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"Great Doughnuts!" gasped Fatty. "I'd rather be in prison!"

BACK TO THE OLD HOME

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "The Mystery of Reed's Wharf," "The Haunted School," "The Fat Boy of St. Frank's," etc. October 25, 1919.

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

BACK TO ST. FRANK'S.

BUSTLE reigned supreme.

Every St. Frank's fellow, senior and junior, was busy with something or other. There were no lessons that day. The whole school, as a matter of fact, was upside-down.

For the sojourn in London had come to an end.

During the last six or seven weeks the school had carried on in temporary premises in London, just off Holborn. We had shifted from St. Frank's, originally, because of a fire which had partially demolished the College House.

The place was re-built now, and the Ancient House had benefited by the presence of the builders and the decorators and the painters, too. The whole school had been given a spring clean, so to speak.

As it was all ready for occupation, there was no reason why we should remain a day longer in London. So we were going back—and the majority of the fellows were pleased with the prospect.

London had been all very well for a change, but we should be glad to get back to dear old St. Frank's, with its spacious playing fields, and its river and other familiar features.

The Remove was travelling by itself, accompanied, however by a couple of

prefects—to keep order. They were not likely to do much in that line, I imagined. The day was regarded as a holiday, and the juniors would probably let themselves go.

Nelson Lee, my esteemed guv'nor, would travel down some hours later than the Remove. We juniors, in fact, were to be the first to leave. And so everything was bustle and noise in the London premises.

"Back to the dear old place," said Watson cheerfully. "Good! I shall be as pleased as Punch when we get there."

"Yes, it'll be a relief," I agreed. "We've been awfully hampered up here with regard to the footer. Once we settle down at St. Frank's we can get ahead with the fixture-list, and proceed to whack every eleven we play against."

Sir Montie Tregellis-West smiled.

"I have been wonderin' if the place will reek of paint an' all that sort of thing," he said. "I loathe the smell of paint, dear fellows. It will be frightful if Study C——"

"Don't you worry your head about Study C," I interrupted. "The College House fellows will have to suffer the most from smells. Their place has been practically re-built, and it's bound to be unpleasantly new."

"I expect the paint——" began Watson.

A head appeared in the doorway.

"You chaps ready?" asked Reginald Pitt. "The 'buses are waiting in the

giddy courtyard, you know. They won't wait for ever. The train leaves London Bridge on time, and we've got to be there pretty early."

"We're ready," I said. "Just coming Reggie."

"Good for you."

Pitt went off, and a few minutes later I strolled out with my chums. There were several motor-buses waiting in the courtyard, and they were practically filled with shouting Removites already.

Morrow and Reynolds of the Sixth were standing by.

"Hurry up, kids," said Morrow briskly. "We're starting in two minutes. Can't wait for laggards. If some of you get left behind you'll have to come on by a later train—and that'll mean punishment."

I ran my eye over the crowd before mounting a 'bus.

"Everybody seems to be here," I said. "It's all right—hold hard though. Where's Study L?"

"In the building, I expect," grinned De Valerie. "Nobody's pinched it."

I looked round.

"Anybody seen Trotwood?" I asked. "Or Little?"

"They're indoors, I believe," said Owen, major. "Both the Trotwoods are trying to get Little away. But there's some grub in the study, and it would break Fatty's heart to leave it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"They'd better be called out," I said, grinning.

Jimmy Little, the new boy in the Remove, was the fattest fellow on record. He was of truly terrific size, and his appetite was large in proportion. He could eat until any ordinary fellow was dazed with astonishment.

Eating, in fact, was his one weak point. He would get himself into tremendous trouble because of his appetite. In all other respects he was one of the best; but food was his one vice. He couldn't resist it.

Just as I was about to hurry indoors, one of the Trotwood twins appeared. It was impossible to tell which one it was by sight. For Nicodemus and Cornelius were alike as two peas in the same pod.

"Where's Fatty?" roared a dozen voices.

"Indoors—gorging!" shouted Nicodemus—for it was the elder twin. "We can't shift the ass!"

"A crane couldn't shift him!" grinned Pitt.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I want a dozen fellows to come in, and yank him out by force," said Nicodemus. "It's the only way——"

"Rats! We're not having any!"

"But, my good friends——"

"I should leave the fat ass alone," said Bob Christine. "If he likes to miss the train, that's his look-out. In any case, it's a question if we could get him on one of these 'buses. He'll want a whole one to himself!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Time's up," said Morrow. "We can't wait any longer, Trotwood."

"My goodness! Gimme just one minute!" gasped Nicodemus.

He rushed into the school again, and charged into Study L. The juniors' studies here had been lettered the same as at St. Frank's, so that no confusion should be caused.

Fatty Little was seated at the table, and before him were a number of cakes and pastries, and a pile of sandwiches. He grinned cheerfully as Nicodemus rushed in. Jimmy was a very amiable fellow.

"Come on!" yelled Nicodemus. "The 'buses are starting!"

"Really my dear Nicodemus, I am waiting for Little," said Cornelius mildly. "It would not be polite for us to go without him——"

"He's coming too, the ass!" said Trotwood major.

"Certainly," agreed Little. "Just give me three minutes to finish——"

"You duffer! There's not a second!"

"But I can't leave this grub——"

"You must!" roared Nicodemus.

"You fat gorgier! The 'buses are starting now! Can't you hear 'em? Leave that stuff on the table and come along!"

Jimmy Little shook his head firmly.

"I couldn't do it!" he declared.

"You—you——"

"It would be a waste of good food," said the fat boy. "I don't mind taking it with me, if you'll wait a couple of minutes while I wrap it up——"

"We can't wait for anything!"

howled Nicodemus. "Help me to force the silly idiot out of this study, Corny! Lend a hand!"

"Really?" said Cornelius mildly. "I can't hear it."

"What?" gasped his brother. "Can't hear what?"

"You said there was a band——"

"I didn't!" yelled Nicodemus. "I asked you to lend me a hand, you ass! We've got to get Little out of this study!"

"Yes, I believe it is muddy," said Cornelius. "I hope my best trousers do not get splashed—Really, my good Nicodemus! Why did you push me? Oh! you are awfully rough."

"You deaf fathead!" roared Nicodemus. "Help me to shift Little!"

"Oh," exclaimed the other Trotwood. "Why didn't you say so at first?"

Nicodemus didn't trust himself to speak. He turned his attention to Fatty Little.

That hungry junior was eating away unconcernedly and calmly. And he didn't move a hair when his study chums hurled themselves at him.

They charged, they pulled, they wrenched—but they couldn't shift him. His weight seemed to hold him down to the chair like a vice.

"You—you greedy, gormandising, guzzling bounder!" gasped Nicodemus. "Aren't you coming? Can't you leave those few sandwiches——"

"But think of the waste——"

"Blow the waste!" hooted Trotwood. "Are you coming——"

"My good Nicodemus, you are exciting yourself over nothing," said Cornelius softly. "The motor omnibuses are no longer in the courtyard. They have gone!"

"Gone!" panted Nicodemus. "Then——then we've lost that train! All because of this——this walking whale! We shall be caned now, or given detention, as soon as we get to St. Frank's. That's a fine way to begin, isn't it?"

Jimmy Little gave a little sigh of satisfaction.

"I've finished," he said calmly. "I don't suppose I shall want anything else until——"

"This time next week, I should think!" snapped Nicodemus.

"Until we get to the station," ex-

plained Little. "And you needn't be in such a flurry, Nick. There are plenty of taxi-cabs, and we can get one in Holborn—and reach London Bridge first, perhaps."

Nicodemus cooled down.

"Well, that's not a bad idea," he admitted.

"We shall have time to visit the refreshment room for some grub," said Little with satisfaction. "We shall need something to sustain us on the journey!"

"You're the limit!" said Nicodemus blankly. "After eating enough for a dozen, you talk about raiding the refreshment-room! It's a wonder to me you don't have your grub in a pail, and shovel it into your tummy!"

The fat boy was not at all offended. He was constantly chipped about his appetite, and he was used to sarcastic remarks.

They seized their bags and hurried out. The 'buses had certainly gone, and the courtyard was strangely quiet in consequence. In Holborn the juniors were fortunate enough to secure a taxi within a minute.

"Drive to London Bridge Station," said Little briskly.

"Wot, the three of you?" asked the cabby.

"Yes, of course."

"I dunno whether the old keb will do it," said the man. "She wasn't built for carryin' helephants! But I ain't afraid of anything except the tyres. If they'll stand it, the old engine won't jib!"

The twins bundled in, and then Fatty squeezed himself through the doorway. The springs of the cab flattened somewhat, but nothing disastrous happened. And the trio were soon bowling along towards London Bridge.

They arrived in plenty of time for the train.

The Remove, in fact, had only just got there, and two of the 'buses were still disgorging their passengers. There was a yell when the occupants of the taxi were recognised.

"Here's Fatty!"

"Mind how you get out, Little!" yelled Pitt.

The Trotwoods were already out, and Jimmy Little proceeded to squeeze himself out of the taxi. As some of the

fellows had feared, however, he had become jammed, half in and half out!

"Great doughnuts!" gasped Fatty. "Gimme a hand, Nicky!"

Nicodemus pulled with all his strength - but Little remained jammed.

"Rescue. Remove!" roared Pitt. "Fatty's wedged!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"All hands to the pump!"

"Here, steady, young gents!" protested the taxi-driver. "If you ain't careful, you'll pull the old keb in 'alves! I never seed such a youngster in all me born days, blowed if I 'ave!"

Fatty Little was still struggling. A crowd of yelling juniors swarmed into the taxi from the other side. And while some juniors pushed, others pulled. And at last Fatty was successfully released.

"Phew!" he whistled. "I shall have to be more careful with these giddy things in future!"

"I think we'd better go and tell the station master here to put on a special carriage for you, Fatty," said Handforth. "There's no telling what you'll do once you're let loose in an ordinary compartment. Hold on! I was talking to you, Little!"

The fat boy looked anxious.

"But the train goes in ten minutes!" he exclaimed.

"What of it?"

"I've only just got time to have a snack——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And he had enough for a dozen before he left the school!" sighed Nicodemus Troowood. "I really think the poor fellow ought to be examined by a specialist. I think he must be suffering from some awful disease."

"Exactly—a healthy appetite," grinned Pitt.

Fatty Little very nearly lost the train, for he left it until the last moment before he could be dragged away from the refreshment room. He succeeded in piling into a crowded compartment at the last second.

And as the train was an express, and wouldn't stop until it reached Bannington, Fatty's presence in this compartment was not welcome. Already full, he overwhelmed it. Handforth was there, too—and trouble naturally followed.

There were many signs of this when

the juniors tumbled out of the compartment at Bannington, after a terrible time of trouble and strife. Mc Clure's face, for example looked as though somebody had trodden on it; Church was suffering from a black eye; Owen major had a cut lip. Handforth had a queer look about him, and it could be traced to the fact that his nose was considerably swollen.

About the only fellow who came out of the compartment untouched was Fatty Little. He jumped to the platform as serenely lighthearted as ever, his face grinning with good nature.

"Well, we had a pretty good ride, after all," he said.

"A good ride!" groaned McClure. "When the train gave a lurch that great carthorse flopped on the top of me, and I thought I was dead for a minute. My hat! It was worse than an avalanche!"

However, Mc Clure did not seem to be particularly injured, and he had probably made the worst of his misfortunes. And when the fellows made for the local train, it was surprising to see how everybody avoided the carriage in which Fatty Little had planted himself.

He was left in sole possession, save for the companionship of the two Trotwoods. They were his study mates, and they considered it their duty to stand by him.

Bellton was reached in due course, and the little station was looking just as forlorn as ever when we trooped out upon the platform. But the day was fine, and we had come back to St. Frank's.

Everybody was in high spirits.

"Seems like the first day of term!" remarked De Valerie, as we made our way out of the booking office.

"Not likely!" said Hart. "On the first day of term the fellows are generally looking a bit glum—it's a natural effect after having been at home for some time. But this is different."

"Yes, I suppose it is," agreed De Valerie. "And now to see the new St. Frank's. I wonder if they've made a complete mess of the Collego House? Not that it interests me at all!"

"But it interests me!" put in Bob Christine. "By George! If those builders have spoilt the look of the place, we'll have a terrible revenge. Who's going to be the first to set eyes on the new show?"

Several juniors were tempted into a race. But Sir Montie and Tommy Watson and I went more sedately, for we were in no particular hurry to get there.

"Well, we've had a good deal of excitement in London," I remarked, as we strolled through the village. "And now we'll have some peace and quietness until the end of the term."

"Yes, begad!" agreed Sir Montie. "That's the idea, old boy."

But the peace and quietness we were likely to get at St. Frank's in the near future was of a very extraordinary nature. For, to be exact, ructions—with a capital R—were destined to break out almost at once!

CHAPTER II.

STARTLING NEWS.

"RIPPING!"

"Oh, fine!"

"Couldn't be better!"

All the fellows were satisfied with the outward appearance of St. Frank's as the old school came into view. The building contractors had cleared their materials away to the last chip, and there was nothing to show that a whole army of workmen had lately been busy on the premises.

The College House, which had been burnt out, didn't even look new. In fact, there was very little difference to be seen in the brickwork. But both Houses and all the other buildings had been painted. The windows, the doors, the gutters—everything had been smartened up.

"Nobody would ever suspect there'd been a fire in the College House," remarked Watson as he gazed upon it.

"Why, the walls are new——"

"Of course they're new," I interrupted. "The walls didn't collapse—they were as sound as a bell even after the fire had burnt itself out. When that place was constructed, people knew how to build, my sons. It was only the roof that fell in—and you can see that the roof is new."

We were glad to get back in the old Triangle. It was much more grassy than usual, for disuse had had its effect. I led the way across to the Ancient House, and entered the lobby.

"My word," said Watson. "What a change!"

The change, indeed, was remarkable. The walls were bright and fresh, and all the paintwork was new, and in excellent taste. Going along to the Remove passage we found that the juniors' studies had also been dealt with. The doors were receiving much attention from the juniors.

For the letters were painted in gold on a dark background and looked extremely neat. It was a problem how long the neatness would remain. The interior of Study C was on a par with everything else. It had been repapered, whitewashed, and painted. Everything was spick and span.

"I'm not sure that I like it so well," I said, after a moment. "There's something cosy about a place where the paint's dirty and the wallpaper's a bit worn. This looks rather stiff and formal——"

"Don't you worry," said Watson. "It'll soon get soiled!"

We decided to go down into the common room, and we were striding along the passage when we were astonished to see a strange man in a cap and gown walking towards us. He was a big, powerful man, with a face which resembled that of a prizefighter—a bulldog face—with a protruding chin, and heavy eyebrows.

"Who's this merchant?" breathed Watson. "I didn't know there were any new masters coming——"

"I expect he's a visitor," I said.

The man was about to brush past us, but he paused, and seized Tregellius West's arm fiercely.

"One moment, boy," he said. "If you appear in public wearing that waistcoat again I will punish you severely."

Sir Montie simply gasped.

"Begad! I—I don't know what you mean, sir!" he protested. "Nobody has raised any objection to this waistcoat before——"

"I don't want to argue with you," snapped the other. "Understand, once and for all, that I will have no fancy vests worn in this school!"

"But——"

"Enough! Go and remove that waistcoat."

Sir Montie's eyes flashed.

"You will pardon me, sir, but I won't do anything of the sort," he said grimly.

"You—you won't obey my orders?" thundered the man.

"Why should I? I don't know you, an' you've got no right to order me about," said Sir Montie. "This waistcoat is in perfect taste, an' nobody has ever complained before. There is no rule here that a fellow can't wear a fancy vest if he wants to. I shall be obliged, my dear sir, if you will be good enough to mind your own business!"

"Hear, hear!" I murmured.

The stranger was red in the face with fury.

"You—you insolent young jackanapes!" he bellowed harshly.

"Eh?"

"You impudent puppy!"

"Begad!"

"I intend to receive obedience——"

"Pardon me, sir, but we've never been told that it is our duty to be obedient to you," I put in. "I don't see why you should——"

"Boy," roared the man. "Do you know who I am?"

"No, sir. I haven't had the—er—pleasure of meeting you before——"

"I am your new Headmaster!"

"Wha-a-at?" gasped Tommy Watson.

"Begad, I——"

"I am Mr. Howard Martin, the Headmaster of this school!" shouted the man.

"And I will have you know that I will put up with no nonsense from any junior boys—or, for that matter, from any senior boys, either. I intend to have absolute discipline and obedience in this establishment!"

We stared at the stranger blankly.

"You—you are the new Headmaster?" I asked, still staring.

"Yes, boys, I am!"

"But what of Dr. Stafford——"

"Bah! Do not mention Dr. Stafford to me," snapped Mr. Martin. "Dr. Stafford remained in London, and where he is now doesn't interest me in the slightest. From this moment onwards you are to recognise me as your Headmaster. It is my intention to rule St. Frank's fairly but firmly—and under no circumstances will I permit any boy to wear ridiculous clothing."

"But, my dear sir——" began Montie.

"That is sufficient!" snapped Mr. Martin.

He stalked away down the passage,

leaving us staring after him as though in a dream. A few of the juniors had collected in the background, and they stared, too. It was absolutely amazing.

"There must be something wrong!" panted Watson. "That chap must be mad. It's dotty to suppose that an awful bounder like him can be our Headmaster! And what about Dr. Stafford? Ain't we going to have him back?"

I looked grim.

"It seems to me, my sons, that we've been double crossed, as they say in the States," I exclaimed. "Without letting us know a word, the Governors have pushed the dear old Head out, and appointed this—this bully in his place."

"Great pip!" exclaimed Handforth fiercely. "It can't be true—it simply can't be! Don't you remember the fuss we made before we went to London? Don't you remember how the whole school demanded that Dr. Stafford should be retained?"

Reginald Pitt nodded.

"Yes, we do remember it," he said grimly. "And we also remember that the Chairman of the Governors, General Ord-Clayton, was the prime mover in the attempt to get Dr. Stafford dismissed. This simply means that the general has succeeded—but he's done it in an underhand way."

"Rather!" I agreed. "The school wasn't allowed to know, and we've come down here to find the new chap in power. By jingo! Unless I'm very much mistaken, there will be a choice selection of ructions before long!"

"There'll be ructions right now!" roared Handforth. "Do you think we're going to put up with a rotten piece of trickery of this kind? Not likely! What do you chaps say?"

"No!"

"We won't stand it!"

"We'll go on strike first!"

"Hear, hear!"

There was a good deal of excitement, and the manner in which the news spread was really astonishing. Before twenty minutes had elapsed practically everybody in the school knew that Dr. Stafford had not come down from London, and that Mr. Howard Martin was installed in his place.

The indignation was general. Mr. Martin had not shown himself much, but it could be seen that he was a tough

customer. Sir Montie made no attempt to change his waistcoat. He decided to wait until Nelson Lee arrived. He was our Housemaster, and we were under his control. My noble chum was determined to take no heed of the outsider's order.

"In any case, it isn't a matter for the Head to interfere in," declared Montie. "I refuse to recognise the frightful bounder—I do really! I have got an idea that somethin' is wrong, begad! Perhaps it is a joke, you know."

"Oh, yes—a very humorous joke!" sniffed Watson.

"Well, we needn't argue about it," I remarked. "The guv'nor will be down within an hour, and we can ask him. It wouldn't be a bad idea to meet him at the station, and hear the latest."

"Oh, ripping!" said Tommy, nodding. "We'll go."

"Dear fellow, it is a first-class suggestion," agreed Montie.

And so, while the school simmered, we strolled down to the station. We were serious and thoughtful. Dr. Malcolm Stafford's downfall—for that, in plain truth, is what it amounted to—might make a tremendous difference to the general life of St. Frank's.

Dr. Stafford had always been fair and even generous in his Headmastership. Everything had gone smoothly and serenely. The old Head had been immensely popular with the whole school.

And now, without warning, he had gone!

And in his place was a harsh, overbearing bully of a man who had started as badly as any man could start. Unless something was done—unless there was a very fine explanation ready—there would be grave trouble with the fellows.

For everybody believed that Dr. Stafford had literally been sacked without justification. If it became known that he had resigned—well, there would be no demonstration at all. The Governors were at liberty to appoint whom they chose, and the boys would have to put up with him.

But if the new Head had taken charge because Dr. Stafford had been dismissed, that was a different thing. When we had left London there had been no suspicion that Dr. Stafford would not come with us. It was rather a blow to find a total stranger in possession at St. Frank's.

"But there's no sense in worrying about it," I said, as I walked to the station with my chums. "Let's wait until we hear the full facts before we start getting excited. The Head may have gone away for a holiday, and this Martin chap is probably only a locum tenens."

"Only a which?" asked Watson. "I thought a locum tenens was a doctor?" I grinned.

"The term is generally applied to doctors," I said, "but it's just as applicable to anybody. It simply means a temporary substitute, so to speak."

"If you call Martin a substitute for the Head, I don't, begad!" remarked Sir Montie. "In my opinion, old boys, Mr. Martin is the most frightful rotter we've ever had in St. Frank's. A master who is lacking in good taste is naturally a fearful bounder. Honestly, dear boys, is there anythin' the matter with my waistcoat?"

"Well, it is a bit—just a little bit—well, noisy," I admitted.

"Noisy!"

"Exactly—loud, you know."

"You awful ass!" exclaimed Montie indignantly. "I refuse to—"

"Hallo! The train's coming in," I interrupted, briskly. "We'd better buck up if we want to welcome the guv'nor on the platform."

We broke into a trot, and the noble Sir Montie found it impossible to continue the discussion regarding fancy waistcoats. We reached the platform just as the train drew to a standstill.

Nelson Lee stepped out of a first-class compartment, and a brief look of surprise came into his face as we hurried up to him, pushing through the crowds of Sixth formers who had come by the same train.

"This is quite an honour, boys," said the guv'nor, smiling. "I did not think that you would come down to meet me—"

"The fact is, sir, we're anxious to see you about something important," I broke in. "We want to know all about it—and we thought we couldn't do better than to collar you as soon as you blew in."

"Ah, I see—a selfish motive, after all?"

"Not exactly, guv'nor," I replied. "Look here—I'll put it to you bluntly."

Do you know if the Head is coming to St. Frank's?"

Nelson Lee regarded me curiously.

"To tell you the truth, Nipper, I'm rather puzzled about Dr. Stafford," he said slowly. "He seemed very pre-occupied yesterday, but would not admit that anything was wrong. This morning he had gone when I inquired for him, and I naturally assumed that he had come to St. Frank's by an earlier train."

"Well, sir, he's not here," put in Watson.

"Then I presume that he will turn up later on," said the gov'nor lightly. "There is really no necessity for you to concern yourselves——"

"But you don't understand, sir," I interrupted. "There's a fellow at the school—a big bully of a chap—named Howard Martin. He's waltzing about in a cap and gown, giving orders wholesale—and he makes out that he's the new Headmaster. Everybody is bowled over, and we don't know what to make of it."

Nelson Lee's expression changed.

"Is this an actual fact, boys?" he asked quietly.

"Bogad, rathor, sir," said Sir Montie. "Why, the awful rotter has ordered me to take this waistcoat off!"

"Your waistcoats, my dear Montie, do not interest me," said Nelson Lee. "But I must admit that I am greatly astonished by what you have told me, Nipper. Much is now clear to me."

"How do you mean, sir?"

"Dr. Stafford has evidently been requested to resign—which amounts to a summary dismissal—and I can now understand why he was so worried," went on the gov'nor. "It strikes me as being rather underhand business, and St. Frank's has been tricked."

"It's a beastly shame, sir!"

"The fellows won't stand it, sir!"

"Rather not, bogad! A fancy vest is——"

"I really hope you boys will not cause any great disturbance," said Nelson Lee gravely. "With a new Headmaster in power, a demonstration would be quite useless. However, I will interview this Mr. Martin as soon as I reach St. Frank's, and then I shall know more about the matter."

Nelson Lee bustled off before we could

question him further, and he walked to St. Frank's as fast as his legs would carry him. He was seriously concerned and annoyed. For this great change to have been made without the knowledge of the Housemasters—Nelson Lee and Mr. Stockdale—amounted to a slight.

Lee would only think that there had been a misunderstanding somewhere. In any case, he was determined to get at the truth without delay, and as soon as he entered the school he went straight to the Head's study, tapped, and entered.

Within the room were two men. One of them was Mr. Howard Martin, and the other General Ord-Clayton, the Chairman of the Board of Governors. This gentleman was a fierce, fiery-looking individual, and he sprang to his feet with alacrity.

"Ah, Mr. Lee, I am glad you have come," he said briskly. "I wish to introduce you to Mr. Howard Martin, who will in future conduct this school."

Nelson Lee took the new Head's hand without enthusiasm or cordiality.

"And you, I understand, are the Housenmaster of the Ancient House?" said Mr. Martin in a condescending voice. "H'm! I trust that you will fulfil your duties to my full satisfaction, Mr. Lee."

"I shall fulfil them to my own—and that, I think, will be sufficient," said the schoolmaster-detecive icily. "May I inquire when this alteration was decided upon, general? I was under the impression that Dr. Stafford was to return——"

"Dr. Stafford will not return," snapped the general. "He resigned his appointment yesterday, Mr. Lee. You will oblige me by refraining from discussing Dr. Stafford in future."

Nelson Lee sat down.

"I am to understand that Dr. Stafford was dismissed?" he asked.

"You are to understand that Dr. Stafford has no further connection with this school," said General Ord-Clayton. "He concluded his duties yesterday, and any property of his which remains at St. Frank's will be sent away in due course. You must surely admit, Mr. Lee, that it would not have been to the benefit of the school for Dr. Stafford to return."

"I admit nothing of the kind," said Nelson Lee quietly. "Dr. Stafford is a

remarkably clever man—a keen judge of character—a kindly, charming gentleman in every way. Under his guidance the school has prospered astonishingly, and I am convinced that he is one of the most capable Headmasters in the country. His loss is a sad one for everybody concerned. The gap will never be filled.”

“The gap is already filled, sir!” snapped Mr. Martin.

“I am afraid not,” said Nelson Lee. “You are occupying Dr. Stafford’s shoes, but his personality will be missed by all. I regret exceedingly that this step should have been taken—and, I may add, I am seriously annoyed.”

“Annoyed!” barked the general. “Did you say—annoyed?”

“I did!”

“You will have the goodness to explain what you mean, sir!”

“That will be quite easy,” said Lee smoothly. “Dr. Stafford was dismissed secretly, without the knowledge of the school. I come down here to find this gentleman in control. Under no circumstances, General Ord-Clayton, can you tell me that such a condition of things is straightforward and open. I am deeply sorry that Dr. Stafford has been treated so harshly.”

The general rose to his feet, his moustache bristling.

“Harshly!” he roared. “Let me warn you, Mr. Lee, that you had better be careful in your choice of words! While Sir Rupert Manderley was Chairman he was content to let things slide along in the same old rut. But I have different views—different ideas. I intend to make a great difference in this school, and I realise that no great alteration was possible while Dr. Stafford occupied the post of Headmaster. In plain words, he was too slow—he was negligent—he was weak.”

“I disagree with you entirely,” said Nelson Lee curtly. “Dr. Stafford possessed that quality which is essential in schoolmasters—sympathy. He understood his boys in every way, and he was never lax in his administration. Under his régime the school was happy and content.”

“Possibly!” sneered the general. “And what have you to say with regard to the College House affair, Mr. Lee? You know as well as I do that the place was burnt down solely because of Dr.

Stafford’s carelessness. The expense ran into thousands of pounds——”

“Completely covered by insurance companies,” cut in Nelson Lee. “And please let me remind you that it is absolutely preposterous to suggest that Dr. Stafford was in any way to blame. I hold no brief for the doctor, but I was here at the time of the occurrence. You were not. It is the acme of injustice to charge Dr. Stafford——”

“That will do, sir!” shouted the general. “It is not necessary for me to listen to you any longer. This gentleman, Mr. Howard Martin, is the Headmaster of St. Frank’s, and you will oblige me by recognising him as your superior.”

Nelson Lee rose to his feet.

“I am afraid I cannot do so with any great sincerity,” he said quietly. “And please let me tell you, general, that this high-handed attitude on your part will only lead to disaster. Do not forget that the great majority of the boys almost loved Dr. Stafford, and there will be great trouble——”

“Let there be trouble!” said the general harshly. “Mr. Martin is capable of dealing with it. Any disturbance will be put down with a firm hand. Boys need to be treated sternly.”

Nelson Lee made no further comment, but retired without even glancing at the men again. He was angry and furious at such shameful injustice.

But at the same time, Nelson Lee was gravely perturbed in mind. He was quite certain that troubles of an alarming nature would occur within the next twenty-four hours.

And Nelson Lee was quite right!

CHAPTER III.

A CHANGED ST. FRANK’S.

“IMPOSSIBLE!”

“It simply can’t be true!”

It was nearly teatime, but nobody was thinking about tea. Not a single junior even commenced preparations for the meal. The fellows stood about the Triangle in little groups, discussing the one all important subject.

Others occupied the common-room and the passage. Ancient House and College House alike, the boys were indig-

nant and amazed. Many would not believe that Dr. Stafford would not return.

To a great many boys the change would make little or no difference—so they thought. One Headmaster was as good as another, in the opinion of a certain set. If the old Head had retired in the ordinary course of things, a celebration would have occurred, and things would have settled down again.

But this was totally different.

The Head had been sacked—kicked out. There was not the slightest doubt that Dr. Stafford had resigned by command. The boys knew him too well to believe that he had left the old place of his own free will.

And, because of this, a popular feeling of sympathy arose. Dr. Stafford was praised by everybody. Even Fullwood and Co., who had never said a good thing about the Head previously, now found quite a lot to say in his favour.

Undoubtedly, Dr. Stafford had been popular while he ruled over the boys. But now that he had gone, and there was a feeling abroad that he would not return, his popularity was increased ten-fold.

"I tell you it's impossible!" declared Handforth firmly. "Why, it's absurd on the face of it! There was a terrific fuss before we went to London—because there was some talk of shelving the Head. Old Clayton was ducked in the ditch, and there was nearly a riot. Do you think the old ass would be such a fool as to cause a fresh outbreak of trouble by pushing the Head out?"

"It's not a question of what we think, Handy—it's a fact," I said. "The Head isn't here, and Martin is. Before long there'll be an announcement of some kind I expect—and then we shall know the truth for certain."

"We want Dr. Stafford!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Of course we want him here," grinned Pitt.

"Oh, don't be funny!" snapped Handforth. "This isn't a time for joking. I've got a great idea——"

"Forget it!" advised Hart.

"You—you—ass——"

"Bury it!"

"I've got a great idea!" roared Handforth, glaring. "I suggest that we refuse to recognise Martin as the Head! Dr. Stafford is the Headmaster, and

we're not going to put up with a rotten bully as a substitute."

"Rather not!"

"Good idea, Handy."

"Ignore him altogether!" went on Handforth. "The Head was kicked out because of that fire——"

"Shame!"

"He was held responsible—when everybody knows that a dotty Greek kid set the place on fire," roared Handforth. "It's simply been used as an excuse to give Dr. Stafford the boot. And we're not going to stand it."

"We want Dr. Stafford back!"

"Hear, hear!"

The fellows were getting really excited, and I watched them with interest. I was quite cool myself, but I knew well enough that the majority of the Removites would cause tremendous trouble before long.

But the juniors were not the only fellows who waxed indignant. The Fifth and Sixth were quite alarmed in their own lordly fashion, and serious faces were to be seen everywhere.

It was really a great tribute to Dr. Stafford's popularity. It would not have been so bad if the school had received a warning. But the news had come as a shock, and it could hardly be credited.

But it was soon found that Mr. Howard Martin was not to be ignored. The juniors were treated to a free exhibition of his quality almost at once.

For the new Head came marching through the lobby towards the exit.

As he appeared there was a hush, and the juniors drew back, eyeing him with hostile looks which they made no attempt to conceal. Mr. Martin glared round as he passed along, his bushy eyebrows set in a fierce line.

Quite abruptly he came to a halt, and seized Sir Montie Tregellis-West by the shoulder.

"Boy!" he roared. "Tell me your name!"

Tregellis-West attempted to shake himself free.

"Really, I fail to see why my name should interest you," he said. "But if you are particularly anxious to know, sir, it is Tregellis-West."

Mr. Martin scowled.

"Ah yes, I think I know," he said sourly. "You are a baronet?"

"Begad! I am frightfully sorry, sir," apologised Montie.

"And because of your title, you doubtless presume to think that you are at liberty to set my orders at defiance?" snapped Mr. Martin. "You will understand, Tregellis-West, that you will receive no favouritism from me——"

"I don't require any, sir, thank you," interrupted Montie stiffly. "Favouritism is a shocking thing, an' the Head was never guilty of it. I shall be frightfully pleased when the Head comes back."

"We all shall, sir," said Handforth.

"I am your Headmaster now, Tregellis-West, and I shall continue to be your Headmaster," exclaimed Mr. Martin harshly. "I ordered you to remove that preposterous waistcoat. You have thought fit to ignore me."

"My waistcoat is perfectly tasteful, sir——"

"You were ordered to remove it—and for your disobedience you will receive a caning," said the Head. "Hold out your hand!"

"Begad, I——"

"Hold out your hand!" roared Mr. Martin.

"I am afraid I must refuse, sir," said Tregellis-West firmly. "I do not regard this as an act of disobedience. Your order was unnecessary and unjust—the waistcoat is quite excellent. I do not feel myself called upon to—Ow! Good gracious! Yarroooh!"

Slash! Slash!

Mr. Martin grasped Sir Montie by the collar, swung him round, and proceeded to lash his cane across the junior's shoulders with stinging force. Montie yelled with sheer surprise at first, but soon stopped.

"You rebellious dog!" panted Mr. Martin. "I will show you that it is unwise to disobey your Headmaster. After this caning you will write me one thousand lines, and they must be brought to my study by mid-day to-morrow."

Slash! Slash!

Mr. Martin continued the caning as though it were to go on for an hour. The watching juniors, silent until now, could stand it no longer. Their boiling feelings surged right over.

"Brute!"

"Leave him alone!"

"Oh, shame!"

The new Head lowered his cane, and twirled round.

"Who spoke just now?" he demanded furiously.

Silence!

"If there are any more insulting shouts I will take measures to quell this insubordination," said Mr. Martin. "As for you, Tregellis-West, you will go to your dormitory this instant and don a plain black waistcoat. I have no intention of allowing freaks to walk about this school!"

"Yah! Rotter!"

"Bully!"

"You're not wanted at St. Frank's!"

"Boo-o-o-ooo!"

It was a long drawn out sound, and proceeded from so many juniors that no single fellow could be fairly dropped on. But Mr. Martin rushed at Edward Oswald Handforth, and delivered a slap which nearly knocked Handy flying.

"You impertinent young hound!" bellowed the new Head.

"Great pip!" gasped Handforth faintly. "I—I—why, you—you bullying cad! If you touch me again I'll punch your beastly nose!"

Mr. Martin fairly staggered.

"Boy!" he thundered. "Are you addressing me?"

"Yes, I am!"

"I am your Headmaster——"

"Rot!" said Handforth. "Dr. Stafford is my Headmaster. I never saw you before to-day—you're an outsider. If you think you can come here and knock me about, you're jolly well mistaken!"

And Handforth, with a sniff of supreme contempt, turned on his heel and walked out into the Triangle. Mr. Martin was apparently nonplussed for the moment—and that sign of weakness revealed his character in a second. Handforth had cheeked him in the most outrageous manner, and the only thing was to deal with the culprit at once.

But Mr. Martin strode away down the passage without uttering a word. And he was followed by a storm of hisses which could have been heard all over the school. The juniors did the thing thoroughly.

"The frightful rotter!" exclaimed Montie. "Begad! He laid that cane on with all his strength, you know!"

"Poor old chap!" I said sympathetically. "It strikes me that Mr. Martin won't be much of a success. He ought to have gone for Handforth bald-headed——"

"What?" said Hart. "Do you agree with Martin——"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" I interrupted. "Handy was a fathead to jaw at Martin like that, but I don't blame him. And a chap of that sort is generally all bluster. He won't last a week unless he's careful."

"I hope he won't last a day, begad!" murmured Sir Montie.

Not three minutes later Morrow and Fenton of the Sixth came bustling along. The two prefects were issuing orders.

"Everybody to assemble in the Big Hall," said Morrow briskly.

"What for?"

"What's the idea, Morrow?"

"Don't ask me what for," said Morrow. "Head's orders. The whole school is instructed to assemble. Speech, I suppose. Now then, you kids, look lively! We're in for some rough times, by the look of things."

"I fancy that somebody else is in for a rough time, too!" I said grimly. "What's your opinion of our new Head, Morrow?"

The prefect grinned.

"It wouldn't be good for discipline if I told you!" he replied. "Don't forget that I'm a prefect."

That answer was quite sufficient for me. I was quite curious to find out what Mr. Howard Martin wanted with all the school. The other juniors were curious, too, and there was not likely to be any absentees.

"I expect General Ord-Clayton means to address the whole crowd of us," said De Valerie. "He's going to introduce Mr. Martin——"

"But Martin oughtn't to have shown himself until after the introduction. That's just where he made a bloomer—giving orders here and there before anybody knew who he really was."

De Valerie's surmise turned out to be correct.

Just before teatime the Big Hall was packed to suffocation. Everybody was there—every member of every form. And there was a general buzz of low conversation until the door at the back of the platform opened and General Ord-Clayton appeared. With him was Mr. Howard Martin.

I noticed that Nelson Lee was not present, and I suspected that the gov'nor was pretty wild with the Chairman of

the Governors for his harsh, unjust action. The general was a man of impulse, and he seemed to have the idea that no man on earth was as clever as he was.

He wasted no time, but cleared his throat, removed his glasses, stuck them on his nose again, and surveyed the throng. Then he removed his glasses again, coughed, and cleared his throat.

"Boys, I am glad to see you all back in the old school," he said, his voice sounding astonishingly loud in the great, silent hall. "I know it is a great pleasure for you all to come back to this noble seat of learning. And I wish to tell you that there are to be some slight alterations."

He paused to see what effect his words would have. They had none—except that the silence was perhaps more deadly than ever.

"There have been alterations to the buildings, as you know," went on the general. "We have been smartened up, eh? We have put on a new uniform, as it were, and we are starting afresh. Well, my lads, the other alterations I referred to concerned certain rules of the school—which the governing board has deemed fit to make—and such like. I have also to inform you that your old Headmaster, Dr. Stafford, has resigned."

"Spoof!"

"He was sacked!"

"You kicked him out unfairly!"

"Shame!"

"Boo-oo!"

General Ord-Clayton glared round him in shocked surprise. The demonstration mostly came from the juniors, but it was nevertheless disconcerting. The general rapped the table fiercely.

"How—how dare you?" he roared. "Silence! Silence at once!"

The juniors subsided.

"Dr. Stafford, I repeat, resigned—and I am quite convinced that his resignation was for the good of the school," continued the general. "Dr. Stafford acquitted himself well for very many years, but every man comes to a day when his duties are too arduous for him, and he becomes inclined to slacken his vigilance. Dr. Stafford has retired, and I am sure that you all wish him much happiness in his leisure years."

"The Head didn't want to resign!"

"No—no!"

"We want him back!"

"Three cheers for Dr. Stafford!"

"Hurrah!"

The cheers which rang out came from almost every throat in the Big Hall. There was absolutely no mistaking the heartiness of that outburst. General Ord-Clayton wisely saw that it would be useless to storm at the fellows—so he smiled impatiently and rubbed his hands together.

"I am glad to see that you hold such affectionate memories of your late Headmaster," he went on, when he could make himself heard. "And now I will introduce you to Mr. Howard Martin, the gentleman who has accepted the Headmastership of this school, and who will, henceforth, rule over you."

Mr. Howard Martin slightly bowed his head in acknowledgment of the cheers which he probably thought were coming. But the silence which ensued was even more ominous than the few hisses which arose from the Remove ranks.

General Ord-Clayton pursed his lips.

"I regret to find that you are not giving your new Headmaster a very cordial welcome," he said severely. "Boys, I should like you to give Mr. Martin a cheer, as a sign of your esteem."

The deadly silence continued.

"Do you hear me, boys?" shouted the general, red in the face.

"Rats!"

"We're not going to cheer that outsider!"

"We want Dr. Stafford back!"

"Three cheers for the good old Head!"

There was an immediate response—for those cheers were for Dr. Stafford. It was really a most ridiculous situation—an embarrassing situation for Mr. Howard Martin. If ever a man received the cold shoulder, he received it. The school showed him plainly that he wasn't wanted.

"I regret to find that I am mistaken," said General Ord-Clayton, in a tone of biting sarcasm. "Knowing you all to be British boys, I naturally assumed that you would be sportsmen. Unfortunately, I find that such is not the case, and the least I say about it the better. I may tell you that Mr. Martin has full power over you all—even fuller powers than those formerly possessed by Dr. Stafford. He possesses the authority to summarily dismiss any undermaster who fails to give him satisfaction, and under

his guidance, I am convinced that St. Frank's will prosper as it has never prospered before."

The school was still unresponsive.

"You will fully understand that Mr. Martin is now your supreme Head," said the general. "He has already made a number of suggestions which have met with my full approval. When you leave this hall you will find several important notices on the various notice boards. There have been certain alterations in the rules, and you must abide by them. No boy will have the excuse of saying that he was not made aware of the new regulations. I wish you all to understand that the discipline of St. Frank's is to be more carefully looked after. There has been altogether too much laxity during the last year or so, and this must cease. You may now go, and I trust that you will settle down to the new order of things with no useless demonstrations or objectless fuss. Dismiss!"

A moment later the school was crowding out of Big Hall. The boys hardly knew whether to be indignant or angry. Upon the whole, I think they were both. They certainly had every right to be.

CHAPTER IV.

SOMETHING LIKE A ROW.

"GAMMON!"

"It's got it on the board. I tell you—"

"You must have read it wrong!"

"Of course!"

"Clear the way, you asses!"

The crowd round the notice board in the Ancient House lobby was a formidable one. They were mostly juniors, but quite a large number of Fifth Formers were there, too. The Sixth had retired to their own common-room to read the notice. It was fixed in the junior common-rooms—but they were packed.

"Gammon!" repeated Handforth. "No tea allowed in junior studies? Rot! I don't believe anything of the sort!"

"Well, come and look for yourself!" yelled Pitt.

Handforth charged through the crowd. Before he reached the notice board, however, he found his path barred by the

huge figure of Fatty Little. The fat boy of the Remove was an enormous size, and Handforth barged into him vainly.

"Can't you clear off, you walking whale?" roared Handy.

"Sorry!" said Little, moving abruptly, and knocking three fellows over without knowing it. "I didn't know I was—Great sausages! How did you fellows fall down like that?"

There was some confusion for a moment, but nobody was rash enough to charge Jimmy Little. He was a mountain, and it was a sheer waste of time to attack him. And during the brief mix up, Handforth reached the board.

"My goodness!" he gasped. "It's true!"

"About the studies?"

"Yes!" roared Handforth furiously. "All juniors are to partake of tea in the dining-hall! No food, under any circumstances, is to be taken into any junior study, and nothing in the nature of food is to be eaten there. Great pip! It's enough to make a chap faint!"

"Wait a minute," I said grimly. "There's worse to follow."

"Eh?" gasped Handforth. "Worse?"

"Read the notice!"

"All junior prep. to be undertaken in the Form-room, under the eyes of a prefect or a master," said Handforth dazedly. "Great guns! This—this amounts to two hours' extra lessons in the evening!"

"Exactly!" I said.

"We—we won't stand it!"

"It's tyranny!"

"All juniors to be in bed by eight-thirty," panted Handforth, his gaze fixed on the notice. "Remove included——"

"What!" roared the crowd.

"Remove included!" said Pitt. "We're to be sent to bed with the fags in future—at half-past eight, if you please!"

"We won't go!"

"No fear!"

"Not blessed likely!"

"Supper for juniors is abolished henceforth," read Handforth. "No boy——"

"No supper!" shouted Fatty Little, in horror.

"Not a crumb!" I said gravely.

"Great doughnuts!" gasped Fatty.

"No supper! It's impossible, you ass!"

Do you think I could sleep a wink if I went to bed without any supper? I'm practically a new chap at St. Frank's, but I'm in favour of defying these rotten ciders. By chutney! They're absolutely inhuman! It's an attempt to starve us!"

"It's not so bad as that, Fatty——"

"But we must have supper!" roared Little, thoroughly alarmed. "Think of it! Nothing but tea in Hall—no grub in our studies—then off to bed without any supper! I—I'd rather be in prison!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, they give you supper there!" snorted Jimmy.

"Supper is only one of the grievances!" bellowed Handforth. "What I don't like is being forbidden to have tea in our studies. And as for doing prep. in the Form-room, why, it's out of the question."

"Absolutely!"

"We won't do it!"

"We'll go on strike!"

"Down with the Head!"

"Three groans to Martin!"

The excitement was rather hysterical for a certain time. Groans were given by hundreds of throats, the noise was appalling. It was scarcely surprising that half-a-dozen prefects came along armed with canes. They had orders to clear the lobby and the passages.

"Steady with that cane, Fenton!" exclaimed Pitt. "Look out! Whoa!"

"Get a move on, then!" said Fenton curtly.

"You don't agree with this beastly tyrant, do you?"

"I've been ordered to clear the lobby, and I've been doing it," replied the prefect. "You'll notice that I'm not making anybody smart. In my opinion this bit of trouble is nothing to what will happen later on. The Fifth is nearly as excited as the Remove. Mr. Martin will find it necessary to make a few modifications in those new rules of his, I fancy."

"Good old Fenton!"

The fellows crowded out into the Triangle, all of them talking excitedly. And a meeting was held on the spot. It was already growing dusk, and by this time the fellows should have been sitting down to tea. But they did not think of eating then. Indignation ran too high.

"Now, then, Nipper, up on your hind

legs!" shouted Grey. "We want a speech."

"Hear, hear!"

"On the ball, Nipper!"

"I'd rather not, thanks," I said, shaking my head. "A speech won't do much good at this stage. I want you chaps to quieten down a bit—you're too excited to listen to a serious speech."

"Oh, rot!"

"Go ahead, Nipper!"

Handforth pushed forward.

"If the ass doesn't want to speak, let him keep quiet," he roared. "I'll spout, if you like!"

"We don't like!"

"Rats!" shouted Handforth. "I'm going to make a speech, and if you don't like to listen to me, you can do the other thing."

"Everybody in St. Frank's will listen—unless they're deaf," said Pitt. "In fact, the people in the village can hear your voice, Handy. Did you happen to swallow a megaphone when you were a baby?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Joking is all very well at certain times," snorted Handforth. "But to joke now—in a time of this kind—is nothing less than a crime! We've all come back to St. Frank's, and what do we find? What, I ask you, do we find?"

"You!" said De Valerie, with a sigh. "You're always on the spot, Handy. It doesn't matter where we go, we're certain to find you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We find a great change!" bawled Handforth, ignoring the yell. "The school itself is looking top-hole—no ass denies that—"

"Even you don't deny it," said Hart blandly.

"The place had been redecorated rippingly," went on Handforth. "We can't grumble at the way in which the builders have done their work. The new House on the other side of the Triangle is a fine piece of work. It looks just the same old College House, but the inside is brand new. And now I find it necessary to refer to something else which is brand new; to be exact—Mr. Howard Martin!"

"Boo-o-oo!"

"Brand new?" asked Somerton. "By Jove! I thought he was getting stale by this time. He looks rather second-hand—"

"He is new to us—that's what I mean," shouted Handforth, thumping McClure's back to give emphasis to his words. "He's new to us, and what I say is this"—thump—"we won't stand him—Steady on, you ass!"

McClure had had enough, and he wriggled away from his excited leader. Church had already squirmed his way towards the outskirts of the crowd. When Handforth made a speech he generally went in for gymnastic exercises, too!

"Mr. Martin has started the wrong way!" roared Handforth.

"Hear, hear!"

"He comes here and turns everything upside down—"

"The rotter!"

"He alters all the school rules—"

"Shame!"

"He ruins the routine which has been the custom at St. Frank's for fifty years past!" roared Handforth. "Is that right? I put it to you, as man to man, is it right? Answer me?"

"No!" roared the crowd.

"What!" snapped Handforth. "You won't answer?"

"You ass!" grinned Pitt. "We said 'No' to your question. It's not right that Martin should come here and ride the high horse. It's wrong—decidedly wrong. And it's up to you, Handy, to think of a solution."

"Hear, hear!"

"Go it, old son!"

Handforth eyed the crowd with a kindly eye.

"Of course, it's only right that you should recognise my leadership," he said carelessly. "A really great leader only comes to the surface when some vital crisis arises. Just like bubbles rise to the surface in a glass of fizz!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Glad that you know you're a bubble, Handy," I grinned. "Before long you'll burst, as all bubbles do!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There's not time now for me to punch noses, but I shall remember these insults and jeers," said Handforth sourly. "I'm the only fellow who realises that something's got to be done. There's no sense in talking. A fellow who stands up and jaws is nothing but a wind-bag—he's no good."

"Then why jaw?" asked Pitt. "You admitted you're a wind-bag—"

"Rot!" shouted Handforth. "I'm going to act now—but a certain amount of talking is necessary to begin with. We wouldn't mind so much if this outsider had carried on in Dr. Stafford's shoes without any alterations. But it is ten times worse than that. This man—this alleged Headmaster—has added insult to injury! Deny it if you can! Not content with pushing Dr. Stafford off the earth, Martin comes here and proceeds to turn everything topsy-turvy. Is it good enough?"

"No!"

"Are we going to sit still and do nothing?"

"No!"

"Do you want Mr. Martin as a headmaster?" bawled Handforth.

"No!" roared the crowd.

"Are we going to put up with him?"

"No!" yelled the crowd.

"Are you going to follow my lead in this business?"

"No!" howled the crowd, in one voice. Handforth started.

"What's that?" he shouted fiercely.

"You ought to have heard. The chaps yelled loud enough, anyhow," grinned Pitt. "We are not going to follow your lead, Handy. You'd like to know why? Well, the Remove isn't exactly anxious to be led into disaster. We don't mind listening to you—it's rather good entertainment; but surely you don't expect us to take you seriously?"

Handforth nearly choked.

"You—you dotty lunatic!" he bellowed. "I've never been more serious in my life. Martin won't be able to deal with me very easily, I can tell you! Poor old Dr. Stafford has been pushed out, and we get this rotter——"

Handforth paused, and looked round him in some alarm. The crowd was melting with singular rapidity. Nearly everybody was making a move for the other side of the Triangle, and Handy was becoming isolated, like a dot in the ocean.

"Hi!" he yelled. "I'm making a speech!"

"Can't help that, old man. There's something more important on hand," shouted Pitt, over his shoulder. "While you're jawing, and while we're wasting our time listening to you, the Fifth is acting."

"Eh?"

Handforth gazed across the Triangle in astonishment. And then he noticed, for the first time, that practically every member of the Fifth Form had collected in a body beneath the Headmaster's window.

"My hat!" said Handforth. "There's something doing!"

"Of course there is!" snapped McClure. "You don't expect that everybody in St. Frank's is acting the goat, do you?"

He did not wait to have his nose punched, but rushed off after the other fellows, Church with him. Handforth followed rather more leisurely, in a state of considerable indignation. He saw absolutely no reason why the Remove should desert him to support the Fifth. But, of course, Handforth never did understand things of that kind.

I saw at once that the Fifth was grim and determined. All the seniors were looking grave as they lined up in a solid mass beneath the Headmaster's window. But they were flushed with excitement, too.

Personally, I was not in favour of making any big demonstration so early. Hasty actions generally lead to nothing at all. I realised that we had a stiff job before us, and in my opinion it would be better to wait awhile, and see how things panned out.

I'm the last fellow in the world to sit down under an injustice, and I wasn't prepared to do so in this case. At the same time, I thought it inadvisable to get up a popular demonstration at the moment. Mr. Martin had the support of General Ord-Clayton, and it was not likely he would budge an inch with the Chairman of the Governors by his side.

But I was interested in the Fifth Form demonstration, nevertheless. The seniors were grimly determined to make a scene—a very unusual proceeding for the stately Fifth.

The whole affair was being led by Chambers, of Study 10. Phillips and Bryant were his willing lieutenants, and all the other seniors followed eagerly enough. As I drew near the Fifth commenced.

"We—want—Mister--Martin!"

The shout was uttered by scores of voices at the same moment, and the effect was rather remarkable. It wasn't a series of yells, but one mighty voice,



1. "Rescue, Remove!" roared Pitt. "Fatty's wedged!"
2. "If you wear that waistcoat again, I will punish you severely," said the new master.

and the words were easily distinguishable.

"We—want—Mister—Martin!"

The Fifth continued the words as a kind of chant, with Chambers standing in front of them with a stick, beating time. I was afraid that many Removites would join in and spoil everything, but they didn't.

At least, not until Handforth arrived. Handforth joined in quickly enough, but he had the sense to keep with the Fifth. And soon every other Removite was shouting the demand, too. It was one mighty roar, and I afterwards heard that people in the village, a mile away, were able to distinguish the words quite clearly.

"We—want—Mister—Martin!"

It was quite evident that the Fifth meant to keep it up until the new Head appeared. And the most remarkable feature of the whole demonstration was that everybody was deadly serious.

"We—want—Mister—Martin!"

At last there was a sign that something was happening. The curtain at the Head's window moved slightly, and then the window itself was pushed up. But it was General Ord-Clayton who made his appearance. He regarded the crowd very severely, and held up his hand for silence.

"We—want—Mister—Martin!"

That was the only silence which resulted. The Fifth did not even pause. It took no notice of the general whatever. He might not have existed, for all the recognition he received.

"Boys, what is the meaning of —"

"We—want—Mister—Martin!"

The general was completely drowned in the yell, which now had a note of defiance in it. Finding that it was impossible to make himself heard, the general retired. A moment later Mr. Howard Martin appeared.

"We—want—"

At a signal from Chambers everybody ceased speaking. The new Head gazed at the throng smilingly. Perhaps he thought the fellows were imitating the crowds which gathered outside Buckingham Palace, demanding to see the King! Perhaps Mr. Martin thought he was to be cheered to the echo.

"Well, my boys, what is it?" he asked beamingly. "You have requested to see me, and here I am."

"I am speaking for the whole Fifth Form, sir," shouted Chambers, amid a tense silence. "I might say I am speaking for the Remove and Third as well —"

"Hear, hear!"

"And what we want to say is this," continued Chambers. "We consider that the restrictions which have been imposed are absolutely unwarrantable and impossible. We request that they shall be dropped forthwith and that the ordinary rules will be adhered to."

Mr. Martin frowned angrily.

"Are you serious, boy?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir."

"You impertinent young dog——"

"Pardon me, sir, but we require an answer—not abuse," said Chambers.

"How—how dare you!" thundered Mr. Martin. "You will leave this window at once. I refuse to give any answer whatever to your insolent demands!"

"Excuse me, Mr. Martin, but we only made a request," said Chambers. "You refuse to listen to that request—so now we demand that the rules shall be as they were before we went to London. We refuse to recognise the new regulations. Now, you chaps!"

"We—refuse!" thundered the Fifth, in one voice.

The scene had evidently been rehearsed, and if Mr. Howard Martin had possessed a grain of sense, he would have recognised at once that this was a case for graceful submission. His orders were harsh and unnecessary, and he was mad to expect the fellows to submit on their side.

"Oh, so you refuse, do you?" he shouted furiously. "We will see about that, you young rascals! I have no desire to punish anybody severely on this my first day in the school, therefore I am prepared to overlook this most disgraceful scene. But unless it ceases within one minute from now—unless you quietly disperse—both the Fifth Form and the Remove Form will be confined to the school premises for a period of two weeks. All half-holidays will be abolished during that time, and extra work will be given during the evening. You have one minute to decide."

Chambers laughed angrily.

"That sort of stuff doesn't frighten us, Mr. Martin," he shouted. "We're not going to obey those rules, and——"

Come back, you rotters! If we don't all stick together we shall go under!"

Chambers looked round him in alarm. That threat of the Head's was a dire one. Gating for a fortnight—no half-holidays—extra evening work! And Mr. Martin was the Head, and he could enforce his order.

Fully half the fellows decided that this was no time for standing up for their rights. They melted away, leaving the other half uncertain.

Many of them followed the deserters, and practically all the Remove vanished. In less than a minute, indeed, Chambers was only surrounded by his own immediate supporters, Handforth and Co., myself, Watson, Tregellis-West, Pitt, and one or two others—a mere handful.

Mr. Martin smiled triumphantly, and retired into his study, closing the window with a slam.

"Well, it was something like a row, at all events!" said Chambers grimly.

"Yes," I agreed. "And something like a frost, too!"

CHAPTER V.

THE TUCKSHOP RAID.

FATTY LITTLE dashed into the Ancient House lobby. His face was red, his eyes were fixed and staring. And upon his face could be seen an expression of absolute consternation and alarm.

"Hi! Look-out, you walking motor-bus!" shouted Owen major.

"Clear the road, there!" yelled Pitt. Crash!

Fatty Little charged into Owen major and Hubbard and Griffith at full speed. He didn't pause in his stride, but the other three juniors were sent flying. Little was amazingly active for his size, and when he gained some momentum he was as difficult to stop as a tank.

"The mad ass!" gasped Griffith, sitting up.

"The burbling lunatic!" panted Owen major.

But Fatty Little rushed on heedlessly. He charged straight into the Remove common-room, where a large number of juniors were congregated.

I was there with my chums, and the

door opened with a crash which nearly smashed the lock.

Jimmy Little rolled in, and four juniors rolled over. The number of fellows that Little knocked down in a day was really surprising—and he knocked them all down unintentionally.

"He's mad!" ejaculated Hart, picking himself up.

"Great pancakes!" gasped Little. "Have—have you heard the latest?"

"Don't get so excited, old son," I said. "What's the trouble?"

"I went to Mrs. Hake for some grub—"

"Oh, grub again!" sighed Nicodemus Trotwood. "You're always after grub, Fatty. We'll see about tea for our study in a minute or two. Oh, but I forgot! We've got to troop into Hall—"

"You—you haven't heard the worst!" shouted Little despairingly. "It's awful! I sha'n't be able to keep alive for more than a week in this place! We shall all be starved to death—"

"Why can't you dry up?" demanded Pitt. "What's the trouble? What's the excitement? What's the row about?"

"Mrs. Hake!" said Fatty, with round eyes. "I—I just went into the tuck shop, you know. It's empty!"

"It wasn't empty when you were in there—it was full!" remarked Hart.

"I—I mean there's nothing to eat only bread!" yelled Little.

"Bread!"

"That's all! Mrs. Hake hasn't got a cake in the place," said Fatty, in horrified tones. "Not a cake—not a pork-pie—not a sausage roll—not even a jam tart. All she's got is roll and butter."

I grinned.

"Well, there's nothing to make a fuss about in that," I said soothingly. "Mrs. Hake ought to have been more enterprising, I'll admit, but I expect her supplies have failed to come in. She'll have plenty—"

"She won't!" groaned Fatty. "That's just it. Frizzling onions! She's not allowed to sell pastry or cakes or pork-pies! Head's orders! She's forbidden to sell any luxuries to any juniors."

"What!"

It was a mighty yell.

"It's a fact!" went on Little. "I nearly had a fit when she told me. The Head won't allow her to sell anything to us—"

except bread and butter! It's awful! I shall starve, you know!"

"I can guess what it means," I said grimly. "Martin thinks that we shall disobey the no-tea order, so he has forbidden the sale of everything except bread-and-butter. We can get that in Hall, so he knows we won't buy that!"

"The mean rotter!" said Handforth hotly. "What about Mrs. Hake? How the dickens will she keep her shop going if she doesn't sell anything?"

"The Head isn't the kind of man to consider Mrs. Hake," I replied. "But we'd better go along and see her for ourselves. Of course, this sort of thing can't last, but we shall be tea-less for to-night, that's certain."

The fellows crowded out of the common-room, and followed me to Mrs. Hake's little shop on the corner of the Triangle. Several other fellows had made the discovery, it seemed, for the shop was half full with excited juniors.

"It's no good you a-goin' on at me, young gents," Mrs. Hake was saying. "I wouldn't forbid you to buy the things you want. But Mr. Martin has given me strict orders not to serve any junior young gentleman with anything excepting rolls and butter. What I shall do, I don't know. It's terrible, young gents, that's what it is!"

"But can't you sell cakes?" asked Christine indignantly.

"No, Master Christine."

"Nor buns, nor pork-pies?"

"I musn't sell anything that might be called a luxury, Master Christine," said Mrs. Hake. "It'll mean ruin for me, that's what it'll mean! Oh dear! I'm sure I don't know what I can do!"

"It's a sin and a shame!" shouted Yorke. "Things have come to a pretty pass when we can't buy tuck with our own money!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Look here, Mrs. Hake," said Christine. "Let's have a couple of small tins of sardines—they'll do all right with bread and butter——"

"Sorry, but I can't, sir," said the old lady plaintively.

"Not sardines?" yelled a dozen juniors.

"Not anything, young gents, in that line."

"My only hat," said Christine blankly.

And there was no doubt about the fact that there were no supplies to be obtained from the school shop. Mr. Martin had apparently prepared well in advance, for Mrs. Hake's shelves were barren—except for several bottles and boxes of sweetstuff. There was evidently no ban upon sweets. But, of course, we couldn't eat sweets for tea.

"It's absolutely amazing" said Watson dazedly. "What the dickens does the old idiot mean? What's the idea of barring us from tuck?"

"Mr. Martin, sir, told me that he didn't want you young gentlemen to do yourselves a injury by eating things which ain't digestible," explained Mrs. Hake. "The Head told me that them things wasn't good for growing boys, and the school supplied enough food for everybody. He said it wasn't right that there should be food lying about in junior studies. Mr. Martin reckons it ain't hygienic or healthy."

"Utter rot!"

"I should think it is," I put in. "How does the Head expect you to keep your business together, Mrs. Hake? Most of your trade was in pastry and cakes and meat pies and tinned fish——"

"Mr. Martin reckoned that I should do well enough out of the sweets, Master Nipper," said Mrs. Hake. "But I sh'a'nt unless you young gentleman buy an enormous lot every week."

"Well, I call it a rotten shame," said De Valerie. "And if the Head thinks we'll stand it, he'll find himself mistaken. We're not prisoners—and we're not in a workhouse. I don't see why we should subsist on the school grub, without any luxury at all!"

"Neither do I," I declared grimly. "Perhaps the Head has overlooked the fact that Mr. Binks keeps a tuckshop in the village. We'll go down there now—there's time before locking-up—and bring back piles of stuff. Then we'll stand about and eat it in the passages, and in the lobby. There's no rule forbidding that!"

"By George!" roared Handforth. "A ripping wheeze! We'll show the old rotter what we think of him! Come on, my sons! There's not much time to waste."

The fellows trooped out of the tuck-

shop in a body, and made for the gateway. Sir Montie and Torry and I were among the foremost, and I don't exactly know what Mrs. Hake's feelings were as she saw us leaving her establishment in order to patronise her rival in the village.

We all hurried down the lane—at the double, in fact—but the fellow who kept well in advance was Fatty Little. Big as he was, he had plenty of energy and could run with quite remarkable speed. And it was his intention to arrive at the tuckshop first. He didn't want all the good things to be bagged by the other fellows before he got there.

It was dark in the village, and a light gleamed from the window of Mr. Binks' neat little tuckshop in the High Street. As we passed the window I noticed that it was stocked with good things.

Fatty was already in the shop, and he seemed to be having an argument with Mr. Binks himself, who presided behind the counter in solitary state. I rapped on the counter briskly.

"How goes it, Binko?" I asked cheerfully. "Just let me have a dozen beef patties, two dozen jam tarts, a dozen doughnuts——"

"Steady on, Master Nipper," said Mr. Binks. "I can't serve ye."

"Eh?"

"What?"

"I can't let you have anything, young gents," said Mr. Binks huskily.

"What the merry dickens are you talking about?" demanded Watson. "Can't let us have anything? Rot! Your window's stocked with stuff—and so are those shelves behind you."

"And well I know it, Master Watson," said the tuckshop keeper. "But I'm afraid I can't serve you anything."

"That's what he told me!" shouted Little warmly.

"It can't be done, sir," said Mr. Binks, shaking his head mournfully.

"Why not?" yelled the crowd.

"We've got plenty of money to pay with—spot cash," I put in. "You simply can't refuse to serve us, Binko. Ring off this tommy rot, and get busy. We want tons of stuff this evening."

Mr. Binks rubbed his hands.

"Oh, dear—oh, dear!" he exclaimed.

"I don't know what to do! All this custom and I can't take it! And there's nobody else I can sell the stuff to—the

village folk won't buy it. Specially got in for you young gents, it was. And I can't sell ye a sixpenny worth!"

"He's mad!" said Handforth. "Or else he's been drinking. Pile over the counter, you chaps, and help yourselves——"

"Don't, Master Handforth," pleaded Mr. Binks. "I shall get into awful trouble if you take anything——"

"But we'll pay for it, you old duffer," said Handforth.

"Mebbe, sir, but Mr. Martin has forbidden me to sell ye anything," said the old man, getting to the point at last. "He give me strict orders——"

"Mr. Martin!" gasped Handforth.

"Our new Head!"

"Great Scott!"

"This is beyond the limit—we won't stand it!"

"Hold on, you chaps," I said, as the crowd pressed forward excitedly.

"Let's get the true details. Do I understand, Mr. Binks, that you have been forbidden to sell anything to any St. Frank's boy?"

"Yes, Master Nipper, that's quite right."

"You've been forbidden by Mr. Martin?"

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Binks sadly.

"Well, old chap, you can take it from me that Mr. Martin has got about as much right to give you that order as the village idiot has!" I said grimly. "You're a tradesman, and your wares are for the general public. We're a portion of the general public, and no harm will come to you if you serve us."

"Good for you, Nipper!"

"So that's settled!" said Fatty Little, with a sigh of relief.

"But it isn't, young gents—I darsn't serve ye," said Mr. Binks firmly.

"Oh, my hat!" I exclaimed patiently.

"Can't you see, Binko, that Mr. Martin had no right to give such an order to you? He can place the tuckshop out of bounds for us—but that's all. Then, if we want supplies, we shall break bounds, and chance the consequences. But—nobody—not even Mr. Martin—can give you orders about whom you're to sell your stuff to. It's the biggest piece of impertinence I've ever heard of—and if you're scared of the Head, you needn't be. Mr. Nelson Lee will see that you don't get into any trouble. Is that good enough?"

The crowd waited anxiously, and Mr. Binks stood behind his counter drumming his fingers in a worried way. As I had told him, Mr. Martin had no authority whatever to restrict Mr. Binks's sales. All that the Head could do would be on our side—he could forbid us to visit the shop, but he couldn't forbid Mr. Binks to serve us.

"It's a difficult thing, young gents," said the old man, at last. "Mr. Martin is your Head, and if I displease him I might find myself in hot water. I'm rare worried about it all, but I'm afraid I can't let ye have anything to-night. It fair makes my heart ache, but it's impossible, young gents!"

"But look here——"

"Have some sense, Binko——"

"Listen to reason——"

Everybody argued, but the old shopkeeper was firm. He wouldn't budge from his decision, and I guessed that the Head had scared him a great deal. Mr. Martin had been down, and had probably bullied Binks into a promise. And the old fellow was as firm as a rick.

"Well I don't know about you chaps, but I know what I'm going to do," said Handforth at last. "I'm going to take all the stuff I want—and if you get in the way, Binko, you'll have your giddy nose punched!"

And Handforth leaped over the counter. It was the signal for half-a-dozen other fellows to follow his example. Mr. Binks was powerless—and he had sense enough to realise it. He stood by, passively wringing his hands.

And the tuckshop was raided in the most wholesale manner. But I took care to stand by the door to see that nobody sneaked out without paying for the supplies he had appropriated. Long, of the Remove, was quite capable of "borrowing" a supply of tuck on the quiet.

There was plenty of money knocking about, and practically the whole of Mr. Binks' perishable stock was seized, and on the counter lay an assortment of ten shilling notes, silver coins and coppers. If anything, the old man received more than the tuck's actual worth.

And, although he was very worried, he could not conceal an expression of satisfaction as he eyed that pile of money. He was afraid that he would get into trouble, but, of course, Martin could not harm him.

"Everybody ready?" I asked at last.

"Waiting for you."

"Good! Then let's get a move on!"

I walked briskly to the door, and found a crowd outside, waiting. They were loaded with all kinds of cakes and pastries, and were all cheerful. A good many villagers were looking on, wondering what all the noise could be about.

And we set off to the school, content in the knowledge that we had done the right thing. We had spent our money in a public shop, and Mr. Howard Martin was defied.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MYSTERY OF MR. MARTIN.

NELSON LEE was looking rather worried as he walked through the village some little time later. He had been to the station to see about certain articles of luggage, and was now on his way back to St. Frank's. It was very dark in the old High Street, for the shops were now all closed, although, of course, the hour was still quite early.

"Hallo! Is that you, Lee?"

The voice came out of the darkness, and Nelson Lee halted and peered at the dim figure which was responsible for the greeting. He recognised Dr. Brett, the village medico.

"Glad to see you again, doctor," said the schoolmaster-detective heartily. "I can't see you distinctly, but your voice sounds as hale and healthy as ever. How have you been getting on?"

"Oh, things have been deadly dull here!" said Dr. Brett, shaking Lee's hand. "I have missed your little visits a great deal, Lee, and I've missed running in to see you during a slack hour. I hope you enjoyed yourself in London?"

"We had quite a lot of excitement one way and another," smiled Nelson Lee, as Brett fell into pace beside him. "You are coming this way? Good! I'm afraid I'm not in a very cheerful mood this evening, Brett."

"Oh!" said the doctor. "How is that?"

"Well, a certain general on the retired list, known as Ord-Clayton, has set himself out to make an exhibition of his narrow-minded foolishness," said Lee. "I can assure you, Brett, that I am furious!"

"I hope you won't start on me!" said Brett, smiling. "But what about Ord-Clayton? I've seen him once or twice, and he strikes me as being a bit of a fire-eater. And what's this I hear about a new Headmaster? I wasn't aware that Dr. Stafford was about to retire!"

"Dr. Stafford has been sacked—for that is what it amounts to actually," said Lee grimly. "Ord-Clayton is responsible, and he has appointed a new Head named Howard Martin, a man who appears to think that a public school is a prison, and that boys are to be treated as so many slaves."

"I'm beginning to understand," said the doctor. "So that's the trouble—eh? But why on earth was such a fellow appointed? Surely Ord-Clayton is not permitted to do exactly as he likes in these matters?"

"Martin was engaged by the Board of Governors, and Ord-Clayton is the chairman," explained Nelson Lee. "His voice is more influential than all the other voices put together, for, to be quite frank, the governors are a set of old fossils! And I am extremely worried concerning the immediate future of St. Frank's."

"You think there'll be trouble?"

"I am sure there will be trouble—it is inevitable."

"With the boys?"

"Exactly," said Nelson Lee gravely. "There have been a number of rules formulated by Mr. Martin—or perhaps it would be better to call them restrictions. They are to be rigorously enforced by the Headmaster."

"And how do you stand?"

"I am nominally an underling," said Lee drily. "I am to obey this autocrat, and carry out his wishes. Brett, I am pretty certain that Martin and myself will have some stormy scenes before very long."

The doctor looked worried.

"That's bad—deucedly bad!" he declared. "You are beginning to make me fear that you will soon be leaving us, Lee. You are not the kind of man to put up with any nonsense from a bullying blusterer."

"You needn't be afraid, old man," said Nelson Lee quietly. "Mr. Martin will not be able to treat me in exactly his own way. Personally, I am quite on the side of the boys, and I shall champion them right from the start. There was no

need whatever for these foolish restrictions to be imposed. It simply means that Martin is anxious to assert his authority. He is not content to come here and carry on in the usual routine. And, quite apart from all this, I intend to get him away as soon as possible. I am thinking of Dr. Stafford."

"He was badly treated?"

"Shamefully treated!" agreed Lee. "The old gentleman is positively loved by the boys, and there'll be big trouble this week. You mark my words, Brett, and don't be surprised if you hear of very severe ructions."

"But what of your position?" asked Brett. "You'll be required to uphold Martin's methods."

"Just for the present I intend to remain passive," said Nelson Lee. "I think it is quite likely that matters will adjust themselves, after a deal of trouble during the first two or three days. The boys will certainly take matters into their own hands, and if Martin possesses an ounce of sense, he will gracefully submit. If he attempts to enforce his will upon the school—well, the real battle will begin. But I am hoping for the best."

"I'll drop in to-morrow," said Brett, as he paused in the road. "I shall be interested to hear how things are going. Well, good-night, Lee! I've got a call to make in this cottage, so I'll leave you here."

They shook hands, and the doctor went to one of his patients, and Nelson Lee continued his way towards the school. The schoolmaster-detective was very thoughtful as he made his way along the dark lane in the direction of St. Frank's.

A fairly high wind was blowing, and many leaves blew into Lee's face as he strode briskly along. The lane was quite deserted, except for himself. But then a rather surprising incident occurred.

Something moved near the hedge, and a dim figure came out to meet Nelson Lee. The latter paused, being fairly certain that the stranger was a tramp, about to ask for a few coppers.

"Is that you, Howard?" asked a soft voice.

"I beg your pardon!" said Lee, rather surprised.

"I know it's you!" went on the voice. "I recognised your figure as you came along. I haven't seen you for five years, but—"

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Lee, "but I think you are mistaken!"

"That won't do, Howard!" said the mysterious stranger, moving closer in the gloom. "I thought perhaps you'd attempt to ignore me, but I mean to have it out with you! No, don't interrupt! I've suffered enough because of what you did, and now that I'm free, I mean to make you help me! I'm not going back to that living death!"

"But, really, I must insist upon speaking!" said Nelson Lee. "You have apparently mistaken me for Mr. Howard Martin."

"I have made no mistake!" exclaimed the other. "A man does not fail to recognise his own flesh and blood. You infernal blackguard! You treacherous hound! I've been waiting for years to face you and to have it out, as man to man!"

"I'm deeply sorry——"

A match flared, flickered for a moment in the wind, and then went out. But the stranger had had sufficient time to see Nelson Lee's features. He gave a little cry, and caught his breath in.

"You—you are not Howard Martin!" he exclaimed huskily.

"I told you I was not," said the school-master-detective. "You were rather too hasty, my dear sir. My name is Nelson Lee."

"Nelson Lee!" shouted the other.

"Yes."

"The—the detective?"

"Yes; although at present——"

But Nelson Lee got no further. The man backed away, and dived through the hedge. Lee stood quite still, and made no attempt to follow. He was rather surprised by what had happened, and the incident had certainly been startling.

Who was the man who had come out of the hedge? A relation of Martin's obviously. And there was an element of mystery in the affair which attracted Nelson Lee on the spot.

He was also permitted to gain a slight insight into the new Head's character. This stranger, who spoke like a gentleman, had referred to Martin as a blackguard and a treacherous hound!

What could it mean?

The detective's first impulse was to question the stranger, and to find out the actual truth. But at that moment his keen ears caught a slight sound down the road. He looked closely, and made out a dim figure coming along from the

village. Quite possibly the figure belonged to Mr. Howard Martin.

Lee meant to make sure.

He walked briskly down the road, as though on his way to the village, and within a few moments he came face to face with the new Head. The latter paused, and peered into the gloom.

"Mr. Lee, I believe?" he said gruffly.

"Yes," said Lee.

"I presume you are on your way to the village?" asked the Head. "I should just like to have a word with you, Mr. Lee. General Ord-Clayton has taken his departure—he left by car an hour ago. I am now in sole charge of St. Frank's, and I am quite sure that Mr. Stockdale and yourself will pull well together with me."

"I trust so!" said Lee shortly.

"We had just a little touch of unpleasantness earlier in the day," went on the Head, "but I am sure you have realised your foolishness, Lee. Stafford was not the right man for this school. He was too slow, too old-fashioned, too out-of-date. I intend to put new life into St. Frank's. I mean to keep the boys more strictly under control. Too much liberty and freedom is bad for youngsters, particularly the junior boys."

"I quite agree with you," said Nelson Lee. "Too much freedom, indeed, is bad for anybody. We must all be restricted in certain ways. But it is my opinion that the rules which have held good for at least twenty years were in no need of revision."

"That is my concern!" snapped Martin. "I have thought fit to alter certain rules, and the boys must obey me. They will possibly object somewhat at first, but what can they do? Nothing! Any insubordination will lead to immediate and dire punishment. I shall crush any rebellion with a heavy hand."

"Let me advise you, Mr. Martin, to be very careful," said Nelson Lee quietly. "Not so very many months ago, during Dr. Stafford's temporary absence, a man attempted to force his will upon the school. He failed completely, and the trouble he caused was really appalling."

"Tut-tut! You will please understand, Lee, that it is not your place to dictate to me!" exclaimed Martin harshly. "I will put up with no impertinence from a mere underling! You were referring

to a man named Hunter. I know all about that episode. Hunter had excellent ideas, but he was foolish in his methods. I shall make no mistakes of that kind."

Nelson Lee shrugged his shoulders.

"It is not my intention to quarrel with you, Martin, neither do I wish to dictate," he said. "But you will be making a grave mistake if you refuse to listen to any grievance which the boys may bring to you. Violence and harshness will never succeed in—"

The Head did not wait for Nelson Lee to finish. He walked up the road, snorting, and Lee was provided with an excellent example of Mr. Howard Martin's manners. Lee smiled to himself and stood near the hedge.

And exactly as he had expected—he heard faint voices shortly afterwards. Gazing into the gloom, he saw two figures higher up the road. Mr. Martin had been accosted by the mysterious stranger.

"This is quite interesting," Nelson Lee told himself. "I had really thought of taking a holiday until Martin received his quietus, but this little affair makes all the difference. I shall remain here, and I shall make it my business to investigate matters."

The detective was not surprised that the stranger had mistaken him for Martin. He was of about the same build as the Head, and he happened to be wearing a light mackintosh of the same type as Martin's, and the other man had not seen Martin for five years.

So the blunder was not to be wondered at. Lee was very pleased that it had occurred, for it had given him a new interest in Mr. Howard Martin.

What was the secret concerning that harsh gentleman?

CHAPTER VII.

THE CHOPPER FALLS.

"TOPHOLE!"

"By jingo! This is the stuff to give 'em!" said Handforth, with his mouth full of ham sandwich. "What do we care for Martin?"

"Nothing!" grinned McClure.

"Less than nothing, in fact," said Pitt, setting his teeth into a jam tart. "I must say that old Binks sells good stuff!"

"Rather!"

The lobby of the Ancient House was crowded; the junior passages were crowded. And all the fellows were partaking of a somewhat late tea. The studies were quite deserted, and the whole situation was really ludicrous.

But none of the rules were broken.

Tregellis-West and Watson and I sat on the foot of the stairs munching beef patties and sandwiches and other good things. The only drawback was that we had no tea. But ginger-beer was a fair substitute.

The feed had commenced shortly before, and everybody entered into it with enthusiasm. Those fellows who were rather nervous of the consequences forgot all about it in their hunger.

Fatty Little was breaking all records. The amount of stuff he packed away was quite staggering. But as there was a plentiful supply of tuck, nobody begrudged him his private hundredweight—as De Valerie put it.

"Well, it's the only thing we could do," I remarked. "No grub here, so we had to go to the village. The new order says that no food is to be taken into the studies. There wasn't a word about not eating anything in the lobby."

"Of course not," grinned Watson.

"Dear fellows, we are breakin' no regulation," said Sir Montie. "Not that I should be frightfully upset if we were breakin' 'em, begad!"

Handforth looked grim.

"We'll break them to-morrow—don't you worry!" he exclaimed. "Those regulations were made to be ignored. But this little business was just a joke against the Head. When he finds out what we've done he'll send out a new order, I suppose. But he can't punish us for this."

"Of course not," I agreed. "That's just where it comes in. If Martin has an ounce of sense, he'll see the humour of it, and he'll allow us to feed in the studies. But it's my opinion he'll have about two fits, and then give strict orders that no tuck is to be brought into the House at all."

"Anyhow, we're safe," said Somerton easily.

"And we're enjoying ourselves," remarked Jack Grey. "I say, Reggie, just chuck over one of those doughnuts."

"Right," said Reginald Pitt. "Catch!"

His aim was rather untrue, for the doughnut whizzed past Grey's head, and struck Morrow's mouth, as he entered the lobby. The prefect staggered back and spluttered, and the juniors roared.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Why didn't you open your mouth, Morrow?" grinned Pitt. "You'd have caught it nicely in one go!"

"You young sweeps!" exclaimed Morrow, looking round angrily. "What the dickens is the meaning of this? What's the idea of hanging about the lobby feeding out of bags? Have you all gone mad?"

"It's all right, Morrow——"

"It's not all right," snapped the prefect. "Clear out at once!"

"Rats!" I said. "You know as well as I do that the Head has given an order that no food should be eaten in the studies. It's cold and dark outside, and I know you wouldn't be heartless enough to turn us into the chilly night."

Morrow looked round with a new expression on his face.

"Oh!" he said slowly. "So that's the game! You're evading the new rules by feeding outside your studies, instead of in! Well, you can do it this once, I suppose, but the Head will soon drop on you. Carry on, my children—I sha'n't interfere."

"Good!"

"You're a sport, Morrow."

"Have one of these beef patties?" said Pitt invitingly.

He held up a bag, and Morrow squinted into it. He hesitated for a moment, grinned, and then helped himself.

"I'm not sure that I'm doing right," he said. "But they look decent"—munch—"and they taste decent, too! There's no rule being broken, so I'm not failing in my duties as a prefect."

"Of course you're not, Morrow."

"Go ahead, old son—have one of these jam tarts!"

Everybody was cheerful, and there was a great deal of satisfaction in the knowledge that no punishment could result. And just then a footstep was heard on the gravel outside, and Owen major, who was near the door, looked out into the gloomy Triangle.

His face, when he turned it back, wore a scared expression.

"The Head!" he muttered.

"Oh, my hat!"

"Cave!"

"Rats!" I said quickly. "Stick where you are, you asses!"

"He's coming this way!" hissed Owen major.

"All the better," I said. "We're doing no wrong, are we? Let him come in and see us—it's just what we want."

"Of course," agreed Handforth. "Gimme one of those doughnuts, Church! I'll have my mouth full when he comes in!"

One or two of the nervous juniors sneaked away, but the majority held their ground. And Morrow didn't move an inch. As a prefect, he couldn't slip away just because the Head was coming; his dignity wouldn't allow it. Moreover, he had no desire to slip away.

Mr. Howard Martin strode into the lobby, his brow black and thoughtful. He seemed to be intensely worried over something, and for a moment or two he didn't notice anything.

Then, abruptly, he came to a halt and glared at Handforth.

"Boy!" he shouted. "What are you eating?"

"A doughnut, sir," said Handforth, taking a big bite.

"How—how dare you?" thundered the Head. "Where did you obtain it, boy?"

"M-m-m-m-m!" mumbled Handy helplessly.

"This is outrageous!" roared the Head. "I gave strict orders—— Good gracious! You are all eating! Pastry—cakes—sandwiches—pork-pies! Upon my soul! I—I am amazed!"

He looked round, and everybody remained silent. Many juniors, however, continued eating.

"Where did you obtain these—these disgusting articles of food?" demanded the Head, after a tense moment. "Where did you buy them?"

"At Mr. Binks's shop, sir," I explained.

"Binks! I gave the man orders not to sell you anything!" snapped Martin. "In the morning I shall see the scoundrel——"

"Mr. Binks is a harmless old chap, sir," I put in. "He refused to let us have any tuck—so we took it."

"You—took it?"

"Yes, sir," I said calmly. "Of course, we paid for the stuff in cash. Binks couldn't prevent us having what we wanted. A whole crowd of fellows went

down. And, in any case, he's a free tradesman, and he's at liberty to sell his stock to the general public——"

"Silence, boy!" roared the Head. "From this moment the village is out of bounds!"

"What!"

Everybody gasped with dismay.

"The village is out of bounds!" said the Head harshly. "Any boy—any junior boy—found in the village to-morrow, or any future day, will receive a flogging before the whole school!"

"But—but that's awful, sir!" shouted Handforth. "We've never been barred from the village before—except when there was a lot of 'flu about. How shall we buy things? We ain't prisoners."

"Your name, boy?" snarled Martin.

"Handforth, sir——"

"You will write me five hundred lines, Handforth, for impertinence," said the Head furiously. "By Heaven! I will have obedience and discipline in this school! And every boy here will write two hundred lines for disobedience!"

"Oh, sir!"

"Hold on, sir," I said quickly. "We haven't disobeyed any order——"

"What?" barked the Head.

"Your order was to the effect that no food was to be taken into junior studies," I went on. "This is the lobby. Not a grain of stuff has been taken into a study. We haven't broken any rule at all—so we can't be punished."

Mr. Martin pursed his lips.

"That is a quibble!" he exclaimed. "I intend to punish everybody here. Nipper—I believe you are Nipper—you will report yourself to me in the morning for a caning!"

"What for, sir?" I asked blandly.

"It is not your business to ask questions!" roared the Head. "You have been insolent, and I intend to teach you a lesson. Take all this food and give it to the house matron. Do you hear me? Go!"

"Just a minute, sir," said Morrow firmly. "This food was bought by the boys' own money. It's theirs. And Nipper was quite right when he said that no rule had been broken. I should have stepped the thing at once if it had been against your orders. It's hardly fair to punish——"

"Silence!" shouted the Head. "Who are you?"

"My name is Morrow, sir. I belong to the Sixth."

"Are you a prefect?"

"Yes, sir."

"From this moment, Morrow, you are no longer a prefect," said Mr. Martin harshly. "You are unfit to fulfil the duties of a prefect! Furthermore, I shall punish you for upholding the juniors in an act of rank insubordination!"

Morrow fairly staggered.

"But—but——"

"Enough!" snapped the Head. "I can easily find a senior boy to fill your place. You made no attempt to stop this disgraceful scene, and you will report to me at nine o'clock this evening."

"Re—report!" stuttered Morrow.

"What for, sir?"

"To receive your punishment!"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I sha'n't be able to come," said Morrow, becoming dangerously calm. "I'm not a junior—and I'm not going to stand any injustice. You have taken away my prefectship for nothing, and——"

"Silence!" raved the Head. "How dare you bandy words with me?"

"I'm not bandying words—I'm speaking my mind," said Morrow hotly. "You seem to think you can treat me as a slave—but you can't, Mr. Martin! You can call me insolent, or anything you like, but I'm not going to be trodden underfoot by you or anybody else!"

"Hear, hear!" shouted Handforth excitedly.

"Good for you, Morrow!"

"Stick to it, old man!"

"Yah! Bully! Cad! Rotter!"

The Head breathed hard.

"Good heavens!" he shouted thickly. "How dare you? Every boy in this lobby will be detained within the gates for two weeks. All half-holidays will be stopped. As for you, Morrow, I shall flog you before the whole school——"

"Will you?" snapped Morrow. "I don't think so!"

"What—what——"

"If you attempt to touch me, sir, there'll be trouble!" said Morrow furiously. "I'm not a kid, and the Sixth will have something to say about this! You've asked for trouble, and you're going to find it!"

The ex-prefect strode away down the passage, and Mr. Martin glared after

him with baleful eyes. He had been defied—defied by a boy! The Head snapped his teeth and walked away.

A perfect storm of hissing and booing broke out, and it continued for quite a minute. And just as it was breaking out into a second spasm, Nelson Lee appeared in the doorway. He stared into the lobby with amazement.

"Boys!" he shouted, "what is the meaning of this?"

The uproar ceased as though by magic.

"We were just exercising our voices, sir," said Handforth tartly. "I think we'll exercise 'em a bit more. Now, then, you chaps! Give Mister Lee three cheers—and let yourselves go! The finest housemaster we ever had, and one of the best in the world! Hurrah!"

"Hip, hip, hurrah!"

The din was even more deafening, but the guv'nor stopped it by holding up his hand.

"This is all very well, boys, and I appreciate it, but you really must be more tactful," he said. "I am afraid you are not very respectful to your new

Headmaster—and that won't do. He is your Headmaster, and you must always remember that. I want to know what the noise was about when I came in."

"I'll tell you that, sir," I put in briskly.

I was helped by my fellows, who insisted on adding words here and there. But the guv'nor understood all right, and he looked grave when I had finished.

"I am sorry to hear this," he said. "I am deeply afraid that it is the beginning of a serious rebellion. Morrow was certainly just in his anger, and I shall attempt to smooth matters over with the Head. In the meantime, boys, you will oblige me by maintaining order. I wish to hear no more hissing."

Every junior was ready to respect that wish, and the Ancient House was quiet during the rest of the evening. The Head took no action, and the Sixth waited in vain for the storm to break. They were with Morrow to a man.

But everybody knew that big trouble was brewing. Mr. Martin had set himself against the school—and the school was ready to fight!

THE END.

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By ROBT. W. COMRADE.

Author of "The Stowaway's Quest," "Scorned by the School," etc.

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. The strange sights and people they encounter on this planet will be told in the following chapter.

The Venusites.

GRESHAM lifted the patent shutter, and the blinding pencil of light shot out and illuminated the ocean for a considerable distance.

"Good," he murmured, "couldn't be in better order."

He snapped the shutter down again, and everything was plunged in darkness, except for the glare from the engine-room windows.

Five minutes later these, too, were invisible, the shutters having been drawn down in place. The *Solar Monarch* was forging ahead, showing not even a pin-

point of illumination, at half speed. The screws hummed musically, and the powerful engine could be felt throbbing under the travellers' feet as they moved silently about the deck.

"What a perfect evening," Frank exclaimed, gazing dreamily at the myriads of stars. "It's hard to realise that we're on another world—millions of miles away from the earth."

"Mon, ye're wrong," chuckled Mac. "It's no on anither world we are—we're between the twa!"

"You're bound to make some funny remark," laughed Frank, looking earnestly ahead, to where could faintly be seen the Venusite town.

They were approaching it rapidly, and it was now evident that no living creature was about. Suddenly the professor drew his small figure upright, and stood in a listening attitude.

"Hist!" he ejaculated, holding his hand up. Frank and Mac paused in their conversation, and also listened.

The shriek of the propeller and fans were the only things they heard at first, then gradually a flapping noise smote their ears, and grew louder and louder every minute.

"Man alive, what can it be?" murmured the Scot, looking around him in a puzzled way; then he, too, threw his arm up, but it was for a different object. "Look," he cried, "Heaven preserve us, what a beast!"

The others followed the direction in which he was pointing. Flying parallel with the *Solar Monarch* could be seen the faint outline of a bird—a bird of truly terrible proportions.

"It is one of those strange creatures we saw this afternoon," cried the scientist

excitedly. "But that was a pigny compared to this."

The monster was keeping pace with the aeronef, no doubt wondering what the noisy thing happened to be, also what it meant by flying in its own particular territory. Every now and again its huge mouth would open and weird noises came from the aperture.

"Turn the searchlight on it," suggested Frank, "and see what effect it has."

"A bit risky," commented Gresham, but he acted on Frank's suggestion nevertheless, and lifted the shutter.

The brilliant light flared out, and for a moment the crew of the Solar Monarch had an uninterrupted view of the flying animal, for it could scarcely be called a bird. It was dark green in colour, and its narrow eyes glittered evilly. The huge wings, with the strange-looking claws at the bottom, were beating up and down untiringly.

A hoarse croaking came from its throat, and it started flying downwards as if dazed. It reeled for a moment, then lurched right into the aeronef. It struck heavily, and for a moment the airship oscillated violently. Before Gresham could rush to the telegraph, the strange creature had managed to get clear, and with a final croak flew off into the darkness.

"Well, I'm glad he's taken his departure," remarked the professor, as he tried to pierce the blackness. "I'm thankful we have nothing of his description on Mother Earth."

"He certainly is far from prepossessing," said Gresham, snapping off the searchlight. "We shall have to go carefully now, for the coast is barely three hundred yards distant."

In silence, except for an occasional low remark, the four adventurers stood leaning over the rail intently watching the dark and silent city. From there it appeared to be a city of the dead, indeed, Professor Palgrave voiced his opinion that it might prove to be so in reality. At all events, no sign of movement was visible. In a few minutes the ship was flying over the houses.

"Either everybody's abed or the place is deserted—one or the other," said the professor in a low voice. It was far from being dark, now that their eyes had grown accustomed to it, the outline

of the houses beneath could be plainly distinguished.

But it was their huge dimensions that was amazing. The Solar Monarch was fully three thousand feet above the ground, yet the house-tops seemed to be immediately below the aeronef's keel.

And they were not only tall; they were proportionately broad. The builders of this city had evidently no idea of architecture, for the dwellings were composed of great blocks, doubtless weighing tons apiece, piled one on top of the other, no mortar having been used.

Another strange fact was the absence of doors. In every house a huge opening, perhaps a hundred feet in height, had been made, but of covering there was none—just a blank space.

"I shouldna care much tae sleep a' nicht in one o' those places," murmured Mac in Frank's ear. "There'd be too many draughts aboot, I'm o' the opinion."

"To say nothing of the bareness of the place," said Frank. "That is, presuming they are bare. I can hardly conceive of them being luxuriously furnished, can you?" And he laughed at the thought.

"I think we can take it for granted the city is uninhabited," put in Gresham, crossing the deck. "What do you say to the idea of descending and exploring the place?"

"The very thing," cried Frank. "I'm curious to see what's inside these strange houses."

Accordingly Gresham telegraphed to Abbie, and a few moments later the vessel was slowly descending to the ground.

It passed between two of the gigantic buildings, and it was not until then that the watchers on deck realised the stupendous size of them. As the ship sank lower and lower, so the city seemed to get larger and larger, until it was towering above them, and the Solar Monarch appeared to be a toy in comparison.

All at once the quiet night air was rent by a weird and deafening noise, and the ground below the explorers became alive with objects—huge objects, towering thirty feet in height. They rushed along the ground at an amazing pace, and every one of them looked upwards.

"By gum, they were on the watch all

the time," cried Frank. "And look what peculiar shaped monsters they are, too! I shouldn't care to be at closer quarters to them than we are now!"

There was every cause for this last remark of Frank's, for the Venusites were of a truly repulsive appearance. Gresham had switched the searchlight on, and a glare of light had illuminated the area immediately beneath the ship.

Evidently the light had no effect on the strange creatures below, for they still capered about as before. I will do my best to describe them, but I fear it must be a crude and inadequate description.

Their towering height was the first thing that struck one; although some were barely over twenty feet, perhaps—the explorers could never tell—these were the female inhabitants. It certainly was the most likely explanation.

In form and outline there was no apparent difference. Their heads, covered with pale green, tangled hair, were out of all proportion to their bodies, indeed, of the two, Gresham always declared that the heads were the larger. The legs—four in number, and close packed—were short and thin, and seemed too frail and weak to perform their proper duties, and support the weight of the enormous head and trunk.

Of arms, two of enormous length could be seen. To conclude, each Venusite was possessed of a tail, and each was covered from head to foot with the same pale green hair.

The legs were the most peculiar part, for they were all on the lower portion of the body. The Venusites stood upright like human beings. The effect of this was most grotesque.

"What are they playing at?" whispered Mac excitedly. "They are mad as hatters, sure, caperin' about like that."

"Suppose we lower the ship and get a little closer?" suggested Gresham. "We can then get a better view and possibly hold a conversation of signs with them."

"By all means," exclaimed the professor eagerly. "Nothing could be more interesting or instructive."

The Solar Monarch sank still lower, until at last it was within fifty feet of the ground. Then the inventor bent over the rail and shouted loudly. Instantly the Venusites ceased their ex-

cited gesticulations, and stood staring up at Gresham in silence.

There were more of them now—several hundred collected beneath the aeronaf. Gresham called again, and pointed first at his ship, and then up into the sky.

Whether his efforts were understood is a difficult question to decide; probably they were not. But if the Venusites failed to comprehend Gresham's movements they became active again. Their heads seemed almost level with the airship, and an utterly indescribable sound—shrill and piercing—emanated from their mouths. They were conversing. Gresham was just about to give the word to Abbie to forge ahead when something occurred which altered the aspect of matters.

Without the slightest warning a huge spiral of rope-like twine, six inches in circumference, came whirling skywards.

It fell with a thud on the deck of the Solar Monarch, causing her to quiver from stem to stern. The twine had curled itself over the forward tank—at the extreme end—and the very weight of it made the vessel sag a little in that direction.

"The brutes," cried Frank, shaking his fist at the crowd beneath, "they are trying to drag us down! They mean to kill us!"

"Undoubtedly!" put in Gresham.

"See, there are a score of the creatures getting ready to haul on the rope and drag us down. You might almost think they were human."

"Tell Abbie to lift the vessel," cried Mac, making a rush for the telegraph. But Gresham was quicker.

"My dear Mac," he said gently. "don't you see what would happen if the vessel was lifted?"

"We shall soon see what'll happen if she isn't lifted," replied the Scot grimly. "But to answer your question, the ship would gang up tail first for a moment, then the rope would slip off her forward tank and set us free."

"You are mistaken, my boy. Do you see that ridge of plates near the edge of the tank? The rope would undoubtedly catch there, and we should do nothing but tilt almost perpendicular and crash to the ground nose first."

"Gum, so we should," muttered Mac in surprise. "Hallo, the scoundrels have started."

It was true. The deck of the Solar Monarch was assuming a slanting angle, and Frank and Mac glanced at one another with rather white faces. They were being dragged down and down, to ultimately fall into the hands of the mammoth Venusites. Surely that meant death for them all?

Uncanny Shrieks.

ONE would imagine that the explorers, in such a tight corner as they were now, would have become excited and lost their heads. Gresham, however, was perfectly calm, and seemed in no hurry whatever. He merely walked over to the telegraph, rang it imperatively, and then spoke crisply to Abbie.

"Lower the machine twenty feet," he ordered, "and then put in your reserve. Do you understand?"

"Fo' suah!" came Abbie's cheerful tones up the speaking-tube, and as the inventor turned and saw the deck getting steeper and steeper, the low hum of the fans changed their tone, and the Solar Monarch sank lower, gradually righting herself as she went.

Frank and Mac, in spite of themselves, burst into a roar of laughter, in which Gresham and the professor joined. The cause of their mirth at such a momentous time was the sudden collapse of the Venusites below.

As already mentioned, fully a score had been hauling on the rope. But as the ship suddenly lowered itself they one and all fell back with uncomfortable swiftness, the rope becoming slack in their hands. With uncanny cries they endeavoured to sort themselves out of the confused heap, and made hasty grabs for the rope.

But Gresham's plan had been successful. When the airship had descended twenty feet it slowly backed away, and the rope, being slack, slipped from the glittering hull and fell to the ground.

Then the inventor became brisk and alert. In three strides he was at the speaking-tube, telegraphing Abbie to lift the ship higher and higher.

And as he stepped back the shriek of the screws rang out as they answered the touch of Abbie's hand, and the Solar Monarch bounded skywards. With a snap Gresham shut off the searchlight,

and everything was plunged into pitchy darkness.

"A narrow shave," commented the professor, coolly lighting a cigar. "Another three feet and the vessel would have lost her equilibrium. My congratulations, Gresham, on your splendid exhibition of coolness."

Gresham laughed lightly.

"I'm flattered, I'm sure," he smiled. "But I consider now that I am under an obligation to return the compliment. The boys"—Gresham always called them boys—"and yourself were undoubtedly as calm as I was at the moment of peril. But, look here, I've a mind to pay these beggars out for their audacity. I'll give them a fright they'll not forget in a hurry."

And the tall, slim form of the inventor disappeared into the conning-tower to emerge again in a few minutes carrying a glittering, circular object.

"A bomb, by Jove," cried Frank. "Surely you don't mean to drop that on the crowd beneath?"

"Don't excite yourself, Frank," smiled Gresham. "The bomb is merely a dummy—it does no harm but makes a great deal of noise and commotion. I intend to ignite the fuse and then lower it by means of ropes until it is almost over their heads. If it fails to frighten them—well, they are stranger creatures than I take them to be, that's all."

Frank chuckled, and once more bent over the rail. The aeronef had become stationary again, but at a much higher altitude, and the searchlight being switched off, Frank had a hard job to distinguish what was going on below.

"They're still there," he said at last to Mac, who was standing by his side. "Look, you can see the beggars moving backwards and forwards. I suppose they're wondering—if they are able to wonder at all—where the deuce we've vanished to—"

"Why, they can see us all the time," said Mac. "The sky's far frae black, an' the shippie is sure ta be seen against the stars."

"Very probably. Ah, now for some fun," continued Frank, with a chuckle, as Gresham lit the fuse. The bomb had been tied to a piece of string, and now it was lowered swiftly downwards until Gresham calculated it to be close to the Venusites' heads.

(Continued on p. III of cover.)

They all waited in silence for the space of thirty seconds; then from below came a deafening roar and a blinding flash of light.

And as the echoes of it still tingled in the adventurers' ears a terrible commotion could be heard going on underneath the motionless airship. Gresham snapped the shutter of the searchlight up, and directed the powerful rays below.

"There they go, look," murmured Palgrave, chuckling. "Like a lot of whipped dogs, howling all the way. By George, but can't they move, eh?"

"I shouldn't care to be in that fellow's path at the present moment, anyway," exclaimed Frank, pointing to one of the Venusites, who was dashing across the city at fully fifty miles an hour.

The tall, cumbersome-looking figure seemed to glide over the ground, with a motion peculiarly its own. Five minutes after the bomb had exploded not one inhabitant was within sight.

"I expected to give the beggars a scare," remarked Gresham, "but I scarcely anticipated such a general decampment. Shall we descend now we have the chance and steal a glance at the interior of one of these remarkable dwellings?"

"It's risky," said the professor doubtfully. "but I think, after all, it's worth a little risk. It is not everybody who'll have the opportunity of examining the dwelling-houses of Venus."

"Yes, send her down," put in Frank. "There's not a soul left in this part of the city—Man alive, what on earth can that be?"

They stared at one another in perplexity, listening in wondering amazement at the uncanny sounds which were proceeding from the far side of the town—almost a mile distant.

At first a low, thundering noise had become audible; this had grown rapidly louder, and now the air was rent by the most peculiar cries imaginable.

They started with a roar resembling that of a lion, to conclude with the shrill trumpeting of an elephant, while a sound, unheard before by human ears, dominated the whole.

"What is it?" Gresham asked. "It cannot be the creatures we have just scared away—they are incapable of creating such an appalling——"

"Doubtless it is a herd of animals," suggested the professor. "I propose we fly to the spot from whence the cries are proceeding."

"That's the idea!" cried Mac. And Abbie having started the motor, the Solar Monarch continued on her way, the hubbub, as she progressed, sounding ever nearer and nearer. Soon, by straining their eyes—for the searchlight had been switched off—Frank and Mac, standing side by side against the aeronef's rail, could just distinguish, far ahead, huge shapeless forms moving amongst the houses.

"Gosh," muttered Mac, "what an awful size they must be! Luke!" he added, pointing, "if those beggars aren't all of fifty feet high, I'll——"

"They're certainly a stupendous height," replied Frank. "And, by the look of things, they have come in force. Just cast your eyes over in that direction; there's a hundred collected there if there's one."

It was right. The city appeared to be filling with the huge animals, and all the time they continued their hair-stiffening cries. The vessel was rapidly approaching them now, and Gresham intended flashing the light downwards so as to obtain a good view before they took fright.

At last the Solar Monarch came to a standstill, hovering immediately over a surging mass of animals, who were crouching and crushing themselves into the doorways of the giant houses.

It will give the reader some idea of their size when I state that there was no room to spare when one of these creatures passed through a doorway a hundred feet in height!

"Keep your eyes open now," advised Gresham, with his hand on the searchlight shutter. "It is possible that they may all take fright, and we shall lose the opportunity of seeing them."

A second later the houses below were brilliantly illuminated, and the explorers gazed on a strange scene. Hundreds of the most weird creatures imaginable were pushing each other about beneath them, in their evident endeavours to gain admittance to the gigantic houses—in the interior of which, presumably, the inhabitants were seeking refuge.

(Continued overleaf.)

In spite of the fact that the visitors to Venus had become used to the immense size of everything on that strange world, Frank and Mac, half expecting to see what they did, could not repress a sharp in-take of breath.

And they were not without excuse. The creatures appeared to take no notice of the blazing light, but continued forcing their way through the doorways unmoved, thus giving those above them time to take complete stock.

"I was prepared to a surprise," murmured Gresham, "but never for a moment did I dream of seeing such a sight as this!"

The reader would never realise what a stupendous task it is to describe the thousand-and-one amazing spectacles which Gresham and his followers witnessed while on their journeyings.

If the description of various places, animals, etc., appear somewhat inadequate, the only excuse I can offer is that I myself have never been to the planets, and so therefore can give no personal experiences.

All my information concerning this wonderful voyage into space has been collected from Gresham, who had foresight enough to make notes on everything they saw as the journey progressed.

Of these latest acquaintances, measuring some sixty to ninety feet in height, I will give but a brief glimpse. In general outline they closely resembled kangaroos, being possessed of very short front members, and extremely long and powerful hind quarters. They were of greeny-grey colour and covered by long and beautifully smooth fur, which, when remembering that Venus is a very hot place, seems all the more remarkable.

Their necks were thick and dumpy; but in regard to the head, their resemblance to kangaroos was nil; for this important part of their anatomy was fully the size of the body; and appeared to be overbalancing the rest.

But all this the adventurers scarcely noticed; it was the faces of the animals which caused their surprise and horror. Never had they seen such terribly loathsome features. The eyes were the dead-

liest part. These seemed to fill half the head, and, protruding fully three feet, their appearance was enough to turn a human being sick.

They were almost white in colour, and some greenish fluid matter was for ever dropping from them.

The nose was practically hidden by the terrible teeth. Of lips, there apparently were none, the teeth and jaw being exposed. One of these mouths opened, and Frank realised with a shudder that it would have been the easiest possible matter to walk inside. In comparison to these, the Venusites themselves were as angels!

"Good heavens, what awful-looking monsters," ejaculated the professor, as soon as he was able to regain his breath. "I implore you, Gresham, to close the shutter and blot out the loathsome sight."

The inventor did as requested, noticing before doing so that his companions were looking pale and ill. He felt the same himself, and touched the deck-bell.

After a moment Abbie appeared, unconcerned as ever, smiling broadly. He took one glance overside and saw the huge bodies beneath.

"By golly, we'm struck sometin' funny dis heah time, sah," he exclaimed. "I reckon dis child'll be mighty pleased when he sees de ole earf again."

"Don't you worry yourself, Abbie; we shall get back safe enough. At present, however, nothing will be more grateful than a brandy-and-soda. Bring four."

"Right, sah."

The spirit soon brought the old colour back to their cheeks, and they were wondering what to do when a fresh development took place beneath them. The awful cries, which had ceased, now rang out again; and so great was their intensity that the Solar Monarch quivered visibly.

But this time other cries were intermixed—cries of agony, it seemed. What was happening? Gresham was convinced that the Venusites were being slain remorselessly by their terrible opponents.

(To be continued.)