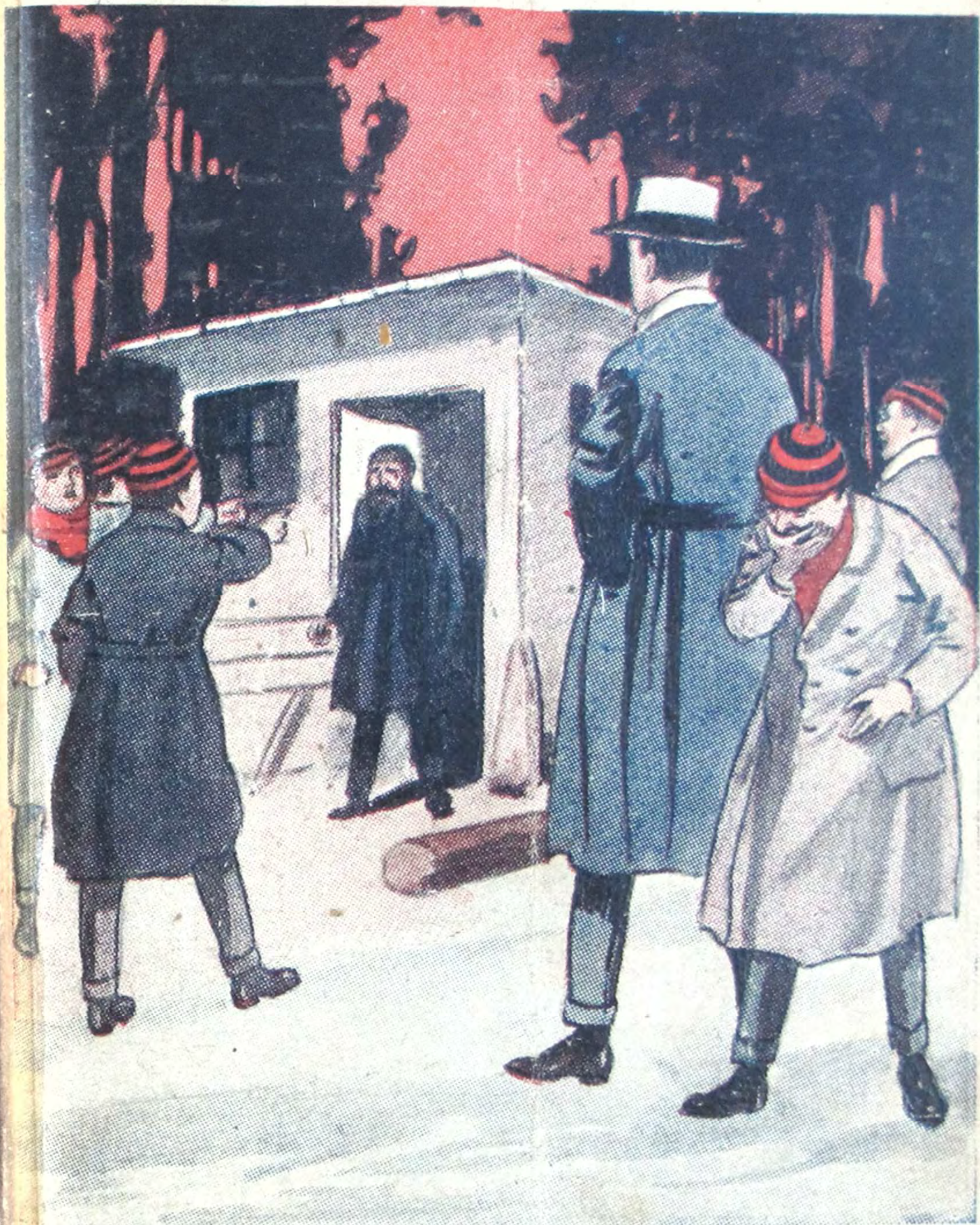


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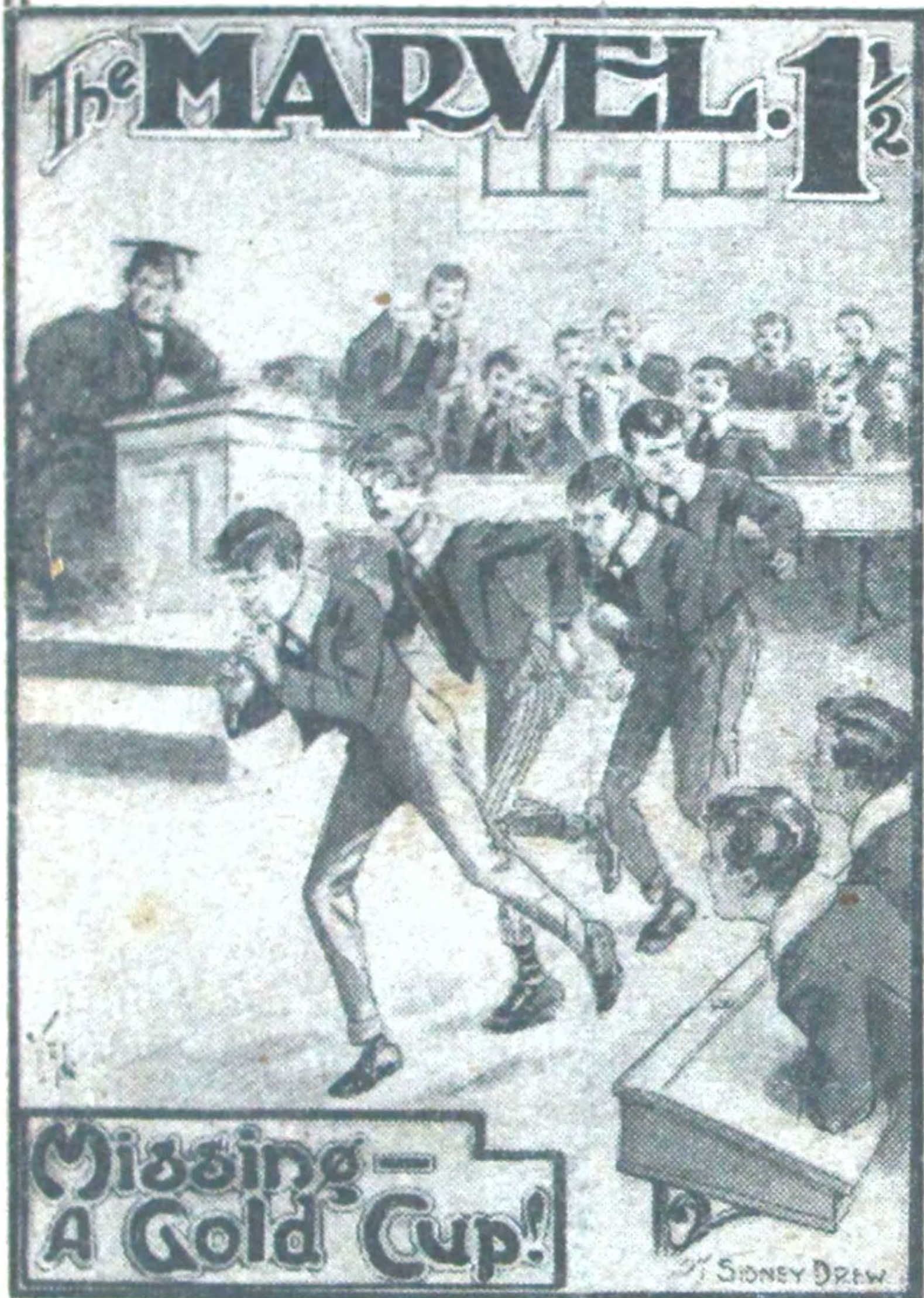
THE SCHOOLBOY SLEUTH!

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "The Soldier Housemaster," "Dr. Stafford's Ordeal," "Who Killed the Colonel?" etc.

February 15th, 1919.

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

A MYSTERY AT ST. FRANK'S.

WHO killed Colonel Clinton?
That was the question which the majority of the fellows at St. Frank's were asking themselves. There had been some stirring times at the old school just recently, and the Ancient House was just as interested as the College House, although Colonel Clinton had been Housemaster of the latter.

I had an idea that the mystery wouldn't be a mystery for long. Nelson Lee, my respected guv'nor, was busily engaged in probing the matter, and he had already gained much success.

Only an hour or two ago the inquest on the colonel had been held, and Dr. Malcolm Stafford, the Headmaster of St. Frank's, had been declared innocent. The police had released him, and he was now back in the school.

The Head himself had been arrested for the crime originally. It was a bit startling, and the blow had greatly affected him. Nobody expected him to attend to any school duties for a week or two, at least.

It was simply splendid to have Dr. Stafford back, but his elimination from the case only made it more mysterious. As the guv'nor had pointed out to me, there was no doubt whatever that somebody had deliberately plotted to get the Head incriminated. The plot had failed, but the mystery was still deep.

Colonel Clinton was dead, and I don't think the College House fellows were exactly ready to weep. They were shocked at the colonel's dreadful end, but he had led them such a terrible dance during his brief reign that it was a positive relief to live a quiet, peaceful life again.

And the knowledge that Nelson Lee was investigating the case caused many juniors to display a lively interest in the whole affair.

"Mr. Lee's not just an ordinary Housemaster," remarked Reginald Pitt, address-

ing a group of fellows on the Ancient House steps. "He's a detective—a famous, experienced criminologist. And to have him here, inquiring into a murder mystery in our very midst, is unique. He'll succeed, too."

"Perhaps," said Fullwood sneeringly. "Mr. Lee ain't such a clever chap as people think. He's been puffed up——"

"What's that?" interrupted Handforth. "Say it again, Fullwood!"

"I wasn't speakin' to you," snapped Fullwood tartly.

"Well, you're speaking to me now!" roared Handforth. "If you think I'm going to stand here and listen to a howling cad running down the best Housemaster we've ever had, you're jolly well mistaken!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Shut up, Fullwood, you rotter!"

"I didn't ask you to stand here an' listen to me," said Fullwood. "You can clear off as soon as you like, Handforth. I'm entitled to my opinion."

"Not an opinion of that sort!" said Handforth wrathfully. "Lend a hand, you chaps! We'll bump Fullwood in the mud until he apologises for insulting the name of Mr. Nelson Lee!"

"Good!" grinned Pitt. "I'm with you!"

Fullwood backed away in alarm.

"Don't you touch me, you rotters!" he exclaimed.

"We might spoil your nice togs—what?" chuckled De Valerie. "Those trousers of yours are wonderful, Fullwood—to say nothing of the rainbow waistcoat. If you don't want your clobber spoilt, you've got to apologise."

"Rats!" roared Fullwood savagely. "I meant what I said, anyhow! There's too much jabber about Mr. Lee! It's sickenin' — Yarrah!"

Fullwood sat down abruptly, Handforth's fist having lunged out with all its customary force and impetuosity. In a second, Handforth and Church and McClure, aided by several other juniors, were bumping Fullwood in the mud vigorously.

"Lemme go, you cads," howled Fullwood desperately.

"Hallo! What's the rumpus?" I asked, emerging from the Ancient House Lobby. "You're not doing Fullwood's clothes any good, you know! That mud——"

"The frightful cad insulted your gov'nor Mr. Lee!" bellowed Handforth. "We're persuading him to apologise."

"Oh, good!" I said. "Go ahead!"

For Fullwood to insult Nelson Lee was nothing new. And although he had been punished for doing so on several previous occasions, he never seemed to learn sense. It had to be driven into him by force every time.

Handforth's method of "persuasion" was quite effective.

"I—I didn't mean what I said!" gasped Fullwood hastily.

"Do you apologise?" demanded Pitt.

"Yes, hang you!"

"That's not a proper apology," said Pitt calmly. "Say, 'I'm very sorry I insulted Mr. Lee, and I apologise.' Go on!"

"I won't!" hooted Fullwood. "Rats to you!"

"Give him another!" said Pitt, grinning.

"You—you—— Ow!" panted Fullwood.

"I—I'm sorry I insulted Mr. Lee, and I apologise! Now will you let me go?"

Handforth snorted.

"You silly ass!" he snapped, reluctantly backing away. "Why didn't you refuse a bit longer? I wanted to give you a roll in the mud——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Fullwood was muddy enough already, and he slunk into the Ancient House looking positively dangerous. Many chuckles followed him, and I gave Handforth an approving nod.

"That's the stuff to give him!" I said cheerfully. "But what was the argument about, anyhow?"

"Oh, I was just saying that Mr. Lee would succeed in unravelling the mystery about the colonel," replied Pitt. "Fullwood thought it was a good opportunity to butt in, and he said that Mr. Lee isn't so clever as people try to make out. That's all. Perhaps he'll think differently in future."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"I don't care what he thinks," I said. "Fullwood's opinion isn't worth a bent pin. In fact, it's rather a compliment to be insulted by Fullwood."

"That one way of looking at it, anyhow," chuckled Jack Grey. "But we know what Mr. Lee can do, don't we? And I'm quite satisfied that the truth about the colonel's death will soon be known."

"Rather hard on the chap," said Pitt, shaking his head. "Clinton was a bit of a beast, we know, but to be killed like that was awful. Murdered in his own study!"

"That's what everybody thought at first, anyhow," I said. "But the evidence at the inquest seemed to prove that the colonel was murdered some distance from the school, and brought here afterwards. It was a jolly queer affair, and the gov'nor's not going to rest until he's got to the bottom of it."

Christine and Co., of the College House,

strolled over and were soon chatting with us. It was surprising to hear them talking about the colonel as though they almost loved him. But the simple fact was that Clinton's tragic death had brought a great change of feeling. While he was alive, the late Housemaster had been the most hated man at St. Frank's.

But now that he was dead the juniors who had suffered most at his hands were ready enough to forget his harshness and to remember only his good points. These were hard enough to find, it is true, and a great many were manufactured. Christine, for example, suddenly remembered that Colonel Clinton often had quite a merry twinkle in his eyes. Nobody else seemed to have seen it, but there was no denial. And this kind of talk was general.

And it was certainly better than abusing the colonel after his death. Somehow, it didn't seem quite the thing to discuss the murdered master's shortcomings now. And the most popular topic of conversation was Nelson Lee's activities. There was not much doubt as to whether the gov'nor would discover the truth—the only point was, when would he discover it?

I was rather irritated, personally. It was a half holiday to day, and dinner was already over. But just after the meal I had strolled along to Nelson Lee's study, hoping to hear some news regarding his plans for the immediate future. But Nelson Lee had been in one of his aggravating moods, and I had left the study unsatisfied.

Having nothing to do made me a bit impatient, I dare say. Under ordinary circumstances, an important junior football match would have taken place on this particular afternoon. But in view of the tragedy which had taken place all football had been put a stop to, and I had been obliged to send a wire to Bannington Grammar School, postponing the match.

The afternoon was to be spent quietly; even punting a football about in the Triangle was not considered allowable. The masters hadn't actually forbidden it, but nobody thought of doing so.

Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson, my two particular chums, had resigned themselves quite cheerfully to the inactivity, and were enjoying themselves before the fire in Study C. Sir Montie was reading, and Tommy Watson was doing his utmost to drive his noble chum out of the apartment by manufacturing a special dish for tea. It was Watson's own idea, and he fondly believed that he was practising economy.

To be exact, he was making some rissoles, and he meant to fry them and have them smoking hot by tea-time.

"Don't come and bother me now!" he exclaimed, as I entered the study. "Montie keeps interrupting, and I believe I've put too much pepper in——"

"That doesn't matter," I said blandly. "I don't suppose we shall be able to eat 'em, in any case."

"You silly ass!" roared Watson. "They'll be delicious!"

"You're prejudiced," I said, shaking my head. "Great Scott! You don't mean to say you're going to shove those squiffy sardines in?"

"Begad!" remarked Sir Montie, turning in his chair. "I have been havin' frightful doubts on the same subject, old boy, but I was afraid to mention the fact. Tommy's quite capable of throwin' flour at me, or somethin' equally horrid!"

Tommy Watson glared.

"You silly fatheads!" he snorted. "I'm not using any flour to make rissoles! And I'd like to know who's making 'em—you chaps or me?"

"Well, you're trying to!" I grunted. "But those sardines——"

"They're only a little stale, nothing squiffy about 'em, really," interrupted Watson. "I don't believe in wasting good food. They were left the day before yesterday, and they're as sweet as nuts. If you're going to interfere, Nipper, you'd better clear out. I'm running this show!"

I grinned and looked on. Apparently all sorts of odds and ends were going to be included in the rissoles, the main ingredients, it seemed, were to be sardines, a piece of tinned salmon, bloater paste, breadcrumbs and crushed biscuits. A couple of eggs were lying on the table, but as they had been purchased from Mrs. Hake's stock, their freshness was doubtful.

"What about those biscuits?" I asked. "They won't go well with fish, will they? They're sweet——"

"How the dickens can a cook work properly with a couple of idiots asking all sorts of silly questions?" snapped Watson crossly. "There aren't many biscuits, anyhow, and this is a good way of using 'em up. They've been knocking about in the cupboard for weeks, and they're too stale to eat in the ordinary way. You wait till tea-time before you start criticising."

"All right, chef," I chuckled. "I just want to point out, though, that you can't fry fish rissoles successfully without some fat."

"That's all right," said Watson. "There's a bottle of salad oil in the cupboard, and that'll do fine. Some silly ass has been putting a dirty feather into it, but all the grit's at the bottom!"

"I think the best thing we can do, Montie, is to clear out completely," I said. "If we stay here while Watson's making these things, we shall never eat 'em. I shouldn't be surprised if he puts some hair-oil in if he runs short of olive. Oh, my hat!"

I dodged out into the passage hurriedly, and just escaped being hit by a couple of biscuits. They fell to the floor and broke, but Watson would probably sweep them up and include them in the ingredients, dust and all. He wasn't quite so particular as we should like.

In order to give him time to calm down, I

decided to run along to Nelson Lee's study again, and chance whether I got hoofed out or not.

The guv'nor was quite cheerful, however, and greeted me with a smile and a nod.

"If you've come here with the intention of pumping me, Nipper, I'm afraid you'll go away disappointed," he said. "After tea I may take you into my confidence with regard to a certain matter, but not now. There are one or two little matters I wish to attend to first. A few points must be verified."

"Look here, guv'nor, it's a bit off-side, you know," I protested. "I think you might let me know what's in the wind."

"And so you will know, my boy—in good time," he replied. "And, let me tell you, a junior schoolboy is not allowed to drop into his Housemaster's study just when it pleases him——"

"Oh, ring off, guv'nor!" I protested. "The schoolboy and schoolmaster stunt may be all right, but I prefer detective and assistant. And as your assistant, I reckon I've a perfect right to know what the game is."

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"A well-deserved rebuke, Nipper," he said, his grey eyes twinkling amusedly. "Perhaps I am somewhat trying now and again, but you must be patient. I mean to claim your services fully before long, but we can't do anything just yet. And as you know well enough, I like to make certain of my facts before discussing them."

"I don't call it discussing 'em when you jaw at me, sir," I said. "We're one, so to speak."

"Well, Nipper, you'll have to wait until after tea," said the schoolmaster-detective, lighting a cigarette. "Our inquiries have not been entirely fruitless, and it is just possible that you will receive a surprise before long."

I grunted.

"That's just like you, sir!" I said grumbly. "You're always hinting at things, and leaving me guessing. Well, I'll be patient this time, but you've got to let me into the know after tea. Understand that?"

"You are painfully clear, young 'un," said Nelson Lee gravely. "I wouldn't dare to disappoint you after the evening meal has been disposed of."

"Perhaps I sha'n't be able to come," I said thoughtfully. "Watson's making some rissoles for tea, so you'd better be ready to ring up the doctor, in case of emergency!"

And leaving Nelson Lee chuckling, I went back to Study C. This time I took care to seize a book and immerse myself in it at once. Watson continued his culinary efforts uninterrupted.

Meanwhile certain events were taking place next door in Study D. Edward Oswald Handforth, in short, had decided that the time was ripe for him to go on the war-path.

CHAPTER II.

HANDFORTH INVESTIGATES.

HANDFORTH rapped the table impatiently.

"I say that it's up to us to get busy!" he declared. "It's no good beating about the bush. Are you listening to me, you asses?"

Church and McClure, who were sitting before the fire, looked round. Both had been reading, quite regardless of the fact that their great leader was talking. But this was nothing unusual. Handforth was always talking.

"Eh?" said Church. "Dry up, Handy, for goodness' sake!"

Handforth glared.

"What's the good of me talking if you don't listen?" he demanded fiercely.

"Well, it's not much good, is it?" said McClure. "The best thing you can do, old chap, is to get a book and—"

"I don't want a book!" roared Handforth. "If you think I'm going to jaw at you chaps for nothing, you're mistaken. Shove those rotten papers down and attend to me. This matter's important."

"Oh, go on!" said McClure wearily.

"And I don't want you to adopt that tone, either!" snorted Handforth. "You seem to forget that the time has come when Study D has got to assert itself. Now with regard to— Are you reading, Church?"

"Only—only a few lines!" said Church, with a start. "Why can't you leave us in peace, you disturbing ass—"

"I'll show you whether I'm a disturbing ass or not!" bellowed Handforth, rushing across the study and seizing Church's paper. "Now then! If you don't attend to me I'll shove these silly books in the fire!"

Church and McClure gave it up, as usual. It was always impossible to read in peace when Handforth decreed otherwise. His long-suffering chums guessed that he had been struck by some new idea.

"How long will it take, Handy?" asked McClure resignedly.

"All the afternoon!"

Church and McClure groaned, but raised no other objection.

"I don't know why it is," said Handforth deliberately—"I don't know why it is that I should have such a couple of apathetic rotters for my chums. On the whole, you ain't bad—I will say that; but I'm having this trouble with you four or five times a week. Whenever I want to discuss anything important, you growl and groan and as good as call me an idiot!"

"You're not blaming us for telling the truth, I suppose?" demanded Church.

"And I don't want any sarcasm, either!" howled Handforth. "You listen to me, and don't interrupt. The moment has arrived when we've got to act in a decisive way. See?"

"No, I'm jiggered if I do!" said McClure frankly.

"How can you see before I've explained?" snorted Handforth. "I'm not going to say a

word against Mr. Lee, but I certainly think that he ought to be showing some sign of getting to the bottom of this mystery about Colonel Clinton. Mind, I'm not grumbling—"

"Not at all!" said Church. "And what the dickens do you know about mysteries, Handy? You rolled Fullwood in the mud for insulting Mr. Lee, and now I'm blowed if you're not doing the same thing!"

Handforth breathed hard.

"If I thought it would do any good, I'd punch your nose!" he said. "But it's an impossible task to try and drive sense into you."

"Of course it is," agreed Church readily. "How can you drive something you haven't got? When a chap drives a nail into a piece of wood, he's got the nail to drive in. But you can't drive sense into my head because you haven't got any sense—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared McClure.

"I suppose you think that's clever?" sneered Handforth. "I'm not going to waste time on you, otherwise I'd point out that driving sense into a piece of wood—I mean, driving a nail in your head— Oh, rats! What the dickens do you mean by mixing me up—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

That laugh was a very short one, for Handforth picked up two books at random—incidentally, they belonged to De Valerie—and hurled them at the grinning faces of his chums.

"We're wasting all the afternoon before we start the investigation!" snorted Handforth irritably.

"Before we begin the which?" asked McClure.

"The investigation," repeated Edward Oswald firmly. "It's no good. I've tried to suppress the instinct, but it can't be done. My keen detective ability is all on fire to get to work, and I'm as cool as ice."

"It's the first time I've heard of fire being as cool as ice," said Church, with a sniff. "And don't start any of your detective rot, Handy, for goodness' sake! Don't forget what happened last time!"

"Last time hasn't got anything to do with this time!" roared Handforth. "In any case, there wasn't much to investigate then. But now— Great pip! It's ridiculous to suppose that Nelson Lee can do it all himself."

"So you're going to help him?" asked McClure blankly.

"Exactly!"

"Supposing he doesn't want you to?"

"You silly ass! Do you think I'm going to ask him?" demanded Handforth. "My plan is to investigate the crime, gather all the data together, and then work out my hypothesis."

Church and McClure stared.

"Your—your what?" asked McClure faintly. "And what was that you were saying about dates?"

"Dates?" roared Handforth. "Dates! I said data. That means— Well, it means— Don't you know the English language, you

ignorant fatheads? I sha'n't tell you what it means!"

"I don't believe in a chap who learns a lot of technical terms by heart, and trots 'em out as though he knows what they mean," said Church sarcastically. "As for that last word—that one that sounded like hippopotamus—I'll bet you took half an hour to learn it!"

"The standing wonder is that my hairs ain't grey!" exclaimed Handforth, with a gulp. "As I said before, my plan is to conduct an inquiry, gather all the hypotheses together, and then make my data."

"I suppose you know best," said McClure; "but you've put it the other way round this time. Go ahead, old man. We're terrifically interested."

"And so you ought to be!" said Handforth, somewhat mollified.

It was always a matter of wonder to Church and McClure that their astute leader could have his leg pulled so easily. A little flattery went a long way with Handforth, and it never failed to work.

Not that Handforth was conceited. And all this talk about investigating was perfectly sincere. Handforth honestly believed that he could do wonders in the detective line—not because he was particularly clever, but just because he had a leaning in that direction. As a matter of fact, Handforth was a hopeless duffer at most things, but as true as steel in any emergency. And, when it came to a pinch, Handy could show some really brilliant gleams of intelligence.

His detective ability didn't exist, and Church and McClure knew it didn't exist; but Handforth thought it did, and that amounted to the same thing. There was only one course to pursue, and that was to humour him.

"It's a jolly good idea, Handy," said McClure diplomatically. "I don't want to raise objections, but do you think Mr. Lee would like to have you interfering?"

"Interfering!" snapped Handforth. "I shall be helping, you ass! And, anyhow, Mr. Lee won't know anything about it until I've found the murderer!"

"F-f-found the murderer?" said Church dazedly.

"That's the idea."

"But it'll take you years——"

"I'm going to find him within a couple of days," interrupted Handforth. "Of course, there may be a hitch or two; but what are hitches for?"

"Sailors use hitches, don't they?" asked McClure vaguely.

"I mean hitches—delays!" bellowed Handforth. "I'm fed up with talking, and we're going out now to investigate. Shove your caps on and follow me. It's a fine afternoon, and we're going to make use of it."

"But—but how are we going to start?" asked Church.

"I'll tell you that when we get outside."

There was no help for it—Church and McClure were compelled to leave the cheery grounds and follow their enthusiastic leader out into the Triangle. They easily guessed

that an afternoon of weary trudging about to no purpose was to be their fate. Handforth looking for clues was too rich for words.

"I suppose we'd better try to find some footprints?" said McClure hopefully. "There are plenty all about here, Handy——"

"Footprints are no good!" snorted Handforth. "Clues we want—clues about the murderer. We know that he killed the colonel outside the school. So it stands to reason there must be a lot of clues if we only look for 'em. Haven't you read how the detectives do it in stories? They just go to the scene of the crime, look round, and read everything on the ground, or on the walls."

"But this isn't a story, Handy," said Church. "You seem to forget that the author provides these clues, just so that the detective can find 'em. It's a different thing when you've got to do it in real life. Besides, it needs a trained eye to see things like that."

"Swank!" said Handforth. "That's all it is, my sons. Anybody can do it if they only take the trouble. And we'll start by examining the ground over by the College House. We'll go over to the corner, then work along the wall right round the building. We're bound to find something."

This programme did not seem very promising, but it was the only thing to be done. And Handforth and Co. marched off to the corner of the College House, and began their investigations. These consisted of examining the gravel carefully and studiously. It was a thankless task, but Handforth was quite enthusiastic.

The Triangle was almost empty, most of the fellows being indoors, in their studies. Those who were out probably believed that Handforth and Co. had lost something, and were trying to find it. At all events, much to the relief of Church and McClure, nobody came up and asked what they were doing.

Twenty minutes passed, and nothing was done. Even Handforth's ardour had begun to fade by that time. He had evidently expected to find clues within the first minute.

"I suppose we'd better start somewhere else," he said at last. "There doesn't seem to be much—— Hallo, what's this?"

Handforth came to an abrupt halt, and stared down at the gravel at his feet.

"What's this?" he repeated.

"Better pick it up and see," suggested McClure.

Lying on the gravel there was a small piece of folded black cloth. Handforth picked it up, and inwardly he wasn't very hopeful. But the next second he gave a yell, and all his enthusiasm returned. For, as he spread the piece of black cloth out, it took a definite shape.

"A mask!" he exclaimed excitedly. "Look at this, my sons! A cloth mask!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Church, staring.

There was no doubt that the crumpled piece of material was a rough cloth mask, with strings attached. It was slightly muddy, and had evidently been cast off in a hurry.

"But why hasn't it been found before?" asked McClure.

"Why?" repeated Handforth. "Look where we found it!"

The spot was between two heavy stone buttresses, against a part of the wall of the College House which lay in a kind of back-water, and was seldom entered by the juniors or other boys.

"It only shows you that it always pays to have a look round," said Handforth grimly. "Now we've got to reconstruct what happened. This mask was discarded by the murderer—that's clear. Why did he discard it? Obviously because he didn't want it any more."

"Marvellous!" said Church admiringly.

"I thought you'd appreciate my powers sooner or later," exclaimed Handforth, nodding. "Now, the murderer discarded it, as I said, because he'd finished with it—and that means that he was taking his departure from the school. I suppose you can follow that argument? He wouldn't chuck the mask away before breaking in, would he? It stands to reason, therefore, that his frightful work was done, and he was scoting. All we've got to do is to find out where he went to."

"That's all!" agreed McClure. "It's easy!"

"Well, I don't know about that," went on Handforth. "We mustn't be too quick. There's really nothing to indicate where the assassin went to, but I should say he made for the road. But we'll leave that for the present. It'll be safer to establish where the rotter came from."

"Why out of the building, of course."

"Exactly—but how?" asked Handforth, searching round keenly, and eyeing the wall with great interest. "Ah! I've got it—it's as clear as crystal. How could it be anything else to anybody looking for clues?"

"That window, you mean?" asked McClure, nodding.

"Oh, so you've seen it, too?" asked the amateur detective, rather disappointed. "I didn't think you'd be so sharp. Yes, my sons that window."

They all three looked up at the small window under which the cloth mask had been lying. The whole thing was obvious; but Handforth seemed to think that he was performing some wonderful deductions.

"Just consider what this means," he went on. "That window, as you know, is the little one at the end of the junior passage in the College House. It's the very window a burglar would choose to break in by. Why? Because the fastening's only a simple one, and because the passage leads straight—Hullo! What's that up there?"

Handforth's eagle eye had suddenly caught sight of something white jammed between the lower sash and the framework near the sill. The window was rather high, and it was easy to understand why nobody else had seen that small patch of white against the dark paint-work. It might have gone unnoticed for days but for these investigations.

Handforth and Co., it seemed, were meeting with "fool's luck," and were stumbling upon valuable information by sheer accident.

"Hoist me up, you chaps," said Handforth briskly.

His chums were now only too eager to help, and Handforth was given a leg up to the window-sill. Here he found that a jagged piece of paper was jammed in between the window sash and the framework, the edges being torn and uneven.

"See?" he asked tensely. "This paper must have been caught in as the window was being lowered, and the murderer pulled it away, thinking he'd got the lot. I don't suppose he could see very well in the darkness. And this piece was left here—unseen by a soul until now."

The inference was quite clear, and Handforth had probably hit the nail on the head.

"I suppose the scoundrel's mask fell off as he jumped to the ground," suggested Church. "That would account for it being just here."

Handforth nodded.

"Of course," he agreed. "That's obvious; I thought of it at once, but it wasn't worth mentioning. Hold me firm now, because I'm going to push the sash up."

"What about the catch?"

"It's not fastened; I don't suppose it has been fastened for weeks," replied Handforth. "This window's out of reach inside, and nobody ever takes any notice of it. My hat! It goes jolly stiffly; that proves how seldom it's opened!"

By exerting his strength, however, he managed to push the sash up a few inches, and the scrap of paper was at once released. Clutching it, Handforth dropped to the ground.

Church and McClure eagerly looked at the find as Handforth spread it out. The paper was about a sheet of ordinary notepaper, torn and crumpled, and considerably dirty. And there was some writing clearly visible upon the face of it!

The discovery was becoming more and more important every moment.

"What's that writing on there?" asked Church eagerly.

"Keep calm!" said Handforth, deliberately straightening his coat before looking at the paper. "Detectives never ought to get flustered. This paper, I'll bet a quid, will tell us a lot. But there's no violent hurry. Just think of Nelson Lee's face when we go to him with—"

"Let's have a look at that paper, you ass!" roared McClure.

Handforth delayed no longer. He spread the torn scrap out, and they all three gazed upon the writing. It was of a curious, crabbed character, and the ink was faded and weak-looking—as though the sun had bleached it.

The writing had evidently been a brief message originally. But only about half of it now remained, the other half having been torn away. It was the commencing portion of it which was in Handforth's grasp.

And this is what the three excited juniors read:

"The job has been done—C. is no more—will wait three days in old woodcutter's hut

In B.W. Don't fail me X. Shall wait until you arri—"

Handforth took a deep, deep breath.

"What do you think of it?" he asked, hoarse with excitement. "My only grandfather! The murderer's there now! Three days, it says here—and three days haven't passed yet! The murderer's still waiting, and we shall be able to collar him!"

"But—but we don't know where he is!" gasped Church. "What does B.W. mean, anyhow? It's no good guessing—"

"You dense idiot!" snorted Handforth. "What can B.W. mean? Doesn't it mention something about a woodcutter's hut? And isn't there an old hut of that sort in the wood? B.W. stands for Bellton Wood."

"My hat! Of course it does!" ejaculated McClure.

They all read the words again.

"I—I say, we'd better take this straight to Mr. Lee," suggested Church at last. "He'll be tremendously glad—"

"Rats!" interrupted Handforth obstinately. "We started this investigation, and we're going on with it. Mr. Lee would be jolly pleased to get this note, but he'll be a lot better pleased if we collar the murderer as well! Just think of the fame, my bucks!"

"Yes, that's all right—ripping!" agreed McClure. "But this murderer will be desperate, Handy, and—and we can't handle him alone. I think we'd better get some help before we go."

"Not likely!" said Handforth. "We're not going to have the glory pinched from us at the last minute, I can tell you! No, we'll do this job off our own bat. Three of us ought to be equal to collaring one man. At all events, we'll have a shot at it."

Church and McClure were not quite so confident of success as Handforth. They realised that a desperate murderer, skulking in a wood, would be a dangerous character to encounter.

But Handforth cast prudence to the winds, and led his chums across the Triangle at a brisk pace. They emerged upon the road and turned in the direction of the footpath which led through Bellton Wood.

"I'm glad a crowd of chaps weren't looking on," remarked Handforth comfortably. "We shall be able to spring a terrific surprise now. Just think of it—we three bringing in the colonel's murderer! I expect he'll crumble up in a minute as soon as we appear."

"Let's hope so!" said McClure, without much confidence.

They soon arrived at the old stile, and crossed it, and then plunged into the wood. The old hut was some little distance away, situated in a little-frequented hollow. It was an ideal spot to use as a hiding-place—particularly at this time of the year, when the wood was hardly entered once in a month.

"No talking as we're approaching the hut," said Handforth quietly, as they walked along. "There's just a chance that we shall surprise the rotter asleep—and that'll make the capture dead easy. I think you'd better leave it all to me, on second thoughts."

"You—you ass!" muttered Church. "You might get killed, Handy! A chap like that is ready enough to murder anybody! I think we ought to have told Mr. Lee before we started out."

"If you're getting nervous—"

"Rot!" interrupted Church indignantly.

They pressed on, all determined now to investigate at close quarters. There was, indeed, quite a chance that the murderer would be caught asleep. In that case the three strong Removites could easily overpower him.

At last the hollow was reached, and the trackers came to a halt. The spot was a very lonely one, and the only sounds were the shaking of the gaunt branches in the wintry wind, and the occasional chirp of a sparrow or other bird. The juniors were far from human assistance.

And Handforth began to feel, possibly, that he had been somewhat rash. In this desolate spot his confidence was not quite so strong as it had been. But he wouldn't admit it.

"We'll creep down cautiously!" he breathed. "You chaps follow me!"

Handforth's idea of caution was evidently not sound; or it may have been his clumsiness. For at the first step he slipped and fell with a bump, cracking two dead pieces of wood rather noisily. He sat there, alarm on his face. Church and McClure crouched down, their hearts beating wildly.

"You silly ass!" hissed McClure.

"How the dickens was I to know the ground was slippery?" grunted Handforth.

The ancient woodcutter's hut was in full sight, about forty yards ahead of them, and at a much lower level. A good many trees intervened, but they were slim ones, and only partially obscured the view.

"Oh, my only topper!" breathed Handforth in dismay.

But at the same time there was a note of triumph in his voice. A man had suddenly appeared from the ramshackle doorway of the hut. Without a doubt he had been disturbed by the sudden crack, and was having a look round.

"Don't move!" hissed Handforth—"don't move a muscle! It's quite possible he won't see us at all."

The man did not even look in the direction of the crouching Removites. Handforth was almost certain that the fellow was the murderer of Colonel Clinton.

He was a short, thick-set man, with a swarthy complexion and a black beard. Undoubtedly a foreigner. And at the inquest, as Handforth well knew, evidence had been brought forward to prove that the colonel's murderer had been a bearded foreigner!

These three boys had found the assassin!

CHAPTER III.

A WONDERFUL CAPTURE.

HANDFORTH and Co., to tell the exact truth, were rather scared.

For all Edward Oswald's confidence, the sight of the bearded foreigner standing there, before the door of

the hut, rather startled him. He had hoped to catch the man unawares, but this was now obviously impossible.

Indeed, Handforth had never really expected to find the woodcutter's hut inhabited at all. He had believed that the scoundrel would have fled. But here he was, as large as life, and dangerous-looking into the bargain.

For the man was grasping a thick chunk of wood. He looked round him carefully, but did not cast his gaze in the direction of the boys—obviously assuming that the noise had come from a spot nearer to the hut.

At last he turned and disappeared into the little building.

"Creep back!" breathed Handforth hurriedly.

They soon reached the welcome cover of some larger trees, and felt more confident.

"He's there!" muttered Handforth excitedly. "I've a good mind to rush down on him and take the beast by surprise. You chaps can back me up, and we'll all have chunks of wood——"

"He—he looks a powerful sort of chap," put in McClure hastily. "Mind, I'm not funk-ing it, Handy. If you mean to go down, I'll go with you—and so will Church."

"Of—of course," said Church, with a manly effort.

"But I think it would be a lot better to fetch help," went on McClure. "The fellow doesn't know that he's been spotted, and he won't scoot while we're away. I can't see any sense in taking big risks when they ain't necessary."

"But there are three of us," objected Handforth. "It ought to be as easy as anything to——"

"Yes; but he's desperate," said McClure. "I vote we rush back to St. Frank's at full speed and tell Mr. Lee. It's all very well to talk big, Handy, but Mr. Lee's the man for a job like this. After all, we've done the main part of the work."

"Of course we have," agreed Handforth. "Oh, all right. I think perhaps it would be better to fetch Mr. Lee. But we mustn't lose a second, and one of you chaps had better remain on guard. Who's it to be?"

Church and McClure looked at one another uncertainly.

"Suppose we toss up?" suggested Church hopefully.

"No—it wouldn't be fair," said Handforth. "That rotter might spot you, and then there'd be another murder committed! We'll all go back together. The chap won't bunk while we're away."

Church and McClure were greatly relieved, and hurried Handforth off before he could change his mind. Of course, they weren't obliged to obey him, and they could have refused point-blank to stay. But they both feared being thought a funk.

Within two minutes the trio were tearing through the wood towards the road. They reached it at last, and then hastened towards St. Frank's at the double. They rushed into the Ancient House, and pelted down the passages to Nelson Lee's study.

I saw them from the window of Study C

as they were crossing the Triangle, and heard them pelt along the passage.

"Something doing, my sons!" I remarked, with a grin. "Handforth and Co. have just pelted in like a whirlwind!"

"Bother Handforth and Co.!" said Tommy Watson briskly.

He had made his rissoles, and I must admit that they looked quite decent in their unfried state. But I should judge by their smell, after they were cooked, before I ventured to devour one.

Meanwhile, Handforth and Co. had reached Nelson Lee's study.

They almost fell into the room, and Nelson Lee gazed round in astonishment as he saw them. The detective had been busily engaged with something at a side-table, and there was a frown upon his brow as he regarded the excited intruders.

"What is the meaning of this, boys?" he asked sternly.

Handforth gulped.

"We—we've found the murderer, sir!" he panted hoarsely.

"Eh? What nonsense are you talking?" demanded Nelson Lee. "I can hardly think that you are daring to play a joke upon me, boys——"

"It's—it's not a joke, sir!" gasped Handforth. "We've really found him—the awful scoundrel who killed Colonel Clinton! He's hiding in Bellton Wood, sir, and we want you to come and arrest him!"

"It's true, sir!" added McClure. "Handforth hasn't made an awful bloomer this time; the same as he usually does!"

Nelson Lee walked across the study.

"I can see, Handforth, that you are labouring under some unusual excitement," he said. "Calm yourself, my boy, and tell me exactly what you mean. I have no doubt that I shall be able to dispel the absurd idea that you have found the murderer of Colonel Clinton in Bellton Wood."

"It's not absurd, sir!" protested Handforth indignantly. "We saw him as plainly as we can see you—an awful-looking scoundrel, sir!"

"Thank you, Handforth!"

"I—I didn't mean that, sir!" gasped Handforth, turning red. "But we did see him—standing at the door of the hut. He looks like a foreigner, sir, with a black beard."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Lee, his manner changing. "Tell me the rest, my boy."

Handforth immediately went into details. He described how he had got on the track in the first place, but, unfortunately, the highly important scrap of paper was nowhere to be found. Handforth must have dropped it during the run back to the school, and he was quite upset about it. However, there was the cloth mask, and this proved that Handforth's story was not a mere fake. And, quite apart from that, Nelson Lee knew that the junior was thoroughly sincere.

"Your story is rather astounding, Handforth, and I cannot quite bring myself to believe that you have stumbled upon the right track," said Nelson Lee at last. "We don't want to make ourselves absurd——"

"But it's true, sir—he's the murderer!" panted Handforth desperately. "I—I thought you'd jump at it, sir! We want you to come along and arrest the man. We'll lend a hand willingly!"

Nelson Lee considered for a moment or two.

"Very well, my boys," he said. "Whoever this man may be, you apparently fully believe that he is the murderer. I cannot quite credit that the criminal would be so mad as to remain in such close proximity to the school. However, we will hasten to the wood and make investigations."

"I should think so, sir!" said Handforth, rather indignant.

Nelson Lee's attitude did not quite meet with Handforth's approval. Here was the most positive evidence—the murderer himself was simply waiting to be captured—and yet Nelson Lee was sceptical!

They started off without any delay, and I was at the door of Study C when they hove in sight. Nelson Lee nodded to me.

"You'd better come along, Nipper," he said briskly. "There's something afoot. Bring your chums, too."

But only Montie would come. Tommy Watson was intent upon his cooking, and nothing would drag him away. During the walk down the road the guv'nor told me of Handforth's great discovery. I wasn't particularly impressed.

"I expect we're on a wild-geese chase," I remarked.

Handforth stopped in the road and glared at me.

"You—you silly fathead!" he shouted. "I tell you the murderer——"

"Come, Handforth, you mustn't get so excited," said Nelson Lee gently.

"Well, Nipper shouldn't say it's a wild-geese chase, sir!" grumbled Handforth, considerably ruffled.

"My dear chap, what you've got to do is to keep your hair on," I said cheerfully. "The man you saw outside the old woodcutter's hut was probably a harmless tramp——"

"Why, you—you—— If Mr. Lee wasn't here, I'd punch your silly nose!" roared Handforth. "What about that note? I got the clue from it, or I shouldn't have gone to the hut at all."

"H'm! It's queer, anyhow," I said. "I don't like to be a wet blanket, Handy, but it seems a bit thick to me that the murderer should kindly oblige us by remaining so near at hand—practically openly, too. I know you're nearly boiling, so I won't say any more."

Handforth calmed down, and we all walked on.

In spite of my doubts, I was compelled to admit that the discovery could not be a mere coincidence. The discarded mask, and the portion of crumpled paper, told of a hurried exit on the part of the murderer.

This, of course, was assuming that those clues had been left by the man—and this I was strongly inclined to doubt. Somehow, it was too easy—too smooth. Nelson Lee had been working hard—scientifically—and had

discovered nothing. At all events, nothing that I knew of. And yet Handforth, the champion duffer of the Ancient House, had actually found the murderer himself!

There was just a faint chance that a fluke had occurred, and that Handy had gone one better than the guv'nor. But I wouldn't actually credit it until I had seen the murderer with my own eyes—until he was arrested.

"Handy's right this time," remarked McClure, as we turned into the wood. "I know he's a fathead usually, but this affair's different."

"We shall see, dear old boy—we shall see," observed Sir Montie calmly.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothin'."

My noble chum said no more, but I guessed that he thought quite a lot. He didn't mean to pledge himself, however, to any statement.

We proceeded through the wood until we arrived near the spot where the hollow was situated. And here Nelson Lee called a halt.

"Now, boys, I think we had better decide upon our plan of action," he said briskly.

"You, Nipper, will go with Handforth in advance. Creep down into the hollow and approach the hut."

"And what about you, sir?" asked Handforth, in surprise. "You don't mean to say you're going to let us face that awful scoundrel——"

"No, Handforth, I sha'n't expose you to such terrible peril," smiled Nelson Lee. "It has struck me, however, that the man might flee precipitately if he caught sight of me first. Therefore, you two boys will form the vanguard of our little expedition. I shall be following close behind with the others—ready for any emergency. Do you quite understand?"

"Perfectly, guv'nor!" I said, grinning.

Nelson Lee nodded, and Handforth and I walked on alone.

"What the dickens were you grinning at, you ass?" growled my companion.

"Eh?" I said. "Oh, thoughts, my son!"

Handforth grunted, and we cautiously descended into the hollow. Through the trees we distinctly saw the old woodcutter's hut. It looked bare and deserted, and the rusty shackle door was standing half open.

"Better let me go first," breathed Handforth. "I don't want to drag you into danger, Nipper."

"That's all right," I said. "We might as well both die together!"

"You silly ass!"

Handforth glanced behind him rather anxiously—apparently looking for the reserves; but they were nowhere in sight. This meant nothing, however. Nelson Lee was probably very close behind us, instantly ready for action if the necessity should arise.

We reached the hut, and Handforth was in a somewhat breathless state—not because of his exertions, but owing to excitement.

"Now!" he breathed tensely.

We both dashed in, and then Handforth uttered a most expressive snort.

"Empty!" he exclaimed disgustedly. "The bird's flown!"

"You're sure you didn't imagine——" I began.

"I saw him as plain as I can see you!" roared Handforth indignantly. "A short, thick-set chap with a black beard—— Oh, crumbs!"

Handforth's sudden exclamation of dismay was caused by an abrupt darkening of the doorway. And there, regarding us grimly and silently, stood a stranger—a bearded man, with a foreign look. There was something queer about him, too, and I stared hard. His beard was false—obviously false. And, vaguely, I seemed to recognise the face.

"Move an inch, either of you, and you die as you stand!" exclaimed the man, in deep, rumbling tones. "So you thought you would trick me, is it? Carramba! You shall suffer as you deserve!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Handforth. "Collar him, Nipper!"

Handforth was about to dash forward, but the stranger raised his hand.

"Himmel! Keep your place!" he shouted. "Did you not hear my warning? Mon Dieu! You are foolish to—— Oh, great goodness!"

The man turned abruptly, dismay in his voice. For Nelson Lee had silently approached, and now barred the retreat of the stranger.

Handforth breathed a huge sigh of relief.

"Handcuff him, sir! He's desperate!" he gasped. "I—I believe he's got a revolver in his pocket!"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I think not, Handforth," he smiled. "Well, Christine, what is the meaning of this ridiculous escapade?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" I roared. "I recognised him over a minute ago!"

The bearded "man" smiled sheepishly.

"Only—only a little jape, sir," he said, in a meek voice. "We—we didn't know that the silly ass would go and fetch you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

I was still roaring, and Handforth looked from me to Nelson Lee, and from Nelson Lee to the desperate murderer. There was an expression of utter bewilderment on his rugged face.

"Chris-Chris-Christine!" he panted, stammering. "I—I don't—— Oh, my only aunt! Spoofed! Dished!"

"Quite so, Handforth," observed Nelson Lee calmly. "I suspected it from the first, and that is why I sent you and Nipper on in advance. If Christine had seen me approaching, he would have fled—and that would have spoilt the joke, eh?"

"I guessed it, too!" I chuckled. "Don't you remember how I grinned, Handy? The whole game was too easy. Anybody could see that those clues had been left there for you to find."

"You—you awful rotter!" said Handforth, glaring at Christine, and looking almost ready to faint. "You frightful spoofer! I'll smash you for this!"

Bob Christine had peeled off his false beard by this time, and he was grinning, too—

but with a wary eye upon Nelson Lee meanwhile.

"I'm awfully sorry, sir," he said nervously. "But how was I to know that Handforth would fetch you? He's dotty, of course, but I didn't think he'd be so fatheaded as to rush off and tell you——"

"You wait until later on!" broke in Handforth, with clenched fists.

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"Now, Handforth, you mustn't speak like that," he said gently. "The joke has gone against you, and you ought to take it in good part. Surely you can appreciate the humour of the situation?"

"Oh—oh, yes, sir!" gasped Handforth. "It's—it's awfully funny, sir!"

And Edward Oswald laughed—a dry, hollow, mirthless laugh. But Christine and I and Sir Montic were roaring, keeping company with Nelson Lee. Church and McClure seemed too dazed to do anything except stand still and stare.

"We might have guessed it!" said McClure at last. "Spoofed again—and we didn't know it! We've all been asses this time, Church. But it's Handy's fault, the silly fathead!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

This time the laugh came from the trees at the edge of the hollow. And there I saw Talmadge and Yorke and three or four other College House fellows. They had evidently scooted upon the appearance of Nelson Lee, but had been attracted back by the sounds of laughter.

"Come here, boys," called the guv'nor, beckoning to them.

The Monks approached, and their grins faded as they drew near. Handforth, having partially recovered his composure, was looking as though he would welcome an earthquake, so that he might be swallowed up.

"And I went and fetched Mr. Lee!" he said dazedly, apparently addressing the empty air.

"I went and told Mr. Lee that I'd found the murderer! Oh, my respected grandfather! I shall be chipped for weeks!"

"—And serve you jolly well right, too!" growled Church. "We shall all be chipped!"

"Found any more clues, Handy?" asked Talmadge, with studied politeness.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The discomfited Handforth was only capable of glaring.

"We didn't dream of dragging you into it, sir," said Christine. "It was just a joke against Handforth and Co. I hope you won't think that we've been disrespectful, sir? We're very sorry——"

"You needn't apologise, Christine," smiled Nelson Lee. "I understand the position fully, and, indeed, I am quite amused. I may have wasted a half-hour, but the entertainment has been most interesting."

"Oh, killing, sir!" said Handforth heavily.

"I am afraid, Handforth, that you do not see the joke," chuckled Nelson Lee. "It is a most elaborate one, and Christine's disguise was really splendid. I didn't know you were so clever at making-up, Christine."

Christine flushed at the compliment.

"Oh, they're only some old 'props' from the Junior Dramatic Society," he explained. "We heard that the murderer was a black-bearded man, and I dressed for the part. I—I hope you don't think it was in bad taste, sir?"

"No, Christine, I don't think that," said the gov'nor. "The joke was purely amongst yourselves, and not intended for my edification. But I should like you to tell me how you 'planted' the clues so neatly. They were well done, or Handforth wouldn't have been so easily deceived."

Christine grinned.

"He asked for it, sir," he explained. "Talmadge and I were strolling in the Triangle when Handforth came out with Church and McClure. Handy was talking about finding clues and all the rest of it, and he was letting everybody know. Well, Talmadge and I thought it would be rather rough on Handforth if he didn't meet with any success."

"Oh, you rotters!" muttered Handforth weakly.

"We thought it only kind to provide some clues, sir," went on Christine, grinning. "So we bunked indoors, prepared that mask and the note, and left 'em where Handforth would be bound to see them. We knew he'd come to this hut afterwards, and so we got ready. The idea was to collar the silly ass, and show him up."

"He's been shown up all right!" I grinned. "Poor old Handforth! I'm afraid you're not cut out to be a detective, old man!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Nelson Lee took his departure, chuckling, leaving us to follow on at our leisure. Handforth and Co. fled. They weren't afraid of the Monks setting on them, but they found it urgently necessary to go away and hide their heads.

Handforth's investigations had fizzled out in the most appalling manner, and although the joke was against the Ancient House, Montie and I laughed as heartily as the Monks themselves.

Later on, everybody else in the Ancient House was chuckling. Handforth and Co. were nearly driven out of their minds by a constant stream of visitors to Study D. Somebody pinned a notice on the door, which read, "Clues for Sale—Cheap!" and the study passage simply echoed with yells of laughter, until Handforth charged out, distributed a few heavy punches, and tore down the notice.

Pitt designed and distributed a number of neatly executed business cards. These caused enormous amusement—except to Handforth. The legend on the cards was something like this:

"HANDFORTH, THE SLEUTH. Investigations undertaken at a moment's notice. Clues found ad lib. Only address, Study D, Ancient House. For further particulars, see small bills. All services free, gratis, and for nothing."

By tea-time Handforth and Co. were nearly crazy, and could stand it no longer. They fled, and rushed down to the village to have

tea in the tuckshop. The whole affair was a humorous interlude in the dramatic sequence of events, and it sounded like old times to hear the laughter in the Ancient House. As for the College House, the Monks were simply laughing like hyenas.

Edward Oswald Handforth wasn't likely to play the detective again—at least, not until next time!

CHAPTER IV.

NELSON LEE'S DISCOVERIES.

TOMMY WATSON beamed.

"Thought you'd like 'em!" he said comfortably.

"Dear old boy, they're simply toppin'!" declared Sir Montie. "I am tryin' to forget the details of manufacture, an' it's quite easy. The flavour isn't half so bad as I thought it would be, begad!"

Watson's smile vanished.

"Not so bad?" he repeated, staring.

"Don't take any notice of him, Tommy," I said, with my mouth full. "These rissoles fairly take the biscuit—they took several biscuits, in fact. I'd never have believed that squiffy sardines, stale salmon, crusty bits of bread, and brillantine would work up so appetisingly."

"Brillantine!" roared Watson.

"Well hair-oil——"

"It was salad oil, you silly ass!"

"I knew it was oil of some kind," I remarked. "Now I can understand how these restaurants fake up such decent feeds. So long as you put plenty of vinegar and sauce on 'em, the flavour's O.K."

Watson didn't look very complimented. As a matter of fact, we were only chipping him. His rissoles were excellent in every way, and really delicious. He had fried them to a turn, and they proved appetising in the extreme. And the sardines and other things were by no means "squiffy," as we jokingly observed.

"You've done it this time, old son," I remarked cheerfully.

"Eh?" said Watson. "Done what?"

"Doomed yourself to further duties in the capacity of chef," I explained. "The next time we have a collection of oddments in the cupboard it'll be your job to fake them up like this. You deserve a couple of medals."

"Well, they're not bad, are they?" said Watson modestly.

"Not quite."

"What?"

"I—I mean they're distinctly good," I grinned. "Now, my dear chaps, you'll have to do without your uncle for about an hour. I'm going along to the gov'nor's study. Pass over the teapot, Montie."

"Begad! You're not goin' to take the teapot with you, old boy?" asked Tregellis-West mildly.

"I'm going to take part of the contents with me—in my tummy," I replied. "Why, I've only had one cup of tea, and Tommy's been guzzling away at full steam——"

"You ass!" said Watson. "I haven't finished my first cup!"

Having demolished the last of the rissoles, I drank a final cup of tea, and then took my departure—to keep the appointment in Nelson Lee's study. Before going, my chums told me solemnly and grimly that if I did not bring back a faithful report of all that took place, my life wouldn't be worth a moment's purchase.

Nelson Lee nodded to me as I entered his study.

"I thought you'd be here to time, young 'un," he said. "Come in and close the door. For the time being we are detective and assistant again—eh? That, I take it, is what you desire?"

"Just the very thing, guv'nor!" I agreed.

I sat down before the fire, and Nelson Lee lit a cigarette and lay back comfortably in his chair, smiling.

"The Handforth episode was rather a wash-out, Nipper," he remarked. "I thought it would be. My investigations have been such that my whole theory would have been completely upset if the murderer really proved to be the fellow in the woodcutter's hut. Handforth is well-meaning, but too impulsive."

"He's a champion ass, sir," I grinned.

"Yet he has his good points, Nipper. And it is only fair to admit that he followed up the clues quite smartly. His only mistake was in not considering the genuineness of that note. Had he thought carefully he would have known that the murderer would not have left such an incriminating document behind him. Moreover, the whole thing was too absurd to be a reality."

"I thought we were going to talk business, guv'nor?" I said pointedly.

"And so we are, Nipper," replied Nelson Lee. "As you know, Detective-Inspector Leonard, of Scotland Yard, is at present staying in the village, investigating this mystery. I'm afraid our friend hasn't progressed very far."

"Neither have we, for that matter, sir," I remarked. "We know that Colonel Clinton was murdered, and that's about all."

"I have not been quite indolent, my boy."

"Oh!" I said quickly. "Then you've made some discoveries?"

"One or two."

"Let's hear 'em, guv'nor," I exclaimed, leaning forward eagerly. "The whole case is awfully mysterious, to my mind. Colonel Clinton was murdered outside the school, it seems, and his body was brought here afterwards. Who brought it? Who committed the crime? The Head's been exonerated, and he's out of the running. And then there's that mystery about the poker," I went on. "The police believe that it was the weapon used to commit the crime, and it was found in Dr. Stafford's study."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"One of my reasons for telling you to come here, Nipper, was to talk about that poker," he said smoothly. "I have discovered quite a deal with regard to it. If you will sit quiet I will tell you the result of my investigations."

"I won't move a hair, sir."

"Well, Nipper, that poker was found on the morning of the murder by Dr. Brett," said the guv'nor slowly. "It was in the fireplace in the Head's study, ominously blood-stained. The police, not unnaturally, at once assumed that Dr. Stafford had committed the crime, and had replaced the poker amongst the other fireirons. Their theory was fully supported by other evidence—there were many indications that the Head had been in the murdered man's room after the crime."

"I think I made it fairly obvious that Dr. Stafford had been plotted against—that all the evidence was faked, in order to incriminate him," went on Nelson Lee. "At all events, the police have now released him; but mainly on account of the statement of a tramp named Hawkins. This man met a foreign-looking individual outside the school on the night of the murder. The assumed foreigner was a black-bearded man, and he was carrying a dead body. That body was undoubtedly Colonel Clinton's, for whose else could it be?"

"Nobody's, sir," I replied. "There was only one murder, thank goodness!"

"Precisely, Nipper—only one man was killed," agreed Nelson Lee. "It is our task to discover the identity of the supposed foreigner—"

"But you were going to tell me something about the poker, sir?"

"And you, Nipper, if I remember rightly, were going to sit still without moving a hair," Nelson Lee reminded me. "I haven't forgotten the poker, my boy. As you are aware, one of my first tasks was to closely examine that article for finger-prints—I had obtained full permission from the police. Well, I found finger-prints in plenty, on the handle."

"But they weren't the Head's?"

"No, my boy, they were not," agreed Nelson Lee. "Now, there was something very curious about that. The absence of Dr. Stafford's finger-marks proved beyond doubt that he had not touched the poker after the crime. It was replaced in the Head's fireplace by other hands. Whose?"

"Why, the murderer's."

"That, at all events, is what one would naturally assume," agreed the guv'nor. "Until I investigated further I was quite ready to believe that those finger-prints were the murderer's. But apparently they are not."

"Then whose are they?" I asked curiously.

"Astounding as it may seem, the man who handled that poker—the man who replaced it in the Headmaster's fireplace—was Colonel Clinton himself!"

I stared.

"Colonel Clinton himself!" I ejaculated in amazement.

"Exactly."

"But it's impossible, guv'nor!"

"I should have said the same thing myself, probably," nodded Nelson Lee. "But the fact is established beyond question. Those finger-prints were made by the colonel, and the mystery, it seems, is far deeper than



1. With a splintering of woodwork Nelson Lee and Nipper plunged downwards into the very ground itself.

2. Nelson Lee applied his eye to the lower mirror, and for several minutes remained quite motionless.

3. For twenty minutes Handferth led his protesting chums round the Triangle in search of "clues."

ever. I have hopes, however, of getting to the bottom of it very shortly now."

I was rather bewildered.

"But how can you be so sure——"

"I would not make such a statement unless I had ample reason for doing so," interrupted the gov'nor. "I have examined many articles used by the colonel—the hair-brushes in his bedroom, for example; his razor, and other articles which he alone would handle. And the finger-prints in every case exactly correspond with those on the poker."

"It's—it's startling, sir," I exclaimed. "I can't get the hang of it at all. According to this, the colonel must have put the poker back into the Head's room before he was killed."

"He could scarcely have done it afterwards, young 'un," said Lee drily.

"Then what about the bloodstains on it?"

"I think there is a satisfactory explanation for them," replied the schoolmaster-detective. "It is obvious that the evidence was faked, and we know that the colonel possessed a great hatred for Dr. Stafford. It was a comparatively easy task for him to manufacture the 'proofs' beforehand——"

"Great Scott!" I gasped. "You don't mean to say that the colonel prepared all that, and then committed suicide?"

Nelson Lee shook a warning finger at me.

"Now, Nipper, you shouldn't be so hasty," he said. "You know as well as I do that the wounds on the body could not have been self-inflicted; you know also that there is a mysterious foreigner in the case—and yet you jump to a conclusion which is obviously untenable."

"Then what's the explanation, sir?" I crowed. "The colonel didn't prepare these things for the Head, and then get somebody to murder him, I suppose?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Now you are talking wildly," he said.

"No, my dear Nipper, the simple truth is that this mystery presents quite a number of knotty points. Perhaps I guess a good deal; but I'm not going to take you into my confidence——"

"Oh, sir!"

"Until we have made a little investigation together," continued Lee calmly. "No doubt you will be able to guess things yourself very soon and that will be far better. Can't you arrive at any conclusion even now?"

I thought hard.

"No, I'm jiggered if I can," I replied at last. "Unless—unless that chap Hardy has got something to do with the affair?"

"Capital, Nipper!" smiled the gov'nor. "It is my firm belief that Mr. Hardy, of Stowe Lodge, is mixed up in this grim business. The colonel, you remember, was in the habit of making secret visits to Stowe Lodge, an old house which stands quite by itself near the river. You remember also that we had one or two exciting adventures at Stowe Lodge, in which a mysterious poison gas played a prominent part."

I nodded.

"I should think I do remember, sir," I said grimly. "There's something queer about

Stowe Lodge, but it slipped my memory for the time being. I didn't connect Stowe Lodge with the colonel's murder at first, but I do now."

"I did so from the very start, Nipper," said Lee smoothly. "I have said nothing to Lennard on the subject, for I wish to make sure of my facts first. It is my intention to make an investigation late this evening—after midnight, to be exact. I shall go to Stowe Lodge, and——"

"It's always the same!" I grunted discontentedly. "Whenever there's anything really decent in the wind, I'm left out of it. I don't want to grumble, sir, but I call it a bit too bad!"

Nelson Lee's eyes twinkled.

"You are premature, my boy," he observed.

"You—you don't mean——"

"Exactly!" he smiled. "On this occasion, Nipper, I want you to come with me. You and I will undertake the trip to Stowe Lodge."

"Alone, sir?"

"Alone."

"And what about the inspector?"

"We may find it necessary to call in Lennard's aid later on, but we shall conduct the preliminary investigation by ourselves," replied Nelson Lee. "As for your chums, it will be better for them to know nothing until the morning."

I shook my head.

"They'll slaughter me, sir," I said. "Before I came here they threatened all sorts of tortures if I didn't give a detailed account of this interview."

"You may tell them the main facts—my discoveries concerning the poker, for example," said Nelson Lee. "You may even tell them that I intend making a trip to Stowe Lodge to-night; they can be trusted, I am well aware. But say nothing about your own part in the programme. If they know that you're booked to accompany me they'll be jealous."

"Why can't they come, sir?" I asked.

"They might be useful."

The gov'nor shook his head.

"Much as I value the sagacity of Tregellis-West and Watson, I think it would be far better for our purpose if they remained behind," he said. "Strictly speaking, this investigation is a one-man job, and I am only suggesting that you should come in order to avoid a violent quarrel on the morrow."

I grinned.

"Yes, I know all about that," I replied calmly. "Well, that's settled, sir. We go to Stowe Lodge to-night—alone. I hope we discover things, that's all."

My hope, as it turned out, was to be amply fulfilled!

CHAPTER V.

A STARTLING REVELATION!

MIDNIGHT boomed out solemnly. I wasn't asleep, for I had awakened only five minutes earlier. Owing to Nelson Lee's training, I could usually drop off to sleep and awaken

at a given time. Sometimes, of course, it went wrong, but not often.

Sir Montie and Tommy had heard my story in Study C with interest. But as I had mentioned nothing with regard to my own nocturnal movements, they were now peacefully sleeping, sublimely ignorant of the fact that I was deserting them, and that they were being left out of the excitement.

I dressed as quickly as possible, making no noise, and feeling brisk and alert. I knew that to-night's programme would probably finish up by Nelson Lee discovering the actual truth with regard to Colonel Clinton's murder.

I was by no means unconscious of the compliment Nelson Lee had paid me by asking me to accompany him on his expedition. I resolved that I shouldn't go in vain, and I was eager to be off.

Creeping silently up the dormitory, I reached the door, and passed out into the passage. Nelson Lee was awaiting my arrival in his study, and the appointment was for twelve-fifteen; so I should be in good time.

Everything had gone smoothly, and the Remove dormitory was left in quietness, every fellow sleeping in peace.

That, at all events, is what I thought at the time.

But I was wrong.

Even as the door was closing, after I had made my exit, a dim figure sat up in bed and gazed down the dormitory.

"Begad!" it said softly.

Sir Montie Tregellis-West was the figure, and he nodded wisely to himself as he pushed the bedclothes back and stepped on to the floor. The next moment he was shaking the shoulder of Tommy Watson.

"Wasser marrer?" mumbled Watson sleepily. "Go 'way, you ass! 'Tain't risin' bell yet—"

"Dear boy, please rouse yourself!" murmured Sir Montie.

Watson raised himself on to his elbows, with his head jutting out above the bedclothes. He blinked at Montie in the gloom, still rather confused.

"Who is it?" he asked crossly. "I was just dreaming—"

"I'm frightfully sorry, old boy, but this isn't a time for dreamin'," interrupted Tregellis-West. "I say it with much sadness, but Nipper has sneaked off on the quiet, leavin' us here in bed."

Watson grunted.

"Jolly good idea, too!" he said, snuggling down again. "Who wants to get out of bed on a cold night like this? If Nipper's ass enough to get up and go out—well, he's welcome. I'm staying here."

"But, dear old fellow, I'm afraid you'll find it ain't quite so easy," said Sir Montie, his voice soft, but very firm. "Begad! Don't you realise that we're left out in the cold?"

"We're in the warm, you ass—it's Nipper who's in the cold!"

"I wasn't speakin' literally, you frightful duffer," said Montie severely. "Nipper was

tellin' us about Mr. Lee goin' to Stowe Lodge to-night. It's quite plain, Tommy boy, that Nipper has gone with his guv'nor. An' we, his faithful chums, are left out of it. Ain't it distressin'? After all our true service we are ignored an' neglected."

"Oh, dry up, for goodness' sake!" growled Watson. "Lemme sleep, you ass! I don't call it distressing, if you do. Buzz cut after the ass, if you want to—I'm going to stay where I am."

Tregellis-West shook his head.

"It will pain me—to say nothin' of painin' you—to apply force, dear boy, but you're comin' with me," he said, in a grim voice. "Pray don't be so shockin'ly lazy. Nipper an' his guv'nor have gone to Stowe Lodge, an' we're goin' to follow. There might be some rippin' excitement, an' we can't afford to miss it. Up you get, dear boy."

"Rats! Go yourself, if you want to."

Tregellis-West argued for two minutes. Incidentally, he solemnly assured Tommy Watson that a jug of icy-cold water was handy, and that Watson's bed would not be improved by the receipt of the aforementioned icy water. Understanding that Montie was in real earnest, Tommy Watson reluctantly commenced dressing.

Once out of bed he felt better, and decided that Montie was right, after all. It was a piece of cheek to leave them behind—it was absurd to suppose that they were going to be left out of the fun.

"Later on we'll give Nipper a lecture—an awful lecture," declared Sir Montie. "We must make him understand, once and for all, that we're not goin' to be treated in this really insufferable manner."

And my two chums attired themselves as speedily as possible. Meanwhile, totally ignorant of their movements, I had met Nelson Lee in his study. He was waiting in readiness, and not a moment was lost in getting off.

"What's in the bag, sir?" I asked, as we crossed the Triangle.

The guv'nor glanced down at his small bandbag.

"You will probably see in due course, young 'un," he replied. "But you must remember one thing—there is to be no talking except in whispers. And only speak when it is absolutely necessary."

"Good enough, sir," I said.

We walked on in silence. Nelson Lee was wearing rubber-soled boots, and I had donned some rubber galoshes over my boots, so we both walked with the minimum of sound. In order to avoid meeting anybody by chance in the lane, we took the towing-path, and this led us almost direct to Stowe Lodge.

It was a fairly modern house, standing quite near to the river bank. Trees almost surrounded it, so we should have ample cover to conceal our approach. While we were still some distance off, Nelson Lee called a halt.

"I want to impress on you, Nipper, that you must keep your wits about you," he

told me, in a soft whisper. "On no account make any outcry."

I stared.

"Why should I make an outcry, guv'nor?" I asked.

"Well, there is a certain reason," replied Lee, somewhat mysteriously. "If events turn out as I fully anticipate, you will feel very much inclined to make an outcry. I have been permitted to see further into this case than you have, Nipper, and—Well, I fancy you are in for a slight shock."

"This is a new game, isn't it sir?" I asked.

"Which is?"

"Talking in conoundrums?" I went on. "I'm blessed if I can see why I should yell just because——"

"Because nothing, young 'un," interjected Lee crisply. "Don't waste time in making guesses. Remember what I said, and follow immediately in my wake."

He walked away before I could answer, and I couldn't make head or tail of it. Yet I knew well enough that he wouldn't talk to me in that way without a jolly good reason. The only thing was to follow the example of the celebrated Mr. Asquith, and to wait and see.

We approached Stowe Lodge with extreme caution, and Nelson Lee skirted round the belt of trees until we were somewhere near the rear of the house. We entered the ill-kept garden as noiselessly as two shadows.

The house lay before us in total darkness, and I couldn't quite see how we were going to get to work. But Nelson Lee was evidently labouring under no indecision, for he touched my arm and nodded.

"We must get round to the side of the building," he breathed in my ear.

I made no reply, but followed him. When we reached the side and came into full view of that portion of the house, Nelson Lee nodded again. He looked almost pleased—why, I couldn't understand. All the windows were dark, and the place looked deserted.

"What's the game, sir?" I whispered.

"Wait—that's all."

I was still mystified, and we settled ourselves down to a period of chilly waiting. After ten minutes a most distinct sound came from our left, and then I saw a chink of light beneath a side door, which was set into a kind of rustic porch.

As I watched the door opened, and the figure of a man was outlined darkly against a dim light in the background. Nelson Lee didn't move a muscle, except to touch my shoulder and to grip it.

The man who had emerged from the porch came out, looked up at the sky, and then disappeared round an angle of the building. Nelson Lee and I were fully concealed behind a clump of laurels, and there was practically no fear of our being discovered. And the fact that the man had left the door ajar proved that he was only absent for a short while. Moreover, he had been bare-headed.

Presently he came back, and I noticed that

he walked with extreme caution, as though fearful of making a sound even within the confines of his own property. For I assumed the man to be Hardy, the tenant of Stowe Lodge.

But as he turned into the porch and pushed open the door, the dim light shining from within illuminated his face for a moment—only faintly, but quite sufficiently for me to see that he was not Hardy.

The fellow wore a thick black beard, and his skin, so far as I could judge, was swarthy, and he bore a foreign appearance. In a moment I knew that this mysterious individual exactly tallied with the description given at the inquest by Mr. Ned Hawkins, the tramp.

In short, the man was the murderer!

The brute was actually sheltering in this house! And this brought other thoughts to my mind. Was Hardy in the game—was he an accomplice? Or had Hardy fallen a victim, like Colonel Clinton?

The affair was sinister, but even now I couldn't quite understand why Nelson Lee had warned me not to make an outcry. It was a surprise to see the murderer here, but I knew better than to betray my presence.

The door closed, and we heard the bolts shot.

"That was rather unexpected, Nipper," remarked the guv'nor softly.

"Eh? Unexpected?" I repeated. "I thought we were waiting here to see him, sir?"

"And so we were—and are," was the guv'nor's reply. "But we are waiting to see him at the bedroom window, my boy. That was my object in coming here. I did not anticipate that he would go for a stroll down the garden-path."

"It—it was the murderer!"

"Yes, Nipper, I think you are right," whispered Lee. "But I shall not act until I am satisfied in another direction. I think I shall be before long."

"It'll take a lot to satisfy me!" I grunted. "Do you think that chap Hardy has been killed, too?"

"Well, my boy, I hardly know at the present moment," replied Lee slowly. "I do not like to think the man has been done to death, but there are certain indications which point in that direction."

"Well, I'm jiggered!" I murmured. "There seems to have been wholesale slaughter, then. Who is this rotter—this foreign chap? I suppose he isn't a dirty Hun, getting his own back on the colonel for something that happened at the war?"

"A somewhat ingenious theory, Nipper, but I am afraid you are wrong," replied the guv'nor. "However, you will not be much longer in doubt, for a light has just appeared upstairs, as you will observe. I have been waiting for it."

I glanced at the house and saw that one of the upper windows was illuminated. A thick cloth blind was down, but it didn't quite reach the bottom. Not that we could see in—the window was too far above us for that.

"Excellent, Nipper!" breathed the guv'nor.

I couldn't see anything to be pleased about.

The wall of the house was utterly bare, and there wasn't even a tree near by up which we could hope to climb. The window might just as well have been a hundred feet above us.

"Blessed if I can see anything to shout about, guv'nor," I remarked. "You don't mean to say that we came here just to have a look at that window?"

"Exactly!"

"But we can't see anything except a streak of light," I protested. "The chap's gone to bed, I expect. I say, have you got a ladder anywhere handy? I know jolly well there's something up your sleeve, sir."

"Not up my sleeve, Nipper—in this bag."

"Oh! And what's in this bag?"

"Something which will enable us to look into that room, I trust," was the guv'nor's reply. "We shall, however, remain on the ground."

I was getting somewhat impatient.

"I'm jiggered if you're not talking in stiffer riddles than ever, sir," I said. "Not long ago you warned me that we mustn't talk—but how can we help it? I should be hugely obliged if you'd just explain how the dickens we're going to see into that room without climbing up to the level of the window?"

"There is nothing easier, Nipper," smiled Nelson Lee.

He was opening the bag as he spoke, and I watched his proceedings with great interest. The thing he took out was unrecognisable to me in the gloom; it was black and oblong, and appeared to be square in section.

Then, to my astonishment, the guv'nor commenced pulling it out like a telescope—length after length.

"Take that end, Nipper, and hold it securely," he murmured.

I did so, much bewildered.

The telescopic arrangement stretched out until it was quite a formidable size. And, in spite of its lightness, it appeared to be very rigid and strong. Each section as it came out automatically locked itself, so that the whole contraption wouldn't collapse unexpectedly.

I saw the reason for this a moment later, for Nelson Lee took the arrangement and held it upright in the air, like a wooden post. But for those catches the sections would have dropped back in a moment.

"I think it'll just be about the right length," breathed the guv'nor. "If not, there is still a foot or so of adjustment in either direction. What do you think it is, Nipper?"

"Don't ask me, sir. I'm as dull as a November fog to-night," I replied. "I can't possibly imagine—My goodness! You don't mean to tell me that this thing is a patent sort of periscope?"

"You are not quite so dull after all, young 'un," said Lee. "Yes, it is a peri-

scope of my own design. I manufactured it only this morning, and I am rather proud of it, too. It is roughly constructed, but efficient."

"Why, it's a fine piece of work," I declared enthusiastically. "By jingo! What a topping idea!"

"Yes, and unless we are careful that light will be extinguished before we can use the periscope," observed Lee grimly. "Come on, lad."

Only a few moments had passed, however, in reality. And it must be borne in mind that Nelson Lee and I had been speaking in the merest of whispers. At a distance of twelve feet, we couldn't have been heard. And now we crept noiselessly forward until we stood right beneath the window.

Nelson Lee gently laid the top of the periscope against the window-sill above, and my heart nearly came into my mouth as I expected to hear a dull, grating sound. But it didn't come, and I afterwards learned that the front of the periscope was provided with a felt pad to deaden all sound.

The front of the instrument was rested against the projecting stone window-sill, and thus held steadily. Nelson Lee applied his eyes to the lower mirror, and stood for some moments quite motionless.

Then he turned his head and gave a slight nod.

"Look, Nipper!" he breathed, with his mouth upon my ear. "But remember what I told you—no matter how surprised you feel, keep silent."

I was quite excited by now, and intensely eager to look into the room above. With the aid of this periscope it was an easy matter, although the man in the apartment was fully satisfied that no human eyes could observe his movements.

I stood quite still, with Nelson Lee holding my shoulders, and steadying the periscope at the same time. I found myself looking upon the reflection of a portion of the room above—a tiny portion, in which I could see a bed-rail, part of a picture on the wall beyond, and a shadow moving on it.

Very gently I moved the periscope until it was focussed, so to speak, upon the inmate of the apartment. I was looking upon his head and shoulders, and could see him with absolute distinctness, for he was in the full radiance of the shaded oil-lamp which burned upon the mantelpiece.

It was the bearded foreigner. He had removed his coat and waistcoat, and was now in the act of unbuttoning his collar. The window, of course, was closed, so it was quite easy to understand why he had heard nothing.

As I watched, he placed his collar on the dressing-table before him, and then turned his back to me. He fumbled with his ears, apparently, and then I was astonished, but not startled, to see him take the beard off and lay it down, too. The man was disguised.

He bent forward and rubbed his face with a flannel or a towel. In the midst of this operation he turned, and I was able to ob-

tain a full view of his face as it actually was.

And then in a flash I knew why Nelson Lee had warned me. For, in strict truth, I felt like shouting aloud with amazement. For this man—this mysterious occupant of Stowo Lodge—was somebody I knew well!

The astounding truth, in fact, was almost staggering. For the man I was gazing upon was none other than Colonel Howard Clinton!

CHAPTER VI.

THE MAN-TRAP.

COLONEL HOWARD CLINTON!

C The man who everybody thought to be murdered—the man who had been looked upon as dead for days—was standing within that room as much alive as I was myself! Just for a dazed moment I thought that I was dreaming.

It was utterly extraordinary.

Nelson Lee probably saw my agitation, or felt it, for I was quivering perceptibly. He understood that I had fathomed the secret. And I understood, in my turn, that the gov'nor must have been aware of the truth for some time.

"Oh, my only hat!" I breathed huskily.

"Let me look, Nipper," murmured Nelson Lee.

I relinquished the periscope and allowed him to take it. He stood gazing into it for a full minute and then silently backed away. Reaching a safe distance he lowered the cumbersome contraption and proceeded to close it up, section by section.

We retired behind the laurels once more, where it was fairly safe to converse in whispers. By this time I had partially recovered my composure, although I was still shaky with excitement.

"Well, Nipper, what do you think of it?" asked the gov'nor.

"I don't think I'm capable of thinking just now, sir," I replied. "Colonel Clinton! He hasn't got his moustache on, but it's him all right. And we thought he was dead—we believed that he had been murdered!"

"Exactly, my lad; but my investigations pointed in this direction almost from the start," continued Lee. "You can easily understand now, the significance of the fingerprints on the poker. The dead man was not Clinton at all—on the contrary, it is highly probable that Clinton is himself the murderer. He attempted to involve the Headmaster—do you understand?"

"And faked up all that evidence, sir?" I whispered. "It was easy enough for him to do that, because he knew his way about in the school, and he knew the Head's habits. But he made a bloomer over the poker, sir."

"Yes, a fatal blunder, indeed," declared Nelson Lee grimly. "The colonel overlooked the fact that fingerprints on polished brass and steel are not always so invisible as they appear. A little gentle treatment

and they become prominent at once. Clinton did not reckon upon that, Nipper."

"It's almost too much for me, sir," I confessed. "After we've been thinking that he was dead, too! Why, he must have killed somebody outside the school, and then dragged the body, or carried it, up there. But why the dickens wasn't it obvious that the dead man wasn't the colonel?"

Nelson Lee looked grave.

"You are touching an unpleasant subject, Nipper," he said. "The man who was found in Clinton's study was terribly battered about the head and face. I shall go into no details, but you can understand that the poor fellow was unrecognisable. The main point is that there was nothing to prove that he was NOT the colonel. His height was about the same, the colour of his hair the same, and he was attired in Clinton's clothes. That, coupled with the fact that the colonel had completely disappeared, naturally led to the obvious conclusion that it was Clinton who had met a terrible fate."

"He must be a fiend!" I muttered, rather startled. "To think that he took that body into the College House— Oh, it's awful! I can't think about it without shivering."

"The more serious aspect is the one concerning the Headmaster," Nelson Lee reminded me. "Colonel Clinton not only killed this man, but he did his utmost to make it appear that he himself had perished at Dr. Stafford's hand. It was a most terrible plot, and I am extremely happy that I was on the spot, and that I have been enabled to help."

"And what's to be done now, sir?"

"We hold the trump cards, Nipper, but we must play them carefully," replied Nelson Lee. "So far as I have been able to judge, the poor man who met his death was Colonel Clinton's associate, Hardy."

"But how can that be, sir?" I objected. "If I remember right, Hardy was hump-backed—or misshapen, at all events."

"Probably a mere subterfuge, my lad—an assumed hump," said the gov'nor. "I may be wrong in my surmise that the dead man is Hardy, but appearances point in that direction. Our next move, of course, is to effect the colonel's arrest. I guessed that he was living in this house as early as yesterday, but I could not act without being in a position to give definite evidence to the police."

"But you can't go to the police at this hour of the night, sir," I said. "And we can't collar Clinton alone."

"Detective-Inspector Lennard is probably asleep at this moment in his apartment at the George Inn," replied the detective. "He won't be asleep for long, for we shall go there at once and arouse him. It will be for Lennard to act upon the information I supply. He represents Scotland Yard, and this case, officially, is in his hands. He will be most eager, I am sure, to take advantage of my little tip. We will go to the village at once."

"Oh, good!" I murmured.

Our adventure had panned out in the most satisfactory manner; we had obtained the evidence we sought. I hadn't got over my

surprise by any means, but I was rapidly getting used to the idea.

And I could imagine the astonishment of Chief Detective-Inspector Lennard when he heard the actual truth. But his astonishment would be nothing to the consternation of the colonel, when he found himself arrested in bed! For this, in all probability, would take place.

Having stowed the periscope away into its bag, Nelson Lee announced that we were to make a move, and together we stole through the trees towards the road, taking the shortest cut to the outer hedge.

And then another startling surprise came.

But this was of a most unpleasant character, and took both the gov'nor and I completely off our guard. It was something which Nelson Lee had not anticipated, although he usually prepared for all emergencies.

As we walked, the ground was solid and heavy beneath our feet. But then, without the slightest warning, a change came. The very earth seemed to sag as we trod upon it, and Nelson Lee gave a sharp little cry.

The next second the disaster occurred.

Crash!

With a splintering of woodwork we both plunged downwards into the very ground itself—down, down, into utter blackness! Earth, dead leaves, and small tree-branches accompanied us.

Then—thud—thud! We both hit something solid together, rolled over, and lay breathless, bruised, and bewildered. Piled on the top of us were masses of debris, and my right arm had been rather badly grazed by sharp edges of broken wood.

"Oh, my goodness!" I gasped. "What's happened, sir?"

Nelson Lee made no reply, but attempted to get to his feet. Within two minutes we had both succeeded in finding our bearings, and we knew the truth. In short, we had plunged into what was nothing more nor less than a man-trap!

It was a catastrophe of the first magnitude.

"Before we attempt to make our escape, Nipper, I want to know if you are hurt," said Nelson Lee softly. "We both fell rather heavily."

"I'm all right, sir, except for a graze or two," I replied. "But—but how the dickens did we manage to fall down? And what about you, gov'nor? Aren't you hurt?"

"Bruised, Nipper—and grazed like yourself," replied Lee. "That's all. We may count ourselves lucky for having escaped so lightly. With regard to our fall, it was a pure mishap, and I can't see that we are to blame."

"The cunning of it!" I muttered. "Why, there was nothing to show that the ground wasn't solid—until we stepped on it. What a pity you weren't walking ahead, sir—then I should have escaped."

"You selfish young——"

"I mean that, with one of us up above, on the solid ground, it would have been easy enough to rescue the other," I pointed out.

"Still, it's no good talking like that, is it? We're both in the same hole, gov'nor."

"Literally, Nipper," agreed Nelson Lee. "And it is a hole, I am afraid, out of which we shall have some difficulty in clambering. I must acknowledge that I underrated the cunning of our adversary. He must have spent many hours upon the excavation of this pit."

"Talk about luck!" I growled. "Why did we walk bang into it? It was just chance, sir——"

"Not exactly, young 'un," interrupted the gov'nor. "We took the most obvious path through the trees. There is a tangle of undergrowth in other places, and the colonel obviously assumed that this would be the most likely route taken by any intruder. Moreover, it is quite possible that there are other man-traps of a similar character in different parts of the grounds. Clinton believes in being safeguarded. And now we will have some light on the subject."

But we didn't.

Nelson Lee had taken out his electric torch, and had switched it on. But the filament in the lamp was broken, and no light resulted. And, of course, I hadn't brought my torch with me. If Nelson Lee had had six sound ones on him I should have brought mine! It was just the "cussedness" of things.

"A nuisance, Nipper; but we must make the best of it," observed Nelson Lee. "Not that the light would have helped us at all. I don't think it will be possible for us to escape; the pit is too deep."

There was little doubt that Nelson Lee's words were correct. Gazing upwards, I could just dimly see patches of the night sky through the branches of the trees. The edge of the pit was jagged and uneven, and masses of sticks projected from all sides. The gov'nor and I had plunged clean through the middle.

The trap had been constructed very much after the style of an animal trap in the wilds. To all appearances the ground was solid, but for a distance of four or five feet the surface consisted merely of cunningly contrived sticks covered with rubbish and dead leaves. In full daylight, perhaps, we should have seen something to arouse our suspicions; but this hadn't been possible in the darkness.

"Suppose I get on to your shoulders, sir?" I suggested.

"We can try it, Nipper; but I'm afraid it will be useless."

We did try it, and Nelson Lee was right. I was still several feet from the surface, although I was just able to clutch two or three of the hanging portions of wood. They only came away as soon as I pulled.

Showers of earth and leaves descended upon us, and I nearly fell from the gov'nor's shoulders.

"It's no good, sir," I gasped. "There's nothing to grab."

A minute later I was standing beside Nelson Lee, and we looked at one another grimly. At least, we stared at the blackness which

enveloped the pit; it was really impossible to distinguish one another.

"We're in a frightful mess, sir," I remarked at last.

"I'm afraid you're right, Nipper," said the guv'nor. "Failing to escape from this pit, we shall be discovered by the colonel. Let us hope he did not hear the crash caused by our fall. There are many hours of darkness left, and I may be able to think of some scheme. In any case, we must rely upon our own efforts."

"What a pity we didn't go for the inspector first!—or arrange that he should come along afterwards," I said gloomily. "Why, there's no telling what may happen, guv'nor. If Clinton comes and finds us here, he might even spurt a dose of poison gas down on us. He's capable of it, the scoundrel!"

"There is really no reason why you should assume anything so alarming," said Nelson Leo softly. "The situation looks rather serious, I will admit, but we shan't improve it by letting our imaginations run riot. The only thing to do is to——"

"Hark!" I whispered. "What's that?"

We both stood stock-still.

And a sound came to us with great distinctness. The side-door was being unbolted!

Colonel Clinton was coming to gloat over his victims!

CHAPTER VII.

MONTIE AND TOMMIE TO THE RESCUE.

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST touched Tommy Watson's shoulder.

"Ready, dear boy?" he whispered.

"Shan't be a tick—I can't find my giddy left sock!" grumbled Watson. "I know it's here somewhere——"

"Didn't you throw it at De Valerie just before lights-out, old fellow?" asked Montie. "I fancy I remember a slight disturbance."

"Oh, yes. Why didn't you remind me before?" growled Tommy. "De Valerie chucked it back, the ass, and it fell under Nipper's bed."

Having recovered the sock, Watson pulled it on, and announced himself ready for departure. Both he and Sir Montie carried their boots in their hands, and they crept silently down the long dormitory to the door.

They made their exit safely, without having aroused any of the other juniors. Stealing downstairs, they cautiously made their way to Study C, and here a candle was lit. By its light the two juniors donned their boots and caps and mufflers and overcoats, having obtained these latter articles from the cloak-room on their way.

"I suppose you realise that we shall probably run into Mr. Lee?" suggested Watson. "What's he going to say to us for breaking bounds after midnight?"

"Nothin' much, dear boy," said Montie easily. "We'll just explain that Nipper deserted us, an' I expect he'll say all sorts of severe things an' then chuckle at the finish. Mr. Lee's a rippin'-good sort. An' we've been

out on these sort of expeditions before now, old fellow."

"I suppose it'll be all right," said Watson hopefully.

They extinguished the candle and cautiously opened the study window. The Triangle was dark and silent, and a fairly mild wind was blowing across from the west. It was by no means a cold night, although extremely black, heavy clouds obscured the stars.

"Which way shall we go?" asked Watson.

"The towin'-path, I should think," replied Montie, who was undoubtedly the leader in this enterprise. "There's less chance of meetin' anybody—although there's not much fear of that at this hour."

"We shall have to be careful about the river," murmured Tommy. "It would be as easy as winking to walk over the bank in this darkness, and I don't feel inclined for a ducking in this weather!"

Watson's warning was quite reasonable, for it would have been easily possible to plunge into the river if rigid precautions had not been taken. The two juniors were compelled to keep to the towing-path, and to walk slowly and deliberately.

"What are we going to do when we get to Stowe Lodge?" asked Watson.

"See what's goin' on."

"And supposing nothing is going on?"

"Then, begad, we sha'n't see anythin'," replied Montie mildly.

"I'm not sure that Nipper's gone to the Lodge at all," went on Tommy. "He told us that Mr. Lee meant to undertake the trip, but it strikes me that we're on a wild-goose chase. If we knew the plans more definitely——"

"Dear boy, please don't raise objections in this way," interrupted Montie, in a severe tone. "I will give you full permission to grumble if we go to Stowe Lodge an' find nothin' doin'. But I've got a feelin' that there's some excitement on. We shall soon see."

They arrived within the vicinity of Stowe Lodge in due course, but approached the house from the direction of the road—having cut across a meadow from the towing-path to the lane before nearing the house.

Everything was still and quiet. Not a light was to be seen, and it really looked as though the place was completely deserted. Montie and Tommy stood against the gates for five long minutes, listening and watching.

"There's nobody here at all," breathed Watson at last.

But his chum shook his head.

"We shall have to investigate, dear boy," he murmured. "Supposin' we creep round that meadow an' look at the house from the back? There's no tellin' what might be goin' on round there."

"Oh, just as you like."

The programme was carried out. But the back of the house was just as dark as the front, and seemingly as deserted. The two youthful adventurers spent fully twenty minutes, and had discovered nothing—had seen nothing—had heard nothing. Their trip, it seemed, had been in vain.

"Hard lines!" murmured Watson. "The only thing to do, Montie, is to get back and slip into our little cots. It's no good messing about here all the night. I'm fed up already."

"Begad, an' so am I, dear boy—I am, really," said Montie. "It's a shockin' disappointment. Supposin' we have one more try?"

"How?"

"There's one side of the house we haven't looked at yet—round to the left. It would be rather stunnin' if we found Mr. Lee an' Nipper there!"

Watson wasn't hopeful, but he followed his noble chum through the bushes. They cautiously made their way to the side of Stowe Lodge, and then received their first encouragement. For a dim light was visible at one of the upper windows.

"Dear fellow, we may find out somethin', after all," breathed Montie. "I think we'd better— Begad!"

Crash!

As Montie was speaking an extraordinary sound came from the dense clump of trees between the boys and the road. It was only the guv'nor and I tumbling into the prepared pit; but my chums didn't know that.

"What—what was that?" gasped Watson.

"I don't know, Tommy boy—I don't, really!" murmured Tregellis-West. "But it sounded like somebody fallin' into a mass of bushes. I think we'd better have a look round, don't you?"

"We shall have to go easy— Hold on!" hissed Watson. "Look up there!"

He indicated the window, and Montie stared upwards. The heavy blind had been thrust aside, and a man was leaning out of the window. He stood motionless, apparently listening.

"Don't move, dear boy!" breathed Montie.

But Tommy needed no warning. They were standing absolutely in full view of the window, with no trees intervening. The darkness alone saved them from discovery. Had they moved to cover, however, their dim movements would probably have been seen. It was the best plan to remain still.

And after a few moments the figure at the window withdrew into the room. The two juniors looked at one another tensely.

"Who was it?" asked Watson, in a whisper.

"I haven't the faintest idea, old boy," replied Montie. "But we'd better creep under those bushes while we've got the chance. It's fairly certain that the man is comin' down here."

"To see what that smash was, you mean?"

"Of course, Tommy boy."

They soon concealed themselves, and it was just as well they did. For the side-door opened, and a man appeared. Even in the dim glimmer which came from his rear the boys could see that he carried a heavy club in his hand.

He walked straight down the path, and vanished amongst the trees.

"Begad!" breathed Sir Montie. "That's frightfully queer, you know!"

"Eh? What's queer?"

"Didn't you notice his walk?" went on Montie. "Amazin' as it seems, that man's walk is just like the colonel's! But Clinton is dead, an' it must be just a coincidence."

"Of course it's a coincidence, you ass!" muttered Watson uneasily. "But, now you remind me, his walk did seem a bit— Hallo! He's talking!"

They listened intently.

Yes, a voice sounded distinctly, although the words were uttered in a low tone. And it was clear to Montie and Tommy that the man was not the colonel—if they had had any doubt about the question. For this man spoke with a foreign accent; excellent English, but not perfect.

"So!" the boys heard him exclaim. "You have fallen, eh? It is well, my good friends—it is capital! Since you come prying here, it is good that you should suffer. Make not the mistake; you will pay the full penalty!"

Tommy Watson nudged his companion.

"Who the dickens is he talking to?" he breathed.

"I don't know, dear fellow; but I have a horrid feelin' that Mr. Lee an' Nipper have met with a mishap," replied Montie. "It's rather a good thing we came, begad! We may be useful, you know."

"Shall we creep forward a bit?"

"It's risky; but we'll do it," replied Tregellis-West grimly.

They left their cover, and edged towards the trees. They knew that discovery might follow; but they were fleet of foot, and could escape easily, if necessary. Moreover, they were curious.

Having reached the shelter of the trees, they felt safer. And now they crept forward with redoubled caution. Even the cracking of a twig might reveal their presence to the strange foreigner.

They halted at last, and crouched low. There, standing only ten or twelve feet away, was the man who had come out of the house. He was talking to his feet apparently, for there was nobody else in view, and he talked with his head bent down. It was really astonishing.

"You understand?" he said, with an air of finality. "Escape for you is quite impossible. You will remain in this prison. So! Before dawn I will return, and your sufferings will be of the terrible. So! You have but yourselves to thank!"

As he finished speaking he turned away abruptly, and walked straight towards the spot where Montie and Tommy were crouching. Just for a second they thought of fleeing; but Montie laid a firm hand on his chum's arm.

They remained still.

By a sheer miracle, it seemed, they were undiscovered. The man strode past within four feet of them, and they heard him continue his way until he reached the house; they heard him close the door and bolt it.

"That was a near shave, Montie," breathed Watson.

"Frightfully near," agreed Tregellis-West. "But we're safe—an' that foreign chap has

gone indoors again. 'This is where we do things, dear old boy!'

"Perhaps we'd better stick where we are for five minutes——"

"Begad, no!"

"But the rotter might come back!"

"He won't come back just yet—an' we've got our chance now," said Montie. "If we wait we mayn't be able to do anythin' at all. Come on, Tommy!"

Watson raised no further objection, for he realised that Montie's suggestion was a good one. They were still very puzzled as to where the prisoners were trapped, for nothing could be seen; the little plantation appeared to be absolutely deserted.

Moving almost openly now, the two boys walked forward, and Watson would have met with disaster but for Montie's precaution.

"Not so fast, dear boy," he murmured, pulling at Tommy's arm. "That man seemed to be talkin' to somebody down a well, didn't he? I've been wonderin' if there's an opening in the ground here——"

"Great Scott!" gasped Watson, coming to an abrupt halt.

He only stopped just in time. For, peering ahead closely, both juniors saw a black, uneven cavity in the ground. And as they stood quite still voices came up as though from the bowels of the earth.

"Yes, I thought I heard something, Nipper," came the distinct voice of Nelson Lee. "Perhaps our cheerful friend is still waiting about——"

"Begad!" ejaculated Sir Montie.

Both Nelson Lee and I heard that exclamation, and we jumped—at least, I did. The guv'nor scarcely moved a hair.

"That—that's Montie!" I gasped. "How the dickens did he get here? Montie! I say, rescue, Ancient House!"

"Dear fellow, this is simply amazin'!" came Montie's voice from above. "Is that you, Nipper?"

"Yes, you ripping old rescuer!"

"Is Mr. Lee with you?"

"Yes, I am here, Montie," said Nelson Lee, answering for himself. "I am afraid you have found us in a most humiliating position. However, mishaps are always liable to occur—and this one was most unfortunate."

"I'm here, too, sir," called down Watson.

"My goodness!" I exclaimed. "Is the whole Remove there?"

"No; only Tommy an' I, dear boy," said Sir Montie. "It's a frightfully queer position—it is, really. We're talkin' to you, but we can't see anythin' except blackness. How far down are you?"

"Oh, I don't know—we feel buried," I replied. "How in the name of wonder did you manage to find us, old chap? I thought we were done for."

"The fact is, Nipper, old fellow, I saw you gettin' dressed in the dormitory," replied Tregellis-West. "It didn't seem quite the thing, you know, for you to creep off without tellin' Tommy an' I about it. An' so we decided to follow. I'm awfully glad we did, because I believe we shall be useful."

"Useful!" I echoed. "Why, you're worth

your weight in sugar! And I apologise most humbly for leaving you out in the cold—and so does the guv'nor! Perhaps he won't say so, but he does!"

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"I have no hesitation in saying that it was a mistake on our part not to enlist the aid of your chums, Nipper," he said. "However, they have been very useful, and I will thank them at a more opportune moment. The main thing just now is to get out of this confounded pit."

"I'm afraid we can't do much, sir," called Sir Montie. "We haven't got any rope, an' we can't reach you——"

"If you search about you'll find several long pieces of wood close handy," interrupted Nelson Lee. "They are like clothes-props, and I have no doubt that with their aid we shall be able to achieve success."

The poles were soon found, and the longest was lowered into the pit. With Montie and Tommy holding firmly to the top, I was just able to grasp it. How they hauled me up I don't know, but it was done. I helped myself a good bit, but it was a stiff job for all three of us, nevertheless.

Of course, we got Nelson Lee to the surface in next to no time, and then we left the garden of Stowe Lodge without a second's delay, finally halting for a consultation three or four hundred yards down the road.

"I hope you'll excuse us for bein' out of bounds, sir," said Montie. "It's a shockin' breach of the rules, I know——"

"You need say nothing further, Tregellis-West," interrupted Nelson Lee. "I should be an ungrateful brute indeed if I suggested a punishment for this trip of yours. Events have proved that you were fully justified in leaving your dormitory, my boys. I hardly dared hope that Nipper and I would be rescued so soon."

"And what about the colonel, sir?" I asked. "He'll find out that we've slipped off, and then he'll bunk——"

"The—the colonel?" repeated Watson blankly.

"Yes—Clinton himself."

"Begad!" said Montie. "How can the colonel bunk, dear boy? The poor man is in his grave——"

"Oh, you don't know, do you?" I interrupted. "There was a man at the top of that pit just before you arrived——"

"We saw him, dear boy."

"A foreign-looking man?"

"Yes."

"Well, he was Colonel Clinton," I declared calmly.

"Oh, don't talk rot!" snapped Watson. "How could it have been the colonel?"

"Nipper is quite correct, my boy," put in Lee. "It will be a big surprise to you, but the colonel is not dead, as we at first supposed. He is hiding in Stowe Lodge, disguised."

"Great goodness!" gasped Watson.

"It ain't so surprisin' as it might have been, sir," said Montie. "Both Tommy an' I were struck by the man's walk—an' I said how like Colonel Clinton's it was. But it's

amazon' all the same. The colonel alive! Begad! Who is the poor chap who was murdered, then?"

"I have no doubt that Hardy, the man who formerly occupied this house, is the unfortunate victim," said Nelson Lee. "But we really have no time to discuss the matter now, boys. The very first thing to do is to secure the colonel."

"Have him arrested, do you mean, sir?" asked Watson.

"Exactly."

"But—but how——"

"Don't you worry, my son," I interrupted. "Detective-Inspector Lennard is in the village, and we're going to rouse him out—whether he likes it or not! And you can bet your boots that he'll like it!"

"Arrest Clinton!" muttered Watson, still very amazed. "And we've been thinking that he was dead! And yet he's the murderer all the time! Oh, my only hat! There'll be a riot in the school to-morrow—a giddy sensation!"

We walked away down the road, and I had an idea that Watson wasn't far off the mark. There would, indeed, be huge excitement at St. Frank's when the actual facts became known. It only remained now to effect the colonel's arrest.

"What's that on your hand, Nipper, old boy?" asked Montie suddenly.

"Blood," I replied.

"Good gracious!"

"It's all right—only a graze," I went on. "I'll get you to wash it for me when we

arrive back at the school; but it's nothing to make a fuss over. When the colonel's arrested I'll attend to those little details."

"May—may we come to the village with you, sir?" asked Tregellis-West, as we arrived at the spot where the lane led into the main road. "Or must we go back to bed?"

Nelson Lee hesitated a moment.

"Well, Montie, I really think that you ought to go back to bed, but after the services you and Watson have rendered I hardly like to dismiss you. I'll leave it to you to choose."

"Begad! I've chosen already, sir."

"And so have I!" put in Watson quickly.

"I needn't ask what that choice is," smiled Nelson Lee. "Well, come along, boys. You may as well see this affair through; but you'll have to keep in the background. You've done your part, and now it remains for the police to do theirs!"

Well, the police did do their part—properly. But it wasn't such an easy matter as we fondly believed. There was a great deal of excitement during that final episode of the drama—far more than we had anticipated; and the experience will demand a special telling.

Everything was cleared up and made straight. But before Colonel Howard Clinton was captured a regular siege was to occur at Stowe Lodge—a time of exciting warfare such as we couldn't possibly foresee.

So, just for the present, that's all.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK

will appear

Another Magnificent, Long, Complete Story of
Schoolboy Fun and Adventure at St. Frank's,
under the title of

THE COLONEL'S SECRET.

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PRICE THREE-HALFPENCE

OUR POPULAR SCHOOL SERIAL**The Chums of Littleminster School.****A Magnificent Story of School Life and Adventure.****By ARTHUR S. HARDY.****The Previous Chapters.****BASIL HOOD** is a new boy at Littleminster School.

On his arrival he makes a friend of

JOHN CHALLIS, a Senior in the Fifth Form.

MYERS and **COGGIN** are two bullies, who, with some others, try to make Challis join the "Clubs," an athletic society. He refuses, and they determine to send him to Coventry. He is persuaded later by Mr. Evans, a master, to join. Challis takes Hood fishing in a punt, which gets cast adrift. Later on Grainger, the Captain, sees Challis at the nets, and asks him to play for the next sixteen against the eleven. Meanwhile Basil suspects Myers of casting the punt adrift, since he found a coin belonging to him near the spot. Unsuspectingly he puts the coin in a drawer in his cubicle. It vanishes, and Basil suspects Myers. Challis plays a splendid innings for the school against Ragley. After the match Myers is seen talking to a low named Joe Smart, who afterwards comes up to the school. The Head gives him a thrashing.

(Now read on.)

Exit Smart.

IT was not until the Head's face was crimson from his exertions, and beads of perspiration were running on to his coat and waistcoat, that he stopped at last and Grainger let the soundly thrashed blackmailer down.

Blubbing like a madman, Joe Smart bolted for the door, and, turning, shook his fist at them.

"I'll 'ave the lor of the whole lot of yer," he shouted, hardly able to articulate for the passion that consumed him. "I'll send you to gaol!"

Grainger neatly lifted the cad's headgear into the air, as if it were a football, and it struck Smart in the face.

"Meanwhile," he cried, "I think you'll want your hat."

Smart clutched at his hat, turned, and bolted.

Then the blushing doctor turned to Grainger, Challis, and Mr. Evans.

"I cannot altogether condone what you have done, my boys," he said; "but, as I have—or—sacrificed my dignity—for the—or—sake of a little exercise, I think we'll—or—say no more about it."

"Jolly good old sort, the Head," chuckled

Grainger, as he and Challis returned to the school. "And—I say, we got off lightly, didn't we?"

Challis smiled good-humouredly, and his twinkling eyes showed that he was happy.

"It's more than Smart did!" he cried.

"H'm, yes! I reckon at the present moment Joe Smart is nursing his—er—Smarts," said Mr. Evans, and then, ashamed of his pun, he nodded and vanished.

THE END OF THE TERM.

THE next morning Myers left the school, left while the boys were at breakfast, and Littleminster saw him no more.

It was just as well, for, curiously enough, after his departure there seemed an entire absence of that bickering, fault-finding, and eternal criticising which had caused so much mischief in the school and had given Challis such a bad time.

A week later the Smarts vanished from their cottage. Perhaps they had come to the conclusion that the climate didn't suit them, or that they would find better scope for their talent elsewhere.

For the rest, everything went with a swing until the week of breaking-up, when the sports were held, and fathers and mothers, older brothers and sisters, came down to see the talent of Littleminster compete in friendly rivalry for the various championships that filled the athletic programme.

In those, of course, Grainger was the supreme head. Never had the captain looked so well or done so well. Throwing the hammer, putting the weight, the long jump, the high jump, and the hurdles went to him, whilst Vernon won the hundred, Digby the quarter and half, and Basil the junior sprint.

These were the best events on the programme, the rest being won in mediocre fashion and in poor times.

But the school mile was the event of the afternoon, and when the boys who were to do battle lined up, Grainger's name was on every lip.

Chalfout and Byfleet were reckoned to have good chances, and John Challis, who had been trained by Grainger, was reckoned a dark horse. It was the only event Challis entered.

To the crack of the pistol the field set off, and ere the first quarter was run Chalfout.

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

Byfleet, Grainger, and John in a bunch had drawn away from the field, which tailed off behind.

The sunshine danced upon the white vests and knickers of the runners, and the scene, with its background of green trees, its stand gay with flags and bunting and bright with the charming dresses of the ladies, presented a thoroughly healthy and delightful picture.

On the runners sped, and Byfleet began to flag. Half a mile had been covered, and Grainger, finding the pace slow, darted in front and quickened up.

Chalfont, accepting the challenge, joined issue, and led at the bell.

And then out went Grainger, with Challis after him. For thirty yards Chalfont fought it out, then turned on to the grass, dead beat.

Into the final straight Grainger turned, with Challis at his elbow, and there, sprinting, gained a yard—two.

"Grainger wins! Grainger wins! Hurrah! Good old Grainger!" cheered the boys, the juniors cheering loudest of all. "Hurrah!"

They were fifty yards from the tape, and then, with a rush and a swoop, Challis pelted by, and, in the greatest finish ever seen, left the school captain standing. He won by a clear ten yards.

"Bravo—old—chap!" panted Grainger, as they turned on to the grass. "I knew you could do it! I knew you could!"

"Oh, but you were done. Look how hard you've been working! You were tired. I'd

never have won if you'd reserved yourself for the mile, the same as I did, old man." panted Challis.

Grainger, smiling, pointed at the board, on which the time has just been set.

"I don't know. Look!" he gasped. "4.29 4-5ths! It's a school record. My best has never beaten 4.37 up till now. So don't talk rot, old fellow!"

That night there was a big feast at Littleminster.

At the end of the week the boys went home. And it is safe to say that none of them was prouder or happier than John Challis, who had commenced the term hated by nearly every boy in the school, but had left at the end of it idolised, especially by Grainger and young Basil Hood.

Of course, he didn't leave for good, you know, for he was coming back to enter the Sixth next term. Grainger was coming back, too, and there were scholarships and other fine prizes to be won, outside the field of athletics.

Grainger, Basil, Ponsonby, and Challis travelled most of the way home together, and when they parted there was much warm hand-shaking and expressions of mutual regret.

"But we'll all be meeting again next term, Grainger, old sport," bawled Ponsonby from the railway-carriage window. "So, Hurrah for the Chums of Littleminster School!"

THE END.

EDITOR'S NOTE.

As you will see, our School Serial, THE CHUMS OF LITTLEMINSTER SCHOOL, comes to an end this week. I should like to say a few words about the story which will take its place.

Commencing next week, THE HOUSE IN THE JUNGLE; OR, JOHN HAMMOND'S DELUSION, is by Alfred Armitage, the popular author of "Red Rose and White," "Cavalier and Roundhead," and many other famous stories.

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THE EDITOR.

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