

No. 231.—SPLENDID NEW ENLARGED NUMBER!

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MR. WROTT ARRIVES AT ST. FRANK'S!

THE TYRANT'S UNDERSTUDY; **Or, THE "FIFTH" AT ST. FRANK'S.**

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 Fat Boy of St. Frank's," "Back to the Old Home," "The Sack for Nelson Lee," etc.

Nov. 8 1919.

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

RIPE FOR REVOLT!

FATTY LITTLE sighed.

"Why did my pater send me to St. Frank's?" he asked sadly.

"Why did I come to a place where a chap can't get enough grub to keep body and soul together? If things don't get better I shall waste away to a skeleton!"

"My dear elephant, it would take you ten years to waste away," said Reginald Pitt cheerfully. "When a chap's got an unlimited supply of blubber, he doesn't need much food to keep him alive."

"Great pancakes!" said Fatty. "You don't seem to realise the actual state of affairs. My case is something like a railway engine——"

"A which?"

"An engine," repeated the fat boy of the Remove. "A small suburban locomotive doesn't need much coal to keep it going; but a whacking great express engine requires four times the amount. It's the same with me. It's only natural that I should need more grub to—to keep steam up!"

I grinned.

"Well, there's something in that," I admitted. "And there's no denying that things are rather bad just now at St. Frank's. I only wish that the grub question was all we had to worry about!"

"It's all I worry about!" said Jimmy Little mournfully.

"We don't happen so be such glut-

tons," remarked De Valerie. "Grub is an important item, I'll admit. But there are other things a lot more urgent. The Head is a bullying beast, and he seems to have got the idea that the junior forms should be ground down under his heel."

"It's a game that other people have tried," I said grinning. "Sooner or later, my sons, Mr. Howard Martin will discover that the grinding process won't pay. He wants to make slaves of us—but he'll fail."

The little discussion was taking place in the Remove common-room of the Ancient House at St. Frank's. Afternoon lessons were just over, and the fellows were giving vent to some of their pent up feelings.

It was a Wednesday—and a half-holiday, really—but the new Headmaster at St. Frank's had decreed that the Remove should employ its leisure time in the Form-room. This would have been more bearable if Mr. Crowell had presided. But the Head himself had taken the Form, and everybody was feeling worn out.

Indignation ran high. And this, of course, was only natural. For Mr. Martin had done his best to antagonise the boys under his control. In point of fact, many of the fellows were prepared to revolt against the tyrannous regime which the new Head had brought into being.

"I was feeling pretty enraged on my own account. For, since the coming of Mr. Martin, there had been nothing but

trouble. Matters had reached a crisis a day or two earlier, when an event of the most disastrous description had taken place.

Nelson Lee, the Housemaster of the Ancient House—and my own respected guv'nor—had been sacked from the school. Sacked like a mere under-gardener! There had been a great deal of trouble at that time, but Nelson Lee had gone.

The Head had had his knife into Lee from the very start, and he had taken the first opportunity to kick the guv'nor out. Unfortunately, Mr. Martin was invested with full powers by the school Governors, and his word was final.

Nelson Lee had accepted his dismissal quietly, and had gone. He had determined, in any event, to leave the school during Mr. Howard Martin's Headmastership. For it was quite impossible for Lee to get on with him.

There had been a fine bust up on the evening of Lee's departure. The whole Ancient House had been aflame, and it was only by the harshest methods that the Head had kept the fellows in check.

And since Lee's departure things had been much worse. They were so bad, in fact, that none of us knew exactly what freedom was. Detention was so frequent that our leisure hours had practically disappeared.

So, while the Remove had the chance, the juniors gave vent to their views in no uncertain voices. Edward Oswald Handforth, the ramheaded leader of Study D, was advocating immediate action.

"There's no sense in delaying matters," he declared warmly. "Just consider the position as it stands—just consider it! How much liberty have we got?"

"None!"

"How much leisure have we got?"

"None!"

"How much voice have we got?"

"None!"

"Rats!" said Pitt. "Handy's got ten voices rolled into one!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"This is no time for weak attempts at humour," said Handforth severely. "I'm surprised at you, Pitt. The position is rotten—rotten to the core. Since Mr. Martin came we've been slaves. Think of it! Slaves!"

"Shameful!" said Watson indignantly.

"Is it right that British boys should be slaves?" roared Handforth.

"No!"

"Are we going to stand such treatment?"

"No!"

"We don't seem to have much choice," remarked Augustus Hart.

"Ah, that's just it!" shouted Handforth. "We've no choice? Exactly! But it is in our power to alter things. If we like to band ourselves together—if we like to amalgamate—we can defeat this bully within twenty-four hours. It is only necessary to do one thing!"

"And what's that?"

"Place yourselves in my hands," said Handforth. "Rally to my banner—to my leadership. I'll lead you on to victory. I'll deal with this tyrant as he deserves to be dealt with. Hands up, those who will support me."

Not a hand was raised.

"What—what——" Handforth paused, staring. "Didn't you hear me?" he gasped.

"Yes!"

"But—but——"

"We'd rather be excused, Handy," I said, grinning.

"You ass!" roared Handforth. "Don't you understand that this is a vital matter?"

"Exactly," I said. "That's why we're not rallying round you."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We want a leader—not a gramophone," said De Valerie.

"You silly fatheads!" howled Handforth. "If you'll place yourselves under my wing, I'll wipe up this bully—Great pip! I didn't notice you here, McClure—or you either, Church!"

"We're big enough," said McClure.

"Why didn't you put your hands up just now?" roared Handforth.

"Eh?"

"You chaps are my study pals—my own chums," went on the leader of Study D. "Do you mean to tell me that you won't rally round——"

"Oh, come off it, Handy," said Church. "You're all right in the main—one of the best chaps breathing—but its no good kidding yourself that you can deal with the Head! Take my advice, and leave the matter to somebody who's more capable of conducting a rebellion sensibly."

"You—you traitor!" shouted Handforth hotly. "Why, I'll wipe up——"

"No you won't, old son," I interrupted, holding him back. "We don't want a row just now, thanks. Martin has instructed the prefects to drop heavily on us if we make too much noise in the common rooms."

"Yes, but look here——"

"The fact is, you're too excitable, Handy," I said. "We've got to look the facts in the face, and can't afford to ruin everything by hasty action. It's tremendously galling to be under the thumb of such a brute——"

"That's why I want to squash him," said Handforth cheerfully. "I want to squash him flat as—as a sheet of paper! And I want to do it now."

I nodded.

"Of course you do," I agreed soothingly. "We all want to do it now. Everybody in the school would be glad to see the back of Mr. Howard Martin. But these things can't be done in a hurry. You've got to remember that the Head has supreme control, and at present his position at St. Frank's is something like that of a little king. His power is complete, and it's no light task to butt up against him. Any small attempt would certainly fail."

"But if we wait things may get worse——"

"I expect they will!" I agreed. "But that doesn't alter the fact that hasty action is inadvisable. I've always maintained that if a thing's worth doing at all, it might as well be done thoroughly. That's why I'm suggesting a little delay. I've got certain plans in my head, and before long I shall develop them. You've got to realise that we're up against something big."

Somerton nodded.

"You're quite right, old chap," he said. "It wouldn't do for us to mess things up by acting in a hurry. You're the Remove skipper, and it's your job to deal with this situation. I'm ready to follow your lead."

"Same here," said Grey.

"You can count me in," remarked Pitt. "We need a level-headed chap for a leader—and you fill the bill O.K. When you're ready for action, call upon me, and I'll do anything I'm ordered."

"Begad! That's the spirit!" said Sir Montie Tregellis-West approvingly. "If you'll all do that, dear fellows, every-

thin' will be all serene. I've got a frightful amount of trust in Nipper—I have, really. He's capable of doin' wonders. But the majority of you are so bally impatient. Rome wasn't built in a day, and——"

"If you think you're going to squash me out, you're mistaken," interrupted Handforth warmly. "I don't believe in all this jaw. Action is what we want. Just consider the things we're having to put up with. Just think of 'em!"

"I'd rather forget them, thanks," said Watson.

"No tea allowed in studies," said Handforth bitterly. "Prep. in the Form-room every evening, detention nearly every half-holiday——"

"We know all about it, you ass," said Pitt. "Our liberties have been taken away, and things are pretty rotten. The Ancient House seems to have copped it worse than the College House——"

"Wait until I've finished!" shouted Handforth. "What about the floggings we've had? What about the way Martin treated Fatty Little?"

"Shameful," said Trotwood.

"It was worse than that," went on Handforth. "He shut the poor chap up in the old tower, and left him for twenty-four hours without food and drink. And what did he do to deserve such treatment? Nothing!"

"Well, practically nothing," said Fatty. "I only scoffed the Head's breakfast——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It was rather nervy on your part, Fatty," I said. "Still, there was no reason for the Head to flog you and shut you in the tower. The flogging would have been quite sufficient."

"Then we've got to remember what happened to Mr. Lee," went on Handforth. "Think of it! The best House-master we ever had has gone—pushed out! Dismissed by the Head at a moment's notice!"

"He took it pretty tamely!" sneered Fullwood.

"Did he?" I snapped. "The guv'nor knocked Martin down, and he couldn't very well stay after that. And he'd written out his resignation before the Head said a word. So your sneers aren't worth much."

Handforth glared.

"Can't you listen to me?" he

demanded. "What was I saying? Oh, about Mr. Nelson Lee. He's gone, and we're absolutely at the mercy of the Head. He's practically taken control of the Ancient House, and things are ten times as bad all round. I tell you, it's time we did something. It's time we banded ourselves together and struck a glorious blow for liberty. We've had enough of tyranny—we've had enough autocracy, and we're not going to be ground down any longer. Rise! Rise, and crush this domineering system!"

"Sounds like a Bolshevik agitator!" exclaimed Pitt, grinning.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"All you can do is to laugh—cackle!" shouted Handforth bitterly. "Take a warning from me! Before long you'll go under—and then it'll be too late to strike the great blow for liberty. Just think of my own experience! Look what happened to me only this morning!"

"Something worse will happen soon!" I said grimly.

"The Head gave me six swipes with his cane and two hundred lines," went on Handforth, his voice filled with indignation. "And why? I ask you why?"

"Probably you deserved 'em!" said Owen major.

"I did nothing—absolutely nothing," roared Handforth. "I was simply running down the passage and Martin bashed into me at the corner. Was it my fault? How the dickens could I help bowling him over? How could I help sitting on his face, and sticking my boots in his tummy?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Was it my fault?" demanded Handforth warmly.

"I don't think we'd better discuss the matter," I grinned. "The best tempered master in the world would be liable to get busy with the cane if he got your feet in his tummy, Handy!"

"We're grumbling at his injustice," put in Pitt. "We can't revolt because he gives a chap something he deserves!"

"What!" bellowed Handforth. "Why, you—you traitor! I'm fed up with the lot of you, and if you won't support me, I'll go to somebody who will. It won't take me long to get crowds of supporters!"

"You'll find plenty on the other side of Bannington," I remarked.

"Bannington?"

"There's a lunatic asylum there——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And this is all I get—jibes and jeers," said Handforth bitterly. "I'm doing my best to help the school, and all you can do is to cackle! The time has come for violent action——"

"Quite right," I agreed. "And I vote we act!"

"When?"

"Now!" I replied briskly. "Lend a hand, you chaps. Violent action is necessary now and again, and it's no good shirking it."

Handforth was seized by many willing hands, and forced towards the door. It wasn't the kind of action he had wanted at all, the noise he created was quite remarkable. However, he was saved from an ignominious exit by the timely arrival of Teddy Long, of the Remove.

The sneak of the Ancient House burst into the common-room, flushed and excited.

"I say, you chaps, I've got some news!" he panted.

"What kind of news?" I asked suspiciously. "If you've been listening at keyholes, my son, we don't want to hear a word."

"Oh, don't be an ass, Nipper!" protested Long. "You know jolly well I never listen at keyholes! I'm too honourable for that—I don't believe in those sort of tricks. I—I was just passing Mr. Crowell's study, and the door happened to be open. I happened to hear a few words——"

"And you happened to stop deliberately, didn't you?" asked Pitt.

"I couldn't help hearing, I suppose?" demanded Long warmly. "The Head was talking to Crowell, and telling him something about a new master——"

"Eh?"

"What?"

"A new Housemaster, to be exact," said Teddy Long, pleased that he had made an impression. "I heard it quite by chance, you know. He's coming down this evening, and the Head's already fixed things up with him. He's going to take Lee's place as Housemaster!"

I looked rather grim.

"I don't know if this is true," I said, "but if it is we shall probably be in for a lively time. A new Housemaster of Mr. Martin's choice will turn out to be a rotter of his own breed!"

CHAPTER II.

PREPARING A WELCOME.

TEDDY LONG was quite pleased with himself.

"Of course it's true," he said.

"I heard the Head speaking as plainly as I'm speaking to you. He was telling Crowell that the new chap will have complete power in the Ancient House, and that Crowell will have to take orders from him."

"We shall have Crowell resigning next," remarked Griffith. "The masters won't stand too much brow-beating. Nobody seems to have remembered that to-day is the Fifth of November. We've got lots of fireworks, but I doubt if we shall be able to let them off."

"The Head wouldn't dare to put the ban on fireworks on Guy Fawkes Day," said Watson warmly. "Not likely! We're going to have a regular display to-night, and the Head can go and eat coke!"

"Ahem!"

The cough came from the doorway, and the juniors turned to find Mr. Crowell standing there. Watson turned rather red, and looked alarmed. The Remove Form-master had certainly overheard his remark concerning the Head.

"I—I'm sorry, sir!" stammered Tommy.

"Eh? I beg your pardon, Watson?" said Mr. Crowell. "Why are you sorry? You were unaware of my entry, and anything I may have heard was not for my ears. I wish to say a few words to you all, boys."

"Good old stick!" murmured Watson.

"As you are all aware, Mr. Lee is no longer with us," went on Mr. Crowell.

"That fact is to be very much regretted"

"Rather, sir!"

"We didn't want him to go, sir!"

"I can quite believe that, boys," said the Form-master. "Unfortunately, there is little prospect of Mr. Lee returning immediately—although I am fairly certain that he will be in our midst again, sooner or later."

"We hope so, sir."

"St. Frank's isn't the same place without him, sir."

"We are certainly having a few changes of late," agreed Mr. Crowell gravely. "Some of them are changes which are not welcome, but you must

remember that it is your duty to respect your Headmaster."

"We can't always do our duty, sir," said Watson bluntly.

"Ahem! Quite so, Watson—quite so," said Mr. Crowell. "However, we will change the subject. What I really came here to tell you is that a gentleman will arrive here this evening to take up his duties as Housemaster, in place of Mr. Lee. You must all remember that he will demand full respect from you, and strict obedience. I sincerely trust that Mr. Wrott will prove to be a trifle more amiable than—ahem! Well, no matter!" concluded Mr. Crowell hastily.

"Mr. who, sir?" I asked.

"The gentleman's name is Mr. Wrott, Nipper."

"By George!" said Handforth. "What a rotten name!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Crowell frowned, although his eyes twinkled.

"Puns are abominable at any time, Handforth; and I certainly cannot allow you to make a pun upon the name of your new Housemaster. His name is Mr. Simpson Wrott—W—r—o—t—t."

"Oh, it's not spelt in the ordinary way, then, sir?" said Pitt. "That's one good thing, isn't it? If he proves to be half as good as Mr. Lee, we sha'n't have anything to grumble at. But he's been appointed by the Head, sir, hasn't he?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Then it's a poor look-out for us, sir," Mr. Crowell coughed again.

"Well, my boys, we shall see what we shall see," he exclaimed. "Mr. Wrott will arrive by the seven o'clock train, and he will probably visit you later on in the evening. So you must be on your best behaviour. That is all I have to say—except that I want you to refrain from any rough horse-play."

Mr. Crowell departed, and we looked at one another.

"He wants us to refrain from any rough horse-play," I said grimly. "With all due respect to Mr. Crowell, I don't see how it's going to be done. My sons, we're going to have a bit of fun with Mr. Wrott."

"Good!"

"How shall we do it—a jape?" asked Watson.

"Something like that," I replied. "It was very kind of Mr. Crowell to tell us

the time of Mr. Tommy-Rot's arrival—"

"And we shall be able to prepare for his reception well in advance," I went on. "Don't forget that it's the Fifth of November, and this evening is something like April Fool's Day—we're allowed a certain amount of rope, as it were. If we jape the new master, he won't be able to say much."

"By jingo! It's a fine idea," said Pitt. "But what's the wheeze?"

"I don't know exactly," I said. "But we can reckon on one thing. Mr. Wrott has been engaged by Martin. So we needn't all be detectives to arrive at the conclusion that Mr. Wrott will be a rotter—and that's not meant to be funny. He'll probably be as big a bully as the Head himself. So we'll take that for granted, and arrange accordingly."

"But supposing he's a nice chap?"

"Well, it won't make any difference, we sha'n't do anything serious," I said. "My idea is to indulge in a regular Fifth of November jape. We hadn't got anything fully planned for this evening, so Mr. Wrott's arrival is quite opportune. We've got plenty of fireworks, so everything is all ready."

Handforth sniffed.

"Blessed if I can see anything particularly startling in that," he said. "What's the good of chucking a few squibs and things at the chap as he walks through the Triangle? I call it a rotten jape, if you ask me."

"We haven't asked you—but I agree with you entirely," I remarked. "A jape like that wouldn't be worth a fig, Handy. I hope you think I'm capable of better things. My idea is far more ambitious."

"If you'll only leave it to me——"

"Dry up, Handy!"

"I'm the chap to deal with this——"

"Gag him!"

"Carry him outside. He would have been there long ago if Mr. Crowell hadn't come in," said Pitt. "What's it to be, Handy? Silence, or the chuck-out?"

"You silly ass——"

"It's the chuck-out," said Pitt briskly. "You haven't maintained silence, so we know what your choice is. Lend a hand, you chaps!"

"Easy!" I broke in, grinning. "Leave Handy alone. We don't want the common-room wrecked. I want five volunteers for special work."

"Right!" said Handforth. "I'm one."

"Yes, you'll do," I agreed. "What about the others?"

Tregellis-West and Watson and Pitt and De Valerie were chosen, and they all collected near me.

"What's the giddy mystery?" inquired Hart. "What's the idea of the secret six stunt? What are you chaps going to get up to?"

"We're going to make preparations," I explained. "Everything will be made clear afterwards. Have patience, children, and you will know all. But just at present I don't want everybody talking about the wheeze. Long is with us, don't forget."

"Oh, I say, Nipper!" protested Long. "I wouldn't breathe a word!"

"No—you'd shout it," I said grimly. "Well, my trusty supporters, come along to the plotting chamber. In other words, Study C."

The other fellows looked somewhat mystified, and quite a crowd collected in the Remove passage while we held a meeting behind the closed door of Study C. When we came out everything was arranged, and we carried several parcels of fireworks.

There were shouts from the crowd.

"Hallo! They've got their caps on!"

"And their overcoats!"

"Hi, you chaps! Where are you off to?"

"Not a word, you asses!" I said warningly. "Don't forget the gates are shut, and we've got to break bounds. Don't yell it all over the house, or we shall be stopped: It's not six o'clock yet, so there's over an hour before Mr. Wrott's train comes in. Be ready for action within an hour. You'll be called upon to lend assistance at the right moment."

"Yes, but what——"

"Nuff said," I interrupted crisply. "This way, my sons!"

The six of us departed, much to the mystification of the crowd. But our movements were not so very strange, after all. Having got safely away from the school precincts, we set off for the village at a brisk walk, and arrived at the station with over three-quarters of an hour to spare.

Everything was quiet and still. But we were not greatly interested in the station itself. We gave our attention to the Station Hotel, opposite—a small inn

which was also a livery stable. It was from here that the station "hack" set out to take up its position opposite the booking-office when a train was due. The place was owned by Mr. Josiah Biggin, a jovial gentleman, with a fat face and a fatter tummy.

"Good!" I exclaimed, as I looked into the yard. "Old Biggin is in there."

We marched in.

"Evenin', young gents!" said the inn-keeper. "Mebbe you're wantin' to hire my old brougham?"

I nodded.

"As a matter of fact, we do," I said. "But we don't want anything else."

"I don't rightly understand you," said Mr. Biggin.

"We want the brougham only—we're not requiring a horse," I explained.

"No hoss?" asked Mr. Biggin, scratching his head. "I reckon you're havin' one of your jokes, Master Nipper. What'll be the good of the old brougham without a hoss? That don't seem right to me."

I took the old chap's arm.

"It's this way, Mr. Biggin," I said. "We're willing to pay you your own price for the hire of the brougham for a couple of hours. We're expecting a new master, and our plan is to meet him at the station, and to pull him through the village—in a kind of triumphal entry."

"Oh, I see—I see!" said Mr. Biggin, nodding. "You boys allus was up to them sort of tricks. Well, you can have the brougham with pleasure—and I won't charge ye much, seeing that you won't have no horse. But if you do any damage, I'll call upon ye to pay it. I know what ye boys are!"

"I don't think we shall do any damage," I said. "But, of course, there's no telling. If we scrape any paint, or do anything of that sort, we'll pay up. In fact, we'll leave a deposit, if you like——"

"No; I won't have that," said Mr. Biggin. "I can trust yo all right, young gents. I suppose ye'll be wantin' the keb for the seven o'clock train?"

"Yes; but we want it now."

"Why, there's over forty minutes——"

"Exactly, but we want to make a few preparations," I explained. "Now then, you fellows, put your shoulders to it. We'll take her up to the station-yard, and make our preparations there."

My five companions worked with a will, and the old brougham was run out of the livery stable and up into the station yard. All was quiet, and there was little fear of us being interrupted in our work.

"We haven't got much time," I said briskly; "and it's going to be a ticklish piece of work. Have you got those fuses, Tommy?"

"Yards of 'em," said Watson.

"And the cannon crackers?"

"Yes."

"And the squibs?"

"They're all handy," said Pitt.

"We've got two or three electric torches, too, so we shall have plenty of light without any risk of the fireworks going off. Who's going to do the grovelling?"

"Leave that to me?" I said.

A rug was fetched off the box in front, and laid underneath the brougham. Then I got down, and commenced work. The idea was quite simple. We were going to smother the brougham with fireworks—all of them unseen, of course—and they would go off at the most unexpected moment.

It was a Fifth of November joke, and Mr. Wrott could hardly fail to appreciate it. Somebody suggested that we should fix crackers in the interior, but I was against this.

"The jape would be quite good enough with the fireworks outside. It wouldn't be playing the game to ignite crackers in such a confined space."

It didn't take me long to get busy.

First of all a few dozen yards of string was used up, crossed and criss-crossed along the bottom of the brougham, and from axle to axle. And on these strings were hung the fireworks, a safe distance apart.

The most difficult task of all was to fix the fuses, for my idea was to use one match only. The end of the fuse would be at the rear of the cab. When ignited, the spark would run along in various directions, letting off the fireworks in a continuous stream.

The whole show, according to my calculations, would last about three minutes. But those three minutes would be closely packed with excitement. The cannon crackers were enormous things, and sounded like big guns when they went off.

I fixed everything so that no damage would be done to the brougham, for we

didn't want to pay compensation afterwards to Mr. Biggin. All round the sides of the vehicle I placed Roman candles in dozens.

It was rather a task to fix these securely, so that they remained upright. But it was done. Another fuse was fixed leading to the top of the brougham, round which was placed a complete square of different coloured flares.

The sight, when all that lot of fireworks went off, was likely to be impressive. And we chuckled hugely as we anticipated the scene.

"Quarter to seven," I said at last. "Hart will be bringing the crowd down soon, and then we shall all be ready."

"It was a good idea of yours to give Hart the tip, and to tell him to keep mum until close upon the time," said Pitt. "We couldn't have done this work properly with crowds of chaps bothering about."

"Begad! It'll be a frightfully good stunt! It will, really!" said Sir Montie, adjusting his pince-nez. "In fact, it's a surprisin'ly rippin' idea of yours, Nipper. What a fortunate thing Mr. Wrott is comin' down on this particular evenin'. Begad! It does sound a shockin' name to say!"

Seven minutes later I had completed the task. Watson and the others had helped me with a will, and it was certain that the fireworks would go off as planned. The fuses were good, and the air was dry and crisp.

"It'll be like a set-piece at the Crystal Palace!" grinned Handforth. "I'm quite ready to admit, Nipper, that this idea is good. I couldn't have thought of anything better myself."

"Go hon!" I grinned.

"Of course, I should have thought of it sooner or later——"

"Rather later than sooner, I expect," put in Watson. "You'd have thought of it about next July, Handy—— Hallo! I hear the sound of approaching footsteps. The crowd is coming!"

The crowd came—fully twenty Removites, a sprinkling of Fifth Formers, and a number of reckless fags. The word had got about what was to happen, and the fellows didn't want to miss it.

"Listen to me, you chaps," I shouted. "The train's signalled, and she'll be here in a minute or two. Nobody's to breathe

a word about the jape, or everything will be ruined."

"We'll keep mum!"

"See that you do," I said warningly. "Leave the jawing to me, and at the word from me help to shove the old 'bus through the village. I expect the chap'll be a rotter——"

"He can't help being with a name like that!" grinned Hart.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"A rotter," I went on. "But we want to give him a royal welcome at the station here. We'll cheer him to the echo, and make him think that everything is rosy. The shock will come later on, when we get through the village."

"Good!"

"Here comes the train!"

A good many of us passed through the booking-office on to the platform. And there we waited for the arrival of the new Housemaster. We didn't know what he would be like, but we could guess.

And he was destined to receive quite a warm reception.

CHAPTER III.

THE GLORIOUS "FIFTH"!

HISSS—SS!

The train pulled up against the platform, with a jar and a hissing of steam. Only two doors opened. One was that of a third-class compartment, and an old lady with a market-bag emerged.

The other door belonged to a first-class compartment, and two figures stepped out upon the platform. One of them was recognised at once, and a gasp of something very much like dismay passed over the crowd.

"The Head!"

"Oh, my only hat!"

"We didn't know he'd be here!"

"It doesn't make any difference!" I hissed. "It's all the better; in fact, he'll probably ride up to the school in the brougham, and we shall get the two of 'em! Let it go!"

"Three cheers for our new Housemaster!" roared the crowd.

"Welcome to Mr. Wrott!"

"Hurrah!"

Mr. Howard Martin and his companion

paused, and regarded the juniors uncertainly. The Head was frowning darkly, and his harsh face wore an impatient, angry expression.

"What does this mean?" he shouted. "Go away!"

"Hurrah!"

"Go away at once!" roared the Head. "How dare you cause this disturbance?"

"We've come to give Mr. Wrott a welcome, sir!" I yelled. "He's our new Housemaster, and we're going to take him up to the school in style. No offence, sir—only a little welcome!"

"I will inquire into this affair later," said the Head sourly. "I suspect that you are all breaking bounds. If so, you will be punished heavily. For the moment, I suppose, I must allow you to continue this absurdity."

"That will be best, sir; that will certainly be best," said Mr. Wrott. "I am honoured, I am sure. I hardly expected to be welcomed so—er—so royally. I am certainly honoured!"

I had been taking a good look at Mr. Wrott, and I cannot say that he impressed me particularly. He was a tallish man, with rounded shoulders—so rounded, in fact, that he seemed to possess a perpetual stoop. His head projected from his body like some evil hawk.

His face was dark and sallow, his nose was prominent, and he possessed protruding teeth, which did not add greatly to his appearance. Big spectacles adorned his face, and he seemed altogether repulsive. He was exactly the type of man I had been expecting to see, and he would probably prove to be a worthy henchman of the bullying Headmaster.

But we had come to cheer him—and we cheered.

"This way, sir!"

"The brougham's waiting!"

"Everything's ready!"

The two masters passed through the booking-office, and paused uncertainly when they saw the horseless brougham. The Head would probably have refused to enter the vehicle, but Mr. Wrott played nicely into our hands.

"I understand!" he exclaimed. "All this is most ridiculous and childish, but I suppose we must humour the boys, sir. They have evidently taken considerable trouble, and we don't want to disappoint them."

They entered the cab, and I sighed with relief.

"Good!" murmured Pitt. "They're in for it now! I thought we were going to be diddled for one awful minute. There'll be a terrible row about this later on, you know. The Head'll go dotty —"

"Let him!" I interrupted. "It's only a Guy Fawkes jape, anyhow. He can't do much to us, at the worst. And it'll be worth a flogging."

"Begad! Rather!"

Several juniors had rushed to close the doors. And, at the same time, they were locked, so that the occupants would not be able to make a dash out when the fun started. We wanted to make sure of this.

"Hurrah!"

"Clear the way for the latest arrival!"

The juniors yelled with all their strength, and the journey commenced. I was at the back of the brougham, ready to ignite the fuses at the right moment. And the vehicle careered along at considerable speed, rattling and bumping over the stones joltingly.

People in the village turned out of their cottages and shops to see what all the excitement was about. They were highly amused, but they had no idea of what was to come later on.

Village kids threw a few crackers at us as we passed, but these didn't bother us. And at last we had left the village behind, and were on the lonely stretch of road which led up to the school.

"Now's the time!" said Pitt pantingly.

"Yes; we're just off," I replied.

"Keep on pushing. The cab's got to continue its journey all the time. You know what's coming, so you won't be startled. The crackers underneath won't hurt anybody."

I struck one of those coloured matches which are called Bengal lights. A red flare followed, and it lasted quite long enough for me to ignite the lower fuse. A second match ignited the other fuse.

They spluttered along the strings, and we waited rather anxiously. Everything depended upon the success of the fuses. Meanwhile, we continued pushing and pulling, and the two masters within the brougham were still ignorant of their coming fate.

"I must be allowed to remark, Mr. Martin, that I hardly expected the boys to give me such a welcome as this," exclaimed Mr. Wrott. "From your

description of them, I gathered that they were quite ruffianly in their behaviour."

The Head grunted.

"I think I can guess why they are so effusive to-night," he said sourly. "They are all Ancient House boys, and you will have complete control of them, Mr. Wrott. Naturally, they want to get into your good books."

"Huh!" Perhaps that is the explanation!" said Mr. Wrott. "I am quite certain that the young rascals will not get milk and honey from me if they do not behave themselves. I will bear in mind your instructions——"

Ba—a—a—ng!

A terrific report sounded right underneath Mr. Wrott's feet, and he jumped.

"Good—good heavens!" he gasped. "What—what was that?"

Bang! Crash! Bang!

"The infernal young hounds!" raved the Head. "They are having the utter audacity to ignite fireworks——"

Bang! Bang!

The explosions were truly terrific, and it sounded as though the brougham would be torn to pieces by the very force of the reports. But it still continued its way, and the "horses" showed no signs of slackening speed.

The Head wrenched at the door handle.

"Upon my soul!" he roared. "We are locked in!"

"Locked in!" gasped Mr. Wrott. "How—how dreadful!"

The Head projected his head through the window opening.

"Boys!" he thundered. "Open this door at once—at once!"

Nobody seemed to hear him, and at that second there was a terrific roar and a blaze of light. Sparks flew up by the thousand from half a dozen Roman candles, and the Head jerked himself back sharply. His face was a study.

"Somebody shall suffer for this!" he snarled. "We are helpless, Mr. Wrott; we can do nothing until this—this outrage comes to an end. The boys shall learn that I am not to be treated with such amazing impudence!"

"It is—it is disgraceful—appalling!" said Mr. Wrott sourly.

By this time the carriage had nearly reached the school, and the firework display was in full swing. Crowds of fellows lined the walls of the Triangle, watching the progress of the flaming coach.

For that is what it actually was.

From a distance, the brougham presented a most imposing spectacle. Coloured stars were shooting up from the Roman candles; silver and golden spray showered down in myriads of sparks. And the whole top of the vehicle was a lurid blaze of coloured flares.

Yet I had arranged all the fireworks so that no harm could be done to anybody or anything. Mr. Wrott and the Head were imprisoned in their flaming chariot, and they could do nothing but glare out of the windows helplessly.

"Hurrah!"

"Three cheers for Guy Fawkes!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old Fifth!"

"That's the stuff to give 'em!"

Everybody was yelling, and the laughter was general. A hundred yards from the gates the brougham was brought to a standstill, and left there. And every junior, myself included, streaked to the walls and climbed over.

I had unlocked one of the doors, on the quiet, before scooting. And by the time the prisoners found out that freedom was theirs, the road was absolutely deserted and the fireworks were giving their last flicker.

"I am amazed," said the Head harshly.

"I am astounded that the boys could have dared to play such an audacious trick. The ringleaders shall suffer with the utmost severity!"

"I agree with you, sir; I agree heartily!" said Mr. Wrott. "It will give me great pleasure to see the young rascals flogged without mercy. We have been insulted—grossly insulted. You were quite right when you described the boys as hooligans, for they are little better!"

"Come with me, Mr. Wrott," said the Head. "We will deal with this matter at once."

They marched up the road until they arrived at the gates of the school. These were slightly ajar, and the Head pushed them open in order to enter. As he did so a flash appeared, followed by a sharp, hissing sound.

"Good gracious!" said Mr. Wrott.

"What—what is that?"

Crack! Whizz! Crack!

They were not left in any doubt as to what it was! Several jumping crackers commenced exploding under their very feet. They had been placed there by my

instructions, and the work had been done well. The opening of the gate ignited a fuse by means of a spark.

And before the two masters could jump out of the way they were surrounded by leaping crackers. And it is somewhat disconcerting to find oneself in the midst of such fiery articles.

The crackers jumped in all directions, and the two masters forgot their dignity, leapt into the air in a series of hops and skips, and fled from the vicinity of the bombardment.

"Go it!"

"Don't forget the Fifth of November!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Headmaster and Mr. Wrott arrived at the Head's private door breathless, and with the ringing of laughter loud in their ears. The Head was positively raving. The crackers had finally robbed him of every atom of restraint, and he was purple with fury.

"The young hounds! The confounded dogs!" he shouted thickly. "By Heaven! They shall be punished so severely that they will remember this affair for months to come! I will flog every boy in the Remove. Every single boy shall be flogged, whether he took part in the actual outrage or not!"

"I agree, sir! I quite agree!" panted Mr. Wrott. "Never, in my whole life, have I been treated with such insolence. And upon my very arrival at the school, too! Unless something is done I shall have no authority whatever!"

"Come with me, Mr. Wrott," snapped the Head.

They went to Mr. Martin's study, and when the door was opened it was found that Mr. Stockdale was in possession. He had been standing by the open window, and he turned a smiling face towards the new arrivals. Mr. Stockdale presided over the College House, and he was quite a decent sort.

"The young rascals!" he said, with a chuckle. "They made you jump that time, Mr. Martin!"

"The young hooligans!" snarled the Head. "They'll yelp like the dogs they are before I have finished with them!"

Mr. Stockdale smiled, and he raised his eyebrows.

"But, my dear sir, I cannot see——"

"Whether you can see or not is no concern of mine," snapped the Head.

"These boys have been impertinent

beyond all description. Are you aware, Mr. Stockdale, of what took place in the lane?"

"You mean the brougham?" said Mr. Stockdale. "Yes, certainly; I am aware of that incident, Mr. Martin. Rather an audacious joke on the boys' part, and they certainly deserve a slight punishment——"

"A slight punishment!" roared the Head. "You are mad, sir!"

"Oh, quite mad—insane, in fact," said Mr. Wrott sourly.

The other Housemaster frowned.

"I have not been introduced to you sir; but you will oblige me by refraining from insulting me to my face!" he exclaimed sharply. "I'm neither mad nor insane; I happen to possess a slight sense of humour. I regret to find that both you gentlemen are lacking in that respect."

"That is quite sufficient, Mr. Stockdale," rapped out the Head. "I require no criticism from you. The boys committed an unwarrantable outrage——"

"Nonsense, 'sir!'" said Mr. Stockdale, becoming incensed. "It is not my wish to quarrel with you, sir, but I must certainly characterise that remark as nonsense. You appear to forget that this is the Fifth day of November, and for very many years the boys had played all manner of jokes with fireworks upon this particular night. Such jokes are generally winked at by every master. Only an hour ago my own boys actually tied crackers to my gown. Fortunately, I am blessed with sufficient sense of humour to realise that they were quite innocent in their fun."

"Go, sir!" barked the Head. "Go, before I really lose my temper with you. I repeat, the boys shall be punished soundly for what they have done, and I require no interference from you!"

Mr. Stockdale swept out of the study without a word. Some little distance along the passage he ran across Mr. Crowell, and the latter paused, noting the pale appearance of the Housemaster's face.

"Is anything the matter, Mr. Stockdale?" asked Mr. Crowell.

"The matter!" exclaimed the other impatiently. "I have been insulted by Mr. Martin, that is all. The man is a perfect fool! I cannot refrain from saying

so, Crowell. He is not only a fool, but a harsh bully!"

"My dear sir——"

"There is no necessity for me to mince my words with you, Crowell," went on Mr. Stockdale. "We are both of the same opinion regarding Martin. He is an utterly impossible Headmaster, and I am seriously considering whether it would not be wise policy on my part to follow Mr. Lee's example—and resign!"

And Mr. Stockdale, still highly incensed, stalked down the passage, to return to his own house.

Meanwhile the Head and his understudy had calmed down somewhat.

"I intend to visit the junior school at once," said Mr. Martin. "Every boy who took part in that outrage shall be given eight strokes with the cane. Furthermore, every boy shall be sent to bed at once——"

"Pardon me, sir——"

"Well?"

"I was thinking that perhaps——" Mr. Wrott paused, and peered at the Head curiously through his glasses. "Perhaps it would be as well if I dealt with the boys personally," he added. "I have no wish to offend you, sir, but do you not think it would be better so?"

"No, Mr. Wrott, I do not."

"I am sorry," said Mr. Wrott, in an oily manner which was peculiarly his own. "I was only thinking that as I am the new Housemaster, it would be fitting if I dealt with this case on my own account. I can assure you that I shall deal with them severely—perhaps more severely than you would yourself."

The Head considered.

"Very well," he said, at last, "no doubt you are right, Mr. Wrott. You will have an opportunity of establishing your authority at once. Go immediately, and punish the boys as you think fit. I shall know what you have done afterwards—and I shall be able to judge your capabilities."

Mr. Wrott smiled, and rubbed his hands together.

"You will not be disappointed, sir," he said—"you will certainly not be disappointed."

He took his departure, and the Head sat down at his desk. He seemed to value Mr. Wrott's capabilities with re-

gard to punishing the boys far more than his scholastic attainments.

And while that little discussion had been going on, Mr. Crowell had been performing one of his duties—to be exact, presiding over the Remove during prep. Prep. was no longer allowed in the juniors' studies.

The Form master could not help noticing the grimy condition of many of the boys. He could not help being aware of the fact that some of the fellows were breathless and hot.

But Mr. Crowell was a sport. He said nothing and appeared to be oblivious of the unusual conditions. Previous to Mr. Martin's arrival, the Remove had regarded Mr. Crowell as a bit of a "beast." He was always so severe, they reckoned. But Mr. Crowell had changed of late. He had probably felt that it was up to him to off-set the Head's harshness to a certain degree by leniency on his own part.

"Now, boys, we will get on with our work," he said genially. "You are aware, of course, that Mr. Wrott has arrived——"

"Oh, yes sir! We're aware of that!" grinned Handforth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You must really confine yourselves to the work in hand," said Mr. Crowell gently. "If you are well behaved this evening, perhaps I will release you half-an hour earlier than usual—for I know that it is a special night, and you have yet to indulge in a little firework display."

"Oh, thank you sir!"

"You're a brick, sir!"

The juniors were as quiet as mice, and work proceeded smoothly for perhaps five minutes. Then the door opened and Mr. Simpson Wrott made his appearance.

"This," I whispered, "is where the band begins to play!"

CHAPTER IV.

AN ABLE UNDERSTUDY.

MR. WROTT looked quite imposing.

He was now attired in a flowing gown, and everybody regarded him with interest. His hawklike face was inscrutable, but there was a

certain sinister expression about it which boded ill for the Remove.

"I find it necessary to introduce myself to you, Mr. Crowell," said the new Housemaster. "And I'm afraid that my visit just now is not a particularly pleasant one. I have come to discover the identity of certain boys who instigated a particularly outrageous plot against Mr. Martin and myself."

Mr. Crowell raised his eyebrows.

"Indeed!" he exclaimed. "I was not aware of any such plot?"

"Nonsense!" rasped Mr. Wrott. "You are aware of the fact that the Headmaster and myself were trapped in a brougham smothered with fireworks——"

"Oh, that!" said Mr. Crowell. "A mere Fifth of November joke, sir!"

"A Fifth of November insult!" snapped the Housemaster. "I require you to point out to me the boys who are most likely to have been the ringleaders in the disgraceful affair."

The Remove waited breathlessly.

"I am sorry, but I certainly cannot oblige you in that respect," said Mr. Crowell. "I have not the slightest idea who the ringleaders may be, and it will be very difficult for us to discover them. My advice, Mr. Wrott, is to drop the matter. No harm was done, and——"

"Twaddle, sir—twaddle!" rapped out Mr. Wrott. "You will kindly leave this room. I wish to deal with these boys myself. The Headmaster has left the matter in my hands, and I shall deal with it."

"Oh, very well," said Mr. Crowell, tartly.

He swept out of the room, and the Remove looked somewhat dismayed. I nudged Tregellis-West, and made a wry grimace.

"This is where we get it!" I whispered.

"In the neck, dear old boy," replied Sir Montie sadly.

"Boy," thundered Mr. Wrott abruptly. "What is your name?"

Tregellis-West looked up, rather startled, and found that the new Housemaster was pointing an accusing finger at him. He rose in his place.

"My name is Tregellis-West, sir," he said.

"Very good, Tregellis-West," snapped

Mr. Wrott. "You will write me three hundred lines for daring to whisper in my presence. I shall require the lines before you go to bed to-night!"

"Begad!" gasped Sir Montie.

"What! What did you say?"

"I said 'begad,' sir—quite an unconscious exclamation," said Sir Montie. "I was so frightfully astonished at receiving three hundred lines for merely whisperin'. An' I was wonderin' how many lines I should have got, if I'd actually talked!"

Mr. Wrott scowled.

"That is sufficient!" he shouted. "Sit down, boy—no, remain standing!"

"Begad!" said Tregellis-West, bobbing up and down.

"Do not use that absurd expression in my hearing," said Mr. Wrott. "I have told you to remain standing because you are one of the boys who took an active part in the brougham outrage. My eyesight, I may tell you, is quite keen, and I have a remarkably good memory for faces."

Mr. Wrott looked over the Remove keenly. His eyes were like gimlets, and they seemed to bore their way through every junior in turn. Mr. Wrott nodded to himself occasionally, and his sinister face broke into a curious smile.

"Yes, I think so—I certainly think I am right!" he said, as though talking to himself. "You, boy, stand up! And you! And you! And you! Stand up all of you! Yes, you as well, boy!"

His finger pointed to seven or eight juniors in turn. They included myself, Watson, Handforth, Pitt, De Valerius and Hart. I was quite astonished, for I could not imagine how Mr. Wrott had picked upon us so easily. He certainly had an eagle eye to have remembered us all so well.

"Exactly," he said—"ah! You were the boys who took the principal parts in the outrage I have referred to. Do not dare to utter a word of denial. I am never mistaken—never!"

"But dash it all, sir, it was only a joke," protested Handforth.

"Boy, what is your name?" shouted Mr. Wrott.

"Handforth, sir."

"Very good, Handforth, I shall give you three extra cuts with the cane for daring to address me," said the Housemaster. "I want everybody here to understand that I intend to maintain

discipline and order in this House. I will put up with no nonsense—and my punishments will be severe for every offence. Follow me—the eight of you!”

He stalked to the door, and there was nothing to do but to obey, although some of the fellows were feeling decidedly rebellious. Nobody would have objected to a hundred lines or so, but it seemed that Mr. Wrott was to inflict an exceedingly harsh punishment.

We followed him to his study, and I noticed that some of the fellows were tenderly rubbing their hands in anticipation of the coming chastisement. It was certain to be brutal.

Mr. Wrott closed the door after we had entered, and we were lined up in a row before his desk. I felt rather bitter as I gazed at the familiar furniture. This man was an intruder—an interloper.

That desk was the gov'nor's; that chair was the one in which Nelson Lee had always lolled. Mr. Wrott had no right here—he was an outsider in every sense of the word.

“Taking into consideration the fact that this day is the Fifth of November, I shall inflict a severe punishment, but not unduly so,” said Mr. Wrott in his cily voice. “I am inclined to be merciful with you. But you have been guilty of a very grave offence——”

“But, sir——” began Jack Grey.

“One word, boy, and I shall lose my temper with you,” snapped the Housemaster. “I will not be interrupted! Do you hear? The boy who dares to interrupt me does so at his peril! If you make me lose my temper—Heaven help you!”

Everybody was silent.

“You are the ringleaders,” went on Mr. Wrott. “The whole Remove will be punished, of course; it will be sent to bed without supper, and half-an-hour earlier than usual. But you boys are the actual culprits. You will each receive eight cuts with the cane, and will each write me five hundred lines!”

“Oh!”

“Great pip!”

“Begad!”

“Silence!” roared Mr. Wrott savagely. “How—how dare you?”

“But such a punishment is terribly harsh, sir,” I protested. “Even the Head wouldn't agree to that! I don't think it's fair——”

“One more word, boy, and I will knock you down!” raved the Housemaster. “You will receive ten cuts instead of eight! Now! You shall be the first, Handforth. Stand forward!”

Handforth clenched his fists, and for a moment I thought that he was going to resist. But he didn't. He stepped forward, and held out his hand. It was impossible to defy the Housemaster openly.

Mr. Wrott swished his cane wickedly.

It was a long, painful looking cane, and Mr. Wrott's arm was large and muscular. It was evident that he was about to “lay it on” with all his strength. The caning was likely to be stiff.

“Now, Handforth!” said Mr. Wrott sternly.

Swish!

The cane descended with terrific force.

“Now the other hand!” snarled Mr. Wrott.

Swish! Swish!

The eight cuts were delivered, and we expected to see Handforth collapsing. But he bore it bravely. He held his hand steadily, and received the cuts without flinching.

“Wait!” snapped Mr. Wrott. “I promised you three extra cuts for addressing me in the Form-room. Hold out your hand again!”

“Certainly, sir,” said Handforth promptly.

Swish! Swish! Swish!

Mr. Wrott paused, panting for breath. We regarded Handforth anxiously, and with a certain amount of wonder. He bore the pain extremely well, by the look of him. But Handy was just that sort. I judged that he was screwing himself up to a tremendous pitch to keep his true feelings to himself.

“Now, sir, it is your turn!” snapped Mr. Wrott.

He pointed at me, and I stepped forward, holding out my hand. The Housemaster regarded me malevolently, and raised the cane.

Swish!

It descended with full strength, and I held my breath in readiness for the stinging agony. But, amazingly enough, my hand hardly tingled. The second and third blows were the same! The cuts, although delivered with all Mr. Wrott's strength, scarcely hurt me.

No wonder Handforth had been so brave over it! Mr. Wrott's muscular

strength was evidently slight—for he appeared to be laying it on with vicious energy. The ten cuts left me unharmed; my palms were just tingling, but in no way tender. I was quite thunderstruck.

And I saw by the expressions on the faces of the other victims that they were being treated in the same way. The terrific caning, in fact, was turning out to be a bit of a farce.

"There!" exclaimed Mr. Wrott, at last, flinging the cane down. "That will be a lesson to you, I trust. You will go back to the Form-room without delay, and you will write me five hundred lines each. Furthermore I require the lines to be finished this evening, before you go to bed. Go!"

"But we can't do them in time, sir——"

"Silence, boy," snarled Mr. Wrott. "Do not presume to argue with me! Another word, and I will give you another caning. Go, and if those lines are not completed before bedtime, I shall double the imposition!"

We trooped out of the study without another word. Nobody was afraid of a few cuts of the cane, but we certainly didn't want to write a thousand lines. Five hundred were five hundred too many.

When we reached the Form-room we found that the others had been dismissed by Mr. Crowell, prep. being over. A few Removites, however, were hanging about waiting for us to return.

"What's the verdict?" asked McClure sympathetically.

"Did you catch it hot?" inquired Church.

"My dear kids, Wrott doesn't know how to cane a fly!" said Handforth. "He must be as weak as a rat—although he certainly doesn't look it. He used all his giddy strength; and yet he didn't hurt any of us."

"It's more than I can understand, you know," I said slowly. "One might have thought that the chap did it on purpose—just to spare us. But that's rot, of course. He's the type of man who delights to cause pain."

De Valerie grunted.

"Well, there's no getting out of the five hundred lines," he said. "We've got to do them, haven't we? He can't lay lines on lightly! The rotter!"

Giving us an impot. like that absolutely for nothing!"

"We shall have to get busy on the work if it's to be finished to-night," I said quickly. "Talking won't do any good, will it? We ought to think ourselves lucky to be able to hold our pens steadily!"

"Begad! Rather!" agreed Sir Montie. "I was wonderin' how it would be possible to write lines with throbbin' hands, old boy. But my hands are quite comfortable—they are, really."

We lost no time in sitting at our desks and getting ready. And then the laborious task of writing five hundred lines commenced. There would certainly be no freedom for us that night. Every second of our time would be occupied. Mr. Wrott had commenced his duties in the Ancient House by getting himself thoroughly hated.

We had been at work in the Form-room for perhaps ten minutes, when the door opened, and a cough sounded. I looked up sharply.

Mr. Wrott himself had entered.

"Ah! You have completed the lines?" he asked harshly. "Quite good—quite good! Yes, these will do, my boy. They are somewhat slovenly, but I will let that pass. Yes, you may go."

Handforth, whose lines Mr. Wrott had picked up, looked surprised.

"I may go, sir?" he repeated blankly.

"Yes, boy."

"But I've only done twenty——"

"How dare you argue with me?" roared Mr. Wrott. "Leave this room at once, Handforth. Go! You have done your lines, but that does not mean to say that you shall insult me to my face. Leave the room!"

"Yes, sir!" gasped Handforth.

He was only too glad to escape.

Mr. Wrott next gave his attention to Reginald Pitt's efforts. Pitt had written about fifteen lines so far, and Mr. Wrott picked them up, and examined them, and then nodded approval.

"These will do admirably," he said. "Boy, you may go."

"Thank you, sir," said Pitt joyfully.

Mr. Wrott treated us all the same. Either he was eccentric, or dotty. His manner was harsh in the extreme, and to argue with him was rather dangerous. But it was remarkable that he should give us five hundred lines, and then be

perfectly satisfied with a mere fifteen or twenty!

"I can't understand the beggar," exclaimed Watson, as we walked down the passage. "He seems to be a regular beast. But what's the idea of letting us off like this? He seemed to think that we'd done the whole five hundred! Anyhow, he didn't mention anything about doing any more."

"He was satisfied with what we'd done, so I don't see there's any reason for us to worry our heads," I said. "If he asks for the rest, I suppose we shall have to do them. But he told us to clear out, so he can't grumble."

"The chap's a rotter," said Hart grimly. "There's no doubt about that at all."

I looked thoughtful.

"I'm not quite so sure about that," I said slowly.

"Eh?"

"Well, just analyse the facts," I went on. "It's as plain as daylight that the Head was going to punish us for the jape. But Mr. Wrott intervened, and decided to deal with the matter himself. He caned us, but it didn't do us much harm, did it?"

"Well, no."

"He gave us lines, and was satisfied with a mere handful," I continued. "The punishment he ordered was harsh and unreasonable. But the punishment we have actually received has been light. Don't forget that. According to positive results, Mr. Wrott has treated us fairly well. He's a bit of a mystery."

"He is!" agreed Hart.

And most of the fellows were inclined to be of the same opinion.

Mr. Simpson Wrott was an able understudy of the Head—at least, it would appear so from his manner. But actions spoke louder than words. So far as we could see at present, his bark was decidedly worse than his bite.

After he had left the Form-room he went straight to the Headmaster's study, and presented himself to Mr. Martin, his eyes glittering in a self-satisfied manner behind his big glasses.

"Well, sir, I have dealt with the culprits as they deserved," he said.

"Oh, indeed!" said the Head. "I am pleased to hear that, Mr. Wrott. How many boys did you actually punish?"

"Eight, sir—the ringleaders," said

the new Housemaster. "I singled them out, took them to my study, and administered eight strokes of the cane to each boy. On the top of that I imposed a sentence of five hundred lines."

The Head nodded.

"Quite right, Mr. Wrott—quite right," he said. "Considering the nature of the offence, the punishment was by no means severe. I am quite pleased with the way in which you have commenced your duties. But I would have you remember that the whole Remove must be punished. It is not sufficient to make an example of the ring-leaders."

"I agree, sir—I agree entirely," said Mr. Wrott. "I propose that the Remove be sent up to bed without delay—immediately, in fact. No boy will be allowed to partake of supper, and lights will be extinguished by me within fifteen minutes, instead of the usual half-hour."

"Yes, that is quite a good suggestion," said the Head. "You will please put it into effect, Mr. Wrott. In my opinion, the Remove is the most refractory form of all, and we must therefore deal with it severely. Once the boys thoroughly understand that my word is law, they will be cowed."

Mr. Wrott nodded, and departed.

Five minutes later the news was general in the Remove that everybody was to go to bed forthwith—supperless. It was not at all a welcome discovery—but there was nothing to be done.

It was only possible to obey the order. And the Remove, with feelings which were too deep for words, trooped up to the dormitory—hungry, rebellious, but helpless.

CHAPTER V.

NOT SUCH A BAD SORT.

"SHAMEFUL!"

"We're treated like a lot of slaves!"

"And we won't stand it!"

"Rather not!"

"Yes; but we are standing it, aren't we?" said Handforth bitterly. "You can call it shameful, and you can say we won't stand it. But what's the position? It's this! We're taking everything lying down! We're taking everything meekly, without lifting a finger! I call it absolutely rotten!"



1. The Head came up, drew level and passed by without observing Mr. Wrot.
2. As the blankets dropped into the attic, the three juniors wondered who had acted the Good Samaritan.

"My dear Handy, the time isn't ripe for us to lift any finger yet," I said. "Don't make the mistake of acting prematurely. There have been many instances of boys revolting against the masters in public schools. But how many times have the boys succeeded?"

"How do I know?"

"That's just it," I went on. "In almost every instance the boys have been beaten by the masters—they have been compelled to surrender ignominiously. And why? That's what I ask you—why?"

"Because they were weak, I suppose," said Handforth; "because they hadn't a proper case."

"Not at all," I said. "The reason, in practically every instance was the same. The boys failed simply because they acted too hastily; because they revolted on the spur of the moment, without making any preparations. The natural result was that the masters were able to bring them to their senses in next to no time. If we revolt now, straightaway, we should be in the same position. Our only course is to wait for a bit, and see how things go on."

"And put up with the Head's rot in the meantime?"

"Yes," I said. "It's the only way. Once we've really rebelled—if it ever does come to that—we shall be able to wipe off old scores. For example, we can pay Wrott back for packing us off to bed like this to-night—on the Fifth of November. Our big firework display has been messed up, and we've been sent to bed hungry. It's not the kind of thing that will make Mr. Wrott popular."

"He's a beast!" said Hubbard flatly.

"Yes, rather."

"And we won't stand him for long—"

"Shurrup!" hissed Owen major. "He's coming!"

The door opened abruptly, and Mr. Simpson Wrott made his appearance. He glided round the dormitory, and strode into the room. His expression was not at all amiable. He snorted as he looked round.

"What is the meaning of this?" he rapped out savagely.

"The meaning of which, sir?" I asked.

"Why are you not in bed?" snarled

Mr. Wrott. "Ten minutes ago I left you here, and there are many boys who are still only partially undressed. It is disgraceful—positively disgraceful! Do you require the whole night to remove your clothing? Get into bed at once!"

"We're generally allowed half-an-hour, sir," said Nicodemus Trotwood.

Mr. Wrott shook his hands fiercely.

"I don't care what you are allowed!" he bellowed. "That is nothing to the point. I have allowed you ten minutes—quite sufficient time. But those boys who are still out of bed will find it necessary to finish their undressing in the dark. I intend to extinguish the lights now."

Mr. Wrott pointed an accusing finger at Cornelius Trotwood—the somewhat deaf brother of the redoubtable Nicodemus.

"You, boy, haven't even attempted to remove your collar yet!" shouted Mr. Wrott. "What is the meaning of that? Why are you not undressed?"

Cornelius looked mildly surprised.

"Naturally, sir," he said; "we have come here to rest——"

"To rest!" roared Mr. Wrott. "How dare you? What do you mean by bandying words with me. Get into bed at once!"

"Really, sir, I see no reason why you should call me a dunce——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence!" bellowed Mr. Wrott. "How dare you, boy, I will punish you for gross impertinence. I will teach you not to make attempts at humour with your Housemaster. What is your name?"

"No, sir, I'm not lame——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You'll have to excuse Trotwood, sir," I put in. "He's deaf——"

"Mind your own business, Nipper!" raved Mr. Wrott. "I do not believe for one moment that this boy is deaf. He has deliberately attempted to poke fun at me, and for that he will suffer. Trotwood, come here!"

But Cornelius was sublimely unconscious of the fact that Mr. Wrott was addressing him. He was removing his clothes unconcernedly, and it seemed probable that he would catch it hot within a second or two.

But the Housemaster, for some reason, dropped the subject without another word. He walked up and down the

dormitory, finding fault here, and grumbling there. He raved and stormed, and finally switched the lights off.

"And, remember!" his voice rasped out of the darkness. "If I hear any disturbance from this dormitory I shall return with the cane. I intend to have submission, and I shall subdue you sooner or later."

Slam!

The door closed, and we heard Mr. Wrott's footsteps passing down the corridor. A murmur of voices broke out.

"Well, he's a queer card," said Pitt. "He didn't pulverise Cornelius, after all! But it's a bit thick, the light being turned off at this time. I'm not half undressed!"

"Same here," said De Valerie. "Can't we turn the light on again?"

"No; it's a patent switch, as you know," I said. "We can easily finish undressing in the dark. Mr. Wrott seems to be a very amiable gentleman, my sons. We shall probably get on splendidly!"

"Oh, yes!" snapped Handforth. "If he's like this on his first night, what the dickens will he be like after a week? Great pip! We shall all be lunatics by then!"

"You're one now," remarked somebody.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Who said that?" demanded Handforth grimly. "By George! I'll wipe up the giddy floor with you——"

"Steady on, my son," I interrupted. "Don't forget what Mr. Wrott said. If there's any disturbance he'll return with a cane!"

"Let him," said Handforth. "I'm not afraid of his rotten cane! He can't swipe for nuts. I want to know who called me a lunatic. I believe it was Owen major——"

"Well, you can believe something else," said Owen major. "I didn't call you anything—although I'm quite ready to oblige. The chap who called you a lunatic knew what he was talking about!"

"Why, you—you——"

"Oh, dry up, Handy," interrupted Church. "I want to talk about something else. Did anybody see if Mr. Wrott took that parcel out with him?"

"Parcel?" I asked. "What parcel?"

"Didn't you see it?" said Church. "I'm near the door, and I saw it all

right. When he came in he was carrying a whacking great brown-paper parcel. He put it down by the door; but I didn't see him take it away."

"You've been dreaming," said Handforth.

"Rats! I saw it plainly."

"By jingo! He's right," exclaimed McClure. "There's a parcel here, just against the wall. It's only loosely wrapped up——"

"Don't open it," I said. "It's not our parcel, you ass. Mr. Wrott may have forgotten it, and he'll be back presently."

"Yes, - but——" McClure paused and sniffed. "I—I can smell something good!" he added. "I believe it's grub——"

"Grub!" gasped Fatty Little, rolling out of bed. "Where?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Who said grub?" demanded the fat boy. "I'm famished, you know! I haven't eaten a bite since seven o'clock—and then I only had half a loaf with some sardines, and half a dozen doughnuts and three or four tarts, and a currant cake!"

"Is that all?" I asked. "It's a wonder you're still alive!"

"McClure said something about grub——"

"Yes, and I meant it," said McClure. "I say, you chaps, this is rather queer, you know! This parcel is full of tuck!"

"Great Scott!"

"Let's have a look!"

"Open it!"

Everybody was hungry, having been sent to bed without supper—and a crowd soon collected round McClure and the parcel. It was soon wrenched open, and the juniors tried to see in the gloom.

"Hasn't anybody got a match?" asked Handforth tartly.

"We don't want matches," mumbled Fatty Little. "I've found something good without a light! This beef-patty is tophole——"

"Clear off, you fat bounder!" roared Handforth. "I'm blessed if the porpoise isn't scoffing everything before we can see!"

"My hat!" said McClure. "What's this? A candle! Three candles, in fact! They were in the parcel!"

A match was struck by somebody, and two of the candles were lit. Then we

were able to gaze upon the contents of the parcel. It was a very large one, and it contained a good supply of good things—cakes, pastry, sandwiches, and all sorts of appetising eatables. There were too three candles, and nothing else. Just the grub and the candles. What could it mean?"

"Gimme one of those sandwiches!" said Handforth hungrily.

He took one, and munched it with great relish. I took one, also, and found it to be excellent. Before a minute had elapsed, every fellow in the dormitory was helping to demolish the good things.

"But just fancy old Wrott leaving the stuff here!" said Watson. "I—I can't make it out, you know!"

"Dear old boy, it's a mystery," declared Montie. "However, there is nothin' wrong in raidin' a feed, an' I'm perfectly agreeable to eatin' my share of this particular supply. Mr. Wrott will be frightfully upset when he finds out—but he won't be able to get the grub back again, begad!"

"I suppose he was going to have a feed in his bedroom—the glutton," said Handforth. "That's the only explanation, anyhow. Who ever heard of a Housemaster carrying great parcels of food about?"

"To say nothing of candles," I put in. "He wouldn't want candles in his own room, would he?"

"By George! No," said Handforth. "What are you getting at?"

"Mr. Wrott knew that we should be in darkness, once he'd gone," I replied. "He knew that we were all hungry, and I'm not going to believe that a man could forget a parcel of that size!"

"But—but——"

"Mr. Wrott left the parcel here deliberately."

"Eh?"

"It's the only explanation," I said. "The Housemaster took pity on us, and brought that grub up. But he wants to make out that it was accidental; or, rather, a piece of forgetfulness. He knew that we should investigate as soon as he'd gone."

Many of the juniors were sceptical.

"Oh, that's sheer rot," said Owen major. "Wrott is a beast; we all know that. He wouldn't do such a thing. Nipper. He's a rotter——"

"Is he?" I said. "I'm not so sure about it, my son."

"Not sure?"

"No, I'm not," I declared. "What has he done that's been rotten? He caned eight of us—and laid it on so lightly that we hardly felt it. He gave us five hundred lines—and was satisfied with about twenty. He sent us up to bed without supper—and took good care that a supply of grub was here."

"It looks rummy, I must say," admitted Pitt.

"His voice is harsh, and his manner is harsh, but he never hurts anybody," I went on. "It seems to me that it's a pose, put on especially for Martin's benefit. Mr. Wrott wanted this job, and he knew that the only way to get it was to make out that he was stern and severe. By nature he's generous, and he can't reveal his character openly. That's my idea, anyhow."

"Begad! I'm inclined to agree with you, old boy."

"Bust my scuppers! And so am I!" declared Tom Burton, the skipper's son. "I reckon Mr. Wrott is a mighty fine pilot. These cakes are first-class—durn my riggin' if they ain't!"

The facts were undoubtedly strange.

Mr. Wrott had left the parcel in the dormitory purposely; there was not the slightest doubt on that point. And it pointed to the conclusion that he was a thoroughly decent sort. We were soon finding out that our new Housemaster was a man of mysterious ways.

He pretended to be a bally, but was really kind-hearted.

"Ah, I feel better now," said Handforth comfortably. "The grub hasn't lasted long, but it was jolly decent——"

"Look out!" hissed McClure. "He's coming!"

"Eh?"

"Wrott!" breathed McClure.

"Who's talking rot?" snapped Handforth. "You cheeky ass——"

The door opened before the candles could be extinguished, and Mr. Simpson Wrott strode into the dormitory. He gave a bellow of fury as he saw the fellows scuttling to their beds.

"Stop!" he roared. "What is the meaning of this?"

Silence!

"Boys!" shouted Mr. Wrott, in a terrible voice. "How dare you leave your beds in this manner? How dare

you light candles, and—and—— Good gracious me! Upon my soul! Food! The remains of a meal!"

The Housemaster seemed to be horrified, and he looked round with a brow which was black with fury.

"Who is responsible for this?" he snarled. "This—this is amazing! That you should have the audacity to partake of a meal in—in the dormitory is past all understanding. I am shocked—I am thunderstruck!"

The Remove remained silent.

"I will not waste time by inquiring how this appalling state of affairs came into being," went on Mr. Wrott savagely. "I will punish every boy in the dormitory alike. You shall all suffer for this act of unparalleled insubordination!"

"But, sir——" I began.

"Silence, boy!"

"I only wanted to say——"

"Upon my soul!" roared Mr. Wrott. "How dare you speak to me, boy? What is it you want to say?"

I could hardly refrain from grinning at the contradiction.

"Just this, sir," I exclaimed. "We found that parcel in the dormitory, here, and, as we were hungry, we naturally divided up the contents. We thought perhaps that you'd left the parcel——"

"I—I!" shouted the Housemaster.

"What do you mean? How dare you suggest that I left the parcel in here?"

"But you brought it in, sir," put in McClure. "I saw you."

"You saw me!"

Mr. Wrott seemed thunderstruck. And then his frown became heavier, and he uttered a perfect snarl of fury.

"By thunder!" he shouted thickly. "You—you have dared to demolish the contents of the parcel which I inadvertently left in this room? I remember now! I did leave it here. Of course—of course! And you have actually descended to robbery in order to satisfy your craving for food!"

"We didn't have any supper, sir!" growled Handforth.

"Supper—supper!" raved Mr. Wrott. "Boys of your age want no supper; they are better without it! For this amazingly audacious act you shall all be punished doubly as heavy as I first intended. I will have no excuses—no excuses whatever. Every boy shall be punished——"

"I don't see why you should punish

me, sir," growled Fullwood. "I didn't eat any of the grub—not a mouthful! It's not fair that you should punish me for what the other fellows did."

"Why, you—you——" began Handforth.

"Silence!" bellowed the Housemaster. Fullwood had always been an accomplished liar.

But for him to make such a statement before the whole Remove was rather startling. He had eaten his full share of the grub, and now he had the audacity to declare that he had touched nothing.

"It would certainly be unjust to punish you, boy, for the sins of the others," said Mr. Wrott. "However, I think I see unmistakable signs of a jam smear upon your cheek, Fullwood—rather faint, but, nevertheless, apparent. I presume some other boy placed it there merely as a joke?"

"I—I——" Fullwood paused, dismayed. "There's no jam on my cheek, sir," he said huskily. "You've made a mistake——"

"I think not; in fact, I am sure not," said Mr. Wrott. "For telling a deliberate untruth, Fullwood, I will punish you here and now. Get out of bed, and hold out your hand."

"Oh, all right, sir!" growled Fullwood.

He had heard about Mr. Wrott's canings, and he didn't mind in the least. He had enough assurance for a dozen, and he held out his hand easily. Mr. Wrott raised his cane, and brought it down sharply.

Swish!

"Yaroo!" howled Fullwood wildly.

"The other hand, boy," rapped out Mr. Wrott.

Swish!

"Ow—yow!" hooted Fullwood. "Oh, by gad! Ow!"

"And now go back to bed," said Mr. Wrott sternly. "As for the rest of you, I have already stated that you shall be punished. You have dared to interfere with my parcel, and you have also broken all the school rules by partaking of food in your sleeping apartment. I intend to be exceptionally severe, and this shall be an example to you. Every boy in this dormitory will write me ten lines!"

There was an intense silence.

"Did—did you say ten lines, sir?" I repeated wonderingly.

"Yes, boy;—I did!" snapped Mr. Wrott.

"Tut—tut—ten!" gasped Handforth. "Is—is that all?"

Mr. Wrott laughed sourly.

"You are at liberty to write me ten thousand, if you wish," he said. "However, I have given my orders, and you will be well advised to carry them out. I shall require those lines before this time next week."

And Mr. Wrott, with a swish of his gown, strode out of the dormitory, and slammed the door behind him. He had not even ordered the candles to be extinguished.

"Well, my only hat!" said Pitt. "If that doesn't take the bun!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!"

"It's amazin', old boy!"

"There's no doubt about it that my surmise was pretty nearly the truth," I said. "Mr. Wrott is an exceedingly peculiar gentleman. He makes a chap feel that the world is coming to an end, and then he does nothing. Ten lines each. Why, it's no punishment at all; and we haven't got to hand them in until next week. That's what he gives us after we've pinched about two quids' worth of grub."

"Dash it all! The chap's a good sort," said Watson bluntly. "He may bark at us and rave, and all the rest of it—but he's jolly decent."

"Hear, hear!"

"And I think Fullwood ought to be bumped for being such a liar," said Handforth firmly. "He only got two swishes from Mr. Wrott, and he yelled just as if they hurt. We know better —"

"You fool!" snarled Fullwood. "He half smashed my hands!"

"Oh, rot! He's got no strength," said Handforth. "Why, when he caned us we hardly felt the cuts at all!"

"I don't care whether you felt them or not," growled Fullwood. "Look at my hands! Look at the marks of that rotten cane! I tell you he swiped me worse than I've ever been swiped before!"

Fullwood extended his hands, and the juniors near him whistled.

"By jove! They do look rather puffy!" said Pitt. "He must have laid it on well. What a good joke!"

"Joke!" howled Fullwood.

"When Mr. Wrott caned us he was

punishing us for that firework jape, because the Head had ordered him to do so. So he pretended to be fierce, and did nothing. I thought he wasn't capable of hitting hard, but this proves beyond all doubt that Mr. Wrott is a decent sort. Fullwood deserved a hiding, and he got it. We didn't deserve a hiding, and we didn't get it."

I nodded.

"That's just about the truth," I said.

"My children, you can take it from your uncle that Mr. Wrott is the goods. We thought he'd turn out to be a beast, but it's just the opposite. Good luck to him!"

"Hear, hear!"

And the Remove settled down to sleep, feeling quite comfortable and cheerful. The only fellows who made no attempt to doze off were Handforth and Church and McClure. They, it appeared, had some little scheme on.

CHAPTER VI.

A SURPRISE FOR DR. BRETT.

MR. SIMPSON WROTT, meanwhile, was seated in the big arm-chair in his study. A cheerrul fire burned in the grate, and a big cigar reposed in Mr. Wrott's mouth. Alone, he did not look quite so forbidding.

For the frown had vanished from his face, and if anybody had been there they would probably have noticed a kind of twinkle in Mr. Wrott's eyes. The new Housemaster was certainly something of a mystery.

He was idly scanning the pages of an evening newspaper, and he had just laid it aside when the door opened, without warning, to admit Mr. Howard Martin. The Head nodded curtly.

"You will be going to bed soon, Mr. Wrott?" he asked.

"I trust so, sir; I trust so," said the Housemaster.

"I hope you have succeeded in getting acquainted with your new surroundings," went on the Head. "How are you getting on with the boys? It is necessary to be very harsh with them in order to keep them in check. I presume you have

carried out my instructions regarding that point?"

Mr. Wrott shrugged his shoulders.

"Have you not heard me?" he inquired. "I'm aware of the fact that my voice is not gentle, and you must surely have heard——"

"Yes, Mr. Wrott; I have heard you," interrupted the Head. "But talking to the boys is not sufficient. You must cane them; you must give punishments frequently. It is the only way to subdue them, and get them completely under control."

"You may leave it safely to me, sir," said Mr. Wrott. "Have no fear on that point. I will get the boys under my control, even if I am obliged to cane them every day and three times a day!"

"That is the right spirit, Mr. Wrott," said the Head, nodding. "A man who is gentle is utterly useless where boys are concerned. The junior boys are naturally more untractable than the senior. We must therefore concentrate our efforts particularly upon the Remove."

"That is what I have always understood," said the Housemaster. "I take it that you are now going out, Mr. Martin?"

The Head looked up sharply.

"For a stroll in the Triangle—nothing more!" he said quickly. "I generally take a stroll before turning in. Good-night, Mr. Wrott!"

"Good-night, sir!"

The Head, who was attired in a big overcoat and a cap, took his departure, closing the door after him. Mr. Wrott sat for a second quite still. There was a thoughtful expression in his eyes.

"Remarkable!" he murmured. "H'm! Why did Mr. Martin make such a point of telling me that his stroll would be confined to the Triangle? Rather a significant point, I am inclined to believe. We shall see—we shall see!"

He rose to his feet, slipped on a cap of his own, and left his study without turning off the electric light. And the Head, passing through the Triangle, had no indication that Mr. Wrott had departed from his study, for his window still gleamed brightly in the darkness.

But Mr. Wrott was not quite so inactive as the Head imagined. He was, in point of fact, only about two hundred yards in Mr. Martin's rear, as the latter gentleman made his way down the lane in the direction of the village.

The new Housemaster's surmise was correct, it seemed. The Head had not confined his walk to the Triangle. And, for some reason best known to himself, Mr. Wrott seemed considerably interested in the Headmaster's movements.

At all events, he was following the Head down the lane in a stealthy manner. He did not allow himself to be seen; he did not allow Mr. Martin to have the slightest suspicion that he was so close behind.

And Mr. Wrott's interest became greatly increased when he saw the Head turn off halfway to the village, and make his way along a footpath across the meadows. Mr. Wrott wondered where on earth the Head could be making for.

But it was not long before he discovered the truth.

After the two men had progressed for a distance of perhaps a mile, the gaunt outline of a quaint, old ruin came into view. It was the ancient remains of Bellton Abbey, an old building which had been in ruins for hundreds of years.

It was one of the local objects of interest, and in the summer time visitors were fairly common. Painters were particularly keen on transferring the abbey on to canvas, and sightseers would go into the dungeons and vaults just for the excitement of it.

But at this time of the year, November, there was nothing doing.

The place was deserted week after week, and the probability was that no visitor would go near the abbey until the following spring had well advanced. In the winter months the old ruin was left desolate.

The situation, then, was remarkable.

For, surely, this was a queer time for Mr. Howard Martin to be bent upon exploring the ruin—on a cold November night, at close upon eleven o'clock! What could the Head's real object be?

Mr. Wrott, apparently, was a very curious individual.

He was determined to watch his chief.

And when Mr. Martin vanished into the ruin, the Housemaster crept up like a shadow, and peered through an ivy-grown window. He was just in time to see the Head vanishing down some steep stone steps.

"Dear me!" murmured Mr. Wrott.

"Most interesting!"

He passed into the ruin as silently as

a shadow, and he followed the Head down into the depths. He hadn't the faintest idea where he was going, or where this adventure would lead him.

But he was eager to find out everything, and he did not hesitate. Further and further he descended, until, at length, he found himself in one of the old dungeon passages. Ahead of him, quite a considerable way, a flickering gleam of light showed itself.

Mr. Martin was walking along the passage, carrying a candle. But where was he off to? That was the interesting question. Mr. Wrott was greatly attracted by the fact that the Head had been carrying a well-filled handbag.

Why?

For what reason was the Head bringing a handbag to this lonely, deserted old ruin? Certainly, such a mission did not appear to be quite in keeping with Mr. Martin's position as the Headmaster of a great public school.

And Mr. Wrott was quite keen to learn what the secret could be. It almost seemed as though he had half suspected that the Head would be making such a journey. At all events, he he did not appear to be exceedingly surprised at the strange behaviour of Mr. Martin.

He continued on his way along the old tunnel gingerly. The walls were damp—they reeked of moisture, and the atmosphere was by no means pleasant. However, after continuing his way for another hundred yards, he was aware of a change.

The walls became dry, and the air was purer.

Mr. Wrott knew quite well that he was down amongst the old dungeons where, in the Middle Ages, bold warriors had sought refuge from their enemies—and where prisoners had been kept for years in solitude until they died.

Mr. Wrott himself had no light, but he was guided by the gleam in front. And he told himself that he would be quite secure; he could find his way out without difficulty.

The Head was quite unaware of Mr. Wrott's activities, and he did not even suspect that he was being watched. For he never once looked round, and did not pause in his walk.

And then his shadower became aware

of the fact that the Head had halted. Mr. Wrott saw that his quarry had turned into an opening, and the light had greatly increased in brilliance. Mr. Wrott stood quite still.

"Dear me!" he murmured softly.

The sound of voices came plainly to his ears!

Mr. Martin was talking with somebody!

This, indeed, was an astonishing situation. The Headmaster of St. Frank's had penetrated these aged dungeons, and was conversing with another man. Who could the mysterious one be? Obviously no ordinary, respectable gentleman. For no such person would dream of meeting Mr. Martin down in those dungeons.

There was something very mysterious and very sinister about the whole business, and Mr. Wrott almost felt inclined to venture further—on the off chance that he would be able to overhear some of the words which were being spoken.

But he decided, upon the whole, to refrain.

He had no wish to be caught red-handed down there—it was not his desire that the Head should discover his curiosity concerning the matter. So he remained still.

He was rather too long, however.

For, quite abruptly, the Head appeared in the passage. He held a lantern in his hand.

"Good-night!" Mr. Wrott heard him say.

And then Mr. Martin came striding along the passage. For one tense moment Mr. Wrott believed that he would be discovered. To flee now would be futile, for he would certainly be seen.

There was only one possibility of escaping detection.

Within a yard of Mr. Wrott, and on the other side of the passage, there was a deep recess in the wall. But could he cross the passage and conceal himself without the Head seeing?

It was a problem—but it had to be chanced.

Mr. Wrott stepped across like a shadow, and slipped into the recess—which, he found, was not so deep as he had believed. The chances were that Mr. Martin would see him as he passed by.

But there was nothing else to be done, and Mr. Wrott waited, his heart beating rather rapidly.

The Head came up, drew level—and passed by.

"Good!"

Mr. Wrott murmured a sigh of relief, and he breathed more freely once again. He waited for five minutes—until all sounds of Mr. Martin had ceased. The Head, no doubt, had emerged into the open once more.

Mr. Wrott considered that it was now possible for him to make a little examination. He was curious, and he didn't disguise the fact. Pulling out a small electric torch he switched it on and moved forward along the passage.

Step by step he progressed, slowly and cautiously.

Then, at length, he came to a blank wall. The passage ended abruptly, in a cul-de-sac! There was no opening of any sort to be seen—no doorway, and no entrance to any dungeon.

"H'm! A secret door, no doubt," murmured Mr. Wrott.

He searched in vain. He could not find any sign or trace of a doorway, and was compelled, at length, to give up the task as hopeless. But he knew that a secret door did exist, and the knowledge occasioned him great satisfaction. He took his departure in a highly pleased frame of mind.

When he emerged from the old ruins, everything was still and silent—the Headmaster had nearly reached St. Frank's by this time, probably. And Mr. Wrott set off across the fields at a brisk walk.

He arrived in Bellton Lane in due course, and he was on his way to the school when he became aware of two lights in the distance ahead. They were bearing down upon him, and he recognised them as the twin lamps of a motor-car.

Mr. Wrott waited by the side of the road, and as the car approached he gazed at it searchingly. It was only a few yards from him when he stepped forward and held up his hand.

The car was a two-seater, driven by a youngish, alert looking man in a heavy fur coat. He applied the brake at once, and pulled his car to a standstill. He regarded Mr. Wrott curiously.

"Well, sir?" he asked.

"You will pardon me, I am sure," said Mr. Wrott. "But I have an idea that you are Dr. Brett, of the village of Bellton?"

"That's quite correct—I am Dr. Brett."

"My name is Wrott," said the Housemaster. "I am a new resident master at St. Frank's——"

"Quite so," said Dr. Brett grimly. "I have heard of you my dear sir!"

"Already?" said Mr. Wrott. "I am flattered!"

"You needn't be," said the doctor bluntly. "I can assure you, Mr. Wrott, that you would not be flattered if you knew how I'd heard of you! But I should like to inform you that the hour is late, and that——"

"Quite so—quite so," agreed Mr. Wrott. "I am particularly anxious to consult with you to-night, Dr. Brett. I ask you, as a very great favour, to grant me this interview."

Dr. Brett considered for a moment.

"Oh, very well," he said. "Jump in, Mr. Wrott."

The Housemaster jumped in with alacrity, and the car was soon speeding towards the village. Dr. Brett was not at all keen upon the interview. He had had a trying day, and he badly wanted to get to bed.

He was quite sure that Mr. Wrott's business was of no importance. And the doctor was not favourably impressed by what he had heard of the new master. He wanted very little to do with him.

They arrived at the doctor's house, and entered. While Brett put the car into his little garage, Mr. Wrott waited in the consulting-room—a cold, bare apartment, far from cheerful. The fire had died out long since.

Dr. Brett appeared at last.

"Now, my dear sir," he said briskly, as he peeled off his big coat. "If you can make your statement as brief as possible I shall be obliged. You must remember that the hour is late——"

"Quite so, my dear Brett," interjected Mr. Wrott, in a strangely familiar voice. "The hour is late—and this room is cold. Why not have a little chat by the cosy fire in your own den?"

Dr. Brett stared at his visitor blankly.

"I—I don't understand!" he exclaimed. "I seem to know——"

"Come, come, Brett!" laughed Mr. Wrott. "Surely you are not deceived?"

"Well I'm hanged!" shouted the doctor—"Nelson Lee!"

"Exactly!"

And Mr. Simpson Wrott lay back in his chair and smiled broadly.

CHAPTER VII.

COMING TO A HEAD.

MR. BRETT fairly staggered. "Lee!" he shouted again. "Man alive! I—I can't believe it! Is it really you? But—but is seems impossible! Your face—your figure—your teeth! Good Heavens! I never thought such a disguise was possible!"

He grasped "Mr. Wrott's" hand firmly, and wrung it with all his strength.

"What does it mean, old man?" he asked amazedly.

"That's what I've come here to explain," laughed Nelson Lee. "I thought you would be interested, Brett—and I know that I shall be safe in taking you into my confidence!"

Brett stared at his companion, still lost in astonishment. And it certainly was staggering to find that this forbidding-looking individual was none other than Nelson Lee, the famous detective!

The truth was out.

"Come into my den—of course!" said Brett briskly. "There's a fire there, I believe. This way, Lee. Great Scott! It's more than I can believe! Where on earth did you grow those awful teeth?"

"A little invention of my own," smiled Nelson Lee. "Protruding teeth always alter one's appearance to an astonishing degree, Brett—so I frequently make use of them in disguising. They are quite comfortable to wear, I assure you."

"They don't look comfortable," said Dr. Brett. "That's right, take that big chair, Lee. Help yourself to a cigar. Now, you beauty, I want to know exactly what you mean."

Nelson Lee lolled back in his chair and lit a cigar.

"Well, to tell the truth, Brett, there's not a great deal that I can say," he exclaimed. "For one thing I had strong objections to being kicked out of St. Frank's by a cad like Martin. And when I left, my firm intention was to get back as soon as possible."

"You haven't taken long, at all events!" said Brett. "But I must say that I don't quite like the idea, Lee."

"Why not?"

"Well, you're Lee, and yet you're not

Lee," said the doctor. "By all that I can hear, you're a terrible person in the character of Mr. Wrott."

"Not quite as terrible as I seem," smiled Lee. "The boys, I believe, are already beginning to tumble to the fact that I am their friend—and not their enemy. Certainly, I have given them no hint. But, you see, I want to keep 'in' with the Headmaster at the same time. It will be a ticklish business, but I think I will manage it all right."

Dr. Brett laughed.

"Think!" he exclaimed. "I know you'll manage it. You manage anything you put yourself to, Lee. But I should have thought that you would appeal to the Governors with a view to coming back in your own personality——"

"That's because you don't understand the position, Brett," said Nelson Lee. "I'm not going into details, but I will certainly enlighten you to a certain extent. I've every reason for believing that Mr. Howard Martin is not all that he seems to be. Do you follow?"

"Well, not exactly," said Brett. "Do you mean to say that Martin is something—well, is there anything dishonourable connected with him?"

"That's just it," said Nelson Lee. "I am convinced that Mr. Howard Martin has been mixed up in some shady business at some period of his life—and he is probably mixed up in it still. While I retained my own identity it was difficult for me to watch the man. He was very cautious, and gave me no opportunities. And I am sure that he dismissed me because he was afraid of me in my professional capacity."

Dr. Brett looked puzzled.

"But why?" he inquired.

"Very shortly after Martin arrived here, he was in touch with a rather mysterious stranger," said Nelson Lee. "This man on one occasion mistook me for Martin, and it was that incident which first aroused my suspicions. For the man was quite sufficient to prove to me that all was not straightforward with the new Head. So, Brett, I thought that it would be rather good if I returned to St. Frank's in another identity. Martin does not suspect me in any way, and I am able to keep my eye upon him at all times—day and night. Do you understand? This little

plan of mine has many great advantages."

"Yes, I can quite realise that now," said Dr. Brett. "But how in the world did you manage to get the job, Lee?"

The detective smiled.

"Well, it was comparatively easy," he said. "Mr. Martin wanted a new Housemaster, and I took good care to be the first to apply. In my present disguise I easily satisfied the Head with regard to my credentials—for he was chiefly concerned with my bullying capabilities. He wanted a man who would treat the juniors like slaves—and he was satisfied that I should fill the bill. That's about all, really. And now I'm here, planted on the spot once more, and I shall not become Nelson Lee again until Martin has been cleared out."

"And when do you think that will be?"

"I really don't know—but I do know there will be some strenuous times at St. Frank's in the immediate future," said Lee grimly. "The boys will not stand Martin's bullying ways for long. He will go to a certain point, and then the storm will break. You mark my words, Brett. If such a thing can be avoided, I shall be thankful, but I am afraid it cannot be. And it is highly probable that when Mr. Martin leaves St. Frank's, he will take up his residence in one of his Majesty's prisons."

Dr. Brett whistled.

"As bad as that?" he said. "Phew! Then I can understand why you resorted to this scheme, Lee. I wish you all the luck, old man—and I appreciate the compliment you have paid me by taking me into your confidence."

"My dear man, you are not connected with the school, and you and I have been friends for long past. There was no reason why you shouldn't know, and I shall welcome a chat with you fairly frequently."

"Thanks," said Brett. "By the way, does Nipper know?"

"No."

"Are you going to tell him?"

"Not yet."

"Well, it seems a very queer business to me," smiled the doctor, as he rose to his feet. "I can't quite believe that you are yourself, even now, you know."

"I don't want to boast," said Lee, "but I am certainly very pleased with this particular disguise. Nipper is usually extremely keen on such matters.

but he hasn't penetrated this one yet. I think I shall wait until he does—before revealing myself to him. I'll give him one or two hints, and if the young beggar hasn't got enough brains to guess the rest he'll have to remain in ignorance."

And that's the way the gov'nor treats me! Of course, I didn't know anything about it at the time, but I naturally learned it afterwards—or I couldn't be setting down the facts here.

The gov'nor left Dr. Brett after a little further chat, and he walked back to the school feeling in a much more cheerful frame of mind. He had always intended telling the doctor, and was rather amused.

Nelson Lee, in point of fact, was enjoying himself greatly. He was very fond of deceiving everybody in that way, and he took particular delight in taking the rise out of me.

When "Mr. Wrott" arrived at the school he was still thinking of the somewhat remarkable occurrence he had witnessed at Bellton Abbey. The Headmaster was certainly up to something fishy, and Lee was highly satisfied with the progress he had made in such a short time.

The very instant Lee entered the gateway he knew that something was amiss. A considerable noise was proceeding from the other side of the Triangle. He recognised Handforth's voice easily, and he also recognised the Head's voice.

"H'm," murmured Lee. "Handforth in trouble again, I'm afraid. The amount of trouble that boy seems to find is truly remarkable!"

He slipped indoors as quickly as he could, and retired to his own room—for he did not want the Head to know that he had been out. After half-undressing, he slipped into his dressing-gown and emerged into the passage.

He was just in time to see the Head marshalling Handforth and Church and McClure into the Remove dormitory.

Nelson Lee strolled up, his face assuming a sour, stern aspect. It was his policy to appear forbidding, and to agree with the Head's harsh methods. If he did not do so he would find himself dismissed. It was, therefore, Lee's intention to keep in Mr. Martin's good books.

"What is the meaning of all this commotion?" he shouted, rushing into the dormitory. "Good gracious! Do you

realise that the time is nearly midnight — Ahem! I am sorry, sir——”

“It’s all right, Mr. Wrott,” said the Head. “You did not know I was here. Three wretched boys actually breaking bounds at this unearthly hour of the night.”

“Shocking!” said Lee. “Disgraceful!”

“We were only trying to work a Guy Fawkes jape on Christine and Co., sir,” protested Handforth. “There was nothing particularly wrong——”

“Silence, boy!” snapped the Head. “Undress—the three of you!”

They had got into their clothes over their pyjamas, and so they were undressed within a few seconds. They were making for their beds when the Head pulled them up sharply. Everybody else in the dormitory was greatly interested.

“Oh, no!” said Mr. Martin. “You will not sleep in these beds to-night! I intend to punish you severely for this escapade. You will spend the night in a cold attic—just as you are, without bedding or blankets!”

“Oh!”

“But—but we shall freeze, sir!” gasped Church.

“I don’t care what you do!” shouted the Head. “I intend to teach you a lesson. Come with me!”

And Handforth and Co. were marched out, leaving the Remove boiling with indignation and fury. Nelson Lee went, too. The detective was as angry as the boys, and he did not intend to allow Mr. Martin’s punishment to be carried out.

He followed the Head down the cold corridor until the attic stairs were reached. Handforth and Co. were already shivering, and they were really scared. The thought of spending such a cold night in an attic appalled them.

Sleep would be impossible. They would be compelled to keep on the move in order to keep their circulation going. And Handforth, at least, had courage enough to protest.

“It’s not right, sir!” he exclaimed. “If we’re left up in the cold all night we shall get pneumonia——”

“Boosh!” snapped the Head. “You are strong—and you can keep moving. I intend you to learn a lesson this time which you will not forget in a hurry. I

mean to put my foot down strongly upon the breaking of bounds.”

“Quite right, Mr. Martin—quite right, sir!” said Lee sourly. “Make these boys suffer. I am in agreement with your most excellent system of punishment. Yes, this attic will do admirably.”

Handforth and Co. were hustled into the cold room, and the door was locked and bolted. There was no escape, and the attic itself contained nothing whatever in the way of warmth.

The Head went away to his own room, and Nelson Lee went back to his bedroom. The affair was settled—it was finished. Handforth and Co. were there for the night, and nobody knew what would happen to them.

But Lee hit upon a scheme.

There were two attics on that particular landing, and Lee was well aware of the fact that both of them contained a trap-door in the ceiling—leading up beneath the rafters.

Nelson Lee allowed half-an-hour to pass.

Then he quietly went upstairs with a considerable quantity of blankets from the store cupboard. It did not take long to get up into the rafter space. Then he crawled upon the rafters until he reached the other trapdoor. It came open with a jerk as he pulled.

“Who—who’s that?” came a startled voice.

“Great Scott! We’re being rescued,” gasped Church.

Nelson Lee didn’t say a word. He dropped his blankets down one after another. Then he silently closed the trapdoor and retired to his own room—quite satisfied.

Handforth and Co. would be warm for the night. And when the morning came, and the Head discovered that an alteration had taken place, it would be impossible to discover who had acted the good Samaritan.

Handforth and Co. were joyous as they rolled in the blankets.

“Another mystery!” said Handforth. “Still, we’re comfy now—these blankets are ripping!”

“I’ll bet Nipper did it,” said McClure.

“Rats! If Nipper had done it he’d have said something!” exclaimed Handforth, who was pretty cute occasionally.

“Look here, my sons, I’ll bet a quid to

a rotten apple that we were saved by Mr. Wrott!"

"Oh, don't talk nonsense——"

"He was here when we were shoved into the attic—and we know that he's on our side," went on Handforth. "Didn't he give us grub when we were hungry? Didn't he give us ten lines each when we were expecting five hundred? Didn't he—— Oh, rats! What's the good of me talking? You know all this as well as I do. I tell you, Mr. Wrott threw these blankets down."

"Well, if he did, he's a brick," said Church. "Shurrup! I'm going to sleep."

And while Handforth and Co. were quite comfortable in the attic some exciting events were taking place in the Remove dormitory. I was the ring-leader, and I was proud of being so.

As soon as everything was quiet I had jumped out of bed. Candles were lit, and preparations were made to hold a meeting. Everybody was with me, and not a single junior thought of sleep.

"We can't do anything for Handforth and Co. just yet," I said. "We shall have to discuss matters. But, in my opinion, this is the breaking point. The Head has acted in an inhuman way—and it's time we showed our hand."

"But what do you suggest?" asked Pitt.

"I suggest a rebellion," I replied quietly.

"A—a—rebellion?"

"Yes!"

"When—to-night?"

"At once!" I said grimly. "We can't wait any longer now. But I am not going to do anything that the Form disagrees upon. Before we go any further we'll take a vote."

"Begad!"

"That's the idea!"

"A vote—submission or revolt!"

I looked round the crowd of excited faces.

"Hands up all those who vote for a revolt against the Head's tyranny," I

said. "Hands up all those who are on the side of justice and right!"

Every hand that I could see went up.

"Good!" I exclaimed. "Now, hands up those who are in favour of submitting tamely to the Head's domination."

Not a hand was raised. Even Fullwood and Co. were with us.

"Great!" I exclaimed. "We're solid. That means to say that our task will be easier. But, remember, there mustn't be any backsliding."

"Any which?" asked Hubbard.

"You mustn't knuckle under if we get a setback," I explained. "And there's not much 'if' about that. We're bound to get setbacks, and one or two of us will suffer while the others go free. If so, suffer in silence for the good of the cause. This job is going to be a big one."

"It'll take twenty-four hours at least," said Owen major.

"You're right," I agreed grimly.

"Twenty-four hours, at least. In my opinion, we sha'n't win the fight until a week has passed. If we go out on strike—for that's what it comes to—we must do it properly. No half measures. We're up against the Headmaster himself, and you can bet your boots that we shall have the tussle of our lives. So, before you enter into this thing you'd better realise the gravity of it. Are you still unanimous?"

"Yes."

"Rather!"

"We're with you to a man!"

"And we regard you as our leader!" said Pitt. "You're the chap for us, Nipper. We trust you to carry us through to victory!"

"Good!" I exclaimed heartily. "I'll do my utmost to lead you well. And if we don't smash this bullying martinet—well, we sha'n't deserve any sympathy. This fight is going to be to the finish!"

There was every prospect of some strenuous, exciting times in the immediate future.

The rebellion had come!

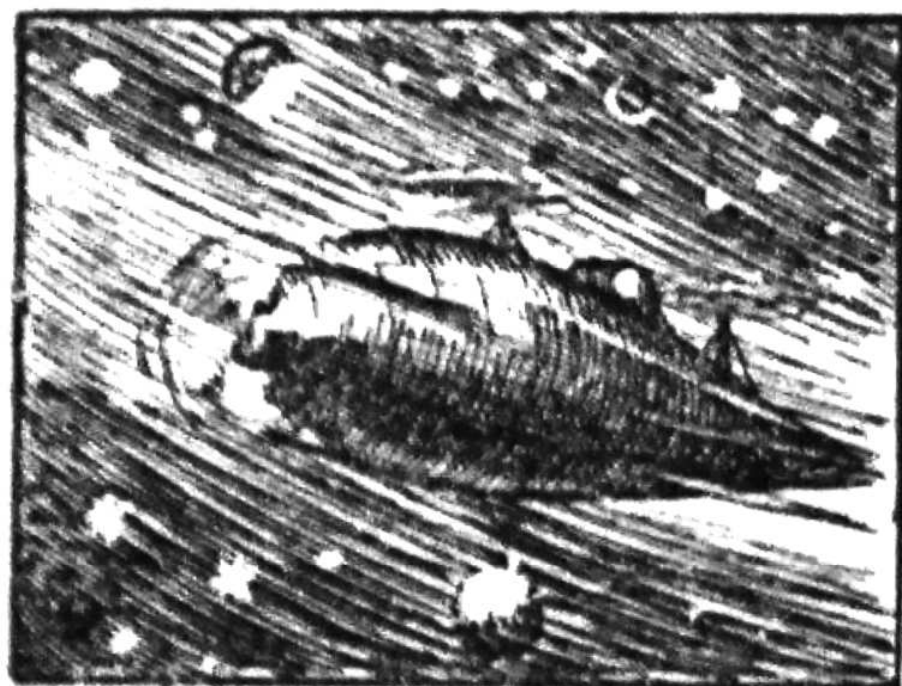
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By ROBT. W. COMRADE.

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. In this world of whiteness the adventurers encounter many extraordinary beings and fresh scenes, such as have never before been seen by the inhabitants of our Mother Earth.

(Now read on.)

Into the Crater.

"WE have risen fully twenty-eight miles," declared the scientist, looking eagerly upwards. "It cannot be much—Gad! the top is in sight!"

The others stared excitedly through the thick glass, and found the professor's words to be correct. They were nearing the summit of the mighty mountain at last.

In five minutes the aeronef, now travelling slowly, rose above the level of the

mountain and another astonished utterance went up

The ground, from the edge of the precipice, sloped sharply downwards, and the explorers found themselves gazing down a hill thirty miles in length, the top half smothered in glittering snow, and the lower half resplendent with luxuriant, creamy vegetation, while at the bottom another ocean stretched out.

There being no clouds the adventurers were enabled to see this magnificent spectacle in all its glory, and for a moment they stood spell-bound.

"What a marvellous sight!" murmured the professor. "What a truly marvellous sight!"

"But look there—not twenty yards from the cliff edge!" cried Frank. "What is all that steam arising from that huge hole? Where is it coming from?"

The others looked.

"Unless I'm very much mistaken," said Gresham coolly, although his voice shook with excitement, "we are now looking down upon a volcano! It is at present inactive, though there are evident signs of its having erupted quite recently. Look at that yellowish-black rock substance strewn about. In all probability the hardened lava thrown out by this volcano. See, too, just round the edge of the crater, there are thousands of brown ashes. As there is no snow there, I think it highly probable the soil just round about there is constantly warm, owing to the rising steam."

"By jingo, I should like to look inside," cried Mac. "But, of course, that's impossible—"

"Far from it," interjected the inventor. "The volcano is at present

inactive, and there can be no danger in crossing the crater. What do you say, Palgrave?"

"No danger whatever—perfectly safe," declared the professor, who was as eager as the boys to see inside. "We can descend to the dining-saloon and from the windows see everything."

"Exactly." And Gresham called to Abbie through the conning tower speaking-tube, and gave him the necessary directions.

A minute later the Solar Monarch rode slowly forward over the cliff edge at a height of perhaps thirty feet.

In the saloon everything could be seen to perfection. A thin spiral of steam was issuing lazily from the crater as if to give the adventurers assurance. The crater itself measured in all two hundred feet across, and as the aeronef crossed slowly over it the watchers could see huge masses of luminous and molten lava rolling about in a manner unknown on earth.

Right in the centre of the crater was a kind of island, composed of rock, and it was from a hole in the middle of this that the steam was issuing.

All around the island the deadly lava hissed and bubbled menacingly.

"Ugh! It gives me a cold shiver when I think of what would happen if the ship was to fall into——"

Frank's sentence was cut short abruptly as he was nearly thrown to the floor. The Solar Monarch had given a giddy lurch, had swung uncertainly from side to side for a moment, and was now slowly but surely sinking into the crater—into that mass of fire and steam!

"By Heaven," cried Gresham in horror, "one of the engines has smashed and the ship is dropping. Tell Abbie to race the other for all it is worth!"

With white, blanched faces his companions looked on as Palgrave dashed out. No need to tell Abbie anything, however. That cheerful nigger, having seen the awful danger, was working like a demon, and at risk of serious overheating was running the remaining engine at a mad pace.

All to no purpose, however. With only half her complement of suspensory screws working, and that in an extremely rarified atmosphere, the Solar Monarch was sinking to her doom!

Nothing they could do would save them from dropping into the deadly

crater. It was too late now to make a dash forward and so land on the outside. The vessel was below the edge!

"My friends, I see nothing but death before us all," said Gresham hoarsely. "Let us meet it like men—like Englishmen should—like Englishmen always have done in the past. Would to Heaven the smash had occurred five minutes sooner. We could have landed then in safety. As it is, it is useless to raise false hopes. It is hard—terribly hard—that your young lives"—to Frank and Mac—"should be thus thrown away, and that this momentous journey should terminate in this tragically abrupt manner. It was my lifelong wish to prove to the world what my machine could do: but I am doomed to disappointment. It is not to be; we shall never see dear old England again, I'm afraid."

Tears stood in the inventor's eyes as he spoke. Palgrave and the two young men looked at one another in a dazed manner, unable to realise the calamity. But they braced themselves up and faced death like Britons should.

"Let us offer up a prayer," said Gresham quietly.

And as the aeronef gradually settled down the four fugitives knelt silently in the saloon. Down below in the engine-room Abbie had far from given up hope. He was working frantically; not at the disabled engine, but at the lower steering gear.

He was gazing intently at the periscope which showed him the ground beneath, and a glad look came into his eyes as the Solar Monarch did his bidding and landed with scarcely a jar right in the middle of the little rock island in the crater.

Having landed safely he left the steering wheel and switched off the engine. Then he flopped himself into an easy chair—for he believed in comfort, did Abbie, and mopped his brow with a piece of oil-waste.

"By golly," he murmured, "we'n got in a rummy kinder place dis heah time! The excessive work had taken all de go out'n dis niggah. But I guess I'll hab to look almighty slick if I'se gwine to get dis contraption into de air again 'fore she busts up! The heat'll be froo just directly, fo' suah."

This was the literal truth. The airship was safe for the time being, but the molten lava surrounding her was

sending a terrible heat out, and unless she was removed from her dangerous and very peculiar position before long, there was a possibility of her becoming overpoweringly hot.

What a marvellous thing it was the accident should happen at such an inopportune moment, and what a strange chance of fate it was that landed her safely in the crater—right in the centre of the fire, so to speak.

Up in the saloon the four explorers waited patiently for the ship to sink into the sea of molten lava. Every minute they had expected her to lurch from side to side—perhaps turn turtle, and every minute they expected to hear the snapping of bolts, the splitting crack of glass, and the groaning of plates as the heat rent them asunder.

Then, to their amazement, they felt the Solar Monarch land gently and unmistakably on something solid. As they gazed at one another in silent wonder the throb of the engine died down, the shriek of the screw ceased, and the aeronef remained motionless.

Simultaneously they sprang to their feet to ascertain the cause of this marvellous happening. They crowded to the window, then started back. For a moment they could see nothing but molten lava and pitch-black walls. Then Gresham remembered.

"Heaven above us," he cried. "We are on the centre rock—for the moment safe! But how, in the name of all that's surprising, did we manage to get here?"

"It's Abbie," cried Frank. "That invaluable and unfailing Abbie! Somehow he's managed to land the vessel on this rock, although, when I last looked, we were sinking into the lava itself! By Jove, to think we were whining and praying here, having given up hope, while that brick below was slaving his life away alone. Quick, we'll go and see what we can do. I'll wager a penny to a pound he's down there sweating away at the faulty motor."

They hastened down the companion, and a moment later burst into the engine-room.

It was as Frank had surmised. There was Abbie, perspiring in every pore—for the engine-room, being next to the molten lava, was, in spite of the thick asbestos, rapidly becoming unbearable—labouring away at a helpless task.

"By golly," he gasped, standing up—

right and gazing mournfully at the smash, before Gresham could utter his intended words of praise and thankfulness. "Dis chile's done his best, but I guess by de time dat engine's repaired dis heah vessel'll be flowin' roun de island like de oder stuff!"

"The case is hopeless, then?" asked Frank.

"Fo' suah, sah."

"You mean before we could repair the damage the airship would be uninhabitable?"

"Dat's so, Massa Frank."

"Oh, well, you've done your best, Abbie," said Gresham, patting the huge negro on the shoulder, "and a very good best into the bargain. Not one man in a thousand would have shown the pluck and ingenuity that you have."

The words were not lost on Abbie, for he swelled visibly with pride, and a grin overspread his genial features, despite the appalling death which lay before him.

"I ain't gwine——"

But his words were cut short and drowned. From beneath their feet came a deafening roar as of escaping steam, and again the adventurers gave one another a questioning look.

What was going to happen next, they wondered. Nothing could amaze them now on this peculiar world. They had grown used to its wonders. Nevertheless the occurrence which did happen the next moment came somewhat as a shock.

The roar deafened them, and the view outside was obscured by clouds of thick steam. Suddenly there was a resounding thud, and the airship shook. Then, with a noise so great as to be indescribable, the Solar Monarch soared into the air enveloped in a huge cloud. Up she went in a semi-circle, then swift and silent, her engines still, she dropped, not to destruction, but to safety!

With hardly a jar she struck the snow covering the mountain side, her occupants hanging on to anything like limpets.

For one second she lay there in the snow, her nose pointing downwards. Then she slipped on the steep slope, gliding on her runners down the mountain at an appalling rate.

What would happen when she left the snow? Undoubtedly she would crash

(Continued on p. 111 of cover.)

into the forest and dash herself and her occupants to pieces.

But yet another surprise. Death was not to be their lot yet. Having skidded for almost a mile at lightning speed, the aeronef seemed to leave the snow, and soar into the air, as if longing for her native element.

Then the explorers realised that she had slipped over the cliff and was dropping. The sensation almost caused their hearts to stand still. It seemed hours since they had been in the crater. As a matter of fact, barely two minutes had passed since the gigantic jet of steam had lifted the airship like a feather and deposited her on the mountain side.

Suddenly she struck again, but so softly that it was barely noticeable. Then the windows became darkened, she gave a final lurch, then remained motionless.

At the same moment a crash from overhead was heard, and the occupants of the engine-room realised what had happened.

She had dropped into a deep snow-drift, and the sides of the wall she had made for herself had caved in, completely burying her!

What a strange chance of fate it was. Five minutes earlier the Solar Monarch had been in danger of melting owing to the excessive heat, now she was in danger of freezing owing to the excessive cold!

Out of Danger.

THE professor was the first to make a move. He crossed the room, and switched on the electric light.

He could see the ashen pallor of the faces around, with the exception of Abbie's, which was creased into a cheerful grin.

"Well, Abbie, I must say you take things unconcernedly," smiled Palgrave, recovering his spirits rapidly. "Do you know we might have all been dead at this moment?"

"Yes, sah, I know dat; but as we ain't, an' as de immejit danger's past, why dis chile tought de most disproprieate ting to do would be to smile! We ain't none ob us hurt—neider us nor de ship, so I tink we oughter be merry and gay!"

And Abbie broke into another broad

grin, and threw a loving glance at his engines, which had suffered nothing by their rapid descent down the mountain side.

Indeed, it is hard to see how anything could have been damaged. The Solar Monarch had dropped squarely on her runners into soft snow, had slid for a mile on soft snow, and now lay in a bed of the same material. So how could she be hurt in any way?

"By George, Abbie, you're right," cried Gresham suddenly. "We've got out of that terrible fix remarkably cheap considering, and we ought to be joyful in consequence. Come, boys, drop that scared look, and let us go up aloft and see if any damage has been wrought. Ten minutes ago I had given up hope of ever seeing a snow-flake again, and here we are buried in the stuff. Upon my soul, it's well nigh incredible! I can hardly realise that by some miraculous happening we were shot from that rock like the cork from a champagne bottle.

"There must have been a terribly powerful jet of steam emerging to lift the vessel. But, there, the surprises on this world are never ceasing, and by now we should have got used to them. If we don't look out we shall get trampled on by some huge inhabitant of Venus, and smashed! So after a glance at the conning-tower we'll look alive and help Abbie repair the faulty motor."

"That's the idea," cried Frank and Mac together, recovering themselves in turn. And, laughing and joking, the four men, who had five-minutes before stared death in the face, mounted the companion and walked into the conning-tower.

They had imagined the aeronef to be completely buried in snow, and now they found that the glass dome was free of it, and on looking through this, could see the suspensory screws unhurt, protruding helplessly from the snow.

"We're better off than I dared hope," cried Gresham exultantly. "If these screws won't lift the Solar Monarch with a layer of snow on her plates I shall be sadly mistaken. They must; it is their nature to lift. They are unlike any other screws in the world. If the aeroplanes at home had my pattern propellor fitted instead of the usual they could travel at three hundred miles an hour with ease!"

(To be continued.)

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