That was good news, at any rate, and, much relieved, George devoured his food, and felt the better for it.

And so, presently, he was able to stretch himself out upon his hard bed and fall into a sound and refreshing sleep, from which he did not awaken until a rough hand shook him by the shoulder and he was given his breakfast. The man who brought it told him to be "quick," for he would be taken before the governor in half an hour.

Well, that promised a lessening of the time of suspense, at any rate. George was eager to get over.

It was less than half an hour when the escort came to lead him into the presence of Von der Klutz.

Once more he was hurried into the trial chamber and set before the uniformed official who held his fate in his hands.

He was sternly told to stand at attention, and then the Governor of the Prison busied himself with many papers and documents, and carried on desultory conversations with several officers who came before him, and answered his inquiries.

The conversation was carried on so rapidly that George could only catch a glimpse of its meaning. That it concerned the football match and its unfortunate termination he knew, but no more.

At last the governor turned towards him. "Well," he cried, rapping the table top with his clenched fist, and glowering at the prisoner. "What have you to say?"

If it had been his intention to scare the Englishman, he failed miserably. Redding brows and harsh, thunderous voices made no impression whatever on George Gray's mind.

In simple straightforward language he told his version of the affair, sticking closely to the truth.

Von der Klutz pulled at his moustaches, and a grim light shone in his steely eyes.

"H'm," he grunted, but whether with approval or disapproval, George did not know. "You are George Gray, the English footballer, who taught and played with the Berlin Rovers before the war, eh?"

"Yes."

"You are an international footballer in your own country?"

"Yea, sir," answered George, wondering what all this had got to do with it.

"And your brother, Jack—he is a clever footballer, too, and he played for the Rovers, and helped to teach them, eh?"

"He did, sir." George's manner was respectful, which the governor did not fail to notice.

"H'm, and you have other well-known

(Continued overleaf.)

footballers in the camp—Ablott, Wilson, Cowdray, and some more; isn't it so?"

"It is, sir."

The commandant made some rapid notes, and then flashed out with: "Why did you assault the man Kutz? He was brought in covered with dust and dirt and blood. Do you know it is a serious, almost a capital offence to attack one of the Kaiser's soldiers?"

"Yes, commandant. But it was hardly my fault. What right had he to gratuitously enter our camp and try to put a stop to a harmless game. Why, it was one of the men here who gave me the football, as we went to camp. We were merely enjoying ourselves, and it's a pity if we can't do that."

"H'm. Kutz ordered you to give up the ball; you all refused, and he then tried to seize it. And then you kicked the football into his face. Is that the truth?"

"It is, sir."

"Why did you do it?"

"I put it to you, sir, if a dirty cur, who'd done you a mortal injury—and I have reason to hate Kutz—assumed to himself an authority to which he was in no way entitled, and then insulted you—tried to deprive you of the only pleasure you'd had since you'd been made a prisoner of war, what would you have done?"

Von Der Klutz struck the table heavily.

Then, with a wave of his hand, he cried, to George Gray's amazement.

"The prisoner is discharged. Take him back to the camp. And I want every officer and man here to understand that I will allow no interference with the British prisoners, save by my orders."

A FOREBODING.

GEOFFREY was thunderstruck by the sudden and unexpected collapse of the case against him. As soon as he recovered sufficiently from his astonishment to be able to speak, he tried to thank Von der Klutz.

"You have nothing to thank me for," scowled the governor. "Had there been the slightest offence on your part, I should have made a drastic example. Understand, I am master here."

Then his beetling brows lifted.

"And now," he said, "go back to your camp. Your football shall be restored to you. I have seen you play in Berlin. I like the English football game. I approve of it. And—there is no harm in it. The ball was given you by my orders."

This revelation startled George Gray

almost as much as his unexpected release had done.

The commandant half turned away, and a tap on the shoulder reminded George Gray that the trial, if trial it could be called, was at an end.

But he suddenly remembered a matter of very vital importance to all who were interned in the camp.

"Commandant," he cried, "May I have a word with you?"

Round swung Von der Klutz, his hands set behind his back, his brows lowering.

"Are you not satisfied at being released?" he snapped.

"Quite, sir; but—I wished to speak about the conditions down at the camp—"

"The conditions are good enough," almost shouted the governor.

"They are not," George replied boldly.

"We don't mind sleeping out in the open, under the sky now, while the weather is warm and favourable. But there is not a single hut there, no shelter of any kind. The ground lies low. The slope from the town runs down to it. If we have rain—and it must come soon—our position will be deplorable. And, on behalf of my defenceless comrades, I beg of you, commandant, to have rainproof shelters of some sort erected without delay; and to order that our meals, such as they are, shall be sent to us regularly."

Von der Klutz's face was convulsed. Mad anger blazed in his sombre eyes, and his lips trembled. Yet, by an effort, he choked back his wrath.

"Bah!" he cried, at last, with a contemptuous shrug. "It is like being in fairyland down there in the camp. The fine weather will hold for weeks yet. I will erect shelters in my own time. At the moment the workmen of the Fatherland have other jobs to do. I am having some of your luggage sent down to-day. It has arrived at Oberheimel. You will have change of clothing. Be thankful for that. The food regulations will be improved as soon as possible. But I will not be badgered. Is that understood?"

George Gray nodded and was marched back to the camp.

It was not till then that he observed that in the west the sky was overcast, and that lowering clouds were fast drifting towards the orb of the sun.

And a feeling of foreboding swept upon him, more threatening even than those sombre clouds which caused his spirits to sink at the awful possibilities that presented themselves to his mind—should the rain-clouds break.

(To be continued.)

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