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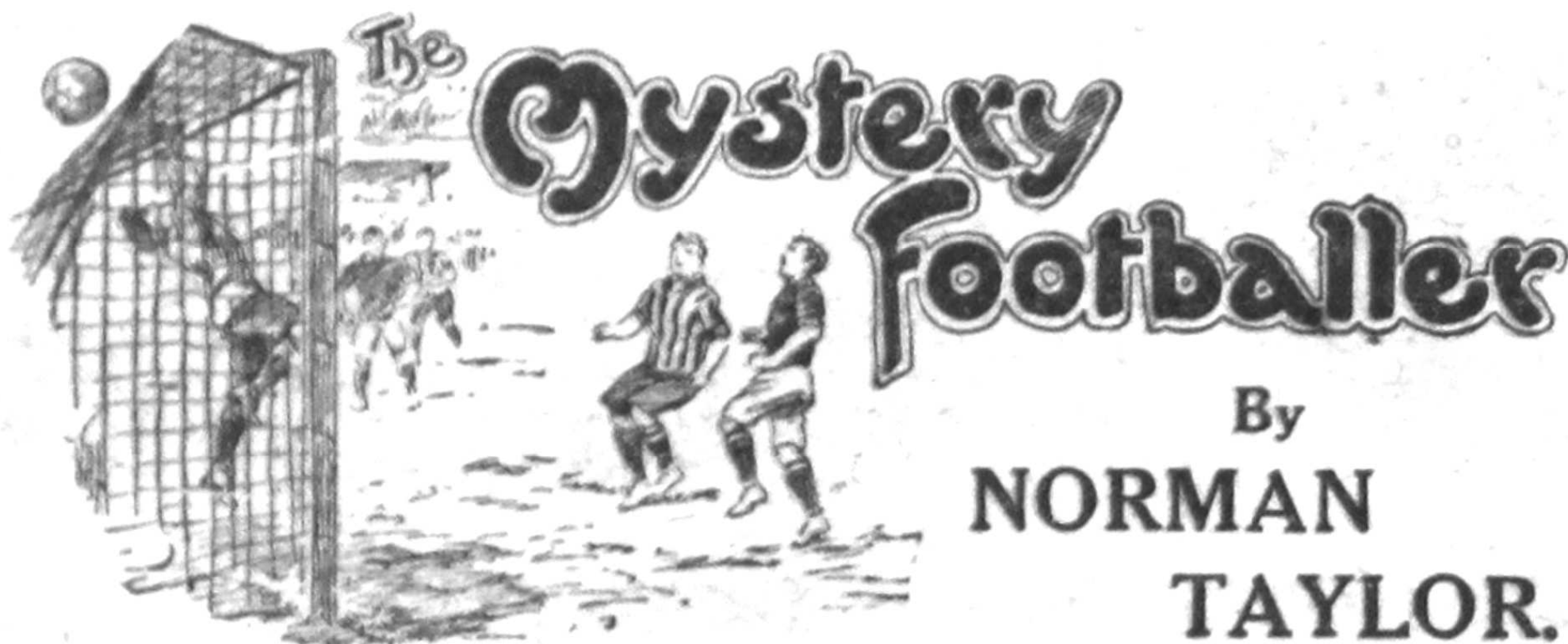


I realised that the time had come for action.

EXIT THE TYRANT

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 "Barring out the Bully," "The Siege of the West Wing," "Victory for the Rebels," etc. December 13, 1919.

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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

A DISTINGUISHED GUEST.

"SARDINES, please!" I said briskly.

"Take the lot!" invited Watson, with great generosity. "You'll only find one and a half there, but that's a detail. Montie's been in the tin already!"

Sir Montie Tregellis-West looked up.

"Begad! That is a frightfully absurd statement, old boy," he observed. "I have removed a couple of sardines from the tin, but I have certainly not been in it. Try the tongue, Nipper."

"I've already got my eye on it, thanks," I said.

Tea in Study C, in the Remove passage at St. Frank's, was quite a cheerful meal. The electric light glowed upon a plentiful table, and the fire in the grate blazed and crackled merrily.

"A bit of a change from yesterday," remarked Watson, as he stirred his tea. "By jingo! It's good to be back in the study again. I wonder what the Head's feelings are just now? He hasn't shown himself to-day at all."

"That's not very surprising," I said. "Mr. Martin has been whacked completely—whacked by the Remove! My sons, we ought to feel jolly pleased with ourselves—and we do. Come in!"

A tap had sounded on the door, but nobody entered in response to my invitation. The tap sounded again.

"Come in, you fathead!" I shouted.

The door opened, and a youth, attired in a thick overcoat and a soft hat, entered, smiling cheerfully.

"How goes it, my children?" he exclaimed.

I jumped to my feet.

"Tinker!" I ejaculated. "Well, my hat! This is jolly good! Come in, old son, and make yourself at home."

"That," said Tinker, "is precisely my intention."

He peeled off his overcoat, and tossed his hat on to a bookshelf. This visit on the part of Sexton Blake's famous young assistant was quite a surprise to me; he had sent no intimation of his coming.

"That's better," said Tinker genially. "Tea is ready, I notice. Good! This cold air makes me rather hungry, and I'm just ready for a good blow-out. Five minutes later, and all the grub would have been gone!"

"That's all right," I grinned. "There's plenty more to be got. We shall have to get in a few extra things, anyhow. These two chaps have wolfed practically all the bread——"

"Why, you ass, you've eaten half the loaf yourself!" exclaimed Watson warmly.

"Well, we won't go into details," I chuckled. "Sit down, Tinker, my son, and let's hear all about it. What business has brought you to this remote corner of the world?"

Tinker sat down.

"I happened to be in Bannington," he explained. "The gov'nor sent me down to interview a man, and the said man is away from home—won't be back until to-morrow. So, knowing that you hung out in this district, I ran over to get board and lodging on the cheap."

"Begad! There's nothin' like bein' candid!" murmured Sir Montie.

"He's only joking, you ass," I grinned. "Are you really staying the night, Tinker?"

"Yes, if I obtain permission from your respected Head," replied Tinker. "If not, I shall get a doss in the village somewhere. I noticed one or two nice-looking inns on the way from the station."

"Oh, we'll manage it somehow," I said. "The Head's a beast—although we've tamed him pretty well lately. But I think it'll be all serene if we obtain permission for you from Mr. Wrott."

"Mr. What?" said Tinker.

"Mr. Wrott," grinned Tommy.

"What a delightful name," remarked Tinker. "And who, may I ask, does this cheerful gentleman happen to be?"

"He's our Housemaster," I explained.

"Your Housemaster?" repeated Tinker, staring. "But—but I thought that Mr. Nelson Lee was filling that honourable position?"

"He was, old boy: but he isn't now," said Sir Montie, shaking his head. "It's a frightful shame, but Mr. Lee went away days an' days ago. Mr. Wrott was engaged by the Head, an' he's not such a bad sort; in fact, he's one of the best. You'll see him, I expect."

"I'll take you along and introduce you soon," I chuckled.

Tinker looked at me curiously.

"Why the accompanying grin?" he inquired.

"Oh, nothing," I said. "Get on with your tea, old man. I say, Tommy, you might buzz out to Mother Hake's and get some sardines, and teacakes, and biscuits, and jam-tarts, and doughnuts, and mince-pies, and cream-rolls——"

"Preparing for a banquet?" asked Tinker.

"No—for your tea."

"Great Scott! I don't want a cart-load," grinned Tinker. "In fact, I can make do with what's here."

But Watson hurried off to obtain some

more grub. Montie and I exchanged a wink, unseen by Tinker. That wink was in reference to Mr. Simpson Wrott, the Housemaster of the Ancient House.

Tinker wasn't aware of it—and nobody at St. Frank's was aware of it, except Study C—but Mr. Wrott was no less a person than Mr. Nelson Lee himself. The gov'nor was on the spot—in disguise.

He had been sacked by Mr. Martin, but had returned a few days afterwards, in another character. It was my gentle intention to give Tinker a bit of a surprise before long.

"You look pretty comfortable here, I must say," remarked our guest, as he sampled the tongue. "I expected to find you in a shocking condition. What's all the fuss about a rebellion and a barring-out?"

"It's over," I said.

"There was some trouble, then?"

"Trouble!" I repeated. "My son, we've been in a state of siege for many days, and the end came only yesterday."

"There was a paragraph in a London daily," said Tinker. "And I heard some rumours in Bannington to-day. I thought it was all a yarn—or, at the best, a mere exaggeration of the truth."

"What did you hear?" I asked.

"That the Remove had revolted, and that grim and ghastly battles were being waged between the boys and the Head's hired army," said Tinker. "I heard that people were being tarred and feathered ten times a day, and that there was grave danger of a general strike throughout all public schools—in support of the St. Frank's lot. I heard that the Head was a double-dyed scoundrel, and that the leader of the junior rebels was a treble-dyed young hooligan——"

"That's me," I grinned. "We'll dispense with what you heard, Tinker. I'll tell you the solid facts. The rebellion started ten or twelve days ago, and I was the fellow who urged the Remove to revolt."

"Bad lad!" said Tinker severely. "You're an agitator——"

"Rats!" I said. "The fellows didn't need much urging, I can tell you. You remember the whole school went to London while repairs were going on down here—after that fire?"

"Yes," said Tinker.

"Well, when we got here we found

that Dr. Stafford had gone, and a perfect beast, named Mr. Howard Martin, was the Head. From the very first moment he started playing monkey tricks with us."

"Is that usual?" asked Tinker politely.

"Oh, don't rot!" I exclaimed. "The Head proved himself to be a bully and a tyrant—he got himself hated by everybody, and he seemed to be particularly severe on the Remove. Well, we got to the point when we couldn't stand any more—so the Remove went out in revolt."

"I don't suppose you were to be blamed," observed Tinker. "If I'd been here, I should have done the same, I expect. But how did it end? Weren't you hung, drawn, and quartered for your nerve?"

"We defied the Head, and we held the possession of the west wing—and refused to give in until our terms were met," I went on. "Of course, the Head was as hard as rock, and he did all he could to defeat us. But he couldn't do it, and, finally, General Ord-Clayton himself came down."

"And who is General Ord-Clayton, may I ask?"

"He's the Chairman of the Board of Governors—a fiery, hot-tempered old chap who ought to know better," I explained. "Well, he blustered about, but only succeeded in getting himself captured by the enemy—the Remove. We threatened to tar and feather him unless the Remove terms were granted."

"Phew!" grinned Tinker. "That was a bit steep, wasn't it?"

"We shouldn't have done the tarring, of course," I said. "It was only a threat. But it worked, and our demands were met and the school went back to its normal condition. That happened yesterday, and the Remove has hardly got back into its normal state yet. The fellows are settling down, though."

"You seem to be a pretty warm lot down here," remarked Tinker. "Ah, good! Here's our cheerful friend with the extra supplies of grub."

Tommy Watson entered, and Tinker was soon doing his utmost to show us that his appetite was nearly as big as Fatty Little's.

"So everything's all serene now?" he asked presently.

"I don't know about all serene," I

replied. "The Head's still here, and I suppose he'll be tamed for a bit. But he's bound to break out again—if he stays. It's my opinion, though, that he'll clear out before long. Or, to be more exact, he'll be cleared out."

"By the Governors, you mean?"

"No," I replied grimly; "by my guv'nor."

"But I thought Mr. Lee wasn't here," said Tinker.

"There are many queer things in this world," I said vaguely. "But we'll dispense with the argument for the moment, and, when you've finished stoking up, we'll run along to Mr. Wrott's study. I dare say he'll allow you to sleep in the Ancient House here. He might even let me be with you for the night."

"Anything but that!" said Tinker firmly. "I want to sleep, my son. I'm not anxious to lay awake all night listening to your snores!"

Tinker soon finished his tea, and then I escorted him down the passage to the Housemaster's study—a somewhat long journey. Long in time, I mean—not in distance, for we were continually stopped by other fellows, who insisted upon being introduced to Tinker.

However, we arrived at last, and I tapped upon the door.

"Come in" exclaimed a harsh voice.

I opened the door, and we both entered. Nelson Lee was sitting at his desk. He was a forbidding looking person, and Tinker regarded him somewhat uncertainly. I gave the guv'nor a quick wink, and he understood.

"Well, boys, what do you want?" he asked curtly. "Who is this, Nipper? Why have you brought this stranger here? You know very well that I am busy. Go away! I can't be bothered now!"

"What a genial gentleman!" murmured Tinker.

"We won't keep you long, sir," I said demurely. "This is Tinker—a friend of mine. I was wondering if you would mind him sleeping here to-night—in the Ancient House, I mean."

Mr. Wrott frowned.

"Yes, I do mind," he snapped. "I object strongly. I have no intention of throwing the Ancient House open to tinkers——"

"Tinker is his name, sir," I grinned; "not his profession."

"Oh, I see—I see!" said the guv'nor, keeping up the joke well. "To judge by his appearance, I should imagine that he were a mere travelling tinker—a knife-grinder and saucepan-mender."

"Well, my goodness!" exclaimed Tinker wrathfully.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

I yelled—I simply couldn't help it.

"Nipper — Nipper!" roared the guv'nor. "How dare you? How dare you bring this—this ugly person into my presence, and then roar with foolish laughter? Go away—the pair of you!"

"Look here, sir, I don't see why you should insult me like that!" exclaimed Tinker warmly. "I'm the assistant of Mr. Sexton Blake——"

"Is that so?" sneered "Mr. Wrott." "I don't care if you are the assistant of the King of Timbuctoo! If you had a grain of sense you would realise that there is something peculiar in these present circumstances."

Tinker looked mystified. There was certainly every reason for him to be surprised, for Nelson Lee had spoken the last words in his own voice, and the abrupt change was certainly astonishing.

"Don't you know me, Tinker—don't you know me?" said the guv'nor, with a chuckle.

Tinker still looked puzzled.

"I know that you spoke to me in a very queer way just now, sir," he said, "and I know that your voice seems a bit familiar to me. But I don't think I've ever had the pleasure of meeting you——"

"You dense ass!" I grinned. "And you call yourself a detective!"

"Come, Tinker!" smiled the guv'nor. "Surely you——"

"Well, I'm hanged!" exclaimed Tinker suddenly. "You're Mr. Lee!"

"Hush — hush!" exclaimed Lee quickly. "You needn't say it quite so loudly as that, my boy. I don't want the truth to be known generally just yet."

Tinker grabbed the guv'nor's hand.

"This is great, sir!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. "By George! You seem to get some excitement down here, after all. I'll half-skin Nipper for playing a trick like this on me!"

"I'm afraid you'll find it necessary to half-skin me, too," chuckled Nelson Lee. "I didn't mean what I said about your personal appearance just now, Tinker—it was only my fun. What are you doing down here, anyhow?"

Tinker explained.

"That's the position, sir," he concluded. "If I can stay at St. Frank's for to-night I shall be awfully obliged. But I'm wondering why you are here in this get-up. Are you engaged on a case, sir?"

"Well, to be exact, I am," replied the guv'nor. "I can't go into any details just now, Tinker, but I dare say Nipper will explain a few things. In any case, I can assure you that the excitement is not yet all over—and perhaps you will see the finish of the affair."

"That's good," said Tinker. "If there's going to be some trouble down here, I'll do my bit. I always seem to find trouble, somehow. I suppose you're referring to Mr. Martin?"

"Well, yes," agreed Lee. "But I don't want to talk to you just now, my boys. Don't forget that I am Mr. Wrott, and your prolonged presence here would seem—well, peculiar. To-morrow, no doubt, I shall be myself again."

Tinker and I took our departure a moment or two later, and Tinker was looking very thoughtful.

"I thought you were as dull as ditch-water down here," he remarked, when we had arrived in Study C again. "But I'm blessed if you don't get more excitement than I find in London!"

I chuckled.

"We don't do so badly," I said. "This case the guv'nor's on just now is rather a mysterious business. I don't know much myself. But it's in connection with the Head, and you can take my tip that Mr. Howard Martin will soon receive a double-barrelled shock."

"But what has he done?" asked Tinker.

"I don't know," I replied. "I do know, though, that our mutual friend, Detective-Inspector Lennard, is down here—and a high Scotland Yard official wouldn't come to Bellton for his health."

Tinker whistled.

"Lennard, eh?" he exclaimed. "Then it is something big! I say, your guv'nor is pretty keen, you know; he doesn't let much grass grow under his feet. I'm glad I came along, now—jolly glad."

CHAPTER II

HANDFORTH'S LATEST.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH brought his fist down on the study table with a crash which set the cups rattling, and caused a plate to jerk off the edge and splinter to pieces on the floor.

"Yaroo!" howled McClure, jumping up hurriedly.

His sudden action tipped the table completely, and Handforth's cup of tea descended into his lap with remarkable precision.

"Ow-yow!" yelled Handforth. "I'm scalded! Ow! You—you——"

"I'm scalded, too!" hooted McClure. "You careless ass——"

"You clumsy dummy!"

"You fatheaded idiot!"

"You blithering elephant!"

"You awful rotter——"

"Go it!" grinned Church. "I think you're winning, Handy."

"You—you cackling idiot!" roared Handforth. "All you can do is to sit there and grin at us! Look at my trousers! I'm scalded!"

"Look at my waistcoat!" bellowed McClure. "It's absolutely ruined! Why the dickens can't you behave like a human being?"

"Why, you—you prize dummy!" shouted Handforth. "What about you? What do you mean by jumping up like that, and tipping my cup of tea over?"

McClure snorted.

"It was your fault!" he replied warmly.

"My fault!"

"Yes, it was!"

"You silly josser——"

"Didn't you bang your fist on the table?" demanded McClure fiercely. "Didn't you upset the teapot? The hot tea poured all down my leg—and I couldn't help jumping up! If you're scalded, I'm jolly glad!"

Handforth breathed hard.

"Well there's no sense in making a fuss," he growled. "Pick that bread and butter up, Church, and don't grin like a Cheshire cat!"

Handforth, as a matter of fact, realised that the catastrophe was his own doing. He wouldn't admit it openly,

but he decided that it would be wise to say as little as possible.

Upsets in Study D were nothing unusual. It was generally known that crockery was doomed if it went to the apartment occupied by Handforth, Church and McClure. They usually smashed one plate or cup per day, on the average.

Handforth, of course, was the cause of it. When he really got going, crockery was a mere trifle. And he generally "got going" once every day, without fail. Church and McClure were ready to testify this.

"Blessed if I can see what caused the trouble," remarked Church, when order was partially restored. "Have you got a grudge against the table, Handy? What was the idea of hammering it like that?"

"I've got an idea, you ass," said Handforth.

"And you tried to knock it into the table?"

"You fathead!" snapped Handforth. "I was simply about to emphasise the fact that we ought to do something. This idea of mine is absolutely the finest thing you've ever heard of——"

"Something like the last I suppose?" grunted McClure. "That one about buying some notepaper——"

"Oh, don't rake up old things like that!" interrupted Handforth tartly. "You fellows seem to forget that when I get an idea I want to bring it to materialisation in the shortest amount of time possible."

"You'd better bring it over here," said Church.

"Bring what?"

"That idea of yours."

"But why should I bring it——"

"There's a wastepaper basket in this corner," exclaimed Church blandly.

Handforth glared.

"You dotty fathead!" he said wittingly. "I suppose you call that funny? My ideas are sound—as sound as——"

"A cracked bell!" put in McClure tartly.

"Look here!" roared Handforth. "If you don't want to hear this idea, say so! I'm not going to let you into the know if you don't want it. Just say the word, and I won't talk on the subject again. Just say the word!"

"The word!" exclaimed McClure promptly.

"Why, you—you—you——"

Handforth paused, and bestowed a glare upon his chums which was calculated to freeze them on the spot. But, somehow, they did not look at all frozen. They were both grinning.

"Now we can get on with tea again," remarked Church carelessly. "I don't suppose that bread-and-butter will be much good after being used to clean the floor. And there's not much tea left, either."

Handforth rolled up his sleeves deliberately.

"Listen to me, you chaps," he exclaimed. "I want to ask one thing—just one thing. Are you going to listen to my idea, or not? Just say the word—a plain 'yes' or 'no'—It's all I want."

"But I thought we'd already done that," said McClure mildly.

"You won't listen?"

"Well, you gave us our choice, and we'd rather not—Yaroooh!"

Biff!

"That's for you!" roared Handforth, pushing his fist into McClure's face. "And this is for you, you grinning—Ow-you-ow!"

Handforth's left, swinging round, had been intended for Church's nose. But Church dodged in time, and Hand's fist crashed upon the back of the chair—with serious results to his knuckles.

"That serves you right!" exclaimed Church tartly. "You ask us if we want to hear your beastly idea, and because we say we don't you try to lash out. Why can't you act like a reasonable human being?"

"Because he isn't one!" said McClure holding his chin.

"If I have any more of your rot, I'll chuck the pair of you outside," exclaimed Handforth, breathing hard. "I won't ask you this time—I'll order you!"

Handforth stood up majestically.

"You call yourselves my chums, and yet you turn away from me when I want your support," he said, with withering contempt. "Do you call that pally? Do you call that sporting?"

"But you gave us our choice!" howled Church.

"Because I thought you would listen!" admitted Handforth. "Well, you've got to listen—see? This wheeze of mine is too good to be chucked away. Only yesterday the rebellion came to an end—and we won."

"Go hon!"

"We won!" repeated Handforth. "In fact, we won easily, and the Head is now as harmless as a dead kitten. But he's a cad and a rotter, and I'm blessed if I can see why we should stand him."

"We can stand him now, you ass—his sting's been drawn," said Church. "Everything will go on as usual with us—just as it did when Dr. Stafford was Head——"

Handforth banged the table again.

"That's just it!" he shouted.

"Eh?"

"That's just the point?" exclaimed Edward Oswald.

"What's the point?"

"Dr. Stafford," said Handforth. "Don't you see?"

"No, I'm blessed if I do."

"Everything will go on in future just as it did when Dr. Stafford was Head," said Handforth. "That's what I mean. Why should we stand it? Why, I ask you, should we allow such a position?"

"You're dotty!" said McClure, staring. "We've been rebelling for nearly a fortnight, we've had all sorts of fights, and we've won hands down—and now you say that we oughtn't to stand it!"

"He's mad!" remarked Church.

Handforth bestowed a pitying smile upon his chums.

"You're quite right," he said. "It's absolutely useless to tell a stunning idea to two blocks of wood. It's a sheer waste of breath. Haven't you got any sense in your heads at all?"

"You don't explain——"

"I've been explaining all the time," roared Handforth. "I ask you—why should we stand the present situation? Why shouldn't we make a further demand—and threaten to go out in revolt again if that demand is refused?"

"Which demand?" asked Church blankly.

"This," said Handforth bending forward. "We'll get up a written demand—signed by the whole Form. We

shall simply say that we require Mr. Martin to clear out, and Dr. Stafford to come back to his old post. Why should we put up with Martin any longer? We want Dr. Stafford!"

Church grinned.

"And you've been all this time getting to the point!" he remarked. "What a lucid chap you are, Handy. Of course we want Dr. Stafford back—nobody denies that. But it can't be done."

"Besides," added McClure, "if Martin is compelled to do things correctly, we can't very well grumble at him. But if he starts any of his bunkum again—well, then we can get busy."

Handforth tapped the table impatiently.

"That's rot," he said. "There's no reason why we should put up with Martin at all. It's a wonder to me how the chap has got the nerve to stick on at all. If he'd had any sense of decency, he would have resigned before now. And my idea is to compel him to resign."

"Compel him?"

"Exactly," said Handforth. "Our demands were granted before—because there was no other way out of it. We've shown our power, and the Governors are afraid of us now. We've only got to threaten to revolt if Dr. Stafford isn't reinstated, and the Governors will be shivering in their shoes. See? The threat will be enough. As soon as we make it, Dr. Stafford will be brought back."

Church and McClure gazed at one another wonderingly. They were trying to find a solution to the puzzle. Where did Handforth get these wild and extraordinary ideas? How was it he struck them?

"I don't like to be a damper, but I believe in speaking my mind," said McClure. "Do you want me to give you my true opinion of that wheeze?"

"Yes!"

"Well I think it's rotten," said McClure bluntly.

"Hear, hear!" echoed Church.

"Oh, do you?" exclaimed Handforth grimly. "You think it's rotten?"

"Yes."

"All right—I've finished with you," said Handforth. "I don't want to hear another word on the subject. I get a

terrific idea, and all you can do is to call it rotten. I thought you had more regard for Dr. Stafford."

"Oh, you hopeless idiot?" exclaimed McClure, with a sigh. "We'd like nothing better than to have Dr. Stafford back again. But we can't threaten to go in revolt once more, Handy. It—it wouldn't be the thing. Besides, if Martin goes on all right, we sha'n't have any reason to demand it."

But Handforth was obstinate.

"We want Dr. Stafford," he said, "and if you won't support the wheeze, I'll find some fellows who will. I'm jolly sure that every study I go to will embrace the idea with open arms."

"Good," said Church. "Go and try."

"Yes, I will!" snapped Handforth. "You'll see, you faithless bounders."

He wrenched open the door, and strode out. The first study he visited was that occupied by Reginald Pitt, Jack Grey, and Timothy Tucker—the latter being a comparatively new boy in the Remove.

"Wait a minute," murmured Church. "It'll soon come!"

They waited. Handforth's somewhat unmusical voice was heard. A few shouts of laughter followed, Handforth's voice rose to a roar, and then there was a scuffle.

The next second Edward Oswald emerged from Study E "on his neck." He slithered across the floor, sat down with a bump, and the study door closed.

"My—my goodness!" gasped Handforth dazedly.

"Good!" said Church. "That's the way to do it, Handy. You said you'd find supporters, didn't you?"

"You silly fatheads——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You cackling lunatics——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Church and McClure retired into Study D, yelling. And Handforth picked himself up, dusted himself down, and grimly looked about him. He was by no means discouraged. Being hurled out of one study was a mere trifle.

He stalked away to Study M, occupied by Somerton, De Valerie and Hart. He strode in without knocking, and found the three juniors about to commence prep.

"I've got an idea——" began Handforth.

"Boil it!" said Hart promptly.

"You ass——"

"Take it away and bury it!" advised De Valerie.

"I've got an idea!" roared Handforth. "I want you chaps to support me in it. If you'll only listen for a few minutes——"

"Sorry," said Somerton. "We're just about to start prep., old chap. If we listen to your idea, we shall be still starting prep. by supper-time. And we don't want to have a row with Mr. Crowell in the morning."

"But the idea——"

"Yes, we know," said Hart, nodding. "You needn't tell us, Handy. We know exactly what it is."

"Eh?" said Handforth. "How do you know?"

"Why, they're all the same—your brain waves," explained Hart. "It's simply the finest idea under the sun—it's the greatest wheeze that ever smote a master brain. And it's worth—well, it's worth at least a bad ha'penny!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you're going to be funny, I'll clear out!" said Handforth. "I'm serious, don't forget——"

"Impossible!" said Hart. "How can you be serious, Handy, when you're a born comedian?"

"I'm serious?" bawled Handforth. "This idea is concerning Dr. Stafford. The Remove has got to get busy again. Justice must be done. And justice won't be done until Dr. Stafford fills his old position once again."

"Well, that's right enough," agreed Hart. "We're not going to deny that statement, Handy. We shall all be jolly pleased to see Dr. Stafford again. He's the finest Headmaster any school could have. But I don't quite see how we can get him back at St. Frank's again."

"You don't see it?" said Handforth. "That's because you're too dull—you're too dense!"

"Politeness is a virtue!" observed the Duke of Somerton mildly. "It's one of the qualities I've always admired in you, old chap. When you speak to other fellows, you are always so delightfully charming."

The sarcasm was not lost on Handforth.

"I'm a fellow of business—I haven't got time to use fancy words," he said. "And I repeat—you're dense. You can't see how it's possible to get Dr. Stafford back at St. Frank's?"

"Our brain power is too weak for such an effort," confessed De Valerie sadly.

"Well, I'll tell you," said Handforth. "All we've got to do is to send a demand to the Chairman of the Governors—General Ord-Clayton. The demand must be signed by everybody in the Remove. And unless the General agrees to obey—well, we should use force."

"The demand, I suppose, is that Dr. Stafford shall be reinstated?"

"Exactly," said Handforth.

"And what's the force we shall use?"

"Another rebellion—another barring-out," said Handforth. "Don't you see? We've done it once, and we can do it again. We've shown our power now, and the Governors won't dare refuse——"

"It's hopeless, old man," said Hart. "We had a reason for rebelling before; we rebelled against tyranny. But if the Head conducts the school in a decent way, we can't make fancy demands of that sort. We should all like Dr. Stafford to come back, but I daresay we shall exist without him. Your idea, Handy, is about as good as I expected it would be. In other words, it's rotten."

"And there's a draught," said De Valerie. "You don't mind closing the door, do you? After you've passed outside, of course."

"Look here——"

"Hand up the poker, Gussy," said De Valerie carelessly.

"Certainly," grinned Augustus Hart.

"You silly asses——"

"Thanks!" said De Valerie, brandishing the poker. "Now, Somerton, if you'll hold his arms, and if Gussy will hold his feet——"

But Handforth had fled.

The occupants of Study M looked rather businesslike, and Edward Oswald came to the conclusion that he would be safer in the passage. He was usually quite ready to battle with anybody, but a poker was an awkward article to argue with.

For about fifteen minutes he continued his task. And during that short space of

time it was really remarkable how Handforth suffered. A thick ear did not discourage him, and a swollen nose seemed to make him more determined. A black eye certainly made him pause to think, and when he was hurled bodily forth from two studies in succession he came to the conclusion that the Removites were not prepared to give him any reasonable measure of support.

Great ideas were evidently not favoured in the Remove!

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CHAPTER III.

THE HEADMASTER'S SECRET.

TINKER looked round with approval. "Good!" he exclaimed. "In fact, tophole!"

"Not so bad, is it?" I remarked. "Jolly decent of Mr. Wrott to let you have this bedroom for to-night, and decent of him to let me keep you company, too. We can have a good old jaw before we go to sleep."

Tinker nodded.

"Yes, rather," he agreed. "We've got plenty to talk about."

The pair of us were standing in a cosy little bedroom in the Ancient House. It was situated not very far from the Remove dormitory, and was, in fact, in the same corridor.

Nelson Lee had very kindly allowed Tinker to have the use of the bedroom, and when I suggested that I should sleep in the room, too, the guv'nor raised no objection. It was bedtime now, and the Remove had already retired.

Tinker glanced at his watch, and grinned.

"What an unearthly hour!" he remarked. "I haven't been to bed as early as this for months. Half-past nine! Ye gods and little fishes! London's only just beginning to wake up!"

"We needn't go to sleep just yet," I said. "If we douse the glim by half-past ten, we shall be all right. I want you to tell me about the cases you've been engaged on recently."

For the better part of an hour we sat in bed, talking about detective work and criminal investigation in general. Then, when we were both beginning to yawn,

the light was extinguished, and we went to sleep.

It only seemed a few minutes to me, and then I was awake again. I don't know what caused me to awaken, but I suddenly found myself staring in the darkness. And the school clock boomed out a single stroke.

"Now, is that one o'clock, or only a half-hour?" I wondered.

The matter was soon settled for I had my luminous watch under the pillow, and I found that the time was actually one o'clock. I had therefore been sleeping for a considerable length of time.

Everything was quiet and still, for scarcely a breath of wind stirred. And as I lay in bed there, I fancied I heard a slight crunch of gravel in the Triangle. I listened intently, and then I knew that I was not mistaken.

I slipped out of bed, wondering. Who could be outside at this hour?

"Hallo! What's wrong?" came a whisper from Tinker.

"Who told you to wako up?" I breathed.

"Nobody," said Tinker. "But you woke me."

"I did?"

"Yes; getting out of bed, you know," said Tinker. "It doesn't take much to arouse me, you know. The springs creaked a bit. What's the time?"

"One o'clock," I replied. "Look here, I——"

"You're not going to get up just yet, I suppose?" asked Tinker, with sarcasm.

"I heard somebody in the Triangle just now," I said, in a whisper. "I don't suppose it means anything, but you never know. And, somehow, I've got a feeling that there's excitement in the air. You remember what the guv'nor said? Anyhow, I mean to have a squint outside."

While speaking, I gently raised the lower sash of the window. It went noiselessly, and a moment later my head was outside in the cold night air.

At first I could see nothing and hear nothing. Then I became aware of two dim figures, moving along near the wall. There was something stealthy about their movements, and I watched wonderingly.

"Yes, this way, Robert," came a whisper. "Go carefully, for there are many ears—and some of them may be alert."

I started.

The voice was that of Mr. Howard Martin!

What was Mr. Martin doing in the Triangle? And who was Robert? There was something strange about the affair.

"If you follow me closely, we shall arrive at the door within a minute," came the Head's voice again. "But be very cautious. Under no circumstances must anybody know that you are here. Do you understand?"

"Of course—of course!" said the other man. "You are too nervous, Martin."

The figures disappeared round a corner of the house, and I knew at once that they were making for the Head's private doorway. They had come round near the wall in order to avoid attention—and had only succeeded in awakening Tinker and me. And, now that we were awake, we were determined not to go to sleep again in a hurry. There was something afoot.

"Did you hear?" I whispered, turning.

"No," said Tinker, from his bed. "What's in the wind?"

"I don't know," I replied; "but just now the Head crept along this wall with a man he called Robert. They've gone into the private doorway, I believe."

"Crept along, did you say?"

"Yes."

"But why?" said Tinker. "What's the idea of creeping? It's the Head-master's own doorway, isn't it? Why should they creep towards it? Isn't the Head the master of his own part of the building?"

"That's just it," I said. "That's just the mysterious point. Why should Mr. Martin bring a visitor here at one o'clock in the morning, and take him into the house as though he were a burglar?"

"Don't ask me," said Tinker. "I'm not a magician."

"But you agree that it's rummy?"

"I do. It's really suspicious."

"That's just what I think," I said. "There must be something about that man that the Head wants to keep quiet. You'd think he'd be pretty free at this hour, and yet he was extra cautious."

"A mistake," commented Tinker firmly. "That's just where Mr. Martin made a bloomer. Over cautiousness is worse than none at all, because, if any-

body else happens to spot it, there's suspicion aroused."

"Exactly," I breathed. "If the Head had brought the chap boldly across the Triangle, I should have gone back to bed without thinking a thing. As it is, I mean to investigate."

"Oh, rot!" said Tinker. "How can you investigate? You're not suggesting that you should go and listen at the Head's door? It's not worth the candle, because it's ten chances to one that you won't hear anything. And there's always the possibility of being surprised."

"No; I wasn't thinking about listening at the door," I said.

"The window, then?"

"No."

"Well, there's nowhere else," said Tinker, yawning. "Were you thinking about listening at all?"

"Yes, of course," I said. "It'll be easy——"

"I'm blessed if I can see it," interrupted Tinker. "You don't want the door, and you scorn the window. If you don't buck up and explain, I'll get out of bed and push your face into the cold water jug."

I went over and sat on Tinker's bed.

"Listen!" I said intently. "Some time ago I made a bit of a discovery. There's an old stairway leading from the tower right down to the basement. It must have been in existence for hundreds of years, and there are only a few fellows who know about it. The masters don't know anything."

"A secret tunnel, do you mean?"

"Yes," I replied. "It's only narrow, and it's musty. But the chief point is that once we're in there we're safe from being spotted."

"This is all very interesting, and you've made me curious to examine that stairway," said Tinker. "But how is it connected with your delightful Head-master and his mysterious companion?"

"It's connected this way," I answered. "This stairway, Tinker, has got several secret doors at intervals, leading out into different rooms. Well, one door is in the Head's study, and there's a little spy-hole which can be opened unseen from the other side. And every word that's spoken in the room can be heard in the tunnel."

Tinker sat up.

"Now you're talking!" he exclaimed briskly. "Fine, Nipper! Terrific! I didn't think we'd have any excitement down here; but it seems to me that there's quite a good chance of making things hum. You don't think we shall be prying, or anything, if we listen——"

"Rather not!" I exclaimed. "The Head's a rotter, and I believe he's a crook, too. I sha'n't feel any compunction in listening to his conversation with that other man. We might get on the track of something important."

Tinker slipped out of bed.

"I'm game for anything you like," he said. "Lead the way, old son, and I'll follow. Anything mysterious is just in my line."

It didn't take us long to slip our clothes on; and then we crept from the bedroom and made our way along the dormitory passage. Tinker was eager for anything, and I felt extremely glad that he had arrived on the scene. Between the pair of us, we stood a chance of making discoveries.

"Here we are!" I breathed.

I flashed the light from a small electric torch upon a portion of the panelling in the wall. Tinker examined the spot with interest.

"Open, sesame!" he murmured softly.

"No; it won't open of its own accord," I chuckled. "The proper entrance is upstairs, in the tower; but there's a doorway here, if my memory's right. Anyhow, we'll have a try."

I bent down, and, after one or two unsuccessful attempts, I touched the little portion of woodwork which operated the catch. The panel did not spring back mysteriously, or anything of that sort, but simply opened about an inch.

"Good!" I breathed. "Follow me, old man."

I pushed the panel open wide, and I did not feel very pleased when it creaked audibly. However, it was not likely that anybody would hear, and Tinker and I passed into the narrow, stuffy stairway.

I closed the panel securely, and then flashed my torch on again. We were standing in an extremely restricted passage, with panelling on one side and stonework on the other. Overhead sloped more stonework, and at our feet a steep stairway yawned. Other stairs led upwards in the rear.

"We'll go down," I whispered. "And, for goodness' sake, move quietly. If we're heard there'll be the dickens to pay. And if you want to speak to me, put your mouth close to my ear and just breathe."

"Don't you worry," said Tinker. "I'm not one of those school kids; I'm experienced in this sort of thing."

We proceeded downstairs slowly, and with extreme caution. It was quite possible that our efforts would bear no fruit. But the element of uncertainty in the adventure only added to its interest.

After a while we came to a place where the stairway ended abruptly, and a short tunnel lay before us. I took hold of Tinker, and put my mouth close against his ear.

"The Head's study is just at the end of this little stretch," I murmured. "So I'm going to put the light out in a tick. We can't take any chances. You grab my coat and follow. And stop when I do."

"Right, O chief!" whispered Tinker. "Lead on!"

After progressing for a few yards, I put out the torch, and walked on at a much slower pace. It soon became evident that it was not necessary to have the light to guide us.

For low voices came to our ears. And within a few moments I felt the little projections which indicated the secret door. Both Tinker and I came to a halt, and stood there as silently as shadows.

With my fingers I felt about cautiously, and presently I found the little object I had been searching for. I pushed it back gently, and almost at once a tiny shaft of light shot through into the blackness. I could see Tinker's face quite distinctly as he bent close to me.

"You have a look first," he said.

But he only spoke with his mouth, and uttered no sound.

I applied my eye to a little spyhole, and found myself looking directly into Mr. Howard Martin's study. The Head himself was standing before his desk, and a stranger stood on the hearthrug.

I could hardly repress an exclamation of surprise.

For the stranger was an extraordinary looking individual, and I realised why the Head had been so cautious in the Triangle. It would have certainly been

an unwise proceeding to allow himself to be surprised with this man as a companion.

For the fellow was practically attired in rags. His hair was long and unclipped, and it was evident that he had not visited a barber for many weeks. His beard and moustache had a ragged appearance.

I moved away, and Tinker looked. The two men within the study were silent at the moment. Neither of them appeared to be very conversational. The Head was looking into some books, and the other man was greedily devouring some sandwiches.

"Jolly queer," breathed Tinker, into my ear.

"What do you make of it?" I breathed back.

"Nothing," murmured Tinker. "But it looks promising."

And then the Head's voice came to our ears.

"Yes, Robert; that's right," he said, in a low voice. "If we reach Liverpool by to-morrow, we shall be able to get on that boat without difficulty. And within a fortnight we shall be in South America."

"I don't quite see it," said Robert. "It's not so easy to get out of England, Martin. Besides, it wouldn't be safe——"

"Don't talk nonsense, man," snapped the Head. "All you can do is to growl and grumble at everything I suggest. I know the captain of this ship personally. It's only a small cargo steamer, and I've been watching its movements in the papers for a week or two. She's in Liverpool at present, and we simply must get there by to-morrow. That means that we leave St. Frank's to-night."

"But there are no trains——"

"Trains! Who is talking of trains?" demanded Mr. Martin. "I have made every preparation, Robert; in fact, I have been preparing for over a week. These infernal boys here suspect nothing—I have deluded all. The recent rebellion was not entirely unfavourable. In many ways I was glad of it. And now the school is normal, it is time for us to go."

"But we cannot leave in the middle of the night," protested the other.

"Yes, we can," said the Head. "In

fact, it is the only way in which we can leave. I have a small two-seater motor-car in readiness. It is a good car, and will take us North without trouble. Petrol is aboard in plenty, and there will be no need for delays."

"I don't like it," said the other man. "I tell you candidly, Martin, I don't like it. Why should we flee the country in this way——"

"Why—why?" snapped the Head. "You must be mad, man, to ask me why! You are wanted by the police—wanted badly. You escaped from prison over a fortnight ago. If you are retaken——"

"Don't speak so loudly!" muttered Robert.

"There is nobody to hear," said Martin. "The school is asleep—sound asleep. We are absolutely alone here."

I couldn't help smiling slightly. What would the Head have said if he could have known the actual facts? Both Tinker and I were tense and alert; we were learning a few details which opened our eyes.

"It is better to be careful," said Robert uneasily.

"You needn't fear," said the Head. "Good gracious! You are as nervous as a kitten——"

"You would be nervous if you had been through what I have been through," said the other fiercely. "You don't realise what it means to hide from all decent men, Martin! You don't know what it means to be hounded——"

"Oh, be quiet!" interjected the Headmaster testily. "You are continually harping on that string, confound you! I have done everything possible, Robert. You came to me that night, upsetting everything——"

"Who should I have come to?" demanded Robert, his voice quivering as he spoke. "I came to you, Martin, because you are the man who should now be in my shoes. I served two years of that living death—for the crime you committed! And when I came here to seek shelter, you turned me away! If I had not insisted, you would have——"

"Stop—stop, you fool!" snarled Mr. Martin. "I have heard that story a hundred times! What is the use of repeating it again and again? Supposing you did serve two years for the crime I

committed? What then? Does it do any good to throw it repeatedly in my face? I was lucky—I escaped. You were unlucky—you were fool enough to get arrested!"

"Fool enough!" exclaimed Robert hotly. "How could I avoid it, when you faked up the evidence to point in my direction? Good heavens! When I think of your filthy, dastardly conduct, I wonder how it is I came here to breathe the same atmosphere as you! I am only doing it because I want my freedom—the freedom which belongs to me!"

The Head muttered an oath.

"Will you never cease your arguments?" he demanded. "We have no time to talk in this way now, you madman. We must get away while we have the chance. I have nothing to fear; but I want to help you."

"Oh, yes," said Robert bitterly. "You will help me by helping yourself—to somebody else's money! You were a thief two years ago, Martin, and you are a thief still! How you managed to get this post at St. Frank's amazes me."

"It was not difficult to fake the credentials," exclaimed the Head contemptuously. "But we are talking at random again. Why this discussion of unimportant details, Robert? We have no time to spare. I am prepared to give up everything so that you shall get out of the country. You are my brother, and I cannot leave you in the lurch."

The other man gave a short laugh.

"You care as much for me as you care for the coals in this scuttle," he exclaimed. "Your words don't deceive me, Martin. You wish to get out of the country because you are contemplating a villainous robbery. And I don't agree with it—I don't like it at all!"

The Head swore again.

"Your likes and dislikes are nothing to me," he snapped. "You will do as I say, Robert—or go back to prison! You can take your infernal choice. Now be quiet; I am tired of your growlings!"

The two men were silent for a time, and Tinker and I had an opportunity of glancing at one another. Those glances were full of tense excitement and wonder. We hardly knew what to think.

But one thing was certain—we had hit upon a very pretty plot!

CHAPTER IV.

THE NATURE OF THE BEAST.

A THIEF!

Mr. Howard Martin, the Headmaster of St. Frank's, was a thief!

And the man with him was his own brother. Much that had been mystifying to me previously now became clear. The Head, evidently, had been concealing his brother somewhere in the district—probably in the ruins of Bellton Abbey.

Robert was an escaped convict, fleeing from justice. But, according to all that Tinker and I had heard, Robert was quite innocent—Martin himself was the guilty party.

And there could be no doubt on this point.

For the Head had admitted that fact in my hearing. He had faked up evidence in order to incriminate his innocent brother. And that brother, having escaped from prison, had come to St. Frank's for shelter.

He had obtained it grudgingly, his villainous brother not being eager and willing to shelter the man he had so foully wronged. We were gaining a keener insight into Mr. Howard Martin's character. We had always known him to be a bully and a cad, but the fellows had never suspected him of being a criminal.

And now I understood why Nelson Lee had held his hand.

I suspected that the gov'nor knew a good deal about the case, and he had refrained from acting because he did not wish to have the innocent Robert recaptured. The gov'nor's object was to get Martin himself—and get him so securely that his unfortunate brother would be granted his freedom.

It was a grim story altogether.

And now, it seemed, the Head meant to make a bid for liberty—he was keen upon going this very night—without waiting for another dawn to come. Robert, on the other hand, was not agreeable.

I felt very thankful that Tinker and I had entered the secret passage. We had been enabled to learn much—and our information, no doubt, would be of considerable help to Nelson Lee.

I was about to make a suggestion to Tinker, when Martin spoke again.

"It amazes me why you should

hesitate, Robert," he said. "You don't seem to realise what an excellent chance it is. We shall both be able to get away from England, and we shall be set up quite comfortably."

"I don't want it," said the other man. "All I desire is to remain here, in my own country—with my name and my honour cleared."

"That's impossible," said Martin. "I know well enough that you are too good-hearted to give me away, Robert. Moreover, you daren't!"

"I daren't?"

"Of course not!" sneered Martin. "In fact, you couldn't do so. Your statement would never be believed, for there is no suspicion against me. You are the guilty party, in the eyes of the law, and, if you are recaptured, you will be clapped in prison again—with three or four years added to your sentence!"

"You infernal hound——"

"Don't become violent—remember where you are," interrupted Martin. "I only brought you here because it will be easier for us to leave together. Moreover, I want your help. This safe contains a very large sum of money—many thousands of pounds, in fact. General Ord-Clayton trusts me implicitly, and I have been able to twist him round my little finger. I won't go into details, but I can tell you that I have got here seven thousand pounds in cash, and from fifteen to twenty thousand pounds in east-iron securities—securities that can be disposed of without the slightest difficulty—once we are in South America."

Robert uttered an exclamation.

"Look here, Martin, I don't like it," he said decidedly. "It isn't right—it isn't honest——"

"Honest?" snapped Martin. "Do you think I care about that? We can't be troubled with any false scruples, you fool. You and I, Robert and Martin Horley, must leave this country at the earliest possible moment. There is a chance for us to get out at once—by a ship which goes to-morrow. We are going—do you understand? And we are going with our hands as full as we can fill them."

"With your hands, you mean," said Robert Horley. "I will touch nothing of your shameful money, Martin—not a penny. What is more, I will take care of myself—I will not consent to go with you."

"Upon my soul!" snarled Martin Horley. "You are enough to make me curse at you, Robert! I will say as little as possible, though. You will help me to clear this stuff——"

"I will not!" exclaimed Robert. "In fact, I have half a mind to shout for help—so that you shall be prevented from doing this vile thing. I don't care for my own liberty. I would prefer to go to prison, and serve my time, than to run away with you—leaving my name stinking!"

"If you dared to raise your voice, I would kill you!" said Martin fiercely. "Yes, Robert, I would kill you! Treachery from you would be the last straw. You ungrateful hound, you are worthless!"

Robert caught his breath in.

"You talk of treachery!" he said fiercely. "You dare to talk of treachery! And it was you who sent me to prison for your own crime! You call me ungrateful, when I held my tongue——"

"I am tired of this!" snarled Martin. "Keep silent, Robert. We are leaving St. Frank's within half an hour. Help me to prepare. Pull yourself together, man, and don't be such a fool!"

Robert did not reply, and Martin moved over to the safe, and commenced turning it out.

Tinker nudged me.

I looked up from the little spy-hole, and found Tinker's mouth near my ear.

"What shall we do?" he breathed.

"I don't know," I replied, speaking in the same way. "But it seems to me that it's up to us to act in some way. Perhaps I'd better sneak up, and give the gov'nor a word of warning."

Tinker nodded.

"That's what I was thinking," he said. "Mr. Lee ought to know. You buzz off, and I'll keep watch here. I'll make a mental note of everything that passes, so you won't miss anything."

"Good!" I said promptly. "I'll go."

Having come to a decision, I lost no time.

Creeping up the passage, I was soon mounting the steep stairs. At last I arrived in the upper corridor, and I was breathing rather hard, when I turned towards Nelson Lee's bedroom.

My thoughts were numerous.

Mr. Howard Martin—or, to give him his real name, Mr. Martin Horley—was contemplating a big robbery! He had

duped General Ord-Clayton right and left, and was now about to decamp with everything he could lay hands upon.

And this was the man who had been appointed Headmaster of St. Frank's!

I was simply astounded.

The events of the night were so extraordinary that I could hardly convince myself that I was not suffering from a particularly violent variety of nightmare. But it was real enough—it was stern reality.

I realised that Tinker and I would be the means, probably, of preventing a big robbery. Nelson Lee, sleeping peacefully in bed, was unaware of the drama which was being enacted in the Head's study.

Without a sound I opened Nelson Lee's bedroom door, and walked into the dark apartment.

"Guv'nor!" I whispered.

Silence.

"Guv'nor!" I repeated. "Wake up!"

Still there was no response. It was unusual for Nelson Lee to sleep so soundly. He was always a light sleeper, and the slightest whisper could awaken him, as a rule. I took out my torch, and switched it on.

"Come on, sir!" I urged. "I've got something to tell— Well, my hat! I've been talking to the thin air!"

Nelson Lee's bed was empty.

There was nobody in the room. The guv'nor, then, was prowling about somewhere on his own. I realised that there was more happening that night than I had first believed.

Nelson Lee, probably, was waiting somewhere for Mr. Martin—waiting for the rascally Head to make a move. And the Head was within the house all the time, preparing to flee the country.

Under the circumstances, I decided to get back to Tinker.

There would be no sense in my venturing out in the hope of finding Nelson Lee. He might be miles away.

And, with Tinker, I stood a chance of doing something.

So, leaving the bedroom, I hurried along the passage to the secret entrance to the stairway.

Within a couple of minutes I was inside, making my way down the steep stone steps. I reached the level stretch after a while, and walked cautiously along—my torch being extinguished.

I was guided by the spot of light which came from the spy-hole. But, somehow, the light seemed to be stronger. The secret passage was quite bright, in comparison to the surrounding blackness.

I arrived at the spot—and received a shock.

Tinker was not there!

Furthermore, the panel leading into the Head's study was slightly ajar! Only one explanation was possible. Tinker had passed through the doorway into the study.

This indicated that the Head and his brother had cleared off—and Tinker had followed, on their trail.

I had my hand on the door, ready to open it, when I was brought up with a jerk. The Head's voice came to my ears!

"Tie him up securely, Robert," it panted. "Good heavens! To think that the young spy was there—watching us all the time. It is high time we left! After this, we dare not remain another minute!"

I applied my eye to the hole, my heart beating rapidly.

Tinker was lying on the couch—his face completely muffled with a cushion. He was secured by the cords from the window curtains. Tinker's feet were also bound. He was helpless.

I tried to reconstruct what had happened.

Tinker had entered the library. Why? What on earth had impelled him to do such a mad thing? For he had simply walked into the hands of the enemy.

It was an astounding shock for me—but, as it happened, I was destined to learn the truth almost at once.

"It was your fault, you fool," Martin went on. "If you had not acted the madman, Robert, this boy would not have interfered. But it is better that he did, perhaps. We can now be sure of getting away in safety."

"The lad saved my life," said Robert Horley fiercely. "You dangerous scoundrel! I didn't think you were so utterly bad, Martin. You had that knife within an inch of my throat when the boy burst in!"

Martin laughed harshly.

"It was only bluff," he snapped. "Do you think I meant it?"

"I know you meant it," said Robert.

quietly. "You were too enraged to know what you were doing."

"Nonsense," said Martin. "I had no intention of harming you—you cowardly fool. But when you talk in that way I certainly lose my temper. Do you realise that we are in a dangerous corner? Do you realise that we must leave at once, if we are to retain our liberty?"

Robert Horley nodded.

"We must leave, certainly," he agreed. "But I will leave on one condition only, Martin—on one condition."

"And what is that?"

"You are to take no stolen money," said Robert. "I will not come with you if you dare to touch a penny that is not yours. You may be a thief, Robert, but I am not—and I will not associate myself with you. Go, if you want to—go, and take your dirty spoils. I will not set the police on your track. But I will not come with you."

"By Heaven, you will!" snarled Martin. "Do you think I will leave you behind—to be captured and arrested? Do you think I will allow you to set the law on me? You may say that you will let me go—but I do not believe you. I shall be satisfied if you are with me—and you are coming."

"I will come if you leave the money behind—not otherwise."

The Head simply shook with rage.

"This boy interfered when I lost my temper five minutes ago—but there will be nobody to aid you if I lose my temper again," he exclaimed savagely. "I will give you one chance, Robert. Will you come with me—now?"

"Only if you——"

"Will you come unconditionally?"

"No!" said Robert firmly. "I am an honest man—I have always been an honest man—and I will not become a criminal at your bidding! I would go back to the prison—steady, man—steady! Put that paper-knife down——"

"I will not!" snarled Martin. "If you do not agree—now then! Don't you dare to interfere—all right, you fool! We shall see! You will have only yourself to thank. A-ah!"

I stared into the study tensely.

The two men, both white-hot with rage, were struggling fiercely—as no

doubt they had struggled when Tinker interrupted. Tinker had only done so because he had feared that Robert would be harmed. And Tinker had been made a prisoner without any delay.

I watched fascinated. The men were still swaying to and fro. And I saw that Martin held a murderous-looking paper-knife. There was a light of murder in his gleaming eyes—it was unmistakable.

Robert was fighting for his life—and he was far the weaker of the pair. Back and back he was forced. At last he could go no further, for the big desk came in the way. He made desperate efforts to gain possession of the knife; but the task was hopeless.

"Yes, it is the better way," hissed Martin. "You shall be left behind, Robert. There is no reason why you should worry me any longer. I will leave you here—as a present for the school. In the morning you will be stiff——"

"Don't be a mad fool," gasped Robert. "You—you——"

I realised that the time had come for action. I, too, would butt in. But I resolved not to get myself collared. I pushed open the panel, and slipped quietly through.

Martin's back was towards me, but Robert saw my entry in the first second.

"Stop, Martin—stop!" he muttered. "There is another boy——"

"You think you can trick me?" snarled Martin. "Oh, no! I'm not so easily taken in—what—what—by Heaven!"

For at that moment I gripped Mr. Martin from behind. I twisted my arms round him, and tried to wrench him away.

"Come on you fellows!" I gasped. "We'll get him yet!"

Martin swore horribly.

The next second he used every ounce of his strength—in a mad effort to gain his freedom. It was really a remarkable display. I was lifted bodily from the floor, and hurled across the room.

I alighted on the edge of the table, on all fours.

The momentum sent me slithering on to the floor, taking a pile of books and papers with me. Martin did not return to the attack, or things might have gone badly with me.



1. A mass of stonework fell thunderously, and Nelson Lee lay motionless on the steps.

2. "Lee!" panted Martin. "How did you get here?"

He rushed at the door, tore it open, and vanished.

His brother, quivering with emotion, and pale to the lips, stood against the lounge, staring at me. Then, suddenly, he collapsed backwards, and lay huddled on the lounge—completely unnerved and helpless.

I didn't trouble to go to him. I knew that he would be useless for anything. I pitied him—I wanted to help him. For Robert Horley had proved himself to be an honest, upright gentleman.

But there was no time.

The rascally Head was escaping!

I rushed at Tinker, tore the cushion off, and unfastened his ropes.

"Thank goodness!" gasped Tinker. "We shall have to be slippy, my son! We've made a frightful muck of this affair! He's bunked!"

"We shall be able to catch him," I panted. "What happened to you?"

"Just what happened to you," said Tinker. "They were fighting, and I butted in. But Martin gave me a cosh with a ruler, and I was knocked out for a tick. Then I was bound up like a Christmas turkey!"

I slipped the last rope off.

"Well, come on," I gasped. "We must chase this rotter——"

"Great Scott!" muttered Tinker, staring.

He was gazing at the window, and I followed his glance. Then I started. The bottom sash of the window was open, and framed in the opening were the heads and shoulders of two men.

They were Nelson Lee and Detective-Inspector Lennard.

CHAPTER V.

THE CHASE.

NELSON LEE sprang into the room.

"What is the meaning of this, Nipper?" he asked sharply.

"Martin has escaped, sir," I panted. "This gentleman here is his brother——"

"I am well aware of that," interrupted the guv'nor. "Mr. Horley and

I have met before, and I know that he is an honourable man. But what have you been doing? Where is the Head?"

"Gone, sir—he escaped!"

"Just like these youngsters!" exclaimed Lennard sourly. "All our plans messed up, Lee. Tinker, too! You ought to know better, you confounded young rascals!"

"We—we didn't know——" I began.

"You had no right to interfere," snapped Lee. "Mr. Lennard and I were waiting for Martin to appear, but knew that something was wrong—because of the noise."

"It's your own fault, guv'nor," I said obstinately. "You should have taken me into your confidence. Tinker and I thought that we were doing the best thing possible. We didn't know that you were on the track. You weren't here——"

"It is just as well that the boys interfered, Mr. Lee," put in Robert Horley weakly. "I owe them my life. Martin would have killed me, but for the timely intervention of these young gentlemen."

"That makes a difference, of course," said Lee, his anger subsiding somewhat. "But after I had made my plans it is annoying to find them upset. We must hurry away, Lennard."

"I think not," said the Scotland Yard man. "I'd better keep my eye on this man. He is Robert Horley, and he is badly wanted——"

"Nonsense, man," interjected Lee. "This gentleman is as innocent as I am. Martin Horley is the culprit—as I shall prove to the world before long. He has escaped, but I have no doubt that we shall be able to trail him."

"He's got a car, sir," I said. I heard him saying——"

"A car?" echoed the guv'nor sharply. "I did not know that! He must have been very careful about it—but listen! I think I hear——"

Lee broke off, and dived out of the window. I followed, and Tinker and Lennard scrambled through. We all stood just outside, listening intently. My thoughts were busy.

I knew that Nelson Lee had had plans of his own—he had intended capturing Mr. Martin redhanded. And Tinker and I had spoilt things, somehow. But

we were not to be blamed. We had done our best.

Throb—throb—throb!

The pulsating beat of a motor came to our ears. The sound came from the rear of the house, but got nearer and nearer. The car, evidently was making its way along the lane—and would soon pass the main gates.

The throb increased to a purr, and as it did so, Nelson Lee and Lennard rushed at the gates. They arrived just a shade too late. For the car shot past while they were still ten yards off.

"Confound!" raved Lennard. "Hang the—go away, Nipper! I want to say something strong!"

"Listen!" exclaimed Lee. "Perhaps we shall be able to determine which road the man takes when he is through the village—sound carries well to-night. Then we can ring up the police of Bannington or Caistowe."

"Splendid!" muttered the chief-inspector.

We stood like statues, listening. The hum of the speeding car came to our ears distinctly. It was still in the lane, and travelling at a reckless speed, apparently. The car had no lights, and the night was dark.

Hum-m-m-m!

The car was roaring along at full throttle, to judge by—

Crash!

The sound was clear and distinct—a dull, elongated crash. Then came complete and utter silence. The steady hum had gone. The effect was almost uncanny, and a queer feeling passed down my spine.

"Great Scott!" I muttered.

The others said nothing for a couple of tense seconds. And I was reminded of a dreadful sound I had heard on one or two occasions—an aeroplane smash. The steady roar of the motor, the splutter, the crash—and then an uncanny, unearthly silence—a silence which was eloquent of disaster and death.

"Our chase won't be a long one, after all," said Nelson Lee quietly.

Lennard cleared his throat huskily.

"Doesn't seem like it," he muttered.

"That was an accident, Lee—and a mighty bad one, too. I'll warrant the car is a heap of ruins. Must have overturned at a corner. I reckon."

"That is the explanation, undoubtedly," said Nelson Lee. "The man was mad with fear, and he drove 'all out.' In the darkness he misjudged the road, I imagine, and charged up the bank. The smash, of course was inevitable."

"What—what shall we do, sir?" asked Tinker.

"We must hurry to the spot at once," said Nelson Lee. "The man may not be dead, and we must do all we can for him—although I must confess that I do not entertain many hopes. That crash was dreadful."

"It was, sir," said Tinker huskily.

"I'll stay here," remarked Lennard. "It's just as well, I think."

He was an official detective—and Robert Horley was wanted by the police. So Lennard was staying, to keep his eye on the prisoner.

Nelson Lee hurried through the gateway, and Tinker and I followed. This night was full of drama, and I hardly knew what the time was, or how long Tinker and I had been out of our beds.

Tragedy was abroad, too, it seemed.

We hastened down the lane towards the village, certain that we should be the first to arrive on the scene of the dreadful accident. The countryside was asleep, and the disaster had occurred, probably, in the open lane.

This proved to be the case.

Half-way to the village we became aware of something dark piled up against one of the leafless hedges. It projected above the hedge, and revealed a jagged edge against the sky-line.

"There it is," I muttered.

We arrived on the spot.

The motor-car was right on top of the hedge, bottom upwards, and a complete wreck. Both the rear wheels were smashed to atoms, and were lying in splinters all over the road.

Tyres were strewn everywhere, with bits of the lamps and other accessories. It was a terrible mess. The smash was one of the worst I had ever seen. The car was simply matchwood.

It must have leaped into the air cleanly, to overturn and disintegrate upon striking.

Nelson Lee turned to us grimly.

"I should advise you to hang back, boys," he said quietly. "I have a torch

here. I will examine the wreckage. The sight is not likely to be a pleasant one. Martin is undoubtedly dead—and probably mangled in a shocking degree."

"I—I think we'll wait here, sir," I said huskily.

Tinker agreed. We were capable of standing the shock, if necessary. But it was not necessary. Nelson Lee was quite capable of discovering the pitiful remains of the late Headmaster of St. Frank's.

We waited for several minutes, without speaking. Somehow, we did not feel like conversation.

We saw Nelson Lee examining the wreckage bit by bit. His torch flashed here and there—flicking sometimes steady at others. Once or twice Lee tore away pieces of the debris.

He climbed the bank, and got over into the meadow beyond. Two minutes later he was back, and he walked towards us.

"Well, sir?" I asked unsteadily.

"I am amazed, Nipper," said the guv'nor. "Martin is not here!"

Tinker and I stared.

"Not—not there?" I gasped.

"No, my lad."

"You—you mean, he's escaped, after all?" I yelled.

"It certainly seems so," said Lee. "Perhaps he was flung bodily out, and escaped with only a few bruises. I am certainly astounded. I expected to find the man half torn to shreds."

"But are you sure, sir?" asked Tinker. "Isn't it possible that Martin is right underneath the car—pinned down?"

"It is just possible," agreed Nelson Lee. "I want you to help me, boys. We will attempt to shift the car, and make certain. But, somehow, I believe that the rascal has eluded us."

I whistled.

"It's possible that he jumped out of the car before the crash," I said. "Perhaps he wrecked it deliberately—just to diddle us."

"That is hardly likely—because we are not diddled," exclaimed Lee. "No, Nipper. The affair was a pure accident. And Martin, it seems, was blessed with fool's luck. He was flung out, practically unhurt."

We found it a fairly easy task to move the wreckage—because it was poised on the bank, almost balancing. One combined heave from the three of us sent the car crashing over into the meadow.

Nelson Lee flashed his torch about.

The light only revealed smashed and torn branches and twigs, and a wild assortment of odds and ends belonging to the car. There was no sign whatever of a mangled corpse.

Howard Martin—or Martin Horley—had escaped!

"This is an unpleasant surprise, in a way," said Nelson Lee. "I was not anxious to find the man dead; but it is now fairly evident that the fellow is fleeing across the country, almost untouched—Ah! One moment. What is this here? What is this?"

"Looks like grass, sir," I said.

The guv'nor was flashing the light of his torch upon a patch of coarse grass near the ditch; we had climbed over into the meadow. I bent closer, and became aware of some dark patches on the grass.

"What is it, sir—oil?" I asked.

"Oil? No, Nipper," said Lee. "Something far more significant."

"Blood?" remarked Tinker.

"Yes, my boy—blood!"

"I can see it now," I said tensely. "Then Martin didn't get off scot-free, after all. Look there! Those stains seem to go right along, sir. Why, there's a trail of them!"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Martin was wounded," he said; "possibly a bad gash on his arm, since he seems to have walked strongly. Perhaps we shall be able to follow this trail; and if we hurry up, we may overtake the man."

"Sure to, sir!" I exclaimed. "Good! This is miles better. I didn't like to think of the man being done in. It's much better to collar a criminal in one whole piece."

We set off without any waste of time.

Nelson Lee leading, with his torch to the ground, we progressed fairly rapidly. Martin must have bled pretty badly, for the blood-stains were continuous. They provided a certain trail.

Over the meadows we went, through gaps in the hedges, and then across fields. After a while, Nelson Lee turned to us.

"I think I know where our wounded friend has made for," he said. "Right from the start we have been travelling in the direction of Bellton Abbey. It is apparent that Martin has sought seclusion in the old dungeons—where, for a time, he concealed his brother."

"You think we shall find him there, sir?" asked Tinker.

"Yes," said Lee. "He certainly cannot have gone far, in his serious condition. He has lost a deal of blood, and, in any case, his capture is certain, sooner or later. The abbey is already within sight."

The old ruins were visible in the near distance, looming against the skyline, gaunt and ghostly.

Sure enough, the trail continued to lead in that direction, and at last we arrived within the ruins themselves. Here and there a blood-stain showed—and Nelson Lee extinguished his torch.

We halted for a moment.

"Now, boys, this will probably be a ticklish business," murmured the guv'nor. "It is possible that Martin is armed—and I do not intend you to go into any danger. You must remain behind."

"Look here, sir——"

"I am quite firm, Nipper."

"And so am I, sir," I said warmly. "If you can go into this danger, so can we. Eh, Tinker?"

"Yes, rather!" declared Tinker.

"It is very brave of you, boys——" began Lee.

"Brave be blowed, sir!" I interrupted. "We want to be in at the finish—that's all. Martin won't be able to do much in his present condition. And if he is a bit desperate—well, we shall be ready to give a hand."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I suppose I shall have to give way," he said. "But you really must keep well in the rear until I permit you to advance. Martin is desperate—he is unscrupulous—and he will not hesitate to use violence."

"Neither shall we, sir," said Tinker grimly. "I'd love to use violence. I owe the rotter one for collaring me in the study."

We moved towards the gap in the floor which led down into the dungeons. Everything was black and still. The place might have been a habitation of the dead, for all the sounds there were.

Nelson Lee commenced the descent, and we followed fairly closely in his rear. For the first few steps all was right.

Then a startling thing happened.

As the guv'nor passed under the stonework, there was an ominous rumbling, a thud and a crash.

A mass of stonework fell thunderously—and there lay Nelson Lee on the jagged stairs, silent and motionless!

CHAPTER VI.

HANDFORTH AND CO. BUTT IN.

"GOOD heavens!" I exclaimed, horrified.

Both Tinker and I dashed forward, careless of any consequences to ourselves. If we thought anything, we believed that the stonework had fallen of its own accord, owing to age.

I had a horrible fear that the guv'nor was badly injured. And I knelt by his side, and caught his hand feverishly.

"Guv'nor—guv'nor!" I panted. "Are you hurt——"

"Merely dazed for a moment, Nipper—nothing more," said Nelson Lee, to my great relief. "The big stone missed me by an inch, or I should have been done in for good. Only a small boulder struck me."

"Thank goodness!" I said fervently.

"Jolly lucky, sir!" exclaimed Tinker. "How did it happen? I suppose these stones are old and crumbly?"

"Undoubtedly," said Lee, picking himself up, and rubbing his head. "But it was no natural fall, Tinker."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"I mean that the huge stone was poised up there deliberately, so that it would fall at the slightest vibration," said the guv'nor. "Mr. Martin, in spite of his injury, is still ingenious. It seems that we shall have a difficult task in capturing him. We must be cautious."

Nelson Lee brushed himself down, and continued his progress down into the old tunnels leading to the dungeons. But he went more carefully now, testing every foot of the way.

I was quite convinced that his head

was aching terribly, but he did not show any sign of it. There was grim work on hand, and it had to be attended to. The guv'nor was not the kind of man to grumble at a little pain.

We reached the tunnels at last, and proceeded down them slowly. But there was no sign of any human being. The further we penetrated, the less chance it seemed that we should find the fugitive Mr. Martin.

At length we came to a place where progress was impossible. The tunnel ended in a blank wall, and there were similar walls on either side.

"He's not here, after all, sir!" exclaimed Tinker.

"I think he is!" said Lee grimly.

He directed the light of his torch upon the ground, and there, quite distinctly, were several fresh bloodstains.

"Phew!" whistled Tinker. "That's obvious enough, anyhow!"

"He must have turned back," I remarked.

"No, Nipper, he didn't turn back," said Nelson Lee. "In a moment you will see our quarry; but I should advise you to stand well back. It is just possible he has a revolver, and lead bullets are not pleasant customers to meet at close range."

Lee bent down low, and then he reached up and pressed a portion of the solid brickwork about halfway up the wall. As he did so there was a kind of dull hammering noise, and a portion of the wall gaped open.

Whiz!

A huge chunk of rock came hurtling out, to smash against the opposite wall. It was followed by another piece, which also struck the stonework harmlessly. Nelson Lee had been wise in crouching low.

He did not wait for any more missiles to come, but lunged forward with tremendous energy.

Tinker and I rushed up at the same moment, both of us flashing our electric torches. We arrived just in time to see the guv'nor grappling with Mr. Howard Martin. We were ready to help on the spot.

But no help was needed.

Martin Horley—to give the man his real name—was unable to deal with Nelson Lee at close quarters. His left arm hung helplessly by his side, and,

after a brief tussle, he was overpowered.

"Lee!" panted Martin harshly. "Nelson Lee! How—how did you get here?"

"You have not been aware of the fact, Mr. Horley, but I have been at St. Frank's almost all the time," said the guv'nor. "Possibly you remember Mr. Simpson Wrott? I was that gentleman!"

The Head nearly choked.

"You—you were Mr. Wrott? I do not believe it!" he panted. "You are lying to me. And if you think you can do me any harm, you are mistaken. You will prove nothing against me—nothing."

"That, of course, remains to be seen," said Nelson Lee. "For the present I must request you to come with me. Mr. Lennard, of Scotland Yard, will take you in hand, Mr. Martin Horley."

The Head uttered an exclamation.

"It is easy enough for you to gloat over me now," he exclaimed bitterly. "I am powerless to defend myself."

"So I observe," said Lee. "Let me see your arm——"

"I want no attention from you——"

"Come, come—don't be foolish," said Nelson Lee sharply. "You have lost enough blood already. Lend me a hand, boys."

Martin's coat was removed, and we then found that his left arm was terribly gashed, although the bone was not broken. He had sustained a serious flesh wound—a wound which would necessitate stitching at the earliest possible moment.

"Horley, I should advise you to be quite frank about everything," said Nelson Lee. "The truth is known—and I have plenty of evidence against you. You are guilty of a robbery for which your brother was convicted, over three years ago. You also intended fleeing from St. Frank's with a considerable amount of stolen property——"

"It is a lie!" snarled Martin.

"Of course, if you prefer to keep up that attitude, I need say no more," exclaimed Lee. "It will be the worse for you in the long run, as you ought surely to realise."

Martin said nothing, but followed us out of the dungeon weakly, and in a condition which plainly revealed his utter dejection. He was beaten, completely, and he knew it.

And while we were bringing him home

in that way, another mysterious little affair was taking place near St. Frank's. And the chief actors in that affair were, strange to say, none other than Handforth and Co., of the Remove.

It came about quite naturally.

Handforth was usually a heavy sleeper, but, for some reason, he awoke in the middle of the night, and he heard distinct sounds of voices out in the Triangle. More than this, he heard the hum of a motor-car.

Handforth lay in bed, comfortable, idly wondering what was in the wind. Then that ominous crash came to his ears, quite distinctly on the still night air. And even Handy's were capable of telling him what had occurred. He sat up in bed quite abruptly.

"By George!" he panted. "That must have been an accident!"

The unusual voices in the Triangle were the undoubted cause of Handforth's awakening. He would have gone to sleep again if nothing else had resulted; but that crash drove all sleep from his eyes.

He jumped out of bed, and shook McClure's shoulder in the darkness. This, at all events, was what he intended doing. As a matter of fact, he shook McClure's head, and jerked it about violently.

"What the—— Gug-gug—— Leggo, you ass!" gasped McClure.

"Wake up, my son—wake up!" exclaimed Handforth softly.

McClure woke up—he couldn't do anything else.

"You—you ass!" he gasped. "What's the idea of this? You're pulling out my hair in chunks——"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "I want you——"

"But it's midnight, or something," gasped McClure. "What the dickens do you mean by waking me up at this unearthly hour? Lemme go to sleep, blow you! I'll jolly well punch your nose——"

"Listen!" said Handforth. "There's been an accident!"

"Eh?"

"A motor-car accident——"

"Blow the motor-car!"

"I heard it just now," went on Handy. "I heard the car roaring down the lane. Then there was a terrific crash, and silence. I tell you it was a terrific

smash—a shocking affair. I think we ought to get up and see what the trouble is. Somebody might be killed, you know."

"My only hat!" said McClure. "Do—do you think so?"

"It's quite likely," exclaimed Handforth. "In any case, it's up to us to have a look. What if nobody else heard that crash? What if the occupants of the car are lying injured, all over the road? We should feel bright specimens in the morning, shouldn't we?"

"We—we'd better go, I suppose," said McClure.

"Yes, rather!"

Handforth moved over and shook Church. Church was not quite so much trouble as McClure had been, and he quickly agreed to accompany his chums down the lane, to discover the cause of the accident. The chums of Study D dressed as quickly as possible, and then slipped out of the dormitory.

Handforth went first.

"I'm not sure that there has been an accident at all," murmured Church. "You know what an ass Handy is—he might have dreamed it!"

"Well, it's better to go—it saves trouble," said McClure. "We should only have had the whole dormitory awake if we'd refused. You can't argue with an obstinate fathead like Handy."

"What's that you're saying?" asked Handforth, turning.

"Oh, nothing!"

"Well, nothing amounts to a lot, then!" said Handforth. "I expect you were grumbling because I've routed you out. You lazy beggars! A fine pair you are—growling because you've been asked to go to the aid of the injured."

Church and McClure said no more, but followed their leader down to Study D. Once there, they put their boots on, and crept out of the window, their intention being to get out into the lane at once. But they hadn't gone far before a figure appeared round the building.

"Who's that?" came a sharp whisper.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Church. "A master!"

The three Remove boys were just about to flee, when the figure came up. It turned out to be Detective-Inspector Lennard, who was still waiting for us to return from the wrecked car.

"Hallo! What's this?" said the chief-inspector. "Who the dence are

you? What are you doing out at this time of night?"

Handforth stared.

"You're Mr. Lennard, ain't you, sir?" he asked.

"I have that honour," said the Yard man.

"I thought I recognised you, sir," said Handforth. "We—we heard a crash, you know, and thought an accident had happened."

"To the best of my belief, an accident has happened," said Lennard. "Rather serious, too, by the sound of it. But that's no reason why you kids should come butting in. You'd better get back to bed."

"Yes, I suppose we had, Handy," said Church.

"Rot!" said Handforth. "Mr. Lennard hasn't got any authority to order us back to bed—and we might as well see what's up now we're here. I vote we go down the lane."

"Do as you like—but don't blame me afterwards," said the Scotland Yard man. "If you get a tanning, it'll be your own fault. Don't say I didn't warn you."

Handforth and Co. hurried to the wall, and were soon in the lane. They went down it at the trot, and presently came to the spot where the accident had occurred. They would have run right past, only Church kicked a torn outer cover which lay in the middle of the road.

"My hat!" said Church. "What's this?"

They examined it, and soon recognised the article. Then they found other articles of debris, and noticed the torn condition of the hedge. A minute later they found the car itself—or what remained of it—lying in the meadow. There was no sign of any injured passengers.

"Well, that's queer," said Handforth. "Where have they got to? I should have thought everybody in the car would have been killed. And what's that Mr. Lennard called out to us, just as we came away?"

"He told us to be cautious," said McClure. "There's a criminal at large or something, and——"

"Oh yes, I remember," said Handforth. "But that's all bunkum, I suppose. I don't believe there's any criminal at large at all."

"I do," said Church. "Why was Lennard there? A big Scotland Yard man doesn't come down to a place like this for nothing, you know. He wouldn't visit Bellton for the fun of the thing."

"There's that, of course," said Handforth. "Still, we can't do anything—and the best thing we——"

Handforth paused, and glanced down along the road.

"Shush!" he breathed. "There's somebody coming!"

There was nothing very startling in this, but Handforth and Co. felt that they would like something mysterious to happen. And they were ready to make a mystery out of nothing.

The figure which was approaching appeared to be a somewhat elderly man, for he was progressing fairly slowly. He came along the lane, and would probably have passed right by.

But he stumbled over some obstruction, fell over and lay motionless upon the ground.

"My hat!" muttered Church. "He's hurt himself."

The three juniors jumped down at the same moment—for they had been standing on the high bank at the side of the road. When they reached the spot, some few yards away, they learned the reason for the stranger's accident.

He had stumbled upon one of the broken wheels—or, at least, a portion of a wheel. Lying there in the darkness, it had been unseen. And the unfortunate wayfarer had stumbled upon the obstruction unawares.

"I say, sir, are you hurt?" asked Handforth anxiously.

The figure gave no sign of life.

"Of course he's hurt!" muttered McClure. "Badly, too, by the look of it. Strike a match, let's see!"

Handforth had some matches, and he struck one, and shaded the light with his hand. Then they saw that the man on the road was certainly elderly. His hair was grey at the temples, and he had a curious little grey beard. He was dressed well, although he wore his clothes carelessly.

And as the three juniors looked at him, he stirred slightly. A bruise on his forehead showed that he had fallen

face downwards, and had probably caught his head on a stone.

"Help me to lift him up!" said Handforth briskly. "We'll sit him on the bank, and then one of you can rush and fetch some water from that ditch on the other side of the road. Buck up!"

They raised the stranger with some difficulty, but succeeded in getting him to the bank at last. Then Church obtained a cup full of water, and the old gentleman's eyes and forehead were bathed.

The effect was immediate. Whether it was the coldness of the water, or its strength, it was rather difficult to say. The water was cold, and it was undoubtedly strong—Church having obtained it from a stagnant portion of the ditch. However, it had the desired effect, and that was all that really mattered.

The stranger opened his eyes.

"Dear me!" he murmured. "What a dreadful thing! I distinctly remember kicking against some obstruction in the road——"

"But—but who are you?" he went on. "Boys, I observe! You were not here when I stumbled. Upon my soul! Is it possible that you boys dared to play a trick upon me——"

"Hold on, sir," said Handforth. "There's been a bad motor smash here. The car's over the hedge, but bits of it are lying all over the road. You stumbled over a wheel, and we happened to come up just in time."

"Ah, I see—I understand!" said the old man. "A motor smash? Dear me! How very unfortunate. I sincerely hope nobody was badly injured?"

"Well, we don't know, sir," said Handforth. "We're from the school, you know—St. Frank's. We heard the smash and we got dressed and came out—strictly speaking, we're breaking bounds."

"Young rascals—that's what you are," exclaimed the old man. "I feel much better now, thank you—much better. I really don't know what I can do to thank you for your kindness. It is possible that I might have been killed if I had remained on the road. Any passing vehicle——"

"Oh, we didn't do much, sir," said Handforth. "Nothing to make a song

about, anyhow. Do you know what the time is sir?"

"Well, I have a vague idea that it is somewhere between two and three o'clock in the morning," said the elderly stranger. "Rather an extraordinary time for people like us to be out and about, isn't it?"

"Well, it is a bit strange, sir."

"Ah, you don't know—you don't realise what it means" chuckled the stranger. "But I feel inclined to take you into my little secret—since you have been so generous to me. You see, at dinner last night one of my oldest friends made a wager with me that I would not walk to Helmsford by the morning—a distance of twenty-five miles. I told him it could be done—and I'm doing it."

Handforth and Co. were astonished.

"But Helmsford's a long way away, sir, nearly twenty miles from here," exclaimed Handforth. "You couldn't possibly get there by the morning."

"If I don't, I shall lose my wager—a matter of five hundred pounds," said the old gentleman. "Not that it will worry me much."

"Not five hundred pounds!" exclaimed McClure wonderingly.

"A mere trifle, my lad," said the old man. "Ah, I am very remiss! I do not think I have introduced myself."

"Not yet, sir."

"Well, my name is Grandmore," said the stranger.

"Thank you, Mr. Grandmore——"

"No, my boy—no," smiled the other. "My name is the Earl of Grandmore—perhaps I should have said so first. I live at Grandmore Priory, some little distance beyond Caistowe."

"Oh, I see, sir—I mean, my lord," said Handforth hastily.

"That won't do—that won't do!" smiled the Earl. "I don't want you to address me in that fashion. And look here, boys. I should like to see you in full daylight when I can have a better look at you, and when I can thank you as you deserve to be thanked. You must come over."

"Oh, sir!" said the three juniors.

"You can manage it, I suppose?"

"I think so, sir—we must," said

Handforth. "Of course, we shall be a bit full up this next week, because we shall be getting ready for the Christmas vac. We break up in about a week, sir——"

"By gad—an idea!" exclaimed the Earl of Grandmore. "A really excellent idea, by boys. How are you fixed for Christmas?"

"There's nothing exactly settled yet, sir——"

"Then you must come to Grandmore Priory for a few days," said the Earl genially. "You must—I shall accept no refusal. You will promise me, boys, won't you? Here is my card, and you can write to me saying when you will arrive."

Handforth and Co. were rather confused.

"But—but we hardly know what to say, sir," stammered Handforth. "We've—we've done nothing, you know——"

"Such modesty is quite pleasing," said the earl. "Well, boys, I must be getting along, or I shall certainly lose my wager. Good-night to you, and I hope that I shall see you during Christmas-time! Good-night—good-night!"

The Earl of Grandmore walked on, leaving Handforth and Co. looking at one another in a state of considerable wonder.

"Well I'm jiggered!" muttered Handforth. "It can't be true, you know."

"But it is true!" said Church excitedly. "An invitation from an earl—one of the real old aristocracy, too!"

"We shall go, of course," said McClure.

"I daresay we can work in two or three days at Grandmore Priory. I can see some of the fellows going absolutely green over this!"

The three juniors walked to the school slowly, and they were very pleased that they had ventured out.

"You've got me to thank for this, you know," remarked Handforth casually.

"You?"

"Well, who else?" said Handy. "Didn't I yank you chaps out of bed?"

"Very likely," said Church. "But you didn't know that we should meet the Earl of Grandmore, did you?"

"Well, I can't say that I did," admitted Handforth. "But the fact remains that our swell visit to the earl's place will be because of my astuteness to-night—although, of course, I don't want to blow my own trumpet."

"Not at all!" said Church. "You wouldn't dream of it, Handy!"

"The earl seems to be a queer old buffer, though," remarked McClure slowly. "Fancy trying a twenty-five mile walk in the middle of the night! That seems rummy, doesn't it?"

"It's a good thing he was on the walk—or we shouldn't have run into him," said Handforth. "But these rich old chaps often get queer ideas like that. They've got such a lot of money they don't know what to do with it——"

"Hallo!" interrupted Church. "What's all this?"

"All this" happened to be Nelson Lee, Tinker and I, and Mr. Martin Horley. We had just arrived from Bell-ton Abbey, and the Head was on the point of collapse.

"You won't have any difficulty with your prisoner, Lennard," said Nelson Lee. "He has lost a good deal of blood, and he is quite powerless. Dear me! What are you doing here, Handforth?"

Handforth and Co. had some difficulty in explaining, but when Nelson Lee heard that they had come out because of the car smash, he gave them no punishment.

The three juniors were really rather dazed.

They couldn't understand where Lee had sprung from—for, of course, he wasn't wearing his "Wrott" disguise now.

But in the morning, everything would be explained—and, what was far more to the point, the tyrant of St. Frank's would make his exit.

CHAPTER VII.

ALL SERENE.

"H EARD the news?"

Practically everybody was shouting that question in the junior school the next morning. Nobody had made any direct

statement, but it was really astonishing how the truth got about.

One fellow had heard it from somebody else, and that somebody else had heard it from still another mysterious individual.

At all events, the truth was known that the Headmaster had been arrested, and that he had already been taken away. Mr. Howard Martin—as we had known him—had left the school in the early morning, escorted by Chief-Inspector Lennard.

The juniors were in a ferment about it.

"This means that Dr. Stafford will return—of course," exclaimed Pitt heartily. "Oh, good business!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Good old Dr. Stafford!"

"We want him back again!"

"And good riddance to the tyrant!"

The fellows hardly knew what to say. And then there was a fresh wave of excitement caused over the strange appearance of Nelson Lee on the scene.

However, after breakfast, Nelson Lee addressed the whole school in the Big Hall. Briefly, he explained the facts, and reassured everybody that the late Headmaster's brother, who was a real gentleman, would soon have his freedom, and that Martin would be clapped in gaol.

The school was amazed when it learned that Nelson Lee had been with them for many days past—in the character of Mr. Wrott. A good many of the fellows, in fact, refused to believe it—until, in a humorous moment, Nelson Lee adopted Mr. "Wrott's" tone of voice for a brief space.

"Hurrah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Three cheers for Mr. Lee!"

"Hip—hip——"

"Hurrah!"

"You're a marvel, sir!"

"We never guessed the truth, sir!"

All sorts of shouts rent the air, but Nelson Lee only smiled. There was a feeling in the school of great relief. Everything was coming right. The tyrant had gone—he had made his ignoble exit—and Nelson Lee had returned. Only one thing was necessary

to complete the satisfaction of the whole school before going home for the Christmas holidays.

And that was to have Dr. Malcolm Stafford return to his old appointment.

The juniors were particularly keen on that point.

"Is Dr. Stafford coming back, sir?" they roared.

"We want the old Head!"

"We want Dr. Stafford!"

"Hurrah!"

"Please, sir, is there any chance?"

Nelson Lee held up his hand.

"I cannot speak while you are making so much noise," he exclaimed. "I sincerely trust that Dr. Stafford will be prevailed upon to return—and I think there is a distinct chance that such will be the case——"

"Hurrah!"

"But you must not count upon it too much," went on Lee. "If possible, I will try to let you know definitely this evening——"

"Oh, good!"

"Dr. Stafford must come back, sir!"

"Yes, rather!"

The juniors were still excited when they were dismissed. Morning lessons that day were a bit of a farce, for the masters could not do much with the boys. It was the reaction after the barring-out, and after the harsh treatment of the late Head.

It was only to be expected.

Nobody was particularly anxious to hear all the details regarding the Head's crime. It was known that he had secreted his brother for some time near the school, and that Robert Horley was quite innocent. It was also known that the Head had attempted to make off with a considerable sum which he had obtained from General Ord-Clayton.

Tinker, of course, took his departure that day, and was glad he had visited the old school.

Nelson Lee had two important announcements to make in the afternoon.

They were announcements which filled everybody with joy.

"Well, boys, I have some news for you," said the gov'nor, addressing the school. "The first item is that General Ord-Clayton has resigned the Chairman."

ship of the Board of Governors——"

"Oh, hurrah!"

"Good riddance to bad rubbish!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Three groans for the general!"

Nelson Lee listened, smiling in spite of himself.

"I can hardly countenance such a demonstration as this," he said severely.

"However, I will say no more if you will keep quiet——"

"Why don't you become the Head, sir?" roared Handforth.

"Oh, good idea!"

"We want you to be Head, sir!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Mr. Lee's the man for us!"

But the gov'nor shook his head.

"No, boys, you are quite wrong," he said. "Moreover, I have much better news for you—news which will please you far more. Dr. Stafford——"

"Hurrah!"

"Dr. Stafford has consented to return——"

"Hip, hip, hurrah!"

"Three more cheers!" bawled Handforth.

"Hurrah!"

"When the Head comes we'll raise the roof!"

"Yes, rather!"

The juniors were doing their utmost to raise the roof already—and even the seniors were cheering as they had seldom cheered before. Everything was turning out all right. As Handforth remarked, everything in the garden was lovely. The troubles had passed, and when the school broke up for Christmas, it would do so in the knowledge that when it re-assembled for the next term, conditions would be absolutely normal.

There was considerable joy, and commotion. Great excitement prevailed when it was learned that Dr. Stafford himself was returning on the following day—he was coming down even before the new term.

"Talk about rosy times!" exclaimed Pitt, grinning. "This is what comes of taking a firm stand, you know. I give Nipper all the credit for this——"

"Rats!" I said. "Nipper doesn't want it!"

"But you've got to have it—it was your idea about the rebellion, and you carried us through to victory," said Pitt. "If it hadn't been for you——"

"Mr. Lee would have put things straight, just the same," I interrupted firmly. "So it doesn't make much difference—only we had a jolly exciting fortnight during the barring-out."

"And we break up for Christmas soon," said Hart. "Everything's crowding on the top of one another. What's that rot Handforth was talking about being invited to an earl's home?"

"Oh, he's dotty——"

"What's that?" said Handforth, bustling up. "Who's dotty?"

"You seem to be talking out of your hat, Handy," I said. "Somebody is saying that you have been boasting about an earl——"

"I haven't been boasting," exclaimed Handforth. "What rot! What is there to boast about, anyhow? Study D has been invited to Grandmore Priory for Christmas—that's all."

"Grandmore Priory!" I echoed. "Then it is true. The Earl of Grandmore lives there. It's a topping place, I've heard."

"It's swank!" sneered Fullwood. "If Handforth expects us to believe that, he'll have to expect—that's all! I think—— Yaroooh!"

Handforth's fist shot out, and Fullwood sat down abruptly.

"You—you silly fool!" he roared.

"Am I?" snorted Handforth. "This is what I do to cads of your sort!"

He proceeded to kick Fullwood along the passage. Every time Fullwood tried to rise, he was bowled over again. I didn't see the end of it, because Handforth and his victim turned the corner.

That visit of Handforth and Co. to Grandmore Priory was destined to be quite a little affair, in its own way, but, of course, it is impossible for me to set down any of the facts here. It is a little episode separate to itself, and I don't think I shall be able to record it in any case.

The following afternoon was a red-letter day in the history of St. Frank's.

Dr. Malcolm Stafford, the dear old

Head, returned. He was almost loved by the majority of the boys, for Dr. Stafford was renowned for his kindness, his sympathy, and his understanding.

He was also respected for his sternness, when sternness was required.

He returned unobtrusively, arriving on foot fully two hours before he was expected. The Remove had intended going down to the station in force—and perhaps the Head had been warned of something of this kind. At all events, he entered the Triangle early in the afternoon, while all the fellows were at lessons.

By a piece of luck, Nicodemus Trotwood happened to be glancing out of the window just as the Head entered. Nick looked twice, stared, and then turned an excited face to the Form.

"I say, you fellows——"

"Trotwood," snapped Mr. Crowell, "how dare you talk?"

"But—but the Head's just come, sir!" gasped Trotwood.

"The Head?" roared the Remove.

"He's just arrived!" exclaimed Trotwood. "He walked in the gateway——"

"Hurrah!"

He was interrupted by a terrific roar which went up. Mr. Crowell did his utmost to control the Form, but it was a sheer impossibility. Fellows were standing up and cheering, and Mr. Crowell raved in vain.

"Let's go outside and chair him!" bawled Handforth.

"Oh, good idea!"

"Come on!"

"Hurrah!"

"Boys — boys!" thundered Mr. Crowell. "How—how dare you? Take your seats at once! Handforth——"

I couldn't help grinning as I watched Mr. Crowell's vain efforts. The Form was out of hand, and a moment later it surged out into the Triangle—and I don't mind admitting that I was one of the first fellows to reach the open air.

The Head was just entering his house, and as the Remove rushed across the Triangle, the Fifth Form came pouring out of the windows of the Fifth Form-room. Such an exhibition of en-

thusiasm had never before been witnessed at St. Frank's.

Mr. Crowell, on the quiet, was quite pleased, I believe, but he naturally had to pretend to be severe.

Dr. Stafford, looking just the same as ever, stood on the top of his steps, surveying the crowd. For ten solid minutes the Triangle and the whole school echoed with the cheering.

As soon as there was a lull, somebody started a fresh outburst, and the Head could do nothing but wait. At last, however, the fellows practically winded themselves; then Dr. Stafford held up his hand, and there was silence.

"Boys," exclaimed the Head, in his well-known deep, kindly voice, "I cannot tell you how deeply I appreciate this wonderfully cordial greeting on your part. Since I have been away I have missed you great——"

"Not a tenth so much as we've missed you, sir!"

"Rather not, sir!"

"St. Frank's hasn't been the same, sir."

"It is good to hear you say that, my lads," exclaimed the Head, with a trace of moisture in his eyes. "I have come back because I have been asked to return, and also because I was anxious to be amongst you again. There have been some evil times during my absence, and I trust that everything will now run smoothly——"

"It's bound to run smoothly with you here, sir!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Hurrah!"

"For he's a jolly good fellow——"

Somebody started singing, and within ten seconds the whole school had taken up the refrain. It roared out in a terrific burst, and I was afterwards told that the singing was distinctly heard on the outskirts of Bannington. I wasn't very surprised to hear this, for the din was deafening.

Of course, the excitement died down eventually. That evening spreads of the most gorgeous nature were held by the dozen. All the tuck in the village was bought up, and double the quantity could have been sold.

And everybody was happy in the knowledge that the school would very shortly break up for the welcome Christmas holidays.

There had been some troublous times

in the old school, but everything had panned out happily in the finish.

Christmas was near—and some further excitement was brewing, if we had only known it at the time!

THE END.

TO MY READERS.

With the removal of Mr. Martin Howard and the return of Dr. Stafford, the boys of St. Frank's, particularly the Removites, look forward to the Christmas vac. with unusual good spirits. They intend to make up for the months of repression and hardship inflicted on them by their late Head, and I think we can all sympathise with them. A Christmas party is to be given by our old friend Lord Dorrimore at a fine, old historical mansion he has rented on the coast of Cornwall. Some people say that it is haunted. Anyhow, it is a large place, where our guests will enjoy a real, old-fashioned Christmas. Your favourite characters of the past year will meet once again round the old log fire at Lord Dorrie's Christmas gathering, and will include NELSON LEE and NIPPER, of course, their friendly rivals, SEXTON BLAKE and TINKER, that delightful old African chief, UMLOSI, and many of the boys of ST. FRANK'S, whose names I need hardly mention, so well known are they to you. The account of the party will be the feature of our CHRISTMAS NUMBER appearing NEXT WEEK, and will be entitled "DORRIE'S CHRISTMAS PARTY!"

THE EDITOR.

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MAGNIFICENT STORY OF ADVENTURE AMONG THE PLANETS



IN TRACKLESS SPACE.

A Thrilling Account of a Wonderful Voyage to the Moon, Venus, and Mars, and of a Flying Machine known as the "Solar Monarch," the Most Marvellous Invention of the Age.

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. At length they decide to quit Venus and make for Mars, the ensuing chapter beginning with their arrival on this planet.

(Now read on.)

Arrival on Mars—In the Dark Cavern.

IT would be wearying to the reader if I were to relate the incidents of that journey through space—Venus to Mars. It is sufficient to state that nothing of note—nothing that will justify publication—occurred. After the

exciting times on Venus, the quiet, orderly, daily round seemed deadly monotonous to Frank and Mac. But they had to put up with it. There were plenty of books to read, plenty of games to play—bridge, billiards, etc.—and, above all, plenty of new and ever-changing sights to see through the massive glass of the conning-tower.

Before long Venus had become insignificant, the Earth larger—for they were, in a way, passing close to it—and Mars larger still. And as the days went on it grew rapidly bigger and bigger. It was hard to believe one was on a ship travelling at an incredible speed through space. The flight was so steady that it was quite possible for one to imagine oneself safely on Earth.

At last, to the explorers' great relief—for they had had enough of inactivity—the "*Solar Monarch*" came to rest softly and gently on the surface of Mars. The second great journey was completed! What new and wonderful sights were they destined to see on this globe? What dangers would they encounter? It was impossible to guess. While Gresham was testing the atmosphere, Frank and Mac stood gazing out of the window with the professor and Abbie. The whole crew were excited and eager. But the view from the conning-tower was dull and uninteresting.

The vessel had alighted in the centre of a mighty plain. As far as the eye could see nothing was visible but the flat ground—flat as a croquet lawn—covered with a short, mossy kind of grass, of a chocolate-coloured hue.

"Weel," exclaimed Mac disgustedly, "if Mars is all like this, I'm thinking we'd better up-anchor an' call at the next shop!"

"This part of the globe is certainly a surprise to me," put in Professor Palgrave, who, binoculars in hand, was eagerly scanning the distant horizon. "I don't mind admitting that I am disappointed, boys. I was expecting to see the planet thickly populated, with towns and cities galore."

"Instead of which we find nothing but short grass," said Frank. "Still, because it's like this here it doesn't necessarily say that the whole of Mars is similar. A Martian alighting in the centre of the Sahara would form a very poor opinion of old Mother Earth, wouldn't he?"

Before he could be answered they heard the inventor mutter "Good," and straightway plied him with eager questions.

"Don't get excited," smiled Gresham. "Upon my word, professor, you're getting quite a young man again! Yes, the atmosphere of Mars is perfectly breathable, although the temperature, let me tell you, is a good many degrees below freezing-point. So put on your fur-coats before venturing out. We are not on Venus now, you know. There the sun appeared a huge size; here he seems to have diminished in dimensions considerably."

Eagerly the adventurers slipped into heavy boots and thick furs. Having donned warm fur-caps, they pronounced themselves ready. It was Gresham who unclamped the coming-tower door, and as he did so a blast of air came in which made them all gasp and choke. It was as cold as ice and had that peculiar feeling about it which one experiences when in a balloon several thousand feet above the ground.

It caught them right in the back of the throat, and made their ears buzz and their eyes water. It was some moments before they had grown sufficiently accustomed to it to speak.

"My word," gasped Frank. "it's worse than a cold bath in mid-winter! Oh, my eyes, they're smarting like the very dickens! How's yours, Mac?"

"The same, only worse," replied the Scot, who was dabbing a handkerchief to his face. "I'd nae idea it would come sae sudden! I expected a cold draught, but, hoots, this is worse than the North Pole, I do believe!"

"Hardly as bad as that, Mac," laughed the professor, who, for some

reason, was least affected of all. "We shall soon get used to the change; it's only the first few lungful which seem so painful. By George!" he added, as he stepped outside, "this reminds me of the moon again; you might imagine you were on springs."

"Is it safe to jump down?" queried Frank of the inventor. "Or shall we lower the ladder?"

"Well, I should advise you to use the ladder, my dear boy. Although, of course, I don't suppose anything could hurt your strenuous young limbs. The force of gravity on Mars is estimated to be exactly a quarter of that of the Earth, namely: On Earth you would fall sixteen feet in a second; here you would fall only four. So you see it's fairly safe."

"Rather!" cried Mac, turning and taking a flying leap to the ground. He landed in perfect safety. A few moments later the others stood beside him, including Abbie, who had grown so accustomed to unusual things now that he took it all as a matter of course. Nevertheless, he could not resist the temptation of landing on the surface of Mars with the rest.

"By golly!" he remarked, as he landed on the small of his back by accident, "dis chile ain't so fond ob dese high-jumps! Yo' tink you'se gwine to strike de groun' 'most before you've started, an' it don't happen till you've lost de centre of equilibrium!"

"In consequence of which you alight in an awkward place," laughed Frank. "Never mind, Abbie, you're not so practised in the art as we are. By Jove! Look at this mossy grass. They'd give a fortune for it at Lord's."

The ground was covered entirely by a beautifully thick and soft moss kind of growth, something delightful to walk upon, and pleasant to the eye.

"It's a mystery to me how it keeps down to this length," said the scientist. "You might well imagine it had been cut and rolled not an hour since."

"Well, boys, this won't do, you know," exclaimed Gresham pleasantly. "It's nearly mid-day and no work done. If we want to see anything before darkness, we shall have to put our best foot foremost and see to the fixing of the screws."

"We'll set about it at once. Look

(Continued on page iii of Cover.)

here, though, this grass isn't stiff in the least," remarked Frank, bending down. "If it were on Earth, every blade would be frozen as stiff as a twig."

"Which serves to show the vast difference between our own planet and this. It is quite possible—nay, probable—that flowers and vegetables flourish galore in this icy temperature. It is only in the nature of things."

Ten minutes later saw a busy band of workers engaged on the "Solar Monarch." At the expiration of another forty the glittering projectile had again been transformed into a serviceable aeronef. The last nut had been screwed tight, and Gresham touched the engine-room telegraph. Immediately the occupants of the deck felt the accustomed quiver of the plates, and the suspensory-screws took up their song. After days of uninterrupted quietness the sound was a welcome one, and Frank and Mac were more than glad that their enforced idleness and quietude were at an end.

The screws had scarcely started when the "Solar Monarch" soared from the ground, and as they accelerated she seemed to shoot upwards at an amazing pace. This was, of course, due to the difference in the force of gravity. Being comparatively slight on Mars the airship found her task an easy one, and responded readily to the thrust of the heliometers. When they had attained a height of 2,500 feet, Graham told Abbie to slow down and start up the propeller. In a few moments the aeronef paused in her upward career, and the low hum of the propeller added its voice to the suspensories.

"On Venus we travelled at the rate of 200 miles per hour," said the inventor, as he stood gazing at the monstrous plains below; "but here I should say we can almost double that average."

They withdrew into the conning-tower, for the icy wind caused by the vessel's passage through the air was cutting in the extreme. Soon they could see by the ground beneath that they were breaking all records. The air whistled and hooted around the glass walls, rising higher and higher until it rose to a shriek. Then Gresham announced their speed. The engines were doing their utmost.

"Our rate of progress is precisely 450½ miles per hour," the inventor said coolly, filling his pipe. "This is, I should

imagine, a record for speed when travelling in a dense atmosphere."

"Great guns!" ejaculated Mac, surprised out of his customary calm. "We shall do the whole journey round Mars in a few minutes!"

"This speed, however, is prohibitive," went on Gresham. "It prevents us enjoying the keen air; therefore I shall slow down until we are travelling at a modest sixty. That will be quite fast enough, I fancy, in this chilly atmosphere."

It was. When the explorers emerged on deck again they had to use thick gloves and ear-mufflers. For an hour they progressed, and still the scene remained unchanged—still nothing but a vast moss-covered plain was visible. Becoming hungry, they adjourned below for a period, during which time the inventor "let her go." They rushed onwards, and still no change occurred. The only variation from the close-cut moss were a number of gigantic cavities which were from time to time visible. These strange pit-like holes were sheer-sided, and all of 150 feet in diameter. The vessel passed over several, but, although the explorers endeavoured to discern the bottom, their efforts were useless.

"Well, upon my word," said Frank at last, in disgusted tones, pushing his chair back from the table, "to think that Mars would turn out such an old fraud! And after all the yarns about her, too! There aren't any blessed canals, either, to relieve the deadly monotony."

"It has been proved fairly conclusively," put in Palgrave, as he cracked a walnut, "that the dark lines which were at one time supposed to be canals are in reality nothing but vaporous matter. From what we have seen, this appears to be the truth, although there are certainly no signs of such clouds." And he cast a glance out of the window at the spotless blue of the sky.

"Well, look here," suggested Mac, always ready for excitement, "since there are nae towns tae explore, or forests or oceans or rivers, what d'ye say to the idea of dropping the wee shippie into one o' these pits and see what's at the bottom? There's nae tellin', the inhabitants o' this world may be kin' o' moles and reside in burrows!"

(Continued overleaf.)

Although Mac uttered this remark in jest, yet he was as near to the literal truth as he could possibly get. Gresham smiled.

"That's rather long-drawn imagination, Mac lad," he said. "However, the next one we come to, if it is anything the same size as the ones previously passed, I'll gratify your whim and lower the 'wee shippie,' as you elegantly put it, into the 'burrow.'"

"Well, anything's better than flying over an elongated tennis-lawn," Frank declared. "I wonder if the whole surface of Mars is like this?"

"Hardly probable. Astronomers at home state that there are several tall and lofty mountains on the crust of this planet. Though we have seen no evidence of them, it does not prove that they have no existence. It is quite possible they are on the other hemisphere—"

"Hallo!" the professor interjected quickly from the window at which he was standing. "If I'm not mistaken there is another pit about a mile distant. Tell Abbie to slow down, or in fifteen seconds we shall have run past it."

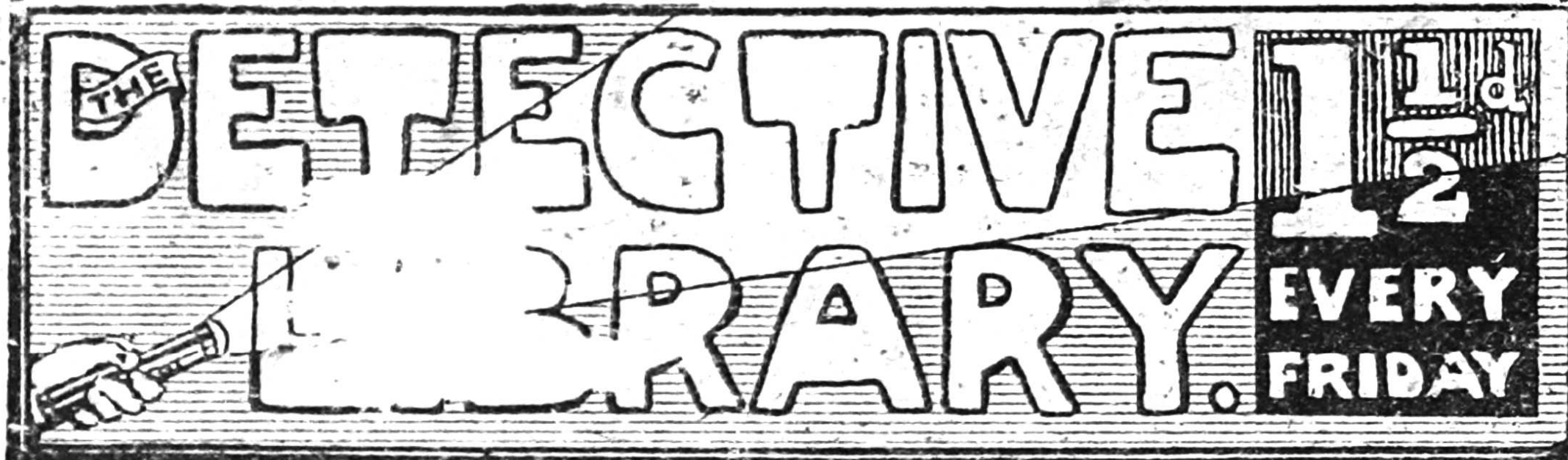
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