

No. 166.—ABSORBING SCHOOL AND DETECTIVE NOVEL!

WAR-TIME
PRICE

THE NELSON LEE LIBRARY 1^{D.}/₂



Nelson Lee was deposited in the carriage, and commenced a triumphal career through the village.

BY GENERAL REQUEST!

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's. Introducing NELSON LEE, NIPPER, and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "Marooned," "The Fight for Mastery," "A Bid for Gold," and Other Tales.

August 10, 1918.

FOR YOU AND ME!

Another Rippling Rhyme.

For you and me the brave boys go to face a grim and ruthless foe, to
fight in darkness, heat, or snow— *for You and Me!*

They break off all their cherished ties, they say, perhaps, their last
good-byes, to suffer under foreign skies— *for You and Me!*

They leave the safe and peaceful grind; they go, their country's need
in mind, and leave the homes they love behind— *for You and Me!*

We're free to count in peace our hoard, our packages in bank vaults
stored, because our men took up the sword— *for You and Me!*

For You and Me!

Are we so small that we would dodge the country's call to **HELP**
the boys who fight and fall *for You and Me?* Oh, let us to the
Tank Bank go, and buy the **BONDS** that **BOMB** the foe, for the
sake of the dear, brave boys who go *for You and Me!*

WALT MASON.

*P.S.—If there isn't a Tank Bank handy go to the Post Office, to a
Stockbroker, or to a Bank! And if you don't want War Bonds, buy War
Savings Certificates—as many as you can and as soon as you can.*

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(The Narrative Related Throughout by Nipper.)

CHAPTER I.

BACK AT ST. FRANK'S—THE ANCIENT HOUSE DOESN'T LIKE IT.

RALPH LESLIE FULLWOOD, of the Remove, lounged elegantly out of the Ancient House lobby into the blazing sunlight of the August afternoon. It was a half-holiday, and Fullwood was attired in all his splendour.

With him were Gulliver and Bell, his two particular cronies, who shared Study A with him. As it happened, I was just about to enter the Ancient House with Sir Montie Tregellis-West.

"My hat!" I grinned. "You'll have to look out for yourself, Montie, or you'll find yourself left behind in the tailor's duminy line. Fullwood looks as though he daren't move, for fear of creasing himself!"

Fullwood scowled.

"I didn't ask for your opinion," he said unpleasantly. "You chaps think you're everybody, after coming back from that Pacific trip. Swanking about, lookin' like a lot of blessed niggers!"

"Begad! Are we so sunburnt as that?" asked Tregellis-West mildly. "Perhaps we caught it off old Umlosi, Nipper. There's no tellin'. But really, Fullwood, when it comes to swankin', I think you lead the procession—I do, really!"

Fullwood grinned sneeringly.

"It's a wonder to me you pal with that chap Nipper, West," he exclaimed, in a contemptuous manner. "Nipper! A giddy gutter-brat, wasn't he? Picked out of the streets by a sneakin' detective—Ow! What the—Yaroooh!"

My blood had boiled up at Fullwood's insulting words. I didn't mind what he said about me so much, but I wasn't going to hear the guv'nor referred to in that manner. Fullwood received my fist on the point of his nose, and he sprawled full length in the dust of the Triangle. As he attempted to get up I pushed him back again, rolled him over, and then knelt on his chest.

"Now," I panted, "apologise, you cad!"

"Help!" roared Fullwood. "Rescue, you rotters! Lemme go, you beast!"

"Not until you've apologised!" I said grimly.

"Look at my clothes!" howled Fullwood. "Begad! That's just what I was lookin' at, you frightful bounder!" exclaimed Sir Montie, carefully adjusting his pince-nez and taking care to stand some little way back. "I'm afraid those trousers of yours aren't improved, Fullwood; an' your nice coat is lookin' shockin'ly dusty!"

"You'll stop down here until you apologise!" I snapped. "Say you're sorry, you insulting cad. Say 'I'm sorry I insulted Mr. Nelson Lee.'"

"I won't!" howled Fullwood savagely. "Why can't you come and lend me a hand, you idiots?" he added, struggling frantically, and glaring at Gulliver and Bell.

"You may like that dust, but I don't!" said Bell tartly. "And, if it comes to that, I reckon you deserve it, Fullwood. Mr. Lee's a rotten Housemaster—too jolly strict; but, hang it all, he's a gentleman!"

"Bravo!" exclaimed Sir Montie. "Bell's actually had the courage to speak the truth!"

"I'll give you one minute!" I said, shaking Fullwood roughly.

"I ain't goin' to apologise!" bellowed the dusty cad. "'Tain't likely! Nelson Lee is a sneakin'—Yaroooh! Oh, my only hat! Stop it, you cad! I—I'll apologise!"

"Go on, then!" I said, ceasing my efforts.

"I—I'm sorry!" muttered Fullwood, between his teeth. "I—I didn't mean to insult Mr. Lee!"

I released him, and he jumped to his feet, bubbling over with rage and dusty from head to foot.

"You wait!" he roared threateningly. "By Jove, I'll make you sit up for this, you low-down street urchin!"

Having delivered himself in that fashion, Fullwood considered it a wise move to retreat as quickly as possible, and he hurried into the Ancient House. I grinned, and dusted my sleeves.

"That's how I'll treat anybody who dares to insult my guv'nor!" I said cheerfully.

Quite a crowd of other fellows had come round, but they were all looking quite pleased and satisfied.

"That's the stuff to give him, old man," said Owen major. "My hat! I'd punch anybody's nose myself if they insulted Mr. Lee! The finest Housemaster we've ever had or are ever likely to have!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Rather!"

"Don't you take any notice of those snobbish Nuts," said Canham.

"I don't!" I replied.

"Not at all!" grinned De Valerie. "But I'll bet Fullwood thinks you took notice of him! I say, Benny—I mean Nipper—ain't your pater really coming back as Housemaster?"

My face clouded.

"No, worse luck!" I replied. "And how many more times have I to tell you chaps that he ain't my pater? I'm his assistant—although, if it comes to that, he's the only pater I ever had, and a jolly good 'un, too!"

"He's coming down to-night, isn't he?" asked Conroy minor.

"Yes, by the evening train—to stay for a day or two!" I said disgustedly. "A day or two! I shall tell him what I think of him when he arrives. How the dickens are we going to get on for a Housemaster?"

"There's some chap coming from Seaton College, I believe," said Owen major. "I'll bet he'll be a soppy sort! I've met some of the Seaton chaps, and they're all editions of Fullwood—snobs to a man!"

"It's one of the hardships of life," sighed Tregellis-West. "It's no good grumblin', so we shall have to put up with it. It's a sad fact, but the Head won't take any notice of advice from juniors, even when it's sound. If he would, I'd go an' give him some straight away, begad!"

"But the Head wants the guv'nor to come back, you fathead!" I put in.

"Oh, does he?" said Sir Montie. "Dear fellow, I'd forgotten that. The Head's all right, ain't he? Then it's your guv'nor I shall have to give the advice to—an' I couldn't do that. I shouldn't have the frightful nerve—I shouldn't, really!"

"What's the trouble here?" asked a powerful voice.

Handforth and Church and McClure, of Study D, strolled up inquiringly. Handforth's nose was sure to be in everything that was going, and he had sallied out to investigate. Church and McClure, naturally, followed him. To see Handforth without his faithful followers was something of a novelty.

"There's no trouble now," I replied. "If you'd come out three minutes ago, Handy, you'd have seen Fullwood rolling in the dust."

Handforth stared.

"What did the ass want to do that for?" he asked blankly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I can see anything to cackle at!" snapped Handforth.

"My dear chap, Fullwood didn't want to do it!" I grinned. "It was a case of not being able to prevent it. I rolled him in the dust and spoilt the look of his half-holiday suit."

"Well, I don't approve of it!" said Handforth dictatorially. "Fullwood's a rotter, goodness knows, but it's a bit too thick to roll him in the dust. No, Nipper, I shove my foot down there!"

"Go hon!" I chuckled. "What an innocent old ass you are, Handy!"

"Look here——"

"Oh, dry up!" put in McClure. "I expect Fullwood deserved it!"

"Yes; but that doesn't make it right," argued Handforth. "I'm always willing to punch a chap's nose, but as for rolling him in the dust—and this sort of dust, too—I reckon it's offside!"

"Fullwood insulted my guv'nor," I said quietly. "He referred to Mr. Lee as 'a sneakin' detective,' and——"

"What!" roared Handforth, rolling up his sleeves. "Fullwood did that, did he? Where is he? Lemme get at him! By George, I'll roll him in the dust myself, and duck him in the fountain afterwards!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go easy, Handy!" I grinned. "It's all over now, and we don't want to start again. And what about your ban upon rolling chaps in the dust?"

"If Fullwood insulted a ripping chap like Mr. Lee, he deserves Coventry for a month!" said Handforth loyally. "Why, Mr. Lee's one of the best chaps under the sun, and I think it's absolutely rotten of him not to come back here as Housemaster. I'm going to tell him so, too!"

"I believe you will!" I chuckled. "Well, it won't do any good, but you may as well get it off your chest, Handy."

And Sir Montie and I strolled into the Ancient House and passed along to Study C, in the Remove passage. We found Tommy Watson there, busily oiling his bat, but he was not looking very cheerful.

"What are you going to do about it, Nipper?" he asked.

"About what?"

"You ass! About your guv'nor!"

"Oh!" I said. "What the dickens can I do? He's said he's not coming back, and there's an end of it. You don't know the guv'nor, Tommy. If he makes up his mind, he makes it up!"

"Begad! Really, old boy?"

"He makes it up thoroughly, I mean," I replied grimly. "I always understood that he was coming back here, but I was wrong. By Jupiter! I feel like going away myself."

"Go—going away!" stuttered Watson.

"Look here, if you start talking like that,

Montie and I will jolly well squash you. Going away, indeed!"

"Yes, it's rather too bad of you, old fellow," said Sir Montie. "My heart ain't over-strong, an' these sudden shocks are a strain. Pray refrain from such startlin' threats!"

I couldn't help grinning. I didn't really mean what I said, and my chums knew it. But to know that Nelson Lee was not returning to St. Frank's made me pretty miserable.

We had returned to the old school on the Monday, and it was now Wednesday. By "we" I mean the party who had undertaken the trip out to the South Seas in Lord Dorrimore's steam yacht. That was all over now, although the majority of the juniors were still talking about it.

We had been compelled to relate our adventures again and again. Handforth did not wait to be asked; he related them to all and sundry, adding picturesque details of his own. Handforth was not particular as to a few discrepancies, and I could not altogether blame the fellows who positively refused to believe's Handforth's hair-raising and blood-curdling stories. Handy's imagination frequently got the better of his veracity.

But St. Frank's, as a whole, had been more surprised at the great revelation which had come out. Before going on that trip I had been "Dick Bennett," and the guv'nor had passed under the name of "Mr. Alvington."

In fact we had taken up our positions at the great school in order to escape the unwelcome attentions of a murderous Chinese secret society, known as the Fu Chang Tong.

But the peril was now at an end; we were no longer in any danger of swift death from the Tong's agents. It was therefore futile to keep up the pretence any longer.

After due consideration, Nelson Lee had decided to let me go back to St. Frank's; but that was mainly because I wanted to. At that time I had supposed that the guv'nor would come as well.

But then, like a bombshell, had come the news that Nelson Lee was to relinquish his position as Housemaster of the Ancient House and intended remaining in London. He had allowed me to come down to St. Frank's in advance, and had sent the information on by letter.

St. Frank's was thunderstruck for a time—with regard to the revelation, I mean. The fellows could hardly believe that "Old Alvy" was none other than Mr. Nelson Lee, the world-famous detective. If it comes to that, they could hardly believe that I was his equally famous—No, I won't put that. I'm too modest. Anyhow, the chaps couldn't credit it to begin with.

The majority of them were delighted when, finally, they were forced to believe the truth. It was only cads like Fullwood,

of the Remove, or Starke, of the Sixth, who sneered. And as nobody took any notice of them, it didn't matter. St. Frank's, as a whole, was mightily pleased.

"Mr. Alvington" was far and away the most popular Housemaster who had ever presided over the Ancient House, and the majority of the fellows simply loved him. And if Mr. Alvington had been popular, Nelson Lee would be doubly so. The very honour of it made the Fossils—as the Ancient House chaps were called—gloat hugely, and the College House fellows had been forced to sing small.

Their turn came very quickly, however, for it became general knowledge that Nelson Lee was not to continue his duties as Housemaster. The consternation in the Ancient House had been rather alarming on the Tuesday, but by this time the fellows were somewhat resigned.

But I wasn't!

Of course, I should jaw at the guv'nor when he appeared, but it wouldn't make any difference. I meant to point out to him that it was a dirty trick to send me to St. Frank's under false pretences—although, to be just, I must admit that he had given me several broad hints beforehand.

"It's no good grumbling," I said gloomily. "Our few voices would be like cries in the wilderness. I suppose we shall see the guv'nor now and again, when he takes it into his head to come down.

"What's the good of that?" demanded Watson warmly.

"Not much good. I'll admit," I replied. "But still, we can make it a condition that he comes down every week-end, or something of that sort. Let's hope that the new Housemaster we have won't be a second Mr. Hunter!"

"Oh, begad!" gasped Sir Montie. "Don't talk about it, old boy!"

Mr. Hunter was still a horrid memory at St. Frank's. He had turned the school upside down with his Prussian habits, but he had been settled by Nelson Lee. And there was really no prospect of the guv'nor's successor being a second edition of "The Hun."

"Oh, he'll be an easy-going sort of chap, I believe," I said. "A slack bounder, something like old Thorn used to be—he was here just before I came. Fullwood and Co. are gloating already."

"Dear boy, why?"

"Because they believe this new chap will make life easy for 'em," I replied grimly. "They think he'll toady to 'em, and all the rest of it. Nelson Lee's a bit too decent for Fullwood and Co.'s taste. But how much longer are you going to be over that bat, Tommy?"

"Just done," said Watson.

We sallied out to Little Side, and for the time being forgot all about our anxieties concerning Nelson Lee. But somebody else had not forgotten, by any means! Somebody else was getting busy!

CHAPTER II.

HANDFORTH'S GREAT IDEA—NO ENTHUSIASM—
STUDY C ADOPTS IT

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH thumped the table. He thumped it violently, and McClure, who was in the act of pouring out tea, gave a fiendish yell as half a cupful of the hot liquid slopped out of the cup and ruined the appearance of his white flannel trousers—to say nothing of causing McClure considerable pain.

"Yow—ow!" he howled. "You—you silly idiot!"

"I've got an idea!" said Handforth abstractedly.

"Look what you've done to my trousers!" roared McClure, dancing about madly. "They're ruined—and I'm scalded!"

Handforth glared.

"I wish you wouldn't make such a fat-headed row!" he snapped testily. "Who cares anything about your silly trousers? Fancy talking about trousers just when I've got the idea of the season!"

"They're stained in fifty different places!" shouted McClure furiously.

"I can't help that!" snorted Handforth. "What the dickens did you spill the tea on 'em for? I've always said you were a careless ass!"

"You—you——" McClure gasped for breath. "Didn't you thump the table?" he shrieked. "You silly, mad duffer!"

Handforth started.

"Oh, did I thump the table?" he asked. "I seem to remember something of the sort. Well, it's your own fault; you shouldn't be pouring out tea just when I want to thump the table!"

McClure nearly exploded.

"How—why—— Oh, what's the good of talking to a raving lunatic?" he yelled. "How was I to know you were going to thump the table? As for your idea, you can take it away and boil it!"

Handforth rolled up his sleeves.

"Oh, so that's the way you talk to your leader, is it?" he said grimly. "What's the good of me trying to think out stunning wheezes if you insult 'em like that? Put up your hands, Arnold McClure——"

"Rot!" said McClure. "I ain't going to fight you over that, Handy. But if you've got any decency in you you'll pay for another pair of trucks!"

"I'll pay for ten pairs if you like!" snapped Handforth. "Fancy jawing about your rotten breeches at such a time as this? Oh, my hat! Talk about Julius Cæsar fiddling while Rome was burning——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Anything funny in that?" snorted Handforth.

"Rather!" grinned Church. "I was just wondering how Julius Cæsar could fiddle while Rome was burning, when it didn't burn till about a hundred years after he was dead! I ain't quite sure of my figures, but that's near it. You ass! You mean Nero!"

"Do you think I care who it was?" roared Handforth, in order to cover his mistake. "Besides, I believe you're wrong. I ought to know more about history than you do, seeing that you're such a couple of dunces!"

"We're what?" snapped Church.

"Oh, blow!" said Handforth testily. "What was I saying? Oh, about those trousers, wasn't it? Can't you chaps think seriously in life? A crisis has been reached at St. Frank's——"

"A which?" gasped Church.

"A crisis," repeated Handforth firmly. "And in nearly every crisis some chap comes to the top, like—like scum on the top of a pot of boiling soup! Well, I've come to the top in this case!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Church and McClure howled.

"Now what's the matter?" bellowed Handforth wrathfully. "Never saw such cackling idiots——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you——"

"My dear old Handy, you've never said anything more truthful!" gasped McClure. "You've come to the top like scum! Oh, my only aunt! Ha, ha, ha!"

And Church went off into a fit for a second time. Handforth started, vaguely realising the significance of his parallel. Then he turned very red and glared at his chums sulphurously.

"You silly chumps!" he shouted. "I can make a ship, I suppose? A chap comes to the top like Kitchener did when he raised the new Army. Well, I'm Kitchener in this case, and I've got the idea of the season!"

"You're too modest, Handy," said Church, who had commenced cutting bread and butter. "And what's the idea, anyhow? Some silly rot, I'll bet!" he added with pleasing frankness.

"No, it's terrific!" said Handforth. "It's about old Nelly!"

"Who?" gasped McClure. "I say, you haven't been falling in love, have you? I—I didn't mean it, Handy," he added hastily, as Handforth rose from the table.

"I should think you didn't!" growled Handforth. "Old Nelly—Nelson Lee!"

Church looked alarmed.

"You'd better let him hear you calling him that!" he said. "Why, he'd skin you!"

"Do you think I'm going to call him that to his face?" snapped Handforth. "Oh, my only aunt! It's a wonder my hairs ain't grey! My idea is to get Mr. Lee to stay on at St. Frank's as Housemaster—see?"

"No, I'm jiggered if I do!" said McClure. "What the dickens can we do, you ass? Do you think Mr. Lee will take any notice of us?"

"He might take notice of the whole Ancient House!"

"But we ain't the whole Ancient House!" roared Church.

"We're the centre of it, so to speak," declared Handforth grimly. "We're the most important chaps in it. I suppose you'll agree with that?"

"Rather!" said Church and McClure in unison.

"Well, then, dry up and let your uncle speak," went on the leader of Study D. "So far I've hardly been able to get a word in edgeways! What we've got to do is to assume the lead."

"Eh?"

"Assume the lead!" repeated Handforth firmly.

"Oh! Is that all?" asked McClure sarcastically. "And what's Nipper going to say?"

"He can say what he jolly well likes!"

"Yes, but he won't say what you like!" declared Church. "If you try any of those games on, Handy, you'll get squashed. Nipper's the Form captain—"

"What's this got to do with the Form?" snapped Handforth. "It's a House matter. Not only the Remove, but the Fifth and the Sixth will all be in it—everybody, in fact."

"And you're going to lead 'em?" gasped McClure.

"Exactly!"

"Lead the Fifth and Sixth?"

"How many more times do you want telling?" roared Handforth, losing patience.

"If the seniors ain't got enough sense to lead themselves, it's up to us to show 'em how!"

"I'm with you all along," said McClure. "But how the dickens are we going to make the seniors understand our point of view? Seniors are great men in their own eyes, and we should be hoofed out of every study we went into. But you haven't explained the idea yet."

"It's just this," said Handforth, bending forward. "I don't believe for a minute Nelson Lee will stay away from St. Frank's. He's got to remain—see? I say so!"

"Caesar hath spoken!" murmured McClure.

"What's that?" demanded Handforth. "What's the good of mumbling like that? Nelson Lee's got to remain, and don't you forget it! My wheeze is to draw up a petition—"

"A what?"

"A petition," repeated Handforth. "You know, one of those giddy documents which people sign when a chap's going to be hanged—"

"But Nelson Lee ain't going to be hanged!" yelled Church.

"Who said he was?" snorted Handforth.

"A petition can be used for all sorts of things, can't it? We've got to draw this thing up, and then get everybody in the whole House to sign it. When Nelson Lee arrives we'll put it in his hand, and he simply can't leave then."

"Why not?" asked Church vaguely.

"How's that going to prevent him?"

"You ass! He'll see that we all want him to stay," explained Handforth, waving his hand. "It only wants to be done in the right way, and it'll be all serene. Shove over the inkpot, McClure, and mind what

you're doing with that bread and butter. Don't you think I want any of it?"

A few minutes later Handforth was munching bread and butter and drawing up the great petition. As this was to be the actual presentation copy, and considering the fact that Handforth was eating bread and butter, the result did not seem very promising. The document was already covered with greasy thumb-prints, and a few blots added to the effect. When Handforth dropped a slab of bread and butter face downwards upon the paper, its appearance was by no means improved. But Handforth was careless regarding these little details.

"Now, lemme see!" he exclaimed, wrinkling his brow furiously. "What are we going to say? I know! 'Dear Mr. Lee—' No, that's too familiar, ain't it? What about 'Honoured Sir'?"

"You can't beat just the plain 'Dear Sir,' in my opinion," said Church.

After some little argument Handforth agreed, and the document was finally drawn up. It was quite brief, mainly owing to the fact that Handforth was not a first-class hand at drawing up this class of document.

It merely ran:

"Dear Sir.—We hope you won't leave St. Frank's. Everybody at the foot of this partition wants you to remain Housemaster. Please don't go, because we want you to stay.—Yours respectfully."

The names of Handforth and Church and McClure appeared at the foot of the precious concoction. Handforth was perfectly satisfied with it, but his chums were decidedly dubious. Somehow, it didn't seem convincing enough—which was not at all surprising!

"I say, you've spelt 'petition' wrong," said McClure suddenly. "That means a wall—a partition—"

"Rot!" snapped Handforth. "Do you think I don't know how to spell a simple word like that?"

Realising the futility of argument, Church and McClure said no more. Church pointed out, however, that everybody was not at the foot of the document, only their names would be there. But Handforth waived this point loftily.

"Come on," he said, getting up from the table. "We'll go round with it for names!"

"What about tea?" asked McClure. "I haven't finished yet!"

"Oh, flow tea—"

"There ain't such a hurry as all that, Handy!" protested Church. "Why, you haven't had any tea at all—and you usually drink about four cups. Don't be in such a giddy hurry!"

Handforth, thus reminded that he had had no tea, reseated himself at the table and did his best to scald himself. The tea was hot and Handforth was in a hurry. But when the mighty leader of Study D was possessed of a great idea, he seldom bothered about such prosaic matters as tea drinking. His schemes were mostly of the wild and

weird brand, but that made no difference to his enthusiasm. Once Handforth got fairly started his enthusiasm was something tremendous.

"Where are we going to first?" asked McClure doubtfully. "Perhaps it would be best to ask Nipper——"

"Rats to Nipper!" interrupted Handforth. "This is my wheeze. Like your rot to suggest we should go to those Study C fatheads! Why, they might even try to collar the idea. No, we'll start the ball rolling in Study H—Farman and Owen major and Canham. After we've got their signatures we'll go all along the passage, and then rope in the seniors."

"It'll take us all the evening," said McClure.

"No fear!" was Handforth's reply. "Why, you ass, Mr. Lee will be here by about half-past eight, and we want to present it to him as soon as he arrives. We're on the war-path, don't forget."

Handforth rose from the table and seized the petition. Church and McClure were wondering how on earth the names of all the Ancient House fellows were to be crowded on to that single sheet of note-paper; but to mention the matter to Handforth would merely invite trouble. This was his idea, and Church and McClure were content to let him carry it out. Inwardly, they had vague fears that something would go wrong.

The trio presented themselves at Study H, Handforth looking brisk and business-like, and his two chums somewhat nervous. This was by no means the first time they had been on such expeditions, and previous disasters led them to be pessimistic now.

"Hallo!" said Owen major, as Handforth and Co. burst in. "Don't trouble to knock, will you? Visitors always welcome."

Owen major and Farman and Canham were just starting tea.

"I've got an idea——" began Handforth.

"We don't want it," said Canham promptly.

"Take it away and lose it!" remarked Owen major cheerfully. "Blessed if I can see why you should bring your ideas here, Handy. Haven't you got a waste-paper basket in your study?"

"Look here, if you're going to rot, I'm going out!" roared Handforth.

"Good!"

"Say, what's the trouble, Handy?" asked Farman. "I guess we'd better let the hobo have a look in, chums."

"He'd better buck up, then," said Owen major. "We haven't got time to waste on Handforth's Tommy-rot!"

"I want you to sign your names on this petition," said Handforth, glaring. "As a matter of fact, it's a bit of an honour——"

"What's that horrible-looking thing?" demanded Canham, as Handforth planked down the petition on the table. "Great Scott! We don't want your butter wrappers here! This is a clean tablecloth!"

"Butter wrappers!" roared Handforth indignantly.

"It's a petition!" grinned McClure, feeling bound to explain.

"I don't care what you call it," replied Canham. "But it looks to me like a piece of paper that's had butter wrapped in it. If you don't take it away, Handy, I'll chuck it out of the window! How do you think I can get my tea with that awful-looking thing lying in front of my plate?"

"You—you silly ass!" shouted Handforth. "You've got to sign that!"

"Sign it!" yelled Owen major. "If you're trying to be funny, Handy, you can go to some other study. You've taken away my appetite for tea already. Why can't you keep this lunatic in check, McClure?"

Handforth had scarcely expected this reception, and he grabbed hold of the petition and thrust it under Owen major's nose. He felt that it was necessary to show these idiots what the thing actually was.

"Now can you see what it is?" he snapped. "You've got to sign your name under that spidery scrawl McClure put there—— What the dickens—— Hi, you ass! You'll crumple it——"

Owen major liked the petition still less when it was thrust under his nose, and he pushed it away, and Handforth with it. The next moment the table rocked alarmingly, two plates slipped off and smashed, and the study was in an uproar.

"Hoof him out!" roared Canham, rescuing the teapot just in time. "Of all the giddy nerve! Out with the ass!"

Exactly ten seconds later Handforth shot through the doorway into the passage, sprawled across to the opposite wall, and slid to the floor with a bump which shook him considerably. His precious petition was rammed half-way down his neck, and the door of Study H closed with a slam.

"Great pip!" gasped Handforth faintly. "Who—who did that?"

The inquiry was quite unnecessary, and Church and McClure did not trouble to explain. They stood near by, grinning incautiously.

"You rotters!" roared Handforth, scrambling to his feet. "Nice sort of chums, ain't you? Why couldn't you help me to smash those bounders up? By George! I sha'n't let 'em sign their names at all now! Where's the petition?"

"Down your neck, ain't it?" asked McClure.

Handforth fished it up, straightened it out, and glared at it. Such rough handling had not improved its appearance, but Handforth did not think of making out a fresh copy.

"Better give it up, Handy," began Church.

"Give it up!" bellowed Handforth. "Give up the best idea of the term? Unless you can talk sense, Church, you'd better dry up! Come along to Study J and back me up. We've got to get this thing signed!"

Study J was occupied by Doyle and Arm-

strong and Griffith. These three juniors were most reasonable youths; but when Handforth burst into their study like a whirlwind and planked down the petition in the middle of their tea-table, incidentally upsetting the sugar-bowl, they were inclined to be wrathful.

"What's that?" shouted Griffith warmly.

"You've got to sign it!" said Handforth. "Just under——"

"Out with him!" exclaimed Doyle abruptly.

Handforth was seized firmly, bumped upon the floor, and projected into the passage upon his stomach. His exit from Study J was far more brisk than it had been from Study H, and he hadn't had time to explain a thing.

"And the next time you come here, walk in like a human being and not like a charging bull!" said Griffith. "This ain't a lunatic asylum!"

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

"Well, it's your own fault!" snapped McClure, who was losing patience. "Why can't you go to Nipper's study? And why the dickens don't you write that thing out again? You can't expect the fellows to sign that greasy——"

"I'm fed up with these fatheads!" snorted Handforth. "We'll start at the top. That's the idea: get Fenton's signature first."

"Fenton's!" gasped McClure.

"Of course!"

"But—but he's the head prefect——"

"I know that, don't I, you idiot?"

"Yes, but he'll slaughter you!" roared McClure. "Be sensible, Handy, and calm down. You can't take that awful-looking thing to Fenton. Dash it all, use your common-sense——"

"Come on!" snapped Handforth grimly.

Once the mighty Edward Oswald was fairly started he required some stopping. Set-backs only made him all the more determined, and he was impervious to hints and blows. He only got over one insult to deliberately ask for another. Had he been less enthusiastic he would have realised that he was going to work in the wrong way. His idea was a good one, but he wasn't making the most of it.

And to approach Fenton, the captain of St. Frank's, was just about the limit. Church and McClure accompanied him in order to keep the peace, but they both resolved to remain on the right side of Fenton's door.

They arrived, and Handforth knocked stiffly. By this time he had recovered his confidence, and marched in boldly in response to a cheerful "Come in." In his present mood, Handforth would have gone to the Head himself with perfect equanimity.

Fenton of the Sixth was chatting with Morrow and Conroy major, and he frowned slightly as he saw Handforth.

"Can you spare a minute, Fenton?" asked Handforth crisply.

"What for?" asked the prefect.

"Well, I've got a petition here," explained Handforth. "We're going to present it to Mr. Lee when he arrives—asking him to stay at St. Frank's, you know. I've signed my name, and I want you to put yours to it. I thought you'd like the honour of being first after me and Church and McClure!"

"Oh, the honour?" said Fenton grimly. "Is it a joke?"

Handforth stared.

"A joke?" he repeated. "Why, you ass—I—I mean—— It's—it's a petition, and everybody in the House is going to sign it. Just have a look at it and then sign your name. If you can suggest any improvement, I might consider the tip—although I don't promise to make any alteration!"

The calm, businesslike manner in which Handforth spoke compelled attention: although he was oblivious of the fact that he was addressing the lordly Sixth-Formers in a manner which was well calculated to arouse their ire.

And when he presented Fenton with the famous petition, the captain of St. Frank's was to be excused for imagining that this was some particularly cheeky practical joke. For the petition by this time was wearing a very worn-out appearance.

"You cheeky young sweep!" said Fenton angrily.

"Eh?"

"Take a hundred lines for sauce!" said Fenton curtly.

"A—a hundred lines!" gasped Handforth. "But—but you don't seem to realise—— This is a petition, Fenton! I want you to sign it."

"Get out of this study, you cheeky young scamp!" roared Fenton, striding forward.

Handforth backed away hastily, and failed to observe that the edge of the door was immediately behind him. The back of his head caught it with a crack which made him dizzy, and he reeled out into the passage.

"Oh, my hat!" he panted. "What do you think of that?"

"Didn't we warn you," began Church—"didn't we tell you——"

"I don't want any of your rot, Walter Church!" shouted Handforth, who always expended his wrath upon his long-suffering chums. "I'm fed up with these fat-headed seniors. We'd better show the thing to Nipper and hear his opinion. I meant to do that at the first, but I thought I'd give these other chaps a chance. What the dickens are you staring at, McClure?"

"No—nothing!" gasped McClure. "Let's get to Study C."

And three minutes later Handforth and Co. presented themselves before Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Tommy Watson, and myself. We were just starting tea, having come in rather late from the cricket field.

"Hallo, Handy!" I said. "You're looking rather flustered. Want to borrow some butter? Sorry; but we've got margarine."

"Rats to that!" said Handforth. "I've

been thinking this afternoon, and I've got an idea—the best idea of the term!”

“Begad! Really?” asked Sir Montie mildly.

“It's about Mr. Lee,” put in McClure hastily. “Handy wants to get up a petition, signed by all the chaps, asking your guv'nor to stay on as Housemaster, Nipper. It's a good idea——”

“Who's doing the talking?” roared Handforth.

I looked thoughtful.

“A petition, eh?” I said. “By jingo, that ain't a bad idea. And do you mean to say you thought of it, Handy—all yourself?”

“Of course I did!” declared Handforth. “If you're trying to be funny——”

“My dear chap, it's a ripping idea!” I said enthusiastically. “It's just the very thing we want. If we can only show the guv'nor that everybody in the House wants him to stay, he might alter his decision.”

“That's just what—I thought,” said Handforth briskly.

“Well, shut the door, and we'll jaw it over,” I said. “What are you grinning at, Church?”

“Oh, nothing!” said Church. “That is to say, I was only thinking what a lot of trouble it would have saved if Handy had come here first. But he wouldn't take our advice.”

“Oh, never mind that!” I said hurriedly, as Handforth showed signs of breaking out. “Let's discuss this thing quietly. I always know a good idea when I see it—even if it's Handy's I suppose you haven't drawn up the petition yet?”

“Rather!” said Handforth. “Just have a look at it!”

And he proudly spread it upon the table before us, doing so with flourish.

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CHAPTER III.

FENTON LEADS THE WAY—A MEAN TRICK—
FULLWOOD AND CO. CATCH IT.

SIR MONTIE gazed at the petition, aghast.

“Is—is that what we have to sign?” he asked faintly.

“Of course it is!” said Handforth. “It's just short and—sweet, without being too flowery——”

“I don't know about flowery,” I put in. “Judging by the look of it, it seems to be more buttery than anything else! Do you seriously mean to tell me, Handforth, that this is the petition?”

“Of course it is!”

“And you were going to present that to the guv'nor?”

“Why not?”

“Why not?” I echoed. “You silly, double-dyed idiot, if Nelson Lee had had that thing given to him he would have slaughtered you! Why, it's in a shocking state. A petition wants to be clean and imposing—not a

grubby, crumpled, greasy scrap of paper like this!”

Handforth looked blank.

“But it's all right, ain't it?” he asked anxiously. “I took it to Fenton——”

“You—you took it to Fenton?” yelled Tommy Watson.

“Yes.”

“And what did Fenton say?”

“He gave me a hundred lins.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Begad! You deserve a thousand—you do, really!” said Sir Montie. “Fancy havin' the cheek to give a thing like that to Fenton! I'm surprised at you, Handy!”

“My dear Montie, it's not Handforth's fault—it's his misfortune,” I grinned. “He seriously believes that this horrible-looking thing is all right. And just listen to it! Oh, my hat!” I picked up the petition gingerly. “‘Please don't go because we want you to stay’! You—you ass!”

“What's the matter with it?” growled Handforth.

“What's the matter with it!” I repeated. “Everything's the matter! It's absolutely rotten! The idea itself is first class, but you've made a frightful mess of it. It's lucky you came here.”

In any other study Handforth would have gone up into the air; but here he merely stared at us, and his face went red.

“You—you write it out, then,” he said huskily. “I suppose I ain't much good at that sort of thing, really. But the idea's mine—don't forget that. I thought about getting everybody in the House to sign it.”

“Quite right,” I agreed. “My dear chap, it ought to work wonders; but it'll have to be done thoroughly, and not in this fashion. Why, the fags wouldn't have concocted——”

“Oh, go easy!” growled Handforth uncomfortably.

I tossed the petition into the waste-paper basket. How on earth Handforth could have imagined that it was satisfactory was beyond my belief; but it was a fact, and it was small wonder that he had been hurled out of three studies in succession.

At the same time the idea was sound. To present Nelson Lee with a signed petition, urging him to remain at St. Frank's—a document which contained the names of every fellow in the House—would certainly have some effect upon the guv'nor. It was bound to, and I became enthusiastic.

Careless of tea, I drew a large four-fold sheet of foolscap towards me, and ruled it into divisions, so that the name of every fellow could be squeezed in comfortably. And I worded the thing itself in a very different manner to the original.

The petition urged the guv'nor, earnestly and respectfully, to reconsider his decision to leave St. Frank's. It pointed out that the Ancient House had never been conducted so well as when Nelson Lee's guiding hand was at the helm, and that it was the wish of every fellow to have him back in command. In conclusion, the document stated

that the Ancient House would feel the blow severely if the gov'nor refused to grant the request.

"Well, I suppose it's better than mine," admitted Handforth rather grudgingly. "Not so short, of course, and I ain't sure that it wouldn't be better in a few words. If you'll hand me that pen, Watson, I'll sign it at the top——"

"No, you won't!" I interrupted calmly.

"But it was my idea!"

"Never mind whose idea it was," I put in. "This petition is a House matter, and it's only right that Fenton's name should be at the top. Then we'll have all the rest of the seniors, and next the Remove. You can be the first Remove chap to sign, if you like."

"It's all rot, but I won't insist," said Handforth generously. "You'd better not go to Fenton, though. He'll kick you out of his study neck and crop!"

"Just because he kicked you out, Handy, it doesn't mean to say that he'll kick me out," I said sweetly. "You do things in the wrong way, old son. It's your fate to be misunderstood; but you generally bring the trouble on yourself. This idea's good, and we're going to push it along!"

So we hurried over tea, and then set out for Fenton's study. Church and McClure and Tommy Watson didn't come—it wouldn't look well to have a crowd. Besides, they were busily explaining the idea to the Remove and Fifth.

Fenton was alone when we arrived, and he looked up with a frown.

"Well, what do you want?" he asked shortly.

"Just your signature, Fenton," I said. "We've got a petition here——"

Fenton turned red with wrath.

"You cheeky young bounder!" he shouted. "Take two hundred lines——"

"Hold on, Fenton!" I said hastily. "Don't be in such a giddy hurry! This isn't anything like that fat-headed thing of Handforth's. We're serious—honest Injun!"

Fenton calmed down.

"I'll give you one minute," he said shortly.

I made good use of that minute, for when I had done the captain of St. Frank's took the petition, read it through, and nodded.

"Yes, I'll sign this," he said readily. "We should all be jolly glad to see Mr. Lee back as Housemaster. But I thought you were trying some silly game on. If you like, I'll come along to the Sixth common-room and get all the other fellows to sign, too."

"Oh, thanks, Fenton," I said gratefully.

He signed his name, and then we departed. Fenton's aid was a great help, for he was the most important fellow in the Ancient House—in the whole school, as a matter of fact. Every prefect and every member of the Sixth followed his lead without hesitation. Even Starke and Kenmore—bullies who didn't want the gov'nor to return at all—were compelled to sign for the sake of appearances.

The document had now assumed an impor-

tant air. With all the names of the Sixth Formers appended, the petition was something which would compel attention at once. And we soon found this out.

The Fifth followed suit to a man, being always ready to take the Sixth's lead. And after that, of course, the Remove tumbled over itself in its anxiety to sign. Handforth was the first of the juniors to append his name, and we only grumbled because he took up so much paper.

"Ripping idea!" was the general verdict.

We were busy for fully two hours for it was a long job getting the name of every fellow in the whole House. Some of the chaps were absent, of course, and spaces were left for them, all ready for when they turned up.

The Third and Second nearly went off their heads, for it was a great honour for them to participate in anything of this kind. I insisted upon grubby hands being made clean before the petition was touched. This resulted in the storming of the bath-rooms.

But at length nearly every name was appended. And the foolscap had been added to by another sheet of the same size. Handforth was openly jubilant, although he was forced to admit that the whole scheme would have fallen shockingly flat if it had been left in his hands.

It was quite possible that all our labour had been in vain; but we were prepared to go to any length to impress upon the gov'nor the fact that he was badly wanted, and that the Ancient House would feel his loss intensely.

Fullwood and Co. had been absent during the general signing of the paper, but they turned up just after the finish, and I collared them at once.

"Names, please," I said briskly. "We've left three spaces for you fellows——"

"What's this fat-headed thing?" asked Fullwood tartly.

"A petition, signed by the whole House, asking Nelson Lee to become Housemaster again."

"And you want us to sign it?"

"You're going to sign it!" I replied grimly.

"You're mistaken—we're not!" sneered Fullwood.

"Rather not!" echoed Gulliver and Bell.

"You can take it away and bury it!" said Fullwood. "We wouldn't sign it for quids! We don't want old Alvy back——"

There was a howl.

"Are you going to sign it?" I asked steadily. "Every other name's here except yours, so you'd better stop this foolery!"

Fullwood and Co. walked away.

"Hold on!" I said. "You'd better know what I'm going to do. Has anybody got a pen and some red ink?"

Some was quickly fetched from the cupboard—we were in the common-room—and I laid the paper upon the table and wrote across the three empty spaces in bold letter-

ing, "Fullwood, Gulliver, and Bell refuse to sign."

"Begad! That's the idea!" said Sir Montie approvingly. "That'll show the cads up for what they're worth!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Good for you, Nipper!"

"You had your chance to sign," I said coldly, "so you can't grumble at your spaces being filled in like that. I expect the Head will see it; but that's your look-out. This paper represents the opinion of every fellow in the House—and it's just as well that Mr. Lee should know yours!"

Fullwood and Co. looked alarmed.

"I—I say," muttered Gulliver. "Will the Head really see that?"

"He will!" I replied. "And he'll see that you've openly insulted Mr. Lee."

"Oh, we'll sign," said Fullwood calmly.

"You won't!" I retorted. "It's too late now, you rotters! I wouldn't let you sign if you went on your knees!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Serve 'em right!"

"Rather!"

Fullwood and Co. were hissed as they left the common-room, looking rather alarmed. My action had taken the wind out of their sails. But I had been quite justified in setting down that the three cads had refused to sign.

Fullwood and Co. went straight to their study.

"We're in for a fine thing now!" grunted Bell savagely. "It was all your fault, Fully. Why the deuce couldn't you sign? We should have backed you up if you had done. This'll mean a floggin', I expect."

"Rot!" snapped Fullwood. "We've got a right to our opinion, I suppose?"

"The Head may not think so," said Gulliver. "If I'd known that Nipper was going to do that I'd have signed—"

"Look here," put in Fullwood. "We don't want that detective chap back—he's too jolly strict; won't let us smoke in the study, or play cards, or anythin'. This chap who's comin' from Seaton is just the sort of Housemaster we want—a chap who'll let us do pretty well as we like."

"How do you know?" growled Bell.

"I met some of the Seaton chaps during the vac.," explained Fullwood. "Accordin' to what they say, we shall be in for an easy time. So I don't see why we should have this Lee rotter back again."

"How the dickens are we going to prevent it?" snapped Gulliver. "Do you think the absence of our names will make any difference?"

"No; but the absence of the lot might," said Fullwood significantly.

"The—the lot?"

"Exactly," replied Fullwood, his eyes glittering vindictively. "Look here, why shouldn't we seize our chance and pinch that rotten petition? It's sure to be kept in Nipper's study until Lee arrives. We'll go along there an' shove the thing in the fireplace and set light to it!"

"I—I say!" muttered Bell. "That's a bit too thick!"

"Piffle!" said Fullwood. "If you chaps don't like to back me up, I'll do it myself. Who'll know? We sha'n't be seen, an' when they go for the petition it won't be there. Nothin' can be proved—an' they'll be dished!"

"By gad!" said Bell. "It would serve the cads right! An' we shouldn't get into any trouble, either. I'm with you, Fully!"

The Nuts talked over their contemptible plot for some time, and then set themselves to watch. They saw me go to Study C with the petition, and they saw me come out without it. After that I was busy in the Triangle, getting the fellows enthusiastic over another idea that had come into my head.

This was Fullwood and Co.'s chance.

The Remove passage was deserted, and the three cads slipped into Study C and were soon ransacking the place. Our valuable petition was in considerable danger, had we only known it. There would be no time to get another one written out—Fullwood knew that—and the whole thing would be spoilt. Nothing would bring home to the gov'nor our feelings so much as that formidable list of signatures. And it would lose half its effect unless it was presented as soon as he arrived. Moreover, the Fifth and Sixth would probably refuse to sign all over again.

Fullwood found it during the first minute. This was not very surprising, for I had only placed it in the table drawer, never dreaming that it would be in any danger.

"Here we are," said Fullwood softly. "Give us a match, Bell. We don't want to waste any time."

Bell struck a match and passed it to Fullwood. Just for one second the petition's fate was in the balance, for the flame flared up beneath the lower corner of the foolscap. As matches will do, however, the flame expired.

"Hang!" snapped Fullwood. "Strike another—quick!"

The fact that the first match went out certainly saved the situation, for, before Bell could strike another, Sir Montie Tregellis-West entered the study. He stared in astonishment.

"Hallo! What are you fellows doin'—?" Sir Montie paused abruptly. "Begad! You—you awful cads!"

With one bound Sir Montie strode forward, grabbed the petition, and flung it on to the recess cupboard. He had seen the Nuts' object at once, and all his fury boiled up to the surface.

"You frightful, vindictive rotters!" he exclaimed hotly. "Begad! I'll teach you somethin'! I'll teach you to play these shockin', low-down games!"

Fullwood and Co., caught in the act, backed round the table in alarm. They imagined that Sir Montie was not alone; but as nobody else followed Tregellis-West into the study, their confidence returned.

"Go for him!" muttered Fullwood savagely.

Gulliver and Bell were not quite so enthusiastic. Sir Montie, for all his languid ways, possessed a pair of formidable fists, and he knew exactly how to use them. However, Sir Montie was alone, and that made all the difference.

The three cads charged at him together, Fullwood's idea being to seize the petition even now, regardless of the consequences—they would probably be drastic, in any case. So Fullwood, at all events, was determined.

He flung himself at Sir Montie, and received a punch upon his elegant nose which sent him staggering.

"Begad! I'm ready for you!" shouted Tregellis-West angrily.

Smack!

His fist caught Gulliver right in the neck, and Gulliver reeled against the table, sending it flying upon the somewhat dazed Fullwood. Bell vainly attempted to escape. But he, too, was bowled over.

"Come on, you awful rotters!" shouted Sir Montie. "Begad! Ain't you goin' to do any more fightin'? I can't hit you while you're down—"

"You interferin' beast!" snarled Fullwood savagely.

He sprang to his feet and glared round him. Gulliver and Bell were nursing their injuries and seemed in no way inclined to fight.

"Rush him, you funky bounders!" snapped Fullwood. "Come on!"

The next few moments were interesting. Fullwood rushed, but his noble chums dodged to the window and escaped. As it happened several juniors had heard the row in the Triangle—the window being wide open. And Gulliver and Bell fell into the hands of a considerable crowd.

Before they could explain Fullwood himself came flying through the window head first. He sprawled upon the gravel with a howl of pain, and was pounced upon and held down. But by this time I had arrived upon the scene with Tommy Watson.

"What's the trouble here?" I asked briskly.

Sir Montie appeared at the window rather ruffled, but perfectly self-possessed. He adjusted his pince-nez and displayed the famous petition.

"Begad, I just rescued it in time, dear fellows!" he explained. "Those frightful bounders were on the point of burnin' it—"

"Burning it?" roared Handforth violently.

"Exactly!"

"Burning my petition!" bellowed Handforth, more excited than ever. "Lemme get at 'em! I'll—I'll—"

But what Handforth intended doing was drowned in the general roar of indignation which rose. And Fullwood and Co., gasping and yelling for mercy, were picked up like straws and frog's-marched round the Triangle four or five times. By the time this gentle treatment was over the cads were just about exhausted.

Their mean trick had failed, but only because of the unexpected arrival of Sir Montie. After that I took jolly good care to place the petition under lock and key. And Fullwood and Co. crawled away in misery.

CHAPTER IV.

A SURPRISE FOR NELSON LEE—AND A ROUSING WELCOME.

NELSON LEE stepped out of the train at Bannington, looking healthier than he had ever looked in his life before; the recently concluded trip to the South Sea Islands had made him as fit as a fiddle.

The previous day he had bade good-bye to his old friends Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi, those two cheerful individuals being already intent upon a trip to some other wild region of the earth. Lord Dorrimore loathed London, and never minded saying so.

After very careful consideration, Nelson Lee had decided not to stay at St. Frank's in the capacity of Housemaster. He felt that his talents—for whatever they were worth—would be rather wasted at the old school.

At the same time he was fully determined to make frequent visits to St. Frank's. The boys, he concluded, would not care particularly—that is, the majority of them. One Housemaster was very much the same as another—always excluding such terrible exceptions as Mr. Kennedy Hunter.

And so the great detective was coming down to St. Frank's this evening in the full expectation that he would receive no particular welcome. But before arriving he received something of a surprise.

It was necessary for him to wait ten minutes at Bannington for the local train which would carry him on to Bellton, the station for St. Frank's. And as he strolled along the platform, travelling-bag in one hand and with a cigarette between his lips, he gazed hard at the back of a man who was reading a poster. Then he smiled and chuckled.

"Why, hallo, Lennard!" he exclaimed heartily. "What on earth are you doing in this highly respectable part of the country?"

Detective-Inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard, spun round and stared.

"Lee, as I'm alive!" he ejaculated.

They shook hands warmly, the C.I.D. man grinning with pleasure. He and Nelson Lee were very old friends, having been engaged in many exciting adventures together.

"Well, I'm hanged if I expected to see you, Lee!" declared Lennard. "And just look at your face, too. Where in the world have you been—holidaying? You're as brown as roasted coffee!"

"Thanks for the simile," chuckled Nelson Lee. "The fact is, I've just returned from a Pacific voyage—"

"Lucky beggar!" said the inspector. "I've been stewing away in London, working myself to the bone. And where are you off to now, pray? Not to that school—St. Harry's, or Frank's, or something?"

"Yes."

"In that get-up?" asked Lennard, staring.

"Do I look so disreputable?"

"My dear man, you're yourself!" protested the Scotland Yard official. "I thought you were somebody else at St. Frank's—a House-master? What about those infernal Chinese fellows, the Fu Changs?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I don't fear those yellow avengers any longer," he explained. "Owing to a certain clause in their society's rules, a man who is marked down for death is allowed to go free if he succeeds in evading the Tong-men for a given time—I can't go into it all now, old man. But you can be satisfied that Nipper and I are safe."

"Then you're leaving St. Frank's?"

"I am; but Nipper will remain."

"Well, I dare say the young beggar can do with some more schooling," said the inspector. "What do you think of the Bannington affair? Rather queer, isn't it? I can't quite get the hang—"

"My dear Lennard, I don't know what you're talking about!" smiled Lee.

The inspector pulled up short.

"You don't mean to tell me— Oh, of course!" he said. "You've been lazing about on a sea voyage. Well, there's quite a pretty mystery down here; the local police can't get on at all, so I've appeared upon the scene."

"It'll soon be cleared up, then—"

"I'm not so sure about that," interrupted the Scotland Yard man. "I've been down here a couple of days and I'm bothered if I can make anything of it. Perhaps you'll just— Oh, is this your train?"

"I think so," said Nelson Lee.

A local train had just pulled in, and the detective boarded it. Lennard remained outside on the platform. He accepted a cigar from Lee, and the pair lit up.

"I'm waiting for the tip train," explained the inspector. "There's one of my men on her. Oh, but about this mystery! For some little time past there have been some queer happenings round about here; and a week ago a prominent local gentleman mysteriously disappeared. Everything pointed to foul play, but I'm hanged if I can lay my fingers on the heart of the mystery. Look here, Lee, can't we manage to have a long chat—"

"How long will you be in Bannington?"

"Oh, for a week, perhaps!"

"Well, ring me up at the school," said Nelson Lee, as the whistle blew. "We can arrange a meeting— Good-bye, old man. Be good!"

"It's my chief failing!" grinned the inspector. "Good-bye!"

Nelson Lee settled back into his seat with a very thoughtful expression in his keen grey eyes. He had not expected to meet

Lennard down at Bannington, and the very fact that a prominent Scotland Yard official was on the scene proved that the mystery was of some importance.

Bannington was in the neighbourhood of St. Frank's, and Nelson Lee was always keen upon a mystery. True, he was in no way connected with this affair, and it was not his habit to push himself forward where the official police were concerned. But Lennard evidently wished to talk the matter over with him, and Lee was certainly interested.

"I expect Nipper will be waiting to greet me at Bellton," he mused. "And possibly Tregellis-West and Watson will be with him. I am afraid Nipper will be somewhat upset—but the young rascal will soon get over it."

Nelson Lee certainly had no idea that anybody but myself and my two study mates would be waiting for the train. The other fellows, he concluded, had something far more important to think about than a former Housemaster. For that was Nelson Lee's position now. The appointment was still open, of course, but he had felt bound to decline.

When the train steamed into Bellton Nelson Lee got a very big surprise. Not only was the platform crowded with Ancient House fellows, but they overflowed into the booking-office and out into the station yard. Just for a moment the gov'nor positively thought that this crowd had no connection with him.

But he was soon enlightened upon this point.

As the train came to a standstill he half leaned out of the window with his hand upon the door-handle. And there was a roar from the juniors when he was seen. I was responsible for that roar, for I had given the word to let it go.

Ever since the signing of that petition, an hour or two before, I had been engaged upon the task of imbuing the fellows with a great enthusiasm—not that they needed much treatment. Practically everybody in the House was anxious for Nelson Lee to take the reins again.

"Here he is!" I yelled. "Now for it!"

"Hurrah!"

"Hip, hip, hurrah!"

The cheers rang out vigorously, and as Nelson Lee stepped out of the train the astonishment upon his face was very apparent. He looked at the crowd, and the crowd looked at him.

"Welcome back to St. Frank's, sir!"

"Hurrah!" roared Handforth before his time.

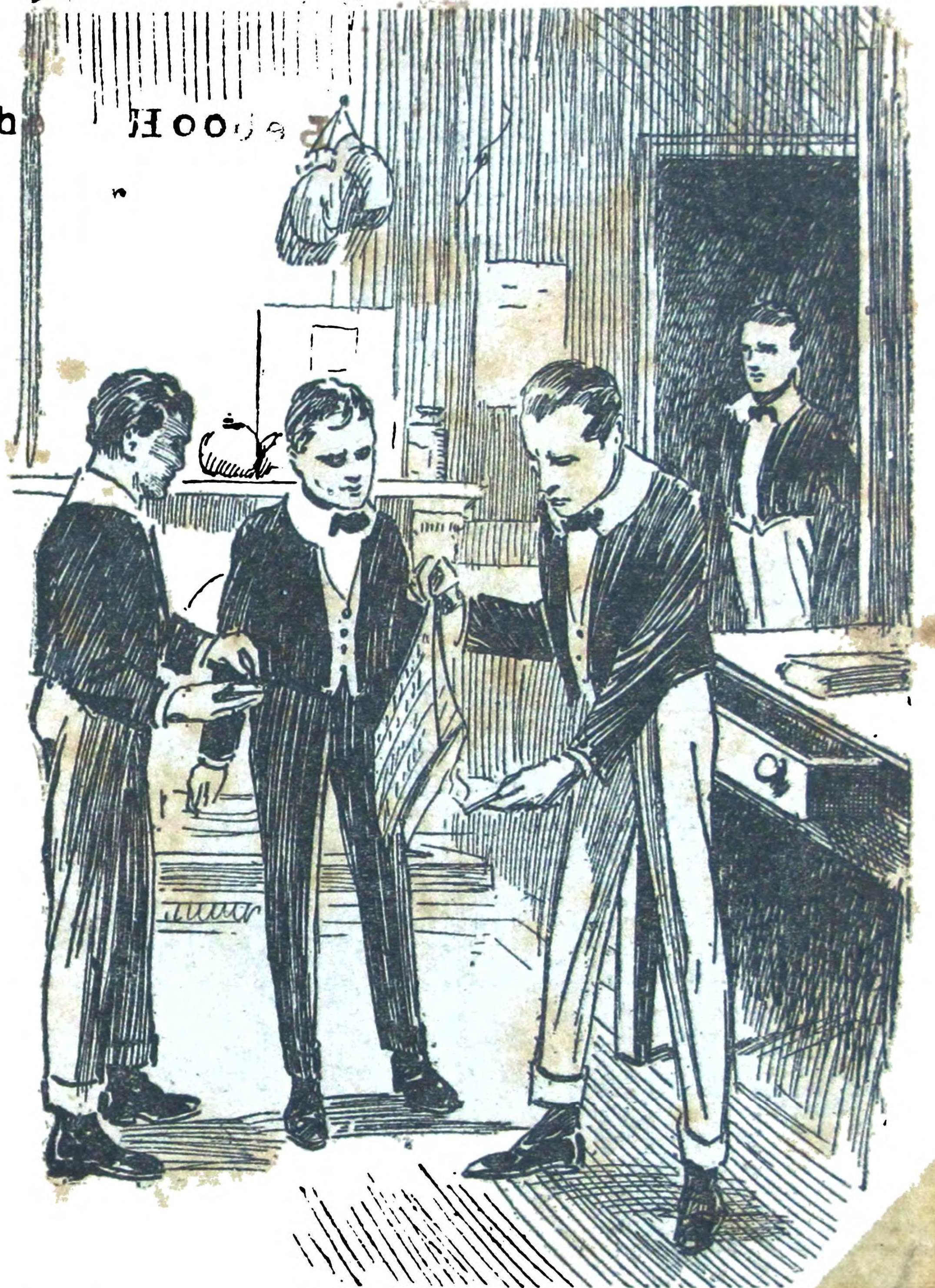
"Hope you've come to stay, sir!"

"Welcome back, sir!"

"Three cheers for old Alvy!"

"Hip, hip, hurrah!"

The enthusiasm I had worked up was nothing to the pitch which the fellows worked themselves into unaided. When a crowd of chaps get cheering—especially when they want to cheer—they generally let themselves go. By the time the welcome was



Fullwood placed the lighted match to the petition, and for one brief instant its fate was in the balance. Then—Sir Montie appeared.

(See page 10.)

half through everybody in the train was at the windows; and by the time we had yelled ourselves hoarse the train had steamed out of the station.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Nelson Lee, hardly knowing what to say. "This is most gratifying, boys. You must let me thank you for this rousing reception, which, I am afraid, I scarcely deserve——"

"No—no!" roared the crowd. "You deserve more, sir!"

"I can assure you, boys, I did not expect anything so pleasing as this," said Nelson Lee. "I can see that you are nearly all members of my own House—or, rather, of the House which I used to conduct——"

"Oh!"

"You're still going to conduct it, sir!"

"Rather, sir!"

"For a long time to come, guv'nor!" I roared.

Nelson Lee was quite at a loss for a reply. Such a tremendous reception as this was not only unlooked for, but somewhat disconcerting. At the same time I could easily see that the guv'nor was pleased. He had really had no idea of his popularity at the old school.

Not only was the Remove there—almost to a man—but every lag in the Ancient House, and quite a sprinkling of Fifth-Form fellows. They had swallowed their dignity in order to take part in this general welcome.

And before Nelson Lee could give voice to the carefully worded reply he was preparing, he was seized by dozens of fellows—at my instigation, I'll confess—and hoisted shoulder-high. Needless to say, I was one of the bearers. And in this triumphant fashion the guv'nor was carried on the flood through the booking-office. Incidentally, we nearly knocked his head off in the doorway!

And outside in the yard a further surprise awaited the now thoroughly alarmed guv'nor. A carriage was awaiting him—but it was no ordinary, common, or garden vehicle. It looked most imposing—being, in fact, an open landau, decorated to such an extent that its actual identity was well-nigh concealed.

The whole carriage was plastered with gaily coloured bunting—specially borrowed for the occasion—and four high posts had been fitted up with long streamers flying in the breeze. Various inscriptions, such as "Welcome Back," and "Good Old Alvy," and "He's Come to Stay!" were upon those streamers.

The landau was horseless, but long ropes had been fitted, and a score of fellows rushed for them at once. Nelson Lee was deposited breathlessly into the carriage, and then commenced a triumphant career through the village. Such a commotion had not been heard in the old High Street for years.

The villagers looked on agape. And Nelson Lee, truth to tell, in spite of his iron nerve, was feeling somewhat scared. The carriage was swaying alarmingly. But I was between the shafts, so the guv'nor needn't have

worried. I couldn't help being reminded of the reception we had accorded the ever-to-be-remembered Mr. Hunter. It had been something after this style, only extremely tame by comparison.

It was nearly dark by the time we arrived at St. Frank's. And then, cheering breathlessly, the fellows drew the landau into the Triangle. Here half the College House was waiting to see the arrival. And Bob Christine and Co., catching the general excitement, led the Monks in a rousing cheer—although Nelson Lee hadn't been, and never would be, their Housemaster. It was just an inkling of the guv'nor's popularity—even with the rival House.

His reception had been a rousing one, and Nelson Lee was greatly impressed—as we fully intended he should be. The whole Ancient House was prepared to go to any lengths so long as Nelson Lee was contented to remain.

And the guv'nor felt the whole thing keenly.

For the first time he became aware of the fact that it would be more than a wrench for him to leave St. Frank's for good. For the first time a wee doubt began to creep into his mind.

Our first move had been a distinct success!

CHAPTER V.

BY REQUEST OF THE GOVERNORS—LEE'S REFUSAL—SOME EXCITEMENT!

DR. MALCOLM STAFFORD, the reverend Head of St. Frank's, grasped Nelson Lee's hand warmly as soon as the latter was shown into the study by Tubbs, the page-boy. Even Tubbs was glowing with satisfaction, and Nelson Lee had not missed his obvious pleasure.

"I am glad to see you again, Mr. Lee," exclaimed the Head heartily. "I witnessed your arrival from the window, and I must remark that the boys have accorded you a very striking welcome back."

"To tell you the truth, Dr. Stafford, I am quite flustered," said Nelson Lee smilingly. "I really don't know how I managed to escape from them. And I had no notion that my return would arouse so much feeling. I am flattered."

"My dear Mr. Lee, the Ancient House has been in a state of gloom since the news leaked out that you did not intend to return to the school in the capacity of Housemaster. Nothing has been said to me, but my eyes are still fairly keen. The boys will be sadly upset if you adhere to your decision."

"But really I am not a schoolmaster——" The Head chuckled.

"Possibly that explains your extreme popularity," he put in. "At all events, there is not the slightest doubt that the Ancient House, as a whole, is enormously anxious for you to remain."

The pair sat down, and the Head looked serious.

"And I wish to add my voice to the general chorus," he went on. "Really, Mr. Lee, I wish you could reconsider your decision—and yet I realise that it is scarcely possible for you to remain at St. Frank's now that you are able to go back to your own identity. Being a schoolmaster must seem extremely tame to you, after your strenuous life—"

"On the contrary, Dr. Stafford, I really think that I have met with more exciting adventures since I arrived at St. Frank's than I ever experienced in the same amount of time previously," interposed Nelson Lee. "It is a remarkable fact, but there it is. And I fully appreciate the point that my departure now may appear extremely selfish."

"I don't quite follow you, Mr. Lee."

"When I was in danger I sought the refuge of this school, and found safety," said Nelson Lee. "Now that that danger has passed I coolly decide to take my departure. But really, I had no idea that the boys would be so affected," he added. "No doubt they will soon forget me—"

"Oh, no!" interrupted the Head quickly. "Boys are forgetful beings, Mr. Lee, but they would not fail to remember 'Mr. Alvington.' While you conducted the Ancient House it prospered exceedingly, and I am almost alarmed when I think of your departure. Really, Mr. Lee, I would rather lose any master in the school than yourself. Please glance at this."

Nelson Lee took a letter from the Head, and saw that it was from the St. Frank's Board of Governors, and signed by the chairman, Sir Rupert Manderley, himself. It was addressed to Dr. Stafford, and urged him strongly to do his utmost to persuade Nelson Lee to remain in charge of the Ancient House.

The governors had gathered from the various reports that the Ancient House had never run so smoothly as when Nelson Lee was in charge. He had taken the reins at a most difficult time—at a time when a "dry rot" had developed, mainly owing to the slackness of the former Housemaster. The Ancient House, in fact, had been in a bad way. It was second in everything; games were almost dead, especially in the junior section of the House.

But under Nelson Lee's influence—a magnetic influence, the governors declared—a wonderful change had come about. The Ancient House had gone up and up; until now, at the present time, it was far and away the premier House at St. Frank's, leading the way in everything. Without Nelson Lee that astounding change could never have been accomplished.

The governors were afraid—and not without reason—that Nelson Lee's departure would be the signal for a decline, and that the wonderful vitality of the Ancient House would relax. Therefore it was most necessary that every effort should be used in urging Nelson Lee to remain.

The great detective laid the letter down thoughtfully. He was impressed—far more impressed than he allowed the Head to know.

Not only the boys, but the governing board requested him to remain.

For a few seconds Nelson Lee wavered.

But then his lips tightened, and he shook his head almost imperceptibly.

"I am very pleased to know that my presence in the school was of such benefit, Dr. Stafford," he said quietly. "Personally, I am strongly inclined to remain. But, seriously, do you think it is right that I should do so?"

"Perfectly right!" said the Head promptly.

"But I am not a schoolmaster by profession, and you cannot deny that I am keeping—or shor'd be keeping—a position which rightly belongs to another man. At the same time, duty calls me elsewhere. No, Dr. Stafford, although I was inclined to waver for a few seconds, I must adhere to my decision. It is most gratifying to know that my services are so urgently required, but I certainly do not feel myself worthy of such unstinted praise as the governors have thought fit to bestow."

"I gather, then, that our efforts are fruitless?" asked the Head.

"I am afraid so."

"I am not surprised, Mr. Lee, but I am deeply sorry," said Dr. Stafford quietly. "Schoolmasters of your calibre are extremely rare, I assure you. It is not a matter of training or of qualifications—although, if it comes to that, I was never in the presence of such a qualified man as yourself. The true secret lies in personality. Your personality, Mr. Lee, was in no way disguised by the name of 'Mr. Alvington.' You cannot help being yourself, and it was not so much the work you did, as the influence of your personality which raised the Ancient House to its present astonishing standard. Bereft of your presence a decline must set in—it is absolutely inevitable. During your period of office the masters and boys were bound together in a manner which has never been attained before, and, I am afraid, will never be attained again. Candidly, Mr. Lee, the boys love you."

Nelson Lee was rather at a loss.

"It is very kind of you to say all this, Dr. Stafford," he remarked, "but, at the expense of repeating myself, I must say that I am not deserving of such commendation. I earnestly hope that the decline you prophesy will not take place."

The Head was silent. He could see very distinctly that Nelson Lee was firm, and he knew that it would be useless to press the matter. So he changed the subject, and the pair were soon chatting amiably.

After a while Nelson Lee glanced at his watch, and rose to his feet.

"If you will excuse me now, Dr. Stafford, I will just take a brisk walk to the village," he said. "I am rather anxious to have a little chat with Dr. Brett; he is quite an old friend of mine."

Five minutes later Nelson Lee let himself out by means of the side door and strode quickly across the darkened Triangle towards

the gates. It was still fairly early in the evening, but was prematurely dark owing to heavy clouds, which seemed to promise a thunderstorm during the night. The gates were not yet locked up, and as Nelson Lee was going out he passed Tubbs. The page-boy hesitated, as though about to say something, but then closed his mouth again.

"Well, Tubbs?" asked Nelson Lee smilingly.

"You - you ain't goin' to leave us, are you, sir?" gasped Tubbs.

"I am afraid so, Tubbs."

"I'm awfully sorry, sir, an' so are all the other servants," said the page-boy feelingly.

"They're terrible cut up, really, sir!"

Tubbs hurried away, feeling that he had been rather too presumptuous, perhaps, and Nelson Lee walked into the lane with the smile still upon his lips. The servants, too! He had certainly not expected anything of this nature.

The lane was gloomy and quite deserted. Nelson Lee paced down it briskly, with his thoughts far away. He was therefore rather startled when three black forms suddenly emerged from the wood which bordered the road. They were unrecognisable in the gloom.

The manner in which the strangers barred the lane made it quite clear that they were intent upon stopping Nelson Lee—for they were only a few yards ahead. They were men—big, powerful men—and one of them held a stout cudgel.

"'Ave you got a light, guv'nor?" asked one of the men respectfully.

Nelson Lee paused in his stride.

"Certainly," he replied, feeling in his pockets.

The detective was thinking rather deeply on other matters, and he certainly did not suspect any attack by strangers in this quiet, peaceful lane. If Nelson Lee had been engaged upon a criminal case he would have been very much on the alert. But even a detective does not suspect everybody of evil intentions.

Therefore he felt for his matches somewhat absently, still thinking of his conversation with the Head. The three men pressed round him, and one of them peered forward in the gloom.

"It's Lee all right," muttered one of them. "On him!"

At the same second the trio grasped Lee fiercely. The detective gave a shout of fury, realising that he had been taken at a disadvantage. He did not pause to think who these men were, or why they were attacking him.

He seized the situation at once, and let drive a punch which sent one of them reeling back giddily.

"You scoundrels!" shouted Nelson Lee grimly. "If you're anxious for a fight, I'm quite ready to— By James!"

One of his attackers tore round in the dust and gave Lee a vicious kick behind the right knee. His leg bent under the force of the blow, and at the same second the man

with the cudgel brought the weapon down upon Nelson Lee's head with a thud.

The detective went down in a heap, dazed.

He wasn't stunned, but the blow had undoubtedly scattered his wits somewhat, and he was unable to put up any further fight. The three men grasped him roughly and carried him bodily into the wood.

Had he been prepared for this attack the result would have been very different—even though the odds were so heavily against him. But it had come as a complete surprise, and Nelson Lee, as a result, had failed.

What could be the meaning of this strange attack?

CHAPTER VI.

WAITING FOR THE SIGNAL—TUBBS BRINGS NEWS—RESCUING NELSON LEE.

THE common-room was crowded.

There was quite an amount of excitement, too. The fellows were very pleased with the manner in which the triumphal journey from the village had passed off. We all knew that Nelson Lee had been impressed. And when we presented him with the petition he would certainly be impressed even more.

"It's no good being impatient, my sons," I said calmly. "Mr. Lee's with the Head at present, but he can't stop there all the evening—"

"Supposing he does," demanded Handforth, "where the dickens shall we be? We'll look a fine set of asses, waiting here —"

"If the guv'nor doesn't show up by nine o'clock we'll go and roust him out," I said coolly. "He's going to have that petition presented to him to-night. And I reckon we'd better present it in the lecture hall—in the presence of the whole House."

"But we can't get the fellows together!" protested Tommy Watson.

"Kats!" I said. "My idea is for Fenton himself to do the honours—"

"Fenton!" shouted several juniors.

"Why not?"

"Why, he's a senior—the giddy school captain," yelled Owen major. "He wouldn't have a hand in this—"

"Why not?" I repeated. "Didn't Fenton start the ball rolling? Isn't his signature the first on the petition? Anyhow, I'm going along to his study. We might as well do the thing properly now that we are about it."

"Begad, rather!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Make a regular ceremony of it," I went on. "We'll get the whole House together in the lecture hall—every chap if we can, seniors and juniors. Then the guv'nor will walk in, and Fenton will hand him the petition. What's going to be the result? Why, it's quite likely that Mr. Lee will decide to remain."

Handforth pushed his way forward.

"That's all very well," he said im-

importantly. "What I want to know is, who's idea was this? Who thought of the petition?"

I grinned.

"I believed it originated in your mighty brain, Handy," I replied. "I wouldn't dream of taking the credit myself——"

"I should think not!" said Handforth. "I'll admit you've improved it a bit——"

"A bit!" yelled Owen major. "Why, you potty ass, that piece of greasy paper you brought us would have choked Mr. Lee off in half a second! And do you think the seniors would have signed it?"

"I'm jolly sure they wouldn't!" grinned McClure. "Handy went to Fenton's study and got the order of the boot instead of a signature—and a hundred lines as a sort of make-weight!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth turned red.

"Well, anyhow, it was my idea!" he roared. "I'm not supposed to know that Fenton would be so potty! He's got a grudge against me, I suppose — there's nothing else to account for it. Why should he hoot me out of his study and then be as mild as milk when Nipper goes there? It's jealousy——"

"All right, Handy," I put in. "Don't run on for ever, you know. The idea was yours, and we'll take good care to let Mr. Lee know it—he might as well recognise that your enormous brain thought out the wheeze."

"That's not the point," objected Handforth obstinately. "It's my idea, and I reckon it's up to me to present the petition!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What's the good of leaving it to Fenton?" went on Handforth. "We don't want a giddy prefect interfering, do we? Let me present the petition, and you can rely on Mr. Lee staying at St. Frank's. I've thought out a fitting speech——"

"Let's hear it!" yelled McClure.

"Not likely!" snapped Handforth. "My speech won't be made until I present the petition!"

"Poor old Handy!" I grinned. "You'll have to wait a long time, then."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Do you mean to say that you don't agree?" shouted Handforth. "Look here, it was my idea from the start——"

"Oh, great Scott!" I groaned. "How many more times are you going to shove that down our throats? You've done your bit, Handy, so dry up. If you don't turn off the tap within ten seconds you'll be squashed flat."

"Look here, you ain't going to shut me up like that!" bellowed Handforth, glaring round him. "I've got my speech ready and I'm going to present—— Hi! What the dickens—— Yaroo! Lemme alone!"

But the juniors had no intention of letting Handforth alone. We were ready to let him run on for a certain length, but Handforth was liable to become monotonous. And the mighty originator of the petition idea was

pounced upon by a dozen fellows, hustled to the door, and forcibly ejected.

This was certainly hard lines for Handforth, after all he had done, but it was entirely his own fault. After the ghastly mess he had made of the petition at the commencement it wasn't likely that he would be entrusted with the delicate task of presenting the genuine article.

Comparative peace reigned in the common-room after Handforth's departure. Certainly a number of violent blows sounded upon the door a moment or two afterwards, but Owen major and Farman and De Valerie were pressed against the door, and Handforth was not admitted.

Dire threats floated through the keyhole, but the only effect they had was to cause many wide grins. And Church and McClure, rather against their will, were persuaded to venture out in order to appease their redoubtable leader. They left the common-room nervously, having had some experience of appeasing Handforth on other occasions.

Less than a minute later the sounds of a heated argument in the passage followed the threats, accompanied by sundry yells and thuds. Five minutes later Church and McClure re-entered the common-room. They were battle-scarred, but triumphant. McClure's nose was much larger than it should have been, and Church tenderly rubbed one of his ears—which was in that state commonly known in the Remove as being "thick." But obviously Handforth had fared even worse, for he was discovered later, in one of the bath-rooms, vainly endeavouring to eradicate an ominous blue patch, accompanied by an even more ominous swelling, in the neighbourhood of his left eye. McClure had presented Handforth with that memento, and McClure boasted of it for weeks afterwards. Handforth's chums were long-suffering youths, but there was a limit.

A general grin greeted them when they appeared in the common-room, and the conversation for some little time ran upon black eyes and thick ears. In answer to all inquiries Church and McClure darkly told the fellows to wait until they saw Handforth!

"The worms have turned—what?" grinned De Valerie.

"Are you calling me a worm?" roared McClure.

"My dear chap, just a figure of speech," said De Valerie calmly. "It's always a wonder to me how you stand Handforth. Life in Study D must be an appallin' round of trouble."

"It is!" said Church feelingly. "But still, we can't desert old Handy, can we? He's a decent chap, one of the very best," he added loyally. "But even Handy goes a bit too far now and again."

"I should say he went too far about twenty times a day," grinned De Valerie. "I like peace in my study—that's why I had one all to myself. But I've got a study-mate now, and we're pullin' together quite decently."

"That's so," agreed a tall, well-built junior, attired in untidy Etons.

I looked at him with a certain amount of interest. He was a new fellow in the Remove; he had arrived at St. Frank's at the beginning of the term, just over a fortnight before. His name was Browne, and he seemed to be quite a decent chap. He had signed the petition willingly, although he knew nothing of Nelson Lee whatever.

I glanced at my watch, and suggested to Sir Montie and Tommy that we should sally out and wait for the gov'nor on the Ancient House steps. If he came across the Triangle we should spot him, and if he entered the lobby from the rear we should also spot him. I was beginning to get somewhat impatient.

"Anythin' you like, old boy," said Sir Montie languidly. "Begad! I hope we shall be able to persuade——"

"Don't hope anything," I interrupted. "Personally, I'm afraid it won't work. But there's nothing like trying."

We passed out of the common-room and strolled through the lobby to the doorway. It was dark outside, and the sky was gloomy and clouded. Although we had only been back at St. Frank's a few days we had fallen into the old way of things immediately, and our South Sea trip was a memory.

"Begad! What's the matter, Tubby?" asked Tregellis-West.

Tubbs, the page-boy, was just entering the Ancient House, and there was ample reason for Sir Montie's inquiry. For Tubbs was looking decidedly gloomy, and his face was expressive of misery.

"Mr. Lee's goin' away, Master Tregellis-West," he said. "I dessay 'e thinks we don't care, but all the servants think just the same as I do. I told Mr. Lee so 'arf a minute ago——"

"Half a minute ago?" I echoed. "I thought he was in the Head's study?"

"No, sir," he replied. "Mr. Lee's just gone out——"

"Gone out!" I shouted.

"Great pip!" gasped Watson.

"Why, yes, Master Bennett—I—I mean Master Nipper," said Tubbs. "Mr. Lee went out not more'n a minute ago——"

"Which way did he go?" I demanded.

"Why, down to the village, Master Nipper!"

I looked at my two chums grimly.

"Of all the bounders!" I panted. "He's slipped away—he's diddled us!"

"Dear fellow, it's shockin'!" said Sir Montie languidly.

"Shocking!" I roared. "Do you think we're going to allow it? He's only just gone, and we'll jolly well haul him back. Come on!"

"Rather!" ejaculated Tommy breathlessly.

We pelted across the Triangle rather wrathful. After all our arrangements to present the petition it was startling to learn that Nelson Lee had calmly walked off. We

had not considered the possibility of his leaving the school during the evening.

"I expect he's going down to see Dr. Erett," I said, as we dashed out of the gateway. "But he won't get back until after bedtime—I know what the gov'nor is when he gets jawing with the doctor!"

We hurried down the lane, and dimly I could see two or three figures in the distance. At that very moment a shout came up the road in Nelson Lee's voice—a distinct shout of alarm.

I pulled up short, and my chums halted, too.

"Great Scott!" panted Watson. "What's the matter?"

"Blessed if I know!" I replied. "There he goes again. By Jupiter! Two or three chaps are setting on to him—— Come on!"

There could be no doubt that the gov'nor was being attacked. For the first second I was so surprised that action had been denied me. Who on earth would want to attack Nelson Lee in this quiet lane?

It was no time to ask questions which couldn't be answered, and I simply pelted forward at top speed, my chums keeping pace just in the rear. Before we had covered half the distance the lane ahead was bare and deserted. Nelson Lee and his attackers had disappeared into the wood.

But I had my eye upon the spot where they had last been seen, and I noticed that the twigs near a gap in the hedge were broken and torn. Without the slightest hesitation I dashed through, grabbing for my electric torch at the same time. Sir Montie and Tommy followed hard on my heels, excited and equally reckless. For we were certainly very hasty.

"Hold on!" I gasped.

Just before us, amidst the trees, several forms were struggling. The truth was, Nelson Lee had recovered from the effects of that blow—it had not been a serious one by any means—and his captors had been startled to find their victim wriggling out of their grip.

Nelson Lee was upon his feet almost at once, and then he went for the rascals furiously. There were three of them against him, however, and the final result would have been inevitable had he been left to himself.

But at the crucial moment we arrived.

I don't believe the men knew anything about our approach until we actually burst through the hedge. At all events, they were thoroughly startled. Perhaps this was because I flashed my torch out, and revealed the trio distinctly.

They possibly believed that we were men, for they couldn't see beyond the spot of brilliant light. And it is always rather disconcerting to find yourself in the full glare of an electric torch.

"Begad! Go for 'em!" panted Sir Montie grimly.

We charged at the same second, making quite a din amongst the dried leaves and rotten twigs. It really sounded as though

a dozen men were charging to the attack. And Nelson Lee had taken advantage of the momentary lull.

One fellow received a punch on the side of his face which sent him staggering, and before he could recover his two companions fled helter-skelter into the wood. The third man just managed to pick himself up in time.

He stumbled away blindly and vanished amidst the trees.

"After 'em!" I roared excitedly.

"No, Nipper!" said the guv'nor. "They were scared, but they will soon recover their wits, and it would be risky for you to follow. Moreover, it would be a hopeless task in this dense wood."

"Are you hurt, sir?" I asked huskily.

"A bruise, my boy—nothing more," replied Nelson Lee. "Upon my soul! This affair is rather extraordinary."

We all breathed hard.

"Were they tramps, sir?" asked Tommy—"footpads?"

"No, Watson; they were not tramps," replied the guv'nor quietly. "They were well-dressed men—and well educated, too. Moreover, they were deliberately waiting for me in the lane—not any passer-by, mind you—and I must thank you, boys, for your prompt assistance."

I was rather bewildered.

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

"I don't know, Nipper—I don't know," replied Nelson Lee. "Those men had planned to get hold of me, and when I found sufficient strength to attack again I saw that ropes were being prepared—in order to bind me. The whole affair is rather startling, and undoubtedly interesting."

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT IS THE MYSTERY—NELSON LEE WAVERS—DR. BRETT, TOO!

FIVE minutes later we were all standing in the lane again. Nelson Lee was not particularly hurt, although there was an uncomfortable bruise upon his head and his clothing was somewhat ruffled.

"Hadn't we better tell the police, sir?" asked Tommy Watson.

"You need not worry your heads, boys," said the guv'nor. "I cannot see how the police could do much good in any case—and you needn't be afraid that I shall be caught napping a second time. I was off my guard on this occasion."

"Where were you bound for, sir?" I asked.

"Dr. Brett's."

"Just what I thought!" I growled.

"Look here, guv'nor, you ain't going!"

"Indeed!"

"It'll be too risky, for one thing——"

"My dear Nipper, a remark of that sort is exactly calculated to make me more determined to go," smiled Nelson Lee. "In any

case I am quite sure that those three ruffians will not bother me again this evening."

"But we want you, sir!" burst out Watson anxiously.

"Begad! Rather, sir!"

"You needn't think I shall run away," chuckled the guv'nor. "I shall be in great evidence to-morrow——"

"But we want you this evening!" I broke in. "Look here, guv'nor, it's all very well for you to talk about to-morrow. We've planned a—a—— Well, never mind what we've planned, but we want you in the lecture hall before supper. We want you to appear there at nine o'clock to the minute."

Nelson Lee glanced at his watch.

"Twenty minutes past eight," he said. "Plenty of time yet, Nipper. And when you refer to 'we,' whom do you mean?"

"Why, the whole Remove—the whole giddy House, in fact, guv'nor!" I replied. "There you go—making me tell you everything!"

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"I assure you, Nipper, my notions are very hazy concerning this very important meeting in the lecture hall," he exclaimed. "However, I must consume my curiosity until nine o'clock—when you will see me in the hall."

"You'll come, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"I have already said so."

"Good for you!" I exclaimed. "Nine o'clock sharp, remember. But where are you going now?" I added. "You can't go down to old Brett now, guv'nor. There isn't time; and, besides, you might get knocked on the head——"

"I think it is far more probable that you will get knocked on the head, you young rascal," interrupted Nelson Lee severely. "It will take me ten minutes to reach Dr. Brett's house, and ten minutes to return—which leaves me, roughly, twenty minutes with my friend. So the longer you keep me waiting here——"

"You'd better buzz off, sir!" I said promptly. "But, mind, if you don't turn up we'll never forgive you! It's awfully important!"

"Rather!" echoed my chums.

A moment later Nelson Lee parted from us, and we returned to St. Frank's with much satisfaction. Not only had we rescued Nelson Lee from a trio of ruffians, but we had secured his promise to attend the lecture hall at nine sharp.

At any other time I should have thought deeply about that attack; but just at present my thoughts were busy in another direction. I was enormously anxious to convince the guv'nor that it was sheer absurdity for him to even think of leaving St. Frank's.

As for Nelson Lee himself, he had no such worries, and he was therefore able to give his full attention to the mysterious assault. The incident had been rather significant, and Lee was impressed.

As he walked briskly down to the village,

his head aching slightly, he could not help connecting the attempt to capture him with the mysterious affairs which Detective-Inspector Lennard had hinted at.

Somebody had been kidnapped in the neighbourhood, and other mysterious incidents had occurred. This clearly pointed to the fact that a gang of criminals were operating in the Bannington district. These men had doubtless learned that a St. Frank's Housemaster was none other than Nelson Lee; they were possibly not aware that he had decided to leave the school.

The knowledge was public property—indeed several London papers had printed quite elaborate paragraphs concerning the affair. All of these paragraphs were highly complimentary to Nelson Lee, and the good work he had done at the school was fully described.

It was quite reasonable to suppose, therefore, that a criminal gang had become nervous; they did not want such an astute man-tracker in the neighbourhood as the celebrated Mr. Nelson Lee. Accordingly, they laid their plans, and had attempted to get hold of the man they feared.

Nelson Lee could scarcely help feeling complimented, and once again he wavered in his decision. There was the hint of a mystery in this district, and it was like breath to his nostrils. But he realised that an investigation would be quite a simple matter—without his remaining at St. Frank's as Housemaster.

"The very fact that these fellows have thought fit to arrest me is of itself rather striking," the detective told himself. "It points to the fact that these criminal operations are of a very sinister nature, and it is feared that I shall upset things. Well, quite possibly I shall—at all events, I mean to do my best in that direction."

By the time Nelson Lee arrived at Dr. Brett's house he had fully made up his mind to remain at St. Frank's for a week or two at least. The Headmaster would willingly extend his hospitality for much longer than that.

Dr. Brett was the village medico—quite a youngish man, and devoted to his work. And he was a splendid companion, and singularly clever. During Nelson Lee's sojourn at St. Frank's he had often spent interesting hours with the doctor. The two had become firm friends, and Nelson Lee had not seen Brett since the latter became aware of the detective's real identity. He had known about it long before St. Frank's, for Nelson Lee had written him immediately upon returning from the South Seas.

He greeted his visitor very warmly, and was obviously delighted to see him. Nelson Lee was equally pleased.

"After I got your letter I realised many things, old man," said Dr. Brett, when he and Nelson Lee were seated in his little study, and after they had talked for some few minutes. "It gave me a bit of a shock, I can tell you."

"Hardly a shock, Brett," smiled Nelson Lee.

"My dear man, I was delighted!" the doctor hastened to explain. "It was the best piece of news I had heard for many a day. I can understand now how you managed to get me out of that frightful mess with the police—when I was arrested for murder, you remember."

"Oh, that was quite a simple affair," said Lee, with a chuckle. "By the way, I had a little adventure only a quarter of an hour ago. I was attacked on the way down here, and should have fared badly had not Nipper and his two chums appeared upon the scene."

Dr. Brett stared.

"Man alive! You talk about it as though it were nothing!" he ejaculated. "By Jove! I wonder——"

"Well?"

"There have been some rather queer things going on near Bannington this last week or two," said the doctor slowly. "I was just wondering if there could be any connection. Did the brutes hurt you?"

Nelson Lee displayed his bruise, and Dr. Brett pursed his lips.

"An ugly knock!" he declared. "You ought to let me do something, Lee."

"Nonsense!" said the detective. "I have suffered far worse bruises than that, Brett, and have not had them attended to. Fortunately my head is singularly hard. I want to know about this mystery—these queer happenings."

"Well, upon my soul, I'm afraid I can't tell you much," said Brett. "There have been two serious robberies, I know, and some old gentleman was kidnapped a day or two ago. The police are trying to find him now, I believe. The countryfolk are quite scared, locking and bolting up their cottages as though they concealed untold wealth. If it comes to that, the villagers could easily leave their doors wide open all night," he added with a chuckle.

"And, by the way, Lee," he went on, "what's this about your leaving?"

"It's perfectly true."

"That's what I was afraid of," said Dr. Brett seriously. "I hardly thought that you would remain now that you are free to go where you please. But it's hard lines, Lee—deucedly hard lines. It's as quiet as the dead down here as a rule, and I shall miss you enormously."

"I shall probably run down occasionally——"

"Occasionally!" snapped the doctor. "What's the good of that? I want you here, old man. Can't you possibly manage to stay on?" he added anxiously. "Jove! I'd give anything if you remained. I was talking to Dr. Stafford yesterday, and he tells me that he will be fearfully cut up if you leave. Stay down here, Lee—you need a holiday!"

"Come, come, Brett, that's too thin!" chuckled Nelson Lee. "I have just concluded a very prolonged holiday. But I must admit

that my resolution has been greatly shaken during this last hour or two."

"Well, let me shake it a little more," said the doctor. "You don't know how you'll be missed, Lee—you can't imagine the void you'll create. You can manage to do some detective work in your spare time, surely?"

Nelson Lee stroked his chin.

"Well, to be quite frank, there was plenty of detective work to be done during my stay at St. Frank's," he said. "If that is anything to judge by, I shall have my hands full during this term—"

"Then you mean to stay?" asked Brett eagerly.

"I didn't say so," replied Lee, his eyes twinkling. "Oh, no, Brett, I must think it over more deeply before finally deciding. This continued offensive, however, is having its effect, and I shall certainly weigh the whole matter carefully before leaving the school."

To tell the truth, Nelson Lee was wavering even now. It required but a little more to destroy his resolution altogether. Everybody he had met had pressed him to stay—and he was not exactly made of stone. His better sense told him that it would be absurd for him to remain in this quiet village, but the human nature within him was strong. The universal request was beginning to impress him far more deeply than he would have admitted.

And when he left Dr. Brett—well, Dr. Brett was hopeful.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MEETING IN THE LECTURE HALL—BY GENERAL REQUEST—THE GUV'NOR'S DECISION.

EDGAR FENTON, the captain of St. Frank's, frowned severely.

"Now then, can't you juniors be a little quieter?" he demanded. "This affair isn't a rag—it's a serious matter for the whole House, and Mr. Lee won't be impressed if you're yelling like that when he comes in!"

It was five minutes to nine, and the big lecture hall in the Ancient House was absolutely crowded. Every fellow belonging to the House was there—including Fullwood and Co.

I suspected that they had come to groan; but they had been warned, in very plain language, that if they so much as uttered one sound of a groaning or hissing nature, they would be ejected with far more force than comfort.

Everybody was excited, of course, and all the juniors were talking. Fenton's remarks were by no means unnecessary. But it's rather difficult to keep a crowd of juniors quiet at the best of times.

In spite of my former doubts, I was beginning to become hopeful.

"Surely to goodness the guv'nor will take some notice of this?" I remarked to Sir Montie and Tommy. "He can't ignore

that petition without offending practically everybody in the school."

"Dear fellow, that's just what I've been thinkin'," said Sir Montie. "We're forcin' his hand, you know. He must consent—he can't do anythin' else. If he doesn't agree we'll cheer him just the same, but we shan't be so hearty."

"I reckon the chaps will raise the very dickens if Mr. Lee says he won't stay," remarked Watson, shaking his head. "I say, I suppose he'll come?"

"Come where?" I asked.

"Why, to the lecture hall."

"Hasn't he promised us, you ass?"

"Yes, but he might think better—"

"The guv'nor's promise is good enough for me," I interrupted. "He'll turn up all right, don't you worry."

"Can't you kids keep quiet?" roared Morrow, of the Sixth.

"All right, Morrow, keep your hair on!" I replied. "I'll be answerable for the Remove, anyhow. Now then, you chaps," I added sharply. "Keep order, you asses! Handforth, don't bawl so much!"

"Who's bawling?" roared Handforth aggressively.

"I don't answer obvious questions," I replied tartly. "Will two or three chaps kindly smother Handforth?"

About half a dozen fellows obliged.

"You—you fatheads!" yelled Handforth. "Leggo! Ow!"

Handforth's megaphonic voice subsided after a while, although occasional outbursts sounded. There would probably have been trouble, but for the fact that the Head entered at that moment.

There was an immediate hush, and Dr. Stafford looked round rather wonderingly. So far as he knew, there was no lecture announced for this evening, and the most popular lecturer at St. Frank's had never succeeded in drawing an audience of this size. It was evidently something very special.

"Dear me, Fenton," exclaimed the Head mildly. "Can you tell me what this meeting is for? I heard—ahem!—a somewhat unusual noise, but the explanation is now apparent."

"We're going to present a petition, sir," said Fenton. "It was Nipper's idea—"

"Mine!" came an indignant roar from the Remove ranks.

"Shurrup, you ass!"

"Smother Handy again!" I groaned.

Fenton grinned.

"There seems to be a little argument in the Remove, sir," he said. "Perhaps it wasn't Nipper's idea. I really believe Handforth originated it, but his efforts were so appalling that I mistook his meaning when he came to my study, and gave him a hundred lines for cheek!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Head smiled.

"Quite so, Fenton," he said. "But I am still somewhat in the dark."

"It's a petition, sir," explained Fenton. "Every fellow in the House has signed it, and my signature is at the top. We are

going to present it to Mr. Alvington, hoping that he'll be persuaded to remain at the school as our Housemaster."

Dr. Stafford nodded approvingly.

"A splendid idea, Fenton!" he exclaimed.

"A remarkably good idea, I may say!"

"I thought of it, sir!" shouted Handforth triumphantly.

"Ahem! Did somebody speak?" inquired the Head, gazing at the throng over the tops of his glasses. "Ah, I notice that you are looking somewhat excited, Handforth. Please keep calm, my boy. I quite appreciate the point that you originated this splendid idea, and I commend you warmly. Fenton, I am sure, will not expect to receive the hundred lines he gave you."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" said Handforth, glowing.

"As for the petition itself, I hope it will succeed in its object," went on the Head.

"When are you expecting Mr. Lee?"

"Almost immediately, sir," said Morrow.

The Head took the petition and glanced over it. He kept nodding with approval, and I saw him start slightly as he looked at a spot near the bottom of the second page. Fullwood and Co. saw that start, too—and they went pale.

"What is this I see here?" exclaimed the Head, in a pained voice. "Can it be possible that Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell have refused to add their signatures? They have a right to their opinion, of course, but I hardly thought—"

The Head paused abruptly, and gazed at Fullwood and Co.

"Did you refuse to sign, boys?" he asked quietly.

"We—that is——" gasped Fullwood helplessly. "Y-yes, sir!"

"Candidly, I am at a loss to understand why you should not add your voices to the general chorus," said the Head. "But may I inquire what you are doing in this lecture hall, Fullwood? And why are Gulliver and Bell here?"

"We—we came to—to cheer, sir!" gasped Fullwood.

The Head raised his eyebrows.

"Really, I cannot accept that statement, Fullwood," he replied. "And since you have chosen to insert this jarring note in an otherwise harmonious gathering, you must leave the lecture hall at once. I cannot permit you to remain—indeed, I am greatly surprised to see you here."

"Outside, you young cads!" muttered Conroy major, of the Sixth, who was standing near the Remove ranks. "You ought to be licked!"

Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell, completely "done," slunk out of the lecture hall. Their refusal to sign had earned them the contempt of the whole House—and the rest of the fellows were not likely to forget it.

Two minutes after they had left, and while the Head was chatting with Fenton, the door opened and the guv'nor appeared. He was plainly taken aback by the sight of the enormous crowd which filled the hall.

"Good gracious!" he began. "What on earth——"

"Here he is!" went up a roar.

"Hurrah!"

"Three cheers for our Housemaster!"

"Hip, hip, HURRAH!"

It was a yell which fairly shook the rafters, and the fellows exerted their lungs to an almost dangerous extent. Nelson Lee, with the memory of his reception at the station still in his mind, could not fail to appreciate this astounding ovation.

He had known that he was well liked in the Ancient House, but it was a complete revelation to him to witness this positive sign of his unprecedented popularity. He mounted to the platform amidst a further thunder of shouts.

"Really, boys, I do not quite see where I come in," he smiled. "Have you asked me to come here merely to be cheered? I assure you, I am not worthy——"

A further roar interrupted him, and Fenton stepped forward.

"I am speaking for the whole House, sir," he said. "We wish to present you with this petition, and hope you will consider it seriously and thoughtfully. Whatever your decision may be, we shall accept it at once, sir."

Nelson Lee took the petition and glanced at it. The next second his gaze left the page and searched the Remove ranks. He had recognised my handwriting in a second, of course, and erroneously concluded that I was the originator of this scheme—which was rather hard luck for Handforth.

I grinned at him cheerfully.

"Read it, guv'nor!" I shouted.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

I didn't realise, until that laugh burst out, that it sounded queer for me to address the Housemaster as "guy'nor." But everybody understood, and everybody was amused.

"Yes, Nipper, I intend to read it," said Nelson Lee. "Had I known what you were decoying me into, I might have taken fright. However, now that I am here, I will gather my courage together and face the ordeal with a bold front—no matter how nervous I feel inwardly!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Nelson Lee read the petition. His face told us nothing; it was perfectly impassive and unreadable. He glanced at all the names, but did not seem to notice that Fullwood and Co. had not signed. Finally he laid the petition down.

The crowd took a deep breath.

But the guv'nor didn't speak for some few moments. We didn't know the actual cause, but I learned of it afterwards. Ridiculous though it may seem, the iron-nerved Nelson Lee felt a distinct lump in his throat!

As plain as anything could be plain, the whole Ancient House had told him that they wanted him to stay. The guv'nor had never suspected that the fellows cared a toss; he imagined that seniors and juniors alike would accept the news philosophically, and with merely a few comments.

But actually the case was vastly different.

From the school governors down to the smallest fag they all wanted him to stay! All the other masters in the Ancient House had added their names to the petition—an afterthought of Fenton's. A separate sheet contained this little collection, headed by a few choice words by Mr. Crowell, the Remove Form-master.

And the servants, too! True, Nelson Lee had only Tubbs's word for it, but he had also seen indications on his own account. Warren, the porter, for example, had been almost painfully respectful, and several maidservants he had passed had actually curtsied to him—quite an unusual occurrence.

In fact the request was a general one.

In face of all this openly expressed feeling Nelson Lee's resolution broke to pieces. He was a human being—far more human than most people imagined—and he simply hadn't the heart to stand before all the fellows and say that he ignored their appeal and that he intended to leave.

He couldn't do it—it was an impossibility.

Furthermore, he did not conceal from himself the fact that he was greatly interested in Detective-inspector Lennard's story; he actually wanted to remain, in order to make investigations on his own account.

But I'm pretty sure, apart from that feature, he would have decided just the same. And he was greatly affected. All this was a singularly fine compliment to him—a personal tribute—and he fully appreciated it.

"Well, boys," he began quietly, amid general silence, "you have shown me, at least, that I was not unpopular during my recent term of office as Housemaster. And it is very nice of you to make this request of me. I can assure you all that I am very grateful for your good wishes, and I know that you are sincere——"

"Rather, sir!"

"We mean it, sir!"

"Hurrah!"

"You've got to stay, sir," roared the crowd.

"Stay—stay!" bellowed the echo of voices.

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Well, considering that you all want me to remain," he said, "I could not ignore this appeal unless I were made of marble. Since I am not, I can do nothing but accept the inevitable, and consent——"

"Honest Injun, sir?" I roared delightedly.

"I intend to ask the Headmaster to be good enough to accept my services for this term—at least," said the guv'nor. "It is quite possible that I may remain at St. Frank's longer——"

"Oh, good!"

"Hurrah!"

"Three cheers for Mr. Lee!"

"Three cheers for Nipper!"

"Hip, hip, hurrah!"

The uproar in the lecture hall was simply enormous. It was heard in the College House very distinctly, and crowds of Monks came charging across the Triangle to see what all the excitement was about. And after the fellows had shouted themselves hoarse, Nelson Lee made a little speech.

It was a somewhat difficult task, because he was being constantly interrupted by fresh bursts of cheering. He informed the fellows that he wasn't much of a hand at talking—which was a distinct libel on himself—and then proceeded to make one of the best speeches which had ever been delivered at St. Frank's.

At the conclusion the chaps did their utmost to get rid of their voices for all time—and some of them very nearly succeeded! At all events, the next day there was an epidemic of hoarseness in the Ancient House.

The general satisfaction was unbounded. The personality of a Housemaster was of great importance to every individual boy—a splendid chap like the guv'nor made life worth living; whereas any ordinary Housemaster caused the routine to be somewhat monotonous and wearisome. The guv'nor's wonderful vitality and magnetic influence had affected the House from the Sixth downwards.

And he had decided to remain. If ever there was an occasion for cheering, this was one!

"Well, upon my soul, Nipper, I scarcely know whether I am on my head or my heels!" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "I don't really!"

We were sitting in the guv'nor's study, and I had snatched the opportunity to have a few words with him before we went to bed. It was splendid to see him sitting there—himself.

"This is really a preposterous state of affairs," continued the great criminologist. "What on earth am I doing here—in a school? I ought to be in my rooms at Gray's Inn Road! I ought to be——"

"You ought to be kicked for saying such stuff, sir!" I put in cheerfully.

"You cheeky young rascal!"

"That's all right, guv'nor!" I grinned.

"We've got to imagine ourselves in Gray's Inn Road—see? This is your consulting-room, and clients will drop in every now and again. I'll bet they will, too! Why, guv'nor, it'll be just splendid down here!"

Nelson Lee lit his cigarette and allowed the smoke to roll lazily towards the ceiling.

"Upon my soul, young 'un, I'm not sure that you are not right!" he exclaimed quietly.

Whether I was right or not, the fact remained that both Nelson Lee and myself were now firmly established at St. Frank's—not as "Mr. Alvington" and "Dick Bennett," but as—ourselves.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!—(See p. iv of cover.)

MAGNIFICENT NEW SERIAL!

The Chums of Littleminster School.

A Magnificent Story of School Life and Adventure.

By ARTHUR S. HARDY.

The First Chapters.

BASIL HOOD is a new boy at Littleminster School.

On his arrival he makes a friend of

JOHN CHALLIS, a Senior in the Fifth Form.

MYERS and COGGIN are two bullies, who, with some others, try to make Challis join the "Clubs," an athletic society. He refuses, and they determine to send him to Coventry. He is persuaded later by Mr. Evans, a master, to join. Ponsonby puts down Challis's name to play in a practice match. The next day he visits Challis in his study. Challis has to tell Ponsonby, however, that he is unable to play in the practice match, having arranged a little fishing trip with Basil. The two are secretly followed on this jaunt by Myers, who, whilst they are occupied in fishing from a moored punt, releases the rope, and they are whirled towards the weir.

(Now read on.)

THE RESCUE.

"KID," said he, "we've got to jump out in a minute. You stand up and cling to me, will you? Don't be afraid. I can swim. I'll get you safe ashore. Only, it's got to be done. Understand?"

Basil stared, white-faced, at Challis.

"We've got to jump into the river?" he asked, with trembling lips. "Why?"

"Because," answered Challis quietly, "if we go over the weir we'll stand no chance."

"But—your fishing-tackle—the punt—all your things—"

"We can't think of them now, boy. Now, stand up. Get ready. We must do it!"

Basil, standing erect, obedient, and resigned, looked ahead, heard the noise of the waters, and shuddered. Challis set his strong right arm about him and smiled.

"Courage, old man, courage," he said. "We shall only get a ducking, that's all."

"I—I—don't mind—as long as I'm with you," answered the little boy, and he closed his eyes.

By this time their plight had been observed from the bridge, and a warning shout rang out. The man who gave it began to run, but it was a long three-quarters of a mile round to the spot where the punt was making for.

Basil closed his eyes. Oh, the noise of those fearful waters! He felt afraid at last, and his heart nearly stopped. But the feel of that strong arm about him gave him courage, steeled him to a brave submission.

He prayed that he would not struggle and spoil Challis's chance.

The bigger boy watched the bank, saw how the current bore the punt near, and at last pulled Basil up and balanced himself upon the side. The critical moment had come.

"Don't be afraid, Basil," said he, and he sprang.

The next moment they were in the water, and the punt swung onward, seeming to gather fresh speed and energy through being relieved of its burden.

Basil uttered one cry, and closed his mouth. Then the waters shut over them.

Down they went, down. Challis rose, and, making sure that Basil had got a firm grip of him, struck out. Already the swift current was bearing them out, and he knew that unless he could master it they were lost.

How he struggled, handicapped by the dead-weight of the little boy.

Sometimes he felt that they would both be lost, then his heart would beat high with hope again. For what seemed endless minutes—it was only seconds in reality—during which they went under several times, the struggle went on, and then Challis, as his brain seemed about to burst, realised that he was making progress.

The bank was only a yard or two away. A stroke or two more and his feet touched the bottom. He stumbled, plunged under, rose again, and, seizing the half-drowned boy, lifted him with a last effort and somehow or other threw him up on to the bank.

Then he reeled, fainting, against the mud wall, and lay there spent.

It had been a close call. Thousands of strange lights danced before his eyes, the blood surged to his brain. He nearly fainted.

He had swallowed a great quantity of water and he felt sick.

But after a little while he grew calmer, breathed more freely, and his eyes cleared.

He saw Basil lying still above him. A shudder of apprehension ran through him. Was the boy dead?

With an effort Challis pulled himself together, drew himself up on to the bank, and bent over the new boy. Basil lay huddled up, his knees drawn towards his chin, his face turned to the earth.

Challis hesitated, awed by the relaxed position in which he lay.

Then, on his knees, he lifted Basil and,

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

supporting his head, peered into the white face. Ah! With a low cry Challis saw that the little chap was breathing, and, with lips trembling with thankfulness and tears welling into his eyes, he set to work to restore animation.

Even so, it was some time before Basil came round.

There were moments in which Challis feared that his friend might have a relapse, and again and again his eager eyes searched the towing-paths in the hope that he might see a stranger there whom he could send for a doctor.

No one came.

It was with a sense of the deepest gratitude to his Maker that Challis saw the light of consciousness gleam in Basil's eyes and saw the boy's lips tremble.

"Is—is that you, Challis?"

"Yes, young 'un. But don't worry yourself by talking. You lie still. You'll be all right in a moment."

"We've been in the water, haven't we?"

Challis nodded, and went on chaffing the cold hands and tending the boy.

"Ah, I remember. It was awful, the struggle, and—I swallowed such a lot of water. It seemed as if someone were striking me on the head with a hammer, Challis. And I couldn't breathe."

"I know. But it's all over, Hood. You'll be as right as a trivet in a minute or two."

Basil lay still and for some minutes did not speak a word.

Gradually the colour came back to his cheeks and the bright light to his eyes. At last he was able to sit up and smile. This was just as assistance came, the man who had shouted at them from the bridge having made his detour and arrived upon the scene.

"Can I help you, guv'nor?" he asked. He was a roughish-looking working-man with a kindly face.

"Thank you, but I think we're all right now," answered Challis cheerfully.

"H'm. You mightn't have been, youngster. And perhaps it'll teach you not to trust yourself in a boat on a river you don't know. The Awle's dangerous in these parts, especially when the river's in flood. I thought you were both going over the weir."

"Thanks, I know the river all right," said Challis calmly. "I went up stream and tied my punt to the shore. Don't know how it broke loose. I think somebody cast it off for a joke."

The man stared.

"Rum sort of joke," he growled. "You're Littleminster boys, aren't you? Thought so. Well, if I could lay hands on the lad who did it I'd give him such a thrashing as he wouldn't repeat his offence."

He gave Basil a hand, and the sag stood on his feet. He and Challis faced their friend, their sodden clothes clinging close around them. Both boys had lost their hats. Each looked decidedly the worse for wear. The man eyed Basil critically.

"You're all right," said he. "And it strikes me, youngster, that you've got something to thank your chum for." He glanced

at Challis. "Did you jump out here?" he asked.

"A little lower down. I knew we should go over the weir if we remained in the punt. I jumped in at the nearest point to the shore."

The working-man's fault-finding gave place to a growing admiration for this big, strong, and capable boy. With a smile and a nod he asked whether he could do anything for them. "I'd give you a change of clothes," he said, "if only I lived near. My home's a couple of miles away."

"Thank you," said Challis, "but we can manage. We'll walk back to Littleminster. And we'll dry-out on the way."

HOW CHALLIS TOOK BASIL BACK TO LITTLEMINSTER.

FIVE minutes later they began the long walk back to the school. Challis felt fit and well again, save for a dull pain in his head. He supported Basil Hood and helped him along, talking cheerily on the way, until he realised that the boy would manage the distance all right, weak and ill though he seemed.

Then he was suddenly smitten with remorse.

"It's all my fault for dragging you out fishing," he said, with frowning brows. "I could easily have got out of the trouble if I'd been by myself. I don't know what you must think of me. You might have been drowned." He burst into a bitter laugh.

Basil turned and clutched his arm, glancing up into the strong and troubled face wistfully.

"Please don't," he whispered. "I've had a beautiful day, but for the wetting, Challis. And it wasn't your fault. We'd have been all right if that brute hadn't cast the painter loose."

Then he added, stopping with a cry of alarm, "But what's happened to the punt?"

Challis shrugged his shoulders. What did he care about the punt at such a time?

"It's gone over the weir, I suppose," he answered.

"And will you get it back?"

"No, boy. It'll be smashed to bits. You see, there's a big head of water come down after the recent heavy rain. It wouldn't stand a chance."

"And—your fishing tackle and gear?"

"They've all gone, too."

"Oh, and you won't be able to buy any more?"

"I'm afraid I shan't, young 'un. Still, I've had a lot of fun out of my fishing. I'll have to try something else."

Challis then lapsed into a moody silence, watching Basil as they walked, searching eagerly for the slightest sign of collapse. His thoughts were not of the sunniest. After all, if he'd only played in that cricket match this would never have happened. Had

(Continued overleaf.)

he been wrong he wondered? His conscience smote him sorely. He was a keenly sensitive and highly strung boy, was Challis, in spite of his size and strength.

Curiously enough, he did not pause to think of the possible outcome of this adventure. It never occurred to him that he might be hauled up before the Head, and that severe punishment might follow.

Over the last mile Basil faltered. Challis looked in vain for some vehicle to carry them. Finally he caught the boy up, in spite of his remonstrances and protests, and pick-a-backed him the rest of the way. He did not falter or tire, yet his relief when he saw the towers of Littleminster loom up in front of him was great.

He passed the main gates, pursued his course through the shrubbery, so that he could gain Evans's house unseen, and, with a sigh of relief, at last arrived at the door without attracting any notice. Here he set Basil down.

"Here we are at last, young 'un," he said, with a beaming smile, as he wiped the perspiration from his forehead. "Home!"

Basil said never a word, but smiled up at him and then promptly fainted.

Challis was only just in time. Yet his strong arm caught him, and picking him up as if he were a child, he sprang through the door.

As he did so somebody approached the threshold. It was Mr. Evans, the master, and as he saw Challis in his sodden clothes, bearing an apparently lifeless boy in his arms, he recoiled with a sharp cry of dismay.

"Good heavens, Challis!" he cried. "What is the meaning of this?"

John Challis had half expected some such encounter as that which took place between him and the master of the house at the school door, and yet he was taken somewhat aback.

His nerves were a little unstrung. In spite of his strength and his effort of will, the walk home from the banks of the Awle had taken more out of him than he knew.

Though he hardly realised it yet, death had been very near to him when he had struggled to save Basil.

His head ached, his heart beat fast, and in spite of his exertions he felt cold when he reached the school.

And what a spectacle he presented!

Mr. Evans could hardly believe his eyes as he stared aghast at the apparition which suddenly loomed before him. Challis's appearance would have shamed a scarecrow. He'd lost his cap. His sodden clothes were streaked with mud and clay. His boots were caked with the ooze and slime of the river bed. Everything he wore clung tightly to him. Over his face, also smeared with mud and dirt, his hair hung in matted streaks.

And out of darkened sockets a pair of fierce eyes glared.

Basil, in an equally deplorable plight, lay limp and inert in his arms.

As Challis reeled back a step the master sternly repeated his question:

"Challis, what is the meaning of this?"

"There has been an accident, sir," stammered the unlucky boy.

"For which you are responsible?"

Challis made no reply, but his sensitive lips quivered, and his face hardened.

"Where did it happen? What have you been doing?"

"We went fishing on the Awle, sir. The punt broke away and we leapt out to escape being carried over the weir."

A sharp exclamation burst from the master's lips. He looked sternly at Challis as he took a step forward.

"If anything happens to young Hood," he cried, "you will be responsible." And his voice was hard. "The boy looks very bad. How long has he been like this?"

"Not long, sir." He walked part of the way back to Littleminster and collapsed when we came within sight of the school," explained Challis, as he supported his burden on his knee. Basil was becoming a dead weight now.

Mr. Evans closely studied Basil's face and listened anxiously for the sound of breathing.

"I think I had better carry him upstairs," said Challis, moving slowly forward, and speaking quietly.

(To be continued.)

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