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THE MYSTERY OF GREY TOWERS

A Yuletide Story of Detective Adventure, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER, SIR CRAWFORD GREY and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "The Ancient House Burglary," "Jack Mason's Luck," etc., etc.

December 28, 1918.

(Continued from p. iv of Cover.)

Looking up, he saw Mr. Evans standing before him.

"Ah, Grainger," said the master, "I'm glad I met you. Did you see Myers pass just now?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was he alone?"

"No. He had a fellow with him."

"Ah! That's just it. I saw them go into a cottage along there. The lout seemed to be bullying Myers. The boy looked positively ill. What does it all mean? Can you throw any light on their acquaintanceship?"

Grainger hesitated, then answered with a frankness that did something towards easing the master's troubled mind.

"Yes. I believe Myers is going to buy a fishing-rod from the fellow," he said. "It's a pity he didn't go to Birch's; but I don't see that we can interfere, sir."

Mr. Evans, frowning, walked along, the captain keeping pace by his side.

"No, I suppose not," he said; "but, frankly, I don't like it. No good can come of it. I'm almost inclined to declare Marsh Lane out of bounds."

Grainger looked sharply at the master.

"I wouldn't do that, Mr. Evans," he cried. "Myers will soon get tired of the fellow, especially if the rod's a swindle, as I've no doubt it is. Better leave things as they are."

"H'm!" muttered the master, and the two tramped sturdily along the road that led to Littleminster School.

THE DAY OF THE GREAT MATCH.

IT was the day of the big match, a scorching hot summer's day, with just a slight breeze to temper the fierce rays of the sun, that beat down from an unclouded sky.

The groundsmen had cut and rolled the cricket pitch and marked out the batting creases of the new wicket. The school flag fluttered lazily from the tall mast beside the cricket pavilion, and all around the ground were suspended smaller flags and pennons, that gave to the scene a gala appearance fitting to the great occasion.

I am afraid that there was a good deal of slackness in the class-rooms that morning during school hours, particularly among the

juniors, and the suppressed excitement during dinner afterwards made itself distinctly felt.

Then the moment the boys were free pandemonium broke loose, and the arguments that arose as to the merits of the different members of the chosen eleven almost led to blows.

In the lane leading to the school scouts were stationed to watch for the brake that was to bring the Ragley men to Littleminster.

At last it came, and, a panting scout having stormed up with the news, the boys rushed out to see the rival team arrive.

Through the gates the brake swung, amid a cloud of dust, and up to the school house it drove. There the masters, Dr. Mason, and Grainger, the school captain, waited to receive them.

Hearty good-natured greetings were exchanged, after which the cricketers, bags in hand, made a move for the cricket ground, where the boys were rapidly taking their places, in eager anticipation of the coming match.

"Good—old—Ragley!" they roared, in a chorus of greeting, the enemy receiving the ovation with grim smiles as they clambered into the pavilion.

The excitement grew. To the waiting boys every moment that passed seemed an age. What was the matter with the beggars? Would they never be ready? What a long time they were getting into their flannels! Was it because they were fumbling it?

"Oh, they're a set of funks all right enough," piped young Fawcett. "They know jolly well they don't stand a chance against old Littleminster. Grainger's boys will lick 'em into a cocked hat."

Myers, passing by, heard.

"I wouldn't make too sure of that!" he sneered. "Ragley's got last year's eleven, and they've won the last three matches. Ponsoby's out of our team, which doesn't improve our chance."

"No; but Challis is in it," said Basil, the champion, "and that does! We're going to win!"

Myers laughed sarcastically.

"Wait till the match is over before you crow," he cried. "We shall see."

(To be continued.)

(Owing to the length of the Complete Story we can only publish a short instalment of our popular Serial. Extra long instalment next week.)

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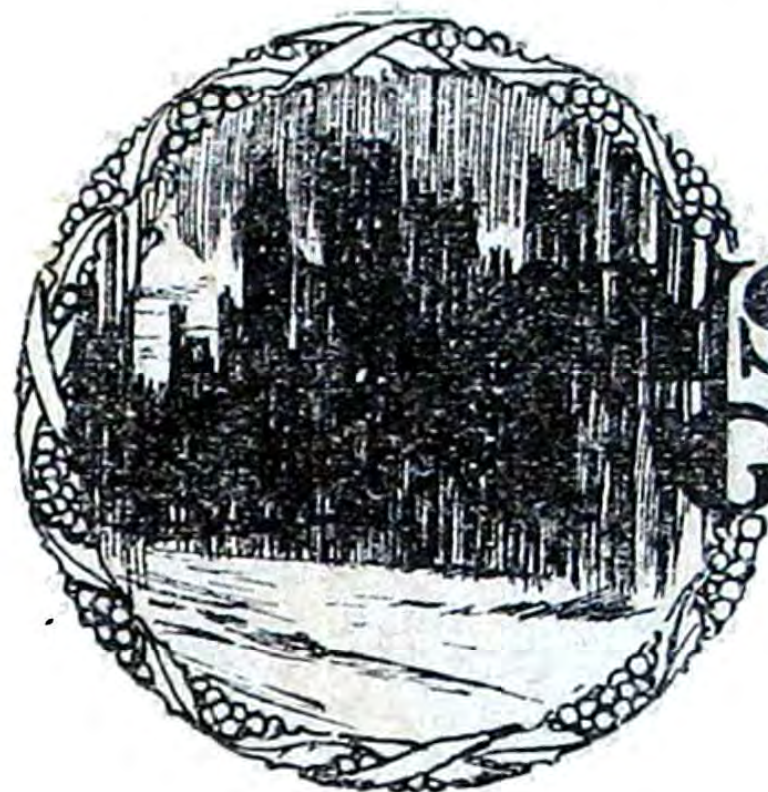
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THE EDITOR.



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A Yuletide Story of Schoolboy and Detective
Adventure, introducing NELSON LEE and
NIPPER, SIR CRAWFORD GREY and the
Boys of St. Frank's.

By the Author of "The Ancient House Burglary," "Jack Mason's Luck,"
and other Stories.

(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

THE FESTIVE SEASON!

SIR CRAWFORD GREY rubbed his hands together genially.

"We couldn't have a better morning for it, boys," he declared, gazing out of the window upon Gray's Inn Road. "It is snowing—and snowing hard, too. The London streets are not improved by the down-fall, but the country will look very seasonable in its white mantle."

"Rather, dad!" said Norman Grey, of the St. Frank's Remove. "I was hoping it would snow, but I didn't think you'd like it."

"Well, my boy, from my personal point of view I might not care a great deal for snow," admitted Sir Crawford, with twinkling eyes. "But I was thinking of you youngsters. I want you to enjoy yourself, Jack—just as I want your friends to enjoy themselves, too."

Norman Grey looked at his father with an expression of wonderful affection in his eyes. He had not been christened "Jack," but the name would probably stick to him—during his schooldays, at least.

There was quite a little gathering of us, and we occupied Nelson Lee's consulting-room in Gray's Inn Road. In addition to the gov'nor and myself, there was Sir Crawford

and Jack Grey, Reginald Pitt, Tommy Watson, and Sir Lancelot Montgomery Tregellis-West.

It was getting near Christmas, and St. Frank's had broken up for the Yuletide vacation. Sir Crawford and his son were just about to start for Grey Towers, in Berkshire, taking Reginald Pitt with them.

We had all been invited; but Nelson Lee, myself, and my own two particular chums—Montie and Tommy—wouldn't go down just yet. We intended remaining a day or two in London, and then joining the others at the baronet's country seat. The programme was quite an excellent one, for we knew that Sir Crawford would prefer to be at Grey Towers comparatively alone to begin with, without a noisy party round him.

There was a very good reason for this, because only the night before Sir Crawford had definitely established that the junior we had known at St. Frank's as Jack Mason was none other than his own son, Norman Grey.

Jack was one of the best fellows breathing, and nothing pleased us better than to find that he was the son of this splendid, upright old gentleman. But that's a libel, perhaps. Sir Crawford was by no means old, and he had looked years younger since the glorious truth had been made known to him.

Pitt, too—he was a good chap. It seemed

only a short while ago that he had been one of the most despised fellows in the Ancient House Remove. But that was all over now. Jack Grey's influence had wrought wonders in Pitt, and had turned him into one of the best fellows in the school.

He and Jack were great chums, and they openly revelled in the thought of going down to Grey Towers together, and the further thought that they would find the country snow-bound and wearing a real Christmassy aspect.

"Well, boys, we must be getting off if we are to catch our train," said Sir Crawford, glancing at his watch. "You won't fail me, Mr. Lee, will you? Bring these dear boys down not later than Thursday."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"We are only too anxious to come, Sir Crawford," he replied. "It is most good of you to invite——"

"Nonsense, sir—nonsense!" interrupted the baronet gruffly. "Good gracious me! If you talk of goodness, what must I say? It is solely owing to your efforts that Jack was restored to me, and my feeble attempts to express my gratitude have been all inadequate. I can only hope that I shall be able to perform some service for you in future days which will partially redeem my debt."

The governor only smiled, and protested that his achievement had been quite ordinary, and by no means noteworthy. All the rest of us grinned cheerfully at his words. We knew all about it, so we could accept his disclaimer for what it was worth.

Our guests took their departure almost at once. Very shortly we should become their guests, and the parting was only a temporary one. Less than an hour later Sir Crawford and his two young companions were comfortably seated in a warm, first-class compartment, speeding towards Gadsbury, the nearest station to Grey Towers.

The snow was still coming down gently and steadily, and there was every prospect of a big downfall. The country through which the train was speeding was clothed in its Christmas cloak, and looked cold and cheerless, but seasonable.

"We shall give Rance a surprise, my boys," chuckled Sir Crawford. "Rance is my butler, and he was given to understand that I shouldn't be in the country for Christmas. I've told him nothing of my fresh plans, either. Egad! What time have I had to do so? It has been a rush since yesterday, Jack—eh?"

"Rather, dad; but you've managed to do a lot," said Jack.

"A fair amount, lad—a fair amount," replied Sir Crawford genially. "Let me see. Three extensive orders to three different great stores. I hope the things will get down to Grey Towers in time for Christmas—otherwise we shall have a poor festive board, I'm afraid. You see, Jack, I was not prepared for such a joyful event, and it has been necessary to do things in a hurry."

"It doesn't matter much, anyhow, father," said Jack, holding on to one of Sir Craw-

ford's arms affectionately. "I can't really think it's all true, even now. It—it seems too good."

"Ah, my dear boy, it is one of those dreams which have come true," said his father gently. "I hoped and hoped—and yet dared not take anything for granted. But last night the glorious truth became known, and here we are. It's strange, isn't it? There are wonderful things happening in this old world."

"It's about the best thing I've ever heard of, sir," remarked Pitt, smiling. "It will mean a great difference for Jack when he goes back to St. Frank's. All the fellows will be knocked over with surprise—especially Fullwood and those other cads."

Norman Grey smiled.

"It doesn't matter much what Fullwood thinks, anyhow," he said lightly. "I believe Nipper wrote to one or two chaps this morning—or he's going to write to-day—telling them about it."

"I don't wonder," said Sir Crawford. "Good news is not to be kept secret, is it? And this is about the finest news in the whole wide world. I want you to enjoy yourselves this Christmas, my boys, and I can certainly promise you a good time. It is splendid that Mr. Lee and those other youngsters will join us in a day or two. We shall be a happy party—all friends together."

"Will there be anybody else, dad?" asked Jack interestedly.

"Not at first, my boy," replied his father. "Later on, at the end of the week, quite a number of people will come if I can persuade them to accept my hospitality. It's going to be a big party in honour of you, Jack. But at first we shall be quiet—I want you all to myself to-day and to-morrow."

Jack was silent, for he really didn't know what to say.

"Perhaps I ought to have stayed behind, sir——" began Pitt.

"Good gracious me!" exclaimed Sir Crawford. "What a blundering tongue I possess, to be sure! I didn't mean in that way, Reginald, my boy. I want Jack to myself, but I want you, too. Forgive me for such a slip."

"It's all right, sir," said Pitt, smiling. "But, you see, I know how much you love Jack, and I shouldn't like to be in the way. If every father had a son as good as he is, they'd be a happy crowd——"

"Oh, I say, don't talk rot!" exclaimed Jack, flushing. "If anybody's a good chap, Pitt, it's you. But don't let's talk about it. The past is over, and there's only the future to think about—a glorious future, too."

"And the present, lad—don't forget the present," said his father, with twinkling eyes. "Dear me! Isn't it snowing?"

It was, and the journey continued to the accompaniment of further flurries of white flakes. When the trio finally descended upon the platform at Gadsbury, their feet sank into a deep carpet of snow.

The station was a comparatively small one, but there was an unusual bustle about it. The platform was piled with boxes, hampers,

and packages of all kinds—an indication of the nearness of Christmas.

The old stationmaster was blue-nosed owing to the cold, but cheerful and hearty. He was even more cheerful and even more hearty when he received from Sir Crawford an advance Christmas-box!

A pair-horse carriage was awaiting outside—a closed brougham. The three travellers took their seats, and their luggage was placed in front by the coachman. And then the drive to Grey Towers commenced.

They reckoned to be home in time for luncheon, but would probably have to wait some little time while it was prepared. This brougham was not Sir Crawford's property; he had wired to a Gadsbury livery stable at the last moment—having completely forgotten the question of transit from the station to the Towers in the rush of other events.

And a carriage was quite necessary, for the distance was five miles, and led through the village of Pellton, which practically belonged to Sir Crawford, every stick and stone.

During the ride the snowfall ceased and the sky cleared somewhat, allowing the wintry sunshine to break out upon the undulating landscape. The sunshine sparkled gloriously upon the freshly fallen snow. It was a picture which filled the boys' hearts with delight.

The snow crunched crisply under the hoofs of the trotting horses; the breath came from their nostrils in clouds, and they warmed to their work eagerly and with a will. The hedges were all covered with masses of snow, concealing the nakedness of winter. And the flakes sparkled like diamonds on the hedge-banks.

"It's real Christmas, sir!" exclaimed Pitt enthusiastically.

"Yes, we don't often get such weather nowadays at Yuletide," said Sir Crawford. "Let's hope a sharp, keen frost sets in. It is freezing now, of course, but it is not nearly severe enough."

"Why not, dad?"

"Your eyes will glisten when you see the great lake in the Towers grounds," replied Jack's father. "It's a wonderful place for skating; and I've never yet met the youngsters who don't like disporting themselves on the ice, eh?"

"It'll be ripping, dad!" exclaimed Jack joyfully.

The prospect was indeed alluring. Jack remembered that I should arrive with the other fellows and Nelson Lee in a day or two, and he could foresee many happy days ahead. It was all new to him—all undreamt of. It seemed like something out of one of the wonder-tales he had read as a child.

And Grey Towers was the castle to which he was being led. It would all be wondrously fascinating. Jack had known nothing but poverty and squalor until he had met Sir Crawford. St. Frank's had been his first real taste of happiness in life—and even there his path had not been exactly a smooth one.

But all the troubles were over now, and he was going—home! He was going to a home he had never seen, but which he had been

picturing to himself through half the night, instead of sleeping.

And Grey Towers did not afford him any disappointment.

After passing through Pellton the journey lay through a heavily wooded country lane—through, indeed, the Grey Towers Park. But presently the carriage turned in between some massive gate-posts, and the travellers were now within the private section of the park itself, negotiating the long gravel drive.

At first the trees concealed the view ahead, but a turn brought Grey Towers into view. It was a noble-looking pile, although not of any great vastness. Built of grey stone, solid and substantial, it had stood the blasts of winter for hundreds of years. It was old—very, very old. Towers jutted out at different points, and gables abounded.

On a dull, drab day the old building would look almost sinister, perhaps—gloomy and forbidding. But now, snow-covered and bathed in sunshine, the picture was one of delight. This was a castle indeed comparable with the one which Jack had pictured in his mind, never dreaming that the vision would become a reality.

"Oh, dad!" he exclaimed, clutching his father's arm. "Isn't it wonderful!"

"I am extremely glad that you like the look of my—our home," said Sir Crawford, gently correcting himself. "The snow came at the right time, and Old Sol has been considerate; his smile is lighting up the old place in a manner which I have rarely seen before."

There was a wide space before the noble flight of stone steps which led up to the great door. The snow upon them was untouched and undisturbed, proving that life at the Towers was very quiet. The servants had the place to themselves, and, of course, did not use those great steps.

"Here we are at last!" exclaimed Sir Crawford, alighting from the carriage and beating his hands on his sides. "Egad! That frost is coming, I believe. And now for Rance. If he has not witnessed our approach, he— Ah! Somebody is awake, after all!"

The great double door at the top of the steps had opened, and they revealed the neatly attired figure of a man of about middle age; and his clothing pronounced him at once to be a butler. He was clean-shaven, iron-grey at the temples, and serious-faced—a butler, every inch of him, although not one of the "old retainer" type so dear to the heart of a novelist.

"Ho, Rance!" cried Sir Crawford. "Surprised to see me, eh?"

Jack, looking on, almost expected to see his father attired in the clothing of past ages. It seemed to him that this old place couldn't be modern; that he had been transported into the pages of one of the rousing historical stories he delighted in. But Rance was a very modern type.

"Yes, sir, I am surprised," he exclaimed, running down the steps towards the little group. "I understood that you weren't coming for Christmas, sir."

"Yes, I arranged to stay at my London house for the holidays," said the owner of Grey Towers. "Well, Rance, I'm here—with my son."

The butler's eyes opened wider.

"I don't think I understand, sir," he said. "And I'm afraid everything is unprepared. It would have been better if you had warned me, sir."

"Undoubtedly, Rance—undoubtedly," replied Sir Crawford. "But, being in a most excited condition, I quite overlooked the fact. However, I am the master of my own house, and I think I am permitted to change my plans if I so desire. I want you to attend in my library very shortly, as there are quite a host of orders I wish to give. We must all look lively, Rance."

"Yes, sir," said the butler unemotionally. "But there's no fire in the library, sir, and Mrs. Baldwin isn't here—"

"Dear, dear!" said the baronet. "This is rather unfortunate. Here is a house without a housekeeper. However, I have no doubt that we shall surmount the difficulty. But we will get indoors, boys."

Jack could think of nothing but the almost awesome nobility of this wonderful place. The great hall, warm and cheerful, and subdued in the light which came through the beautifully coloured windows, filled him with a silent ecstasy. The magnificent staircase, so wide and so richly carpeted. It was all splendid.

"I am afraid there's no room you can enter yet, sir," said Rance apologetically. "We've had no fires to-day, not knowing that you were coming."

"But fires can be lit, Rance, and fires must be lit," exclaimed his master. "It was unfortunate that I could give you no hint of my coming, but such is the case, and we must make the best of it. Get four or five of the kitchenmaids to work at once—"

"That's impossible, sir," interrupted the butler respectfully. "I fear that I must crave your pardon, sir, for taking a liberty which was outside my province. But I was only thinking of the servants in a generous spirit. I have given them all a holiday for Christmas, with the exception of three or four, and they are the footmen and the coachmen. I am very sorry, sir!"

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Pitt blankly.

But Sir Crawford laughed with great heartiness.

"Well, well! I can't blame you, Rance," he exclaimed. "We must rough it, I suppose, for a few hours. You are the butler, and the servants are in your charge; I cannot blame you for being considerate. However, you'll have to send word to the village at once and get what temporary help you can—pending the arrival of the ordinary staff. They, I'm afraid, must be recalled; but I will compensate them."

"Very good, sir," said Rance.

And in this way Norman Grey arrived home. At present he had no thought of any dramatic adventure—neither had his father. But one was coming, and swiftly, too! Events

were destined to occur at Grey Towers which would be both startling and extraordinary.

CHAPTER II.

STRANDED IN THE STORM!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH sniffed.

There was a world of contempt in that sniff, and his chums, Church and McClure, regarded him in surprise. The trio were seated in the rear of a powerful touring car, which was ploughing through the deep snow steadily and relentlessly.

In the front seat of the car were Sir Edward Handforth and the chauffeur. The boys were by themselves, and had been discussing the recent honour which had been bestowed upon Handforth's noble pater.

The car belonged to Sir Edward, and had been to fetch Church and McClure—the whole trip being Handforth's idea, an idea which his father had good-naturedly indulged. Perhaps he wouldn't have been so ready had he known that the weather would change so much for the worse. This was the day following the arrival of Sir Crawford Grey at Grey Towers, and it looked very much as though an ugly snowstorm was brewing. The wind was already howling bitingly and viciously. Evening was drawing near, and the dusk was deepening.

Handforth and Co., well wrapped up, were quite comfortable in the rear of the big car. The three St. Frank's juniors were in the best of spirits, and, as before mentioned, were talking about Sir Edward.

"What the dickens are you sniffing about?" asked McClure. "Got a cold?"

"No, you ass, I haven't!"

"Well, what's the matter, then?" went on McClure. "I only mentioned that your pater wasn't a 'sir' the last time I saw him. He was just a plain 'Mr.' like my dad. You seem to be offended."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "Nothing to be offended about, is there?"

"When was the honour given to him?" asked Church.

"A month or two ago. It was in the papers, if you had any eyes," replied Handforth. "It's a queer thing some of the chaps at St. Frank's didn't spot it. Perhaps they did, and didn't connect him with my pater. Anyhow, I wasn't going to make a song about the—the disgrace!"

"The what?" gasped McClure. "A disgrace to be made a baronet?"

Handforth snorted.

"He ain't a baronet—it's only a knighthood," he said contemptuously.

"Well, blow it all, it's nothing to sneer at," said Church. "I know if my father was made a knight I'd let the other chaps know soon enough. It's an honour, Handy, and I'm blessed if I can understand you."

"Oh, don't be potty!" snapped Handforth. "Where does the honour come in?"

I felt like having a bust-up with my pater for accepting it."

"You—you fathead!" gasped Church, staring.

"There's no honour in being made a knight nowadays," said Handforth. "It reminds me of that giddy comic opera—'The Gondoliers,' ain't it?—where some chap says that dukes are three a penny. It's not so bad as that, but pretty near. Knights are as cheap as bloaters, anyhow!"

Handforth spoke with feeling. Naturally, his statements were greatly exaggerated—they always were. But it amazed his chums to find that he took this view. But, then, you never could know how the dickens Handforth would take anything. His father had been knighted months ago, and he hadn't breathed a word about it!

"Of course, if you like to call your pater a bloater, that's your look-out," said McClure. "I don't mind a bit."

Handforth glared.

"I didn't call him a bloater!" he roared indignantly.

Sir Edward turned round in his seat.

"Getting hungry, boys?" he asked genially. "I heard something about bloaters, didn't I? You'll have something better than that before long!"

"Yes, pater, rather!" gasped Handforth. He certainly had no wish to explain to his father how that word had cropped up. Handforth senior was something like Handforth junior when it came to impulsiveness. He was quite capable of cuffing Edward Oswald right and left if the occasion demanded, although, like his son, he would be sorry for it immediately afterwards. But, as Handforth had complained, that didn't relieve the pain. It would be far better to be sorry before he started.

The crisis was passed successfully, for Sir Edward did not press his son for details regarding the subject of bloaters. And the conversation in the tonneau took a turn, not unnaturally, upon grub. Handforth and Co. indulged themselves in speculating what food they would partake of upon arrival home.

This interesting subject, however, was soon disposed of, for an interruption occurred in the shape of dense masses of snow, which swept abruptly out of the heavens. A halt was called while the big hood was drawn over the car as a means of protection from the elements. Handforth complained bitterly about his father's crass stupidity—but out of Sir Edward's hearing—in purchasing a motor-car other than a landaulette or a limousine. This car was draughty and cold now that the snowstorm had swept down. In the warm weather Handforth would be the first to comment upon his father's wisdom in buying an open car!

The journey continued in pitchy darkness, for the black clouds which had rolled up had brought night on very suddenly. The journey had been unduly prolonged owing to the state of the roads.

The clouds were releasing their burden

with such vigour that it was almost impossible to see a couple of yards ahead. The snowflakes were small, but in myriads, and they were covering the ground rapidly and banking up into drifts everywhere. The fine afternoon had changed to a dull evening, and a dull evening had developed into a night of wild hurricane.

"My hat!" muttered McClure. "We shan't get home, shall we?"

"You silly fathead!" snorted Handforth. "Do you think this car is a rotten dud, or what? The snow may delay us, but——"

Handforth's remark was cut short in a rather dramatic manner, for he suddenly pitched out of his seat and fell sprawling with his chums. They were in a wild heap, but unhurt, and the car was still. Furthermore, it appeared to be standing at a very acute angle.

"Great pip!" gasped Handforth. "What's happened? Take your beastly foot out of my ear, you ass!"

Handforth and Co. succeeded in getting to their feet, and they found their way out of the car somehow or other. Sir Edward and the chauffeur were floundering in the snow close by, regarding the car in a concerned manner, standing in the full light of the headlamps.

"What's the matter, pater?" asked Handforth.

"Don't ask such silly questions, Edward!" snapped Handforth senior, no longer genial. "Can't you see what the matter is? You never use your eyes; that's what's wrong with you, my boy. We have blundered into a snowdrift."

"It wasn't my fault, sir," said the chauffeur. "I couldn't see which was the road and which wasn't. I suppose we're half in a ditch, or something. I'm very sorry, sir——"

"Nonsense, Fisher," interrupted Sir Edward. "It wasn't your fault in the least. This infernal snow is absolutely bewildering. Where are we, for goodness' sake? Can't we get the car out of this confounded fix?"

Fisher cocked his head doubtfully.

"I'm afraid not, sir," he replied. "She's deep in, and we should need a dozen men to haul her out. No good reversing her engine; can't get any grip on this surface. Besides, she's half capsized, and——"

The chauffeur bent down and pulled the snow away from the front wheel nearest him. When he looked up there was a wry expression on his face.

"Wheel's broke, sir," he announced, "and we're not carryin' a spare one, either. She's properly crocked, sir. I don't see how we're goin' to get her home for days. Must have another wheel, anyhow."

Sir Edward snorted—just like his son.

"What a bothering nuisance!" he exclaimed disgustedly. "This means that we've got to trudge through this infernal snow until we get to a station, which might be six or seven miles off. This is what comes of indulging you, Edward."

"Here, I say, it ain't my fault!" protested Handforth indignantly. "A walk won't

do us much harm, pater. It'll be rather jolly, in fact. Real Christmas, with a vengeance!"

Sir Edward made no comment, but his expression plainly told how "jolly" he judged the situation would be. There was nothing for it but to walk along the road until they came to a town or a village. The unfortunate Fisher was left with the car until relief could be sent out to him.

Sir Edward said very little as he walked on with the boys. He was, in fact, in a shocking temper. Handforth senior was very much like his son in the fact that he was hopelessly unreasonable. As a rule he was genial and good-hearted, but the prospect of trudging miles through the snow upset him.

Besides, there was a distinct probability that there would be no train, even if they did get to the station. They would be forced to put up at some little village inn. Sir Edward detested all country inns, large or small—particularly small. He had not slept in an inn for twenty years, and the thought of doing so now was appalling. Handforth's father was a man of even, regular habits, and anything which drove him out of his ordinary rut worried him intensely. He would not mind so much if there was a big modern hotel near by, like the Savoy. Sir Edward always stayed at the Savoy when in London; he had his own suite there. But there was not much prospect of finding a second Savoy in this locality.

The trudge through the storm wasn't far, for within ten minutes the quartette came within sight of several twinkling lights in the distance between the flurries of snow, the wind, fortunately, driving from behind them.

The twinkling lights resolved themselves into those behind the windows of several small shops in a village street. A country police constable, white with snow, loomed up out of the darkness, and peered curiously at the wayfarers.

"Ah, my man, I should like a word with you," said Sir Edward. "We have been unfortunate enough to strand our car in a drift up the road. Can you tell me the name of this place?"

"Pelton, sir," said the constable.

"Is there a railway-station here?"

"No, sir; the nearest is Gadsbury, fower mile away," replied the policeman. "But I don't reckon it 'ud be much good your goin' there. They say the trains ain't runnin', owin' to a fall of snow in the cuttin'. And it's a rare wild night."

"You needn't tell me that," snapped Sir Edward irritably. "This is abominable! The nearest station four miles away, and no trains running! We're stranded, boys, absolutely stranded. We must, at least, send a telegram——"

"I don't reckon you can, sir," put in the constable. "I just heerd from old Alfred, the postman, that the wires are down on the other side of Lambert's Pond. This 'ere is a reg'lar freeze night, an' no mistake."

Sir Edward uttered an impatient ejaculation. The position seemed to be getting

worse and worse. No station, no trains, and now no telegraphic communication! He wouldn't be surprised to hear that there wasn't an inn in the wretched place.

The gale whistled shrilly past the little group, making it almost impossible for them to stand steadily. The snowflakes were whirling madly, and the four unfortunate travellers were smothered in whiteness from head to foot.

"Oh, corks!" muttered Church, shivering. "This is lively, ain't it? How are we going to get home to your place, Handy?"

"Don't ask me!" growled Handforth.

"Is there a decent hotel here, my man?" asked Sir Edward gruffly.

"I dunno about a hotel, sir," replied the policeman. "There's the Blue Lion, up the street. I reckon you'd best go to the Lion. The Broken Pitcher ain't much of a place for accommodation. Mr. Murray, the landlord of the Blue Lion, will take you in——Thankee, sir! Thankee kindly!"

The constable took the half-crown which was generously handed to him by Sir Edward.

"Just up the street, sir, against that there reddish light comin' from the post-office," he went on respectfully. "You can't mistake it. Merry Christmas to ye, sir! Merry Christmas to all of ye."

"The same to you, and many of 'em!" grunted Handforth. "If this is your idea of merriment, it ain't mine. My hat! Ain't my feet cold?"

They stamped up the street through the thick snow, and at length arrived at the Blue Lion. Sir Edward, already irritated beyond measure, glared at the old building almost balefully.

"Wretched hovel!" he exclaimed bitterly.

It certainly wasn't much of a place, and investigation didn't improve matters. The parlour into which they were shown was cold and cheerless. The only warm, comfortable place in the building was the tap-room—and Sir Edward positively refused to submit to that indignity.

The sleeping accommodation of the inn was limited, but Mr. Murray, the landlord, offered his best. Handforth would have to sleep with his father, and Church and McClure would occupy a room to themselves. Orders were given to send out assistance to Fisher, who was guarding the derelict motor-car. The car was to be surrounded with lanterns and left there until the morning.

The knowledge that the beds weren't aired, and that this necessary operation would now be performed, caused Sir Edward to explode afresh.

"Our deaths of cold—that will be the result!" he snapped. "I know it! These inns are all the same. We shall be the victims of influenza——What on earth is the matter with you, Edward?"

Handforth looked at his father queerly.

"Nothing, pater," he replied. "At least, I was thinking."

"I thought something was wrong," said Sir Edward irritably.

"But look here, dad," went on Handforth,

with a sudden show of eagerness. "You remember that letter I showed you this morning, from a chap named Nipper—Mr. Nelson Lee's assistant? He's a member of the Remove at St. Frank's——"

"Don't bother me with——"

"But I've just remembered, pater," protested Handforth. "Nipper gave us the news that Jack Mason ain't Jack Mason at all, but the son of Sir Crawford Grey. And Grey Towers is within a mile of Pellton—this village. Nipper mentioned the address in his letter. It only just struck me——"

"My dear boy, it doesn't matter a fig," interrupted Sir Edward testily. "We don't know Sir Crawford Grey, and we couldn't impose——" He paused, thinking. "I don't know, though," he went on. "Under these exceptional circumstances——"

"But Mr. Lee and Nipper and Pitt and two or three other chaps are staying with Sir Crawford now—this minute!" said Handforth eagerly. "Don't you see, pater? You know Mr. Lee—you've met him. And we know Tregellis-West and Nipper—and we know Sir Crawford's son, too. He's almost a pal of ours. If we go to Grey Towers we shall be welcomed with open arms."

Sir Edward's eyes gleamed.

"By George!" he exclaimed. "You're right, son. Anything to escape from this place! Grey Towers, I should imagine, is a big mansion. We shall find comfort there—comfort and cheer and good companionship. In ordinary circumstances I would not dream of thrusting myself upon a stranger because I happen to be acquainted with one of his guests. But our breakdown, and the wildness of the night, is ample excuse. Sir Crawford will certainly make us welcome—unless he has a heart of stone."

"He's a splendid old chap, sir," put in McClure. "He's been to St. Frank's more than once. You'll like him immensely. I say, Handy, this is a ripping wheeze of yours. We shall see Nipper and Mr. Lee and all the rest of them!"

Handforth was inclined to pat himself upon the back. It was astonishingly fortunate that the car had broken down just near this place. The coincidence was rather remarkable, but Handforth and Co. didn't seem to notice it. They were only concerned with the immediate prospect.

Their gloomy looks vanished, and Sir Edward smiled quite genially. He questioned the landlord, and learned that Grey Towers, sure enough, was only a mile distant. Yes, Sir Crawford was there; he had passed through the previous day, and some boys were with him. Sir Crawford evidently intended spending Christmas at the Towers.

Everything was turning out splendidly, and Handforth senior donned his heavy fur coat and gloves and hat. His good humour had been restored, and the prospect of trudging through the snowstorm for a mile was almost a pleasant one—with the further prospect of cheer and comfort at the end of it.

The juniors were quite excited, for they had not expected anything so good as this. They were almost glad that the car had got

stranded. Sir Edward rubbed his hands together with great satisfaction.

Perhaps he was thinking of the dinner which would be served at the Towers, for the evening was yet young, and they would arrive well in time for dinner. The meal which would have been served at the inn had filled Sir Edward with foreboding, and he had been troubled with gloomy anticipations.

The quartette passed out into the wildness of the night cheerfully and gladly. The chauffeur would be all right, for he could find food and lodging at the Blue Lion. Sir Edward left full instructions.

The snowstorm was, indeed, severe. The wind howled and moaned through the trees, and round the outlying cottages of the village. It shrieked down the country road, carrying with it masses of fine, stinging snow. Sir Edward and his three young companions struggled on with grim determination.

They had received full instructions from the somewhat mortified Mr. Murray. He didn't like losing his distinguished guests so suddenly, and he felt rather slighted. However, Sir Edward had no great consideration for the worthy man's feelings.

The great gateway of the Towers drive was reached at last, and within ten minutes the snow-covered travellers were mounting the wide steps of the mansion itself. The big house looked strangely dark in front, but this was nothing to worry over. In the darkness Sir Edward groped for a bell or a knocker, and finally discovered a huge, old-fashioned bell-knob. He pulled it vigorously, and the resulting peal was heard within the mansion, far distant, but clear in a momentary lull in the storm.

"Now we sha'n't be long!" said Handforth cheerfully.

He was right, for the wait was but slight. Then heavy bolts were drawn back and one of the great doors opened, admitting an icy rush of wind and a thousand fine snowflakes. A man in butler's attire peered out into the gloom. A soft glow of light and warmth was revealed behind him.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, after a moment. "Come in, sir. Come in, young gentlemen. I didn't expect you until to-morrow."

He stood aside, and Sir Edward and his companions followed. They didn't exactly understand the man's words, but that mattered little. The main thing was to get into the warm hall, out of the cold and snow.

"Ah, that's better!" exclaimed Sir Edward, shaking the snow off his shoulders on to the great mat. "I presume you are Sir Crawford's butler——"

"Yes, sir," said the man. "I'm Rance, sir."

"Very well, Rance. Will you tell your master that four weary wayfarers crave his hospitality," said Handforth senior. "We have met with a mishap—— What on earth are you shaking your head about, man?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lee——" began Rance.

"Eh?" interrupted Sir Edward. "I'm not Mr. Lee."

Rance's face underwent a quick change.

"Not Mr. Lee?" he repeated sharply. "Who are you, then?"

"There is no necessity for you to use that tone, my man," said Sir Edward curtly. "I am Sir Edward Handforth, and these boys—"

"I thought you were Mr. Nelson Lee," interrupted Rance. "Sir Crawford told me that Mr. Lee would be coming with three boys, but he said that they would come tomorrow. I naturally mistook you—"

"Of course—of course," said Sir Edward, interrupting in turn. "A most natural mistake, Rance. Well, no matter. Tell your master that we are here. I am tired of standing on this mat at your pleasure."

"I'm sorry, sir," said Rance, "but Sir Crawford is not at home."

Sir Edward and the boys looked startled.

"Not at home!" repeated the former sharply. "But I understood—"

"Sir Crawford is not at home, sir," persisted Rance, his voice cold, but respectful. "There is nobody at home. All the servants are away for the Christmas holidays, except four—"

"They told us in the village that Sir Crawford arrived yesterday," put in Handforth bluntly.

"That is quite correct, my young friend," said Rance. "But the master went away again almost immediately, with the boys. He left no orders, and only told me to make apologies to Mr. Lee when he arrived. No, sir, I shouldn't take your coat off," he went on quickly.

"Indeed, and why not?" demanded Sir Edward grimly, removing his fur coat with great deliberation. "I don't like your tone, my man. And refrain from addressing my son as your 'young friend.' I won't have it! It strikes me, Rance, that you are inclined to be impertinent."

The butler's eyes flashed angrily.

"I hope not, sir," he said, keeping himself in check with an effort. "But you do not seem to understand the position, sir. Sir Crawford is not at home, and I do not know where he is staying. This house is empty except for myself and four servants. It is quite impossible for any guests to remain, and I must ask you to leave at once, sir. Sir Crawford made no mention of your name—"

"Probably not, for I have never met your master," interjected Sir Edward. "I came here because I thought that I should find a welcome for these boys and myself. No doubt the correct thing would be for us to depart, but I have no intention of doing so. The night is colder than ever, and we shall stay. Sir Crawford, I have no doubt, will fully understand the position when I make my apologies to him later on."

Rance laughed unpleasantly.

"I don't wish to be rude, sir, but you are an intruder," he said. "You will kindly leave this house at once, and take these boys with you—"

"Confound your impudence!" snapped Sir Edward angrily. "How dare you order me

out in that fashion? We intend to stay, Rance, and you may be sure I shall report this grossly impertinent conduct on your part to Sir Crawford. I will make my own explanations to your master. Go and see that food is prepared and beds made ready."

Just for a moment Rance stood quite still; then he bowed.

"Very good, sir," he said quietly. "If you will remain here for a short while I will have a fire lighted in the library."

And Rance departed, leaving the intruders in the big hall, gathered about the glowing fire in the great fireplace.

"I say, pater, it's a bit high-handed, ain't it?" asked Handforth.

"I must confess that you are right, lad," said his father. "But I have no intention whatever of bending to the will of this fellow, who appears to imagine that Grey Towers belongs to him. It is necessary to be high-handed occasionally. Strictly speaking, we are intruders, but Sir Crawford will forgive us, I am sure. Indeed, he will almost certainly uphold our attitude. It is only common courtesy to take in strangers on such a bitter night as this."

Sir Edward was quite comfortable with regard to the attitude he had adopted; and, without a doubt, he was fully justified. The butler seemed to accept the position unemotionally, and he presently ushered the guests into the spacious library, where a great log fire was already blazing in the grate. The subdued lights of modern lamps filled the room with a warm glow.

"I am afraid I cannot serve a very elaborate dinner, sir," said Rance. "There are no women servants here, so we are handicapped. Might I suggest, sir, that you take the meal here, in order to save lighting other fires?"

"Oh, certainly—certainly," said Sir Edward. "Do as you like about that, Rance."

The butler retired, leaving Handforth and Co. grinning. The threat to report his impertinence to Sir Crawford had evidently taken effect, and he was now very anxious to get into Sir Edward's good books.

This was further in evidence later on, for Rance did everything in his power for the comfort of his unexpected guests. The dinner was simple but appetizing, and it was served on a small table, which Rance brought into the library and placed before the roaring fire. Two footmen then appeared with trays and dishes, and the meal progressed almost in state.

Before that cheerful fire, warm and comfortable, the visitors felt extremely grateful to be out of the bitter cold of the night. Although the situation at Grey Towers was very different from what they had expected, this comfort was far superior to any they would have experienced at the Blue Lion. Sir Edward Handforth expanded under the comfort and warmth, and regarded the butler almost genially.

"We must forget that little incident in the hall, Rance," he said, lighting a cigar. "No doubt you were taken aback, and I was somewhat sharp. Everything is all right now,

and Sir Crawford will hear no complaint from me."

"Thank you, sir," said Rance quietly. "Thank you very much indeed, sir."

He was obviously pleased, and after the dinner things had been cleared away he announced that sleeping apartments had been made ready; the three boys would share one room and Sir Edward would occupy another. This arrangement was quite satisfactory, and Sir Edward was further pleased when he learned that fires had been lighted in the bedrooms.

"Rance is a good fellow, after all," remarked Handforth's father, lying back in his chair and smoking contentedly. "He is doing his best for us, and we can afford to forgive that outburst of impudence when we first arrived. Eh, my boys?"

"Rather, sir," said Church and McClure readily.

"You ought to give him a tip, pater," said Handforth. "I know I——"

Handforth paused as Rance again appeared in the gloom of the doorway beyond the soft glow of lights. The butler was carrying a massive silver salver, on which could be seen four cups of steaming hot coffee, with a little sugar basin beside them and silver jug of cream.

"I thought you would like coffee before retiring, sir," said Rance respectfully.

"Excellent, Rance, excellent!" exclaimed Sir Edward. "Upon my soul! I didn't anticipate this luxury."

Sir Edward was extremely fond of coffee before retiring, and never missed it in his own home. He had refrained from mentioning the matter here because he knew that the kitchen staff was non-existent and these few menservants were doing their best to fill the breach. It was therefore doubly welcome to have this coffee brought in to him. It had been unexpected, and the tip which had been decided upon for Rance was immediately doubled. Sir Edward was very like his son in the matter of generosity and open-handedness.

"Now, Rance, you must really accept this little Christmas box," said Sir Edward genially. "Slightly in advance, perhaps; but no matter. You have done your best for us, and we are grateful."

"Thank you, sir," said the butler. "It is very kind of you, sir."

He took the two crisp brown-and-green Treasury notes and discreetly thrust them into his waistcoat pocket. Then, bowing, he retired silently and in a stately manner. Sir Edward handed round the cups of coffee with a genial smile.

"Upon my soul!" he chuckled. "How we misjudged that man! What's that, Edward? You don't want any? Nonsense——"

"You know I don't like coffee, pater," said Handforth, who had rejected the proffered cup. "I wouldn't give a penny for a gallon of it. If it was tea, I wouldn't mind. But coffee is rotten."

"I regret to say, Edward, that you are shockingly plebeian in your tastes," said his

father severely. "Since you have refused the coffee I will drink it myself—and you may have the pleasure of witnessing the act. If you choose to go thirsty, that is your look-out. This cream is most delicious—to judge by the looks."

The coffee was consumed, and Sir Edward felt far more comfortable afterwards. It had not possessed the precise aroma which he delighted in, but was, nevertheless, pleasingly palatable. And under the influence of the warm beverage and the glowing fire the little party grew sleepy.

"We must get to bed, boys," said Sir Edward, yawning. "It is quite early yet, but there is nothing to keep us up—and I feel unusually drowsy, somehow."

"Blessed if I can make it out," remarked Handforth. "Church and McClure are yawning all over the shop, too. I feel fresh enough. I'll bet it's that giddy coffee——"

"Nonsense, Edward!" smiled his father. "Coffee has the effect of refreshing one. It is the fire, and the warmth of the whole apartment. Come along."

He pressed the bell, and Rance appeared and escorted them to their bed-chambers. Both apartments were stately and luxurious, and glowing fires burned in their grates. Handforth said good-night to his pater, and he and his chums commenced undressing. Handforth was most disgusted, for he had quite a lot to say, and Church and McClure paid very little attention, being shockingly drowsy.

They fell asleep, indeed, almost as soon as they had snuggled down between the sheets. Handforth lay awake in his own bed, gazing at the glowing embers of the fire and thinking over the events of the day. It was rather remarkable, he decided, that Sir Crawford had not been at home—for Handforth had been quite positive that the baronet was in residence at Grey Towers for Christmas.

Handforth couldn't sleep, somehow, and the great silence of the house was only accentuated by the howl of the gale outside. Perhaps he became rather anxious, and this further kept him awake. At all events, it seemed to him that hours passed, and still he couldn't slumber. The fire had died down to a mere handful of red cinders, and the great room was gloomy.

Suddenly Handforth sat up in bed.

Outside in the wide corridor he had heard a strange sound—a sound as though something was being bumped along the flooring. It died away, and all became silent once more. Handforth slipped out of bed, his face grim. There was nothing of the funk about him; indeed, he was rather inclined to be foolishly reckless on occasion. Handforth never counted the odds when it came to a scrap. At St. Frank's he had often attempted to fight, single-handed, three or four fellows of his own weight. Naturally, Handforth had been promptly slaughtered; but he was always ready to come up the next time, smiling and confident.

He opened the door of the bedroom and looked out into the dim corridor. He saw

the door of his father's room standing open, for a glow of light was streaming out. This was queer, and Handforth investigated.

Arriving in the bedroom, he found it empty—Sir Edward's bed had been slept in, but its late occupant was not there!

For some few minutes Handforth stood about the room, wondering why his father had gone out. The fire was burning, and Handforth was cold, so he knelt down on the furry hearthrug and transferred some of the warmth to himself.

At last, becoming impatient, he got to his feet and went to the door again. He had heard a slight sound, and thought that his father was returning. But now Handforth started. A light was gleaming out of his own bedroom—and he had left it in darkness!

He ran down the corridor, a strange feeling of alarm gripping him. He hardly knew what to expect, but he was amazed to find that both Church and McClure had vanished! Their beds were empty!

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

The alarm within him was turning to dread, and he walked to the door uncertainly and almost fearfully. And then the most startling thing of all occurred. Dark forms, almost invisible in the gloom, sprang at him. He was gripped, held in spite of his struggles, and borne to the floor. Within one minute Edward Oswald Handforth was helpless—a prisoner!

What on earth could it all mean? What was the explanation of these mysterious happenings of the night?

CHAPTER III.

A CHRISTMAS MYSTERY.

"**G**REY TOWERS!" said Nelson Lee, with a wave of the hand.

We regarded the old place with interest, and decided that it looked quite splendid in the wintry sunshine.

I was seated with Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson in the rear of Nelson Lee's big touring car; the guv'nor was at the wheel. And we were ploughing along the drive of Grey Towers through the thick snow.

The storm of the night before had passed, leaving the countryside snowbound and looking the worse for wear. Trees had been blown down everywhere, telegraph wires were sagging at dozens of points, and many poles had been snapped like carrots by the fury of the blast. I don't know whether a carrot would have snapped under the same conditions, but the simile is good enough for me.

Snowdrifts were everywhere, and the railway service was greatly hindered. Seeing that the weather had cleared up, Nelson Lee had decided to make the trip by motor-car. It was only a short run from London, anyhow, and we timed ourselves to get down in readiness for luncheon.

Nelson Lee had not sent a wire, because Sir Crawford already knew that we would arrive

on this particular day just after noon. And we naturally expected to find Grey Towers full of activity and Christmas cheer.

By this time, no doubt, everything was planned. Sir Crawford had outlined a great many schemes to us, and we knew well enough that his idea was to celebrate the finding of his son in the most lavish manner. Grey Towers was to be a blaze of light in every room and corridor during this Christmastime. The place was to be festooned with holly and mistletoe and decorations of all descriptions. In short, the whole party was to be a joyous, lively one.

Outwardly, however, the old mansion showed no sign of gaiety. We pulled up before the great door and regarded the house with interest. Jack Grey and Pitt had not appeared, although we fully expected them to be on the steps awaiting our arrival. Neither was there a sign of any activity. The great steps were snow-covered from top to bottom, without a break. Nobody had passed out that morning, at all events.

"Looks a bit gloomy, doesn't it?" remarked Watson, as he alighted from the car. "You might think the giddy house was empty."

"You won't say that when you get inside, my lad," smiled Nelson Lee. "Sir Crawford is probably out in the park with his young friends—skating on the lake, perhaps. At all events, we shall soon see."

We mounted the snow-covered steps, and Nelson Lee pulled the great bell-handle with vigour. Somehow, the sound it brought forth from somewhere in the remote distance seemed to ring hollow and desolate.

"Rummy, isn't it?" I asked curiously.

Before anybody could reply the door opened and the staid form of a man in butler's attire stood before us.

"Ah, I have no doubt that you are Mr. Lee, sir?" he asked at once.

"That is quite correct," replied the guv'nor. "Sir Crawford is expecting us—"

"I am Rance, sir, Sir Crawford's butler," interrupted the man. "I was instructed that you would come down to-day, and the master further told me to express his apologies during his absence."

"Absence!" I echoed wonderingly. "Isn't Sir Crawford here? What about Pitt? What about Sir Crawford's son—"

"I am sorry, young sir, but the master is not at home," replied Rance, turning to Nelson Lee again. "Sir Crawford is very sorry," he went on. "He greatly regrets that he is not able to welcome you as he would like."

Nelson Lee regarded the butler steadily.

"I don't quite understand this," he said.

"But come in, boys. There is no necessity for us to stand in the cold, surely? Now, Rance, what is this you are saying? I understood that Sir Crawford was here with his son and another boy."

"That's quite right, sir," replied the butler. "Sir Crawford was called away, however, and he went the day before yesterday. Not a soul has arrived since; the house has been completely empty except for myself and

three or four menservants. Grey Towers is shut up for Christmas."

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie. "This is remarkable—it is, really! Surely there is somethin' wrong somewhere?"

"Obviously, Montie," said Nelson Lee. "This is a most unpleasant surprise—and strange, too. I cannot imagine Sir Crawford allowing us to come down here without sending a line of explanation. You will oblige me, Rance, by giving me your master's present address."

"I don't know it, sir," replied the butler. "Sir Crawford went away and left no instructions—except that I was to make apologies to you, and to ask that you should return to London and await the explanation which will be forthcoming. At all events, it is impossible for you to stay here."

"Oh, my hat!" I muttered.

"On the contrary, Rance, it is not impossible, because I intend to stay," said Nelson Lee calmly. "These boys and myself were expressly invited by Sir Crawford, and I prefer to wait at Grey Towers until your master either returns or communicates with me. The fact that he has gone is astounding enough, but that he should have done so without warning me is quite inexplicable."

"I can say nothing further, sir," replied Rance steadily.

"Has nobody called since Sir Crawford left?"

"Nobody, sir."

"In short, not a soul has used the main steps to the front door since your master went away?" proceeded the gov'nor.

"Not to my knowledge, sir. As you saw, the snow was quite undisturbed," replied Rance. "There has been a great fall within the last day or two. Would you care to take a little refreshment before leaving, sir?"

Nelson Lee laughed.

"I fancy we shall take more than a 'little' refreshment before leaving, Rance," he replied smoothly. "These boys and myself will remain here, as I said before, until Sir Crawford returns or communicates with me direct."

A cold light leapt into the butler's eyes.

"You will pardon me, but you cannot stay——" he began.

"That is enough!" snapped Nelson Lee curtly. "Do not dare to give me your orders, Rance. You may go. I will ring when I want you again."

Just for a moment it seemed as though the butler were about to burst out angrily; but he bit his lip, bowed, and walked away. But I did not neglect to notice the furious—almost evil—light which gleamed in his pale blue eyes.

"The cheek of it!" I exclaimed. "Fancy trying to order us out of the place, gov'nor! But what do you make of it? Why didn't Sir Crawford tell us that he was going away? And why did you ask all those questions about somebody coming, sir?"

Nelson Lee regarded me thoughtfully.

"You want to know a lot, young 'un," he

remarked. "I can form no opinion at the present moment as to why Sir Crawford left. But I am quite certain that he did not do so without a very excellent reason. But, come, we will enter one of these apartments."

We found ourselves in a spacious, noble room, which was evidently the library. The air was cold, but not exactly chilly. There was no fire in the place, but Nelson Lee bent down and felt the firebricks at the back.

"Warm," he remarked. "There was a fire in this room yesterday, at all events. I have a mind to test the veracity of the excellent Rance. If Sir Crawford left the day before yesterday, why was there a fire here last night? Touch the bell, Nipper."

I did so, and Rance appeared after a short interval.

"You rang, sir?" he asked respectfully, but coldly.

"I did, Rance," replied Lee. "Will you see that a fire is made in this room as quickly as possible?"

"I have already given orders, sir."

"That is excellent," went on the gov'nor. "The room is chilly; I gather there has been no fire in it for some days."

"Not since Sir Crawford left, sir."

"There was no fire yesterday?"

Rance's eyes searched the grate narrowly.

"No, sir," he said; "there was no fire in this room yesterday."

"I thought the air was very chilly," said Lee carelessly. "That's all right, Rance. Hurry the servants up, won't you?"

The butler retired, and we all looked at Nelson Lee queerly. Rance had been bowled out in a direct lie. No warmth could have been retained in the firebricks for such a time as the man had intimated.

"What's the meaning of that, sir?" I asked in a low voice.

"I don't know, Nipper," was the gov'nor's reply. "I half suspect that Sir Crawford was here as late as last night. At all events, something very remarkable has happened, and I have no intention whatever of leaving this house until I know the truth. Rance, for example, stated that nobody had been down the front steps during the course of yesterday."

"Well, that's true, sir, isn't it?" asked Watson.

"I don't think so, my boy. There were no distinct footprints in the snow, I will admit, owing to the fall during the night; but certain inequalities on the surface hint that that fresh snowfall has covered up some tracks which were made during the course of yesterday. I am quite sure, in fact, that Rance has been lying to me; and if he will lie on one thing, however unimportant, there is no guarantee that his whole story is not a string of falsehoods."

We were rather startled.

"But—but what can it mean, sir?" I asked. "What reason has the butler got for telling lies? And why did Sir Crawford go?"

"Really, Nipper, I can answer no questions as yet," said the gov'nor. "But I am quite certain that we have a mystery to deal

with. Sir Crawford's plans were quite definite, and he would not alter them of his own free will without informing me. Neither would he apologise for being absent through the medium of his butler. At the very least, he would have left a personal note of explanation."

"You mean that something has happened?"

"Precisely," said Lee quietly. "Something has happened, Nipper."

A few moments later he dispatched Tommy and Montie out to the car to fetch their bags and portmanteaux. As soon as they had reached the hall door Nelson Lee closed the door of the library and looked at me keenly.

"Come here, Nipper," he said, in crisp, low tones.

I was over by the window, and we met in the centre of the room. There was something unusual about the guv'nor's tone, and I regarded him curiously and with interest. He gripped my arm.

"I didn't want to speak out before your chums, in case they give any hint," he said grimly. "I can trust them, I know; but I think it is better that we should keep this to ourselves for the time being. Something of a sinister character has taken place, Nipper. I am convinced that Sir Crawford has met with foul play."

"What!" I breathed.

"I do not forget faces easily, my boy," went on Nelson Lee. "Over ten years ago I was present at the Old Bailey, during the trial of two men for burglary with assault. I forget the exact details now, but somebody was killed, and the two criminals received stiff sentences. One man went to penal servitude for life and the other for ten years."

"But what the dickens—"

"Don't interrupt, Nipper," said Nelson Lee crisply. "The man who received the ten years' sentence is in this house at this very moment—calling himself Rance."

"Great Scott!" I gasped. "Are you sure, sir?"

"I am sure, young 'un," said Lee grimly. "The man created a great scene in the dock, and I remember his face distinctly. I should say he has been out of prison for two or three years. But he is the same fellow. Just get that into your head, and ask yourself what it means. I'll warrant the man has not settled down into the quiet life of a butler. It's fishy, Nipper—infernally fishy!"

I was startled afresh, and showed it.

"Don't look like that," went on the guv'nor. "We must allow no hint of this discovery to escape, either by word or sign. We'll watch, Nipper, and see how the land lies. There is some conspiracy here, I'll stake my life!"

We had no opportunity to say anything further, for Sir Montie and Tommy arrived back from the car. It was perhaps just as well to keep them in ignorance as yet. The guv'nor only vaguely suspected.

My two chums were to be trusted right through, but they had not been trained as Nelson Lee had trained me. If they knew the truth about Rance, they would probably

give him the tip—quite unintentionally—that we suspected him. He was certainly as sharp as steel, and would be on the look-out. The guv'nor knew that I wouldn't give anything away by my looks or attitude.

I was rather stirred, for the whole thing was so unexpected. We had come down here with the idea of meeting with a great welcome from Sir Crawford, his newly-found son, and Pitt. And they had vanished! They had gone away without leaving a word. And the great mansion, instead of being gay and festive, was shut up for Christmas!

There was certainly much to ponder over. And almost immediately something else cropped up which turned our thoughts in a different direction. Tommy Watson was wondering where to put his bag, and appealed to Nelson Lee.

"My good boy, it will go up in your bedroom ultimately," said the guv'nor. "You'd better put it down against that lounge for the time being."

Watson obeyed, but a moment later he had turned.

"Just have a look at this, you chaps," he said. "I found it behind the lounge, and I can't quite make it out. Do you know if Pitt or Mason—I mean Grey—brought away Handforth's cap by mistake?"

"What are you jawing about?" I asked.

But the question was unnecessary. Watson was examining a St. Frank's cap. And, written across the lining inside was the name "E. O. Handforth," in large, sprawly letters. It was just like Handforth to put his full name in his cap.

"I say, this is jolly queer!" I said. "Jack Grey and Pitt left their school things at our place in London, guv'nor. They came down here wearing topers. How in the name of wonder did Handforth's cap get here?"

Nelson Lee examined the article with interest.

"Are you sure that one of the other boys couldn't have brought it?" he asked. "But I need scarcely ask. With the name written so largely inside the cap, a mistake could hardly occur. Is it possible that Handforth has been here?"

Nelson Lee looked at the fireplace meditatively.

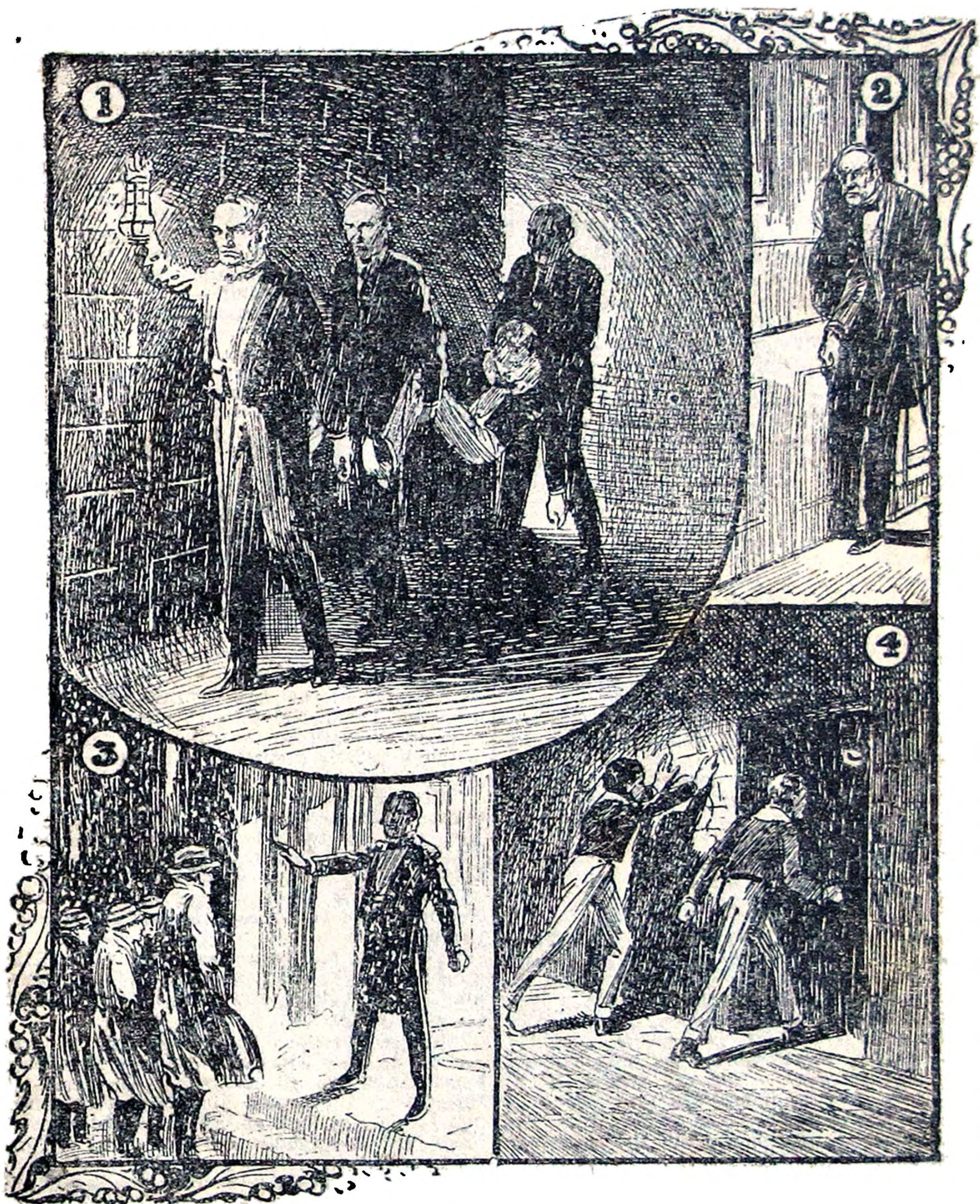
"There was a fire last night—some people came yesterday, if I read the signs aright," he said, in an absent manner. "I wonder? I wonder if—"

He paused, and the rest of his thoughts he kept to himself. Then suddenly he turned to us, fully alert.

"Act as though everything is quite usual, boys," he said. "I intend paying a visit to the village almost at once. I will do so immediately after we have partaken of refreshment. While I am away you must keep together—all the time. Don't separate under any consideration."

"Begad! Why not, sir?" asked Montie mildly. "Is there danger?"

"There might be—and it is best to be on the safe side," replied Nelson Lee. "The whole situation is strange, and I mean to



(1) Sir Montie was borne silently down the passage, the man in front holding aloft a lantern.

(2) Outside the stout door was the figure of a man. It was the butler—listening.

(3) "It is impossible for you to stay here," announced the butler calmly.

(4) Quite abruptly the great square stone slid back into the wall with a grating noise, revealing a dark aperture.

investigate at once. But don't forget what I told you—— Yes, Nipper, the view is really excellent."

Sir Montie and Tommy stared at the gov'nor in surprise; but I grinned. I knew the reason for that abrupt change of subject. A footstep had sounded out in the great hall, and a moment later two footmen appeared, staid and very stolid-looking. One of them proceeded to light the fire, and the other took possession of our bags and other things and carried them upstairs.

About ten minutes later we were sitting down to a hastily prepared luncheon, coffee and sandwiches being the chief items on the menu. But they were quite excellent, and we were very hungry. The keen frost had given us appetites of the first quality.

"Now, boys, remember what I said about sticking close together during my absence," said Nelson Lee, when we had finished. "I don't suppose I shall be away for longer than an hour. I trust you, Nipper."

"Right, sir," I replied promptly.

The gov'nor went off almost at once, and we were left alone. My chums piled me with questions, but I was unable to answer them. The affair was very strange, and we couldn't make head or tail of it at present.

The finding of Handforth's cap added to the mystery, for I don't think either Jack Grey or Pitt had possessed it when they left Gray's Inn Road. Then, too, there was the remarkable absence of Sir Crawford and the hostile attitude of Rance. All contributed to make us strangely uneasy.

Outwardly the butler was polite and respectful, now that he knew that we had determined to stay. But there was hostility behind his polite words, and we didn't fail to notice it.

But Nelson Lee was destined to discover much which would prove of interest.

CHAPTER IV.

SIGNIFICANT FACTS.

PELLITON village was quiet when Nelson Lee strode briskly up the single main street. It was generally quiet, of course, but this afternoon not a soul was to be seen out in the open.

The snow lay thick everywhere, and the light of the short winter day was already beginning to wane. The sky was overcast, but there was no immediate prospect of a further fall of snow. The temperature was well below freezing point, and the snow was crisp under Nelson Lee's foot as he walked.

It was natural, perhaps, that he should commence his inquiries at one of the small village inns. Gossip generally finds its way into the tap-room sooner than anywhere else; moreover, it was a public place, and Lee could make his investigations unobtrusively, without appearing to be inquisitive. There was more than a chance that Rance would be on guard, or that the man had sent somebody into Pelliton to watch Lee's movements.

Neither was it very surprising that the detective should enter the Blue Lion, since this was far better in outward appearance than the Broken Pitcher. Certainly Nelson Lee could not have commenced his inquiries better, for he went to the one place where he was likely to obtain information. Luck was on his side that afternoon, without the slightest doubt.

The bar was cosy and warm, and quite empty except for a worried-looking man who sat over by the fire, a mug of beer near him. He was attired in a thick winter overcoat with large buttons, which somehow suggested a livery. His boots were thick, and the lower part of his legs were encased in gaiters. Without a doubt he was a chauffeur, and didn't seem to be an inhabitant of the village.

Nelson Lee had hoped to have a few words with the landlord, but only a young girl was behind the bar, and her face did not express sufficient intelligence to warrant Nelson Lee starting a conversation. He decided that it would be better to wait for a little while.

He obtained a glass of beer, and took it over to the fireplace and sat down opposite the worried-looking individual in the overcoat. He stirred as Lee sat down, and looked up half eagerly.

"You don't happen to come from the Towers, sir?" he asked respectfully.

"Why, what is your reason for asking?" said Lee, without committing himself.

"My gov'nor went up there last night, sir," explained the man. "I'm Fisher, an' I drive Sir Edward Handforth's car. We had a bit of a smash up the road last night, and couldn't get no further—Sir Edward and me an' three nippers."

Nelson Lee knew that he had struck oil at once. The news that Handforth's father had gone up to the Towers was strikingly significant. The mystery of Handforth's cap being in the library was explained, and it opened up a vista of possibilities which Nelson Lee did not care to contemplate at the moment.

"I'm afraid I can give you very little information, Fisher," he said, setting down his glass. "Have you had no word from Sir Edward to-day?"

"No, sir," replied the chauffeur. "I was ordered to stay here until I got instructions, but it ain't like Sir Edward to leave me all this time. I expected him down this morning, to have a look at the car. We fetched it in, an' it's round the back now, lookin' pretty sick."

"Possibly Sir Edward has gone home by train, taking the boys with him," said Nelson Lee. "You will no doubt receive your instructions——"

"But he couldn't have gone home by train, sir," objected Fisher. "The station's four miles away, an' you've got to go through this village to get to it. The master wouldn't have done that without seein' me first. Besides, I've been about all the mornin', an' there hasn't been a sign of him."

"Oh, well, you'll hear sooner or later, I dare say," said Nelson Lee smilingly. "At all events, there is no need for you to worry. Sir Crawford Grey may have persuaded your master to stay for a day or two. I understand that Sir Crawford is now at the Towers?"

"That's right enough, sir," replied Fisher. "He came the day afore yesterday, an' the landlord was only speakin' to me about him an hour ago. Said it's rather queer."

"What is rather queer?"

"Why, Sir Crawford not showin' himself in the village either yesterday or to-day," said the chauffeur. "Accordin' to Mr. Murray—he's the landlord o' this bright place—Sir Crawford don't never fail to stroll through the village as soon as he's come down. No swank about the old gent, accordin' to what I can hear. Mixes with everybody as if he was one of them, genial and kind-hearted. But this time there's been no sign of him—an' near Christmas, too! The landlord says that it don't seem right, somehow. An' then my guv'nor not showin' up," added Fisher. "I'm beginning to feel rather anxious, sir. I hope nothing's happened."

"Have you communicated with Sir Edward's home?" asked Lee.

"Yes, sir. I rang up this morning—the line bein' in order again, after the storm," replied the chauffeur. "I forgot to mention that when you asked if my guv'nor might have gone home by train. The mistress answered the 'phone, and seemed rare anxious. But I told her what had happened, an' she was calmed like. Knowin' that Sir Edward is at Grey Towers, Lady Handforth don't worry at all; but I do—although I s'pose I'm silly. No harm can't have come to him."

"It would scarcely seem possible," said Nelson Lee. "Take my advice, and remain here comfortably until Sir Edward turns up. There is no chance, I suppose, that his host—Sir Crawford Grey—has left the Towers?"

"Oh, no, sir, he ain't left," replied Fisher. "He must have been there last night, because my guv'nor and the boys would have been back otherwise. I suppose they're havin' a good time," he added bitterly, "leavin' me down here at this measly hole. I think the guv'nor might have had the decency to send for me. It must be a bit of all-right up at the Towers—even amongst the servants. I dare say there's one or two pretty housemaids there, too."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"The company here certainly seems rather dull," he admitted. "Well, I must be getting on, I suppose. Take my advice, and remain here until you hear from your master. I certainly shouldn't worry."

"No, sir, I won't," said Fisher. "Why, what—Thank you, sir. You're a real gentleman. Thank you, sir. Merry Christmas!"

The chauffeur was exceedingly surprised and delighted, and he was frankly at a loss to understand why this absolute stranger should give him a liberal Christmas-box—to

the extent of ten shillings. At all events, Fisher decided that "the gent" was a real good 'un. And his spirits were greatly improved.

Nelson Lee considered the ten shillings well spent, for he had gained all the information he required without asking any direct questions of the ordinary inhabitants. The talkative chauffeur had come in very handy.

The facts which Lee had gleaned were significant.

Sir Crawford Grey had arrived at the Towers with two boys—his son and Pitt—two days ago. They had certainly not departed—unless they had stolen away in the dead of night, which theory was untenable. They could not have gone away without some of these curious village folk knowing of it.

The same applied to Sir Edward Handforth and his three companions. They had gone to the Towers, and had not returned. And yet there was nobody at the old mansion except Rance and four menservants.

It was really extraordinary, and reminded Nelson Lee of a fairy story, where good people are lured into an ogre's house and are never heard of again. What had become of Sir Crawford and his guests—the latter now numbering six? Or, rather, five, since Jack Grey was certainly not a guest. Where had they disappeared to?

What devilry was afoot? Having recognised Rance, the butler, as a criminal who had served ten years' penal servitude, Nelson Lee's suspicions were naturally very acute. The mystery would have been startling enough under ordinary circumstances, but the presence of Rance at the Towers was doubly significant.

Nelson Lee was firmly convinced that Rance knew a great deal more than he professed to. He had undoubtedly lied, and he would not have done so had he no secret to keep. Then, again, the butler's obvious anxiety to get rid of Nelson Lee and the boys—what could that mean?

Rance wanted the place to himself—that was the only explanation. Well, he wouldn't have the place to himself, and Nelson Lee grimly told himself that he would root out the secret of this startling affair.

He became rather anxious about me and Sir Montle and Tommy, and he walked back to the Towers briskly, after paying a visit to the post-office. He had not taken the car, because he wanted to cause as little comment in the village as possible.

His doubts were set at rest when he saw us watching him from the window of the library. Five minutes later he joined us, smiling and cheerful. He told us nothing of what he had discovered; but this was because a footman appeared and told us that tea would be served when we liked.

"Oh, at once, by all means," said Nelson Lee.

"Will you kindly step into the drawing-room, sir?" said the footman.

We followed him out of the library, and were soon in the drawing-room, where a great fire was blazing. We hadn't known

anything of this, for I had kept my chums in the library during Nelson Lee's absence.

The tea was excellent in every way, and the toasted scones were delicious. We attacked them vigorously, and Nelson Lee condescended to take us into his confidence—to a certain extent.

"We mustn't talk too loudly, boys," he said, almost in a whisper. "I am not at all sure about Rance and these other men—they may be listening. This position is a curious one, and we must treat it carefully."

"Begad! I'm shockin'ly muddled, sir—I am really," said Tregellis-West. "My brains ain't much good, of course, an' I suppose that's why I'm so frightfully bewildered. It all seems so strange an' uncanny—"

"Strange, Montie, but not uncanny," said Nelson Lee. "I am greatly puzzled myself; so you need not disparage your own wits, which, I am well aware, are remarkably keen. I want to impress on you the necessity to appear unconcerned."

"But why, sir?" asked Tommy Watson.

"Because Rance particularly wants to get us out of this house—and because I have no intention of getting out," replied Lee grimly. "If possible, we must hoodwink him. I want to discover what has happened to Sir Crawford and the boys."

"Dear fellow—!—I mean, they're not here, are they, sir?" asked Montie, rather flustered. "Sir Crawford's gone away."

"That is undoubtedly the case," said the gov'nor. "But I want to find out why he went away and how. I may as well tell you, boys, that there is some deep game afoot in this house. It is something which evidently took Sir Crawford completely by surprise, and which has taken me by surprise, too."

"We know all this, sir," I put in. "We want to hear about your inquiries in the village. Did you discover anything?"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Quite a lot, young 'un," he answered quietly. "I have been thinking matters over, and I have come to the conclusion that it will be better to tell you the main facts of the case. Sir Crawford and Jack and Pitt arrived here the day before yesterday. So far as is known in the village, they haven't departed. Where they are is a mystery, but I shall probe it. Rance, I am sure, could tell me."

"Phew!" I whistled. "Do you think they've been kidnapped, gov'nor?"

"I will state no opinion at present, Nipper," replied Nelson Lee, in a low voice. "You need not be alarmed, however; Rance would scarcely commit any drastic act of violence when so many people are concerned."

"So many, sir?" asked Montie. "Begad! There's only three."

"Seven, Montie," corrected Lee smoothly. "I have learned for a positive fact that four people came here last night, and they have not been seen since. Their motor-car was stranded in the snow, and they sought

shelter at this house. I can only conclude that they shared the fate—shall we say?—of Sir Crawford and his two young companions."

"Who were they, sir?" asked Watson huskily.

"Three of them you know very well indeed," said Nelson Lee. "The other you have met on one occasion, I believe. It is rather curious—"

"Do—do you mean Handforth, gov'nor?" I asked quickly.

"You are thinking of that cap, Nipper," said Lee. "Yes, I do mean Handforth. He and his father, and Church and McClure. Old friends, eh? They came here last night, and that is all I can tell you."

"Oh, begad!"

"Well I'm jiggered!"

"Handforth and Co., of all people!"

We stared at Nelson Lee rather blankly, after giving voice to those ejaculations. This was tremendously astonishing. But I soon arrived at a solution.

"I wrote to old Handy," I remarked. "He must have remembered that Grey Towers belonged to Sir Crawford Grey; and Handforth often met Sir Crawford at St. Frank's. They came here for shelter, probably expecting to find us. In any case, they knew Pitt and Jack Grey. But where are they?"

"Ah, that is the question," said Nelson Lee quietly. "Where are they? Where is Sir Crawford himself? They may be twenty miles from here—we don't know. But we shall know, boys. I intend to probe this mystery to the bottom. The fact that Rance wants to get rid of us is very interesting. I am quite anxious to find out how he will act. We shall stay, and I have an idea that his plans are completely upset. But be careful to betray none of your thoughts."

"It's a cheerful outlook for us, sir," I remarked. "Seven of 'em vanished in two nights—and we're here on the third night!"

Sir Montie looked at me reproachfully.

"Pray do not be so ridiculous, Nipper," he said. "Isn't Mr. Lee here? There can't be any danger with Mr. Lee on the spot. If he had come before, the others wouldn't have met with any trouble. I'm quite easy in mind."

"I am flattered, Montie," smiled Nelson Lee.

"Begad! I didn't mean to be flatterin', sir," protested Montie. "I'm only confident, that's all."

"Well, I am glad of that, my boy," said Lee. "There is certainly no need for any of you to be alarmed. I will see that you come to no harm while you are in this house. But we will refrain from further conversation now."

"Hold on, sir!" I said. "What's the programme?"

"I have no programme yet."

"You're going to wait until something crops up?"

"Exactly—or until it pleases me to move," replied Nelson Lee. "Cheer up, boys."

There are two or three days before Christmas, and I am hopeful of settling this affair within the next twenty-four hours. We shall have that jolly Christmas party, after all. But for the present—mum's the word!"

We were all imbued with the guv'nor's confidence, and we felt quite easy in mind. We knew that this old house contained some strange secret, but we made no attempt to fathom it. Nelson Lee was intent upon that, but he would choose his own time.

Rance seemed to be perfectly resigned to our presence, and he went almost out of his way to make himself agreeable. We were almost ready to suppose that he had merely resented our presence because he had reckoned on an easy time with the house free of guests. But the guv'nor and I, at least, knew Rance's record. And we were duly prepared for trouble.

The butler had evidently given further orders to the men under him, for a fire was alight in the billiard-room, and we took ourselves off to that apartment soon after tea. Here we played for two or three hours, enjoying ourselves immensely.

Dinner, at Rance's suggestion, was served in the library. He reckoned that we should be more comfortable there. Nelson Lee at once agreed, and when dinner-time arrived we went in rather curiously.

The meal, contrary to our expectations, was excellent—plain, but well-cooked, and served in a manner beyond reproach. Seated there, in the cosy library, we enjoyed the meal greatly. The fire was cheerful, and the soft lights glowed upon the snowy-white tablecloth and caused the silver to glitter.

"Well, I haven't got much fault to find with Rance so far," remarked Watson, lolling in a chair before the fire, after the dinner-things had been cleared away. "He seems to be doing his very best to make us comfortable."

"He's deep, if you ask me—jolly deep," I replied, shaking my head.

Nelson Lee made no comment. He was toying with a cigar, preparatory to lighting it. This was a favourite trick of his when deeply immersed in thought. Sometimes he toyed with the cigar so long that he ruined it.

Montie and Tommy and I chatted together for five or ten minutes, and then a knock at the door announced that the butler was there. He entered, bearing a big silver salver, upon which stood four steaming cups.

"I thought you might like coffee, sir," he said respectfully. "Your bedrooms are ready when you choose to go up, sir."

"Thank you, Rance; you are excelling yourself," smiled Nelson Lee. "Yes, we shall enjoy the coffee. It was most thoughtful of you."

Rance looked pleased, and gracefully retired.

"Jolly decent of him, sir," I remarked, taking my cup. "I must say he's doing his best. Here, let's have some of that cream!"

"Help yourself, young 'un!"

I helped myself, and I helped Montie and

Tommy. They sipped theirs whilst I stirred mine thoroughly. Nelson Lee had lighted the cigar, and was now lolling back in his chair, again thoughtful.

"Get on with the coffee, sir," I said, taking up my cup.

"In a minute, Nipper," said the guv'nor absently.

I placed my cup to my lips and sipped the delicious beverage. It was quite nice, but—but there was something strange about the flavour. I sipped again, and noticed that Montie and Tommy were getting on with theirs.

"Can't you taste anything rummy?" I asked.

"Eh, dear fellow?" asked Sir Montie. "Rummy? The taste is rather——"

"What?" snapped Nelson Lee, sitting forward in his chair abruptly. "The coffee tastes queer? Stop drinking, boys. Let me test it."

He picked up his cup, sniffed at it carefully then tasted it gingerly. This being insufficient, he took a mouthful. The next moment a hard glint appeared in his eyes, and I was rather startled. My chums stared almost fearfully.

"The coffee is splendid—eh, boys?" said Nelson Lee, in a genial voice. "That's right! Drink it all, as I have done. It will do you good."

While speaking, he rose from his chair, nodding his head towards the door. We understood. Rance was probably listening—although he couldn't have overheard our previous low-voiced remarks.

Nelson Lee glanced round him, and a flickering smile crossed his face. He took each cup and emptied the contents into a great vase which stood upon a pedestal. There were some dried ferns in the vase, and I don't suppose the coffee did them any good. However, that was a minor detail.

The guv'nor resumed his seat and bent towards us.

"Fortunately, you only consumed a slight proportion of the coffee," he said, in a soft voice. "Do not be alarmed—there is no danger whatever. We must make Rance believe that we drank the stuff. Yawn once or twice when he comes in presently, whether you feel like it or not."

"Anythin' to oblige, sir," said Sir Montie.

But both he and Tommy Watson were looking at one another strangely. They had partaken more liberally of the coffee than we had, and they knew, as well as I did, why Nelson Lee had poured the coffee away.

It was drugged!

I sat quite still, wondering if this little scene had been enacted the night before—only with Handforth and Co. and the former's father as the actors. Had they been drugged, too? I was quite sure that they had.

What it all meant I couldn't imagine. But, somehow, I had a presentiment that the night would not pass peacefully in this strange old house!

CHAPTER V.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF SIR MONTIE.

NELSON LEE was on the alert.

He stood in his bedroom—the bedroom occupied by Sir Edward Handforth the night before—in front of the cheerful fire. The wind, which had risen again, moaned round the gables of the Towers eerily. Now and again the rattle of a distant window would sound, and the ivy constantly beat upon the glass of Lee's own window.

Tregellis-West and Watson and I had gone to bed at the same time as the *guy'nor*—about an hour before this. We had been told to get between the sheets and to sleep. My *chums* soon dropped off, owing to the effects of the coffee—for they had nearly half-emptied their cups before Lee discovered the trick.

I was drowsy, too, and soon dozed—although I had determined not to.

But Nelson Lee was fully awake, and on the alert. He was expecting something to happen, although he didn't know what. But the facts of this curious case were very significant. He believed that Sir Crawford Grey and his guests had met with a similar fate to that which had been planned for us.

Drugged, we should have been utterly helpless—in the hands of Rance and his fellow-rascals. For Nelson Lee had not the slightest doubt that the other servants were somehow "in" this grim business.

The detective had a revolver ready on the mantelpiece. He did not think that he would have to use it, but it might scare somebody. Nelson Lee rarely used his revolver, although he generally carried it with him. He wasn't a "gunman," as they would say in the Western States.

The hands of the clock on the mantelpiece pointed to five minutes before midnight. Within, the great house was silent, except for the strange creaks and whispers which are heard in all old buildings in the dead of night. Outside, the wind howled dismally.

There was no prospect of sleep for Nelson Lee. He stood by the fire, constantly on the alert. If he had to remain awake all night he would not care. But he felt sure that action of some sort would be necessary before dawn.

The necessity came almost at once.

Something sounded out in the corridor—something different from the occasional creaks of the old woodwork. Nelson Lee was waiting for it. He believed that Rance would make the first move in the direction of his—Lee's—bedroom. We boys were less important.

But the detective waited, and the hands of the clock passed the hour. Nothing had happened, and the sound in the corridor had not been repeated. Nelson Lee looked rather grim, and softly crossed to the door.

He opened it gently and looked out. All was darkness, except for a tiny slit of dim light coming from a bedroom further along the corridor. Lee started slightly, and quickly moved forward,

"The boys' bedroom!" he muttered. "Have I been careless?"

He knew the truth a few moments later, for, entering the apartment occupied by Tommy Watson, Tregellis-West, and me, he looked round at the three beds searchingly in the subdued light from the turned-down lamp on the side-table. Then he caught his breath in with a sharp hiss.

Sir Montie's bed was empty!

"Fool!" muttered Nelson Lee harshly.

But he was referring to himself, and he stood for a moment gazing round him. Montie's clothes were neatly folded over the back of a chair; his slippers were missing. Had the junior merely left the bedroom of his own accord for some reason?

Nelson Lee grasped my shoulder and shook it. The next moment I was fully awake, sitting up, and blinking at the *guy'nor*.

"Anything the matter, sir?" I asked, staring round. "Why, what—"

"Where is Montie?" said Lee sharply.

"Oh, my hat!" I gasped. "I—I don't know, sir! I've been asleep, I suppose. I meant to keep awake, too. I didn't drink much of that rotten coffee, but it got into my head a bit. What a silly idiot I've been—"

"Rubbish, Nipper!" cut in the *guy'nor*. "I told you to go to sleep. I am the idiot—not you. I could have prevented this if I had had my wits about me. But I supposed that Rance would attend to me first—and I was ready for him. However, the position is not so bad that it cannot be restored. Get your clothes on quickly—and rouse Watson, too."

Tommy was soon awake; rather drowsy and heavy-eyed, but awake all right. And we were filled with anxiety regarding Sir Montie. At that very moment our noble *chum* was experiencing a decidedly startling adventure.

Afterwards he couldn't tell us exactly when he awoke. All he knew was that during a short period of half-wakefulness he was dully conscious of a jolting, swaying movement. At last he opened his eyes, and saw a lantern swinging from the hand of a man who walked immediately ahead.

Even now Montie was not fully in possession of his senses. His brain was clouded, somehow, and it was only by an effort of will that he pulled himself together. He had been taken from his bed—fast asleep, of course—and was now being carried by two men down a long, narrow passage.

"Begad!" murmured Montie. "What on earth is happenin'? Pray allow me to walk, dear fellows. Am I dreamin', or is this a new joke—"

"You'd better keep quiet, boy," came the curt tones of the man who was carrying his shoulders. "No need to be scared—you won't be hurt. And you'll be amongst some friends presently."

Montie was in full possession of his senses now. He said nothing for a few minutes, because he was trying to discover where he was. There was no wind, yet the air was icy cold. He couldn't be outside the house, he

told himself. And he knew well enough that the man who had spoken was Rance, the butler.

The affair was startling, but Montie remained calm. He was chilled, for he was only wearing his night attire. The passage took a turn to the left, and then a long flight of stone steps was descended. The air was not only cold, but clammy and dank in some way. There was a smell of earth and oldness in Montie's nostrils.

And then he suddenly knew the truth.

This was an underground tunnel! He was being conveyed somewhere beneath the ground—far beneath. Grey Towers was an old, old house, and the presence of secret passages and hidden chambers was only to be expected. Indeed, Sir Crawford had told some stories about an underground passage at the Towers.

But what could it mean? Sir Montie was not in the least frightened, but he was decidedly incensed. It was like the impudence of these men to cart him about in this unceremonious fashion!

"Begad!" he gasped. "You frightful rotters—"

"Set him down, Will," said Rance at that moment. "That's better!"

Montie was placed upon his feet, but not because he had protested. Further progress was barred by a great iron-studded door. The wood was oak—as hard as iron itself—and the iron studs were rusty with enormous age. There was a massive lock and two huge bolts.

"Don't ask questions, boy, because they won't be answered," said Rance curtly. "Put these slippers on and draw the blankets over you. I don't suppose you're feeling very warm in this atmosphere."

Tregellis-West gladly donned the comfortable slippers which were handed to him. And he was grateful for the warmth of the two blankets. These latter, and the slippers, had doubtless been taken from the bedroom.

"Now then, through with him," muttered Rance. "And don't make a noise."

There were two other men in addition to the butler. Both were known to Montie; they were footmen. The one with the lantern softly pulled back the heavy bolts of the door, and turned the massive key in the lock. They had all been recently oiled, and they worked smoothly and noiselessly.

The door swung open, and Sir Montie was pushed through the opening before he could guess what was about to happen. The door closed behind him with a soft thud, and he heard the bolts shot home.

"It's a dream," murmured Montie. "It must be a dream—or a nightmare. I'm rather inclined to think it's a frightful nightmare."

He was in a low passage, with a rough stone floor. At the end of it a lantern hung from a nail, shedding a subdued light upon the strange scene. On either side of the passage were doorways, set deeply into the stonework. And, strangely enough, the air was quite warm. But at that moment

Montie saw a big oil-stove at the end of the passage, beneath the hanging lantern. The oil-stove was burning at full pressure.

And then Reginald Pitt appeared.

Tregellis-West didn't seem very surprised. The whole adventure was so bizarre—so breathlessly astounding—that he was almost past surprise. And for several seconds the two juniors stared at one another silently. It was Pitt who spoke first. And Pitt, as of old, was cool.

"Where the dickens did you spring from?" he asked, striding forward.

Montie watched him wonderingly. Pitt, too, was attired in a blanket and slippers, but he had fastened the blanket round him to form a kind of cloak.

"Begad! Is that really you, Pitt, old boy?" asked Montie. "Until I hear your voice I sha'n't believe anythin'. I shall believe I am seein' visions. But I'm mad—I am, really. You spoke just now, didn't you?"

"Yes, I asked you where the dickens you sprang from," said Pitt. "Well, I'm jiggered! Another prisoner to swell the company! But I'm jolly glad to see you, old chap. What about Nipper and Mr. Lee?"

"Really, dear old boy, pray allow me to pull myself together," said Sir Montie. "I am shockin'ly handicapped, begad! I can't see things properly without my glasses, you know, an' it's a frightful bore. Mr. Lee will soon be here, I'll warrant—he won't allow this sort of thing to go on. But I'm so bewildered, old fellow. Fancy you being in this funny old place—"

Before Montie could say anything further he was still more astonished. For Sir Crawford Grey appeared, followed by his son and Sir Edward Handforth, the three juniors who had gone to Grey Towers with him.

"Montie!" shouted Handforth sleepily. "Well, I'm blowed!"

Sir Crawford's eyes gleamed.

"This is splendid!" he exclaimed. "It means that Mr. Lee has arrived on the scene; and I am quite convinced that Mr. Lee will not fall a victim to these rascals—as we have done. Rescue is within sight, Sir Edward."

"By George! I hope so!" said Handforth's pater. "Disgraceful affair! Never experienced anything like it in my life before! Cast into a dungeon, clothed in a blanket! Disgusting—absolutely disgusting! That fellow Rance—"

"He brought me here, sir—Rance, I mean," put in Montie. "Mr. Lee suspects him, you know, an' is on the alert. There's no need to worry, an' I'm not goin' to."

It was some little time before Tregellis-West could quite bring himself to realise that Sir Crawford Grey and his guests were all imprisoned in these dungeons—beneath the Towers itself. But it was a fact, and it was also a fact that the rascally butler and his men were responsible.

But the prisoners were not ill-treated. There were eight or nine dungeons opening out of the passage, and Rance had provided

thick mattresses and blankets. In addition, there was a lantern in each dungeon, and the oil-stove diffused a gentle heat throughout the whole underground passage. Food was provided in plenty—tinned stuff mostly, and there were numerous cases of mineral waters, etc.

Montie explained what had happened, as far as he knew, and there was nothing to be done except wait, for the only known exit was by means of the heavy oaken door. In two or three places there were tiny gratings for ventilation purposes; but they were not large enough for a cat to squeeze through.

The captives decided to return to their mattresses, for there was nothing to be gained by standing about. If Nelson Lee came to their aid they would soon become aware of his approach. But it might be hours before help arrived.

Montie vaguely wondered why Pitt had been the first to see him—why Pitt had been awake while the others were obviously asleep. If he had seen Pitt's movements now he would have understood.

Jack Grey and Pitt shared one dungeon between them, and when they returned Jack flung himself upon his mattress rather moodily. He had been asleep until the disturbance had aroused him.

"I hope Mr. Lee will be able to find us, Reggie," he said thoughtfully. "We're having a fine Christmas, I must say! There's no telling--- What the dickens are you looking at me like that for? There's nothing to grin at, is there?"

Pitt was smiling serenely.

"There might be," he replied. "I don't know—yet. But before Montie came, while you were snoring—"

"Rats! I don't snore!" protested Jack.

"Well, while you were sleeping, then," grinned Pitt. "Don't interrupt, you ass! I was making investigations while everybody slumbered. And this will show you how busy I was! Yank down that lantern!"

Jack removed the lantern rather wonderingly.

"I can't understand what you're driving at," he said.

"Well, look at this!"

And Pitt flashed the light over a great stone slab which formed a part of the dungeon wall. It looked absolutely solid—a part of the wall itself; but Pitt had obviously been scraping away at the rough plaster which surrounded the slab. He pointed to it rather triumphantly.

"It's a fake, Jack!" he declared. "That's not real plaster at all. This big slab opens—and I was just pushing it when Montie blew in. It's a way out, I believe, and we're going to escape!"

Jack Grey's eyes opened wider.

"You're—you're rotting!" he panted.

"Come and have a look for yourself," was Pitt's calm reply.

They both bent over the slab in the wall, for it was right against the floor. Pitt pushed vigorously in different sections, but nothing happened for the first moment or

two. Then, quite abruptly, the great square of stone slid backwards into the wall with a grinding, grating noise.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Jack.

Pitt picked up the lantern, and they both passed through into a cold passage, the air of which felt very stuffy. But the juniors had no thought of bad air, or anything of that sort. They wanted to explore this great discovery.

They had moved forward for about six feet when something thudded behind them. Jack Grey turned, then uttered a low exclamation. The heavy slab had closed to in their rear.

"Hold the lantern—quick!" he exclaimed huskily.

Pitt, who shared his companion's alarm, cast the light of the lamp upon the blank surface of the stone wall. There was no fastening, and no visible method of opening the heavy stone door.

Jack Grey and Reginald Pitt were cut off from their friends!

CHAPTER VI.

THE FIGHT IN THE DARK.

PITT laughed softly.

"Well, this is a nice go!" he remarked. "It's no good worrying, my son. In any case, we're just as well off as we were—perhaps better. But I wonder what the others will say when they find we're missing—and no trace of us!"

"My father will be terribly worried," said Jack. "But we might be able to get to the house, Reggie—and then we can tell Mr. Lee. Oh, there's no telling what we can do now that we've escaped from the dungeon. This passage must lead somewhere."

"I wouldn't like to deny that," said Pitt calmly. "Come on."

They walked forward, finding themselves in a low tunnel, with walls which almost brushed their arms as they passed along, one behind the other. Evidently the passage had not been used for years, but the air was breathable, although dank and filled with the odour of earth and age.

Before covering twenty yards Pitt's light revealed a flight of rough stone steps immediately ahead, leading directly upwards. They were steep and treacherous, but the boys managed to reach the top in safety. But then disaster occurred to them.

It was quite an accident.

Pitt swung the lantern up to see if the passage continued. And, somehow, his arm caught against a rough projection in the stonework, and the lantern slipped from his fingers and fell on to the second step from the top.

"Hold it!" gasped Pitt in alarm.

Jack made a grab, but was just a shade too late. And the lantern clattered down the steps, smashing the glass to atoms. And the light went out after one brilliant flare, leaving the two juniors in utter darkness.

"Well, that's done it!" exclaimed Pitt

grimly. "We're hopelessly fixed now, Jack. What a careless fathead I was——"

"You couldn't help it, old man," said Jack quietly. "We'd better push on carefully, feeling our way. No need to worry."

But Pitt knew otherwise—and he was sure that his companion knew otherwise, too. Their position had not been very rosy even with the light to aid them. But now, without any spark of illumination to serve as a guide, they were utterly helpless. The disaster was great.

And this was no ordinary darkness, either. It was utter—almost too black to be fully described. It was like the darkness of the catacombs, and could almost be felt. It hemmed the boys in, and they felt bewildered and confused. The silence, too, was startling now that they stood for a moment without speaking. Somehow, they felt chilled to the bone. The absence of the light had completely robbed them of that confidence which had been so apparent a moment before.

"Move along this way, Jack," muttered Pitt, striving to steady his voice. "You're near those beastly steps, and you might tumble down in this pitchiness. Grab hold of my fist."

Pitt thrust out his hand blindly, and after a moment or two Jack discovered it, and they stumbled along for some little distance, until they were quite clear of the treacherously steep steps. But then another thought came to Pitt, and he checked his progress abruptly.

"We mustn't be in a hurry," he said, still holding his chum's hand. "There might be holes in the floor, or more steps, or something. We shall have to feel our way forward by the inch."

"That's what I was thinking," said Jack quietly. "We're in a rotten position, Pitt, I hope we shall get out of it all right. These old tunnels might extend for miles. Dad was telling me about the Towers, and he said that the ground beneath was honeycombed with secret passages."

"We're finding that out for ourselves," said Pitt grimly. "I—I don't know what to say, Jack. It was my fault right from the start. I was a silly ass to come along here without telling the others."

"Your fault!" protested Jack. "Don't talk rot! We're both in it together, and we'll see it through. Keep going—that's the main thing. We're bound to get to the end of the tunnel sooner or later."

They crept on through the intense blackness, step by step, Pitt literally feeling every inch of the way. But the tunnel appeared to be straight now and fairly level. It was wider, too, and the juniors occasionally stumbled into narrow spaces which they first thought to be side-passages; but which turned out to be shallow pockets hewn out of the rock-like ground.

"My hat!" muttered Pitt abruptly.

He came to a dead halt, and Jack Grey guessed that his chum had found a gap in the floor, or some more steps. But the reason for Pitt's ejaculation was quite

different. Right ahead, clear and distinct, gleamed a point of brilliant light—which could only be emanating from an electric-torch.

"Rance, I expect!" said Pitt grimly. "Rance and some of his precious helpers. Perhaps they've got Nipper—or even Mr. Lee. This is where we can do something, Jack. By Jove! We can be of use, after all!"

"How?" gasped Jack. "How? They'll be on us in a tick——"

"We just passed one of those niches," interrupted Pitt. "Dodge into it, my son. They won't see us at all, and we can spring out——"

Pitt broke off, and they both retraced their steps for about ten feet and crouched in the fairly deep niche. It concealed them completely, and they waited there. The tunnel echoed with footfalls now, and the boys were certain that only one man was approaching. This was all the better; there was more chance of success.

The critical moment arrived.

The niche became filled with reflected light, and Pitt and Grey could see one another, looking queer in their blankets. Then, with a yell, Pitt sprang out. He dashed right into the man with the light, and the next second the torch went flying and was extinguished.

The boys, tremendously excited, attacked Rance hotly. They were positive that the man was the rascally butler; and if they could only render him helpless, they would gain a great victory.

Pitt's onslaught was so fierce that the man staggered back against the rough wall. Then Jack took a hand, and between them they succeeded in getting their opponent to the floor. Actually, a loose stone was responsible, and not the boys' efforts. But the enemy was down—and that was the main thing.

They tried to hold him, and then discovered that their task was harder than they had anticipated. The prisoner was possessed of amazing strength, and he heaved upwards wildly, nearly pitching Jack right off.

"Hold him!" gasped Pitt. "Hold the rotter!"

Quite abruptly the captive ceased his efforts and laughed.

"Well, boys," he said genially, "if you have quite finished with me——"

"Mr. Lee!" shouted Jack, springing up in alarm.

"Oh, great pip!" muttered Reginald Pitt.

"It is very fortunate that you spoke when you did, Pitt," went on Nelson Lee, struggling up. "I thought you were enemies, and was about to exert my full strength. Big damage would have been done——"

"But—but we—we thought you—you were Rance, sir!" stuttered laughed.

"Exactly!" chuckled Nelson Lee. "I am aware that there was some misunderstanding. Well, never mind, boys. I'm not hurt. Find my torch, if you can."

"But aren't you cross, sir?" asked Jack fearfully. "We whacked you——"

Nelson Lee laughed.

"No, I'm not cross, Jack," he replied. "Why should I be? Perhaps you were both rather hasty, but I can't blame you for that. Ah, that's better," he added, as Pitt handed him the electric-torch and the light was switched on. "It is a good thing the lamp isn't damaged. Pitt and Grey. I thought so. Where is your father, Jack?"

"In the dungeons, sir," replied Jack quickly. "We escaped by a secret door—which nobody else knows about. Pitt found it, and we came through to explore—and the door closed on us, and we couldn't open it again. Then our lamp got smashed——"

"Through my carelessness," added Pitt. "Well, it doesn't matter much now. We're tremendously glad to see you, sir. Tregellis-West arrived about half an hour ago, and he told us that you were on the alert."

"In the dungeons!" said Nelson Lee, repeating Jack's words. "Dear me! That sounds rather melodramatic. How many of you are there, Pitt?"

"Seven, sir," said Pitt. "Sir Crawford, Jack, and I, and Handforth, McClure, Church, and Handy's pater. They arrived last night, after we had been imprisoned all day. We've been having a lovely time, sir."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"And nobody is hurt in any way?" he asked.

"Oh, no, sir; we're all whole enough," replied Pitt. "And the dungeons aren't so bad as they sound. We've got mattresses, and blankets and lights, and a heating-stove, and heaps of food and drink. Rance has been pretty thoughtful in that way. He's only keeping us imprisoned."

"So I observe," said Lee drily. "Rance is in ignorance, apparently, of this other exit. It is strange how he knew of the dungeons——"

"Oh, no, sir," put in Jack. "Dad was telling me that these dungeons are known to all the servants—there's no secret about them at all. But my father thought there was only one exit—through the big doorway."

Nelson Lee nodded, and looked very satisfied.

"Well, the rest will soon be free," he remarked. "Rance's little game is just about over, I think. I suppose you are wondering how I came to be in this tunnel, boys? Tregellis-West was taken away, and Nipper and Watson and I had no idea as to where he had been taken. But we watched, and we saw Rance and two other men emerge from a panel in the great hall."

"That's right, sir," said Jack. "Father told us about it, and promised to show us the dungeons. We didn't think we should see so much of them, though!"

"I knew nothing of the tunnel, and was at a disadvantage," said Nelson Lee. "However, I slipped through the panel after the rascals had gone, and Nipper and Watson are somewhere in the rear, waiting."

Jack Grey looked puzzled.

"But this isn't the tunnel leading to the big door, sir," he objected.

"No, it is a branch of that tunnel," explained Lee. "When I arrived at the fork, I paused for a moment, and I thought I heard voices in this direction—as, indeed, I did. So I came this way, and you were thoughtful enough to make me fully aware of your presence."

"We—we thought you were Rance, sir——" began Pitt.

"Of course," chuckled Lee. "Well, we'll return to—— Hallo, hallo! I thought those young rascals would become impatient!"

The young rascals—in other words, Tommy and myself—had not only become impatient, but anxious, too. Tommy and I, instructed to wait at the house end of the tunnel, had heard faint sounds echoing along the old passage; and at last we had investigated. The guv'nor's light had guided us from the point of the fork, although we had a torch of our own, of course.

"Pitt!" I exclaimed, in astonishment. "Pitt and Mason!"

"Grey," corrected Nelson Lee smilingly.

"Oh, I don't care which I call him," I replied. "Tommy and I thought that you'd found Montie, sir. Isn't he here?"

"He isn't far off, Nipper," said the guv'nor. "Don't look worried. This interesting affair will soon be over now. Owing to the failure of the coffee trick, Rance finds himself in a queer position. If we had consumed that coffee, my boys, we should have shared the dungeons with all the others."

Tommy Watson stared.

"The—the dungeons, sir!" he gasped.

"Exactly," nodded Lee. "But if you will follow me, you will have the pleasure of seeing the dungeons for yourselves. Pitt and Grey managed to escape by another door, but we needn't bother about that."

We all walked along the tunnel, the guv'nor leading the way. And Reginald Pitt obliged by telling Tommy and I what had happened. We were greatly delighted—and rather thrilled. This Christmas adventure had been most unexpected, but it seemed to be panning out quite well now. I didn't pretend to know what Rance's game was, but we should soon learn, probably. He had been indulging in wholesale abduction—for that is what it amounted to actually. And his motive for doing so was hard to discover—especially as he had made no demand for money. Perhaps that had been his intention, however. After we were all imprisoned, the wheeze was to demand a heavy sum to purchase our release. That's all I could think of anyhow.

We came to a flight of stone steps, leading downwards, and proceeded to the bottom. And then we saw a heavy iron-studded door, fitted with great bolts and a huge lock. The key was in it, and Nelson Lee gave it a twist.

Then the bolts were shot back and we all passed eagerly through.

We were in a different passage now. The air was warm, and a lantern hung from a hook in the wall. Deep doorways could be seen on either hand, but there was no sign of any living being.

"Anybody at home?" I shouted cheerily. There was a chorus of ejaculations from both sides. I grinned as I heard a familiar "Begad!" Somebody said "Great pip!" in a voice which reminded me of Study D at St. Frank's, and there were all sorts of other exclamations, such as "Bless my soul!" "Oh, my only topper!" and "Hurrah, we're rescued."

The next moment the owners of the voices appeared, and I nearly yelled with laughter. They looked a queer lot in their blankets. Sir Edward Handforth tried to be dignified in his blanket, but it was too short for him, and the effect was a scream. But, of course, I felt light-hearted then, and was ready to laugh at anything.

"Hurrah!" yelled Handforth excitedly. "We knew—Well I'm blowed! How did Pitt and Grey get behind there?"

"We've been exploring, my son," said Pitt, grinning. "Didn't know we had left our palatial suite, did you?"

Sir Crawford Grey came forward, and he grasped Lee's hand.

"Upon my soul!" he exclaimed huskily. "I hardly know what to say, Mr. Lee. Thank Heaven you have come. These—these scoundrels have had their own way long enough! We have been shamefully treated. Egad, sir, I go hot when I think of it! Kidnapped in my own house, by my own butler! On the eve of Christmas, too!"

"It is certainly an extraordinary episode, Sir Crawford," agreed Nelson Lee. "Rance, however, did not reckon upon the arrival of Sir Edward Handforth and his three young companions—and they naturally left a few clues behind them, which I immediately followed. But can you tell me how the roguery started?"

The baronet nodded.

"What I can tell you will be of little avail, I am afraid," he replied. "I arrived at the Towers with Jack and Reginald, and found that Rance had given the ordinary staff a holiday for Christmas. I couldn't be cross with him for that, because I had given him no intimation that I should be spending the holidays at the Towers."

"Quite so," smiled Lee. "I can well understand his feelings when you arrived."

"I gave him my orders, and in due course I went to bed," went on Sir Crawford. "The boys went to bed, also——"

"After partaking of hot coffee?" I put in quickly.

"Yes, that is so," answered the baronet. "Rance brought us coffee just before retiring. I fell asleep, and did not awaken until I was in this noisome place—Jack and Reginald with me. We were amazed, and completely bewildered."

"Quite so—until we arrived," put in Sir Edward Handforth. "And, by George, we should have been just as much in the dark but for my son."

"Yes, I found out things," said Handforth carelessly.

"But only because you dislike coffee, my son," said his father, robbing poor old Handy of the glory which he imagined was

due to him. "You see, Mr. Lee, Rance brought coffee to us, and Edward refused his—and I drank it, unfortunately."

Edward Oswald grinned.

"It put you to sleep all right, pater," he remarked.

"Confound the stuff!" snapped Sir Edward. "I remembered nothing until I awoke down here, Mr. Lee. But my son was aroused in the night, and he found me and his chums absent. Then he was captured by men he knew to be Rance and the footmen. He was brought here, and we knew nothing more until Tregellis-West arrived. The coffee, we have concluded, must have been drugged."

"That is fairly obvious," agreed Nelson Lee. "Rance was foolish enough to attempt the same trick upon such an old hand as myself. I therefore tricked him into believing that the coffee had been consumed—and remained on the watch. This happy conclusion is the result. Rance has failed completely in his scheme."

Sir Crawford looked helpless.

"But what is the scheme, Mr. Lee?" he asked. "I must confess that I am quite at a loss, and I beg of you to explain."

"I am afraid I cannot do so at the moment," replied the gov'nor. "I don't know what Rance's plans were, but they have certainly failed. When we get back to the house and you are in more comfortable attire, we can discuss things at greater ease."

"I suppose you collared Rance, sir?" asked McClure.

"Not yet, my lad; at least, I have not given much thought to the man," was Nelson Lee's reply. "My main idea was to rescue you all."

"But, good gracious!" exclaimed Sir Crawford. "That was very considerate of you, Mr. Lee, but—but the rascal will have fled by this time. He must know what is afoot, and we shall find that he has taken himself off—with all his rascally companions. That would be terribly unfortunate, Mr. Lee."

The gov'nor nodded.

"It would," he agreed quietly. "But I don't think your faithless servants will take themselves very far, Sir Crawford. Come, we will hasten to the house with all speed and witness the interesting denouement of this strange affair."

I knew that the gov'nor had something in his mind of which we were in ignorance. But we were soon to discover the full truth.

CHAPTER VII.

A MERRY CHRISTMAS!

SIR CRAWFORD GREY, in spite of Nelson Lee's reassuring words, was gravely afraid that Rance would have taken alarm and fled.

All the late prisoners of the dungeons hastened after Nelson Lee along the passage. The journey itself was not particularly long, and we soon found ourselves in the great hall of Grey Towers.

The place was absolutely silent, and seemed utterly deserted. There could be no doubt that Rance and the other men were already escaping through the night. Sir Crawford was inclined to be excited.

"I am not a harsh man, as a rule, but it would certainly give me great pleasure to see those scoundrels in the hands of the police," he exclaimed. "And now they have gone. It is a pity—a great pity."

Handforth's father nodded.

"Quite right, my dear sir—quite right," he agreed. "It is not my habit to criticise—particularly such a distinguished gentleman as Mr. Nelson Lee—but, had I been in his shoes, I should certainly have acted differently. In the first place, I should have taken care to place the rascals hors-de-combat before entering upon any search for the victims. But, as I said, I do not criticise."

"Not at all!" grinned Handforth junior.

"Bogad! It's all right, dear fellows," said Sir Montie serenely. "We know Mr. Lee, don't we? He's got somethin' up his sleeve—he has, really. Can't you see a little twinkle in his eye?"

Nelson Lee laughed.

"Well, Sir Crawford," he said, "I was not so unwise as to leave the place unguarded while I searched for you. So, you see, sir," he added, turning to Handforth senior, "I am not quite such a simpleton, after all. If the culprits have escaped, it will be owing to the failure of the police."

"But how, Mr. Lee?" asked Sir Crawford. "The police are not here—"

"At least, they ought to be," smiled the gov'nor. "I fancied, however, that you would prefer to attire yourself more rationally before meeting the sturdy members of the County Police Force."

"Have you got some bobbies here, sir?" asked Pitt eagerly.

"There ought to be at least a dozen of them," replied the gov'nor. "I took the precaution to 'phone to the Chief Constable of the county while I was in the village this morning. He promised to send sufficient men to form a cordon round the Towers. I don't think Rance has slipped through. But we will see presently."

I grinned as I surveyed the surprised expressions of the others. Although I knew nothing of Nelson Lee's little plan, I was not surprised—it was just the sort of thing he would do.

Everybody lost no time in rushing upstairs to get into their clothes. Tommy Watson and I were already dressed, of course—and so was the gov'nor. The boys were down first; and they were just in time to witness the arrival of the police Nelson Lee referred to.

The gov'nor had opened the big hall door, and he had blown a short blast upon his whistle. The reply came at once, and it was in the shape of two cold-looking police-constables. They saluted, and were immediately joined by three others—who held between them one of the footmen. Nelson Lee had given orders that the police should watch the house and arrest anybody, no

matter who, they saw leaving after midnight. After that they were to await the signal.

Very soon an inspector turned up with four more men. And they held Rance himself and one other man. The last to enter were three others members of the Force—who held the final captive. This made four prisoners altogether. One of Rance's accomplices, a groom, had vanished quite early in the evening, presumably to carry out some orders of his chief. It was lucky for him that he had gone.

"Cold work, sir," said the inspector breezily. "Yes, we've got them all, although I must confess I don't quite know the game. However, we know you too well, Mr. Lee, to think that you would act in this way without sufficient reason."

"Your chief prisoner is this man, Rance, as he calls himself," said Nelson Lee calmly. "He is to be charged with abduction on a large scale, and conspiracy with intent to rob his employer. The other men are his accomplices. It might also interest you to know, inspector, that Rance's real name is Thomas Hawker, convicted to ten years' penal servitude for an affair at—"

"You—you clever hound!" snarled Rance, savagely. "I might have known what it would be with you coming here! I've been a fool; I ought to have abandoned the whole thing as soon as Sir Crawford came down."

"It would have been wiser, certainly," said Nelson Lee drily.

"Look here, my man, there's no need for me to tell you that what you say is being taken down, and that it may be used in evidence against you," put in the inspector. "I must warn you—"

"Do you think I care?" snarled Rance fiercely. "What's the good now? The whole game's up, and I might get a stiffer sentence if I don't tell the truth. I don't mind saying what my plans were. They'd have been successful if this darned crew hadn't come down to the Towers."

Sir Crawford and Handforth's father had arrived on the scene by this time, and they were listening with interest.

"You thought you'd have the house to yourself, eh?" asked Sir Crawford.

"Yes, I did—I didn't know you were going to change your mind so blamed quickly," growled Rance disgustedly. "Bah! The whole thing's a rotten failure, and I thought it was going to be as easy as lifting a two-pound weight! You can't say that I've treated you badly, anyhow. I saw that you were made comfortable."

The baronet nodded.

"That aspect of the case will probably tell in your favour at the trial," he said grimly. "You are certainly a scoundrel, Rance, but you considered your victims' comfort in the most surprising manner. Now, tell me, why did you do this? Why did you plan such a disgraceful affair against your own master?"

The ex-butler laughed harshly.

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"You may have been my master for a month or two, but that was only part of my plan. I had certain ideas, and I meant to carry them out. I got this place by means of forged references and obtained the positions here for my four pals. That made five of us altogether in the know. Well, you told me that the place was to be closed for Christmas, and that suited me down to the ground, so I gave all the other servants a holiday."

"Leaving Grey Towers at your mercy?"

"Yes; and we were pleased, too," replied Rance. "Oh, it's no good trying to keep the thing secret," he went on bitterly. "You've got a heap of gold and silver plate, Sir Crawford, and there are some nice sparklers in the safe—rings and other jewellery. Oh, I reckoned upon a nice little haul, enough to set me up all through next year!"

"You utter rascal!" exclaimed Sir Crawford angrily. "To think that my house was in such hands! Good gracious! I must be more careful in future, that is very certain. But for my unexpected return I should have been robbed right and left."

"Yes, you can think yourself lucky!" growled Rance savagely. "When you and those two boys came I felt mad, and decided not to abandon the scheme. So I gave you that coffee after preparing the dungeons. I didn't mean you to come to any harm, Sir Crawford. I thought I'd be able to bluff Mr. Lee into going away."

"And that's where you made a mistake—eh?" I said cheerfully.

"It was those others that upset me!" muttered Rance, nodding towards Sir Edward Handforth. "They came here and swanked about as if they owned the place, and I couldn't get rid of them. So they joined you in the dungeons. I reckoned to get the stuff cleared out before the New Year and then vanish."

"Leaving us locked up in the dungeons, no doubt?" asked Sir Edward tartly.

"Oh, you wouldn't have come to much harm," snapped Rance. "I was going to write to the local police after two days—anonymous, of course—saying where you were—see? This'll mean another stretch for me."

"You will have what you deserve," said Nelson Lee curtly. "You no doubt held the mistaken view that you would be able to slip away safely even if four plans did not quite mature. In that you were mistaken, Rance, for I took certain precautions."

"It was like a nightmare!" said the man. "As soon as I'd dealt with one lot, along came the next! It got too thick at last, but I wasn't going to give in then. I ought to have done, but I was fair mad with rage."

Ten minutes later the inspector and his men took their departure, triumphantly bearing away their discomfited prisoners. The affair had ended well, and we were all feeling content. Sir Edward Handforth seemed rather uncomfortable, however, and I soon knew the cause.

"I hope you won't believe what that rascal said, Sir Crawford," he exclaimed. "It is utterly false to say that I—ahem!—swanked about the place as though I owned it. The statement—"

"My dear sir, pray do not imagine that I should believe such a thing," put in Sir Crawford quickly. "You have already told me the facts, and you did quite right—quite right—in staying, in spite of Rance's behaviour. On such a wild night you had every justification for remaining in any house. And in mine you were doubly welcome, whether I was at home or not. I sincerely trust you will honour me by continuing your visit for a day or two, my dear Sir Edward. I am anxious to show you that I can be a better host than Rance!"

We all laughed, and after that there was quite a lot of conversation concerning our various adventures. Finally we got to bed, to sleep soundly until the sun was high in the heavens in the morning.

It was Christmas Eve, and Sir Crawford had some difficulty in obtaining the servants he needed. The employees who had been given a holiday all returned, and several others were obtained. By evening Grey Towers was alive with activity, and everything was merry and cheerful.

Sir Montie and Tommy and I—all of us, in fact—helped with the decorations, and Grey Towers rang with gay shouts and laughter. It was a very different scene now—and all within twenty-four hours!

Altogether we spent a most enjoyable Christmas. Handforth and Co. stayed until after Boxing Day, when Handforth's pater carted them off. He had, of course, already telegraphed to his wife, explaining a little of the affair.

Jack Grey was about the happiest of us all, for this celebration was more in honour of him than for anything else. He had returned to his home, although he had not known that it was his home until just recently.

It was really remarkable. Jack had left Grey Towers a mile of two years, and never set eyes upon it again until now. And I am quite certain that no fellow could wish for a better father than Sir Crawford Grey. He had loved Jack intensely before, even knowing that the boy was his own son. But now his love was greater than ever, and he thanked Heaven that he had found him.

Of course we had a tremendously gay time at the Towers, and most of us were rather reluctant to think of returning to St. Frank's. But all good things come to an end in time.

Nelson Lee had intended returning to London before the New Year, but Sir Crawford positively insisted upon us remaining until the very day we had to return to the school. And when Sir Crawford insisted it was a hopeless task to refuse him.

One of our chief sources of delight was the great lake in the park, for the ice was thick upon it, and we had some glorious skating. Then, of course, we visited the dungeons

(Continued overleaf)

again—under happier circumstances. Sir Crawford showed us other secret passages too, and we spent a ripping time.

So, in spite of the grim opening to our visit, we spent one of the happiest Yuletides I can remember at Grey Towers. Indeed, we had almost completely forgotten the rascally Rance and his accomplices by the time the New Year arrived. It was an affair of the past, and we were enjoying the present.

With regard to the future, well, we were destined to have some very unexpected excitement at St. Frank's. For changes were to occur there which took us completely by surprise.

I can't tell what these changes were now, but I shall make it my business to record all the facts exactly as they occurred. And I think they will prove as stirring as any adventures which had occurred in the past.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!—(See p. ii of cover.)

OUR POPULAR SCHOOL SERIAL!

The Chums of Littleminster School.

A Magnificent Story of School Life and Adventure.

By **ARTHUR S. HARDY.**

GRAINGER'S SUSPICIONS.

SMART took a half-pace forward.

"If you give me any of your lip," he snarled, "I'll chuck you over the bridge, that I will!"

"I don't think so," returned Grainger quietly. "You haven't introduced me to your friend, Myers?"

"This is Mr. Smart, Grainger," faltered the unhappy boy. "Smart, you leave Grainger alone. He's our school captain, and one of the best."

"I don't care a rap who 'e is," muttered Smart sullenly. "I don't want to know 'im. Suppose we come along? We've got a lot to talk about."

Grainger still barred the way.

"And what," he said, looking fixedly at Myers, "may you and Mr. Smart have to talk about?"

The desperate boy felt impelled to answer, and did so with flaming cheeks.

"Oh, I'm taking up fishing," he declared. "And Smart's got a jolly rod at home I'm thinking of buying. I'm going to have a look at it now."

"If you want to buy a rod, why don't you go to Birch's, in the town? You can't beat his."

"I—er—don't like Birch's things," said Myers, fidgeting uncomfortably. "I think his shop's a swindle. Really, Grainger, I suppose I can please myself—"

Grainger moved aside.

"Of course," he answered. "But I shouldn't let any of the masters see you with—er—Mr. Smart. If the Head saw you, might have something uncomfortable to say. Take my advice, and be careful."

Myers replied with a forced laugh, and footed it over the bridge with Smart, who, laughing coarsely, hurled a challenge back at the school captain.

"If ever I meet you alone, Mr. Grainger, perhaps we may have a little private conversation all to ourselves," he bawled. "And my talk's straight to the point."

Grainger returned no answer, but watched them as they made their way along the sunlit road, until he saw them enter a cottage in the far distance, by the allotments.

For Grainger the scene around him had lost all its beauty.

A frown had chased the soft smile from his face. What was there between Myers and this cad?

Myers had been lying, of course, when he said he intended to buy a fishing-rod from Smart. The cad had some hold over him, and the school captain was worried.

He sank into a profound reverie, from which he was startled presently by hearing his name called.

(Continued on p. ii. of Cover.)