

No. 167.—MAGNIFICENT SCHOOL AND DETECTIVE NOVEL!

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There was a slip, then a wild yell—Handforth had tumbled into the garden!

THE MOOR HOUSE MYSTERY!

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing a Fresh Battle of Wits between NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the "CIRCLE OF TERROR." By the Author of "A Bid for Gold," "By General Request," etc., etc. August 17, 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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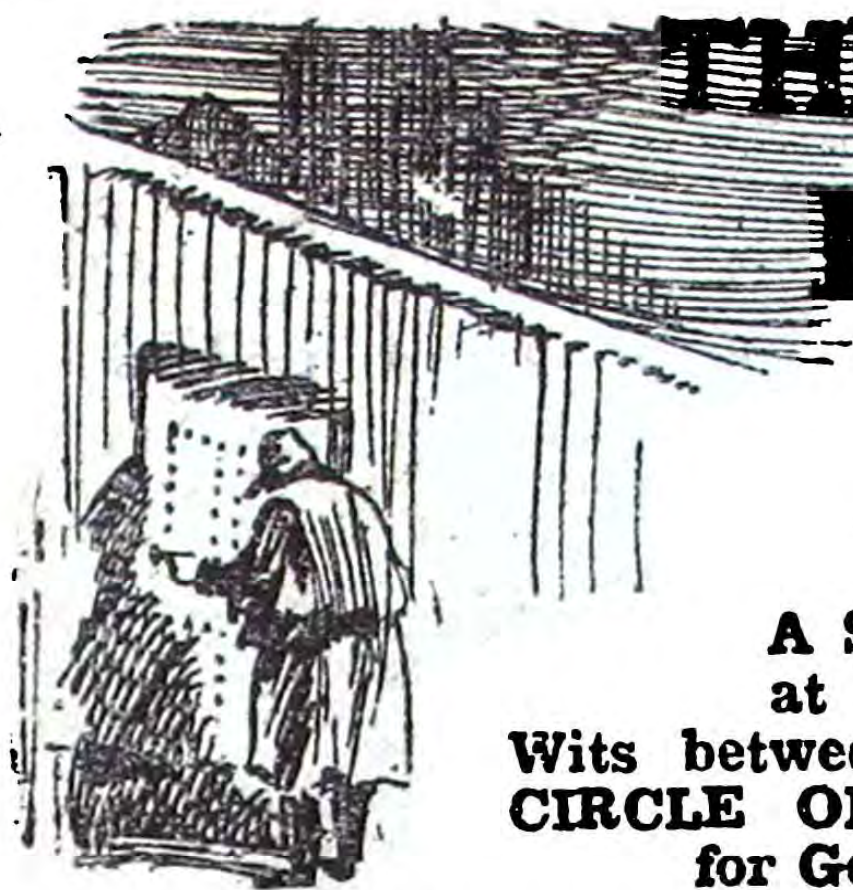
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THE MOOR HOUSE

MYSTERY!

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing a fresh Battle of Wits between NELSON LEE and NIPPER and "THE CIRCLE OF TERROR." By the Author of "A Bid for Gold," "By General Request," etc., etc.

(The Story related throughout by Nipper.)

CHAPTER I.

BROWNE, THE NEW FELLOW—HANDFORTH'S FOLLY—REAL GRIT!

NELSON LEE came out of the Ancient House at St. Frank's and emerged into the bright sunlight of the September afternoon. It was a half-holiday, and a great many of the fellows were already on the playing-fields. I had a bat tucked under my arm, and was about to start for Little Side when the guv'nor appeared.

"Oh, Nipper," said Nelson Lee, beckoning to me. "Just a minute."

Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson were with me, and they accompanied me to the spot where the guv'nor was standing. He regarded us smilingly as we came up.

"I have a little piece of news for you, Nipper," he announced. "A short while ago Detective-inspector Lennard rang me up from Bannington and imparted the triumphant information that he has secured the men he has been after for the past week or so."

"Good luck to him!" I said heartily. "Those crooks were the fellows who attacked you, weren't they, sir? Did the inspector mention anything about that?"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Yes, Nipper," he replied. "And it is quite apparent that my attackers were in no way connected with the criminals Lennard has run down. So that little affair in the lane remains a mystery."

"Begad!" ejaculated Montie. "Who were the awful bounders—"

"I am 'quite at a loss, Montie," said the guv'nor. "It is just as well to know, however, that they have nothing to do with Lennard's case. Possibly they were merely footpads, although I did not think so at the time. We must now await further events."

Nelson Lee was referring to a somewhat startling incident which had occurred on the Saturday of the previous week. Three

unknown men had made an attack upon him, for no apparent reason, and they had got away. Our old friend, Detective-inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard, was in the local town of Bannington, investigating the mysterious disappearance of a prominent resident.

The guv'nor had suspected that the two affairs were connected, but that theory was now knocked upon the head. I was rather sorry, because the attack upon Nelson Lee still remained a mystery.

"What are you going to do, sir?" I asked.

"Nothing, Nipper," smiled the guv'nor.

"Nothing, sir?" I echoed.

"Exactly—unless something further develops," replied Lee. "The incident was really a minor one, and there is no reason for us to suppose that further attacks will be made. But I am delaying you, boys—"

"That's all right, sir," said Tommy Watson. "We're only practising this afternoon. Oh, there's that new fellow," he added, as a Remove junior emerged from the Ancient House. "Didn't you want to have a word with him, Nipper?"

"Well, he wanted to have a word with me, I believe," I replied. "It's about the cricket, I suppose. De Valerie mentioned that Browne was rather keen on cricket."

Nelson Lee nodded to us and went his way.

And we approached the fellow who had just emerged from the Ancient House. He was a new boy in the Remove—having arrived at the commencement of the new term—and I hadn't had much chance of talking with him.

Browne was not exactly an elegant junior—so far as clothing went. His features were rather aristocratic; but he was undoubtedly the most carelessly untidy fellow in the Remove, and that's saying a lot. How on earth he managed to get his trousers so

baggy was a mystery. Sir Montie almost shuddered as he eyed Browne through his pince-nez.

"Really, dear fellow," he protested, "I'm not a chap to interfere, but I feel bound to put in a word about your clobber. Begad! They're shockin'—especially the trousers!"

"What's the matter with them?" said Browne cheerfully.

"The matter?" echoed Tregellis-West. "Oh, my goodness! What ain't the matter? The fact is, Browne, the fellows are all talkin' about your baggy trousers——"

The new junior grinned. "Let 'em talk," he interrupted calmly. "I don't see that my trousers need worry anybody but myself—and they don't worry me!"

"You mustn't take any notice of Tregellis-West," I chuckled. "Trousers are a pet hobby of his——"

"Really, Nipper!" protested Sir Montie mildly.

"I was going to ask you about the cricket, Nipper," went on Browne. "I believe you're the Remove skipper, ain't you? I should like to have a chance, if I'm not barred——"

"Why should you be barred?" I asked. "Well, I'm a new fellow——"

"That doesn't make any difference," I put in. "If you can handle a bat or a ball decently you'll have a chance in House matches. I don't believe in favouritism. How did you stand at your last school?"

Browne hesitated. "I—— Well, I didn't have much of a show there," he replied awkwardly. "The fact is, the junior skipper was a beastly snob, and I refused to play in his team. But you're different, Nipper, and I shall be awfully pleased if you'll give me the chance to show what I can do."

"The chance is yours, my son. You'd better come along to Little Side this afternoon."

"Thanks," said Browne. "I'll just run in and change into flannels."

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie, "I hope your flannels ain't so frightfully baggy as these, old boy. By the way, what school were you at before you came here?"

Browne coloured slightly. "Oh, a rotten hole," he replied vaguely.

And, without saying anything further, he turned and trotted into the Ancient House. Sir Montie regarded Tommy and me with a pained expression upon his noble features.

"Dear fellows, was that a snub?" he asked anxiously. "Was I rude in askin' Browne where he came from? I shouldn't like him to think that I'm a curious bounder——"

"He won't think that, Montie," I grinned. "Rather queer that he should avoid that question, though. He seems a decent sort, and, personally, I don't care tuppence where he came from."

We strolled off to Little Side, Sir Montie still looking pained. Meanwhile, Browne changed into flannels with feelings of great

satisfaction. Strange noises out in the Triangle caused him to approach the window, in order to seek the explanation.

This was quite simple. Edward Oswald Handforth, of the Remove, was having a little argument with his study-mates, Church and McClure. Browne hadn't got used to Handforth's little ways yet, and he thought that slaughter was about to happen for a few moments.

Handforth and Co., however, were merely engaged in an every-day "row." The cause of this one was just as trivial as usual. Handforth declared that he could throw a tennis-ball over the Ancient House without hitting the roof, and Church and McClure said he couldn't. Hence the heated argument.

"You'll have one of the prefects down on you, you fathead!" snapped McClure. "Throwing tennis-balls over the school ain't allowed——"

"What does that matter?" snorted Handforth. "Rules were made to be broken, weren't they? You just watch me!"

He seized the ball firmly, and, as a preliminary, proceeded to give a gymnastic display, waving his arms about in the most astonishing manner. Finally, the ball soared aloft, yards wide of the intended mark, and hit the old clock-tower. It bounded back, rolled down the sloping roof, and lodged in the gutter.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" ejaculated Handforth. "How did that happen?"

"What's the good of asking silly questions!" snapped McClure. "It serves you right for being so jolly obstinate. We shall have to go and borrow Warren's ladder now——"

"Rot!" said Handforth. "I can climb up that ivy, I suppose? It won't take me two ticks to get that ball down. You keep your eyes skinned for prefects!"

Church and McClure looked scared.

"Look here, Handy, you can't climb that ivy," protested Church warmly. "It won't bear the weight of a hulking great fellow like you——"

"Are you calling me hulking?" roared Handforth.

"Well, ain't you?" "Why, you—you——"

"Oh, don't start scrapping!" snapped McClure. "You weigh two or three stone more than I do, and if you climb that ivy you'll come a frightful cropper—and break your neck, I expect!"

Handforth regarded his chums pityingly. "And that's all the confidence you've got in your leader!" he said, with bitter sarcasm. "My only hat! I'll show you whether I can climb that ivy or not, you unfaithful bounders!"

And Handforth stalked towards the building, leaving Church and McClure gazing at one another rather helplessly. Arriving under the ivy, Handforth gazed upwards.

The gutter was certainly a long way up—and it seemed to get further and further

away as Handforth prepared to ascend the ivy. But he had committed himself now—and Handforth never turned back.

Church and McClure ran up breathlessly.

"Don't do it, Handy!" exclaimed McClure huskily.

"Rats!" said Handforth.

He continued his climb obstinately. He knew well enough that it was a risky proceeding, but to turn back now would be undignified—and Handforth's dignity was a weird and wonderful thing.

A head appeared from one of the dormitory windows, further along. It belonged to Browne, and he watched the proceedings with interest. The sunny Triangle was deserted, except for Church and McClure and one or two fags in the distance.

"What's the game?" asked Browne interestedly.

"Why, that silly ass is climbing up to the gutter!" called back McClure. "We told him not to——"

"He'll break his neck!" declared Browne.

"You mind your own business!" roared Handforth, who had been listening to the conversation. "I don't see why you should interfere, you new bounder!"

"I'm not interfering," said Browne. "I'm just looking on. Better mind how you go, old chap. I shouldn't look down, if I were you. Hold on tight, and don't take any notice of us!"

This advice was quite excellent, and Handforth, although he wanted to say a lot, felt that it would be wise to give all his attention to the task. The ground seemed to be a terrible distance below him already.

"Oh, there's no danger!" he told himself obstinately.

Handforth was not lacking in pluck and determination. Whatever his faults—and they were legion—he was not a coward. And he continued his climb resolutely and with as much doggedness as though the matter were one of life or death.

The ivy was naturally thinner near the top; but Handforth met with no mishap until he actually reached the gutter. He grasped it, and made a grab at the ball.

It was probably that grab which caused the catastrophe, for Handforth always did things in a reckless fashion. Anyhow, his feet parted from the ivy and dangled in mid-air. The gutter was not exactly flush with the wall, but slightly overhanging; consequently Handforth was now suspended merely by his fingers.

"Oh, my only hat!" he gasped.

"Hang on, you ass!" shouted McClure shrilly. "Don't jerk your feet about like that—get a grip on the ivy again!"

This advice was perfectly unnecessary, for Handforth was making frantic efforts to recover. But, try as he would, he could not find any footing. Very fortunately the gutter was immensely strong, and there was no fear of it breaking away.

"I—I say," gasped Handforth. "Lend—lend a hand, you fellows! I can't find the

giddy ivy again! Oh, my goodness! My arms are nearly torn out already!"

A few minutes before Handforth's chums had been prepared to laugh, but now they were thoroughly frightened. Handforth's position was extremely serious. If he released his grip he would fall sheer, and serious injury would result—probably death.

Something had to be done—quickly.

"Oh, corks!" panted McClure. "We'd better rush for Warren's ladder. Old Handy will kill himself——"

"Make haste, you asses!" yelled Handforth frantically.

There was a note of sheer alarm in his voice, and his chums dashed away at full speed. But, even while they were running they were fully aware of the fact that their efforts would be useless. Warren's ladder was right at the bottom of the playing-fields, and it couldn't possibly be brought into the Triangle under ten minutes.

And it would be almost impossible for Handforth to hang on all that time. But there was nothing else to be done, and Church and McClure sped like the wind.

"Help!" muttered Handforth desperately. "Oh, I can't hang on here! Help—help!"

"Hang on, old chap!" came a firm voice. "I'll lend you a hand!"

Browne, the new fellow, left the dormitory window and dashed into another room further along the passage—he didn't know whose it was, and he didn't care. The window was almost immediately beneath Handforth. Brown flung up the sash, and his face was grimly set.

"Hang on!" he called again.

And then, grasping the ivy, he commenced climbing with such agility that he proved himself to be a fine athlete. And the danger in this enterprise was considerable.

Browne climbed up like a monkey, until at last he was between the wall of the Ancient House and the dangling Handforth. By this time the news had sped round, and crowds of fellows were rushing into the Triangle.

"Great Scott! It's Browne!" yelled somebody.

"Come down, you ass!"

"You'll get killed!"

"Don't take any notice of those fatheads!" said Browne steadily. "Do you think you can hold on if I take the weight off your legs, Handforth? I expect they'll have a ladder here soon——"

"My—my fingers are slipping already!" panted Handforth faintly.

"All right! Let me take some of your weight!"

The new boy obtained a firm grip with his feet and right hand. Then he thrust out his left hand, and drew Handforth towards him, holding him firmly, and relieving the strain.

"That better?" he asked breathlessly.

"Not—not much!" panted Handforth. "Oh, what an ass I was to get up here! I—I say, Browne——"

"Well?"

"You'd better get down!" muttered Handforth. "If you ain't careful you'll slip, and then we shall both be done for! I—I can't hang on any longer. You get down while you're safe!"

This was rather plucky of Handforth. He knew very well that not a soul on earth could help him except Browne; and yet he had told the new junior to get down! The truth was, Handforth believed that he would involve Browne in disaster as well as himself.

"Look out!" he muttered. "I'm—I'm going to drop!"

"Don't be an ass!" snapped Browne. "Let go gradually; and I'll try to hold you. Once you've got a grip on the ivy you'll be all right. Don't drop suddenly——"

Handforth's position was too desperate for him to offer any further objection. He drew his breath in and released his hold. It was a critical moment, and just for a second it seemed as though both boys would fall to destruction.

A gasp of horror went up from those below.

I had arrived upon the scene by this time, and I stood with several other Removites, watching helplessly. There was no time for us to do anything—it all happened within a few seconds.

Browne was evidently strong, for he held Handforth during that critical moment, and the latter made a frantic grab at the ivy, secured a hold, and clung there.

"Thank goodness!" I muttered. "It was nearly—— Oh!"

Handforth had been saved, but the extra strain upon Browne had been disastrous. The ivy roots gave way beneath his right hand just as Handforth found security.

There was a rip, and the new boy fell. He made a frantic effort to save himself, and partially succeeded, for he grasped a firm root and hung on. But this, too, gave way under the enormous strain. And Browne dropped sheer.

He hit the ground with a thud, rolled over, and lay still.

Just for a moment there was complete silence. Everybody stood rooted to the spot with horror. And then the spell was broken, and we rushed up. Sir Montie and I flung ourselves down beside Browne.

"Dash indoors for help!" I panted. "Get——"

"That's all right, old chap!" exclaimed Browne, sitting up and grinning weakly. "No need to make a fuss over a trifle. I'm only bruised and scratched."

"Begad! I thought you were smashed all up!"

Browne rose to his feet and felt himself critically.

"Nothing broken," he said calmly. "If I had tumbled right from the gutter I should have been just about fit for hospital; but I didn't fall half that distance. Where's Handforth?"

Edward Oswald was swinging hastily down the ivy, and the very moment he touched the ground he rushed up and grabbed Browne's

hand. His face was flushed now and his eyes were shining.

"Are—are you hurt?" he gasped hoarsely.

"Nothing to speak of."

"Thank Heaven!" said Handforth, swallowing something. "By George! You're a brick, Browne—you're a stunner! I—I— Hang it all, what the dickens can I say to thank you?"

Browne grinned.

"I don't need thanking," he said. "I was up at the window, so I thought I might as well lend a hand."

"You've got real grit, Browne," I said admiringly. "I don't suppose you'll be much good for cricket this afternoon."

"Try me and see!" said the new boy promptly.

His coolness rather surprised us. Somebody started a cheer—it was McClure, I believe—and the fellows responded with a will. But Browne looked alarmed.

"I say, don't yell!" he protested. "You'll have a whole crowd of prefects coming down on us, and then we shall get into hot water for climbing up that ivy. Don't make a fuss!"

"My dear chap, you deserve a medal!" I exclaimed warmly. "And the thing which surprises me more than anything is that you should be in one piece! Are you sure your legs ain't broken?"

Browne fully satisfied us upon that point. But it was certainly a remarkable escape—a sheer piece of luck. Other fellows might have half-killed themselves.

Browne, of the Remove, had shown us that he was possessed of real grit—and it was universally recognised that he was made of the right stuff.

CHAPTER II.

SIMON LEGG, THE MISER—A SCRAP WITH THE HOGS—QUEER GRATITUDE!

BROWNE showed up pretty well at the cricket, but that fall had affected him more than he would admit, and he was somewhat shaky. However, I could see that he would be a useful man.

Handforth invited him to tea in Study D, and that meal was a gorgeous one. Edward Oswald always had plenty of money, and he spent a large amount in providing a very special spread. With regard to pocket-money, though, Browne appeared to have unlimited supplies of his own.

Fullwood, who was a great dandy, openly sneered at Browne's untidiness, but the leader of the Nuts was very curious concerning Browne's financial resources. He received no satisfaction, however, for Browne was very secretive concerning himself—and this was rather strange, for he was an open, honest fellow in every way.

After tea Tregellis-West and Watson and I decided to stroll down to the village. There were one or two purchases he wished to make, and the evening was glorious.

Our little run was destined to prove some-

what exciting—although we had not sallied out in search of trouble.

Just before we got to the old bridge which crossed the River Stowe we sighted a curious figure walking down the road some little way ahead. It was the figure of an old man, bent and almost deformed. He walked by the aid of a huge stick, and his clothing was mainly composed of old-fashioned rusty black material, which looked as though it had been dug out of his grandfather's chest.

"Queer old bird!" remarked Tommy Watson. "I don't remember having seen him about Bellton before. Who is he?"

"No good asking me," I replied. "He looks like the grandfather of the oldest inhabitant! Just notice his beard! Why, it reaches nearly to his waist!"

The old fellow turned into a side road, but as we were passing he came to a halt, looked round, and shook his stick at us aggressively. And his wrinkled old face was expressive of anger.

"Begad!" said Sir Montie. "What have we done, dear fellows?"

"I suppose he mistakes us for somebody else," I replied. "He can't have a grudge against us, anyhow. Hallo! Here's Brewster!"

Brewster and Ascott and Glynn, of the River House School, were sauntering along the village street, and they spotted us at the same time as we noticed them. And they came forward at a trot.

Brewster and Co. were old pals. They belonged to Dr. Hogge's Select Academy, and were decent fellows. The majority of the River House boys were snobs and cads, but Brewster and his chums were true blue.

They greeted us warmly, for we had not met since the beginning of the new term. And after some little conversation, mainly connected with our recent trip to the Pacific, I turned to another matter.

"Did you see that old chap with the long beard?" I asked.

"Who? Old Legg?" asked Brewster.

"Is that his name?" I said. "He shook his stick at us."

Brewster and Co. grinned.

"Old Simon Legg shakes his stick at every schoolboy he meets," said Glyn. "He's a bit cranky, you know, and the village people call him a miser——"

"A miser!" echoed Sir Montie. "That's awfully surprisin'—it is, really. He doesn't seem to be worth a penny, you know. But misers are always like that, ain't they?"

"I expect it's only a yarn," I remarked.

"I'm not so sure of that," said Brewster. "Old Simon Legg came to the village six or seven weeks ago—soon after our schools broke up for the holidays. He's bought that old cottage on the moor."

"That ramshackle place that stands by itself?" I asked.

"Yes; but it isn't ramshackle any longer," replied the River House fellow. "Old Legg must have a lot of money, because he's spent quite a pile on that cottage. It's all been repaired and made new, and he's had a high

fence built completely round the cottage and garden."

"A whacking big fence, too," put in Glynn. "I'll bet it's ten feet high if it's an inch. And the only way in is through a small door made in the fence itself; and the old chap keeps it locked as though there were millions of pounds inside. Why, there are two huge locks on that little door!"

"I suppose a man has a right to fence his property in if he wants to," I remarked. "Still, it's jolly queer. And why does he shake his stick at boys in that way?"

"Goodness knows!" said Brewster. "Some of the village kids have stuck their tongues out at him, and all that sort of thing; but I don't believe they did it until he started them off. He's half-loony, I believe. He lives all by himself, and won't allow another soul within the enclosure."

"Begad! Somethin' of a mystery," said Sir Montie languidly. "It's rather interestin', ain't it. I can see Handforth nosin' about when he hears this. Handforth's a frightfully curious chap."

We walked into the village, Brewster and his chums accompanying us. And, having made our purchases, we strolled back slowly in the dusk, telling our friends all about our exciting adventures in the Pacific. They were greatly interested, of course, and for a few moments we didn't realise the significance of certain shouts and yells of laughter which came to our ears.

Then Glynn uttered an angry snort.

"The—the rotters!" he shouted. "Look there!"

I broke off, and stared down the road. Four or five boys were throwing clods of earth at somebody just a little distance ahead, harring his path. The fellows, I saw at once, were Wellbourne and Co., the deadly rivals of Hal Brewster.

The Hon. Aubrey de Vere Wellbourne was the leader of that set of boys known at the River House School as "The Honourables." They were snobs and prigs of the first water, and in order to distinguish themselves Brewster and his chums had termed themselves "The Commoners." Some measure of this sort had been really necessary.

"What are the cads up to?" asked Watson.

"Why, they're pelting somebody! It's old Legg!" exclaimed Brewster wrathfully. "I say, that's a bit too thick! Pelting an old chap like that with clods of earth!"

"Just like Wellbourne!" growled Ascott.

Brewster looked at me quickly.

"Are you—are you game——"

"For a scrap?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Count us in!" I said promptly. "Wellbourne and Co. are as much our enemies as yours, and we'll lend a hand with pleasure."

"Begad! Rather!"

There was something particularly caddish in hustling an old man as Wellbourne and Co. were doing. For they had gone a step farther now, and were crowding round old Simon

Legg and forcing him towards the half-dried duck-pond, which lay near by.

The old fellow's hat and stick had been taken from him, and he was helpless in the grip of the yelling Honourables. It was evidently their intention to force him into the mud of the pond.

"Old miser!" yelled the Hon. Cyril Coates jeeringly.

"You—you young varminths——"

"We'll spoil your rippin' clothes—what?" said Wellbourne, with a vicious chuckle. "It's a wondah you ain't kicked out of the village, you ragged old boundah!"

"I'll have the law on ye!" exclaimed Simon Legg shrilly. "I'll have ye put in prison——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hustle him into the pond!"

"Go it!"

"Yes, you'll go it!" exclaimed Brewster hotly, as we ran towards the group. "By jingo! We'll duck the cads themselves!"

Brewster was enthusiastic, and he did not realise that there would be a difficulty. There were six of us, and five of the enemy. We could easily put them to flight, but as for ducking them—well, there was not much prospect of such a pleasant interlude.

"You awful rotters!" roared Brewster, as we whirled up.

The Honourables ceased their efforts abruptly. They had been so occupied in their caddish act that they had failed to observe our approach. And now, when they turned, it was too late for them to flee.

"Oh, goodness!" gasped Coates in alarm.

"Look heah, we don't want any interference from you!" roared Wellbourne, backing away. "Mind your own bally business. If you touch——"

"Young varminths — young varminths!" croaked the old man.

The next moment an exciting tussle was taking place. Brewster had selected Wellbourne, and the pair were fighting hammer-and-tonga. I had very little difficulty with Coates, and Tommy Watson knocked out the Hon. Bertram Carstairs in about two seconds.

The rest of us didn't have much of a show, for after a very short space of time three of the cads had fled. Sir Montie was greatly indignant. He hadn't had a chance at all.

"I say, it's frightfully rotten!" he protested. "I was goin' for one of those cads, but he bunked! When you've done with Wellbourne, Brewster, I'll—— Begad! That's the way!"

Brewster was forcing the Hon. Aubrey towards the pond, and I was performing the same manoeuvre with Coates. And a minute later the pair of them floundered helplessly into the mud. It wasn't deep, but it was appallingly sticky.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Make 'em sit in it!" roared Watson.

"You beastly boundahs!" raved Wellbourne. "Just you wait——"

"No need to wait!" grinned Brewster.

"This is where you get it in the neck, my son!"

The Hon. Aubrey attempted to emerge from the pond, but Brewster and Glynn hurled him back, and he sat down in the mud with a sickening squelch which half buried him.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, my only hat!" gasped Brewster. "This is worth quids!"

Wellbourne and Coates were allowed to crawl away at last. But their glorious white flannels were white no longer. And the odour which arose from the mud was in no way gratifying. Even Wellbourne's chums shrank away from him as he joined the group higher up the road.

We turned our attention to the aged Mr. Simon Legg.

The old chap was standing near by, glaring at us as though we were the culprits. His face was almost hidden behind the grey whiskers and bushy eyebrows, but his eyes gleamed strangely.

"Hope you're not hurt, Mr. Legg?" I asked politely.

"Mind your own business, boy!" rasped the old man. "Where's my stick, hey? Where's my cap, you young dog?"

"I'll find them, sir," I said, still polite.

Mr. Legg's shortness of temper was excusable, and I didn't forget that he was eccentric. But Brewster had retrieved the cap, and Sir Montie followed him with the stick.

"Glad to have been of some service, Mr. Legg," said Brewster.

The old man snatched the cap viciously, growling something under his breath. And then Sir Montie graciously handed over the stout walking-stick, accompanied by one of his best smiles.

"We're frightfully pleased to have been of some service, sir," he said, beaming. "Those awful cads——"

"Drat ye, boy!" croaked Simon Legg harshly.

"Begad! I——"

"Interfering young dogs—that's what ye are?" rasped the old man, snatching the stick.

He grasped it in his horny hand, swung it aloft, and brought it down heavily upon Sir Montie's noble back. The next second I received a painful cut myself.

"Look here——" I began wrathfully.

"Oh, really!" protested Tregellis-West. "I decline to be whacked——"

"Get ye gone!" shouted Simon Legg, raising his stick. "Ye young varminths! Shoo! Shoo! Get ye gone!"

And, still waving his stick, the old man shuffled along the lane, "shooing" as though we were chickens. We watched him, our feelings being somewhat mixed.

Sir Montie wriggled painfully.

"Dear fellows, some people have amazin ways of expressin' gratitude," he remarked mildly.

"Gratitude!" I growled. "If I see Wellbourne and those other cads interfering with

old Legg again, I'll—I'll let 'em interfere to their hearts' content!"

"Rather!" agreed Brewster warmly. "The old rotter doesn't deserve to be rescued!"

And we glared after the ungrateful Mr. Simon Legg with expressions which were the reverse of friendly.

CHAPTER III.

THE MYSTERY OF THE MOUNT—NELSON LEE'S PROMISE—AN INVESTIGATION.

TUBBS, the page-boy of the Ancient House, opened the door of Nelson Lee's study in response to a cheerful "Come in." He found the Housemaster busy at his desk.

"Well, Tubbs?" asked Nelson Lee.

"A gentleman to see you, sir," said the page-boy, stepping into the room and laying a card upon the desk. "'E's waitin' in the ante-room, sir."

The schoolmaster-detective picked up the slip of pasteboard and glanced at it somewhat curiously. It bore the name:

HOWARD RIDGEWAY,

The Mount,
Bellton, Sussex.

Lee remembered the Mount well; it was an old house just upon the edge of Bannington Moor, quite near to the school, although virtually isolated from it because of the dense woods which intervened. The detective had visited the Mount on two or three occasions, but not since the arrival of Mr. Ridgeway, who was comparatively a newcomer.

"Oh, bring Mr. Ridgeway to me at once, Tubbs," said Nelson Lee, nodding.

"Yes, sir."

Tubbs departed, and Nelson Lee tidied his desk somewhat and placed a box of cigars handy. It was not often he had visitors—especially strangers. Mr. Ridgeway had resided at the Mount for five or six months, but Nelson Lee had never spoken to him.

Tubbs ushered him in a few moments later. He proved to be a quiet-looking man of medium height, with a studious type of face. He wore glasses, and was well groomed.

"I really must apologise, Mr. Lee, for introducing myself in this fashion," he exclaimed, as the detective shook hands and waved him into a seat. "But my errand is of an unusual nature, and I shield myself by reason of that."

"My dear sir, your apologies are quite unnecessary," smiled Nelson Lee. "I have passed you once or twice in the village, I believe?"

"Frequently," said Mr. Ridgeway. "But I did not know, until recently, that you were the celebrated private detective of Gray's Inn Road."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"The secret was well kept," he said. "I do not think it will be necessary for me to

explain my reasons for that little deception, since you are probably aware of the facts. They have been going round the village for quite a while, I believe."

"I thought it was merely a villagers' tale at first," said Mr. Ridgeway. "But I am afraid I am wasting your time; and I am anxious to have one point settled, Mr. Lee. You are a Housemaster in this school, as I am aware, and I scarcely know how to proceed. To be blunt, is it possible for me to consult you—professionally?"

"There is no law against such a thing," laughed Nelson Lee.

"Then you are open to accept a case?"

"It really depends upon the nature of the case itself," replied the great detective. "If you wish me to travel to the other side of England I shall be forced to decline——"

"Oh, no! It is quite a local affair."

"Then there is no reason why we should not go into the matter," said Lee. "I am quite ready to work professionally, Mr. Ridgeway, so long as the task does not necessitate prolonged trips abroad."

The visitor settled himself in his chair and accepted one of Nelson Lee's choice cigars.

"I am an author, Mr. Lee," he explained, after a few moments. "That is to say, I write fiction—novels and the like. As I write under another name, you are probably unacquainted with my poor efforts. Just at present I am alone at the Mount, my wife having been scared away——"

"Scared?" repeated Lee, raising his eyebrows.

Mr. Ridgeway nodded.

"I find myself compelled to apologise again, Mr. Lee," he said. "You will probably wish me elsewhere when you learn the actual cause of my mission. Were it not for the fact that I am a positive disbeliever in the supernatural, I should not have presumed to approach you."

"I gather, from your remarks, Mr. Ridgeway, that your case is one of—well, haunting?"

"Exactly—exactly!" said the other. "Please don't tell me that you are not an occult expert—I am well aware of the fact. And I only come to you because I am convinced that some human agency is at work, although how it is managed I am at a loss to account for. I was in a difficulty, for the police would merely laugh at my story. Indeed, I am sorely afraid that you will be amused yourself."

"Please let me hear the details," said the great criminologist, sitting back in his chair and lazily surveying his visitor from beneath partially lowered eyelids.

"Well, details are rather lacking," said Mr. Ridgeway. "There is really very little to tell. Nine people out of ten would declare that the Mount is haunted. As a matter of fact the previous owner sold me the house at a reduced figure because the place had a somewhat sinister name in that respect."

"The village people, I believe, regard the Mount somewhat askance," smiled Nelson Lee.

"Not excluding myself!" chuckled Mr. Ridgeway. "These country folk eye me suspiciously as I pass their doors—almost as though I were a ghost myself. To be quite truthful, however, I have never seen any spectral manifestation whatever, and until recently the Mount was quite undisturbed."

"And then?"

"Well, voices made themselves heard," said Mr. Ridgeway. "That is a somewhat bald statement, but I will enlarge upon it in a moment or two. My wife, as I mentioned to you, has been scared away—she is of a somewhat nervous temperament. But I'm not scared, and I don't intend to be. I bought the house reasonably, but I spent quite a considerable amount of money upon interior decorations, improvements to the garden, and other matters. I should never see that money again if I tried to sell the place; furthermore, I don't want to leave. It is quiet, and admirably suited to my work."

"I can quite understand that, Mr. Ridgeway," nodded Nelson Lee.

"The phenomena I am about to describe consist of ghostly voices only," continued the other. "I am not sure whether the manifestations can be called supernatural. At all events I will willingly wager a ten-pound note that the cause of the demonstrations is a natural one. I have neglected my work in the most abominable fashion attempting to arrive at a solution, and I have been forced to give it up in despair."

"You have at least succeeded in interesting me."

"That is good news," said Mr. Ridgeway. "I hope to do more—for I want you to come to the Mount and investigate personally. What I can tell you will sound absurd, and you will quite fail to understand how upsetting the whole matter can be. In the middle of the night I am awakened, and distinct voices are audible—"

"One moment," interrupted Lee. "Voices, you say? Can you distinguish any definite words?"

"Far more than I care about!" was the reply. "Oh, yes, the words are always clearly audible. I am repeatedly warned, in spectral whispers, to flee from the place, or sacrifice my life. My wife became positively ill on account of these warnings, and refused to stay another hour in the place. She is now in London, worrying herself on my account."

"You have made investigations on your own account, I presume?"

"Repeatedly, Mr. Lee, replied the visitor. "And I can solemnly assure you that these voices make themselves heard while there is not a living soul within a mile of my bedroom—at least, to my knowledge. I have searched and searched in vain. There is

nothing to account for the extraordinary manifestations."

"How is your bedroom situated?"

"Quite to itself, on the upper floor."

"And the walls?"

"Are of the commonplace variety—of medium thickness, and composed of solid brickwork," replied Mr. Ridgeway. "The outer wall itself is bare, and the interior walls face upon a passage and a dressing-room. Certainly no human being could find concealment within earshot."

"The servants, perhaps—"

"Ah, you're off the track there, Mr. Lee," said Mr. Ridgeway. "My servants are three in number—a housekeeper and two maids. They are all local people, and they leave at nine-thirty every evening. Thus, when these strange voices make themselves heard I am quite alone in the house. I have searched every room and every corner—I have even examined the whole garden."

"Without result?"

"Without the slightest result."

"And you still believe that human agency is responsible?"

Mr. Ridgeway set his jaws doggedly.

"Hang it all, I can't believe anything else!" he declared. "Although I have every reason to be convinced of the supernatural, I'm not convinced. Man alive! I can't credit that spirits can waken me in the dead of night. Oh, no. It's too absurd. Moreover, I have always been contemptuous of ghost-stories and spiritualists and the like; and I don't take kindly to this destruction of all my pet theories."

Nelson Lee stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"H'm! I must certainly have a look round that bedroom, Mr. Ridgeway," he observed. "Your story has impressed me—although, to be quite truthful, I must acknowledge that an occult explanation seems to be the only possible one."

"Then you believe in ghosts and spirits?"

"On the contrary, my dear sir, my opinions are very similar to your own," said Nelson Lee. "I said that an occult explanation 'seems' to be possible. But things are not always as they seem; that is why I wish to examine that room with my own eyes."

"By Jove! This is very good of you, Mr. Lee!" said the visitor. "When do you think you'll be able to spare an hour—"

"We'll go along at once, if it is agreeable to you."

Mr. Ridgeway jumped up.

"Agreeable!" he echoed. "Why, my dear Mr. Lee, this is altogether too good of you. I'm afraid I'm—"

"Please, don't be afraid of anything," smiled Lee. "I am coming so promptly mainly because I wish to satisfy my curiosity—and this is just the quiet part of the evening, when I have some time of my own. There is no time like the present."

It was quite characteristic of Nelson Lee to sally forth at once. Mr. Ridgeway's story had attracted him, and all his old instincts were aroused. Just because he was

at St. Frank's it did not exclude him from participating in detective work.

True, this particular case did not seem to promise much field for investigation, but Nelson Lee was interested apart from that. Ghost stories always appealed to him—mainly because he believed they had some natural explanation.

He removed his college gown and donned a tweed cap. Then, with a fresh cigar between his lips, he accompanied Mr. Ridgeway out into the Triangle. They were just in time to see three highly important members of the Remove Form wheeling their jiggers from the bicycle-shed. Needless to say, these important personages were Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Tommy Watson, and myself.

We were just off to Bannington, having parted from Brewster and Co. twenty minutes earlier. Sir Montie had failed to purchase some Kodak supplies in the village, and so we were off to Bannington.

"What's the guv'nor doing with that chap?" I remarked critically. "He's Mr. Ridgeway, of the Mount, isn't he?"

"I don't know his name," said Watson. "Getting pally with him, I suppose. Well, buck up, you slow-coaches. We sha'n't get back before locking-up if we're not careful."

We cycled out into the lane, and I saw that Nelson Lee and Mr. Ridgeway were walking in the direction of the moor. We lost sight of them in a moment, and went on our way.

Meanwhile the guv'nor was intent upon his mission, and Mr. Ridgeway himself was animated with satisfaction. He had hardly hoped to secure the interest of such a celebrated gentleman as Mr. Nelson Lee so quickly.

"There's one thing I'm afraid of," he remarked, as they paced along the dusty lane. "You'll look round, Mr. Lee, and then you'll come to the conclusion that I'm a sufferer from nerves. You'll probably advise me to visit our excellent Dr. Brett."

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"I hardly think so," he replied. "You don't look like a man who is affected by nerves, Mr. Ridgeway. The very fact that you have remained alone in the house night after night is proof enough that you are immune in that respect. By the way, you have no neighbours, have you?"

"Not a soul," replied the other. "The old cottage on the moor itself has lately been occupied, but that's quite a distance away. There is no other residence, large or small, nearer than the school."

"You mentioned a cottage——"

"Yes, it's fully half a mile from the Mount, and down on the moor itself," replied Mr. Ridgeway. "It stood empty for months, but was taken over during the summer by a queer old fellow named Legg. He rather likes me, I believe, for we often have a word together—although he won't have anything to do with the village people."

"How long has the old man occupied the cottage?"

"Oh, for six or seven weeks."

"And when did your ghostly voices commence?"

"Well, the first manifestation occurred nearly three months ago, but they have grown more frequent of late——" Mr. Ridgeway broke off. "Why, good gracious! You don't suspect old Simon Legg of having a hand in the business, do you?"

"I suspect anybody until I prove them innocent," smiled Lee. "That's rather the reverse to usual custom; but I have often found the least likely people to be the guilty ones."

"But old Legg is out of the question——"

"Quite possibly," agreed Nelson Lee.

"And your information that the voices made themselves heard five or six weeks before he came places him above suspicion. But I have always made it a practice to obtain all information possible—whether it bears directly upon the case or not."

A few minutes later the pair arrived at the Mount. The place was an old one, and stood upon a high bluff overlooking the wide expanse of Bannington Moor. The great stretch of bleak country lay before the old house, providing a splendid view on a clear morning. To anybody who loved solitude the Mount was an ideal spot. For, although Bellton was within an easy walk, the old place was absolutely isolated. Practically no traffic passed its gates from one week's end to another.

Nelson Lee and his client walked up the gravel path, and the detective found time to admire the flowers and the neatly set beds. Mr. Ridgeway explained that gardening was his recreation, and he employed a village lad to do the heavy work.

"The fact is, Mr. Lee, I like my home immensely, and I don't see why I should be booted out by those infernal voices," he remarked. "It sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? But upon my soul, a man cannot sleep contentedly if he is constantly annoyed by mysterious whisperings."

"Have you tried another bedroom?"

"My wife wanted to, but I wouldn't allow it," replied Ridgeway. "Hang it all, I don't see why we should be driven out of our own bedroom! And one is just the same as another."

They entered the house, and after a short chat in Mr. Ridgeway's library they adjourned upstairs. The servants were still on the premises, of course—they didn't object to being there during the day. Treble salary would not have induced them to sleep in the place.

Upstairs, Nelson Lee examined the bedroom thoroughly in the fading light of the late summer's day. He discovered nothing. The walls were exactly as Mr. Ridgeway had described; the fireplace was a modern one, and offered concealment for nothing larger than a rabbit.

Immediately beneath the bedroom was the library, and above it a store-room. Under

no circumstances could any human being find cover from which to perpetrate the whisperings. The detective did not intend to spend any further time—for such time would be wasted.

"If I were a sceptical man, Mr. Ridgeway I should assume that your imagination had run riot and that the ghostly voices were merely audible in your own brain," he smiled. "But I know that you are an unemotional man, and there is something deeper in this affair than appears on the surface."

"You have arrived at no conclusion?"

"None whatever."

Mr. Ridgeway's face expressed his disappointment.

"Then I have bothered you to no purpose—," he began.

"By no means," interrupted the detective. "I was about to ask you, my dear sir, if you would object to my spending the night with you."

"By Jove! You mean that?" asked the other eagerly.

"Of course."

"It's jolly good of you, Mr. Lee, and I hope the voices will get busy," said the owner of the Mount. "I was about to suggest something of the same sort myself but couldn't pluck up the courage. Thank you exceedingly."

"Please reserve your thanks until I have earned them," said Lee drily. "To spend a night in the bedroom is the only possible course. I must hear these sounds with my own ears before I can form any clear opinion. If I put in an appearance at eleven o'clock, will that be agreeable?"

"Suit yourself, Mr. Lee, suit yourself!"

"Eleven o'clock, then," said the detective, thrusting out his hand. "Good-bye for the present, Mr. Ridgeway. I hope we shall have better success later on."

Two minutes later Nelson Lee emerged from the house and walked briskly down the gravel path to the gate. It was nearly dark now, and the shadows were black beneath the thick trees in the lane. As Lee walked towards the school he pondered over what had just taken place.

Although he had achieved no result he was hopeful. Mr. Howard Ridgeway's story had attracted him greatly, for it contained an element of mystery which was entirely to his liking.

He descended into the hollow which came before the level stretch which led straight to the school gates. And abruptly three dim forms emerged from the hedge and rushed at him. The attack was so abrupt that Nelson Lee would have fared badly had he been off his guard.

But he still remembered that other attack: and he now acted with astonishing swiftness. He was not caught napping this time! Instead of waiting for the unknown men to attack him he sprang forward and met the fellows squarely.

Crash!

Nelson Lee's fist drove forcibly into one man's face, and he staggered back with a

wild yell and collapsed into the dust. Lee whipped round, thrusting his foot out at the same moment. The move was timed beautifully, for a second man tripped over the obstacle and pitched upon his face before he could recover his balance. And the third attacker felt the weight of Lee's fist upon the side of his head.

"Not quite a success, my friends!" said Nelson Lee grimly.

"Down him!" snarled one of the men.

"I advise you to hesitate," said the detective, his voice as steady as a rock. "I happen to have a revolver in my fist, and the trigger is of the hair variety. It might go off, and then a bullet would be let loose. My aim is pretty accurate, too!"

"You—you infernally clever brute!" panted one of the three.

At the same moment he dashed for the hedge and disappeared through a gap. His companions took the hint and followed his example. But not before Nelson Lee had flashed out his electric torch. He just caught a glimpse of two baffled, scared-looking faces, and then the men had gone. The detective chuckled and walked on as though nothing had happened, stowing his torch away, but retaining the revolver in his grip. He was feeling satisfied, and with every reason. The attack had failed before it had developed.

"Quite interesting—quite enlightening!" murmured Lee. "Mr. Ridgeway's convictions are undoubtedly correct. The fellows don't approve of my visit. By James! This matter promises to be most entertaining. But where have I seen that face before?"

He was thinking of one of the men he had caught a glimpse of. Vaguely in the back of his mind he remembered having seen the features of that man. It was a dim memory, and Nelson Lee was puzzled and slightly annoyed.

He seldom forgot a face, though he knew that there was a possibility of his having been mistaken. Or perhaps he had seen the man many years before. But where? And in what connection?

It was tantalising, but rack his memory as he would, he couldn't place the fellow at all. But when he turned into the school gates he made a grim resolve to get at the truth sooner or later.

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CHAPTER IV.

HANDFORTH IS OBSTINATE—THE OLD MOOR COTTAGE—I AM SUSPICIOUS.

TOMMY WATSON glanced at his watch. "Plenty of time," he said. "We shall be able to ride home comfortably and still be all right for locking-up."

We were standing in the old Bannington High Street, outside the big chemist's shop where Montie had made his purchases. Our machines were standing against the curb, and the evening shadows were lengthening.

We reckoned that we should just be able to get home before lighting-up.

"Hullo! What are you chaps doing here?"

The voice was unmistakable, and, turning round, we found the one and only Edward Oswald Handforth. He had just dismounted from his bicycle, and behind him were the ever-faithful Church and McClure.

"Just going home, Handy," I said. "We might as well all bike back together, if you think you're capable of keeping the pace!"

"Why, you ass, I was about to suggest the same thing!" he snorted. "But I was wondering if you'd care to go at our speed! I'll show you how to ride a bike——"

"Begad! Pray don't trouble, old fellow," said Sir Montie. "We don't need showin', really we don't. An' the way you ride a bike is too frightfully original to be copied——"

"Look here——" began Handforth warmly.

"Don't start fighting in the High Street, Handy!" I grinned. "Montie would think it beneath his dignity, but he'd put a decent show, I daresay. And you don't want to go back to St. Frank's with a couple of black eyes, do you?"

Handforth glared.

"If you think Tregellis-West could give me a black eye you're jolly well mistaken," he said with a sniff.

"Dear boy, I wouldn't attempt to do anythin' of the sort," exclaimed Sir Montie mildly. "I'm a peaceful chap, an' I know my limitations. But begad! I'm ready to scrap with you, Handy, if——"

"That's all right!" said Handforth generously. "I'll let you off this time, only don't let it happen again!"

"I'm overflowin' with gratitude!" murmured Sir Montie.

Handforth was apparently unaware of the fact that Sir Montie was pulling his leg; it was an absurdly easy task to pull Handforth's leg, because he always took everything literally.

"Well, let's be going," I said briskly.

"Hold on," put in Handforth. "I've got an idea——"

"Keep it!" advised Tommy Watson.

"I've got an idea!" repeated Handforth, bestowing a freezing glare upon the interrupter. "I suggest that we go home across the moor instead of the usual road. What do you chaps say?"

"No!" said the chaps in one voice.

"But you don't understand."

"No need to understand any more," I put in. "The moor road is further round than the other, Handy, and I'm not particularly anxious to take my jigger over those beastly flints on the moor road. Think of something better, old chap!"

Handforth was obstinate.

"It won't hurt the tyres," he declared.

"I don't mind risking my bike, anyhow."

"I don't suppose you do," grinned McClure. "Owen major might be a bit wild when you get back, though!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If it was my own jigger I should be just the same!" snapped Handforth. "But my back tyre's punctured, and Owen major wasn't using his old iron, so I borrowed it."

"Without going to the trouble of mentioning the matter to Owen major, I suppose?" I grinned.

"No need to waste time like this!" said Handforth hastily. "Are you chaps coming with me along the moor road?"

"No," I replied, "you're coming with us——"

"Rot!" said Handforth. "You don't seem to understand what I'm driving at. And yet I'm plain enough, goodness knows!"

"We've got used to that, Handy," I said kindly. "It's not your fault that you weren't born handsome, or, perhaps, your plainness is the result of so many scraps? Your face looks as though it's been knocked out of place——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What's the matter with my face?" bawled Handforth.

"Begad! Don't ask us, old boy!" protested Montie. "I wouldn't dream of bein' personal, you know. But when you ask what's the matter with your face——"

"Look here!" roared Handforth. "I'm fed up with this rot! If you don't come with me I'll jolly well go by myself! Nice chaps, ain't you?" he added bitterly. "Leave a pal all on his own!"

"But my dear old ass, what's the idea?" I asked patiently. "If you'll give us a sensible reason for taking our bicycles over that puncture-mixture called a road, we'll consider it."

"What about that old chap, Simon Legg?" asked Handforth.

"Oh, stick to the subject——"

"I am sticking to the subject, you ass!" snorted Handforth. "Doesn't the moor road lead right past old Legg's cottage?"

At last I understood.

"Oh, so that's the idea!" I exclaimed. "You curious beggar! What do we want to pry into that old chap's concerns for? I suppose he's got a right to live by himself on the moor?"

"I don't know that Handy's idea ain't a good one," remarked Watson reflectively. "There's something queer about that chap, and I should like to have a squint at his fenced-in cottage myself. What do you say, Nipper?"

"Oh, I don't care," I replied. "I'm not particularly keen, but we don't want to stick here all the evening. Let's get a move on, and Handy can lead the way. If there are any especially choice flints on the road he'll find 'em first!"

Handforth had his way and he was content. So we started off through the outskirts of Bannington, and took the small lane which led to the moor. The distance was slightly longer than the usual route, but this was not of much importance. It was the state of the road itself which generally caused it to be barred by cyclists.

By picking our way cautiously, however,

we avoided the flints and suffered no casualties in the puncture line. It was practically dark by the time we came within sight of Simon Legg's cottage.

It lay some little way from the road, and was reached by a footpath across the moor itself. Not another house was within sight, except for the Mount, which stood out prominently upon the hill half a mile away, flanked and backed by the density of Bellton Wood. We shouldn't have been able to see the Mount at all if several windows had not been illuminated.

On every other hand the moor stretched out gloomily. In winter this place was one of bitter winds and miserable dreariness. And even now, in August, the solitude of the moor was almost unnerving.

"Blessed if I can see anything!" said Handforth grumpily. "It's too dark to distinguish even the fence. Suppose we leave our bikes here and have a closer look?"

"Oh, don't waste any more time—" I began.

"All right!" snapped Handforth. "I'll go myself!"

"You'll be late for locking-up—"

"Fifty lines!" snorted Handforth. "Do you think I care for that? I've got an idea that Simon Legg is up to some shady game in that cottage," he added darkly. "Why should he fence it in? Why should he be afraid of decent people going near?"

"Oh, he's an old crank," remarked Church.

"I say, drop down you chaps," I whispered suddenly. "There's somebody coming along the moor, and I believe he's making for the old man's cottage. Why, there are three of 'em—"

"Visitors, I suppose?" said Watson.

We all laid our machines down and dropped into the long, dry grass which bordered the road. At a distance of a hundred yards we were quite invisible, and the men we had seen had not noticed us.

"Yee, they're going to the cottage, and they're in a hurry, too," I murmured. "This is rather queer after what Brewster told us."

"What was that?" remarked Handforth curiously.

"Why, he said that old Simon Legg lived all alone, and that he wouldn't allow another soul near the place."

"That's what I was told by old Warren," said McClure.

"Perhaps these men don't mean to go within the enclosure," I said. "Anyhow, we'll stick here and watch for a few minutes."

We did, and we dimly saw the three figures approach the dark mass which marked the fenced-in cottage, and then they were swallowed up amidst the shadows. Scarcely a minute later, however, an oblong patch of dim light appeared ahead, and it was then blotted out by moving figures.

"What's that?" whispered Watson.

"Why, the door in the fence," I replied. "There you are! They've all gone in—all three of them. This looks rather fishy, my sons. I'm beginning to suspect that old

Legg isn't quite such a harmless old chap as he seems."

"Let's creep nearer!" said Handforth eagerly.

I assented willingly, for my own curiosity was firmly aroused now. And leaving our machines by the roadside we covered the distance to the cottage and gained a nearer view. Brewster had not exaggerated the height of the fence; he had described it as being ten feet, and it was certainly all of that.

The wood was heavy stuff and must have cost a large amount of money. For the fence extended right round the cottage and garden, leaving a spacious enclosure within.

"Nothing to be seen even now!" grumbled Handforth. "I say, hold me on your shoulders, McClure, and I shall be able to grab hold of the top of the fence."

"No, don't do that!" I put in sharply.

"Why not?"

"Because it wouldn't be the right thing," I replied. "It's all very well to come here and look at the place—the moor is as much our property as Legg's—but we mustn't climb his fence."

"Rot!" said Handforth.

He spoke in a determined voice, and I knew that it would be a hopeless task to argue with him. Nothing short of physical force would have shifted Handforth from his purpose—and we couldn't very well have a scrap just outside Simon Legg's cottage. Besides, I must admit that I had an inclination to see over the top of that fence myself. That's just human nature. When something is hidden away, one is particularly anxious to see it. Forbidden fruit is always the sweetest.

Handforth was already commandeering the services of the long-suffering McClure. This patient youth was called upon to hoist Handforth on to his shoulders, and Church had to hold things steady.

Three attempts only resulted in bruises and high words. McClure objected strongly to Handforth's feet being thrust into his face. Handforth was trying to stand on McClure's shoulders, and one or two accidents were unavoidable.

"Can't you keep your feet steady, you ass!" hissed McClure when, his leader was finally in position. "That's the second time you've kicked my nose!"

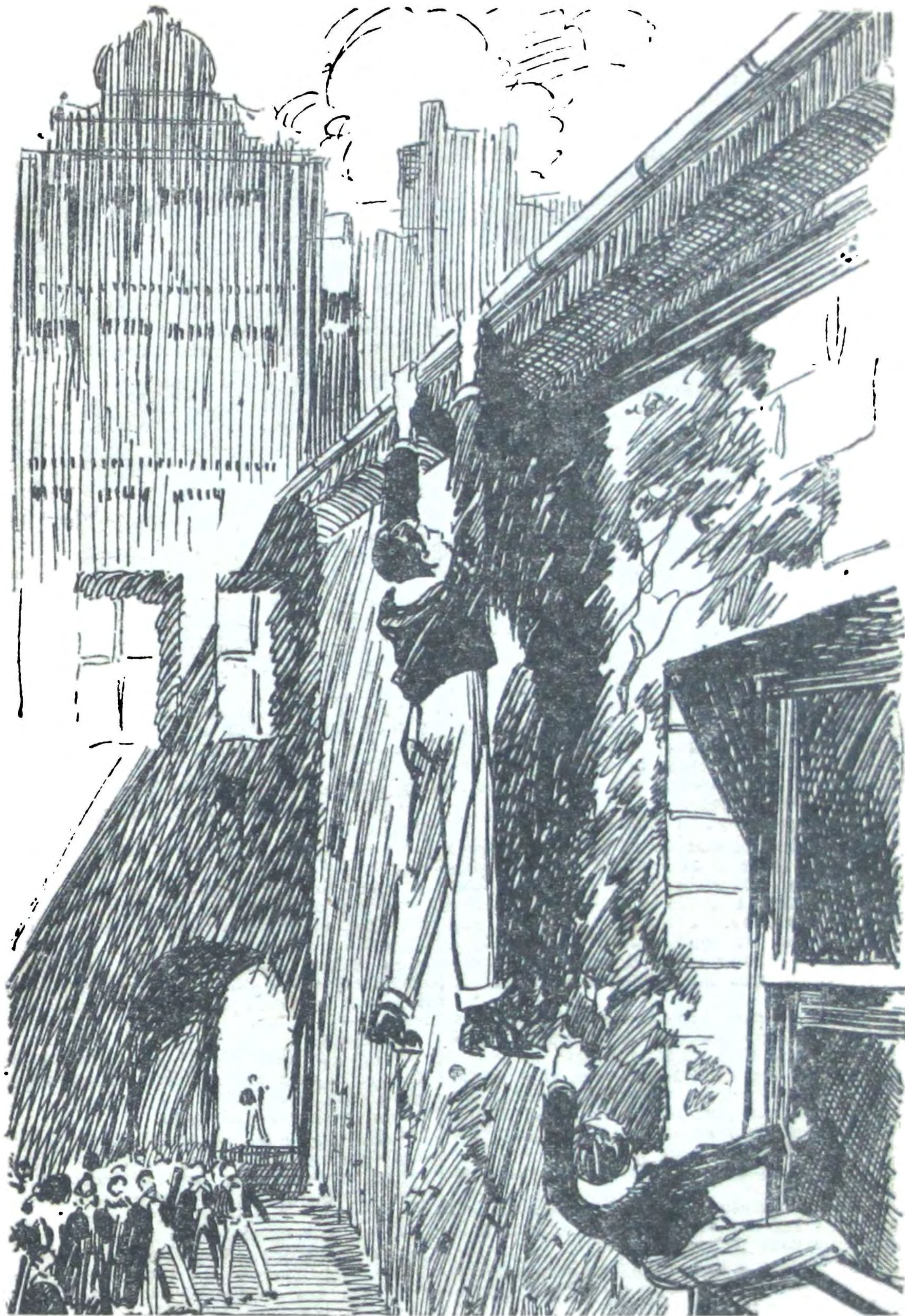
"You shouldn't have such a large one!" snapped Handforth.

"What about your feet?" gasped McClure. "What size do you take—thirteens?"

"You wait until I get down!" muttered Handforth warmly. "By George! Hold tight, you ass! We shall be over! Whoa!"

The whole venture had been in danger of collapse, for Handforth was heavy, and Church was not prepared to hold him steady for long. McClure carried most of the weight, and his legs gave way beneath the strain.

Handforth made a grab, and grasped the top of the fence. Then, with a heave, he pulled himself up and gazed over. But Handforth was always ram-headed. He wasn't



Handforth's arms felt as if they were being torn from their sockets; Browne, leaning half out of the window, was already grasping the ivy in his perilous attempt at rescue!—(See page 3.)

content with a peep. He sat astride the fence and leaned over.

The next second there was a slip, the sound of cloth tearing, and then a wild yell. This was followed by a thud and sundry gasps. Handforth had tumbled into the garden!

"Oh, the silly ass!" I exclaimed angrily. "I thought he'd go and do a mad thing like that! I'll bet he's hurt himself, too!"

"We shall have to climb over!"

"Listen!"

We distinctly heard the sound of a door opening. Then running footsteps were audible, and one or two low voices. Handforth was apparently quite sound, for a series of yells rang out loudly, and the air was filled with uncomplimentary remarks.

"Serves him right!" growled Watson unfeelingly.

We expected to see Handforth come hurtling through the doorway at any moment. But with surprising suddenness his yells ceased and all was quiet. It was rather an ominous silence. We listened intently, but no sound came to our ears.

"I—I say!" muttered McClure. "What's happened to Handy?"

"Blessed if I know!" I replied. "He stopped his noise pretty suddenly, didn't he? I don't like it, my sons!"

"Begad! What shall we do?"

"We'll wait a minute, and then hammer on the door," I replied grimly.

We waited, still listening. But the only sound which reached our ears was the dull roar of a railway train in the cutting, two miles across the moor. All round us there was complete silence.

"We'll get busy!" I said suddenly.

The mysterious manner in which Handforth had been silenced caused me great uneasiness. The whole business, in fact, was strange. And I searched along the fence for the doorway. I found it at last, and rapped upon it loudly with my knuckles. The other fellows crowded round me, waiting. There was no sound, and I banged again.

Then a door opened—the door of the cottage, in all probability. Shuffling footsteps sounded, and then two keys were turned in two locks and two bolts were shot back. The door opened for about six inches, but couldn't go further, owing to heavy chains which secured it at top and bottom. The place was like a prison.

"Who's that?" croaked the voice of Simon Legg.

"Sorry to disturb you, Mr. Legg," I said grimly, "but one of our fellows happened to fall over your fence——"

"Drat ye!" snapped the old man harshly. "Get ye gone! How dare ye come bothering honest folk with silly tales!"

"I tell you——"

"I know nothing of what ye say!" said Simon Legg savagely. "I am alone, and won't be disturbed. Young varminths! Get ye gone, before I get my whip!"

"Where's Handforth, you old rotter?" roared McClure.

"Drat ye!" snarled the old miser. "I have seen no boy, and I tell ye that I'm alone. No man passes this door but myself. Ha, ha! Simon Legg don't want no visitors!"

And with that he slammed the door viciously, and we heard the bolts shot in position and the keys turned in their locks.

"Well, I'm hanged!" I said, between my teeth. "This is serious, old chaps. We shall have to rescue Handforth somehow. What an old liar! Said he was alone——"

"What's that?" asked Watson abruptly.

A faint sound had come from the rear of the enclosure, just round the angle of the fence.

"Handforth!" I exclaimed.

We all hurried round at top speed. It was now quite dark, and we should have blundered right on if a deep groan had not brought us to a stop. And there, lying in the grass at the foot of the fence, was Edward Oswald Handforth.

"Great Scott!" panted McClure. "He's—he's injured!"

Handforth gave another groan.

"I'm nearly dead!" he gasped. "Oh, my only aunt! I'm smashed all to pieces! Why didn't Browne let me fall from that gutter? I should have been saved all this pain! Fetch an ambulance, you chaps! I'm—I'm dying!"

"Don't be such an ass, Handy," I exclaimed shakily.

"It's a fact!" moaned Handforth. "If—I if I don't last out till we get to the school, I leave my pocket-knife to you, McClure! There's about four bob, too. You can have my old tennis-bags, Church——"

"You—you ain't really dying?" gasped McClure.

"Yes, I am, you ass!" said Handforth weakly.

"But—but you can't be——"

"Don't I know if I'm dying or not?" roared Handforth, sitting up with amazing vigour for a dying person. "I suppose I know better than you, don't I? I'm all broken up. My ribs are cracked, and I believe my left leg's on the other side of the fence——"

I grinned.

"There's not much wrong with you, Handy," I said with relief. "Stand up, and don't talk such rot!"

Handforth groaned again.

"And that's all the sympathy I get!" he said bitterly. "You're heartless, Nipper! Telling a dying chap to stand up! Oh, my hat! Where am I? Was it an earthquake?"

His voice was growing stronger every moment, and Tommy Watson and I grabbed hold of his arms and yanked him to his feet. After about ten seconds we were quite satisfied that Handforth was whole, and that there was practically nothing the matter with him. We told him so, and he appeared surprised.

"Great pip! I thought I was done for!" he said wonderingly. "Why the dickens didn't you chaps come to my rescue?" he

went on, waxing indignant. "I fell over that giddy fence, and then I'm blessed if I know what happened. Two or three bulking men collared me, and then I was pitched over here. I—I believe I fell on my head!"

"That explains why you're not hurt," I said cheerfully. "Your head's hard enough for any old thing, Handy. Well, we'd better make tracks—we shall be late for locking-up, anyhow!"

"I—I say, I can't ride my bike!" groaned Handforth, as he hobbled along with us. "I haven't got the strength of a mouse!"

"I didn't think you were a funk, Handy," I said carelessly.

"Funk!" roared Handforth. "By George! I'll show you! I'll race the whole crowd of you back to the school!"

I grinned in the darkness. To suggest that Handforth was afraid was always a certain means of spurring him on. And, having regained our bicycles, we rode swiftly towards St. Frank's.

But I was puzzled, and somewhat worried. This affair, although it had turned out all right, had a sinister aspect. I could quite understand why Handforth had been pitched back over the fence—there wasn't much in that. It had been his own fault, anyhow.

But why had old Simon Legg lied to us? Why had he declared that he was completely alone? Obviously, the three men who had entered had done so secretly, and Legg was very anxious to keep it quiet.

And my suspicions were aroused.

I felt that we had not seen the last of Simon Legg by any means—or of the three mysterious men, either. And, as events turned out, I was not far wrong in my conviction!

CHAPTER V.

FULLWOOD GETS IT HOT—THE ALARM OF BROWNE—FULLWOOD'S RESOLVE.

WARREN, the school porter, had locked the gates by the time we arrived, and he reluctantly informed us that we should have to be reported. Warren was a decent sort, and he didn't enjoy the task of reporting juniors for being late.

Just as we were about to leave the bicycle shed I gave my companions a word of warning.

"There's no need to mention anything about that affair to the other fellows," I said. "We don't want everybody jawing——"

"Why not?" demanded Handforth.

"Well, I should think you'd want it kept quiet more than anybody, Handy," I said. "Your part in the adventure wasn't overwhelmed with glory, was it? You'd be chipped to death if the yarn got about. Besides, we should all get into hot water, once the Head learned that we had trespassed on old Legg's property—for that's what it amounted to."

"Dear fellow, you're quite right," said Sir Montie thoughtfully. "Handy can't do any

thin' at all. He had no right in old Legg's garden, an' the chap was justified in pitching him out. An', if it comes to that, it's no business of ours how many visitors Legg has."

The other fellows all agreed to keep quiet—mainly for our own sakes, and we went into the Ancient House. As Sir Montie and Tommy and I were about to enter Study C, Browne emerged from Study M and came along the passage.

"Feeling all right?" I asked genially.

"A bit stiff, old chap," replied Browne, in his easy manner. "I say, I've been having a terrible time. The fellows won't let the subject drop; they're talking about it as though I'd done something marvellous. I'm fed up with it!"

"That's only your modesty!" I chuckled.

Browne passed along towards the lobby. He was a singularly innocent sort of fellow; his belief that he had done nothing worthy of note was quite a sincere one—there was no mock modesty about him whatever. And he had earned the respect of the whole Remove. Yesterday Browne had been merely "a new kid." To-day he was acknowledged as one of the best fellows in the House. His popularity was assured.

But for some reason he didn't seem to like it. The very idea of being praised or complimented was distasteful to him. Most of the fellows realised this, and respected his wishes by keeping quiet. It only earned for him, however, greater respect than ever.

In the lobby Browne gave us another proof of his decency. We didn't learn about it until afterwards—and then it wasn't from him. I don't suppose he would have ever said anything at all.

Browne was intent upon having a stroll in the Triangle, and he walked towards the lobby briskly. Nearly all the fellows were in their studies, for prep. was in full swing. The majority of the fellows did their evening preparation between seven-thirty and eight-thirty.

Browne had finished his, for Mr. Crowell had set him light tasks, being a new boy. And as he turned into the lobby he heard a squeal of pain proceed from the cloak-room. It was the voice of a fag, and he was undoubtedly in anguish.

"If you don't go," came a threatening voice, "I'll skin you alive! Take that, you young beast! Like your cheek to refuse my orders, confound you! Cut off, before I get wild!"

"I—I shall be late for supper," Fullwood——

"That's your look-out!" snapped Fullwood. "Cut off, you, young cad!"

"I won't!"

"Why, you—you little monkey!" snarled Fullwood. "If you give me any more of your cheek, Jones, I'll twist your ear until——"

"We ain't supposed to fag for the Remove!" shrilled Dicky Jones, the youngest fag in the Third. "I can't sneak, Fullwood,

because sneaking ain't the thing. But you've no right to— Ow!"

Smack! Smack!

"Now will you go?" panted Fullwood savagely.

Sobs came from the cloak-room, and Browne set his lips firmly. It wasn't his habit to interfere in matters which didn't concern him. But this was a clear case of bullying—and Browne was down upon that. He strode towards the cloak-room grimly. And just at that moment Dicky Jones came slithering into the lobby, having been propelled by the vindictive Fullwood. He nearly fell over, but recovered his balance, and then darted towards the outer door.

"Hold on!" said Browne quietly. "Just a minute, kid!"

Dicky Jones paused and looked round.

"Where are you going to?" asked Browne.

"Out—outside," faltered the fag.

"Fullwood told you to go, didn't he?" went on the new fellow. "Well, Fullwood knows that the gates are locked and that it's against the rules to break bounds. You stay indoors, sonny."

Fullwood appeared, red with fury.

"What the deuce has it got to do with you?" he shouted violently.

"I'm not going to stand here and see this kid bullied—that's what it's got to do with me!" said Browne. "Understand, Fullwood? I suppose he wants you to get some cigarettes, kid?" he went on.

"Ye-es!" said Dicky falteringly.

And he displayed a half-crown in his grubby palm. Browne took it, and handed it to Fullwood. The leader of the Nuts, however, blazed with wrath and struck Browne's hand upwards. The half-crown sailed aloft and clattered to the floor.

"You—you interferin' beast!" roared Fullwood. "What the deuce do you mean by shovin' your spoke in? I'll punch— Hi! Come back, you young cad!"

But Dicky Jones, seizing his opportunity, had sped away. And Browne and Fullwood faced one another in the middle of the lobby. Ralph Leslie Fullwood was in a towering passion, but Browne remained quite calm.

"Better pick your money up, Fullwood," he said easily. "It's nothing to do with me if you smoke, but you know as well as I do—better, in fact, because I'm a new chap—that fagging ain't allowed in the Remove. And fagging after locking-up is forbidden to everybody—even the Sixth!"

"By gad! I'll show you!" snarled Fullwood, clenching his fists. "You disreputable pauper! Who are your people, I should like to know? Some beastly tradesmen, I suppose—publicans, or somethin'!"

Browne smiled.

"Yes—or something!" he agreed calmly.

"I'll smash you——"

"Why not start?" asked the new boy. "You keep on talking about it, Fullwood, but you don't do anything. I'm not anxious to fight. I've stopped your little game, anyhow——"

"Hang you!" rapped out Fullwood furiously.

He threw himself forward, lunging out at Browne's face with all his strength. A cad to the backbone, Fullwood was not lacking in courage when he was brought to the point. And just at present he was almost beyond himself. He had disliked Browne from the first day of the term, and this interference—as he called it—made him "see red."

"Take that!" he panted hoarsely.

Browne didn't take it, although it was a near thing. The next few seconds were exceedingly interesting, and it was a great pity that a crowd of fellows were not there to see it. The only witness was Dicky Jones, who had paused, at a safe distance, to watch the proceedings.

Fullwood's vicious blow was safely parried, and after that Fullwood began to feel very sorry for himself. He could use his fists, but he made the great mistake of supposing that Browne couldn't stand up to him.

But Browne, the new fellow, having been started off, just sailed in with a will. His right swung round, swept Fullwood's guard aside, and landed with a thud. Fullwood gave a howl, staggered back, and then something which felt like a battering-ram hit him in the chest. It was only Browne's left, but it possessed a four-point-seven punch!

"Yaroo!" howled Fullwood wildly.

He went over with a crash, and just at that moment several fellows came along the passage. They had missed that neat display of stick-ups, but they were hopeful of seeing some more.

"A fight—a fight!"

"Go it, ye cripples!"

"What's the row?" demanded Owen major.

"Who's won?"

"Well, I don't think Fullwood has," said Browne lightly. "It's all over, old chap. Nothing doing!"

"You—you cad!" snarled Fullwood, getting to his feet. "I'll tell these chaps what you did now!" he added viciously. "Sprang upon me from behind and punched me in the neck——"

"Any more lies?" asked Owen major. "I don't believe it!"

"Rather not!"

"Browne ain't that sort!"

"Thanks!" said Browne. "I wasn't going to say anything, but Fullwood's forced me to. He was bullying a Third Form kid, and I stopped him—that's all. He thought he'd knock me down, but I had quite a different idea—that's all, too!"

"Serve him jolly well right!" said Hubbard. "He's always been trying to make the kids fag for him. My hat! I shouldn't like to feel your fists, Browne! You've done some damage!"

"It was gorgeous!" shouted Dicky Jones, who was hovering in the background. "He knocked Fullwood down beautifully. Oh, you ought to have seen it!"

"I'll skin you for this, you little rat!" hissed Fullwood.

"Look here, Fullwood, if you touch this kid again I'll thrash you until you can't stand—"

or do my best," said Browne quietly. "I don't know who the nipper is, but you're not going to bully him. Is that clear, or do you want another taste?"

Fullwood opened his mouth to speak, but he was so furious that the words choked in his throat. And he turned on his heel and stalked down the passage, followed by a series of derisive jeers.

"I should advise you to keep out of Fullwood's way, youngster," said Browne thoughtfully. "But if he tries those games on again, just come and tell me. I'll make him sorry for himself!"

And Browne strolled out into the Triangle without waiting to hear the Third-Former's expressions of thanks.

I heard all about it a little later on in the common-room, and my opinion of Browne rose higher. I was down upon all bullying, and had had two or three scraps with Fullwood and Co. myself. It was rather surprising to find that Browne, a new junior, should start a campaign against the Nuts so early as this. He was proving himself to be made of the right stuff.

He was a distinct acquisition to the Remove—more particularly because of his form at games. He was a splendid batsman, and with a little practice he would turn out to be a first-class man. Even now he was quite good enough to be included in the House team.

"Later on, before the season's over, I'll give you a chance to play in a big match, Browne," I said cheerfully. "Of course, I shall have to consult Christine. He's the skipper of the College House lot. But if you improve as I hope you will improve, it'll be O.K."

"Thanks, awfully," said Browne, flushing slightly. "I shall be on the playing-fields as often as I can—and you won't find me slacking. I suppose you play really big matches now and again?"

"Now and again!" said Tommy Watson warmly. "Why, you ass, the St. Frank's Junior Eleven is famous! We've got quite a number of fixtures to clear off yet. We've come through with flying colours so far, and I'll bet we'll be on top at the end of the season."

"Sandcliffe will be a hard nut to crack, I believe," I remarked thoughtfully. "They're a hot lot, I've heard. Then we're playing the River House School, and Bannington, and St. Olwell's. I'm not quite so sure about Redwood—"

"Redwood!" exclaimed Browne suddenly.

His interjection was so marked that we all looked at him. His face had turned slightly pale, and there was an expression in his eyes which could be nothing but alarm.

"Yes, Redwood," I repeated. "It's a school a long way from here—right over in—"

"Are—are you going over there to play?" asked Browne eagerly.

"No, their team's coming here."

Browne looked dismayed.

"What's up?" I asked curiously. "Do you know Redwood?"

"No—er—well—that is to say, yes!" said Browne awkwardly.

"Begad! That's frightfully lucid!" remarked Montie.

"I suppose you came from Redwood—what?" asked De Valerie.

"I've met some of the chaps from Redwood," said Browne, still awkward. "They're awful snobs, you know."

"But what's the idea of evading the question?" asked Watson bluntly.

Browne coloured still more.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Coming to the study, De Valerie?"

"Not just yet."

Browne nodded, and walked out of the common-room. He was conscious that all eyes were upon him, but he looked calm enough, although that expression of alarm was still in his eyes.

"I'll bet he was at Redwood before he came here," said Owen major, nodding wisely. "Why the dickens didn't he say so? Jolly queer, ain't it? He seemed almost frightened!"

"He was kicked out, I expect!" sneered Fullwood, who was standing with Gulliver and Bell. "A chap doesn't like to be reminded of anything like that."

"Don't jump to conclusions, you cad," I said tartly.

"It's obvious," said Fullwood. "The rotter was simply shiverin'—because he's been found out. By gad! I'll make it my business to show him up properly!"

"Browne's all right," said De Valerie. "He's rather close about himself, but I don't mind; it's nothing to do with me. He's a decent study-mate, an' I like him."

At the same time we could all see that De Valerie was upset. Why had Browne evaded those questions? Why had he seemed so startled when he learned that the Redwood fellows were coming over to St. Frank's?

Fullwood, still sore from the little scrap in the lobby, seized upon the chance eagerly. He detested Browne, and it would be nectar to him if he could do him any injury. And he drew his study mates aside, his eyes gleaming viciously.

"I'll bet a quid that he got the sack from Redwood," he said with satisfaction. "It was as plain as daylight, and if we can prove it we'll hound him out of St. Frank's."

"Rather!" said Gulliver. "The shabby tramp! He's a disgrace to the Remove, anyhow!"

"How are you going to find out?" asked Bell shortly.

"Fullwood's got some idea, I'll bet," remarked Gulliver.

"Rather!" said Ralph Leslie Fullwood. "An' there's no need for us to wait until the Redwood chaps come here. They're playin' Bannington Grammar School on Saturday. We'll trot over there an' make inquiries."

"That's a ripping idea," said Bell, nodding. "An' if we can have him booted out of St. Frank's, all the better!"

And the cads of the Remove found much

satisfaction in the thought. But other events were to occur in the meantime—events in no way connected with Browne.

After the Remove had gone up to its dormitory, Nelson Lee had an adventure at the Mount; so I'll now get busy in telling all about it.

CHAPTER VI.

NELSON LEE KEEPS HIS APPOINTMENT—THE GHOST VOICES—LEE'S ADVICE.

MR. HOWARD RIDGEWAY was standing at the open door of the Mount when Nelson Lee turned into the gateway. The night was quiet, except for a somewhat blustery breeze, and the tree-leaves were rustling noisily in the lane.

"You're prompt, Mr. Lee," said Mr. Ridgeway cordially. "My hall clock is just striking eleven. Come in—come in! I only hope I haven't brought you here on a fool's errand."

"If we fail to meet with any success to-night we must persevere," smiled Nelson Lee. "We are quite in the hands of these ghost voices—although I have formed a certain opinion."

"Indeed! May I ask—"

"Not just at present, Mr. Ridgeway," interrupted the detective. "My chief anxiety now is to experience this phenomenon personally. Does it occur every night?"

"At first the voices were only heard at intervals," replied the other. "For example, there was a lapse of ten days between the first manifestation and the second, and after that the ghost-voices were erratic. For the past week, however, I have been disturbed nightly."

"At what hour?"

"Well, generally between twelve and one," replied Mr. Ridgeway.

They passed into the library, and Lee partook of one of his host's cigars and some whisky. As he explained, he did not need the spirit to steady his nerves, for he was of the opinion that a man's nerves are far steadier unstimulated.

"With reference to the hour of the manifestations," he remarked, as he lay back in his chair. "Have you ever retired earlier than twelve, Mr. Ridgeway?"

"Yes, once or twice."

"And did you hear the voices on those nights?"

"Yes—oh, yes."

"At what time?"

"Well, now you come to mention it, I suppose the sounds became audible before the witching hour of midnight," smiled Mr. Ridgeway.

Nelson Lee nodded.

"And now for the other extreme," he said. "Have you ever retired at a later hour than one o'clock?"

Mr. Ridgeway chuckled.

"It is no uncommon occurrence with me," he said drily. "I think I told you, Mr. Lee, that I'm an author—and surely any other

explanation is unnecessary? When I have had a press of work I have sometimes sat at my typewriter until three o'clock."

"That is just what I am getting at, Mr. Ridgeway," said the detective, leaning forward in his chair. "Now, please tell me: have you heard the voices on such nights as those?"

"Yes—more than once."

"At three o'clock in the morning?"

"Yes."

"Soon after you retired for the night, I presume?"

"Exactly."

"In other words, these ghostly voices invariably disturb you soon after you have got into bed?" asked Nelson Lee. "They come before you have had time to drop into a sound sleep, no matter at what hour you retire. That is rather significant, Mr. Ridgeway."

"How?" inquired the host.

"Well, it surely points to the fact that there is a reasoning mind behind these manifestations?" suggested Lee.

"A human mind?"

"I have yet to hear of a superphysical mind which is capable of reasoning as we do," smiled Nelson Lee. "If these voices were actually spirit phenomena they would surely talk away to their hearts' content at any hour. It is hardly conceivable that they would deliberately disturb you every night a short while after you slipped between the sheets. No, Mr. Ridgeway, I don't believe in the ghost theory. The evidence—what little there is—points to trickery."

"Well, I'm hanged if I can see where it comes in," said the author. "And who in heaven's name is responsible? It can't be a joke, and I haven't got an enemy in the world. Good gracious! Why should somebody try to scare me out of my wits?"

"It is far more probable that the object aimed at is to scare you out of the house, Mr. Ridgeway," said Nelson Lee. "I suppose you have had no offers from anybody to purchase the place?"

"Good gracious, no!"

"You can think of no reason why anybody should desire to get rid of you?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Nobody—unless it's some of my critics!" chuckled Mr. Ridgeway. "They have been saying some biting things concerning my last novel, but I don't suppose they wish to hurt an innocent author!"

Nelson Lee laughed, and a few minutes later he and his host retired for the night—but not to sleep. The bedroom was brilliantly illuminated by means of a paraffin incandescent lamp. It gave a light precisely similar to that of gas—quite a splendid means of lighting for country houses.

Nelson Lee looked round critically. He examined the room once more, but without result. There was certainly nothing within the apartment or in its vicinity to account for the sound of human voices.

"From which part of the room do the sounds come?" asked Lee.

"Well, it's difficult to tell from the bed."

replied Ridgeway. "I could have sworn that they proceeded from the fireplace, but when I have walked to that part of the room the voices sound almost behind my back. I can tell you, Mr. Lee, it's confoundingly uncanny."

Nelson Lee nodded. He was thinking deeply. Try as he would, he could arrive at no solution. It had struck him that somebody might climb to the roof and whisper down the chimney; and the acoustic properties of the room might intensify the sound in a confusing manner.

But Mr. Ridgeway had assured him that this was off the track—that the chimney had been closed throughout the summer. It was closed now. The window was equally futile, for Ridgeway had examined that first of anything. The only thing was to wait and hear the sounds with his own ears.

Accordingly, the light was extinguished, and the two men sat in easy chairs, smoking and remaining quite silent. Outside the wind rattled the old shutters occasionally, and the leaves kept up a continuous rustling noise.

Midnight boomed out from the old grandfather's clock in the hall. When the sounds had died away the silence was almost oppressive, for a lull had stilled the wind.

The minutes passed slowly. The quarter-past sounded solemnly throughout the big, deserted house. Mr. Ridgeway was just leaning towards Nelson Lee, in order to make a whispered remark, when he pulled up short. He became rigid, and grasped the arms of his chair.

Distinctly, but very faintly, a moan had sounded. It was repeated—a long, eerie wail.

"Did you hear?" whispered Ridgeway.

"Yes!" murmured Lee. "But do not talk."

For some few seconds there was silence again, and then, perfectly distinctly, came a voice—a strange, hollow voice, which was utterly unnatural in tone and character. It was like nothing human, and the words were pronounced slowly and deliberately.

"Art thou awake, O wretch?" came the inquiry.

"Have you ever answered?" whispered Lee.

"Yes, once—out of curiosity."

"Well, answer now," said the detective.

"And be frightened."

Ridgeway gave a nervous gasp.

"Who—who are you?" he asked shakily.

"Speak louder, for I hear thee but faintly," came the reply.

"That's a queer ghost!" whispered Lee grimly. "Try him again."

"Who are you?" repeated Ridgeway loudly.

"Fool!" said the ghost voice. "Have I not explained that I am the voice of the poor brute who was murdered within these walls. Take heed, my friend, and get thee hence. Thou art in danger—thou wilt surely die unless my warning is heeded without delay."

While the words were being spoken Nelson Lee rose from his chair and walked towards the fireplace. The words seemed to come from the atmosphere itself, but they

were undoubtedly near the fireplace. He waited there, and flashed out his electric torch.

"You can take your warning somewhere else," said Ridgeway.

"Thou art a fool of a man," came the reply. "Many times have I spoken with thee, but once more only shall I trouble to converse. If my last warning is unheeded thou wilt—"

While the voice was speaking Nelson Lee crouched forward close against the wall. And abruptly the weird sounds veered right round and came from the other side of the room!

"... die as surely as thou art now living," concluded the voice, without the slightest pause.

"But what is the danger?" asked Ridgeway nervously.

Dead silence.

"Speak again!" shouted Ridgeway.

There was no sound, but Nelson Lee beckoned to his host to remain silent. And the detective crossed quietly to the window, leaned out into the darkness of the night, and remained there for some few minutes. When he came back, Ridgeway was looking eager.

"See anything?" he asked.

"No—but I heard something," replied Lee grimly.

"What did you hear?"

"A slight murmur from your chicken-house," was the answer.

"What the deuce—"

"The chickens made one or two sleepy remarks," smiled Nelson Lee. "Quite significant, Mr. Ridgeway. I heard no sound of human footsteps or of human presence, but evidently the chickens did."

"But, man alive, they can have no connection with this business?" protested Mr. Ridgeway. "The yard is separated from this part of the house by a high wall. I'm in a fog—in fact, I was ready to believe that the voice was an infernal spirit, after all."

"It was most uncanny," Nelson Lee agreed. "To-morrow night, it appears, the ghost is coming for the last time. Well, Mr. Ridgeway, I advise you to reply to it and say that you will leave the Mount at once—that you will lock it up—"

"You are not serious?" asked the other blankly.

"Perfectly serious."

"Ah, but you don't mean me to carry out what you suggest?"

"Most decidedly," said Nelson Lee. "My advice to you, Mr. Ridgeway, is to clear out of this place as soon as you possibly can. Dismiss your servants and lock up the house. Leave it quite deserted."

Ridgeway was amazed.

"Then you have concluded that the whole thing is supernatural?" he asked huskily.

"Will you do as I ask?"

"I sought your advice, Mr. Lee, and I should be a boor indeed if I rejected it," replied the other. "Yes, I am prepared to do

just as you tell me. But I don't like it—I'm hanged if I do!"

"At the same time, I have your promise?"

"Yes."

"Good!" said the detective calmly. "If you'll escort me to the library, Mr. Ridgeway, I'll just explain a few details which will interest you. Moreover, I am anxious for further information."

And Nelson Lee and Mr. Ridgeway descended to the library—the latter in a state of considerable wonderment.

CHAPTER VII.

NELSON LEE EXPLAINS—MY EVIDENCE—AN INTERESTING PROBLEM.

NELSON LEE was looking quite contented as he lounged back in Mr. Ridgeway's best easy-chair, his fingers pressed together and a cigarette between his lips. His host, on the other hand, was very apparently upset.

"I must confess that I am completely at a loss, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed slowly. "Moreover, I hardly expected that you would give me the advice which you have done. Frankly, I am disappointed."

"By the way," said Nelson Lee absently, "I rather like this system of lighting, Mr. Ridgeway. How was the house illuminated before you came here?"

Mr. Ridgeway stared.

"Really, Mr. Lee, I fail to see the relevance of your remarks!" he exclaimed, somewhat testily.

"Yet, I can assure you, I have an excellent reason for making the inquiry," said Lee smoothly.

"Well, I believe some idiot faked up acetylene lighting years ago," said Ridgeway, still speaking with some impatience. "Goodness knows why he did so, but I consider——"

"I think I am satisfied, Mr. Ridgeway," said Nelson Lee, dropping the ash from his cigarette into a little bronze tray. "I am perfectly satisfied also as to the cause of the ghost voice. The matter is really absurdly simple."

Mr. Ridgeway looked up in astonishment.

"But I understood you to say that the causes were supernatural?" he asked.

"No," replied Lee. "I merely mentioned that the thing was uncanny, and I advised you to leave the house. Well, as an actual fact, the trick was performed with very little trouble. I investigated a somewhat similar case a few years ago—so you must not give me the credit of being at all sharp. I have the benefit of previous experience."

"Please, go on," said the other helplessly.

"The voice which spoke within your bedroom, Mr. Ridgeway, was actually quite a considerable distance away," continued Lee.

"Can you tell me where the acetylene gene-

rator was kept which supplied the house

"Really, Mr. Lee!" protested Ridgeway, jumping up. "What on earth has that infernal generator to do with our conversation? I believe it was placed in an outhouse which adjoins the kitchens—at least, I have noticed several gas-pipes——"

"Ah! We are progressing," smiled Lee calmly.

"Upon my soul!"

"I was just about to question you regarding the gas-pipes," continued Lee. "You have saved me the trouble——"

"But—but—— Good heavens!" gasped Mr. Ridgeway. "You are not suggesting that those gas-pipes——"

"Exactly," nodded the detective. "The 'ghost' merely stood in your outhouse and spoke into the pipes, adding, probably, a speaking-cup of his own design—in order to intensify the voice. Passing through the pipes, which acted in exactly the same manner as speaking-tubes, the human voice lost its character and became eerie and hollow."

"But who has done this confounded thing?" panted the other.

"Ah, I don't know," said Lee. "I merely give you the information that the voice has been trickery all along."

"Well, I must be an absolute fool!" exclaimed Ridgeway, taking a deep breath. "Your opinion of me, Mr. Lee, must be too shocking for words. To think that I was duped by such a preposterously easy trick as that!"

Nelson Lee shook his head smilingly.

"That is why you were duped," he said. "It is so simple that it could scarcely fail in its object."

"But how did you jump to it so quickly?"

"As I explained a few moments ago, I inquired into a case of a similar character some years past," replied Lee. "But that was in London, where gas-pipes are common. The pipes were used, in that instance, as a medium for projecting a deadly poisonous gas into the apartment. I did not consider such a possibility in this affair, because I knew very well that coal-gas had never been laid on. It was only after hearing the voice that I knew that some such explanation was the only possible one—hence my inquiry concerning the lighting arrangements."

"Yes, I understand that, Mr. Lee," said the author. "But I am more fogged than ever. I had those pipes ripped out—the infernal things were a nuisance—— Oh, but the bedrooms were left intact, I remember. The pipes were concealed in the walls, and I left them there. But the ends are plugged up!"

"How many pipes are there in your bedroom?"

"Two; one on each wall."

"Which accounts for the voice sounding on both sides of the room," said Nelson Lee. "In the daytime I doubt if the voice could

be heard at all; but at dead of night, when everything is still, the faintest of whispers is audible—especially to a man whose ears are on the stretch. I noticed two bronze ornaments upon the walls—open, flowery things, like sprays—

"What am I thinking about!" protested Mr. Ridgeway. "Of course—of course! My wife had those ornaments placed there, and the ends of the gas-pipes were utilised for fixing them."

"Obviously the pipes were not plugged up before the ornaments were fixed," said Lee. "Consequently the sounds had free egress, and the bronze ornaments possibly acted in an intensifying manner upon the voice—something like a gramophone-horn."

"I follow your explanation exactly," said Mr. Ridgeway. "And I am furious with myself for having approached you upon such a ridiculous matter. I hope you will forgive me, Mr. Lee, and that you will make me pay a heavy fee for my—"

"On the contrary, my dear sir, I am greatly pleased," interrupted the detective quietly. "Some people, for a reason best known to themselves, are extremely anxious to frighten you away from this house. I want you to go."

"But what on earth for?"

"In order to deceive the enemy—whoever he may be," was the reply. "If you leave the Mount locked up it will be assumed that the object has been gained—that you have been scared away. I shall thus have a clear field for investigation. We have solved the mystery, Mr. Ridgeway, but it has only opened up a still deeper one."

"Yes, so it appears," said Ridgeway gravely. "Who in wonder's name can be doing this? What possible object can be gained if I leave the neighbourhood? I have no valuables—at all events, nothing to warrant such a deliberately thought-out trick of this sort. Can you suggest anything, Mr. Lee?"

"I'm afraid not," was the detective's reply. "That is why I wish you to leave the house. I am anxious to keep an eye upon things and to see how the matter develops during your absence. You can rely upon me to take good care of your property."

"If you think it is really essential that I should go—"

"I do."

"Then I consent, of course. But for how long?"

"Until I send you word to come back," replied Lee. "The object of this 'ghost' is to get rid of you temporarily. If you had obstinately remained I am almost certain that you would have been kidnapped."

"You startle me, Mr. Lee!" exclaimed Mr. Ridgeway. "I write very glibly about kidnapping and criminal dealings, but when these things affect one's self—well, it's hardly pleasant."

"I was going to ask you to let me have the keys—"

"Certainly," agreed Ridgeway promptly.

"You shall have them when I depart, Mr. Lee. And now, with regard to the question of fees? How do we stand—if I may put it so bluntly?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Surely it is early to discuss such a matter?" he asked. "Please wait until I have earned a fee, Mr. Ridgeway. I am convinced that you are only experiencing the preliminaries. The actual mystery itself is still very obscure."

Mr. Ridgeway lit another cigarette.

"Would you advise me to communicate with the police?" he asked slowly. "Or do you think it would be better to let the matter rest?"

"I should advise the latter course," replied Lee. "I fail to see what the police could do. There is nothing for them to inquire into. We know that somebody is perpetrating this trick, but we are quite in the dark as to his identity. If the police came nosing about here they would simply cause a delay; for as soon as they had grown tired the criminals would recommence the operations."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Ridgeway eagerly. "An idea!"

"A good one?" smiled Lee.

"I'll leave that for you to decide," smiled the other. "That ghost fellow is coming again to-morrow night, isn't he? He'll come into that outhouse. Why shouldn't we lay a trap for him and capture him?"

"There is nothing to prevent us taking such a course, certainly," said the detective slowly. "But I should not advise it."

"Why not?"

"Because we should merely catch the tool and not the brain!" replied Lee. "We can be practically certain that the originator of this plot would not risk coming here personally. And if we do as you suggest, Mr. Ridgeway, we shall not improve matters. On the contrary, our hand will be exposed—we shall make it clear that we know all about the dodge. And my plans would not work at all smoothly."

"Gad! I shouldn't have thought of that," said Ridgeway. "I'm a ram-headed beggar, Mr. Lee; but you have had much experience in criminal work. My idea is to collar the chap red-handed, but I can see that yours is much better. Let them think they've tricked me, whereas, actually, you are really tricking them."

"Precisely," agreed Lee. "I don't think you will be bothered any further to-night, so the longer I remain the more sleep you will lose. It is getting on for one o'clock—"

"You are not going, are you?" broke in Ridgeway quickly.

"I was thinking of doing so,"

"Oh, but it's absurd!" protested the other. "I don't mind remaining in the house alone, of course—I'm used to it—but I was thinking of you, Mr. Lee."

"Pray don't concern yourself for a moment on my account," said the detective. "The

walk to the school will do me good, for I wish to think over this business thoroughly. If you can call to-morrow, Mr. Ridgeway, we'll have another chat, and arrange details."

Five minutes later Nelson Lee took his departure. He stepped out briskly and turned down the lane towards St. Frank's. After he had covered about a hundred yards a form emerged from the hedge and ran towards him.

"Well, Nipper?" queried Lee crisply.

"News, guv'nor—terrific news!" I panted. "But you've taken your time, I must say."

"That form belonged to me, and I was somewhat indignant."

"Do you know I've been hanging about for close on three hours?" I demanded warmly. "Three hours! And for the last hour and a half I've been bubbling over with tremendous news!"

"My dear Nipper, you were very anxious to come with me on this expedition, and I set you a certain task," said the guv'nor. "How have you fared? Personally, I have met with great success."

I fell into pace beside Nelson Lee.

"Let's hear your yarn, sir?" I said briskly.

"But I thought you were bubbling over

"Well, so I am, but now that you're here I don't mind," I replied, grinning. "What about that ghost, sir? You don't look very frightened, I must say—and your hair's not white!"

Nelson Lee told me all about his experience in the Mount, and I was greatly interested. When the guv'nor mentioned that he suspected that a big gang of criminals was involved, I nodded vigorously.

"How did you guess that, sir?" I asked.

"The fact is almost obvious, young 'un," was his reply. "Moreover, I believe that I have arrived at a further conclusion—although I made no mention of it to Mr. Ridgeway. I can think of only one reason why Ridgeway's absence should be desired—and it concerns the old man of the moor cottage, Mr. Simon Legg."

"How do you make that out, sir?"

"I have been somewhat interested in the excellent Mr. Legg," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "The simple country people about here may think that the old man is an eccentric old miser, and that the high fence around his cottage is merely the outcome of a cranky desire to be private. I think differently, however—I have my own ideas. The Mount directly overlooks the cottage. For whilst the latter is on the moor, the Mount towers above it, its rear windows providing direct observation upon the cottage itself. Those fences are high, but it is still possible to see within the enclosure from the upper windows of the Mount."

"So you think old Legg is trying to frighten Mr. Ridgeway away, sir?"

"I think Legg has a hand in the game," replied the schoolmaster-detective. "This is merely the overture, as we might say; the actual plot has yet to develop, and I am quite in the dark regarding its character."

"I'm not, guv'nor," I replied triumphantly. "Anyhow, I jolly well know who's doing it!"

"Indeed!" said the guv'nor calmly. "I'll hear your yarn in a moment or two, Nipper. Legg is certainly not what he seems—and he is not working alone. On two separate occasions I have been attacked, and I feel somewhat flattered. The enemy evidently fears me, which proves that he is nervous. Your story regarding what happened at Legg's cottage during the evening proves that my attackers are connected with the old man—for they evidently went to the cottage immediately after their futile attempt to get hold of me."

"But you don't know who they are, do you?" I asked triumphantly.

"Do you?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Then don't be such an infernally selfish young beggar!" snapped the guv'nor. "I haven't heard a word of your report. I posted you within the Mount grounds. Well, what did you see?"

"At about twelve o'clock two men slipped over the bottom wall of the garden," I replied quickly. "They crept into an out-house, and that's all I know. Of course, they were doing the telephone stunt—using the gas-pipes as speaking-tubes. But I couldn't get near without the risk of being caught. But as they were leaving I had a beautiful piece of luck."

"I suspect that your modesty prevents you from telling a true account," said the guv'nor lightly. "I will warrant it was not so much beautiful luck as astuteness on your part, my lad."

"Well, I wouldn't say that, of course," I grinned. "The fact is, sir, I tucked myself behind some bushes. And when the two men came back they paused within five yards of me and spoke for a minute or two. It was mainly concerning Mr. Ridgeway, and they seemed to be confident that they would succeed in scaring him off."

"Is this your bubbling news?" asked Lee drily.

"Rather not!" I replied. "I recognised one of the men, sir. He was a chap named Dickson, and I saw him at a picture-palace in Fulham Road—a little place called the Cosy Cinema—"

Nelson Lee came to a halt and grasped my shoulders.

"Upon my soul!" he exclaimed tensely. "Dickson! Why, you've got a better memory than I have, Nipper! He was one of the fellows who attacked me, but I couldn't place him. I excuse myself, however, by reminding you that I only saw him once—whereas you tracked him throughout one whole day."

"But—but you don't seem to realise what it means, sir!" I panted excitedly. "This chap—Dickson—he's a member of the Circle of Terror!"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"The Circle of Terror!" he echoed. "By James! I was not far wrong when I suggested to Mr. Ridgeway that a big gang was operating. The Circle of Terror!" he repeated. "No wonder they attempted to get me out of the way, young 'un!"

I could see that Nelson Lee was greatly impressed. As for myself, I could hardly contain my excitement. We had had many grim tussles with that infamous secret organisation known as the Circle of Terror—the criminal society which had done its best to terrify the whole of England during its most prosperous days. Owing to Nelson Lee's great campaign the Circle had been rather quiet of late. Professor Cyrus Zingrave, the High Lord of the Circle, was not the man to rest on his oars for long, however. And now, by a curious chance, the guv'nor and I were getting mixed up in another battle of wits against our old enemies.

"It's amazing, sir!" I said, taking a deep breath. "But what does it mean? What can be the explanation of these mysterious goings on?"

"I have not the faintest idea, Nipper," replied the guv'nor absently. "But Simon Legg is connected with the plot—and something is going on within that enclosure which must be kept an absolute secret. The

mystery of the Mount is solved—but what lies beyond?"

"More mystery!" I declared.

"You are right, Nipper—in more ways than one," replied the guv'nor drily. "For it is, indeed, a moor mystery."

"Oh, my hat!" I groaned. "Fancy joking now!"

"Really, Nipper, I am not joking," Nelson Lee assured me. "I am thrilled with the thought of engaging in another war with my very excellent old friend, Professor Zingrave. This is possibly a mere side-line in the Circle's programme, but it will prove of great interest, nevertheless."

"And what do you mean to do, sir?" I asked, as we arrived at the private gateway which led into the Triangle at St. Frank's.

"Do, Nipper?" said the guv'nor smoothly. "Well, I shall lose no time in getting into bed, and you'd better do the same, my lad. We must watch and wait, and see how the plot develops. It promises to be most entertaining."

And five minutes later we were both getting into bed. I didn't sleep for some little time, for my thoughts were too busy. Another fight with the Circle of Terror! It was something to be excited over, and no mistake.

The mystery was all cleared up in the end, but we were destined to pass through many adventures and to receive some big surprises before the end was reached.

THE END.

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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 **Coggins** 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. With great bravery Challis saves Hood from drowning. He carries him back to the School. Arrived there, he runs into the arms of Mr. Evans.

(Now read on.)

CHALLIS'S RECEPTION.

THE master started and flashed a quick glance at Challis. The boy's coolness surprised him.

"Yes," he answered. "Carry him up. Or stay let me have him; you're tired."

"You'll soil your clothes, sir. Besides, I can manage." Challis hesitated no longer, but strode resolutely onward through passages and up stairways, passing gaping and excited boys, until he reached Basil's dormitory. Into this he carried him, and having placed him gently upon the floor of his cubicle, set a pillow beneath his head.

That done, he reeled and fell into a chair. The reaction was almost too much for him. Every muscle and nerve within him tingled and throbbled. His face was ashen white.

"Go to your room and change, Challis," said the master in a kindlier tone. "I'll look after Hood."

Challis stared gloomily at Mr. Evans. "He'll need the attention of a doctor," he said. "Shall I send for Mr. Morant, sir?"

"I'll attend to that. Stay, though. Send one of the boys to me. You're bound to meet some of them on your way to your room."

Challis rose with an effort, stepped for-

ward, and bent down for a moment, studying the face of the unconscious boy intently.

"I can't think that he is as bad as he looks, sir," he whispered, a little unsteadily.

"And I have done my best——"

"Yes, yes! But please go, Challis."

The big boy lumbered out of the cubicle and made his way to the dormitory door. He heard someone coming up the stairs beyond.

After a moment's hesitation he pursued his way and came face to face with Ponsonby. Ponsonby's face was a study.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed. "It's Challis."

His eyes roamed over the startling apparition, and as he saw the state the "cad" was in he burst into a roar of laughter.

"Well, you're a pretty beauty," he sneered. "You sneak away from the cricket match and get yourself into this sort of a mess. Not surprised. You seem fond of dirt. There's no accounting for tastes. But the chaps are going to make it red-hot for you."

Challis eyed him sombrely.

"Ponsonby," he said, and his voice was level and cold. "Young Basil Hood has met with an accident. He may be pretty bad. Mr. Evans wants you to fetch Dr. Morant. Tell him to come at once, it's urgent."

"Why not go yourself?" sneered Ponsonby.

"You see the state I'm in? Otherwise I would——"

Ponsonby hesitated. He felt inclined to ignore Challis's requests, if only on principle.

"Don't stand gaping there, man," cried Challis irritably. "Hood may be worse than we think. Every moment is precious. He was nearly drowned in the river——"

Ah! Ponsonby understood why Challis was in such a mess now. He knew that the boy spoke the truth, and so, the better side of him rising uppermost, he swung round on his heels and ran.

"All right. I'll fetch the doctor in a jiffy," he cried, and a moment later was gone.

AT THE WEIR.

JOHAN CHALLIS, having gained his room, selected a change of clothing and, stripping himself, washed and towelled down, after which he got into an old suit of spare clothes.

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

He felt a little better then, though he was feeling very downcast. His thoughts would insist on straying to that cubicle in which he had left Basil Hood lying. He kept on looking out of the window and opening the door to listen for the doctor's arrival.

The doctor came. Challis, with door wide open, sat and waited, his heart leaping every now and then as he fancied he caught the echo of anxious voices.

At last he could stand it no longer. He felt he must find out how it fared with Basil.

Leaving his room he strode eagerly towards the dormitory in which he had left the boy. As he approached it he saw some of the boys standing about the passage, and then Dr. Morant, Mr. Evans, and Ponsonby appeared. They were carrying something with extreme care. Challis, stifling the groan that leapt to his lips, stopped aghast, his face deathly white, his eyes starting in terror.

It was Basil, he knew it was Basil, and he feared that the boy was dead.

As they came up with him he stepped forward.

"Mr. Evans," he asked, and his voice was so hoarse that he could not recognise it as belonging to him. "Tell me how he is. Doctor, please—"

"Stand aside," hissed the doctor roughly. "We don't want anyone interfering now."

Challis felt that Mr. Evans glowered disapprovingly at him and shrank back as if he had been struck. The bearers passed onward.

Raising his hand to his throbbing head the boy felt then that it was all up with him at Littleminster. He could not bear to stay in the place any longer. If young Hood was dead he would get his father to consent to his leaving, or—

He felt a touch on his arm, and with a start saw Percy Grainger, the school captain, standing before him. Grainger's face wore a kindly expression. Perhaps he saw how it was with Challis. Perhaps he had heard all about the accident. At any rate, he said, with a sympathetic gleam in his eyes:

"It's all right, Challis. The youngster will come to no harm. They're taking him to Mr. Evans's room, where he'll be quieter. The doctor says he'll be himself again in a day or two, if not to-morrow."

Challis's face brightened. He stretched out his hand, which Grainger, however, ignored.

"Thank you, Grainger," he cried hoarsely. "You don't know what a weight you've taken off my mind. I shan't forget your kindness."

Then he turned and hurried away. But not to his room or his studies. He was incapable of concentration, and knew it.

He passed down the stairs instead, and left the school by one of the back doors. With hurried strides and with head bent he kept on until he had passed the gates and was retracing his steps along the road that led to the river Awle.

He felt that he must be out in the air.

The school was stifling. It shut him in. He wanted to think. He wanted to find out what had become of the punt. He was anxious to know the extent of his indebtedness to the landlord of the Magpie Inn. If the punt had been smashed up in its fall over the weir, he felt that he would have to replace it or pay compensation. He hadn't the money. His father couldn't afford it, but he must know the worst.

And somehow the river called to him with a strangely enticing voice. He had always loved it, and it had nearly drowned him and Basil.

The very thought of it drew him onward, and so he at last came to the bank, turned along the towing-path, reached the bridge, crossed to the other side, and then made his way in the direction of the roaring weir.

As he went he turned his sombre eyes upon the swiftly flowing waters. What a stream was running, to be sure, after the recent heavy rain! The punt would have stood no chance.

On he trudged, speeding up until he walked at five and a half miles an hour in his eagerness, and came in sight of the weir.

All the sluices were open. The stream swept level and with glass-like surface past the piles and through the openings, to fall in a tumbling mad cascade and head of foam into the depths beyond.

The punt had gone through. On the boy went, making a wide detour, on and on, until he came to the shallows over which the river raced, eager to reach the deeper water beyond the approach to the lock.

And there he saw the remains of the punt. Its bottom had been staved in and part of the side was broken away. The wreckage, damaged beyond repair, lay there, and he saw at a glance that he could not hope to reach it. Not very far away, and close in shore, he saw the landing-net lying, and, wading in, secured it.

Alas! the net was torn, and the thing would be of very little future use. With a deep-drawn sigh he turned and slowly walked back to the school, his brows set in a frown, his face clouded.

He had lost all taste for his fishing, and he felt somehow that he would never care for it again.

BASIL AWAKENS.

NEWSPAPER of the accident had swept through the school from end to end by the time Challis got back. The boys could talk of nothing else. Without exception they condemned him.

He had treated the honour of his selection for the next sixteen with contempt.

He had slighted the selection committee by going off to Ash on the Awle, and had taken young Basil with him out of pure selfishness. And so careless had he been as to almost drown the little chap.

"And a lot he cares," sneered Myers. "It's my belief he'd rejoice if young Basil

(Continued overleaf.)

Hood became seriously ill after his tumble into the river. Clumsy idiot! He might risk his own neck without endangering the life of a kid like that."

"Hear, hear," chimed in some of the bigger boys of Evans's.

Grainger, passing at that moment, heard and stopped.

"That's not fair, Myers," he cried warmly. "Challis was genuinely upset about young Hood."

"Oh! Then why did he cut off without waiting to hear what the doctor had to say? Ryder saw him sneaking out of the school like a thief——"

"After I had reassured him about Hood," said the captain sternly. "Myers, if you have a spite against Challis, at least be fair."

"Fair? Fair? When he insults the cricket club, slights the whole House, and goes off to his beastly fishing instead of doing the decent thing and taking his chance in the next sixteen."

"Don't forget that Challis has never played cricket since he came to the school. He'd have been woefully out of practice. And I know he is fond of fishing. Besides, you fellows are not very friendly towards him, and he may have been sensitive because he hasn't the proper kit."

"Of course you would stand up for him, Grainger," sneered Myers.

"I'd stand up for any chap if I thought he wasn't getting fair play," returned Grainger coldly as he walked away.

Myers turned to Ryder and the others.

"We're not going to allow the matter to rest here. Challis will have to pay up for what he's done to young Hood," he said.

At supper that night the boys talked in bated breaths about the happenings of the day. All eyes were directed at Challis, who, pale but apparently unconcerned, ate as usual, the only difference in his behaviour being that he was even more silent and taciturn than usual.

How the boy endured sitting at table with all the babble and chatter around him he hardly knew. It was purgatory, sheer purgatory. He believed what Chalfont said because his fears had already led him to anticipate the worst. As soon as he could he rushed upstairs to his room and paced up and down, up and down, up and down, thinking, thinking of Basil Hood, and how the boy had looked when last he'd seen him.

If he were to die, what then? What then?

He stood and leant upon the mantelpiece. As he did so he saw a piece of cardboard resting there.

On it had been painted in bold black type the one word: "Murder."

With a cry Challis seized the piece of

pasteboard and tore it in bits. He hurled the pieces into the fireplace.

Turning, he made for the door, livid, distraught. It was a joke of course, a cruel, clumsy joke, but it told all the same.

Out into the passage the boy leapt, and hurrying noiselessly onward, made his way to Mr. Evans's bedroom.

He was about to turn the handle, when Chalfont, who might have been watching, sprang forward and tore his arm away.

"You can't go in there," said the boy. "You're not wanted. Hood's in a stupor. Mr. Evans is with him. The orders are——"

Challis flung Chalfont fiercely backwards.

"Stand out of the way," he cried, and wrenched the door open, making more noise than he had intended.

He passed into the room.

Mr. Evans, the master, was sitting at the bedside with a shaded lamp throwing its light upon a book he had been reading.

He rose at the intrusion.

He made no attempt to conceal his surprise at seeing Challis there.

"Go to your room, Challis," he said, in an irritated whisper. "You're not wanted here. You've done enough harm already." The master used expressions he would not have chosen had he had time for reflection.

The distraught boy ignored them.

"I had to come. I want to know how it is with young Hood. I couldn't stay away until I knew there was no danger. Please let me stay a little while, sir," he pleaded.

"Go to your room," repeated the master sternly. "This is really too much. Not content with——"

But Challis, glancing at the figure which lay upon the bed, saw a pair of bright eyes glancing up into his, saw young Hood, who had awakened at the sound of their voices, smiling at him.

Then a low voice said:

"Please let him stay, Mr. Evans. I want him here. He saved my life, you know. Yes, you saved my life, John. You were so cool, so brave——"

But Challis had rushed forward, had thrown himself down on his knees beside the bed, and had stretched his arms out to clasp the frail body which lay beneath the clothes.

"Are you all right again, old fellow," he murmured brokenly, the tears welling into his eyes in his great relief.

"Yes, I think I'm better, and it's jolly being here with you."

Mr. Evans looked, heard, said nothing, but going to the open door waved Ponsonby, who was peeping in, back, and closed it gently.

He began to see the river accident from another point of view.

(To be continued.)