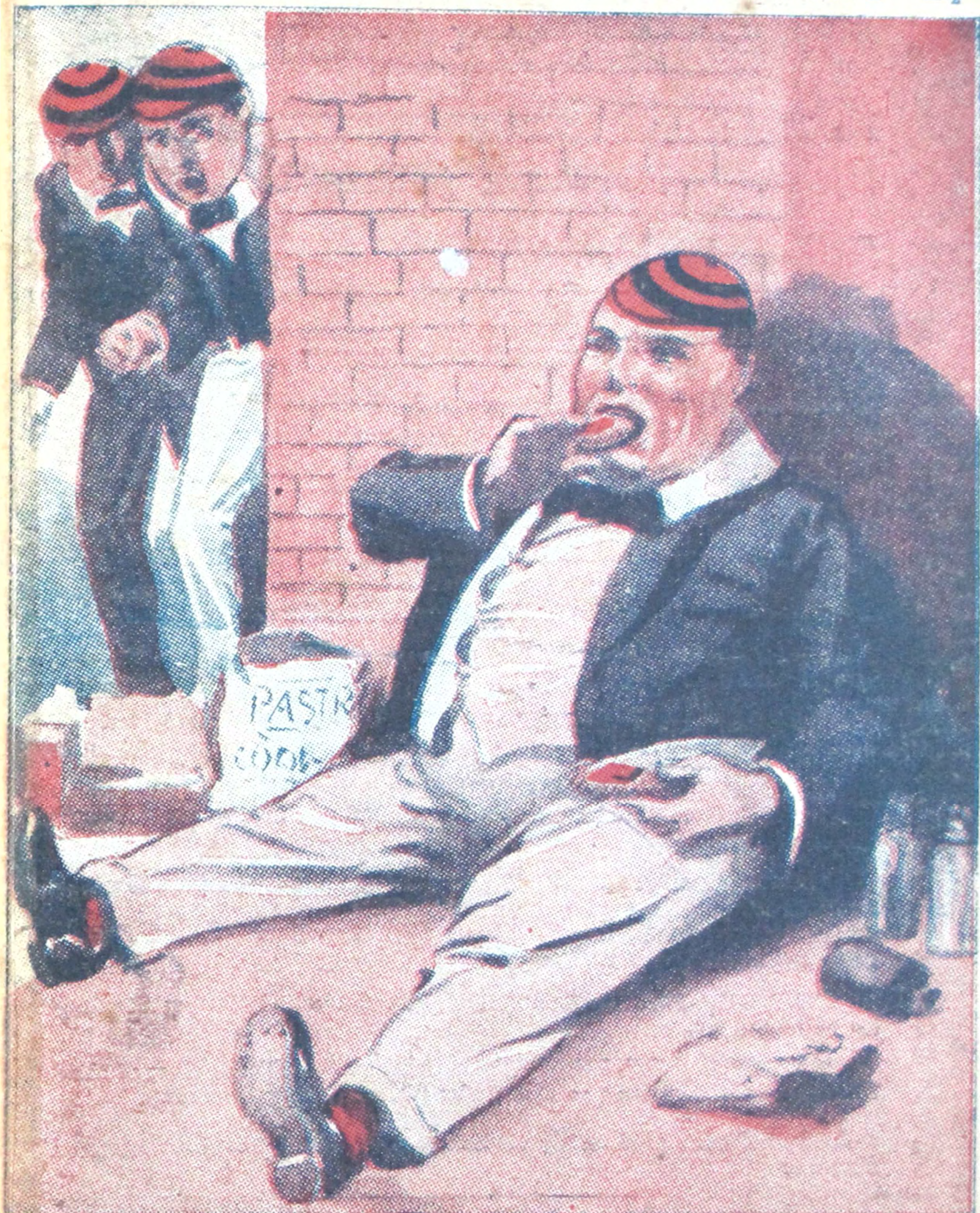


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They saw Jimmy Little helping himself to their tuck with evident enjoyment.

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

LITTLE IN NAME ALONE.

"THE elephant," remarked Reginald Pitt, "has arrived!"
"Eh?"

"Gaze upon it and wonder!" said Pitt.

"What the dickens——"

"You're not looking in the right direction," went on Pitt, grinning. "Outside, you duffers—in the road!"

Several juniors of the Ancient House of St. Frank's were lounging against the archway which led into the courtyard of the temporary school buildings, situated just off Holborn, London.

The school was close upon the road, and the courtyard was reached by means of a tunnel-like archway. The main entrance, however, was in the front. And a big open motor-car had just pulled up.

"My hat!" remarked Jack Grey, of the Remove. "You're not far wrong in describing that merchant as an elephant, Reggie! Phew! What a size! I wonder how much his suits cost?"

The other juniors grinned.

"What's the humour about?" I inquired, coming up with Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "Anything special in the joke line?"

"Yes," said Tommy Watson. "There it is—look!"

I looked.

What I saw certainly made me stare in a manner which was not exactly polite. The gentleman who had just

stepped out of the big motor-car was one of the fattest men I had ever set eyes upon. He was not particularly tall, but astoundingly stout. His body, his legs, his arms, his neck—all were of enormous size.

"Well, it's hardly fair to make fun of the poor chap," I smiled. "Don't let him see you grinning—he wouldn't like it. Did you notice the way the car jumped up after he'd got out? 'What a load off its mind!'"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Shush, you asses!" I said warningly.

"Gee whizz!" grinned Justin B. Farman, the American junior. "I'd sure say the guy was the biggest ever. I guess he leaves good old Fatty Arbuckle ten stone in the rear. He's sure some galoot!"

The stout gentleman looked in our direction, and then walked towards us. I was rather surprised to see that he didn't waddle, but walked briskly and easily, in spite of his enormous bulk.

"There you are!" I whispered. "I warned you not to laugh too loudly you asses! You'd better stand your ground!"

Some of the fellows had begun to fade away, but they halted as I gave them the advice. And the fat gentleman paused before us, and smiled in the most genial manner possible. It seemed as though a house had suddenly sprung up, and we stood in its shadow.

"Well, boys, having a little smile on the quiet, eh?" said the gentleman amiably. "But you can't offend me—I know I'm fat, so what's the good of

worrying about it? I suppose you belong to St. Frank's, eh?"

"Yes, sir," said Pitt. "This is St. Frank's."

"Really?" said the stranger. "But I understood that St. Frank's was situated in the county of Sussex, near the coast? I also understood that the school had been temporarily moved to London?"

I nodded.

"That's quite right, sir," I said. "The College House caught fire, you know, and it had to be rebuilt. But I understand that the school is practically ready for us to go down to again, and I think we're shifting back to the old home next week."

"Splendid—splendid!" said the fat gentleman. "And which do you like best—London or the country?"

"I reckon we like St. Frank's best, sir," said Grey. "It was all right up here to begin with, but there's nothing like the good old school. I shall be jolly pleased to get back, for one. This place came in handy as a temporary home, but it can't hold a candle to St. Frank's. But you seem to be interested, sir?"

"As a matter of fact, I am interested—most decidedly," said the stranger. "I have been making arrangements with your Headmaster, and with the school governors, for my son to receive his education amongst you."

"Oh, that's interesting, sir," said Pitt. "Is he a junior?"

"Yes, my lad, if you can call a boy of fifteen a junior," said the fat man. "He will soon be one of your school-fellows, although I can't tell you exactly in which form he will be placed. I am very pleased to have made your acquaintance. My name is Henry Little—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Somebody cackled loudly—Handforth was the culprit, I believe—and some of the other juniors grinned. They really couldn't help it.

"Don't mind me, my boys—don't mind me," chuckled Mr. Henry Little. "My name is rather incongruous, eh? One of life's little ironies. And I suppose I really was little at one time of day!"

The fat gentleman nodded genially, and went to the front entrance. He vanished inside, and the grins broke out afresh among the juniors.

"Ye gods and little fishes!" said De

Valerie. "Mr. Little! I reckon his name ought to be Mr. Monstrous!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And his son's coming to St. Frank's," said Pitt. "If he's built in the same proportions as his father, mercy save us! We shall have every passage in the school blocked up whenever the chap's about!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Still, Mr. Little is a jolly decent sort," I remarked. "Let's hope his son takes after him in his jolly manner. We haven't got a really fat fellow at St. Frank's—and a fat chap comes in handy sometimes."

That was the first we heard of the new junior—and Master Little himself was destined to arrive much sooner than we had anticipated.

His father was interviewing the Head; and that worthy old gentleman was much concerned regarding his study furniture. There was really no chair in the room capable of accommodating the visitor.

"Yes, Dr. Stafford, I have made all arrangements with the Board of Governors," Mr. Little was saying. "My son is to be admitted to St. Frank's at once—and I can assure you that I'm very pleased."

The Head nodded.

"I understand that you have had some trouble with the lad?" he suggested quietly.

"Well not exactly trouble," said Mr. Little. "James is one of the best boys breathing, but his will power dwindles away to nothing where matters of food are concerned. His appetite, my dear sir, is simply appalling. It will be necessary to feed him far more liberally than the other boys—and, of course, I am prepared to pay the extra expense."

Dr. Stafford smiled.

"I do not think we need discuss that question just now, Mr. Little," he said. "Your son, I feel sure, will be well looked after at St. Frank's. The school will return to Sussex early next week, I may say. And I presume the lad will be introduced to his schoolfellows on that occasion?"

The fat visitor leaned forward.

"Well, Dr. Stafford, I wanted to ask you a favour," he said. "I should like my son to come at once—to-day, if possible. I want him to get acquainted with his new life here, in London—before he goes away into the country. I

shall be able to see him almost every day for a few days, at least, and by the time he goes he will be comfortable and content."

"That is not a bad suggestion," said Dr. Stafford. "For my part, I have no objection to offer. You are quite at liberty to bring your son to-day, if you wish to, Mr. Little. Tell me your plans definitely, and I will make all arrangements."

Mr. Little's face screwed itself up into smiles.

"Splendid—splendid!" he exclaimed. "How very good of you, my dear sir. I shall leave my son in your care with the greatest confidence. I feel sure that he will not get into any mischief while he is in your charge. He is a boy with a high standard of honour, truthful and chivalrous. If only he is in congenial surroundings he will be happy and content."

Mr. Henry Little took his departure shortly afterwards, looking very good humoured. And that afternoon, soon after lessons had commenced, Mr. Crowell made an announcement in the Remove Form room.

"Boys," he said, "I have a little item of news for you."

The juniors regarded the Remove master with interest.

"About going back to St. Frank's, sir?" inquired Owen major.

"No, my lad—that would not be news," said Mr. Crowell. "You all know, I daresay, that we shall probably return to the old school early next week. I wish to inform you that you will have a new Form fellow from to-day onwards."

"A new chap for the Remove, sir?"

"Yes."

"Which House, sir?" asked Bob Christine.

"Not your House, Christine," said Mr. Crowell. "The new boy, whose name is James Little, will reside in the Ancient House, and I have decided that he shall share Study L with Trotwood minor and Trotwood major."

"Really, that is most interesting, my dear sir," said Nicodemus Trotwood, who was about five minutes older than his brother, Cornelius. "My brother and I will be most delighted to welcome the new boy in our study."

"That is very nice of you, Trotwood," said Mr. Crowell drily.

"I beg your pardon, my good sir, but did I hear my name mentioned?"

asked Cornelius, who was the exact counterpart of Nicodemus—so far as looks went.

"I was speaking to your brother, Trotwood minor," said Mr. Crowell. "You need not trouble. We will continue the lesson."

Cornelius looked surprised.

"No, sir, I have not seen him to-day," he said mildly.

"Eh? You have not seen whom?" asked the Form master.

"Jesson, sir——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I was not talking about Jesson, of the Sixth!" shouted Mr. Crowell. "I said that we will continue the lesson, Trotwood. Please be silent."

"But, Mr. Crowell, I was not violent."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I did not say you were violent," roared Mr. Crowell. "I am sorry to say, Trotwood minor, that your affliction of deafness appears to become worse day by day. We have wasted enough time. Boys, continue your work."

Cornelius looked mildly astonished, and asked his brother in a whisper, why Mr. Crowell should have referred to a Turk. Nicodemus grinned, but made no attempt to explain. He didn't feel up to it.

It was interesting to know that Master Jimmy Little was booked for the Ancient House Remove. I decided to be on the look-out for him after lessons—for, as junior skipper, I felt it was my duty to welcome the new fellow.

We had learned that Little was likely to arrive at any time during the evening. And having seen his father, there was a good deal of speculation regarding the new fellow's size.

Some of the juniors reckoned that he would be slim, for it was not at all certain that he would take after his pater. However, the best thing was to wait and see. We should all know then.

Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson and I were just on the point of going in to tea when we heard a shout from the archway. And at that moment Mr. Little's big motor-car rolled into the courtyard. The genial fat gentleman evidently intended the introduction of his son to be accomplished in style.

There was a rush at once, and the car was soon surrounded.

"My hat! They're a pair!"

"He's as big as his pater!"

"Great Scott!"

"Is that young mountain coming into the school?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There were a good many yells, and some of the fellows were not at all particular whether they were overheard or not. Ralph Leslie Fullwood, for instance, regarded the motor-car and its occupants with a sneering smile on his face.

"Rotten swank!" he exclaimed sourly. "I'm blessed if I know what the school's comin' to! We don't want any beastly pork butchers here!"

"Rather not!" said Gulliver. "We'll soon have him pushed out!"

"It's a disgrace to St. Frank's," went on Fullwood loudly. "I shall protest—Yaroo!"

Fullwood sat down abruptly in the gravel. Handforth's fist was responsible; for Handforth was ever on the look-out for some excuse to use his knuckles.

"You insulting cad!" roared Handforth. "If you can't say anything polite when you open your mouth, you'd better clear off. St. Frank's sank pretty low when you were admitted!"

"Hear, hear!" said several voices.

Mr. Little apparently heard nothing of the squabble. His back was turned towards Fullwood and Handforth, and he beamed upon all in general. Beside him stood a second edition of himself—an edition in miniature, so to speak.

And yet he wasn't so miniature, after all. James Little was proportioned in exactly the same way as his father. His smooth, pink face had precisely the same jolly expression, and his eyes twinkled merrily. A tuft of fair hair escaped from under his topper, which, in spite of its size, seemed too small for him.

I seemed to take to the chap at once. He looked the soul of good nature, and his fatness was rather startling. His Eton suit bulged everywhere, although it was the largest Eton suit I had ever set eyes on. His figure closely resembled a barrel, and his arms were as fat as any ordinary fellow's thigh. I couldn't guess the size of his collar, and his neck simply filled it.

"This boys, is my son—and, from this minute onwards, your schoolfellow," said Mr. Little genially. "I feel that I am

really introducing two boys in one, for his bulk is considerable."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You needn't talk, dad," said Little junior. "And I'm not to blame for being fat, I suppose? Hallo, you chaps! How the dickens are you? Jolly pleased to meet you all. I hope we shall rub along all serene!"

Jimmy Little jumped out of the car. There were one or two murmurs of surprise, for the fat boy jumped out with wonderful lightness. There was nothing lumbering about him, in spite of his tremendous bulk.

I stepped forward.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Little," I said. "You'll excuse me, but I feel inclined to address you as 'Big.' 'Little' doesn't suit you at all——"

"It doesn't," agreed the new boy. "But when a fellow's born with a name of that sort, he can't very well change it, can he? I'm pleased to meet you, although I don't know who the currant bun you are!"

"Who the what I am?" I asked.

"You mustn't mind that sort of thing from Jimmy," chuckled his father. "His thoughts generally run on food, and he is in the habit of mentioning eatables in ordinary conversation."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, I see," I grinned. "Well, my name's Nipper, and I'm the captain of the Remove. You're coming into our Form, Little. As soon as you like, I'll show you round, and escort you to Study L.

"Thanks muchly," said the fat boy. "Well, pater, you can clear off as soon as you like, you know. Don't let me detain you. I dare say I shall be able to find some tea knocking about somewhere."

"Good heavens!" said his father. "I spent fifteen shillings on your tea not an hour ago!"

"A change of scene always gives me an appetite, pater," said Little junior. "I reckon I shall be jolly comfortable at St. Frank's."

The new fellow evidently intended to make himself comfortable at all costs, and when his father took his departure Master Jimmy Little appeared to be quite at home. He was something novel in new boys!

CHAPTER II.

SOMETHING LIKE AN APPETITE.

JIMMY LITTLE beamed round him with abundant good nature after he had been left to the tender mercies of the Remove. His fat figure looked something like a monument on the steps of the Ancient House—as we called that portion of the school the Fossils inhabited.

Little was quite at his ease. New boys as a rule were nervous and rather scared, but this new boy acted as though he had been at St. Frank's for a whole term. It was really impossible to dislike him.

His round face wrinkled itself up into smiles every time he spoke; and his great weight did not seem to bother him in the least. I have seen a good many stout boys in my time, but Jimmy Little put them all in the shade. He was positively the biggest boy of fifteen I had ever seen. He was far fatter than many men of fifty—and extremely fat men at that.

"I suppose tea is served here?" he asked rather anxiously.

I grinned.

"But I thought you'd had tea?" I inquired.

"Well, I had a snack," admitted Little. "Nothing much, you know. Only a chop and vegetables, and fruit pudding, to start with. I had some fish and potatoes, of course, and five or six rolls with cheese afterwards. I finished up with a dozen pastries and a three-bob cake. But you can't call that much!"

"Much!" gasped Pitt. "It sounds like a meal for a dozen."

"Something like an appetite!" grinned Watson.

"Well, I suppose it is," confessed Little. "Something—but not much!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I suppose you were kidding?" demanded Handforth, planting himself in front of the new boy. "You couldn't really have eaten all that lot this afternoon. Although, I must admit you look as if you had!" he added, gazing at Little's waistcoat.

"My dear chap, I wasn't kidding at all," said Little. "I must have plenty of grub, or else I shall get weak. They do have tea here, don't they?"

I glanced at my watch.

"Too late, my son. Tea in hall is nearly over."

"Great doughnuts!" said Little, in dismay.

"But you needn't be scared," I went on. "We're allowed to have tea in our own studies—the fellows can provide what they like. You'll have tea with the Trotwood twins—it's their honour, you know."

"Oh, ripping!" said Jimmy Little. "Is tea ready now?"

"Never mind about tea!" exclaimed Handforth. "I want to ask you a few questions, kid. To begin with, why don't you tell your tailor to make you a decent suit? In a week's time you'll be oozing out of this one."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Dry up, Handy," I grinned. "Don't clip the new fellow now——"

"I'm asking him some plain questions," said Handforth. "They may be personal—in fact, they are personal—but new kids are supposed to put up with that sort of thing. New kids must be meek; they've got to answer questions without delay—or else be punished."

"But tea——" began Little.

"Blow the tea!" roared Handforth. "I want to know all about you. Are there any more at home of your quality? How many brothers have you got? Is your sister a second edition of you?"

"I'm awfully sorry, old chap, but I can't answer all those questions until I've been strengthened by a meal," said Little calmly. "You don't mind moving, do you? I don't want to be rude——"

"If you don't answer my questions in two ticks, you cheeky bounder, I'll jolly well punch you!" roared Handforth.

"Go ahead!" said the new boy calmly. Handforth took him at his word.

His left swung round, and thudded upon Little's chest with a bang. Any ordinary junior would have been sent spinning. But Little didn't even stagger. He apparently failed to feel the blow.

"Well, my hat!" said Handforth blankly.

Biff!

Again he landed out. Jimmy Little made no attempt to guard himself. He received the punches on his arms and chest with the smile still upon his face, and Handforth stood back and gasped.

"Ain't you hurt?" he panted.

"Hurt?" said the fat boy. "You don't think those taps hurt, do you?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Taps!" said Handforth faintly. "I was using all my strength!"

"He's armour-plated, Handy," I said

"His face isn't!" roared Handforth.

"And I don't stand rot from anybody."

Swish!

Handy's fist lashed out—but it didn't land upon Little's face. The new boy dodged with amazing agility, and then simply walked forward. He collided with Handforth like a battering ram, and didn't pause in his stride. Handforth went staggering back, recovered himself, and then Little ran into him again. This time Handforth floundered over with a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was really funny, and everybody howled. The fat junior simply walked into the leader of Study D, and Handy was knocked over as though a motor-bus had collided with him. Little's weight was something to reckon with!

"Give it up, Handy," chuckled Pitt.

"The—the cheeky ass!" gasped Handforth, struggling up. "Ain't you chaps going to lend me a hand? Help me to bowl him over, you rotters! Back me up!"

A good many of the juniors were quite ready to join in the rag, and there was a rush at Fatty Little as he was about to enter the building. Three fellows bumped against him, and recoiled—almost as though they had struck against an indiarubber ball. But sheer weight told, and Little was sent spinning over.

He collided with the ground with a thud, rolled over, and rose to his feet unhurt and smiling.

"Is this a new game?" he asked politely. "It doesn't do a fellow's clothes any good—Frying steaks! Look out!"

Over he went again, with a jar which ought to have shaken every bone in his body. But he was so extremely well protected by his fat that he was quite unhurt. And again he picked himself up.

"Sorry, but I'm going indoors," he said. "This is a silly game."

"Hold him!" roared Handforth. "Bar the way!"

A number of juniors planted themselves in the doorway, providing a thick barrier. If I had attempted to get

through I should have failed, for I cannot charge eight or nine strong juniors and hope to get the best of it.

But with Fatty Little it was different.

He walked into the group as though it didn't exist. He didn't even use his fists, but simply charged unconcernedly. The effect was rather staggering—and, most decidedly, it was funny.

The juniors were sent in all directions, like ninepins, and Little walked through them without even pausing in his stride. A perfect yell went up from the juniors who were watching.

"Oh, my hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Hubbard, who was one of the bowled over ones, scrambled to his feet rather dazedly. He looked round in amazement.

"Great pip!" he ejaculated. "That—that chap's a human tank!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I believe he'd walk through a brick wall!" grinned Pitt.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And, meanwhile, Jimmy Little was walking serenely down the passage, looking for Study L—and tea. I found him after a moment or two, and he was just as cheerful as ever.

"You're a holy terror, my son," I said. "I don't think you'll find many chaps anxious to have a scrap with you. By the way, can you box at all?"

"I'm pretty fair at it," said Little. "You see, although I'm fat, I'm not lumbering. Without boasting, I'll bet I could race a good many fellows over a measured hundred yards. I believe in keeping fit—and the only way to keep fit is to have plenty of grub."

"Grub again!" I grinned. "I'm afraid you'll starve at St. Frank's if you require grub in wholesale quantities. This is Study L," I added, as we halted outside the doorway. "You're going to share this with two fellows named Trotwood. They're twins, you know, and quite decent chaps."

"Three freaks in one study!" grinned Owen major.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

I passed into the little room with the new boy, and I noticed that his gaze was fixed upon the table. His smile vanished as he saw that the tea was not particularly plentiful. A loaf of bread stood upon a plate, and half a tin of sardines reposed on another plate. There was some jam

and three or four cakes. The Trotwood twins themselves were not present.

"Is—is this my tea?" asked Little, in dismay.

"Begad!" put in Tregellis-West. "Your tea, dear fellow? That's for the three of you!"

Little gave a gulp.

"Three of us!" he gasped. "But—but that's only a mouthful."

"My hat!" I grinned. "I can see that the teas in Study L are going to be plentiful in future—with an appetite like this to satisfy. I hope your dad allows you about five quid a week for extra meals, Little?"

The fat boy shook his head sadly.

"No such luck!" he said in a mournful voice. "I only get thirty bob a week pocket money, and it's always used up by Tuesday! Then I have to starve until Saturday comes round again!"

"I wish I had thirty bob a week pocket money!" said Tommy Watson. "I reckon I'm lucky to get a quid—and I don't spend half that on grub. The school itself provides plenty to eat."

"Well, we'll leave you to it, old son," I said, slapping Little upon the back. "I hope you're still alive by six o'clock. It wouldn't look well in the newspapers to read that a skeleton of a chap had died through starvation at St. Frank's!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's all very well to laugh!" said Little sadly. "But you wouldn't laugh if you had an aching void like I have! Just look what I've got to fill up every day! It's—it's the only worry in my life!"

We went our way, chuckling. I was inclined to believe that Jimmy Little was exaggerating a bit. He undoubtedly possessed an unusual appetite, but I couldn't quite believe that he was capable of eating much after the meal he had demolished earlier in the afternoon—if, indeed, he had tucked away as much as he had described.

I went along to inform Nicodemus Trotwood that the new boy was waiting for tea. Meanwhile, Little eyed the table in Study L with great disfavour. He cut himself two slices of bread, and disposed of them in record time, aided by a few sardines. Then, with his mouth full, he went out into the passage.

He was looking for his new study mates—because his natural instincts told him that it wasn't polite to begin without

them. But his appetite was the most powerful factor, and it won the day.

He happened to glance into Study M, next door. The door stood ajar, and the study was empty. Little's eyes grew round and gleaming as his gaze rested upon the well-spread table.

Study M was occupied by the Duke of Somerton and Cecil De Valerie—but not at the moment. Augustus Hart was also in that study. The three juniors were in funds that evening, and they had provided themselves with a particularly fine spread. They didn't go in for quantity, but quality.

Hart had prepared the tea, and he had just gone along to find his study mates. And the coast was clear!

Jimmy Little had a fight with himself for a moment.

But he knew well enough that his appetite would win, and he edged his way into Study M, as though fascinated at the sight of the table. On a plate stood a number of delicious-looking little rolls. There were dainty pats of butter; a small tongue was set out appetisingly with parsley. A glass dish was filled with choice pastries. There were other delicacies, too.

"I must—I simply must!" murmured Little. "Oh, it's too good to be missed! And it's always allowable to raid another chap's study—it's always done in public schools!"

His scruples went, and he closed the door and sat down at the table. The way the good things went was simply staggering. The rolls, the tongue, and the pastries disappeared at record speed.

Jimmy Little had just finished—he had, in fact, cleared the table to the last crumb—when the door opened, and three cheerful juniors marched in.

"A nice thing, being late," Hart was saying. "There you are, my sons! A feast for the giddy king—Why, what the—Great goodness!"

Hart paused, and stared. He stared at Little, and he stared at the table.

"Where—where's all the grub?" he demanded huskily. "Where's the feed?"

"Old chap, that's rather an unnecessary question. The feed has gone like a glorious dream—although it's not far off. The new fellow has scoffed the lot!"

Hart and De Valerie grabbed the fat boy in righteous wrath.

"Have you eaten our tea?" roared Hart.

"Where is it?" shouted De Valerie.

"I—I——"

"You burglar!" yelled Hart.

"You gorging elephant!"

"But please let me explain——" gasped Little.

"There's nothing to explain, you burgling rotter!" said Hart fiercely.

"You're going to get scalped for this! You've had the cheek to come into this study and wolf all the grub——"

"I—I looked in by chance, and I couldn't resist it," confessed the fat boy.

"I'm awfully sorry, you fellows. I apologise with all my heart. I don't want to have a row, you know."

"It's no good saying you're sorry—now!" snapped Hart.

"But I am sorry, and I feel that I'm a greedy rotter!" said Little earnestly.

"I do feel like that—afterwards. When I see the grub I forget everything, you know. If you'll allow me, I'll pay for another supply of fodder—and I hope you'll forgive my nerve."

The chums of Study M couldn't very well resist the new boy's manner.

"You'll pay for another lot just the same?" asked De Valerie.

"Yes—willingly," said Little. "It's only right."

Hart was already grinning.

"Well, you're a queer card!" he exclaimed. "You come here, scoff our grub, and then offer to pay for another lot! Dash it all, you chaps, I can't be wild with this merchant! He's a scream!"

Fatty Little looked relieved.

"How much?" he asked, pulling out his purse.

"A small tongue—tinned, a dozen rolls, a dozen mixed pastries, a jam roll," said Hart, naming a few other things.

"That's how much. We don't want money, Fatty. We want the same as you scoffed. You can go out and buy the stuff."

"By Jove! That's rather a good idea, old chap," said Somerton. "It ought to teach you a lesson, Little. You've boned our tea, and now you've got to go and buy another one. Buzz off—we're hungry."

The fat boy was given directions, and he went off cheerfully. The shops were only a short distance away, and the chums of Study M waited patiently for

their tea. They felt that they had done right in sending the culprit.

At least, they felt that way to begin with. But after twenty long minutes had passed, and there was still no sign of Little, they began to change their minds. Hart glanced at his watch impatiently.

"The ass ought to have been back five minutes ago," he said.

"Oh, he's new to this district," said De Valerie. "We oughtn't to have sent him, really. Still, he wolfed our grub, so he deserves to have the trouble. It doesn't do to let new kids get too fresh."

The door opened, and Pitt put his head in.

"Finished tea?" he asked cheerfully.

"Good! I want you chaps——"

"Rats!" said Hart. "We haven't started tea yet."

Pitt stared.

"Where's the grub, then?" he asked.

"In Little's big tummy!" said De Valerie grimly.

"What the dickens——"

"The cheeky ass came here and burgled our tea!" said Hart warmly.

"But he did the decent thing, I must admit, and offered to buy a fresh lot. He's out now, fetching the stuff."

Reginald Pitt chuckled.

"That chap's a masterpiece!" he remarked. "Fancy having the nerve to raid a study on his first giddy afternoon! You say he's gone out—— By George! I wonder—I wonder——"

"Well, what do you wonder?"

Pitt's face broke into a broad grin.

"Well, I'm not making any statement," he said, "but five minutes ago I spotted the new kid in the courtyard, in a secluded corner. He was carrying several bags, and he was dipping into the bags pretty heavily. Rather suspicious—what?"

The chums of Study M jumped up.

"He's out in the courtyard!" roared Hart. "Eating?"

"Yes!"

"Great guns!" said De Valerie. "It's impossible!"

"Well, his jaw was going at express speed, anyhow," said Pitt. "I'd bet anybody that he was eating—although where he was putting the stuff is a bit of a problem. You said he had scoffed your tea—enough for three of you?"

"He did!" said De Valerie. "You

must be mistaken, Pitt. Even a giant couldn't eat any more——"

"I'm going out to see!" said Hart hastily.

De Valerie went with him, and the pair fairly gasped when they saw Jimmy Little tucked in a corner of the courtyard, feeding his mouth with considerable rapidity from a number of bags.

"You—you glutton!" roared Hart wrathfully.

"Oh, I say—— I—I——"

"Is that our grub?" bellowed De Valerie.

"Ye-es!" confessed Little. "You—you see, I—I couldn't resist it! I managed to keep myself in check until I got here, but the stuff was so jolly good that I couldn't help sampling——"

Little looked up, confused and guilty.

"But you were choked up with grub before you started!" yelled Hart.

"Oh, that was only a biting on!"

"A—a biting on!" said De Valerie faintly.

"That's all! I was hungry, you know——"

"Hungry!"

"Of course! The walk gave me an appetite——"

"Oh, my stars!" gasped Hart. "This chap will be the death of us inside a week! Did you ever hear such a twist! He—he was hungry because he walked into Holborn, after eating all that grub, too. Great Scott!"

De Valerie and Hart seized the bags, and found that there was very little left of the second feed. Their amazement was so great that they almost forgot to be angry.

In fact, they couldn't help seeing the humour of the situation—and they were good-natured fellows. They had entrusted Little with the task of purchasing the duplicate tea—and he had demolished that also!

"You're absolutely the limit!" declared Hart. "There's a moral to all this, you chaps. Never, under any circumstances, trust grub to this human food destroyer. He's not to be trusted!"

Fatty Little looked pained.

"It's true—I know it!" he said mournfully. "I'm not to be trusted with grub. It's my weak spot, and I'm hopeless when there's any grub about. You see, I'm always hungry—and hunger makes criminals of us all!"

The juniors only stared.

"I'll pay for another lot, of course," went on Little. "It's a good thing I've got the cash—my pater tipped me a fiver this afternoon. But don't, for goodness' sake, let me go for any grub when I'm stoney! I shall scoff it just the same, and then I can't pay for it!"

De Valerie laughed.

"Well, thanks for the warning," he said. "But as for this grub, you needn't pay for it, Fatty. It was worth the money, anyhow! You ought to go into a giddy side show, as a champion eater!"

The new boy was greatly relieved, and declared that the chums of Study M were bricks. They were. But if Little had really been like his name, he would probably have been bumped on the spot.

But to bump the fat boy was a task which three ordinary healthy boys were not capable of accomplishing.

CHAPTER III.

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER.

"ONE of the best!"

This was the general verdict concerning Jimmy Little.

I was quite in agreement with such an opinion. The new boy, apart from his craving for food, was a really decent chap in every way. His sunny smile was cheering to look at; his twinkling eyes made a fellow feel high-spirited.

And he was modest, retiring, and altogether likeable. On the morning after his arrival he was apparently quite at home. It was a bit startling to go round a corner suddenly, and to find the passage filled with Jimmy Little. But that is what we experienced frequently.

And anyone who chanced to run into him by accident got far the worst of the collision. Jimmy himself wouldn't move—but the other fellow invariably staggered over backwards. It was like running into a marble elephant.

It was simply impossible to shift him, and he was not subjected to any of the little japes which were generally tried upon a new fellow. He was not an easy customer to tackle! Even Handforth thought it wiser to steer clear of Fatty, after his experience of the previous evening.

Just before morning lessons, I came across Little in the doorway. There was a sad expression upon his face, but he smiled immediately I came up. I slapped him on the back, and my hand tingled.

"Cheer up, old son!" I said. "Why the worried look? Homesick?"

The fat boy shook his head.

"I—I'm hungry!" he said plaintively.

"Hungry!" I gasped. "But you only had your breakfast a quarter of an hour ago—and you demolished three times as much as any other fellow!"

"I was satisfied for the minute," said Little. "But what's the good of a tiny biting on like that? I believe in starting the day well, by having a jolly good meal. I shall starve at St. Frank's if things go on like this. It's awful! I don't know how I shall last out until dinner time!"

"Well, I don't suppose you'll die of starvation," I said cheerfully.

During morning lessons Little was cheerful and serene. When his mind wasn't on the subject of food he was the happiest of mortals. And he proved himself to be an excellent scholar.

Mr. Crowell was quite satisfied with him. There was some doubt as to whether the form upon which he sat would bear his weight, and Handforth facetiously suggested that a cast iron one should be made. That remark cost Handforth fifty lines, and he didn't attempt to be funny again.

As soon as lessons were over I caught hold of Little by the arm.

"Watson and I are going out into Holborn," I said. "Care about coming with us?"

"Yes, thanks—I'd like to come," said the fat boy.

"But we're not going for grub, mark you," I said warningly.

Little grinned.

"Don't remind me of it," he said. "I'm all right when I'm not thinking about the stuff. I suppose everybody here thinks I'm an awful glutton—but I can't help it, you know. I was born with a terrific appetite. I am told that I used to eat as much as a full grown man when I was seven."

"I can quite believe it!" I said readily. "But come on—and mind you don't get in the way of a motor-bus. We don't want to have a 'bus overturned in Holborn, you know!"

Little grinned, and we passed out into the courtyard, and then into the street. He was a very genial companion, and Tommy Watson and I were kept quite amused as we walked along.

We were in Holborn, our objective being Gamage's. Tommy wanted to buy some photographic stuff, and we had plenty of time to accomplish the mission before dinner. We walked down the crowded pavement cheerfully.

And when we were nearing our destination I was rather interested in the behaviour of a total stranger who happened to be crossing the busy road. He caught sight of us when he was right in the middle. And for some unknown reason the man came to an abrupt halt, an expression of astonishment and gratification in his eyes. Incidentally, he was nearly run over by a taxicab.

He jumped out of the way quickly, reached the pavement, and then stood staring after us in a manner which could not be mistaken. I was quite convinced that he was interested in Fatty Little.

But why? Why should a man be? He was a coarse-looking fellow of about forty-five; a man dressed in a loud suit with a light-coloured bowler hat. His spats glared at one, and his boots were of a staring yellow. As for his face, he advertised to the world at large that he and whiskey were the greatest of friends. A heavy moustache adorned his upper lip. Altogether he was a coarse, horsey-looking customer.

"Come on, Nipper," said Watson, who hadn't noticed anything. "What the dickens are you staring at? We haven't got all day?"

"Keep your hair on," I said calmly.

We continued our walk, and I wondered if Jimmy Little knew of the stare which the stranger had bestowed upon him. It seemed that he was unconscious of the man's attention, for his manner was unaltered.

When we came out of Gamage's I was keen. I glanced about me without seeming to do so. And there, sure enough, stood the man in the yellow boots on the opposite side of the road, just against Wallis's. As we moved up Holborn he kept pace with us on the other pavement.

I didn't say anything to Little—for I was not absolutely certain that he was the object of the man's regard.

When we turned down the quiet road

which led to the school, I saw that the man was still looking at us. But after that I lost sight of him. Little was quite cheerful as we entered the courtyard of the school.

"Nearly dinner-time, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes, in about ten minutes," I said.

"Ten minutes!" exclaimed Fatty. "Great cream buns! I can't wait till then."

But he did wait, for there was nothing else to be done. And during dinner he was the star turn. Even fellows from other tables craned forward in order to see "the gorilla cat," as somebody unkindly put it.

But Little didn't mind.

He beat all records in the Remove, and some of the fellows began speculating as to how much the school would lose on Little during a couple of terms. But these little pleasantries had no effect upon the new boy.

The simple fact was that he was large, and he had an extremely healthy appetite. Perhaps it was an abnormal appetite. But there was nothing really wrong with him. He fed himself because he was hungry—and not merely for the sake of eating.

During the afternoon lessons I wondered who the mysterious stranger could have been. As it turned out, I was to see more of the fellow almost at once. And I was destined to be puzzled even more.

After school the courtyard was rather crowded with fellows. The air seemed heavy, and the sky was overcast. There was every indication of rain during the evening, and the juniors were making the most of the fine weather while it lasted.

Little was in his study, with the Trotwood twins. In all probability they were discussing tea. I happened to be out in the courtyard, and Handforth and Co. were there, too.

Then I noticed a familiar figure entering under the archway. I paused in the middle of a remark to Tregellis-West, and stared. The newcomer was the stranger I had seen in Holborn.

He was already in conversation with Hubbard and Owen major. I strolled over, curious. Sir Montie looked after me rather indignantly.

"Really, old boy, you are frightfully rude," he protested. "What do you

mean by walkin' away just in the middle of tellin' me about the footer fixtures——"

"I'll go on with that later, Montie," I said briskly.

"But, dear fellow——"

"Come on!" I said. "There's something special doing."

I regarded the flashily dressed stranger with interest as I drew nearer. He was even coarser than I had supposed him to be. And yet, at the same time, his manners and his speech were quite polished. I was rather surprised at this, and concluded that he had come down in the world through drink.

"I have got nothing to do with you young gents," he was saying. "The boy I want to see is Master James Little. He belongs to this school, does he not? Can't one of you run and tell him that a friend has called."

"A friend?" said Handforth, staring

"That's what I said."

"But you're not a friend of his!"

"Oh yes, I am," said the stranger calmly. "Just run in and tell Little that Mr. Montgomery Ford is here to see him."

"Any relation to the motor-car merchant?" asked McClure.

The man scowled.

"I don't want any impertinence!" he snapped. "If one of you will go and tell Little that I'm here, I'll give you sixpence."

Handforth fainted.

"Don't all run at once!" he gasped. "Sixpence! What riches."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

I pushed my way forward through the crowd.

"What is it you want, sir?" I asked grimly. "Keep quiet, you fellows."

"I am glad to see that there is somebody here, with politeness to spare," sneered Mr. Ford. "I want you to go indoors, sonny, and I want you to tell James Little that I've come to have a word with him."

"Are you a friend of Little's?" I asked. "I mean to say, is he expecting you, and does he want to see you?"

"That is none of your infernal business," snapped the man. "Jimmy and I know one another quite well——"

"If so, why don't you apply to the Housemaster in the usual way?" I asked keenly. "I'm afraid Little isn't here at the moment——"

"I suppose he's hidin' away somewhere," sneered Fullwood. "I thought the kid was no class! If he's got pals of this sort, he must have been dragged up in pretty rotten society!"

"Dry up, Fully!" snapped Hart. "We don't want your rotten opinion—Hullo! Little's on the steps now. You can't mistake that mountain."

Jimmy Little had just emerged from the schoolhouse, and he stood looking over towards us for a moment. Then he turned his back as though to go in once more.

"I say, Little!" I called.

But Fatty took no notice; he went straight in.

"Very friendly—I don't think," remarked Handforth.

"Hold on—I'll go and see," I said.

I hurried across the courtyard, and made his way to Study L in the Remove passage. The door was ajar, and I pushed it open and entered. The fat boy was alone, and he was leaning over the table, apparently writing. He looked round in a rather guilty fashion, and nodded, trying to conceal his feelings.

"Hallo, Nipper," he said. "Anything the matter?"

"There's a man out in the yard asking for you," I replied. "He says he's a friend of yours, Little, and he wants to see you."

The fat boy looked surprised.

"Oh, that's rot!" he said. "How should I know him?"

"He gave his name as Montgomery Ford," I added.

"Rather a high sounding name," said Little carelessly. "Perhaps he's made some mistake, Nipper. I don't want to see the fellow. You might ask him to go away, will you?"

"Then you do know him?"

"Eh?"

"And you're afraid to go out and see him?" I demanded.

"I'm not afraid!" said Little, with a troubled look. "Why the currant bun should I be afraid? Not likely! I'll come with you if you want me to. But what's the good of seeing the fellow?"

He moved towards the door as he spoke, and I couldn't quite make out what the trouble was. But I did feel sure that this visitor was decidedly unwelcome, and that Little didn't want to have anything to do with him.

The fat boy walked briskly along the

passage, his great form looming up in front of me so that the whole view ahead was obscured. We entered the courtyard, and Little broke into a run.

"Look out!" shouted Pitt. "Clear the way for the tank!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors scattered, for they had come to learn that it wasn't wise to be in Little's way when he wanted to get through a crowd. Something always went—but it was never the fat boy who suffered.

"Ah, here you are, Jimmy," said Mr. Ford genially, extending his hand. "How goes it? Pleased to see you again."

Little smiled blandly.

"I don't get the idea," he said. "Haven't you made a mistake?"

"Look here, you needn't pretend you don't know me——"

"Pretend!" said the fat boy, his manner changing. "Who's pretending? What's the good of saying I know you? As I said before, you must have made a mistake. I should advise you to get out of this place."

"You—you young hound!" shouted Mr. Ford. "If you dare to deny that you know me, I'll show you up——"

"None of that!" roared Handforth. "You're a beastly fraud—and I believe that you're one of those rotten confidence men. How would you like to go out? On your feet, or on your neck?"

"You impudent——"

"You've got ten seconds to get out on your feet," said Handforth. "That's plenty of time, and if you don't choose to clear, we don't mind obliging by chucking you out."

Little turned to Handforth.

"There's no need to be violent, old man," he said quietly. "The chap is harmless by the look of him. I'm sorry, Mr. Ford, but I should advise you to go. Good afternoon."

He held out his fat hand, and Mr. Ford took it.

I was watching casually, and I rather wondered why the fat boy should have shaken hands. Then I ceased to wonder, for I spotted something which escaped the notice of the other juniors.

As the pair gripped hands, I caught a glimpse of something white. And then I knew the truth.

During that brief handshake a scrap of paper passed from Little to the stranger.

It was this paper, evidently, which the new fellow had been writing in his study—in preparation for this handshake, if it should be necessary. I needed no telling that the paper contained a message.

How was Little connected with Ford? What was there between the two? I didn't quite like the look of things, for I was sure that Fatty Little was a thoroughly decent sort, and I was just as sure that Montgomery Ford was a rascal.

The latter had seen Fatty in Holborn by sheer chance, and he had lost no time in coming to the school. He was an acquaintance, and Little evidently did not welcome him.

The man tried to look unconcerned.

"If you don't choose to know me, I can't do any more," he said gruffly. "But I can tell you, Master Little, that you're not the gent I took you to be. I'm disappointed in you."

He carelessly turned away, and I saw him give a hasty glance at the paper. It was clumsily done, and I did not miss it. But the man was not aware of the fact that I was watching him closely.

When he looked up, there was a different expression on his face, and he placed one hand in his pocket.

"Well, I'll be going," he said briskly. "Maybe, I've made a mistake. Come to think of it, you don't look just like the young gentleman now. Perhaps it's your brother, or your cousin, I'm thinking about. Well, good afternoon!"

He turned on his heel, and went out. Jimmy Little looked relieved, and his face broke into a sunny smile.

"Now we'll see about tea," he said cheerfully.

"You can't diddle me," sneered Fullwood. "Those two know one another, an' it's my opinion that Little is a rotten cad! He's pally with that horsey-lookin' bounder, although he won't admit it. I'll bet the pair have been arrangin' a few bets, or somethin'."

Little turned on his heel.

"What's that you said, Fullwood?" he asked calmly.

"Nothin'—to you!" snapped the cad of the Remove.

"You said something insulting about me, anyhow," exclaimed the fat boy. "I don't allow that sort of thing."

"You—you don't allow it!" stuttered Fullwood.

"No, I don't!"

"Why, you cheeky new kid——"

"And I treat cads in this way," said Little grimly.

He seized hold of Fullwood, much to that junior's alarm. The other fellow watched with joy. Fullwood had made some insulting remarks, and if the new boy made him pay, he would add to his popularity. A fellow who took insults from Fullwood lying down was not considered much of a sport.

Fullwood was raised in the air like a feather. The next second he came down upon Little's knee, face to the ground.

Slap! Slap! Slap!

The fat boy's hand rose and fell, and the juniors yelled.

"Go it, Fatty!"

"That's the stuff to give him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, my hat! A spanking for Fully!" yelled Watson. "Oh, you naughty boy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Slap! Slap! Slap!

Fullwood struggled and roared, but it was useless. He was held tight, and he received the ignominious punishment against his will. Finally, Little allowed him to go, and Fully rolled to the ground.

"I may be fat," said the new boy, "but I'm not helpless!"

"You—you—you——"

"Yah! Dry up, you cad!" hooted the crowd.

Little went indoors quite calmly. He had raised himself a good deal higher in the estimation of the Remove. He was a novel kind of fat boy. He was genial, he was good-tempered, and he was able to take care of himself. It was quite evident that he was not willing to put up with any nonsense.

"Good man!" grinned Watson. "He's the right sort!"

"Begad! Rather, dear old boy," smiled Sir Montie. "I am beginnin' to think that Little is a decided acquisition to the Remove—I am, really! He's capable of lookin' after himself, anyhow!"

But what was the mystery concerning the unwelcome Mr. Ford? I'll admit that I was very curious. And I had an idea that I should be doing Little a good service by looking into the matter.

There was something wrong somewhere. But what?

And what was the message which Fatty Little had given to Mr. Ford?

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE TRACK!

TOMMY WATSON grunted.

"Drizzling," he said disgustedly, turning away from the study window. "I thought the weather was going to turn out rotten."

"Never mind about the weather," I exclaimed, bustling into the study. "Cleared away the tea things? Good! Get your coats and caps on, my sons. I've got a pass-out for the three of us from Fenton. We're O.K. until half-past eight. Fenton's a good sort."

"Really, old boy, what is the good of goin' out on an evenin' like this?" asked Sir Montie mildly. "I fail to see——"

"We're going to get on a motor-bus in Holborn," I explained, "and we're going to get off the 'bus at the top of Kingsway. Then we're going to walk down to the Stoll Picture Theatre, and have an evening's enjoyment. How's that?"

"Oh, ripping!" said Watson heartily. Sir Montie beamed.

"I am willin' to admit that the idea is first-class," he said. "We have only been to the London Opera House, as it used to be called, once before, an' the show was astonishin'ly fine. I'm quite keen on goin', Nipper."

"Then get ready," I said briskly.

"What about prep?" asked Tommy Watson.

"We'll worry about prep. when we come back," I replied. "If we hurry off now, we shall be in time to get good seats before the crowd comes along. That place generally fills up between six and seven."

My chums lost no time, and, five minutes later, we sallied out in the drizzle and walked into Holborn. The evening was certainly a "beast." In addition to the drizzle, there was a sign of fog in the air. I looked up into the sky, and shook my head.

"This fog will get worse before long," I said. "I shouldn't be surprised if we have to walk back. The 'buses won't be able to run in thick fog."

"Well, don't anticipate trouble," said Watson. "And even if we do have to walk, the distance isn't far. In fact, it's hardly worth taking a 'bus now. If it was fine, I'd rather walk."

As Tommy had said, the distance was

certainly not far. Only just up High Holborn, and we were at the top of Kingsway. We walked down that wide thoroughfare, and soon came to the gigantic building which, designed and constructed as an opera house, had been turned into a successful picture theatre.

"Where shall we sit?" asked Watson. "Circle? One-and-three each, isn't it?"

"Oh, we'll go in the stalls," I said. "They're only two-and-four, and they're the finest seats in the house. There's a queue waiting for the circle, anyhow, and I don't fancy standing in a giddy queue."

So we walked up the wide steps, and I purchased three stalls. Then we entered the great entrance-hall, and were soon down on the floor of the building. The whole floor was one price, and we could sit where we liked—provided we didn't sit on somebody else. And it's quite possible to do that when you go into a dark picture theatre while the show is on.

We found three seats together, seven rows from the front. They were right on the centre gangway, and we lolled back in the luxurious chairs in comfort. Fortunately, a topical picture was showing, and then commenced a long "feature" film, imported from the United States. But it was a good one, and we were soon interested.

My whole attention was on the picture, a quarter of an hour later, when I heard a familiar voice quite close to me. Two people were passing down the gangway, and, as they had only just come in, they couldn't see distinctly. I could see them quite plainly, for my eyes were accustomed to the gloom.

"I think there are two together in the front row," said the familiar voice.

"Fatty Little!" I murmured, sitting up.

Then I saw that he was accompanied by Mr. Montgomery Ford. So that scrap of paper had arranged for a meeting here! It was a coincidence that I should be in the theatre at the same time; but it was a commonplace coincidence, after all.

Fatty Little was not the kind of fellow to accompany Ford into a public-house, which was probably the latter gentleman's favourite type of meeting-place. The pair couldn't very well talk out in the drizzle, and so they had come to a picture theatre.

They seated themselves in the front row, totally unaware of our presence.

'And it was quite evident that they were not interested in the screen. They sat together, talking in whispers.

"Did you spot 'em?" I breathed, turning to Montie.

"Eh? Spot whom, dear old boy?" asked Tregellis-West. "It is quite easy to see that frightful rascal, Julius Hartz, because he nearly fills the screen——"

"I wasn't talking about the characters in the film, you ass," I grinned. "Did you see the pair who just came in and sat down in the front row?"

"Begad! I'm not at all interested in people who sit in the front row—or any other old row, dear boy," said Sir Montie. "You are shockin'ly disturbin', you know. I completely missed that last subtitle——"

"Can't you asses be quiet?" hissed Watson.

"Oh, all right," I said. "But I was just drawing your attention to the fact that Jimmy Little is sitting in the front row——"

"Let him sit there," said Watson. "He's got some sense, after all. He couldn't do better than come here on a beastly evening like this."

"That coarse boulder, Ford, is with him," I explained.

"Oh!"

"Begad!"

"Now do you understand?" I asked. "I don't like that chap, and I believe he's up to some shady business with that fat ass."

"Well, he's old enough and big enough to look after himself," remarked Watson. "If he gets into trouble, it's his own affair. Stop jawing, and look at the picture. By jingo! That was a decent slosh!"

Watson gazed at the screen intently, and lost all interest in his immediate surroundings. But the arrival of Little had a different effect upon me. I lost all interest in the picture, and centred my attention upon those two seats in the front row.

Little and his companion were still talking, although, of course, it was impossible to hear even a whisper. They spoke together in the lowest of low voices, in order to avoid disturbing their immediate neighbours.

I saw Little shake his head once or twice, and it struck me that Ford was arguing with him. This went on for about twenty minutes. Then, rather to

my surprise, the pair rose to their feet and prepared to leave.

"Bend forward, you chaps," I whispered hurriedly.

Tommy and Montie obeyed just in time, and when Little passed up the gangway he did not notice us sitting there. I looked round, thinking that the pair might be bound for the lounge, in the rear, where they would be able to talk in comfort. And I was right.

"Stick tight, my sons," I whispered. "I'm going to the back. If you don't see anything of me by the time the show's over, go home, and don't worry. But I expect I shall be back soon."

Without waiting for them to reply, or argue, I seized my cap and walked up the gangway. There were only one or two people standing at the back, and it was easy enough for me to take up a position where I could look into the lounge and remain unseen myself.

Jimmy Little and Mr. Ford were sitting on one of the comfortable settees, talking together earnestly. Cups of coffee were brought to them, and they sipped this while they talked.

Then, apparently having come to a decision, they rose and passed through one of the exit doors—for there were two leading out of the lounge. I made up my mind quickly, and acted.

I didn't follow them, but hurried up the main stairs to the big entrance hall. I arrived outside, to find that the fog had increased already, and everything was looking drab and cold and miserable.

Exactly as I had expected, the fat boy and Ford emerged from one of the side exit doors. They saw nothing of me, and walked round to the front of the building, and set off up Kingsway, in the direction of Southampton Row.

I began to think that I had wasted my time, for it seemed that Little was on his way back to the school. However, it wouldn't matter much. Barely forty minutes had elapsed since Montie and Tommy and I had entered the picture theatre, and the show lasted about three hours.

The fog was not thick; I was able to shadow the pair up Kingsway without difficulty, and I kept fairly close. The fog, in fact, was a great help to me. I soon discovered that my surmise was wrong, for Little and his unsavoury companion turned into New Oxford Street and proceeded along that thoroughfare

until they turned down a road to the right, which I knew to be Southampton Street. Within a few minutes we were in Bloomsbury—quiet, dark and subdued. In the fog everything was still and ghostly. It seemed impossible that we had been in the bustle of the traffic only a few moments earlier.

I wondered what the game could be. Why was the fat boy accompanying Montgomery Ford to this quarter? There was evidently something "on" between the pair. I decided to watch closely, and I did not feel that I was taking an unfair advantage. I was certain that Jimmy Little needed advice and guidance. He was being led away by the smooth-tongued rascal.

After a short walk, the pair entered the doorway of a drab-looking building, which I recognised as a poor-quality hotel. They disappeared into the interior, and I watched from the open.

Gazing through the open hall, I saw the pair vanish into a doorway at the rear. This, then, was Ford's temporary abode. He had taken Little home with him. Why? What could this man want of a mere schoolboy?

There was practically no hope of discovering anything by remaining in front, so I took a stroll down a little alley, and after a few minutes I came within view of the hotel's rear.

There was a fairly big yard at the back, and the wall was not very high. I jumped up, and looked at the dull building. It was indistinct and ghostly in the mist, but the lighted windows of several lower rooms were clearly visible.

I decided to risk it.

With one hop I cleared the wall, and crept along the yard until I neared the windows. They stood out much more distinctly as I approached. If any of the hotel servants happened to spot me—well, I could slip away in next to no time in that fog. I'd done things like that scores of times, while shadowing for the guv'nor.

But I was undisturbed. One of the windows was that of a room in a jutting-out portion of the building. The blind was up, and the window itself was open at the top. As I watched, I caught my breath in.

Montgomery Ford came to the window, and pulled down the blind. He did the job thoroughly, and there was no chance of my seeing within. It was a dark

blind, and the window was almost blotted out.

But I didn't mind.

There was nothing I particularly wanted to see. I was more anxious to use my ears. I glanced at the open window at the top, and I crouched next to the sill. A dull blur of voices came to me—but no distinct words.

"Well, there's nobody to spot me in this fog," I told myself.

Within three seconds I was on the window-sill, with my head on a level with the open space. And now, as I had anticipated, the voices were clear and quite loud. I could hear every word.

CHAPTER V.

THE FAT BOY'S DECISION.

MR. MONTGOMERY FORD lay back in his chair and crossed his legs.

"Well, my lad, I'm glad you've come with me," he said genially. "We can talk comfortably here. That picture theatre was all right—but we've got business to discuss, and we want privacy."

"Yes," said Jimmy Little.

He looked round the dingy apartment rather anxiously. There was nothing but old-fashioned furniture, chipped ornaments, and a miserable bit of a fire in the ancient grate.

Mr. Ford grinned as he watched his young companion.

"Ah, I know your weakness," he said, with a chuckle. "You didn't get anything in the theatre, did you—barring a cup of coffee. Hungry, I suppose?"

"I'm a bit peckish," admitted Little eagerly.

"Well, we'll soon put matters right," said Mr. Ford, rising. "I've got a few good things in the cupboard, Jimmy. While you're eating I'll talk to you—and point out the advantages of my little plan."

He rose to his feet and opened the doors of the sideboard cupboard. To Little's delight, he proceeded to take out dish after dish of expensive delicacies. The fat boy's mouth fairly watered as he gazed upon them.

"Oh, ripping!" he exclaimed. "Great cheese-cakes, what a feed!"

"It's nothing to what you'll have if



1. Fatty chastises his tormentor, Fullwood, to the immense delight of the other Juniors.

2. The Juniors were sent in all directions like ninepins as Little strode through them.

"you'll agree to my scheme," said Mr. Ford pleasantly. "Now, laddie, tuck in for all you're worth. I'll smoke."

Fatty Little needed no second bidding. He proceeded to "tuck in" at a rate which caused Mr. Ford to regard him with wonder.

Outside, in the fog, I was listening—unseen and unheard. My presence was not suspected, and the pair in the room were confident that they were quite alone. I could see nothing through that dark blind—but I heard all.

"It's this way, Jimmy, my lad," said Mr. Ford, as he lit a long, black cigar. "You and I are fairly old friends—we've met before, haven't we? We know one another thoroughly—and I think you rather like me."

Jimmy Little nodded and grunted—his mouth was too full for speech.

"It happened when you were at that private school, down in Kent," went on Mr. Ford reminiscently, as he lay back and closed his eyes. "I bought the old circus to the town for two days, and I spotted you as you were sitting in the three bob seats with some of your pals. That's right, isn't it?"

"Yes, Mr. Ford," said the fat boy. "We'd seen your circus advertised for a week before that, so when it came we paid up and went in. And, if you remember, we thought the show wasn't worth the money—"

"That's right, laddie—that's right enough," admitted Mr. Ford. "I happened to hear you talking about it as you were going out—grumbling, in fact, and I took you aside and explained things. Several of my best turns weren't appearing that day, and the whole show was upside down. By jip, Jimmy, I was fairly knocked over when I saw you, because I knew you were just the fellow I'd been looking for for years. A real, genuine fat boy! No padding, no swindle—the real goods!"

Little grinned.

"No need to be personal," he remarked.

"Personal!" echoed Mr. Ford. "My dear fellow, this is a business talk—and the business mainly concerns your bulk. We've got to be personal, in a way. You're fat, and you mustn't take offence because I speak about it."

"I was only joking," mumbled Jimmy, with his mouth full.

"Yes, I fairly gloated when I set eyes

on you for the first time," went on Mr. Ford, laying back in his chair again. "As a circus proprietor—as a showman of fifteen years standing, I recognised in you the finest turn I could possibly have in my show, and you were a schoolboy, in a good school, and of good parentage. I thought the case was hopeless—until I had a chat with you."

"I'm afraid it's hopeless now, Mr. Ford—"

"Now, none of that!" interrupted the circus proprietor. "If it's humanly possible, I'm going to secure your services for Fordelli's Gigantic Circus. The whole show is on a better footing now—it's one of the most palatial concerns on the road."

"Why, is it bigger now?" asked Fatty.

"Bigger!" Mr. Ford laughed heartily. "Why, laddie, I've added new capital to the business, and the circus is now simply a travelling palace. Luxury galore—a sumptuous life for any gentleman. By jip! you've only got to see it. The caravans are like royal coaches! I've had one made especially for your benefit—if you think well of my offer."

"Yes, but I don't think—"

"This caravan is the last word in luxury," went on Mr. Ford, rubbing his hands together. "Electric light, a natty little bedroom, with silks and satins and tapestries; a living room furnished in the loveliest polished mahogany; everything, in fact, conducive to comfort and ease. The larder itself in that caravan is almost as big as an ordinary living-room—and my order is that it shall always be full!"

The fat boy's eyes gleamed.

"Full of—what?" he asked eagerly.

"Food, laddie—the finest food obtainable," said Mr. Ford. "All the choicest eatables one can imagine, and a constant supply—that's what I've arranged for you. When we made that last arrangement, six weeks ago, times were bad. There's been a marvellous change since then."

"You've been pretty quick about it," remarked Little.

"We've had fifty men working on the job," said the circus proprietor. "I tell you, Jimmy, you won't know the show when you see it again. I offered you three pounds a week and all your food to appear in my show—and you agreed. Well, things went wrong—"

"Yes, the grub wasn't what you said

it would be," put in Fatty. "And after the first night I decided to clear off. Then my pater came along and took me home, and I was taken away from the school, too. That arrangement of ours, Mr. Ford, wasn't very successful, was it?"

"It wasn't. I've got to admit the truth," said the man. "But you didn't give it a fair trial, Jimmy. The food I ordered for you didn't come in, and before I could straighten things out your dad came along and took you away. I nearly got into trouble for that, too. But this time it will be different."

The fat boy made no remark; he had even ceased chewing, which was a clear indication that his thoughts were very busy. Ford sat watching him, wondering what effect his words had had.

And, meanwhile, I stood outside on the window-sill.

And now I had a perfect understanding of the whole position. I knew exactly why Jimmy Little had come with this man to such a dingy hotel. The pair were old acquaintances.

I was certainly astonished at the revelations which had been made to me. Jimmy Little had run away from his former school to appear in a circus! It was amazing, and I could only find an explanation in the fact that the junior had been fascinated and blinded to the truth by the thoughts of the free and easy life he would lead, and the amount of food he would be allowed.

As I had learned, the attempt had failed, and Jimmy had been taken away. Now, by all appearances, Mr. Ford was intent upon persuading Jimmy to go to him for a second time. I guessed that Ford had seen the fat junior quite by chance, and had immediately taken advantage of the opportunity which had presented itself.

I listened more intently than ever, feeling that I was perfectly justified in acting the part of an eavesdropper. I was justified in every sense of the word, for I knew that Montgomery Ford was a lying rascal.

Within the room, they were talking again.

"It's all very well, Mr. Ford, but I don't think I can accept your offer," said Fatty Little slowly. "I've just got to this new school, and my pater trusts me. It wouldn't be right——"

"Tush!" interrupted the man. "There's no question of right or wrong

about it. You've got to think of your own interests in this world, Jimmy. I'll just tell you what my offer is, and you can accept it or refuse it—as you like. But I can give you my word that I am treating you like a lord. You happen to be valuable to me for the circus, and I'm willing to pay you well."

"Yes, but——"

"No, don't interrupt," went on Mr. Ford. "This is what I propose, my lad. As long as you're with the circus I'll give you five pounds a week in solid cash. It's quite likely that after a month or two I'll increase your pay to seven-ten. You'll have your own caravan—the most beautiful vehicle I've ever seen—and you'll have all the food you want. You'll give your own orders to the chef, and he'll carry them out to the letter."

"It sounds all right," said Fatty, with gleaming eyes.

"It's absolutely fine!" declared Mr. Ford. "Why, in three years-time you'll be worth twenty pounds a week to anybody. I'll give you that money myself. And don't run away with the idea that there's anything degrading in circus life. This show of mine isn't a third-rate affair, remember. It's positively the biggest travelling circus on the road to-day. You'll be one of the most honoured members of my company. You'll have no work to do, except to appear in the ring for ten minutes every evening. You'll lead a life of comfort and luxury, and you'll be able to put all your wages in the bank."

"My father wouldn't agree——"

"I didn't suppose for a minute that he would," said Mr. Ford. "But you needn't consult your father about it. Just come with me, and everything will be all right. I want you, Jimmy. You're valuable to me."

The fat boy shook his head.

"But what would be the good of it?" he asked. "My father is pretty smart, you know, and it wouldn't take him long to guess where I'd got to. Within three or four days he'd find out where your circus is located, and he'd come down."

"Precisely!" agreed Mr. Ford genially. "That's just the very idea."

"But pater would take me away——"

"No, sonny, that's just where you make a mistake," said the circus proprietor.

"If you went to your dad now he would

put the ban on the whole thing. That's why I'm going to work in this way. Mr. Little will come down, and he'll see the circus as it actually is. He'll see you in your own caravan, comfortable, happy and content. I'll talk to him, and I'll guarantee that he'll be agreeable to your staying on. If he isn't—well, you can go away. There's really nothing in it. And what's more, Jimmy, I'm prepared to engage a private tutor to travel with you. So your father won't have a leg to stand on—he'll be bound to consent. But the main idea is for you to run away, and make him come down to the circus. It's the only way of proving to him that everything is above board. You see the point, don't you?"

"Yes, of course," said Jimmy. "I like the idea all right, Mr. Ford. It seems to me that everything will be gorgeous. And now that you've explained things about my pater, I'm more inclined to agree. You're sure I shall have all the grub I want, aren't you?"

"You'll have more than you can eat," declared Mr. Ford. "Look here, laddie, let's decide things this evening. There's no sense in delaying matters. The show opens to-morrow at Bristol, and I've got to go down by the mail train to night. I can't see you again, so we must—positively must—settle the thing at once."

"But but it means going away at once!"

"What of it?" asked the showman. "You're strange in this school—you don't know anybody. It'll be no wrench for you to run away. I'm going down to Bristol by the night express from Paddington. Meet me on the departure platform at a quarter to twelve. I'll have the tickets and everything. You can steal out of the school easily enough—get up after the other boys are asleep—"

"Oh, that'll be easy enough, I expect," said Fatty. "We go to bed at half-past nine, and I needn't sneak out until eleven. It'll mean getting up at about half-past ten. I'm game, but—but it's so sudden!"

"You mustn't let that worry you," said Mr. Ford easily. "Most great decisions are taken quickly. Hang it all, Jimmy, I'll be even more generous. If you'll agree to come with me for a year I'll give you six pounds ten a week, all the food you can eat, your home, and all your clothes. How's that?"

"Splendid, but——"

"But you're afraid I won't carry out my promise?" asked the showman. "We won't leave it to chance, any way. I'll sign an agreement, binding myself to carry out every observation. And you'll sign this little paper, promising to appear in my circus for a year. Now, Jimmy, let's have your final answer."

The fat boy sat still for a full minute, and his gaze was resting lovingly on the food which still remained. Food was his one weakness, and the thought of having all that he desired fascinated him. And Mr. Ford was so plausible and so smooth that Fatty was caught in the net.

"All right," he said, after a long pause. "I agree."

The circus proprietor slapped the table.

"Splendid!" he exclaimed. "That's the way, my lad! Now we can talk properly. Just put your name to this sheet of paper while I'm signing the agreement. We trust one another all right, but business is business!"

Fatty Little glanced at the piece of paper which was laid in front of him. The words were few, and merely consisted of a promise to serve Mr. Ford for twelve calendar months from the date of signing. Jimmy put his name to it without hesitation, and Mr. Ford pocketed the document.

"The agreement isn't quite ready yet," he said. "I've just remembered that it's got to have a stamp—and I'll do it to-morrow, anyhow. Now, my lad, don't forget the arrangement. Be at Paddington at a quarter-to-twelve to-night. I shall be there, on the departure platform. I shall have the tickets, and then everything will be rosy. You're in for a splendid life!"

Little rose to his feet.

"By chutney!" he exclaimed. "I shall enjoy myself tremendously after I've settled down to it," he said. "It's splendid, Mr. Ford! I shall keep all the money you pay me, and save it up."

"That's just the idea," said the showman. "How many lads of your age are able to earn ten or twelve pounds a week—for that's what it comes to, considering that you have free board and lodging. You've got to be thankful for your amazing luck, laddie."

The fat boy gazed down at his huge bulk.

"I'm blessed if I can understand why I'm worth so much!" he said. "Where

the pork-pie is the sense of paying money to see me? The public seem to have queer ideas, Mr. Ford. It's a mystery to me."

"Well, we've got to cater for the public, and so long as we give them what they want—well, we needn't worry our heads," said Mr. Ford. "All right, Jimmy, you get back to the school before you're missed, and don't forget the appointment. You know the way back to Holborn, don't you?"

"Yes, I think so," said Fatty. "I'll find my way, anyhow."

The pair went out of the room.

And, outside, I didn't shift from my position. I couldn't possibly intercept Little, even if I wanted to—which I didn't. My first concern would be to report the whole affair to Nelson Lee.

And there was no hurry about that. I remained on the window cell, motionless. Somebody was moving in the yard next door, and I had no desire to be spotted after having met with such success.

And then I heard voices again.

"Yes, you can come in now, Bill," Mr. Ford was saying. "The kid's gone, and everything is settled."

I listened more intently, and was very pleased that I had remained. Now, in all probability, I should hear the truth! For I certainly did not accept Mr. Montgomery Ford's statement as honest truth.

"Settled?" said a gruff voice. "Did the kid swallow the yarn, then?"

"Whole!" chuckled Mr. Ford.

"By thunder!" exclaimed Bill, "I thought he was a bit of a mug, but this fairly beats me! What about that yarn you were going to spin him—did you pile it on as thickly as you told me you would?"

"I piled it on so thick that I was almost afraid he'd rumble me," said Mr. Ford pleasantly. "But he took it all in—and a good thing for us he did. We've got him now, Bill, and he'll be worth all the trouble we've taken."

"You think he'll look all right in the circus?"

"As a fat boy, he'll make a tophole turn," declared the showman. "You ought to know that, Bill, without asking me. Later on we can make him do some tricks. He was pleased about the caravan!"

The other man chuckled.

"An' it's the dirtiest old box of rubbish I ever saw!" he remarked. "An' strictly speakin, the circus ain't even so good as it was, old man. Did you promise to pay the kid five quid a week?"

"It's settled at six-ten."

Bill roared.

"He'll be lucky if he sees the colour of a penny!" he exclaimed. "And the food won't be anything particular, neither. But you'll have to feed him pretty well, old man, or he'll get thin! And don't you think there's a chance that he'll write to his father as soon as he sees he's been done?"

Mr. Ford grunted.

"The brat won't have a chance," he said. "As soon as we get to Bristol I'll take him straight on to the ship—pretending that I'm going to see a friend. Then I'll make him sleep there. When he wakes up after a few hours we'll be out to sea—and the next land he'll set eyes on will be South America!"

"It's easy," observed Bill.

"The whole thing came into my head when I spotted the kid in Holborn," went on Mr. Ford. "He's worth seven or eight quid a week to us, Bill. The show's not extra grand, and young Little will be able to fill one of the gaps. When we open in South America he'll be trained, too—I'll keep him busy on the voyage."

"You don't think he'll cause trouble out there?"

"How?"

"Well, he might complain to the police——"

"Not likely!" said Ford. "He can only speak English, and the police wouldn't believe him, anyway. Once in South America, he won't be able to write, or cable, or anything. I'll see to that. And we shall have a really fine fat boy for the circus without paying him a farthing. It'll make pounds a show difference to us, once we're really on the road."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," said Bill. "Well, Ford, I don't need to stay here any longer. Everything's packed up and on board, and I mean to get down to Bristol by an earlier train. I'll see you down there in the morning."

"Right you are," said Mr. Ford.

They talked for a few minutes longer, but I was not interested.

I had heard all I wanted to know—I had learnt the truth. Ford was a bigger

scoundrel than I had taken him to be. Under false promises he was getting Fatty Little to run away. Once on that ship at Bristol, he would be powerless. He would be taken to South America, and would be compelled to serve in the circus for years, in all probability. In a foreign land the boy would be helpless.

It was a deliberate case of kidnapping, and I was very grim as I slipped down from the windowsill and made my way across the yard. I felt very pleased with myself for having followed Ford and the fat boy from the Stoll Picture Theatre. My little piece of detective work had rewarded me well.

What was the next move to be?

I glanced at my watch, and found that barely an hour had passed. Tommy and Montie would still be in the picture theatre, wondering what had become of me. I decided to pay again, and to fetch the pair out. Then we would go to the school, and tell Nelson Lee all about it.

A minute later I was hastening towards the London Opera House.

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE FOG.

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST adjusted his pince-nez and stared at me.

"But, dear old boy, you are surely jokin'!" he exclaimed.

"I'm telling the truth!"

"Oh, rot!" said Tommy Watson flatly.

We were sitting in the lounge in the great picture theatre. The corner was a quiet one, and I had just told my chums what had taken place. They listened with obvious disbelief, and were fully convinced that I was attempting to pull their legs.

"Do you expect us to believe that silly yarn?" went on Watson.

"I want you chaps to realise that I'm telling the truth," I said grimly. "It's one of the worst plots I've ever heard of. That awful scoundrel means to ruin Little for life—because that's what it'll come to. I don't blame Fatty so much—the yarn sounded perfectly true, and there seemed no risk. The

new kid is all right—he's one of the best—but he's rather weak-willed when it's a matter of grub. And I honestly believe that he's accepted Ford's proposal because he thinks he'll have an unlimited supply of food."

"But, begad!" protested Montie. "It—it seems impossible——"

"These sort of things generally do," I interrupted. "But it's the truth, and I thought I'd come along and tell you fellows first. There's no immediate hurry—we've got hours of time before that train goes."

My chums were convinced at last.

"Oh, the awful fat fool!" said Watson. "He must be mad!"

"He isn't mad, and he's not a fool!" I said. "You didn't hear Ford spinning the yarn, Tommy. Placed in the same position, I believe you would have consented just the same as Little did. He doesn't know criminals as I know them, and a smooth tongue and a genial face are enough to put him at his ease. Fatty is just a good chap, trusting and easily gulled. It's not his fault in the least, and my opinion of him is in no way impaired. I merely think that he ought to ask advice first. But, of course, he won't."

"Then what's to be done, dear old boy?"

"We're going to the school as soon as we've finished this lemonade, and I shall tell the guv'nor all about it," I said. "You can bet your boots that Mr. Lee will know how to act for the best."

Five minutes later we were on our way to Holborn. The fog was getting thicker, and the drizzle was still heavily in the air. It was a miserable evening altogether, and London presented one of its worst aspects. It was an evening when a fellow would be glad to get away. Jimmy Little would have no regrets, probably, when he set off to catch the midnight train.

We reached the school, and were admitted at once—without being reported. For, of course, we had pass-outs from Fenton. In the hall we met Handforth and Co. They were all grinning at us.

"Any special joke on?" I asked.

"Not much," said Handforth. "That fat ass just knocked Gulliver down for grinning at him. He simply butted into Gully, and Gully went yards! You ought to have seen it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Church and McClure.

"The cheeky fathead has been out, too," went on Handforth. "Marched in as bold as you like, and Morrow's going to report him. That's why Gully was grinning. Those Study A cads always like to see other chaps in trouble. But I'll bet they'll steer clear of Little in future!"

I was pleased to hear that Fatty had returned; and when I passed him in the passage shortly afterwards, he seemed to be quite content and at his ease. There was a gleam in his eye, however, which meant much to me.

I made my way straight to Nelson Lee's study.

The guv'nor was at home. He lolled in his chair, reading and smoking, and he welcomed me with a smile.

"Well, Nipper, how do you like London this evening?" he asked. "This fog promises to be quite thick in another hour or two. I expect you'll be glad to get back to St. Frank's—eh?"

"I sat down on the edge of the table.

"The fact is, guv'nor, I've come here on a serious subject," I said slowly.

"Oh!" said Lee. "What's wrong, Nipper?"

"Well, to put it in a nutshell, Little, the new boy, is in the hands of a precious rascal who means to take him off to South America," I said grimly. "It's a case of kidnapping, sir, and I want you to act."

Nelson Lee placed his paper down, and lit a fresh cigarette.

"And when did you have this quaint dream, young 'un?" he inquired.

"It's not a dream," I protested. "It's the truth, sir."

"Nonsense!"

"But look here, sir——"

"My dear Nipper, I'm not going to believe that Little is in danger of being carried away to South America," said the guv'nor smoothly. "Somebody has been trying to have a joke with you——"

"Will you listen?" I roared.

Perhaps the guv'nor could see that I was exasperated. Anyhow, he lay back in his chair, and waved his hand.

"Go ahead!" he said. "I'll say something later on."

Without wasting a second I told the guv'nor of Ford's visit to the school; I told him how Ford had claimed Little

as an old friend. Then I went on to describe what I had seen in the Stoll Picture Theatre. In short, I told Nelson Lee everything that I had seen, and everything I had heard. When I had finished he was sitting up in his chair, regarding me intently.

"Is this all true, Nipper?" he asked sharply.

"Every word of it, sir."

"You're not attempting to hoodwink me?"

"Oh, don't be funny, guv'nor!" I protested. "It's all true—and you can see as well as I can that Jimmy Little is being spoofed by that rotter. It's a criminal case, by the look of it."

Nelson Lee rose to his feet.

"You are right, my lad," he said briskly. "Upon my soul, you have done splendidly. You have displayed wonderful forethought and ingenuity, Nipper. Owing to your efforts, we shall be able to frustrate this evil scheme."

"How will you set to work, sir?"

"I do not think there will be any difficulty," said the guv'nor. "I was aware that Little had partaken in some wild escapade connected with a circus—his father told the Headmaster all about it. I thought perhaps you had heard the story, and had enlarged upon it for my benefit. But I can see that the matter is no joke—but a very serious business."

"I suppose you'll arrest Ford at the station?" I asked.

Nelson Lee was thoughtful for a moment.

"We must go to work carefully, Nipper," he said. "I think I will leave matters in your hands at this end. You have proved yourself to be fully capable of dealing with a delicate situation. We can't very well act now—there is no positive assurance that Ford will be at the hotel—and he will naturally flee at the first sign of danger."

"What will you do, then?"

"Wait until midnight," said Nelson Lee grimly—"wait until the train is almost due to depart."

"Little is to meet the man at a quarter to twelve, sir."

"On the platform?"

"Yes."

"Then it is quite simple," said Nelson Lee. "We will make our plans accordingly. You will remain awake in the dormitory, Nipper, and will prevent

Little from leaving the apartment. Even if you should fail it will not much matter, since I shall be at Paddington. It will be better, however, to prevent the lad from leaving the school. I think I can trust you and your two friends—Watson and Montie—to look after Master Little."

"We'll keep him in the dormitory, sir, even if we have to tie him down," I said. "And what will you do?"

"I shall consult the police at once." "Scotland Yard?"

"No, not Scotland Yard," said Nelson Lee. "I will walk to the nearest police station, and obtain the services of two officers. We will leave the station in time to arrive at Paddington by eleven-forty-five. Ford will expect Little—and we shall turn up in the boy's place. It will be rather an unpleasant surprise for the rascal, and he will take quite a different journey. For, instead of going to Bristol, he will accompany us to the lock-up."

"Good!" I said heartily. "That's ripping, sir."

"And remember, not a single word to Little—don't let him guess for a moment that his plans are known to anybody else," said the gov'nor. "The boy is foolish, but I do not think he is wicked."

"Oh, no, sir," I agreed. "He's as steady as a rock, and there's nothing wrong with him. He's simply an ass for listening to a man like Ford. Will you punish him very heavily?"

"I don't think he will need any punishment at all," replied the gov'nor. "No, Nipper, the boy is not to blame. He is young and inexperienced, and Ford has got him under his influence. However, there is no need for us to discuss this now. It will soon be bed-time for you—and I rely upon you to carry out your part of the programme."

"Right, sir," I said. "I hope everything will be O.K."

After that I went back and reported to my chums—and they were fully determined to keep awake with me, and lend a hand in keeping Jimmy Little forcibly in bed. We could trust Nelson Lee to deal with Mr. Montgomery Ford.

The gov'nor did not sally out upon his mission until after bed-time. It was just after ten when he entered the police station, and it was getting on towards

eleven when he had explained matters to an attentive inspector.

"So you see how the matter stands," said Nelson Lee, at last. "There is plenty of proof that this man is attempting an act of deliberate abduction. I want you to let me have two officers in plain clothes. My plan is to walk up the platform at a quarter-to-twelve, and to arrest Ford with as little commotion as possible."

The inspector nodded.

"Quite an excellent plan, Mr. Lee," he said. "But I shall have to let you have uniformed men. It really doesn't matter—you'll be able to get your man without difficulty. There will be no hitch."

The two men were brought in—a sergeant and a constable. They were informed of the plan, and everything was got ready.

A taxi-cab was outside the police-station just after eleven, and Nelson Lee took his seat at once. The fog was thicker, and it was just as well to leave plenty of time for the journey.

The taxi sped along fairly rapidly, considering the state of the atmosphere, and all went well until the taxi was approaching Marble Arch, at the end of Oxford Street. Then the fog became much thicker—a dense patch of it seemed to lie over Hyde Park. And the cab was obliged to crawl.

Many minutes were lost in this way, and the driver was urged to speed up. He was about to do so just after entering Edgware Road. And then, without warning, a rather startling mishap occurred.

A big lorry, booming along at a greater speed than was safe, swerved in order to avoid a crawling motor-'bus. But it swerved too sharply, and the off-side front wheel of the taxi was caught.

Crash!

The taxi swung round, half toppled over with a smashing of glass, and its occupants were flung into a confused heap. Nelson Lee's head came in contact with something hard, and for the moment he was stunned.

A crowd formed, and there was considerable confusion.

Both the police-officers were unhurt, but they did not seem to realise the necessity for swift action. They were anxious about Nelson Lee, and when the great detective came fully to himself he

discovered that the time was ten minutes to twelve.

That knowledge awoke him fully.

"Upon my word!" he exclaimed testily. "What is the meaning of this? That train will depart within nine minutes, and we are stranded here——"

"There's a cab just across the road, sir," said the sergeant.

"Then get into it!" snapped Nelson Lee. "You ought to have gone on without me! I doubt if we can reach Paddington in time!"

They hurried across the foggy road, and jumped into another taxi. The driver did his utmost, but the fog was thick, and speed was impossible. As a result, Nelson Lee and his men met with failure.

As they rushed through the station, they saw that the time was midnight. And the express for Bristol was just steaming out of the station when they arrived at the platform.

They were too late!

CHAPTER VII.

SECOND THOUGHTS.

TEN o'clock had already struck, and the Remove dormitory was still and quiet. But three juniors were wide awake. One of them was myself, and the others were Tregellis-West and Watson.

I sat up in bed, and saw that my chums' eyes were open.

"It seems to me, dear old boy, that everything isn't goin' to pan out as we thought," whispered Montie. "I believe the chap is sound asleep, begad!"

"Looks like it," I replied. "But don't jaw, old son. Little planned with Ford to meet him at Paddington to-night, and it's pretty certain that he'll go. As the guv'nor will be there, everything will be O.K. The fat ass won't get into any trouble, and he'll be brought back after Ford has been arrested."

"What's the time now?"

"Shush! Just after ten," I breathed.

"But dry up!"

I knew well enough that Little would have to act before many minutes had passed, if he was to arrive at Paddington Station before midnight. His plan was to break bounds and to slip into Holborn.

Then he could simply get a taxi, and drive straight to the Great Western Railway terminus.

The fellow was an absolute idiot, of course. I had thought much better of him. However, I had a kind of idea that Jimmy Little was all right in the main. He had been tempted by Ford's smooth tongue and lying offers.

Ten-thirty boomed out at last, and, as the stroke died away, there came a movement from Fatty's bed. I looked up without making a sound. Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West were alert, too. Our plan was to prevent Little from going, and we meant to do it.

However, I wanted to see what the chap would do. He got out of bed, yawned, and proceeded to pull his socks over his fat feet. Then he prepared to remove his pyjamas. But he paused while doing so.

For a full minute he sat without moving.

Then he rose to his feet, paced up and down for a few minutes, and sat down on the edge of his bed. He repeated this performance three times. But at last he apparently came to a decision.

For, with a quick shake of his bulky figure, he tore off his socks, and got back into bed again. And as he lay his head upon the pillow, he gave vent to a soft, low chuckle.

I knew the truth in a moment.

Fatty Little had recovered his senses at the eleventh hour!

He had realised, at the last moment, how mad and foolish the whole project was. And he had determined to remain in bed, and to leave Mr. Montgomery Ford in the lurch.

My opinion of Fatty rose in a leap. He was the fellow I had first taken him to be, after all. His moment of weakness had passed. It was very gratifying to know that he had fought his own battle—and that he had won.

It was quite clear to me, however, that the truth would come out. He would know that when he learned of Ford's arrest. So I slipped quietly out of bed, and went over to Little—watched curiously by my chums.

"Good man!" I muttered heartily.

"Great rock cakes!" muttered Fatty, sitting up. "What—what——"

"Give me your fist, old son," I said.

"I'm jolly pleased with you! You've

proved that you're made of the right stuff!"

Little was quite staggered.

"But—but I don't understand!" he exclaimed. "What's the idea, Nipper? What do you mean by grabbing my fist? I—I've done nothing——"

"You've decided not to run away on a fool's errand," I said quietly. "You've decided to leave Mr. Ford to his own devices."

Fatty stared at me, and gulped.

"You—you know?" he breathed.

"Yes."

"But how?" he asked, after a moment. "How did you——"

"I spotted you with Ford in the Stoll Picture Theatre, and I guessed that something was wrong," I said. "I knew jolly well that that fellow was up to no good. I followed you, and I was just outside the window when you were talking to Ford in the back room of that private hotel."

"You were—listening?" asked Fatty.

"Yes; and I don't mind admitting it," I replied. "Little, you don't know what you've missed! After that chap had sent you away he spoke with another man, and then I heard the truth."

"The—the truth!"

"That rotten circus is going off to South America next week, and you were to have gone with it," I said grimly.

"Good heavens!" gasped Little. "But—but he told me——"

"He told you a whole string of lies," I interrupted. "After he'd got you, he wouldn't have paid you a cent. On the ship you wouldn't have had an earthly chance, and in South America you would be as good as dead!"

The fat boy stared at me in horror.

"And—and you knew all about it?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You knew it, and you were going to let me go?"

"Not on your life!" I replied promptly. "I may as well tell you that Mr. Lee knows all about it, and he's going to be at Paddington at two minutes to twelve, and he's going to have police with him, and Ford will be arrested for conspiracy and an attempted abduction."

"Great doughnuts!"

"Tregellis-West and Watson and I were all ready to collar you," I went on. "As soon as you were half dressed, we

were going to spring out and keep you here by force. But what has happened is a thousand times better, Fatty. You made up your own mind, and you took the right decision."

For a few moments he said nothing. Then he gripped my hand, and held it between his own plump fingers.

"I've been an awful fool, you know," he whispered. "But it was the grub! Ford promised me five quid a week and all the food I could eat, and—and when I get on the grub line I'm willing to agree to anything! But I saw the idiocy of the whole thing, and I chucked it up."

"You've done the best," I said. "That man is a crook——"

"Oh!" interrupted Fatty abruptly.

"Oh! I've just remembered something!"

"What is it?"

"Didn't you say that Ford is to be arrested?"

"Yes."

"But he's got a paper I wrote out and signed—a paper promising to serve him faithfully for a year," said Little earnestly. "I was a mad idiot to sign it, but I didn't realise——"

"It doesn't matter," I said. "He can't make use of that paper."

"But the police will find it, and my pater might get it!" said Fatty, in distress. "I—I don't want the pater to know anything, if it can be kept quiet. I'll tell you what—I've got an idea."

"Out with it!"

"I'll go to Paddington, after all——"

"Eh?"

"I'll go there, and see Ford," said Fatty eagerly. "I'll get him to show me that paper for some reason, and then I'll simply wait with him until Mr. Lee and the police arrive—so that he won't be suspicious. I'd like you to come, too, in case of accidents, but you'll have to keep in the background."

I made up my mind in a second.

"We'll all go—the four of us!" I said briskly. "There's no reason why we shouldn't be in this little coup. Dress yourselves as quickly as you can. There's not a minute to waste."

Tommy and Montie had been listening, and they raised no objections. Fatty Little was pleased and relieved, and he shivered when he realised what a narrow escape he had actually had.

We were soon dressed, and then we stole out of the dormitory, and got out

of the school by means of the gymnasium roof. I had been seriously afraid that Little couldn't manage the descent.

But it was quite easy to him. His bulk did not seem to interfere with his agility. He was surprisingly light and active.

Outside everything was foggy, although the drizzle had stopped. When we arrived in Holborn we realised that there was not much chance of getting a taxi. The fog was too thick.

So we hastened along to Chancery Lane Tube Station, and went to Paddington by underground. The fog had not interfered with the tube service, and we arrived in the great terminus just after eleven-thirty.

"Splendid!" I said. "Tons of time! Now look here, Fatty. What time have you arranged to meet Ford?"

"Quarter to twelve, on the departure platform."

"He'll have the tickets?"

"Yes; I think so."

"And then you'll take your seats in the carriage," I said. "The best thing you can do is to use some soft soap. Keep Ford nicely spoofed until you catch sight of Mr. Lee and the police. Then you can show your real hand."

"And where will you be?" asked Fatty.

"In the nearest waiting-room to your carriage," I replied. "We shall watch you, and, if I get a chance, I'll give you a signal from the waiting-room door. That's all. You'd better hurry off now."

"Right," said Fatty. "And thanks with all my heart for what you've done!"

He hurried off, and we looked after him with feelings of gladness. He was a thundering good sort, and it gave us much pleasure to see that he was doing the right thing. The fat boy of St. Frank's was proving himself to be strong-willed, after all.

He found the departure platform easily enough, and there, as he had expected, he found Mr. Montgomery Ford. The rascally circus proprietor nodded genially as Little approached him.

"Good for you, my boy!" he said. "I knew you wouldn't disappoint me. I'm going to give you the time of your life, and before many weeks have passed you'll look upon me as your own father."

"That'll be tophole!" said Fatty calmly. "And we're going straight down to Bristol to-night, Mr. Ford? Hada't we better find a decent carriage?"

An empty compartment was soon discovered, and, after they had settled themselves down, Fatty leaned out of the window and looked down the platform. I saw him at once, and waved. He went in almost immediately.

Then commenced a rather anxious time of waiting.

I was sure that Little would succeed in his object. The train was due to pull out at twelve o'clock precisely, and when the clock showed the time to be eleven-fifty-five I began to get anxious.

Where was the guv'nor?

Why hadn't he arrived?

I saw the guard getting his flag ready, and all the doors were already closed. Fatty appeared at the window again, looking up and down anxiously. He was obviously becoming alarmed. He didn't want to be taken away, after all!

"Begad! Somethin' has gone wrong!" muttered Tregellis-West.

We had the waiting-room to ourselves, and we all stood at the door. I clenched my fists grimly.

"Come on!" I said. "We're going to take a hand—By jingo! Fatty's jumped out of the train! He's coming—"

"Ford's after him!" said Watson excitedly.

Little, knowing that there was only a few seconds left, had decided upon the only course. He jumped up before Ford could hold him back. One leap, and he was out of the train. He streaked across for the waiting-room.

And the circus proprietor ran after him!

Fatty burst in, breathless.

"Mr. Lee hasn't come!" he panted. "I've got that paper—I snatched it at the last moment! The train's going out in two ticks—"

Ford rushed into the waiting-room.

"You little fool!" he raved. "What's the matter with you? The train's going in—By thunder! What the—"

"On him!" I said fiercely. "We'll collar the scoundrel ourselves!"

"Good egg!"

Mr. Ford was overwhelmed in a moment. Fatty's weight alone was enough to hold him down. And as he

lay on the waiting-room floor, the train slowly steamed out of the station.

Before it was quite lost to sight three figures came rushing to the barrier—Nelson Lee and two uniformed police officers. They had arrived too late, and, of course, I found out the reason shortly afterwards.

"Hold him tight!" I said rapidly.

I went outside, and waved my hands.

"Guv'nor!" I roared, careless of attracting attention. "Mr. Lee!"

Nelson Lee saw me and heard me, and— Well, there's practically nothing else to say. Mr. Montgomery Ford was

taken prisoner by the police and hauled away. Fatty Little went back to the school with us, and on the way the guv'nor gave him a quiet, kindly little lecture.

In the finish, the affair was hushed up, and I think Mr. Ford was brought before the magistrate on another charge altogether. Anyhow, we didn't see anything more of him.

And there is not the slightest doubt that Jimmy Little will listen to no more offers of employment—for the sake of grub! The fat boy of St. Frank's had learned his lesson!

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INTRODUCTION.

ROBERT GRESHAM, inventor of the *Solar Monarch*, an airship designed to travel through space, decides to put his theories to the test by making a journey to the moon and other planets. He is accompanied by

FRANK HILLSWORTH and **MACDONALD GUTHRIE**, both wealthy young adventurers; **PROFESSOR PALGRAVE**, a renowned scientist; and **ABBIE**, a burly negro, who acts as cook and engineer. The airship is secretly constructed in England. At last everything is in readiness to start. The adventurers are aboard, and as Gresham pulls a lever the *Solar Monarch* shoots up into space. The moon is reached in a week, the projectile attaining a speed of 2,000 miles an hour. The surface of the moon appears destitute of life, but the explorers learn, after many exciting adventures, that the dark fissures and caves are inhabited by strange monsters. They return to the *Solar Monarch*, and set off for Venus. En route, they pass through Weidhoff's Comet, and after attaining a speed of 80,000 miles an hour reach the planet Venus. The strange sights and people they encounter in this world of whiteness will be told in the following chapter.

Through the Howling Cyclone.

THE weird monster lurched towards them rapidly, and Frank unslung his rifle and bent towards Gresham.

"Shall I take a shot at him?" he queried eagerly. "In two minutes it will be too late."

Gresham glanced at the toad-like object

now barely twenty yards from them, and made up his mind swiftly. He followed his young companion's example, and unslung his gun.

"It will be the wisest course for us to shoot at the same moment," he suggested. "Then there will not be much danger in it. It is too late to retreat now. It would be foolish to turn our backs towards it, unprotected."

Mac and the professor acquiesced, and the four shots rang out almost simultaneously. The creature gave a leap high into the air, and then seemed to crumple up like a punctured bladder.

It lay on the ground flat and limp. The explorers were equally surprised at the result.

"Well, I'm hanged," exclaimed Frank. "The thing must be as soft as putty. I never saw anything drop so quick in my life."

"Truly a remarkably easy creature to kill," was Gresham's opinion. "Suppose we examine it? You have got your camera, Mac? Good! I want to secure as many photos as possible."

They hurried around the milky-looking, but nevertheless foul pond, and came to a halt by the thing's side, and after taking several photographs (one being of the inside of its mouth) the four adventurers made their way back to the *Solar Monarch*.

On the way they passed several small animals, all of them being either pale green or pink in hue. Birds of grotesque form flew out of the trees by the score.

They found, on close examination, that the creamy-hued tree-bark was of a spongy nature, but the tree itself as hard as an English oak.

They reached the vessel and found Abbie comfortably seated on the ladder reading a magazine and smoking his favourite pipe. His greeting was interesting.

"By golly," he said—his usual prefix to a sentence—"dis niggah's seen an almighty queer creature."

"Why, Abbie," said Frank, "what on earth—or, rather, Venus—do you mean?"

"Well, sah, it happened dis heah way," Abbie explained, laying his magazine aside. "Dis chile was sittin' heah readin' an' smokin' when I heard a kinder flappin' noise. I looked roun', but dere weren't notin'. Den all ob a suddin a great big bird came a-flappin' past de ship."

"How big, Abbie?"

"Well, sah, I guess it were sometin' like ten feet long, an' de wings ob it—sakes, dey look jest like dose ob a mighty big bat, wid little claws at de end ob 'em."

"And how about it's head?" asked the professor eagerly.

"De head, sah, was 'most as large as de body, and seemed to be all mouf, an' it had two feahful lookin' eyes. I tought it were gwine to eat dis niggah, for suah!"

"Evidently a creature something similar to a pterodactyl, which used to roam the earth countless ages ago."

"I beg yo' pardin', sah," said Abbie, with studied politeness, "but I guess I didn't catch dat dere word."

"Well, Abbie, it really means a gigantic flying lizard. I should very much like to see one of these peculiar——"

"By golly," cried the nigger, suddenly starting up and nearly falling to the ground in his excitement, "dere comes one ob dem dis heah minute!"

"Jove! he's right!" cried Gresham, who was standing below. "Take a pot-shot at him, Frank—my rifle's unloaded!"

The huge flying monster—it was not a bird—came rapidly towards them, its bat-like wings beating the air heavily. It was green in colour, but differed considerably from a pterodactyl. Its head was altogether a different shape, whilst its eyes were smaller and narrower. In addition to this, two huge ears protruded. It came nearer and nearer, until it hovered directly over the Solar Monarch. For a moment it checked, evidently at a

loss to account for the yellow, glittering object.

In that moment Frank brought his rifle to his shoulder and pulled the trigger. With an ear-splitting scream the gigantic object wheeled round, and dropped like a stone.

When it had almost reached the ground, however, it partially recovered, and once again commenced to beat its huge wings. It gradually rose and made off over the cream-coloured forest, not before Mac had succeeded in snapshotting it, however.

"What a pity, he's escaped us after all," remarked the scientist regretfully, when they stood on deck. "Never mind, Mac secured a photo, and that's the main thing. What do you propose to do now, Gresham?"

The inventor glanced at the sun.

"Well, as it is far from evening," he said, "I suggest a cruise about. We can travel a good distance and observe everything admirably from the deck here."

Accordingly, Abbie adjourned below, and presently the screws took up their song once again.

And as the aeronef glided over the forest the four men on deck looked interestedly and eagerly over the rail; Abbie seeing everything from the engine-room windows. They passed over forest and plain, valleys and hills, but no sign of life did they see except hundreds of birds and insects, and occasionally an animal of weird figure and size.

Once Frank swore he saw a spider eighteen inches in length, and again Mac declared that a waspy insect nearly three feet long had flown from one clump of bushes to another.

It was highly interesting, watching everything from the airship, and the explorers were absorbed in it to such an extent that they failed to notice at once some menacingly black clouds rapidly appearing on the horizon behind them.

All their attention was taken up with the ground beneath. The forest was all cream coloured, and the long grass on the plains the same. Once or twice, however, they passed some trees and shrubs pale green in hue.

Suddenly Mac, who had stood upright for a moment to light a cigar, uttered an exclamation, and the lighted match dropped from his hand.

"By gosh!" he cried. "Luke ower

yonder. Did ye ever see such dark-lukeing clouds in your life?"

He pointed astern, and the other three glanced swiftly over their shoulders. The clouds were absolutely pitch black, and seemed like something solid. And they were rising at a truly appalling rate, moving across the sky like a sliding roof.

"By the look of it," said Gresham grimly, "we are in for a storm. Upon my soul, what a speed they are travelling at, and did you ever see such solid-looking fellows?"

"Which do you think will be the wisest course for us to pursue?" inquired the professor. "Drop to the ground, or continue to fly through the atmosphere?"

"Most certainly land," declared Gresham. "It would be foolish in the extreme to remain up here, with such a prospect before us. See, the storm is above our heads already."

The inventor moved towards the speaking-tube. As he did so the travellers became aware of a low, moaning sound—heard even above the roar of the suspensory screws.

Gresham looked swiftly behind him, then his eyes grew round, and his breath stopped short. About half a mile away the forest, in a straight line which extended for miles, was being lashed about as if in a hurricane. The massive trees were being bent double, and foliage, twigs, and whole bushes were being torn up and carried along.

"Too late," cried Gresham. "If we tried to land the gale would wreck us in a moment. The ship would be overturned like an empty pail. As it is, I am very doubtful whether we shall live through it."

His companions were staring with horrified eyes at the swiftly nearing hurricane. Then, as the vessel was rising in an endeavour to escape the cyclone, a slight puff of wind struck their faces, and almost at the same moment the pitch-black clouds obliterated the sun, and the landscape became darkened, until the explorers could hardly see the ground beneath them.

Then, with an abruptness that was startling, the Solar Monarch was lifted by an unseen hand and carried along at a terrible pace, rocking this way and that, and shrieking in every joint.

Mac was nearly swept off his feet, and carried overside, but the professor man-

aged to grasp the band of his Norfolk jacket in time. Then the four of them hung on the rail like leeches. To move would mean being swept off like a fly. This was the mysterious part; one would have imagined that as the ship was flying before the wind the deck would be calm. But this was not so, for although the aeronef was being carried at breakneck speed, the wind was travelling even faster—fast enough to cause a hurricane on the vessel's deck. It was a source of wonder to Gresham how his invention managed to keep her nose to the gale, and he was expecting every minute to be dashed to the ground below.

But the gallant little Solar Monarch held her own, and rode along before the wind, holding her head up high, proud of her efficiency.

By this time it was pitch dark, and Frank, although he knew the professor to be two yards from him, was unable to pierce the blackness. To talk was impossible, for the roar of the wind drowned even the hoarse whirring of the suspensory screws.

Nothing could be done except trust to Providence to spare them. They could feel the deck heaving beneath their feet like an unbroken colt.

As everything happened on this strange planet with amazing swiftness, the whole arc above them was rent in twain by a flash of lightning that seemed to crackle and spit as it tore the heavens apart.

For a moment they could see one another, the aeronef, and the flying ground beneath them with strange distinctiveness, then the grotesque scene was blotted out.

And immediately after darkness came the thunder peeled out; but thunder such as the adventurers had never before heard, not even in the heart of the tropics.

It deafened them, and rolled and reverberated unceasingly. The sound was like a score of 12-pounders being fired simultaneously, only twenty times longer in duration.

At last it was over, and Frank could feel the warm blood streaming from his ears and nose. Then a drop of rain fell, but a drop such as they had never dreamed possible. It fell on the deck and sounded even above the howl of the wind. After that more came, until the quartet were soaked to the skin. But the rain had barely started yet.

It did so a moment later, and Gresham felt himself being pressed downwards as it beat on his back.

It could not be called rain; it was coming down by the ton, like water over a fall. It beat on the deck, threatening to stave the plates in, the screaming of the water-laden screws ringing out above all else. The inventor realised that the Solar Monarch was being gradually borne to the ground.

If that happened nothing could save them, for they would be rolled along and killed in a moment. He endeavoured to raise himself up, but the force of the deluge held him down. With a super-human effort, born of despair, he wrenched himself away from the rail and crawled to the speaking-tube. After what seemed an age of groping his hands touched it.

The telegraph was next to it, and, grabbing the handle, he signalled to Abbie to race the engines for all they were worth—to their utmost capacity.

Then he waited, trying to feel the difference in the action. After a moment it came, and he distinctly heard the angry shrieking of the fans as they tore around afresh, in spite of the water being hurled over them. To tell whether the ship was rising was out of the question. Gresham had done his best.

He thought he heard a cry from Frank, and turning his head with difficulty he saw the reason for it. Far away, on the horizon behind them, a white streak was appearing in the sky. The storm was passing. But what a difference there seemed in the speed.

It had overtaken them with lightning-like rapidity, but it seemed to be ages before that white streak widened.

As a matter of fact, the storm was passing as swiftly as it had arisen. Just then another terrific flash split the heavens, and another peel of thunder, quite equal to the last, rolled out. But after that the fury of the storm abated, and it gradually grew lighter.

The gale lost some of its violence, and the rain stopped with a suddenness which seemed like a tap being turned off.

The four soaked, aching, and wondering explorers once more drew their backs up erect and gazed at one another. With amazing swiftness the sky cleared, and while they were still looking at each other dazedly the sun blazed out, making

the wet Gresham glitter and scintillate like burnished gold.

"Hoots," Mac exclaimed in a hoarse voice, "luke down there!"

He pointed to the ground—or, rather, what had been the ground when they had last looked. Now, however, there was nothing but a rolling expanse of water—milky water, with angry waves chasing one another across the surface.

"The sea!" cried Frank. "By Jove, we must have been blown a goodish way. What do you think of it, Mr. Gresham?" he added, turning to the inventor, and wringing his clothes out.

"I can make nothing of it," Gresham said. "Presumably the storms on Venus are all like the one we have just experienced. If that is the case I have no wish to remain on this globe for any lengthy period, I can tell you. But I call the behaviour of the Solar Monarch splendid; every minute I expected her to crash to the ground."

"The force of the storm was decidedly appalling," the professor put in. "An American cyclone is a gentle breeze in comparison."

"Weel, thank guidness it's over," Mac exclaimed. "I'm thinkin' its no a bad suggestion tae gang below and change our claes. I'm wet tae the skin, includin' everything in ma pockets——"

"How about these?" laughed Frank, holding out a couple of five-pound notes in twenty pieces. "I'm afraid I couldn't get them cashed now."

All signs of the storm had vanished. There was not a cloud in the sky, and the wind had dropped as if by magic, but the heat was terrific. The waters, too, had subsided in a surprisingly little time. At that moment Abbie's black face appeared at the conning-tower door, looking scared and perspiring.

"By golly," he gasped, "I tought de end of dis heah world had come, sartin!"

"Not just yet, Abbie," said Gresham. "It was only a storm. It's all over now, you see."

"Is dat what yo' call a storm, sah?" the nigger inquired solemnly. "Sakes, dis child tought it were about free earf-quakes wid a volcanic corruption frown it!"

The four white men roared at Abbie's quaint words, gravely spoken as they were. Then, noticing how high they were above the sea, Gresham told the

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negro to lessen the velocity of the suspensory screws, for they were rising higher and higher every moment.

So Abbie disappeared once more, and presently they were gliding along, at an increased rate, barely sixty feet above the level of the sea. Nothing but the milky whiteness could be seen, all signs of land had vanished, and it would very soon be night, for the sun was nearly on the horizon.

For some strange reason the adventurers were all feeling thirsty, and as this thirst increased, they were forced to admit that the water that had inadvertently entered their mouths during the storm was the cause of it. It had tasted slightly sweet, but otherwise no different from ordinary water.

"Well, if it acts like salt, and makes one more thirsty than ever," said Gresham, "I shall certainly refrain from filling the tanks with it."

For an hour the Solar Monarch progressed onward, then Frank, who, telescope in hand, was keeping the look-out, called:

"Land-ho!"

Ten minutes later they could distinguish a low-lying coast-line. In one spot this seemed irregular and a haze hovered over it. Mac was the first to realise what this portended. He turned swiftly to Frank.

"Hoots, mon," he cried excitedly. "De ye ken what yonder place wi' the mist hoverin' ower it is?"

"No, I can't say I ken what it is, Mac."

"Weel, I'll tell ye; it's a city! If ye luke through the glass ye'll see the houses, I'm thinking."

The City by Night—The Venusites' Attack.

THIS startling declaration of Mac's made Frank and the others stare at him for a moment in astonishment. Before any of them could speak the Scot had snatched the glass from Frank's hand.

"I was right," he cried a moment later, looking up with flushed face, "you can distinguish the buildings and houses, an' by the luke o' them they're higher than the biggest sky-scraper in the whole of the United States!"

"Are you sure, Mac?" questioned the inventor curiously.

"Ay, sure enough. Take a peep through this telescope if ye dinna believe me, and ye'll no be long in doot!"

They all did so, and at the end of two minutes they were all agreed that Mac was right—that they were approaching the first city!

It was a moment of excitement for them all, and the first thing Mac thought of was his beloved camera. He was for pressing on at all speed; but the professor, more thoughtful, intervened.

"Considering the lateness of the hour," he remarked, "you must admit that it would be unwise to act on Mac's suggestion."

"How do you make that out?" Frank queried eagerly, for he was as keen on going as Mac was.

"Well, for one thing," said Professor Palgrave, "in less than an hour darkness will fall. For another, we are unaware of these Venusites' size and power. Perhaps they have means of destroying us that we can never dream of. No, no, Frank, it would be very much safer and wiser to wait here until some few hours after darkness has fallen. Then we can advance unperceived and examine the place by searchlight. If they are not all asleep—I expect and hope they will be—the light will doubtless startle them."

"I agree with you, professor," put in Gresham at this point. "You must remember, boys, that we are in an unknown land and among unknown people—people whom we have never seen, and of whom, therefore, we can form no opinion, much less gauge their powers."

"As the professor points out, in all probability the inhabitants of the town before us will have retired to rest when we arrive. Then we can advance under cover of darkness and explore at our leisure. It is possible these people will take us for enemies, and will try to destroy us with all possible expedition."

"We must put ourselves in their place. Suppose, for a moment, you were walking along the Old Kent Road, in London, and you suddenly saw an apparition the like of which you never imagined to be possible—in fact, people from another world, whom you thought were intent on killing you. What would you do? Why, most probably gather a body of people together and endeavour to destroy the

(Continued overleaf.)

dangerous thing. "See," the inventor added, "the sun is already sinking behind the ocean; in another thirty minutes it will be night."

"Which reminds me that I'm feeling tea-i-fied," laughed Frank, "so I vote we adjourn below and have a good tuck in. That will serve to fortify us for the night."

Abbie excelled himself. The dinner—they had the two meals in one—he served was luxurious, and it was quite possible to imagine oneself in a West-End restaurant.

The way the black worked was a wonder. He seemed to thrive on it. He was always up first, and worked throughout the day cheerfully and never seemed to get tired or worn out.

The explorers quite expected, remembering how Abbie's attention was needed in the engine-room, to find a cold, auxiliary kind of meal awaiting them. No such thing, however. As I have already said, the dinner was a triumph. And it was surprising how clean he looked, dressed in white ducks and cook's cap. His face shone like burnished copper, and the good humour written on it seemed never to fade.

And yet, when, twenty minutes later, the four white men were on deck, and Gresham telegraphed below, Abbie was there, in the engine-room, awaiting orders; almost before he had had time to clear the saloon table.

"The man's a marvel!" Professor Palgrave declared, passing his cigar-case round. "A treasure among treasures, Gresham."

"He's all that," returned the inventor; "and I envy you, Frank, for having such a man for a servant."

"At the present he's servant for us all," answered Frank, "so you've nothing to envy me about that I can see."

They were sitting out on deck, reclining languidly in folding chairs. The Solar Monarch was stationary, hovering over the creamy ocean like a great bird. The scream of the fans had so accustomed itself to the travellers' ears that now they could hear one another's voices quite distinctly, and without the necessity of shouting.

It was magnificent, sitting there. Not a breath of wind stirred, and the gentle murmur of the water below them sounded soothing and seductive.

The twilight seemed to linger, and the afterglow of the sun was a wonderful sight. The sky, now dotted with a few fleecy clouds, was for ever changing its colour.

The four men on the aeronef's deck were lost in the beauty of the scene. Presently Abbie appeared at the conning-tower door with a tray, bearing on it four cups of delicious, fragrant coffee.

"Upon my soul, Abbie," exclaimed Frank, "your surprises are never ceasing. I wonder what you will do next?"

Abbie grinned appreciatively, and taking no notice whatever of the beautiful scene before him, once more disappeared into the bowels of the ship. And so, for the next hour or so, the adventurers sat smoking and chatting, and gradually it grew darker and darker, until it was almost impossible to distinguish the sea beneath. The stars, millions in number, shone with a brilliancy unknown on earth.

Having finished their cigars and coffee, the explorers roused themselves and set about making preparations. From the shore no sign of life was visible—not even a light showed itself. Evidently the inhabitants of Venus went to bed with the sun.

Before leaving the earth Gresham had seen that a powerful searchlight had been stowed aboard the Solar Monarch. This was a new invention; not his own, but one lately put on the market by a clever American citizen.

The light was a powerful acetylene gas jet, of no great intensity in itself. The cleverness of the invention lay in the magnificent lenses. They were a marvel of construction, and when properly burning the lamp would throw a shaft of light almost equal in power to those carried on modern battleships.

A good stock of carbide had been laid in, and having charged the generator the searchlight was affixed to the deck-rail on a swivel, which allowed the shaft of light to be turned in any direction at ease.

(To be continued.)