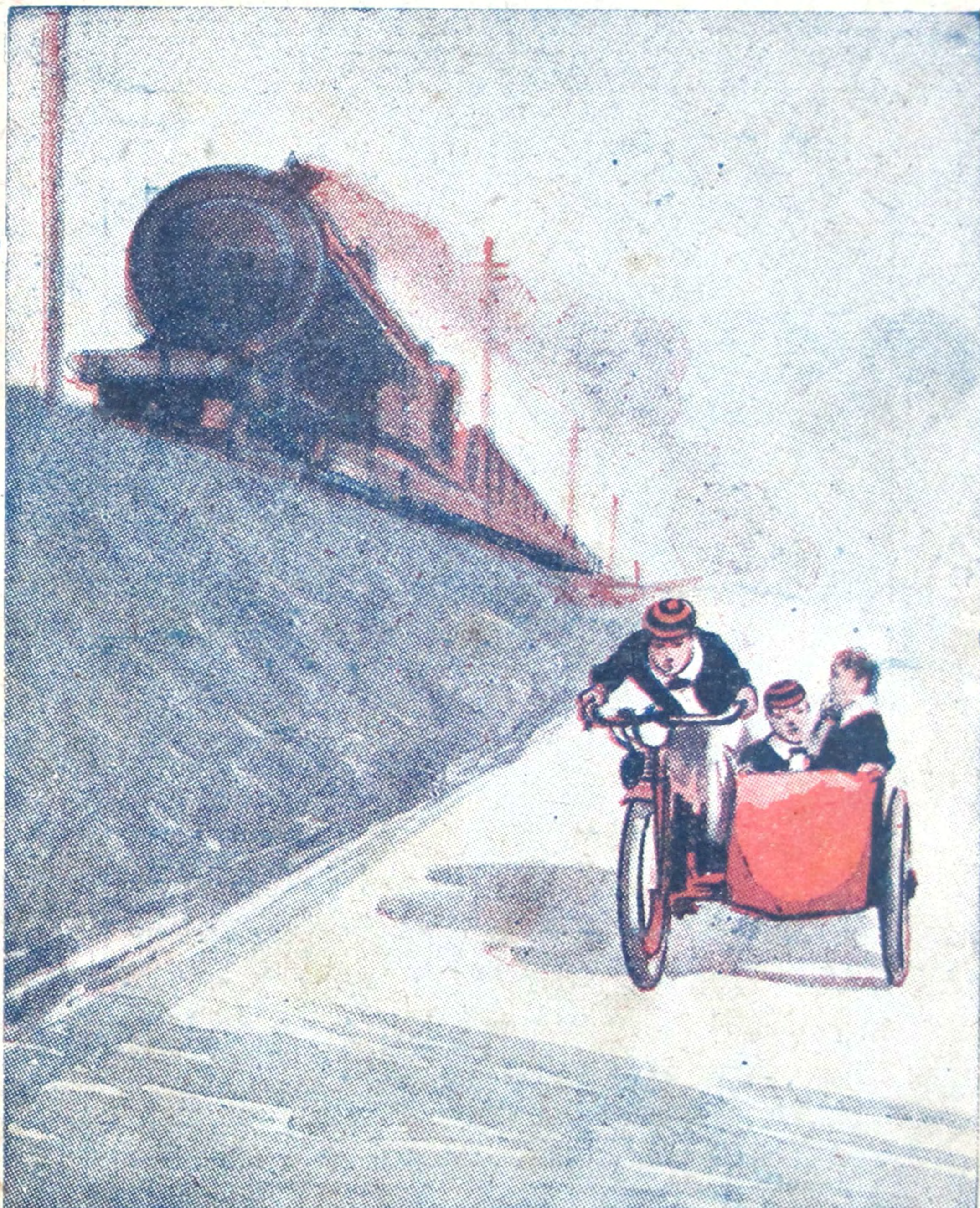


No. 168.—MAGNIFICENT SCHOOL AND DETECTIVE TALE!

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THE COTTAGE ON THE MOOR!

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(The Story Related Throughout by Nipper.)

CHAPTER I.

A BRUSH WITH SIMON LEGG—THE MYSTERY—NELSON LEE IS PLEASED.

CECIL DE VALERIE, of the Remove Form at St. Frank's, nodded.

"That's a bet, my son!" he said briskly.

"Right-ho!" I grinned. "I don't believe in betting, as a rule, but as the stakes amount to nil, it doesn't matter. But you've got to go right to the station, mind."

"Into the giddy booking-office itself," said De Valerie. "You chaps will be witnesses—what?"

"Rely on us," said Browne, with a chuckle.

"You can place the absolute reliance upon our wonderful selves," beamed Sessue Yakama, the Japanese boy in the Remove. "But it is the ridiculous bargain, Nipper, that you refrain from the trot. It must be the walk all the way."

"Good enough," I replied readily. "Off you go, my sons!"

De Valerie and Browne and Yakama mounted their bicycles and pedalled away. And I started off for St. Frank's, walking as fast as I could manage it without actually running.

The wager was a trivial one.

It was evening, and nearly dark. I had been to the village in order to make a few purchases, and on my way back had met the three Removites just against the bridge at the edge of the village.

They were on their way to the station to inquire about a parcel, and I had somewhat rashly declared that I could arrive back at the school, on foot, before they could do so on their jiggers. They had to cycle right through the village and back, and they might possibly be delayed at the station—so the odds were fairly even.

Browne, who was a new fellow in the Ancient House, stipulated that I should walk all the way; for, as he pointed out, if I ran all the way I could whack them hands down, so to speak.

I set off, rather amused.

The lane was very gloomy under the thick, heavy trees. On one side lay the black, impenetrable mass of Bellton Wood, and on the other side the lane was bordered with leafy trees and bushes. What little daylight there was left was shut out completely.

"Oh, I shall do it easily!" I told myself, watching a dim figure just ahead of me.

"Hallo! That's old Simon Legg, I believe."

I grinned as I thought of the queer old fellow, popularly known in the village as a miser, who had taken up his residence in the little cottage on Bannington Moor. Simon Legg was a cranky old chap, and he had a strong dislike for all boys—although nobody knew exactly why. If a crowd of fellows passed him in the village street he would pause and shake his stick at them.

But he was a harmless old fellow, to all intents and purposes, though I happened to know a few facts concerning him which made me regard him in a different light. There was quite a little mystery in connection with Simon Legg and his cottage on the moor, and my respected guv'nor, Mr. Nelson Lee, was greatly interested in it.

As I walked on rapidly I noticed that he was walking rapidly too. This was rather unusual, for the old fellow generally shuffled over the ground at quite a sedate pace, his bent figure being assisted by means of a stout ash-stick.

I saw him turn and glance back. Then he went towards a gap in the hedge and disappeared from my view. I concluded that he was making a short cut through the wood on to the moor.

But I soon learned different.

Just as I was about to pass the spot there was a quick shuffle, and then Simon Legg sprang in front of me, his stick upraised. His eyes were blazing angrily beneath their bushy eyebrows, and his long beard fairly seemed to bristle.

"You young varmint!" he croaked harshly.

"Sorry, Mr. Legg, I can't stop," I said, trying to push past, remembering that I

hadn't a moment to lose if I was to get back at St. Frank's before the other fellows.

"No, ye don't—no, ye don't!" snapped Simon Legg.

He shuffled through the dust as I attempted to get past, and planted himself fairly in my path.

"I'll teach ye!" he snarled. "Young dog!"

"Look here, what's the matter with you?" I demanded crossly. "Let me pass——"

"What do you mean by follering me—hey?" he croaked. "I'll teach ye to foller a poor old man an' spy on him——"

"Why, I wasn't following you!" I put in. "Can't I walk up the road without you suspecting those things? I'm in a hurry, Mr. Legg, so you'd better stand clear. I don't want to be impolite——"

"Ye young liar!" shouted the old man violently. "Follering me—that's what ye was doing! An' I'll stop them games, drat ye! I'll stop 'em!"

Swish!

Simon Legg's stick whirled down near my head, and, instead of being impatient, I became furious. If that blow had struck me I should have been almost brained. I dodged, intending to get past—for I didn't want to come to blows with the old crank. I had every reason to believe that he was weakly, and it didn't seem the thing to go for an old man, even though he had provoked me.

My arm was grasped, however, and I gave a little yell of pain. Simon Legg's grip was like that of a vice, and the next moment he had me almost helpless. I struggled desperately, rather alarmed now.

"Let me go, confound you!" I shouted angrily.

He cackled gloatingly.

"Not till I've thrashed ye!" he exclaimed, his croaking voice becoming stronger. "Not till I've beat ye to a pulp, ye young varmint! I'll teach ye to foller an honest man!"

He raised his stick with the evident intention of bringing it down upon my back. But I wasn't putting up with any of that nonsense. With a sudden heave I flung my arm round and jerked the stick completely out of his hand. It swung through the air and fell in the hedge-bottom.

"By gosh! I'll make ye pay for that!" rasped the old man, with a savage twist of my arm. "It won't do ye no good, Nipper! I know what your name is—old Simon don't go about with his ears closed!"

"You madman!" I panted desperately.

And then a really fierce struggle commenced. Legg was intent upon hurting me, and he was doing his utmost to drag me towards the hedge. Perhaps he wanted to get me into the wood, so that he could wreak his vengeance upon me in solitude. I was convinced that he was far more dotty than everybody believed.

I knew, however, that De Valerie and the other two fellows would come whizzing up the lane at any moment, and then I should have all the help I needed. But if Legg suc-

ceeded in dragging me through the hedge he could easily keep me quiet until the fellows had gone past. And then awful things might happen.

For I was no longer in any doubt regarding Simon Legg's strength. Instead of being weakly, as I had fondly imagined, he was proving that he possessed enormous strength. I'm fairly strong myself—as wiry as a Chinaman, the gov'nor had often declared—but I was nearly helpless in Simon Legg's grip. It was as much as I could do to defeat his obvious purpose.

"Let me go!" I panted hoarsely.

"Ye young rat!" snarled the old man. "If ye don't keep still, I'll half kill ye! Strugglin won't do ye no good, drat ye!"

But struggling did do me good, for Legg found it impossible to drag me into the hedge. We swayed about, kicking up the dust, and generally making a considerable commotion. But the lane was dark and deserted, and there was no sign of the three bicycle lamps I expected to see.

My strength was weakening, and I realised it with alarm. For my assailant appeared to be as vigorous as ever. He was wiry and muscular, in spite of his age and bent old back.

He didn't relax his efforts for a moment. Foot by foot he forced me towards the hedge, but I resisted every inch of the way. And then, with a sudden swing, he whirled me right off my feet, and I knew that I was on the grass border. Another swing of that sort would carry me through the gap.

At that moment I caught a faint glimpse of three swiftly moving figures down the lane, and I realised, with a gasp of relief, that De Valerie and Browne and Yakama were approaching. They hadn't lighted their lamps, as I had expected, and their approach had been so sudden that Simon Legg was even now unaware of it.

"Help!" I shouted desperately. "Rescue, Remove! Help!"

"Ha, ha! That won't serve ye!" rasped out the old madman. "Ye'll get no help, boy! We're alone, and I mean to take ye behind the hedge and thrash——"

"Help!" I yelled wildly.

There was an answering hail, and the grating of brakes. The next moment De Valerie and Browne and Yakama swung themselves off their bicycles, threw the machines against the hedge, and rushed across the lane.

"Here we are!" shouted De Valerie encouragingly.

"Curse the interferin' young hounds!" snarled Simon Legg.

He released me as though I had suddenly become red-hot, and dived into the hedge with crab-like agility. A crashing of rotten twigs sounded, and he had vanished.

"Thank goodness!" I gasped weakly.

"Who was it?" asked Browne. "Some rotten tramp——"

"No!" I replied, leaning on Browne's arm. "Oh, my hat! I was nearly done when you chaps came up. Thanks awfully!"

"No need to thank us," said Browne. "We've done nothing, Nipper. I'm blessed if I can understand!"

"Neither can I," remarked De Valerie.

I said nothing for a moment; for, to tell the truth, I was rather shaken, and found it necessary to get my breath back. Legg had not hurt me, however—it was only a matter of wind.

"The rotter meant to get me into the wood!" I said huskily. "I never knew he had such enormous strength——"

"We are quite in the esteemed dark, Nipper," interposed Yakama softly. "Who is the individual possessed of such stupendous muscular vigour? We are of the great anxiety."

"Didn't you see?" I asked. "It was old Simon Legg——"

"Legg!" yelled De Valerie.

"Yes."

"But he's an old man of eighty!" exclaimed Browne. "Are you trying to pull my leg— Oh, my hat! I didn't mean that to be a pun," he added apologetically.

"It was Legg, I tell you," I declared. "I'm all right now, thanks. The chap's got tremendous strength! It's a jolly good thing he didn't get me through the hedge."

"But how did it start, old chap?" asked Browne.

"Why, I was walking up the lane, as we arranged, and old Simon happened to be in front of me," I explained. "He dived into the hedge, but sprang out upon me as I was passing. Swore that I was following him, and then started grabbing me."

"Oh, he's off his rocker!" remarked De Valerie.

"I should say he is!" I growled. "Too much off his rocker for my liking. But I'm all right now—thanks to you chaps."

"Will you not give the preposterous information to the noble police authorities?" asked Yakama gently. "It is the case of the assault, and you can have the man severely summoned!"

"Oh, that's no good!" I replied. "What can we prove, Jappy? It wouldn't be worth it, even if it could be done. Old Legg may have fits like that, and I shall take care to steer clear of him in future. Goodness knows I'm not a funk, but he's one too many for me."

We walked up to the school, the other three wheeling their machines. Our little "wager" was now off, for Simon Legg had completely upset it—as De Valerie remarked.

By the time we entered the Ancient House I was practically myself again, and I went along to the Housemaster's study—Nelson Lee's private sanctum. For the great criminologist occupied the position of Housemaster at St. Frank's. I meant to tell him all about what had just occurred and hear his opinion.

I was wondering if there was anything behind that attack upon me. Simon Legg was a bit of a puzzle. Several weeks before he had appeared in the neighbourhood, having taken possession of the old moor cottage.

He had had a high fence built completely round his lonely abode, and was supposed to live absolutely alone.

A day or two before, however, Nelson Lee, in the course of an investigation connected with an old house known as the Mount, had positively discovered that Simon Legg was not alone.

The gov'nor and I found out, in fact, that he was closely connected with the Circle of Terror—that grim criminal organisation of which we knew so much. Nelson Lee had fought many battles with the Circle, and it now looked as though we were on the verge of another.

Why the Circle of Terror was operating down here, and how Simon Legg was connected with it, remained a mystery to us. Nelson Lee was certain that the affair was a big one; for the Circle agents had twice attempted to get hold of the gov'nor. They feared his presence, and wished to render him harmless.

Nelson Lee was lying low—waiting and watching, as he informed me. It was the best course to pursue.

I tapped upon the door of his study, and entered. The gov'nor was lounging in an easy chair, reading a newspaper. He looked round at me, smiled, and nodded.

"Had some trouble, Nipper?" he asked calmly.

"How did you know, sir?" I said, staring.

"The fact is obvious, my lad," he remarked, laying the paper down. "It is not your usual habit to wear a sadly crumpled collar; neither do you usually prefer to have your tie almost at the back of your neck. I assume that the tussle was of a somewhat grim nature, and not connected with a mere schoolboy——"

"You're jolly keen to-night, gov'nor!" I broke in.

"Not at all, Nipper," he smiled. "The gleam in your eyes is well known to me—I have often seen it before. It is a danger-signal. It implies quite a lot, and it would not be there if the struggle had been a trivial one. Let's hear the yarn, young 'un!"

I told him all about it, and he listened without a word of comment until I had finished. Then he nodded slowly.

"I'm glad you didn't come to any harm, my boy," he said quietly. "You are very lucky, for Simon Legg is far more dangerous than he appears to be. He did not suspect you were following him—oh, no! He merely seized the opportunity to get you into his clutches. Our record, Nipper, is well known, and criminals of every class are inclined to be hostile. You must be more on your guard."

He rose from his chair and looked at me with satisfaction.

"This Circle of Terror business is gripping me, Nipper," he said keenly. "Before long we shall probably obtain the opening we require, and then some really exciting work will commence."

"Have you got any idea, sir?"

"Regarding the nature of the mystery, you mean?"

"Yes."

"I have many ideas, my lad," said the detective. "But they are all mere theories, and I would not dream of putting them into words even to you. We must await developments before moving any further in the game. So for the present we must rest upon our oars. I am quite pleased with the way events are turning."

I could see that the gov'nor was in his most dangerous mood. As soon as the chance occurred he would get busy in earnest. At present it was necessary to wait—to see what the enemy would do. Nothing could be done with regard to Simon Legg.

And so, after a few more words with Nelson Lee, I left his apartment, and made my way to Study C, in the Remove passage, in order to tell Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson all about it.

CHAPTER II.

FULLWOOD'S LITTLE SCHEME—THE TRUTH ABOUT BROWNE—THE NUTS' JOY.

RALPH LESLIE FULLWOOD scowled. "Yes, we'll find out the truth about that cad this afternoon!" he said, with savage satisfaction. "I'll bet he won't look so jolly cheerful when we've shown him up in his true colours!"

"Rather!" exclaimed Gulliver and Bell.

Fullwood and Co. were lounging under the chestnuts in the Triangle at St. Frank's. Browne, of the Remove, had just passed by. I was with him, and I had noticed the scowls which the elegant Fullwood had bestowed upon my companion.

It was the following day—Saturday—and morning lessons were over. It was a half-holiday, of course, and I was full up with thoughts of cricket. It was not exactly an important day in cricket, but the Ancient House juniors were playing the College House juniors, and I was confident of success. Browne, the new fellow, was to have a chance, for he had shown wonderful form at the nets during the week.

"We'll make the cad sing small!" went on Fullwood, with relish. "By gad! We'll have him hounded out of the school!"

Browne was unaware of these pleasant remarks; but he would not have cared a straw even if he had heard them. The opinion of Fullwood and Co. was not valued in the Ancient House. They were utter cads and no decent fellows would have anything to do with them.

Fullwood's animosity towards Browne was easy to understand. Browne was an extremely careless fellow in his attire, generally going about the school with baggy trousers, and with one or more tears in his jacket. This of itself was sufficient to earn the severe displeasure of the elegant Nuts. Moreover, Browne was a good sort, and that was another reason why Fullwood and Co. would have nothing to do with him. On the top of

all, the new fellow had knocked Fullwood down for bullying.

There was a certain amount of reason in Fullwood's threat to "show up" Browne in his true colours. For it certainly seemed as though the new junior had a secret which he particularly wished to keep to himself.

For Browne would never make any mention of the school he had belonged to previous to his arrival at St. Frank's. Several fellows had questioned him on the subject, and they had met with no response. For reasons best known to himself, Browne said nothing.

One evening we had received a hint. Cricket was being discussed, and I happened to mention Redwood College. Browne had immediately pricked up his ears, so to speak, and had shown unmistakable alarm when I said that the Redwood juniors would shortly be paying us a visit.

The news had given Browne a turn, for he had gone pale; and when somebody asked him, point-blank, if Redwood had been his last school, he evaded the question and walked out of the common-room.

Now, that was very significant. The majority of the fellows had no wish to pry into Browne's affairs—they were content to take him on his own merits—and he was extremely popular with nearly everybody. Only a few days before Browne had shown his grit by rescuing Handforth from a most perilous position—Handforth, like the fathead he was, having climbed up the ivy to the gutter and having got into a mess at the top. But for Browne's plucky action, Handforth would have got into a far greater mess at the bottom!

So we all looked upon him with favour. It was none of our business, anyhow, to inquire where he had come from. Undoubtedly it was rather a pity for such a splendid chap to be secretive—but nobody can be perfect.

Fullwood and his companions were not content to let matters rest, however. Fullwood saw an opportunity of getting his own back. He believed that Browne had been expelled from Redwood; and, without question, Browne's own actions led the whole Remove to think the same thing. Even De Valerie, his study-mate, could get nothing out of him. He wouldn't even mention his people, or where his home was situated.

The genial idea of Fullwood's was to get into communication with the Redwood fellows themselves. If it turned out that Browne had been sacked from Redwood—well, Fullwood would make things hot for him. If Fullwood could do anybody a bad turn he was happy.

As it happened, the Redwood juniors were due to play Bannington Grammar School on this very Saturday afternoon, and Bannington was only three miles off. Dinner over, Fullwood and Co. would cycle over to Bannington in search of the information. There was no doubt that they would obtain some.

I was busy with my team; and as soon as dinner was dispensed with I took my men out to the nets for some preliminary prac-

tice. Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell wheeled out their bicycles and started on the trip in quest of knowledge.

The late summer afternoon was extremely warm, the sun shining down from a sky of intense blue. The dust lay rather thickly on the roads, so Fullwood and Co. took the journey rather easily.

They arrived at the Grammar School grounds during the first innings of the Grammarians, and settled themselves near the pavilion in order to watch the game—not that they were interested. Banker and nap were far more entertaining to Fullwood and Co. than cricket.

Fullwood could not very well speak to any of the Redwood fellows, for they were all in the field. This was awkward, but nothing could be done.

The Grammarians did not object to the presence of St. Frank's fellows; they fondly believed that Fullwood and Co. had cycled over to watch the game—and all spectators were welcome.

Over an hour had elapsed before the innings was over. And now Fullwood obtained his chance. Several Redwood juniors were near by, talking boastfully of the runs they intended making. The St. Frank's Nuts regarded the Redwood visitors with favour, recognising fellows of their own stamp. For the fellows were snobs of the same class as Fullwood himself—which made things much easier.

"I say, you chaps," said Fullwood pleasantly; "can we have a word with you?"

Two of the visitors glanced round.

"Hallo!" said one of them. "You ain't Grammar School fellows."

"No," replied Fullwood, making himself agreeable. "We come from St. Frank's. Pleased to meet you. My name's Fullwood; these chaps are Gulliver and Bell."

"St. Frank's, eh?" exclaimed one of the others. "I wanted to speak to some of you fellows. I'm Stevens, junior skipper at Redwood. We've got a fixture with you—"

"My dear chap, it's no good talkin' to me about cricket," interrupted Fullwood. "I don't know anythin' about the beastly game. I wanted to ask you somethin' else."

"Fire ahead, then," said Stevens.

Fullwood was feeling pleased with himself. He had got into conversation with the Redwood fellows very easily, and he knew the great moment had arrived. This was where the detestable Browne was going to be shown up!

"I was goin' to ask you about a fellow who's come to our school this term," he said smoothly. "He's a secretive bounder, an' won't say where he comes from. But I've got an idea he was at Redwood last term. I thought perhaps you'd be able to give me a tip."

"What's the fellow's name?" asked Stevens.

"Browne."

"Eh?"

"Browne," repeated Fullwood

"By gad!" said Stevens. "Do you mean to say that Browne's at St. Frank's?"

"Yes—in the Remove."

Stevens whistled.

"That's rich!" he exclaimed. "Oh, by gad! That's jolly rich!" he exclaimed. "I say, Hicks, did you hear that? Browne's at St. Frank's. Like his beastly cheek—what?"

"Eh? Browne at St. Frank's!" grinned Hicks. "Just like his rotten nerve! Well, I hope they like him—we didn't!"

Fullwood and Co. exchanged glances.

"Why, was he kicked out?" asked Fullwood.

"Not exactly—we kicked him out!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Where's the joke?" asked Gulliver, as two of three of the Redwood juniors laughed.

"Browne was kicked out, you say?"

"Well, he was, and he wasn't," replied Stevens, grinning. "He'd have been there now if we'd have allowed it. But it wasn't likely that we were going to stick such a cad at Redwood."

"By gad! Rather not!" exclaimed Hicks warmly.

"What was he sacked for?" asked Fullwood eagerly.

"He wasn't sacked at all."

"But you just said—"

"I said that we kicked him out of the school—and so we did!" explained Stevens. "We made the place too jolly hot to hold him! He was hooted out, neck and crop, and left weeks before the end of term."

Fullwood tried to conceal his impatience.

"I suppose the cad had pinched something?" he asked.

"No; his pater did that!" chuckled Stevens.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Redwood fellows yelled.

"I say, that's rich!" grinned Hicks.

"Blessed if I can see anything to cackle at!" snapped Fullwood. "Why the deuce can't you answer a plain question?"

"That's what we have done—"

"Well, I can't see it!" said Gulliver bluntly.

"And do you mean to tell me that Browne has had the cool cheek to go to St. Frank's?" asked Stevens. "I suppose he hasn't said anything about his pater?"

"Not a word!"

"Awfully secretive—what?"

"Won't tell anybody a thing!" replied Fullwood. "We only discovered that he came from Redwood by accident. I thought he'd been sacked, but you say he wasn't?"

"No, although it amounts to the same thing," replied Stevens. "You see, we found out something about him after he had been in the school for close upon a term and a half. And the uproar was simply appalling."

"What did you find out?" asked Fullwood eagerly.

"Why, his pater is doing time!" grinned Hicks.

"Time?" repeated Fullwood vaguely.

"Yes—chokey, you know!"

"Cho—chokey!" gasped Bell faintly.

"Pretty dense, ain't you?" asked Stevens, staring.

"Chokey!" yelled Fullwood. "Do—do you mean to say that Browne's pater is in prison?"

"Dartmoor, I believe," remarked Hicks calmly.

Fullwood and Co. looked dazed.

"Oh, my only hat!" gasped Bell. "No—no wonder he wouldn't say anything about his people! A giddy jall-bird! Oh, hold me up, somebody!"

Fullwood recovered himself fairly rapidly. His eyes were gleaming with vicious triumph, and he could not conceal the gloating satisfaction which thrilled him. This was better than he had dared hope for! It was news which he would willingly have paid a fiver for.

"I suppose it's true?" he asked.

"What do you mean—true?"

"Well, you're not pulling my leg, are you?" said Fullwood, intending to be quite positive.

"No; it's as true as I'm standing here," said Stevens. "Browne's pater is in quod for embezzlement, or fraud, or somethin' like that. Anyhow, he's a pretty low-down bounder, and he's doing five years' penal servitude. Of course, when we found that out, we hounded the cad out of the school!"

"I should think so, too!" said Fullwood. "We'll hound him out of St. Frank's in less than a week. It's a nice thing when the sons of convicted criminals find their way into a decent place like ours! Why, it ought to be made public!"

"It was—at Redwood!" grinned Hicks. "Everybody knew it. Some silly fathead tried to make out that it wasn't Browne's fault—that he wasn't responsible for what his pater did. But that was sheer rot!"

"Oh, of course!" remarked Gulliver. "I know jolly well that St. Frank's chaps will be wild when they hear about it. The awful cad! The frightful jall-bird! We'll jeer him to death!"

Fullwood and Co. were gloating. This lever was of enormous power, and they could easily guess the effect the news would create at St. Frank's. It was a positive disgrace to have the criminal in the school!

"I was going to ask——" began Fullwood.

"Sorry, old man. Can't stop any longer," said Stevens. "This is where our innings starts. If you stay here you'll see us knock the Grammarian's score into a cocked hat!"

And, with this modest remark, Stevens walked into the pavilion. Fullwood and Co. didn't stay to see the miracle. They wouldn't have seen it even if they had stayed. For, as a matter of fact, the boastful visitors were beaten to the wide that afternoon.

Fullwood had other thoughts beside cricket.

He had gained all the information he wanted, and that was enough for him. He was so filled with satisfaction that his face

was wreathed in smiles continuously. And Gulliver and Bell kept up a series of continuous chuckles. They were picturing to themselves the sensation which their news would create at St. Frank's.

"By George!" said Bell, his eyes gleaming. "We'll scoot back at once and tell all the fellows——"

"No, we won't!" interrupted Fullwood calmly.

"What do you mean, you ass?"

"No need to hurry," replied the triumphant leader of the Nuts. "If we went off straight away, we should find the House-match still in full swing and everybody in the playing-fields. That wouldn't suit us at all. We want to collect the fellows all together."

"Tell the news to an audience—what?" grinned Gulliver.

Fullwood nodded.

"That's the idea," he said. "By gad! We'll make the bounder go green! Just think of it! The son of a beastly convict! Why, he won't be able to stay at the school another week! We'll make his life a misery!"

And, with these cheerful and charitable thoughts, Fullwood and Co. cycled back into the town of Bannington—for the Grammar School was situated some little distance out—and celebrated the occasion by partaking of many ice-creams and by purchasing some cigarettes.

Then they cycled slowly towards St. Frank's, and paused near the wood in order to have a quiet smoke and to discuss their plan of action. It was getting on for tea-time when they got on the move once more, and their expressions were those of vicious joy.

"Now for the giddy exposure!" grinned Fullwood, with an unpleasant chuckle. "I only wish we could pitch that cad Nipper out as well. But Browne's the chap we're after—and Browne's going to get it in the neck!"

"Oh, rather!" grinned Gulliver and Bell.

And the three precious young rascals chuckled afresh.

CHAPTER III.

NELSON LEE KEEPS WATCH—THE MEN IN THE COTTAGE—AN AMAZING LETTER.

BANNINGTON MOOR stretched away towards the horizon, bare and deserted. From Nelson Lee's point of observation he could see no sign of a human being.

A haze hung over the moor, and the afternoon sunshine converted the usually drab landscape into a scene of sombre colour. Far away a trail of smoke marked the passage of a railway-train through the cutting. It was a quiet, lonely scene.

Nelson Lee was at a top rear window of the Mount—the old house on the edge of the moor, belonging to Mr. Howard Ridgeway,

the novelist. The schoolmaster-detective had taken advantage of the half-holiday to pursue his investigations.

In the near distance, on the moor below, an old-fashioned cottage was within sight. A month or two before it had been empty and deserted and dilapidated—standing out clearly above all else, since there were no trees or bushes anywhere near.

The cottage, however, possessed a garden; or, at least, a piece of ground which was honoured by that name. It was now completely fenced in, and the fence was all of ten feet high. From the moor road and from the surrounding hillocks the cottage itself was invisible.

But the Mount stood upon high ground, as its very name implied, and from the top windows it was easily possible to look right down over the fencing and see the cottage door and windows—although the distance was so great that the naked eye could distinguish but little.

Nelson Lee was greatly interested, and for an excellent reason.

Only a few days before Mr. Howard Ridgeway had approached him with a queer yarn about the Mount being haunted. Lee had investigated, and had conclusively proved that the "haunting" was a faked-up business, engineered with the deliberate intention of scaring the novelist away. And the men who were responsible were agents of the Circle of Terror. And old Simon Legg, the occupant of the fenced-in cottage, was undoubtedly connected with the plot.

Mr. Ridgeway had been reluctantly induced to leave by Nelson Lee. The latter had pointed out that it was far better to deceive the criminals by making them believe that their object had been attained.

Lee himself had the keys of the Mount, and he had come here this afternoon for the purpose of watching the cottage. He was armed with a big telescope, and having had a general look across the moor with his naked eye, he focussed the instrument upon the cottage.

It sprang into prominence at once, every detail being clear and distinguishable. And a black object near the cottage, which had previously been something of a puzzle to Lee, now resolved itself into a covered-in motor-car. Without the telescope it looked like a small shed.

Old Simon Legg appeared, and stood in the doorway of the cottage, smoking. He was talking either to himself or to somebody hidden from Lee's vision, for his lips were moving.

"Quite interesting!" murmured Lee softly.

He had seen Simon Legg on many occasions, but he had never seen the old man standing as he stood now. His back was straight, instead of being bent, and he carried himself easily and lightly. Lee could easily understand why Mr. Ridgeway had been frightened off; these windows overlooked the cottage-gardens. Simon Legg now

believed, of course, that the Mount was empty.

After a few minutes two other men appeared, and then the motor-car was pushed further into the open, and Nelson Lee was permitted a clearer view. The limousine, he could see, was a powerful vehicle, but it was curiously black. Even the usual bright parts, such as the lamps and brackets and wind-screen fittings, were dull black.

Lee found himself wondering how the car had been taken into the garden, for, as far as he knew, there was only one door in the fence, and that was a tiny one, through which a stout man would have some difficulty in passing. It was quite obvious that a certain portion of the fencing was hinged, like a big gate. But it was cleverly concealed.

The two men set to work upon the car, Simon Legg watching them. Lee was puzzled slightly; and then, as he watched, he grasped the truth. The workers were removing the black from the bright parts. For some reason or other the car had been rendered absolutely dull, as though to conceal it in the night. As Nelson Lee watched through the telescope he saw the various bright fittings coming into view.

"H'm!" he murmured. "This is rather curious. The car's work is evidently done—what did that work consist of? Something of a sinister nature, without a doubt."

Lee fell to wondering how he could investigate further. The whole thing was somewhat difficult, for there were few openings. Two courses were possible. One was to act boldly and bring the police into the affair; and the other was to prowl round the cottage after dark.

Neither was very promising.

The first course would be premature. Lee did not want the police bothering about at this stage. The Circle of Terror had not matured its plans so far, and the detective had no wish to spoil a possible coup by acting rashly and hurriedly.

As for prowling round the cottage after dark—well, what was the good? The fence was ten feet high and there wasn't a crack in its whole surface. Even if he climbed into the garden itself he would gain no reward worth mentioning. And the risks would be considerable.

No, Nelson Lee's best plan was to wait. His opportunity might come at once, or it might be necessary for him to wait a considerable time. But he would have given much to know why that big limousine had been blacked, and why it was within Simon Legg's garden.

He suddenly caught his breath in sharply.

"Confound it!" he muttered, biting his lip with vexation.

He backed away from the window, closing the telescope with a snap. For he had suddenly become aware of the fact that the men within the enclosure had left their work and had retired in the cottage. Their movements had been suggestive of haste. Searching for the cause, Lee noticed two bright spots were reflecting the sunlight at one of the open

windows. For two seconds only was Lee at a loss.

And then he knew that those bright spots were the outer lenses of a pair of binoculars. The enemy was using the same dodge as himself! He could see them, and they had just become aware of his unwelcome attention. Hence the abrupt stoppage of work.

"What an infernal nuisance!" snapped Nelson Lee. "The very thing I wished to avoid more than anything else. I must be more careful; but the harm, I'm afraid, is already done."

The schoolmaster-detective was very angry with himself. He had been incautious, and he knew it. No further object could be gained by remaining within the Mount.

And so, without loss of time, Nelson Lee left the place and returned thoughtfully to St. Frank's. He arrived some little time before tea, and spent twenty minutes or so upon the playing-fields, watching the junior cricket-match.

But cricket had very little interest for him that afternoon. The Circle agents had known long enough ago that Nelson Lee was interesting himself in their affairs. So perhaps little harm had been done. But he regretted the incident. The enemy could no longer be in any doubt as to the Mount. They must know that Nelson Lee had free access, and that he was using the place as an observation post—the very possibility they had striven hard to obviate.

When Nelson Lee entered the Ancient House he almost ran into the arm of Tubbs, the page-boy.

"I've been looking for you, sir," said Tubbs respectfully.

"Indeed, Tubbs," smiled Nelson Lee. "Well, what have you to say, now that you have found me?"

"The 'Ead wants to see you, sir—urgent," said Tubbs.

"Did he use that word himself, my boy?"

"Yes, sir," replied Tubbs. "Very urgent it was, sir, the 'Ead said."

Nelson Lee nodded, and walked to Dr. Stafford's study, wondering what the urgent matter could be about. When he arrived he found the Head looking gravely concerned and troubled. A letter lay open upon his desk.

"Ah, Mr. Lee, I have been waiting for you," he exclaimed. "I really don't know how to explain this matter. It is so inexplicable that I am completely at a loss. I really cannot understand what Sir Rupert can have heard, and I am quite certain that he has been misinformed."

"May I see the letter, Dr. Stafford?"

The Head passed it over without a word, and Nelson Lee took it, mystified by his companion's manner.

The letter, however, left him in no doubt as to the reason for the Head's agitation. It was from Sir Rupert Manderley, the chairman of the Board of Governors. He was well acquainted with Nelson Lee, and it was Sir Rupert who had urged him, more than anybody else, to retain his position as Housemaster.

The letter, therefore, was most extraordinary, for it ran:

"102, Sloane Gardens,

London, S.W.

"My dear Dr. Stafford,—The matter upon which I write you is of a somewhat delicate nature, and I find my task an unpleasant one. Certain facts have come to my knowledge regarding Mr. Nelson Lee, who now occupies the position of Housemaster in the Ancient House. These facts are of such a nature that I hesitate to put them into writing.

"I feel compelled to ask you to suggest to Mr. Lee that his resignation should be tendered forthwith. At the same time, after our amicable relations in the past, I am reluctant to take this course.

"Will you, therefore, kindly show this letter to Mr. Lee, and ask him to meet me to-morrow evening (Saturday), at ten o'clock precisely, at the address above. It is most imperative that Mr. Lee should keep this appointment, for there are certain matters which must be discussed without a moment's delay.

"With kindest regards,

"Yours most sincerely,

"RUPERT MANDERLEY."

Nelson Lee did not move a hair as he laid the letter down. Dr. Stafford was considerably surprised, however, when Lee broke into a soft laugh.

"Really, Mr. Lee, I think you fail to comprehend the serious nature of Sir Rupert's letter," he exclaimed.

"Not at all," said the detective. "I can assure you, Dr. Stafford, that I am fully aware of Sir Rupert's meaning. But there is no necessity for alarm; and you may rest easy in mind with regard to this matter. It is not at all serious."

"But, my dear sir, it is appallingly serious!" protested the Head. "Sir Rupert desires your resignation, and the thought that any rupture should occur fills me with dismay."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Sir Rupert is on the wrong track somewhere," he said calmly. "Possibly he has been listening to some hints set going by my enemies—for, I can assure you, I have many. It is obviously a roundabout attempt to get me away from St. Frank's—to force my resignation. I really thought Sir Rupert had more faith in me."

"Will you take the evening train to London?"

"Decidedly," replied Nelson Lee. "I should not wish for Sir Rupert to labour under this misapprehension for a moment longer than is necessary. I will very soon settle the matter, once I am face to face with him. At all events, there is no necessity to worry."

The Head was extremely worried, however.

"I hope this matter will be set right, Mr. Lee," he said, polishing his glasses with some agitation. "Sir Rupert has always struck me as being a very level-headed man, and I cannot quite understand how he should listen to any cock-and-bull story which——"

"I don't think that is the case, Dr. Stafford," interrupted Lee. "As you are probably aware, it is an easy matter to set evil rumours in motion. Sir Rupert has the honour of St. Frank's at heart, and he is naturally anxious concerning the school's well-being. The statements or rumours—whichever you will—were probably given to him in good faith, and he was compelled to believe them."

Dr. Stafford shook his head.

"No matter who spoke ill of you, Mr. Lee, I should not believe a word of the slander," he declared. "Good gracious me! Have I not every reason to know that you are a man of absolute integrity and honour?"

"I hope so, doctor," smiled Lee. "And I thank you for your—"

"There is really no need for you to thank me, Mr. Lee," interrupted the Head. "And I am pained—indeed, shocked—to learn that Sir Rupert could doubt you for a moment."

Dr. Stafford was upset, but Lee's calm manner served to ease him somewhat. And a few moments later the detective left the study and went to his own.

He was almost positive that an agent of the Circle of Terror—a highly placed member—had caused the matter to reach Sir Rupert's ears. And the baronet, who was of a nervous disposition, had fallen into the trap. Well, Nelson Lee would set his mind at rest.

And a visit to London was imperative.

CHAPTER IV.

FULLWOOD'S BOMBSHELL—AND ANOTHER ONE

THE House match had just finished when Fullwood and Co. cycled into the Triangle, gloating and triumphant.

I had strolled off Little Side with Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson, and we were discussing, with much satisfaction, the result of the match. The college House had been beaten hollow, so we had every cause to feel elated.

Browne had proved his worth, for he had made thirty-seven runs off his own bat, and that was a splendid show. He was not brilliant, and had made no display; but his form was first-class, and I knew that I could rely upon him to slog away steadily and firmly.

He was genuinely delighted when I told him that Christine, of the College House, had agreed with me that he—Browne—was sufficiently excellent to be included in the St. Frank's Junior Eleven, which was composed of the best players of both Houses.

"It's jolly decent of you, Nipper," he said gratefully.

"Rate!" I said, slapping him on the back. "If you were no good I should tell you so, and you wouldn't have a chance in a Third-Form match. But you're the real goods, and we'll give you a chance in a big match before long."

"Oh, thanks!" said Browne. "I didn't have a chance at—at—"

"Well, go on," urged Tommy Watson.

"It doesn't matter," said the new boy colouring.

He walked away, and Sir Montie adjusted his pince-nez.

"Dear fellows, it's a great pity," he remarked. "It's a shockin' pity, begad! He's a splendid fellow, an' I like him immensely. I can't quite believe that Browne left his last school in disgrace, but it's frightfully queer."

"Well, he hasn't left this school in disgrace, so we needn't worry ourselves," I said cheerfully. "Hallo, what do you want, Fullwood? Anything I can do for you to-day?"

Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell, having put their bicycles away, had approached us in the middle of the Triangle, with the obvious intention of speaking. It wasn't often that Fullwood wanted to speak to me.

"Is anythin' the matter, Fullwood?" asked Sir Montie politely. "You're lookin' awfully satisfied, you know. Begad! Gulliver an' Bell have the same gleam in their eyes. Have you been doin' somebody a bad turn?"

"Oh, don't rot!" snapped Fullwood, frowning.

"Dear fellow, I wouldn't dream of rotting with you," Tregellis-West assured him. "I'm shockin'ly inquisitive, an' I like to find out things. Perhaps you've been backin' winners this afternoon?"

"I want to speak to Nipper!" said Fullwood tartly.

"I retire, corrected," murmured Sir Montie.

"What's the trouble, Fullwood?" I asked. "I may as well inform you that I'm in a hurry, because I'm as thirsty as a fish, and Mrs. Hake has just had a fresh supply of mineral waters—"

"There's something more important to think about than drinking ginger-beer!" interrupted Fullwood briskly. "The fact is, Nipper, I want you to collect the whole Remove together an' to hold a meetin'. It's a House matter, an' of the utmost importance."

"Eh? What's that?"

Edward Oswald Handforth, of the Remove, who was just passing with Church and McClure, paused inquisitively. It was certainly unusual to hear Fullwood talking about something of the utmost importance.

"What are you getting at, Fullwood?" I asked.

"I'm gettin' at nothin'," replied Ralph Leslie Fullwood, smiling with complete confidence. "But I've been takin' a lot of trouble this afternoon, an' I've got the honour of the House at stake—"

"Oh, my only aunt!" gasped Handforth.

"Hold me, somebody—"

He collapsed into the arms of Church and McClure. But his chums, not being prepared for the move, let Handforth down with a terrific bump upon the gravel. Handforth was always violent, and he generally hurt himself more than anybody else.

"Yarrah!" he howled. "You—you—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'll slaughter you!" roared Handforth, jumping to his feet and throwing off his

jacket. "Couldn't you see that I was fainting, you silly fatheads?"

"How the dickens did we know you were going to faint just then?" snapped McClure. "I'll admit Fullwood's remark was enough to make anybody dazed; but you ought to give us warning——"

"Oh, stop this rottin'!" snapped Fullwood impatiently. "I tell you the thing's absolutely important. Why doesn't somebody keep that idiot quiet?"

Handforth nearly fainted again.

"Are you referring to me?" he bellowed violently.

Fullwood backed away.

"Look here——" he began.

"I've got more respect for my eyesight," snapped Handforth. "If I looked there—at your face—I shouldn't have any appetite left for tea!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Dry up, Handy, and let Fullwood say what he's got to say," I grinned. "He's simply bubbling over with news of some sort, and I expect he's going to tell us some blood-curdling tales about one of the chaps. If so, Fullwood, you'd better not begin. I don't believe in sneaking—and I don't believe in lies——"

"I tell you it's the truth!" roared Fullwood. "I've got proof of it, and if Browne denies it——"

"Browne!" I put in sharply. "What have you got to say about Browne?"

There was an immediate hush amongst the other fellows. By this time over half the Remove was collected around us, listening to the argument. And every junior was interested in Browne; his secrecy was well known, and it was only natural that the Remove, as a whole, should be curious.

Fullwood calmed down. He could see that he had gained the attention he required, and that same gloating, triumphant expression appeared again upon his well-cut, supercilious features.

"Yes, I've got something to say about Browne," he sneered. "Somethin' that will make you open your mouths with surprise, I can tell you! Somethin' which will turn you against Browne for good!"

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "I can't quite believe that, you know—I can't, really. It's askin' too much!"

"Let's hear it, whatever it is," said Handforth. "And if it's one of your usual rotten libels, Fullwood, we'll duck you in the fountain, by George! So you'd better be careful what you say! Browne's a jolly good chap. He saved my life——"

"I know the school he came from——" began Fullwood.

"Hold on," I interrupted. "You're not going to say anything about Browne, Fullwood, until he's here. I don't believe in speaking behind a chap's back. Somebody go and fetch Browne," I added, looking round.

"He's over by the gym., talking to De Valerie and the Bo'sun," said Hubbard. "Hi, Browne!"

The new boy glanced round.

"You're wanted!" roared a dozen voices.

Browne strolled over with his two companions, and eight or nine other fellows joined the crowd. A crowd always collects others, and before Browne had found his way to the centre practically the whole Remove to a man was there, including the College House fellows. Any amount of fags were scurrying about on the outskirts, vainly attempting to find an opening.

"What's the trouble?" asked Browne calmly.

"Fullwood's the trouble," I replied. "He's nearly bursting to say something about you, Browne, old man, so you'd better stiffen your back. He says that we're going to all turn against you."

Browne turned a shade paler.

"What have you got to say, Fullwood?" he asked quietly.

Ralph Leslie Fullwood grinned.

"Ever heard of Redwood College?" he asked sneeringly.

Browne started.

"What about Redwood College?" he asked.

"Well, it happens that the Redwood juniors have been playin' Banninton Grammar School this afternoon, an' I've been chattin' with some of them," said Fullwood calmly. "Goin' pale, eh? I don't wonder at it, you beastly outsider!"

Browne had certainly gone pale, and he clenched his fists hard. But, whatever the revelation was to be, he looked as calm as ever, and there was not the slightest sign of apprehension in his manner. It was clear, indeed, that he didn't fear the disclosure.

"I suppose it'll all come out now," he said resignedly. "What a confounded nuisance! Pity you couldn't mind your own affairs, Fullwood, without bothering about me. When you've done I'll allow myself the pleasure of punching your head!"

Fullwood sneered.

"I wouldn't allow you to touch me, even if you had new gloves on!" he retorted bitingly. "I'm goin' to show you up, you cad! Understand? I'm goin' to tell the chaps all about you!"

"We don't want to hear it!" I put in.

"We don't——"

"Rats! We do!"

"Go it, Fullwood!"

The majority of the fellows were curious, and although Browne was popular with them, they were, nevertheless, anxious to hear the truth about him. His reluctance to say anything had fostered this unusual curiosity.

"Yes, go it," said Browne calmly. "If you're going to blurt it out, Fullwood, you'd better do it at once."

Fullwood was surprised.

"My hat! The nerve of the chap!" he exclaimed. "Do you mean to say that you don't care, Browne?"

"There's nothing much to care about, is there?" asked the new boy.

"You impudent rotter!" shouted Gulliver. "How you can stand there an' brazen it out——"

"Brazen what out?" roared Handforth.

"We ain't heard anything yet. I warn you, my bucks! I snain't believe a word of what you say, and I've a good mind to punch your heads before you start!"

"Let him speak, Handy," said Browne quietly. "It doesn't matter much now, anyhow. The truth is bound to come out."

"It's coming out now," said Fullwood. "By gad! You've got the nerve of a dozen! I want to say, you fellows, that I'm not simply repeatin' a rumour. I've been talkin' with Stevens, the skipper of the Redwood Junior Eleven. Ask Browne if he knows him."

"Do you?" inquired Handforth, turning to Browne.

"I've met the cad!" replied the new boy. "Stevens is an absolute snob—a rotter—in fact, he's very much like Fullwood!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"One for you, Fully!"

"You'll laugh in another way soon!" snapped Fullwood. "He's admitted that he knows Stevens, an' he's admitted that he's an old Redwood fellow——"

"No, he hasn't!" I interrupted.

"Well, I am!" said Browne calmly. "And I'll add, straight away, that it was the best day of my life when I left Redwood. St. Frank's is heaven compared with it! St. Frank's is about the best public school on the map!"

"Hear, hear!" roared about fifty voices, with huge gusto.

Browne grinned.

"Well, go ahead, Fullwood," he said. "Get it over!"

"By gad!" said Fullwood, breathing hard. "All the fellows are with you now, but there'll be a change in another minute. I can tell you. I've had a chat with Stevens, an' several other Redwood fellows. An' I've learned all about your beastly pater!"

Browne stared.

"My—my pater?" he repeated, with ominous quietness.

"Yes, your pater!" exclaimed Fullwood triumphantly. "Now, you chaps, you can judge for yourselves. This outsider is an absolute disgrace to St. Frank's. He was hoofed out of Redwood, an' he'll be hoofed out of this school within a week!"

"Why?" roared Handforth dangerously.

"Because he's the son of a criminal!" yelled Gulliver, unable to contain himself any longer. "The son of a rotten jail-bird!"

"What?"

"Oh, my only sainted aunt!"

"Great p p!"

A perfect storm of shouts went up, and Fullwood and Co. stood grinning in the centre of the crowd. Browne had given a big start, but he showed no sign of alarm. On the contrary, I had an idea that there was a twinkle of amusement in his eyes.

"Oh, so that's your news, is it?" he asked. "Well, is there anything disgraceful in that—even if it's true? A fellow isn't supposed to be judged for what his pater does, is he?"

"It's true, then?" gasped Handforth.

Browne shrugged his shoulders.

"Fullwood knows all about it," he replied quietly.

"Yes, Fullwood, you'd better tell us the rest," I put in.

"I've told you enough, haven't I?" said Fullwood. "Browne was hoofed out of Redwood by the other chaps, an' I don't wonder at it. They found out that his pater is doing time—five years' penal servitude. By gad! Ain't it simply disgraceful?"

Sir Montie Tregellis-West adjusted his pince-nez.

"Pray let me get the matter clear, old boy," he said. "I'm rather dense, an' things need explainin'. Was Browne expelled from Redwood?"

"No, he was hoofed out by the other chaps—compelled to leave."

"But why?" asked Sir Montie mildly.

"Because his father's in chokey!" roared Fullwood. "Isn't that enough?"

"Really, Fullwood, I fail to see how Browne can be accused of bein' a rotter!" said Sir Montie, his eyes gleaming. "Personally, I ain't interested in Browne's pater, havin' never had the pleasure of meetin' him. Browne's a rippin' chap, an' I'm one of his pals!"

And Sir Montie, without the least sign of condescension, frankly thrust out his hand towards Browne. The new fellow hesitated.

"Do you think my fist is fit to touch?" he asked quietly. "According to Fullwood, my pater is a convicted criminal!"

"That's nothin' to your discredit, is it?" asked Montie.

Browne took his hand warmly.

"By Jove! You're a splendid chap. Tregellis-West," he said, taking a deep breath. "Thanks awfully!"

"There's nothin' splendid about me, that I can see," said Montie. "I'm judgin' you as you are, Browne; although, goodness knows, it ain't my place to judge anybody. An', if it comes to that, I don't believe what Fullwood says!"

I took Browne's hand the instant Montie released it; in fact I had wanted to be there first, but the noble Sir Montie had forestalled me. Handforth was next, and then Tommy Watson and a crowd of other fellows. Half the Remove showed Browne, in fact, that they didn't care a snap about his pater. The other half hung back.

"You silly idiots!" roared Fullwood, infuriated by the non-success of his revelation. "Don't you realise that he's a rotten outsider? He's the son of a convict——"

"Look here, Fullwood, your vicious little plan has misfired!" I snapped sharply. "You'd better clear off before you're kicked across the Triangle! I agree with Tregellis-West all along the line. It doesn't matter a hang to us if Browne's guv'nor took the wrong turning. That doesn't mean to say that Browne is made of the same stuff."

"Rather not!" declared Handforth firmly.

At the same time, I knew very well that this revelation would make a big difference. The juniors would never forget that Browne's

father was in prison, and it was an unpleasant stigma. No wonder he had been reluctant to name his last school, or to say anything about his people.

"You can say what you like!" roared Fullwood. "St. Frank's ain't big enough to hold the son of a convict, an' I'm goin' to get up an organised protest. We'll get our people to write to the Governors——"

"You'd better not!" put in Browne calmly.

"Why not?" demanded Merrell.

"Well, because it wouldn't do any good," replied Browne. "I'm not called upon to answer these charges, am I?"

"No," I said promptly.

"Well, I won't trouble to do it," said Browne. "You all know Fullwood, and you know a bit about me. I'll leave you to judge things for yourselves. Thank goodness this school is different from Redwood! They're snobs and cads there, but there are only a few of that class at St. Frank's. And I'm jolly glad to know the really decent fellows in the Remove. It's bucked me up wonderfully."

He looked round smilingly, and half the fellows who had hung back before now nodded with approval. Browne's frankness was refreshing, and it was almost impossible to believe that Fullwood's story was true. For, all said and done, no fellow could remain easy in the light of such a revelation. And I turned to Browne curiously.

"I just told you that you needn't answer the charges," I said. "But I should just like to know, Browne, if they are true?"

Browne smiled.

"Well, as a matter of fact, they're not," he replied easily.

"You—you liar!" shouted Fullwood.

Smack!

Browne's open palm hit Fullwood's cheek forcibly, and the leader of the Nuts staggered.

"If you call me a liar again," said Browne, "I'll punch next time! You've said enough, Fullwood, and you'd better slink away before you're hurt. I've stood all this calmly—mainly because it's untrue, and because I wanted to see how the fellows would take it. By Jove! I'm delighted with 'em!"

"Isn't your pater in quod?" said Handforth bluntly.

Browne shook his head, and his eyes were sad.

"My father died three years ago," he replied, in a low voice.

There was an immediate hush, but Fullwood and his cronies gave a tremendous yell of indignation and wrath.

"It's absolutely the limit!" shouted Gulliver. "Stevens and a lot of other chaps told us that——"

"Hallo! Who's that talking about me?" came a voice from the outskirts of the crowd. "Let's get through, you fellows."

Stevens and Hicks, of Redwood College, passed through the crowd, and a murmur of excitement ran round. Fullwood's story would now be given the lie, or corroborated, as the

case might be. From Fullwood's attitude, it seemed as though the latter would be the most likely.

"Come on, Stevens!" he shouted. "These chaps won't believe what you told me about Browne—and Browne denies the yarn."

"He can deny it all he likes," said Stevens. "You needn't take my word for it, anyhow. Everybody at Redwood will tell you—— Why, what the dooce——" He stared at Browne wonderingly.

"I didn't know you were here!" he exclaimed, with great warmth.

"Didn't you?" asked Browne calmly. "You can't know everything, Stevens. But you're aware of the fact now, aren't you?"

Stevens thrust out his hand.

"How the dickens are you?" he asked effusively.

"A lot better than I was at Redwood, thanks!" said Browne, studiously ignoring the thrust-out hand. "But I think you know, Stevens, that I don't like your face?"

Stevens turned red.

"Oh, all right!" he muttered awkwardly.

"Seeing that you're a visitor, though, I'll forget what happened at Redwood, and we'll let bygones be bygones," added Browne, taking Stevens's hand.

"Oh, thanks, old fellow!" said the Redwood junior gratefully.

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

Everybody was amazed. After what Fullwood had said, it was certainly rather staggering that Stevens should act in this manner. He almost fawned upon Browne—the son of a convict! As for Fullwood, he nearly went off his head.

"You—you fool!" he shouted violently. "What are you shaking hands with that cad for?"

"Which cad?" asked Stevens, staring.

"Why, Browne!" shrieked Fullwood.

"Browne! Browne isn't here!"

"You've just shaken hands with him!" yelled Fullwood, his voice cracking. "Didn't you tell me that——"

"Oh, great Scott!" gasped Stevens. "Did—did you think——"

"Isn't he Browne?" I asked.

"What do you think of that, Hicks?" grinned Stevens. "Why, you potty idiots, this fine chap is the Duke of Somerton—the owner of ten thousand acres and a millionaire!"

CHAPTER V.

THE DUKE EXPLAINS—FULLWOOD AND CO. DEFEATED—STARTLING NEWS!

BROWNE sighed.

"You've let the cat out of the bag now!" he exclaimed regretfully. But, still, it was bound to come, so it doesn't matter so much. You needn't have been so dramatic about it, though!"

Handforth pushed forward.

"It's all rot!" he shouted. "There must be some mistake! Browne ain't any fat-



"Ye young rat!" snarled the old man. "If ye don't keep still I'll half kill ye!"—(See p. 2.)

'headed duke! Didn't he tell us that his name was Browne?"

"So it is," said the new boy, smiling.

"There you are!" roared Handforth. "What does this silly idiot want to say he's the Duke of Some-town or other——"

"It's a fact!" yelled Stevens. "He's the Duke of Somerton, an' if you don't believe it you can ask somebody else!"

"We ought to know, considering that Somerton was at Redwood for a couple of terms!" put in Hicks. "Do you mean to say that he hasn't told you his real name!"

"He just said that Browne's his name!" exclaimed Tommy Watson. "What's all this fatheaded mystery? Why can't we get at the truth?"

"My dear chap, it happens that my family name is Ffyfe-Browne," explained the new fellow. "But I left off the 'Ffyfe' when I came here, as I didn't want anybody to know that I was the Duke of Somerton."

"Then you are?" shouted Handforth.

"I don't like admitting it, but it's the truth," replied Browne.

The whole Triangle was in an uproar by this time. Nearly everybody was confused, and I must acknowledge that I couldn't quite get the hang of things myself. Three minutes before, Browne—according to Fullwood—was the son of a convict. Now he was a noble duke and a millionaire! I realised at once that the latter was the truth.

Ralph Leslie Fullwood nearly went mad.

"You're all wrong!" he shrieked. "He's Browne—he's the son of a criminal! He's an outsider——"

"Don't be a fool!" snapped Stevens. "You told me that Browne was here. How the dickens was I to know that you meant Somerton? I thought that Browne himself was at St. Frank's."

"Oh, then there is a Browne?" I asked.

"Of course."

"How do you spell the name?"

"B-r-o-w-n," replied Stevens.

"Well, our Browne has always had an 'e' at the end of his name," I said calmly.

"There's some confusion somewhere. We'd better straighten it out without delay. First of all, Stevens, was the chap named Brown at Redwood, and did you hoof him out?"

"Brown was a cad," replied Stevens, with a sniff. "He was the son of a giddy thief, an' we weren't standing that—not likely! We made the place too hot to hold him—as I told Fullwood. But how the dickens was I to know that Fullwood was such an idiot as to confuse Brown with the Duke of Somerton?"

"I suppose it's my fault, really," said the duke. "It's up to me to explain, and I'll get busy on the job. But why did you turn up, Stevens? What are you doing in decent company?"

"Oh, I say!" protested the Redwood fellow. "I came here to see the junior skipper about a cricket fixture——"

"We'll talk about that later," I interrupted. "Let's get this other affair threshed out."

"Rather!"

"Go it, Browne!"

"Speech—speech!"

The juniors were very excited. St. Frank's was a select school, but noble dukes were rare, and to have one in our midst—practically without knowing it—was sufficiently romantic to cause a general commotion.

"I don't believe it!" shouted Fullwood desperately. "I don't believe the cad's a duke at all! It's all rot—it's all a wheeze to——"

"Shut up, Fullwood!"

"Yah!"

"Order—order!"

Fullwood was compelled to dry up, and then I put my voice in.

"Browne can't make a speech here," I said. "Let's go over to the Ancient House steps. Browne can make one of the pedestals a platform, and then we shall be able to hear him. But, of course, if he doesn't want to make a speech——"

"I do!" interrupted the Duke of Somerton. "The thing's gone so far now, Nipper, that it's up to me to put things straight. There's no reason why the fellows should misunderstand."

The crowd surged towards the Ancient House, the new fellow's confidence being quite sufficient to prove that he was actually the duke. Fullwood and Co. were looking hot and flustered and dismayed, and they were terribly anxious to hear the truth. Stevens and Hicks, the two Redwood juniors, were carried along in the flood, grinning.

"I suppose there's no giddy joke here?" asked Handforth.

"Joke? Rather not," replied Hicks. "That chap's the Duke of Somerton all right; but, from what Fullwood said, we thought that he was Brown."

"That's not surprising," I put in. "He's always called himself by that name here, and Fullwood naturally used it when he referred to him. And the fact that the duke was always secretive led the fellows to believe that there was something wrong."

"But why was he secretive?" asked McClure.

"He's just going to explain that," I replied. "The confusion came about because there was really a fellow named Brown at Redwood—which isn't surprising. Brown's rather a common name, I believe."

"Go hon!" said Handforth.

The Duke of Somerton coughed. He was standing upon one of the large flat-topped pillars which ornamented the stonework of the Ancient House steps. And he surveyed the crowd with complete calmness and with an expression of regret.

"I'm rather sorry the truth has come out," he began. "I don't mind Fullwood's little blunder, because it served to show me that the majority of you chaps are topholders. I had an idea that I should be fallen upon by everybody if it came out that I was a duke, and then I couldn't know who were the decent fellows and who weren't. But Fullwood settled the thing nicely for me. He said that I was the son of a convict, and

nearly every one of you rallied round me—and I'm pleased. By Jove! You're different from those cads at Redwood!"

Hicks and Stevens looked sheepish.

"It was Fullwood who said you were Brown!" said Stevens. "How were we to know that Fullwood was a madman?"

"Begad! Ain't you got eyes?" asked Sir Montie mildly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Fullwood scowled.

"I don't believe it!" he snarled. "He's Brown—the convict's son!"

"Of course he is!" chorused the other Nuts.

"When I came here in my family name I never thought of poor old Brown," said the duke quietly. "He was at Redwood while I was there, you know, and he was one of my chums—a straight chap and as honest as the day. It wasn't his fault that his pater got on the wrong track, and I sympathised with him. It's rather rotten that his name should be dragged up here, but Fullwood's to blame for that."

"You're an impostor!" roared Fullwood.

"I'm not going to take the trouble to prove my identity," went on the duke. "Stevens and Hicks have told you who I am, and Dr. Stafford can tell you, too. When I came to St. Frank's I wanted to be just plain 'Browne.' I'm an ordinary sort of chap, and as much a boy as any of you fellows. I wanted to enjoy life here."

"Couldn't you enjoy life under your title?" I asked.

"Well, I didn't think so," replied the Duke of Somerton. "You see, I made the mistake of thinking that St. Frank's was the same as Redwood. It isn't, thank goodness—but perhaps that's because I've been a mere nobody. That may alter now that I've got a title. At Redwood I was absolutely miserable."

"Why?" demanded a dozen voices.

"Because of my title."

"How the dickens could that make you miserable?" demanded Handforth.

"I was a duke, and the only other titled fellow at Redwood was an earl, and he was in the Sixth. The fellows seemed to look upon me as a kind of god, and I was sick to death of it. I couldn't do a thing wrong, and even the seniors toadied to me."

"That was rotten," I agreed.

"Two or three times I deliberately broke the school rules, on purpose to get punished," went on the duke. "I was so sick of doing everything right that I made up my mind to do something wrong. But I wasn't punished! The prefects winked at everything, and allowed me to do just as I liked. That was because I was a duke!" he added bitterly.

"Didn't you protest?" I asked.

"What was the good?" said the new boy. "If I made any complaint about being treated different from everybody else they seemed to think that I was making a joke. If I did happen to attempt a humorous remark everybody giggled and said that I was witty. When my clothes were at their shabbiest—I'm not particular about attire—I was

told that I looked particularly neat! I got absolutely fed up with it all. I was sick of the awful snobbery and priggishness."

"Begad! I don't wonder, old fellow."

"And what did you do?" I asked.

"I was tired of my title; I wished it anywhere!" said the duke. "It was a continual nuisance, because the whole school seemed to look upon me as a superior being. And that's sheer rot. I'm quite a commonplace individual, and, thank goodness, if there was any swank in me, Redwood College took it out!"

"And what about Brown?" asked Handforth.

"Oh, he was in the Fourth," replied the duke. "Quite a decent fellow, but nervous and weakly. The chaps found out that his pater had got into trouble, and they turned on him like a pack of wolves. The poor bounder was practically forced to leave the school; his life was made impossible. That affair settled my mind, and I left Redwood for good."

"You didn't understand, Somerton—" began Stevens.

"I understood all I wanted," replied the Duke of Somerton. "I remember, too, that you were one of the worst snobs in the Fourth. I suppose you're the same now? You were the fellow who got up the agitation against poor Brown, and the sooner you leave this school the better!"

"Oh, I say," protested Stevens. "You're always funny, old man!"

"There you are—there's another sample of it!" said Somerton. "I've just insulted Stevens, and he makes out that I was trying to be funny! The fact is I couldn't insult anybody at Redwood. And so when I came here I meant to be on the safe side. I left my title behind, and everybody thought I was just plain 'Browne.' If Fullwood hadn't interfered the truth wouldn't have come out. I've been as happy as a sandboy since I've been at St. Frank's; it's the finest school under the sun. But I'm doubtful now; I'm afraid that the old life will begin again. It isn't all honey being a duke!"

I grinned.

"You needn't be worried, Somerton," I said cheerfully. "We don't stand that sort of thing at St. Frank's. Tregellis-West is a baronet, but he's no different from others. If you were a giddy prince you'd still be a Remove fellow. The only snobs here are Fullwood and his set—and you know them at their true worth! Fullwood and Co. haven't got a voice louder than a whisper in the Ancient House."

"Then things will go on as usual?" asked the duke eagerly.

"Of course."

"Thanks!"

"But why were you so jolly secretive?" asked Handforth, who was always dense. "I can't quite see—"

"My dear chap, how could I answer any questions?" said Somerton. "If I had named my former school some of you would have found out that I was a titled fellow, and then the cat would have been out of the bag. I

couldn't even name my people. There was only one chap who knew the truth."

"Oh! Who was he?" I asked.

"De Valerie—my study mate."

Cecil De Valerie nodded and grinned.

"Yes, I knew the dreadful truth days ago," he said calmly. "Somerton said he couldn't live peacefully in Study M without me knowing, and so I was told. Rather a surprise—what?"

"Rather!"

"Good old Browne!"

"Three cheers for the duke!"

There was quite an uproar for a few moments, and then His Grace managed to make his voice heard again.

"There's one thing more I want to ask," he said. "You're all decent fellows, and you'll oblige me by forgetting that I've got a title. Call me any old thing you like, but don't call me 'duke'!"

The frank nature of this remark proved to all of us, more than ever before, that Somerton was not troubled with swelled head. And his popularity was ten times increased from that moment.

The fellows who had not come forward when they believed that he was the son of a criminal felt very sorry for themselves. By tea-time the news had spread all over the school, and there was quite a considerable amount of excitement, in spite of "Browne's" request. It could not be denied that the Ancient House gloried in the fact that it possessed a duke. And it was regarded as a great triumph for the Fossils over the Monks. Christine and Co., of the College House, were glum. They had no titled fellow on their side, and actually thought about asking Browne to transfer into the College House. Naturally, there was nothing doing.

As for Fullwood and Co.—well, they were absolutely mad. They slunk away, gnashing their teeth. The Nuts were the laughing-stock of the whole school, from the Sixth downwards.

After all that Fullwood had said the denouement was particularly rich. Fullwood and Co. had flung their bombshell, but it had recoiled upon themselves in the most uncomfortable manner. The very fellow they wanted to chum up with more than anybody else in the whole school had been the object of their venom. They had despised him, and had done their best to discredit him. All hope of gaining his friendship was now at an end.

"It was all your fault, Fully!" growled Gulliver. "It was you who suggested the idea——"

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Fullwood sourly. "We were all in it. The whole thing's a mess-up."

"And the chap's a millionaire!" groaned Bell. "Oh, what chances we've chucked away!"

"A millionaire and a duke!" said Gulliver. "An' now he won't say a word to us; we've cut our own giddy throats! This is what comes of interfering! Why the deuce couldn't

you find out for certain before telling all the fellows? You're always in a hurry, Fullwood!"

"Oh, rats!" snapped Ralph Leslie Fullwood. And he walked off in a black mood.

Meanwhile Sir Montie and Tommy and I were partaking of tea in Study C; and, needless to say, the sole topic of conversation was the Duke of Somerton.

"The way he stood all that jaw from Fullwood was rich," remarked Tommy Watson, as he helped himself to another cup of tea. "Oh, Somerton's all right; he's one of the best."

"Hear, hear!" I echoed. "I've arranged a match with those Redwood chaps, by the way. It'll be a frost, I expect, but we couldn't send them away without arranging anything. The Grammar School whacked them hollow, I hear."

"What about your guv'nor, old boy?" asked Sir Montie. "Isn't he scoutin' up at the Mount?"

"I think so," I replied. "After tea we'll stroll along and do some scouting of our own. We don't seem to get any further with that affair; and I'm anxious to find out the truth concerning old Simon Legg. He's up to no good, my sons, and the sooner we discover his little game the better."

"But I thought Mr. Lee was doin' that?" asked Montie.

"Well, the guv'nor's doing his best," I replied, grinning. "But where would he be without us? We've been so busy this afternoon that I haven't had a chance of thinking about him. For all we know he might have discovered lots of things."

"Do you really think that old Legg is connected with the Circle of Terror?" asked Watson.

"I don't think it—I know it!" I replied grimly. "We've had tussles with the Circle of Terror before, and it looks as though we're going to have another. But I'm blessed if I can see what the game is; although I'm pretty certain that it's not connected with St. Frank's."

"I thought that the rotters were perhaps up against Mr. Lee," remarked Tregellis-West.

"Well, of course they're always up against the guv'nor," I replied. "But that's only because he's proved such a thorn in their side. They were playing this game down here before the term commenced, and when the guv'nor and I appeared on the scene they didn't like it. It must have been a shock to 'em to learn that Nelson Lee was going to be so close. So you can bet your boots that the Circle agents will do their best to make things hot."

"Rather excitin'," said Montie. "But what can we do this evenin'?"

"We can scout, and find out anything that's going," I replied. "I vote we hurry over tea, get our prep. done, and then sally out. What do you chaps say?"

They agreed, and exactly an hour later we marched forth into the Triangle, free for the evening. It was rather dull, and darkness promised to descend earlier than usual

because of the heavy clouds. But there was no sign of rain at present.

We had no settled programme. The idea was to slip along to the Mount in search of Nelson Lee. I had been to the guv'nor's study before we left the Ancient House, but he hadn't been there. I concluded, therefore, that he was still on the watch.

As we walked along the lane we heard a motor-car approaching, and presently it hove in sight. I recognised the occupant as Inspector Jameson, of Bannington. This worthy police official was well known to me, for the guv'nor and I had encountered him several times. He was somewhat pompous, although a fairly capable officer.

"Good evening, inspector," I called, as the car was passing.

"Evening, my lad," replied Inspector Jameson, stopping the car. "Do you know if Mr. Lee is at the school?"

"I don't think so," I replied. "If there's any message—"

"Well, the fact is, Nipper, I have a piece of news for him—news that will be particularly interesting, I believe," said the inspector. "I was passing this way, and I thought I would call. A convict has escaped from the prison on the other side of Bannington Moor—"

"Phew!" whistled Watson. "Is he prowling about this neighbourhood, sir? When did he escape?"

"Last night, my boy."

"Then it's queer we haven't heard of it," I remarked.

"Not at all," replied Jameson. "The news has not been publicly made known, owing to the extraordinary circumstances of the escape. The authorities do not intend to publish the fact until all hope of recovering the convict has passed. I'm not at all sure that I ought to have told you, but if Mr. Lee can trust you, I suppose I can."

"That's logic, sir!" I grinned. "But why should the escape of a giddy convict interest my guv'nor?"

"Because he was the cause of the fellow being arrested," replied the inspector. "The man is, I believe, one of your chief enemies, Nipper."

"Oh!" I exclaimed, interested. "What's his name?"

"Sutcliffe—"

"Sutcliffe!" I yelled. "You—you don't mean Jim—"

Inspector Jameson nodded.

"Exactly!" he agreed. "Jim the Penman is at liberty!"

CHAPTER VI.

I MAKE DISCOVERIES—AN EXCITING RACE—JUST IN TIME!

"JIM THE PENMAN!" I echoed, startled.

"Begad! Who is he, anyhow?" asked Sir Montie mildly.

"Who is he?" I repeated. "Why, you ass, Douglas James Sutcliffe is the cleverest forger in the world—bar none! The

guv'nor and I had a tremendous job with Jim the Penman. We collared him two or three times, but he always managed to escape."

"He was badly injured when he fell into the hands of the police on the last occasion," said the inspector. "Just recently, however, he has recovered his full strength, and last night managed to get away."

"Without help?" I asked.

"Oh, no!" said Jameson. "He was helped considerably. Nipper. It is only too clear that outside confederates prepared everything to the last detail. But we can't trace him, although the whole country is being scoured. Tell Mr. Lee when you see him—he will be interested."

The inspector continued on his way, and we stood in the lane looking at one another, more than startled by this item of news. At least, I was startled. Tregellis-West and Watson knew practically nothing about Jim the Penman.

"Did Mr. Lee really collar him?" asked Watson.

"Of course he did," I replied. "It was a near thing, even then. Jim tried to escape in an aeroplane, but he crashed down and half killed himself. The guv'nor and I have had our most exciting adventures fighting Jim the Penman."

"Begad!" exclaimed Montie. "Not more excitin' than your battle with the Circle of Terror?"

I nodded.

"Yes," I replied grimly. "Professor Zingrave, the High Lord of the Circle, is a clever, cunning rascal, but Jim the Penman is a more finished criminal in some ways. He's absolutely audacious—the limit in cool cheek. And he generally plays a lone hand; whereas Zingrave hides behind the whole organisation of the Circle of Terror. I'm sorry that Jim has escaped, he'll make himself a nuisance before long."

"Do you think he'll come here?" asked Watson.

I started.

"By Jupiter!" I muttered. "I—I wonder — The inspector said that Jim was helped, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"And the Circle of Terror agents are doing something queer on Bannington Moor," added significantly. "Is there a connection? Did those Circle chaps help Jim the Penman to escape? I wonder if it's all part of the same plot?"

"Begad! That's rather tall, ain't it?" asked Tregellis-West.

"Nothing's too tall where Jim the Penman is concerned," I replied with emphasis. "Some of the things he's done would absolutely take your breath away. Anyhow, we won't do any guesswork; we'll hurry along to the Mount and tell the guv'nor the news."

This new development had put a different complexion upon the whole case. I could easily understand why the authorities had not published the news of Jim's escape—they wouldn't do that until they had either

collared him or he had eluded them for good.

I didn't even know that Jim the Penman had been transferred to Kingstown Prison—as the convict settlement on Bannington Moor was called. He had been at Portmoor, hundreds of miles away.

Obviously the escape had been effected during the transfer, or soon after it. Jim the Penman at liberty meant trouble—for lots of people. For Sutcliffe would not remain idle.

We arrived at the Mount and cautiously looked in at the gate. Owing to the clouded sky and thick trees which grew on every hand the whole place was gloomy and nearly dark.

There was not a sign of anybody, and I hesitated.

"Look here," I murmured. "This garden may be watched, for all we know, and it wouldn't be wise for us all to go blundering in. You chaps stroll up the road for five or ten minutes, and I'll slip in here and look round."

"That's all very well——" began Watson.

"Nipper's right, dear old boy," put in Montie. "I should like to take part in the investigation, but three would be a crowd. Nipper's leader, an' what he says must go!"

"Oh, all right!" said Tommy gruffly. "Only don't be long!"

I parted with my chums and slipped through the hedge near the gate, remaining in cover behind the bushes during my progress towards the house. It was my intention to have a look round, for, to tell the truth, I had begun to suspect that Nelson Lee had left.

It was sheer chance, of course, but it was a marvellous stroke of luck that I happened to enter the Mount garden just at that time.

If I hadn't done so the guv'nor's life might have been lost! That's not an exaggerated statement, but the simple truth. For I was permitted to learn something which was to lead to tremendous activity on the part of Tommy, Sir Montie, and myself. It's rather queer, but I've noticed that the most important things of all are often learned by sheer accident.

It was so in this case.

As I was nearing the back of the house, still keeping to cover, I became aware of voices fairly close at hand. I crouched down perfectly still, in the midst of three or four dense laurel bushes.

The voices came nearer, and I was able to distinguish the words spoken.

"—— won't bother us again, that's one thing," somebody said. "So it won't matter about his spotting us this afternoon. That letter will do the trick nicely."

"Lee's a cute fellow," said another voice.

They were much nearer now, indeed, almost passing the bushes in which I lay concealed. I listened intently.

"He may be cute," said the other man, "but he'll never suspect this dodge. He'll leave by the evening train, but he'll never get to London. Our agents will enter the

train at Ketworth, and Lee will be silenced within ten minutes. After that his body will be thrown from the train while it is passing over the Wray Bridge."

"It'll be a good thing for us, anyhow," said the other man. "I shouldn't care for the job myself, though. No, this way; we'll get in by the back door. Those rear windows must be——"

The men passed out of earshot, and I was left half dazed. They had been talking about the guv'nor! Nelson Lee had been decoyed by a letter of some sort, and was to be murdered in the train!

I dragged out my watch and looked at the time. The train would leave Bellton within twenty minutes! And careless as to whether I was heard, I hurried back to the road, and found Tregellis-West and Watson waiting anxiously.

"Isn't he there, old boy?" asked Sir Montie.

"Run like mad!" I panted. "This way!"

My chums stared after me in amazement as I pelted up the road. But they followed, and caught up with me a hundred yards further on. Both were looking excited and impatient.

"Have you gone dotty?" gasped Watson, grabbing my arm.

"I overheard two chaps talking in that garden," I panted. "A letter's been sent to the guv'nor, and there's just a chance that he's fallen into the trap——"

"What trap, you mad idiot?"

"Nelson Lee's going up to London by the evening train, and it starts in less than twenty minutes! Some rotters are planning to enter the train at that little place called Ketworth," I went on huskily. "They mean to kill him and chuck him into the river!"

"Oh, begad!"

"I don't believe it!" said Watson. "It's too tall!"

"You don't understand, Tommy," I put in. "The Circle chaps are bound to carry out orders, and it's pretty clear that the murder of Nelson Lee has been ordered. Thank goodness we've got on the track. We might just be able to warn him!"

All this time we were running as fast as our legs would carry us. Sir Montie made no word of complaint, although his elegant clothes were becoming smothered in dust.

"We'll go to the school first," I said. "It's just possible that the guv'nor hasn't gone at all, and we should be fine fatheads to rush down to the station for nothing."

"You'd better make the inquiries, old boy, while Tommy and I get our bikes out," suggested Montie. "That'll save time, you know. Running's all very well, but it's frightfully faggin'!"

"Good idea, Montie," I exclaimed. "We mustn't lose a second."

I knew very well that they were sceptical, but I wasn't. I had had experience of the Circle of Terror before, and I knew well enough that nothing was too dastardly or ruthless. The only hope was that the guv'nor had not fallen into the trap.

We arrived at St. Frank's, and found everything quiet. The majority of the fellows were engaged upon their prep., and there was practically nobody in the Triangle.

Tommy and Montie hurried to the cycle shed, and I rushed into the Ancient House. I met Handforth and Co. in the lobby.

"Where's Mr. Lee?" I gasped.

"Not in my pocket!" grinned Handforth.

"Don't rot——"

"I haven't seen him since dinner time——"

I didn't wait for Handforth to finish, but hurried on and came across Tubbs near the dining hall.

"Why, Mr. Lee's gone to London, Master Nipper," he replied, in answer to my question.

"Gone!" I yelled.

"Ardly ten minutes ago, sir——"

I left Tubbs staring after me, for I was rushing back towards the Triangle at full speed. Those few words had been quite sufficient. Nelson Lee had gone, he had started upon the journey of death!

I found my chums waiting with the three machines ready.

"He's at the station!" I panted hoarsely.

That was enough; Montie and Tommy jumped on to their bikes and we all pedalled down to the village as fast as possible. It would be touch and go, for there was scarcely five minutes left.

We rode like the wind, and as we went whizzing through Bellton we distinctly heard the train enter the station. Unless it remained there for a full minute we should be done, and as a rule this local train only stopped for a few seconds.

To make matters ten times worse, the front tyre of my bicycle developed a puncture, for I felt the rim bumping upon the road, and in less than twenty yards the tyre was flat.

I pedalled on grimly, yelling to my chums to get there first. In spite of the flat tyre, however, I reached the station a few yards ahead of them and literally tumbled off.

The train was on the move!

I pelted through the booking-office and arrived upon the platform just in time to see the guard's van opposite me. For one second I had a wild thought of jumping on board, and, indeed, I should have done so, but the old Bellton porter wheeled a truck past at that very second, just as I was about to hurl myself forward. It was only by a supreme effort that I saved myself from crashing headlong.

And by the time the path was clear the train was at the end of the platform and gathering speed. Montie and Tommy joined me, breathless and dismayed.

"Oh, begad! Too late!" gasped Tragellis-West.

"What's to be done now?" said Watson.

"Can't we send a telegram along the line?"

"It wouldn't get there in time!" I said huskily. "A telegram's got to be dispatched and received and delivered—no, it wouldn't get to Bannington before the main-line train left."

We had walked through the booking-office into the wide station yard again. I was desperate, and hadn't the slightest idea of what to do. This was no trivial matter, but an affair of life or death. And then, in a flash, I saw a possible chance.

"That motor-bike!" I gasped.

"Eh?"

"That motor-bike and side-car," I went on, pointing to a powerful side-car combination which stood outside the station hotel. "The train goes round a bit and the road's straight," I continued rapidly. "We can drive like the wind and arrive in Bannington in seven or eight minutes, and the guv'ner will have to wait four minutes for the main-line train!"

"But—but we can't take that, bike!" roared Watson.

"Can't we?" I said grimly. "We're going to!"

"But the owner won't let us have it——"

"But the owner won't have a chance of giving permission at all!" I retorted. "You asses! We can make explanations afterwards. Jump into the side-car, and don't say a thing. Leave it to me!"

"Good enough, old boy!"

Sir Montie was always quick to fall in with my plans, no matter how wild they seemed. Watson was rather liable to object; but in this instance he didn't have a chance.

We rushed at the side-car outfit madly, and my chums tumbled into the car in a breathless condition, looking round them somewhat nervously. As for myself, I saw that the machine was a nearly new Royal Enfield. I started the engine rapidly, seeing after one glance that everything was ready. I had driven motor-bikes on hundreds of occasions, and my experience stood me in good stead.

The engine roared as I jumped into the saddle. The next moment the clutch went in with a jerk and we shot forward giddily. From behind came several lusty shouts, but I didn't even trouble to glance round.

A few seconds later we were on the Bannington Road, rearing like the wind, and leaving a cloud of dust behind us which resembled a young fog. The Enfield went like a dream, and I opened the throttle wider and wider.

"Steady, Nipper—steady!" gasped Watson.

"Shut up!" I snapped. "You're all right!"

"You'll have us over——"

"Rot!"

"Begad! I didn't bargain for this, you know!" exclaimed Montie, who was underneath Tommy Watson, and considerably squashed. "We shall get into a frightful row for pipchin' this machine. But I don't mind. Life's full of these worries! Begad! Ain't we goin'?"

I was crouching over the handle-bars, and my cap had long since blown away. I'll bet that machine had never gone so fast since it left the testing ground.

It was in fine fettle, and we raced along the smooth Bannington Road like a mad-

dened demon. Pedestrians were left staring after us, half choked with dust and thinking awful things about road hogs. And as for speed limit—well, I forgot all about it.

There was a speed indicator on the bike, and, glancing at it, I saw that we were streaking along at thirty-nine miles an hour—and that's "some going" on a side-car outfit with three up. Descending a long slope we touched the forty mark.

Sir Montie and Tommy simply clung on, and couldn't say a word. A motor-car passed us like a flash, and things looked a bit queer for a time. The motor-car had left a cloud of dust, and we roared through it blindly. My eyes were choked for a few seconds, but I didn't throttle down for a moment, trusting to luck.

And when we gained the clear atmosphere once more we found ourselves within a hundred yards of a bend. How the dickens we got round it I don't know, but it was a tremendous risk. The machine careered on to the grass bordering the road; my passengers were nearly bumped out, but immediately afterwards we were tearing along again, unharmed.

Every second was of value, however, and I couldn't afford to slow down for anything. It wouldn't matter if we were fined heavily—the gov'nor's life was at stake!

Through the outskirts of Bannington we raced, and here I was obliged to diminish the speed, but we scattered the people in the High Street, going at thirty miles an hour. The station came into view, and we could distinctly see a train standing against the platform.

"We've done it!" I gasped triumphantly.

I opened the throttle wide, and we mounted the slope into the station-yard like a charging bull. People were staring at us, and a good few of them were shouting. They clearly thought that I had lost control of the machine, and that a terrible accident was inevitable.

Even Sir Montie and Tommy were alarmed.

But at exactly the right second I jammed over the control and applied the brakes. We came to a standstill exactly opposite the booking-office—although to this day I don't know how I managed to avoid an accident. We were unscratched, and the borrowed side-car outfit hadn't come to an atom of harm.

"Out with you!" I gasped.

My chums staggered out of the dust-covered side-car and followed me through the booking-office. The guard's whistle had already blown, but the train was not yet on the move. Clearly an echo of the excitement had reached the platform, for many heads were thrust out of windows, and amongst them I saw Nelson Lee's.

"Hurrah!" I roared. "Come on, my sons!"

The train was moving now, and we pelted along madly. Nelson Lee already had the door open, for he had the good sense to realise that we were determined to get on board.

I tumbled in, and helped to drag Sir Montie up. Watson collapsed in a heap upon the top of us, and the gov'nor slammed the door hard. The race had been a hard one, but we had won!

CHAPTER VII.

SUCCESS—FOILING THE "CIRCLE OF TERROR" —A NEAT CAPTURE.

NELSON LEE was very angry.

"What is the meaning of this, Nipper?" he demanded. "You might have killed yourselves——"

"We had to come, gov'nor—to save your life!" I gasped.

"What!" snapped the gov'nor. "Are you mad, Nipper?"

"We tried to get to Bellton in time, but the train was just going," I panted. "So we borrowed somebody's motor-bike and side-car without asking permission——"

"And do you mean to tell me that you didn't leave Bellton until the local train had left?" asked Nelson Lee sharply. "Why, you young rascal, you must have driven like the wind to reach Bannington in time."

"Begad! He did, sir!" exclaimed Sir Montie. "It was simply appallin'. I was expectin' to be pitched into the ditch every other second, ah' I ain't sure, even now, that I'm really awake!"

"It was hair-raising, sir!" put in Tommy Watson.

Nelson Lee surveyed our dusty figures critically.

"I can only assume, Nipper, that you have a very excellent reason for acting in such a mad fashion?" he said. "You do not usually lose your head, and there is a glint in your eye which tells me much. Why did you race after me?"

"Because the Circle agents mean to kill you, sir!" I replied grimly. "You're off to London, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"And you received a letter?"

"That is the case——"

"It's a decoy, gov'nor!" I interrupted. "It was sent by the Circle of Terror especially to trap you!"

"Nonsense, Nipper!" said Nelson Lee. "You have got on the wrong track somewhere. This letter is from Sir Rupert Manderley himself, and it merely concerns an appointment in London for this evening. Moreover, the letter was not addressed to me at all, but to the Headmaster."

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Tommy Watson. "Then we were wrong!"

I glared.

"We weren't wrong!" was my retort. "I tell you, sir, there's trickery, and if you examine that letter you'll find it's a wrong 'un. Oh, but you haven't got it on you, I suppose?"

The gov'nor produced it, and read it through.

"I really think, Nipper, that you are mis-

taken," he said gently. "You acted from the best motives, no doubt, and I appreciate your concern on my behalf. But this letter is genuine and was written by Sir Rupert. He would not take part in any conspiracy against me!" the gov'nor added drily.

I suddenly caught my breath in.

"I've got it!" I exclaimed. "By Jupiter! You're wrong, sir—that letter ain't genuine!"

Nelson Lee looked somewhat impatient.

"Before we proceed further, Nipper, tell me why you followed me, and what made you assume such alarming theories," he said sharply. "I can only imagine that you misunderstood something you heard."

"I went to the Mount with Montie and Tommy," I replied. "We thought we should find you there, gov'nor. I crept into the garden and heard two men approaching. And I distinctly heard them say that you wouldn't cause them any further trouble—that you had been tricked into going to London by this train by means of a letter, and that measures were to be taken to settle you?"

"Indeed! What measures?"

"I don't know, sir, except that some Circle agents are to enter the train at Ketworth," I replied. "That's about twenty miles further on, isn't it?" Well, they meant to kill you in some way—poison, perhaps—and then chuck you into the river as the train passes over the Wray Bridge. That's what I overheard, and I thought I'd better get busy!"

"You certainly got busy, Nipper," said Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "And I must acknowledge that you were fully justified in taking the action you did. But, really, I cannot see any flaw. This letter to the Head is positively genuine. I would know Sir Rupert's writing at a glance."

"It's not his, sir—it's a forgery!"

The gov'nor examined the letter once more.

"My dear Nipper," he said impatiently. "There is only one man who can forge handwriting with sufficient skill to defy detection. And that man is in prison."

"Jim the Penman, sir," I put in.

"Exactly!"

"Well, he wrote that letter!" I said calmly.

"Oh, begad!"

"Of course he did!" yelled Tommy Watson.

Nelson Lee stared at us.

"You haven't told me all that you know," he said sharply.

"There's only one other item, sir," I replied. "We met Inspector Jameson, and he told us that Jim the Penman escaped from Kingstown Prison last night!"

The gov'nor whistled softly.

"Upon my soul!" he murmured. "Had I been aware of that fact earlier, I should have suspected the truth," he declared. "This letter is absolutely an exact copy of Sir Rupert's handwriting—Jim the Penman's

skill is evidently of the same quality as of old. He escaped last night?"

"That's what the inspector told us."

"The Circle of Terror had a hand in the game, of course," said Lee musingly. "Moreover, the whole plan was prepared well in advance, and this letter must have been written immediately after Jim escaped—a severe test, indeed. There was some quick work, boys."

"Rather, sir," I agreed. "Somebody must have rushed up to London last night with that letter, so that it could be posted—"

"I suspect that it was faked in some way—the envelope, I mean," said Nelson Lee. "Probably it was posted in Hannington, or some other local town. I did not see the envelope."

"And what do you think of it all, sir?" I asked.

"I think that you have acted with commendable promptitude," replied the gov'nor. "But for this warning I should certainly have fallen into the trap. Whether the Circle agents would have succeeded in their evil designs is another matter. Possibly I should have been killed. Upon my soul! I have been caught napping,—eh?"

"I don't see how you could help it, sir," I remarked. "You didn't know that Jim the Penman has escaped, and you didn't suspect that letter of being a fake."

"Please don't make excuses for me, Nipper—"

"I'm not, sir," I protested. "You don't need any excuse, that I can see. But do you really think that the Circle is connected with Jim's escape—I mean, did they help him?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Why undoubtedly, sir?"

Nelson Lee regarded me very thoughtfully as he lit a cigarette. His grey eyes were looking their keenest.

"Did Inspector Jameson say how Jim got away?" he asked.

"No; he didn't give any details."

"He made no mention of a limousine?"

"No, gov'nor."

"Well, there was a limousine used in the escape," said Nelson Lee. "I was puzzled this afternoon, boys—but I can understand now. I suspect that Jim the Penman is not far from St. Frank's, after all."

And the gov'nor told us all about his watch in the Mount—how he had seen the motor-car within the enclosure of Simon Legg's cottage. It had evidently been blacked for the especial purpose of effecting Jim the Penman's escape.

"I must thank you, boys, for your timely help," said Nelson Lee quietly. "As for the unfortunate gentleman who owns the motor-cycle and side-car, we shall offer him full explanations, and compensate him as he thinks fit—for it is a most serious action to seize property in that barefaced manner. Let us hope he will be a sensible man."

"And what are you going to do now?" asked Watson eagerly. "What are you going to do about those Circle agents?"

"Well, you may be certain that I shall not allow them to carry out their purpose," said Nelson Lee drily. "The Circle is confident that they will settle with me to-night. Actually, I intend to deal them a severe blow. The men who have been picked for this particular task are special agents, and the Circle cannot afford to lose such men. Yet I mean to capture these gentlemen."

"How, sir?" I asked.

"In quite a simple manner, Nipper——"

"But you can't have them arrested, sir, without evidence," I protested. "And it would be risky to give them a chance to finish you off. Better let the rotters escape!"

"I shall give them no chance whatever; and, as for evidence, my word will be quite sufficient to have the men placed under arrest for the time being. They will be held in custody."

Nelson Lee outlined his plan, and we were delighted with it. To know that our wild ride had not been in vain was very pleasing, and to take part in the capture of the Circle's deadly agents was even more pleasing.

The train arrived at a small station six miles from Ketworth, and Sir Montie and Tommy and I alighted and got into the next carriage—leaving Nelson Lee alone. The station-master was called by Lee and given certain instructions, which he promised to carry out.

Then the train restarted, and went onwards through the darkness of the mild summer night.

At length we pulled into Ketworth station. It was a comparatively small place, although Ketworth held the opinion that the town was of great importance.

The very instant the train stopped I jumped out on to the platform with my chums, and looked up and down. Near the booking-office I saw the station-master talking with a police-inspector and two constables. The gov'nor's instructions down the line had already borne fruit.

We hurried down the platform.

Meanwhile Nelson Lee sat in his own compartment, apparently deeply interested in the pages of a magazine. He glanced up casually as three men came bustling into the compartment. The very fact that they had walked past several empty smoking compartments and had deliberately entered his was significant enough.

All three men were highly respectable in appearance, and, seemingly, strangers to one another. One was elderly and inclined to be stout; another looked as meek as a curate; whilst the third was, indeed, a clergyman. It would be almost impossible to imagine three more inoffensive-looking gentlemen than that trio.

Nelson Lee was positive, however, that they had entered his compartment with the definite intention of murdering him. He knew the Circle of Terror too well to be deceived. The Circle always did things thoroughly; and it was no time for hesitation.

Nelson Lee collected his things and left the compartment. As he did so he observed the quick glance which was exchanged between the three men. That glance proved positively that this move had not been expected, and that the trio were acquainted with one another.

Nelson Lee turned back at the doorway, and a small, neat revolver was in his hand. Its muzzle travelled steadily from one man to another, and they all looked dismayed.

"You will oblige me, gentlemen, by keeping your seats," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "I do not wish to fire, but you will compel me to act drastically unless you——"

"How—how dare you, sir!" stuttered the clergyman indignantly.

"You must be mad!" exclaimed one of the others.

"Not at all," smiled the schoolmaster-detective. "I am merely proving that I am not quite such an easy fish to land as you seem to imagine. No, my friend," he added calmly. "That door is locked, and it would be foolish to attempt to escape."

"Hang you!" snarled the clergyman, suddenly starting to his feet. "Open that door, you fools!" he added, turning. "Lee daren't fire, and we must escape——"

"You can move, if you like!" snapped one of the others. "Nelson Lee isn't so squeamish about firing as you seem to imagine—By George! We're done now!"

At that moment I had arrived upon the scene with the inspector and the constables. The sight of the uniforms was the signal for the three men to make a mad dash for liberty. This was only possible by means of the opposite door—and it was locked.

For about four minutes there was a wild scramble—a terrific fight. And then the three Circle agents were subdued and handcuffed. They were marched off, Nelson Lee having promised the inspector to make a full report on the morrow.

"Well; thank goodness, their game's been spoilt!" I exclaimed fervently.

And Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson echoed my sentiments heartily.

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It was afterwards found that the three agents of the Circle of Terror carried enough evidence to convict them twice over. And they would certainly suffer severely—although not half so severely as they deserved.

The Circle's plan had been foiled, and we had every reason to congratulate ourselves. The episode had concluded in our favour.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!—(See p. iv of cover.)

GRAND NEW SCHOOL SERIAL

The Chums of Littleminster School.

A Magnificent Story of School Life and Adventure.

By **ARTHUR S. HARDY.**

The First Chapters.

BASIL HOOD is a new boy at Littleminster School.

On his arrival he makes a friend of

JOHN CHALLIS, a Senior in the Fifth Form.

MYERS and **COGGIN** are two bullies, who, with some others, try to make Challis join the "Clubs," an athletic society. He refuses, and they determine to send him to Coventry. He is persuaded later by Mr. Evans, a master, to join. Ponsonby puts down Challis's name to play in a practice match. The next day he visits Challis in his study. Challis has to tell Ponsonby, however, that he is unable to play in the practice match, having arranged a little fishing trip with Basil. The two are secretly followed on this jaunt by Myers, who, whilst they are occupied in fishing from a moored punt, releases the rope, and they are whirled towards the weir. With great bravery Challis saves Hood from drowning. He carries him back to the School. Hood is very ill, and Challis fears he will die. Tormented by his thoughts, he forces his way into the sick-room. His relief is unbounded when he finds Hood is making a recovery, and is already out of danger.

(Now read on.)

CHALLIS EXPLAINS.

SO Basil Hood was no longer in danger. The boy was able to talk, to recognise his friends, even to speak a word in favour of the chum who had saved his life.

As John Challis realised this he knelt beside the bed, his heart swelling with thankfulness and the tears welling into his eyes.

After all, big though he was, he was a mere boy, and he may be forgiven the sudden lapse from self-discipline and constant self-repression to which he had accustomed himself since he had come to Littleminster School and first realised that he stood little chance of making headway towards popularity with his schoolmates.

The fears with which he had been haunted ever since he saw the master, the doctor, and Ponsonby bearing the unconscious form of Basil Hood along the passage to the master's room were suddenly dissipated. He knew that he had worried himself unnecessarily. The taunts and threats which had been hurled at him did not matter to him now. He even forgave the coward who had

placed that card bearing the word "Murderer" in his room in the burst of thankfulness which came over him.

For a minute or so he remained still, then smiled into Basil's eyes.

Mr. Evans, watching, pulled at his chin.

"Are you better, old fellow?" asked Challis gently.

The master saw the big boy's face soften, saw a gentle smile curve his lips, and the cold gleam of his eyes warm mechanically.

"H'm!" he murmured to himself.

"Yes, I'm feeling much better, thank you, John," said Basil, with flushing cheeks. "I'm all right. Only I feel tired. That ducking did me no good, I suppose. But everybody is so very kind to me, it doesn't matter."

Looking up just then, he saw Mr. Evans staring down at him.

He caught Challis's arm, as if he feared the boy would be forced to leave him. Again he made his plaintive appeal.

"Don't send him away, sir, please!"

Challis flashed a look at the master.

"I'm not at all sure that it wouldn't be better to do so," remarked Mr. Evans. "The hour is late, and it's against the rules. He ought not to be here. Still, as you seem to want him, perhaps I'll let him stay a little while."

"Thank you, sir," said Challis gratefully, as he rose to his feet.

"Only on one condition, mind; that he doesn't worry you, and that you lie still and don't talk, Hood."

"I sha'n't talk—much, sir," answered Basil, with a sigh of content. "Only you don't know how good it is to have Big John here. But for him I should have been drowned."

Mr. Evans held up a warning finger.

"That'll do," he said. "I must have no talking. Challis, perhaps you will tell me how the accident happened."

"There's nothing much to tell, sir," said the big boy. "I didn't want to play cricket. I shouldn't have been of any use to the side. And I'm sure they didn't really want me. I'd arranged with the manager of the Maspie Inn to have his punt out that day. I'd had a new rod sent down from home, and wanted to try it. Basil said he'd like to go with me, and—that's all."

"But the accident happened below bridge, I hear. Surely you did not choose that dangerous place for your fishing-ground?"

"No, sir. We went up stream, to the piles. I usually fish there, or else punt up as far as Minnenden."

"Then how on earth did your punt get loose? Were you returning to the boat-house, and did you allow the punt to get out of hand?"

"No."

Basil broke in at that.

"Some cad cut the moorings adrift," said he. "I saw him hiding in the willows. I don't know who it was, but he did it. And if it hadn't been for Challis I'd have been drowned!"

An exclamation of dismay burst from the master's lips.

"Surely Hood is mistaken!" he cried, looking serious. "Nobody would have done such a dastardly thing as that. Was your punt cut adrift, Challis?"

"Basil says so, sir," answered Challis; "I can't say. I was so intent on my fishing, for I'd hooked a beauty, that I paid no attention to anything else. We were swept into deep water, where the punt-pole was worse than useless. One couldn't paddle against the swollen stream. And so, as the current drew us into the bank, I got hold of Hood and leapt out. That's all, sir. It was really nothing."

Mr. Evans, frowning, studied Challis's face. The boy spoke without malice or temper. If he felt indignant, he concealed his indignation marvellously.

"And the punt has gone over the weir, I suppose?"

"Yes. I saw her lying in the shallows, broken up."

"And your tackle and things went with her?"

"Yes. I managed to recover the landing-net, but it was damaged beyond repair. Still, I don't mind. Nothing matters but that young Hood is getting well again. I should never have forgiven myself if he had come to harm through my fault."

The master nodded understandingly.

"Of course, that is the great thing," said he. "Was the water—er—deep where you plunged in?"

"Not so very deep, sir," answered Challis.

"I see. And Hood collapsed owing to reaction after the shock? Well now, young man," and he patted Basil's shoulder in a kindly way, "you've had your chum with you long enough now. Time you went to sleep. Challis, I think you had better go back to your room now."

"I will, sir. Good night, Hood! Good night, Mr. Evans; and thank you kindly for allowing me to remain in your room so long. I wouldn't have come"—here his sensitive lips trembled—"only I was feeling very anxious about him. I thought that—he—might—"

He paused, unable to complete the sentence. The master, with a nod and a smile, led him to the door, opened it, and wished him good night.

He waited until the big, lumbering figure had disappeared in the darkness of the passage, and then went thoughtfully back to the sick boy's bedside. Basil's eyelids were drooping.

"It was good of you to let me have John here for a bit, sir," he sighed. "I was worrying about him. He's such a—a brick. I think I can go to sleep now."

Five minutes later he was breathing steadily, and the master knew that the boy would be almost himself on the morrow.

Going to a bed that had been hastily rigged up for his use, he threw himself down on it, and lay for a long time thinking.

"There's a lot in that chap Challis," he muttered to himself, after he'd worried things out a bit. "Funny that he remains so unpopular."

A THREAT.

IN the morning, when the doctor came and examined his patient he was delighted with the progress Basil had made.

"It is astonishing," he said. "I could hardly have believed it! He must have been as near death as makes no difference in that plunge of his into the river. But he won't want me any more. I shouldn't let him attend school for a couple of days. Pamper him a bit, and he'll be as right as a trivet."

Mr. Evans thanked the doctor, and gave Basil the use of his own private study for the rest of the day. He also ordered that the boy's meals should be served there.

During that day Challis applied himself to his tasks with his usual astonishing concentration. He even seemed to work harder and more cheerfully, perhaps because he knew that his friend was out of all danger and about again.

And it was as well for him, for by so doing he escaped the many black looks and sneering smiles which were flashed in his direction, and was deaf to the whispered taunts and calumnies that were intended for his ears.

Myers, Ryder, and the rest of his enemies were disgusted at his apparent indifference.

"The cad's skin is made of elephant-hide," jeered Myers. "But we'll make him sit up before we're done with him!"

That morning, after school, Myers, withdrawing himself from the rest of the boys, hastily wrote out a letter, which he enclosed in an envelope addressed to the proprietor of the Magpie Inn, and posted surreptitiously at the first opportunity.

"Sir,"—the letter ran—"As you are perhaps not aware of the fact, I wish to inform you that your punt lies over the weir, smashed to pieces. I don't like to do anyone any harm, but as John Challis, who hired it, let it go adrift by his stupidity and carelessness, I think he ought to be made to pay for it. The loss of the punt was not due to accident."

"A WELL-WISHER."

Myers left the school unseen, posted the letter outside the gates, and came back again as secretly.

"We'll see how the beast likes that!" said he to himself. "My word, won't he catch it hot! And he hasn't got a shilling to bless himself with!"

That evening Mr. Evans was not present at supper. He'd gone for a walk, directing his steps towards the River Awle. Having arrived on the river's bank, he turned his steps up-stream, and eventually arrived at the piles, where the fishing punt had been moored. The roar of the weir spoke of the danger that had threatened Challis and Basil Hood.

With knitted brows the master strolled to that distant point and studied the ground there.

He could see where the bank had been scraped by Challis in landing, and was able to detect the spot where he had laid Hood down.

Mr. Evans realised then that Challis must have shown coolness, grit, and nerve. To have saved young Hood, who had told him that he was a poor swimmer, was no mean feat.

In the shallows the master found the punt. He saw the rope attached to it floating snakelike in and on the water. It had been carried a little further down and a little nearer the shore than when Challis had seen it. It was in an even more dilapidated state than before. The wreck was past salving.

Of a sudden he heard a step behind him, and, turning, beheld a red face and highly indignant man.

"Hello! Nice game, ain't it?" said the newcomer, pointing at the submerged and broken punt. "I lets my punt to a brat of a schoolboy, and blowed if he don't smash it up for me! Look at it! And it was a new punt, too! Leastways, I bought it a few months ago, and had it caulked and painted up till there wasn't a better fishing punt on the Awle."

"Then you must be the proprietor of the Magpie Inn?" said Mr. Evans.

"Yes, that's me. My name's Laws. And a good-natured and considerate man I am though I say it myself. I've always tried to treat the boys of Littleminster decent, though they've given me a bad time now and again; but after this, blow me if I'll have out to do wi' 'em."

"I am a master at Littleminster," remarked Mr. Evans quietly.

"Oh, a master there, are yer? Thought you were. Then what do you think of boys who serve me a dirty trick like this?"

"I expect you'll find it was an accident," said Mr. Evans.

"Accident be blowed! Accident! Not likely! If it were, why didn't that boy Challis come and tell me about it? Why sneak and hide, and leave it to somebody else to write to me and tell me the news?"

"Oh, one of the boys was nearly drowned, and Challis was very upset about it!"

"Upset, was he? And well he might be!

But he hasn't treated me right, and I'm not going to waste any sympathy over him. He'll have to pay for it! I'll make him

"Why, what do you intend to do?" asked Mr. Evans, raising his eyebrows.

"Do? I'm going to bring it before the headmaster. I don't suppose the boy can pay. But I'm not going to be a loser over this."

Mr. Evans looked grave. He didn't want such a thing to happen.

"I'd rather you didn't take such action," said he. "Why not let matters be for the present? I'll have a talk with Challis, and we'll see what can be done."

"Not me!" thundered the proprietor of the Magpie. "I've made up my mind, and when Mr. Laws makes up his mind, there's an end of things!"

The master tried to reason with him; but after some minutes, seeing that it was useless to argue, gave it up in despair.

"Very well, if you must do as you say, you must!" he cried. "But it's a pity, that's all."

Whereupon he turned his back on the irate innkeeper and walked slowly back to school, hoping that by the time morning came the man would have changed his mind.

A COMMAND FROM THE HEAD.

IGNORANT of the storm which was brewing, for he believed that, now that young Hood was better, nothing more would be said about their unlucky adventure, John Challis stuck closely to his



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studies and worked hard every moment of the time he was in school.

Out of it he kept aloof from the boys. He knew that the members of the club who had made up the next sixteen were sore over the beating their side had sustained at the hands of the house, and he realised that he was being largely blamed for it.

In the face of what had happened he was sorry that he hadn't turned out for the team, for at the worst he could only have made himself a laughing-stock through his lack of practice at the game. He was man enough to stand that.

But the mischief had been done. He had added to the number of his enemies, and he felt that the less he said about the matter the better.

After school Challis ran up against Ponsonby and Ryder.

He tried to avoid them; but Ryder, of Hales's House, blocked the way.

"Look here, Challis," he cried, "why didn't you play for the next sixteen against Evans's eleven?"

"It's not quite your business, is it?" asked Challis quietly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You're not in Evans's."

"Perhaps not; but I take a great interest in cricket, no matter whose house team plays. We wanted to see what you could do, and you deliberately flout us!"

"I—I didn't mean it that way," said Challis helplessly, his cheeks burning, his eyes glowing. "I had a fishing engagement—had arranged for the hire of a punt. I wanted to try a new rod—"

"Yes, and you jolly well lost it! And serve you right! Smashed up the punt, too! And won't you catch it? And to drag young Hood with you—"

Challis, with clenched fists, took a step nearer to Ryder.

"Leave me alone!" he cried. "It's not fair! I don't badger you! I'm as sorry as ever you can be that it happened, but I won't stand being talked to by you—I won't—"

He was about to say more, but checked his anger with an effort, and turned away.

Ryder watched him go with relief, not unmixed with surprise.

"I say, Ponsonby," he whistled, "the beggar's got some spirit in him after all! Who'd have believed it! I'm not a funk, you know, and can box as well as most boys here; but, by George, for a second he scared me—"

Ponsonby laughed.

"Oh, somebody'll be along here presently who'll scare Challis," he remarked.

"Eh, what do you mean?"

"The proprietor of the Magpie Inn is coming up to see the head about that lost punt!"

Ryder whistled a second time.

"Phew! Poor beggar! You make me feel sorry for him," he cried. "I wouldn't be in his shoes for a million."

Challis was very silent during dinner. Afterwards, in school, he lost himself in his lessons as usual.

Afternoon school ended. With a sigh of relief Challis grabbed his books and prepared to return to his room.

On the way he met Mr. Evans face to face.

"Oh, Challis," said the master, in a not unkindly tone, "the head wishes to see you. Will you go to his study at once?"

Challis stopped aghast.

"Dr. Mason wants to see me?"

"Yes, Challis. I'm sorry. But I'd go at once and get it over if I were you."

Challis hesitated, his face clouding.

"Are you going, too, sir?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Might I ask what I am wanted for, sir?"

"It is about that accident in the punt, Challis."

The boy sighed. So it had come, after all. He was not to escape without interviewing the head. Well, be it so! He was ready to face the music.

Begging leave to run upstairs and deposit his books there, he presently returned and rejoined the master.

"I am ready, sir," said he then, and they hurried out of the school together.

(To be continued.)

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