

No. 256—Tells of the Strange Conduct of Mr. Crowell!



MR. CROWELL APPEARED TO BE WALKING IN HIS SLEEP.

The Remove Master's Delusion

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 "St. Frank's at 'Appy 'Ampstead," "A Shock for St. Frank's," "The Prisoner of the Island," and numerous other Stories.

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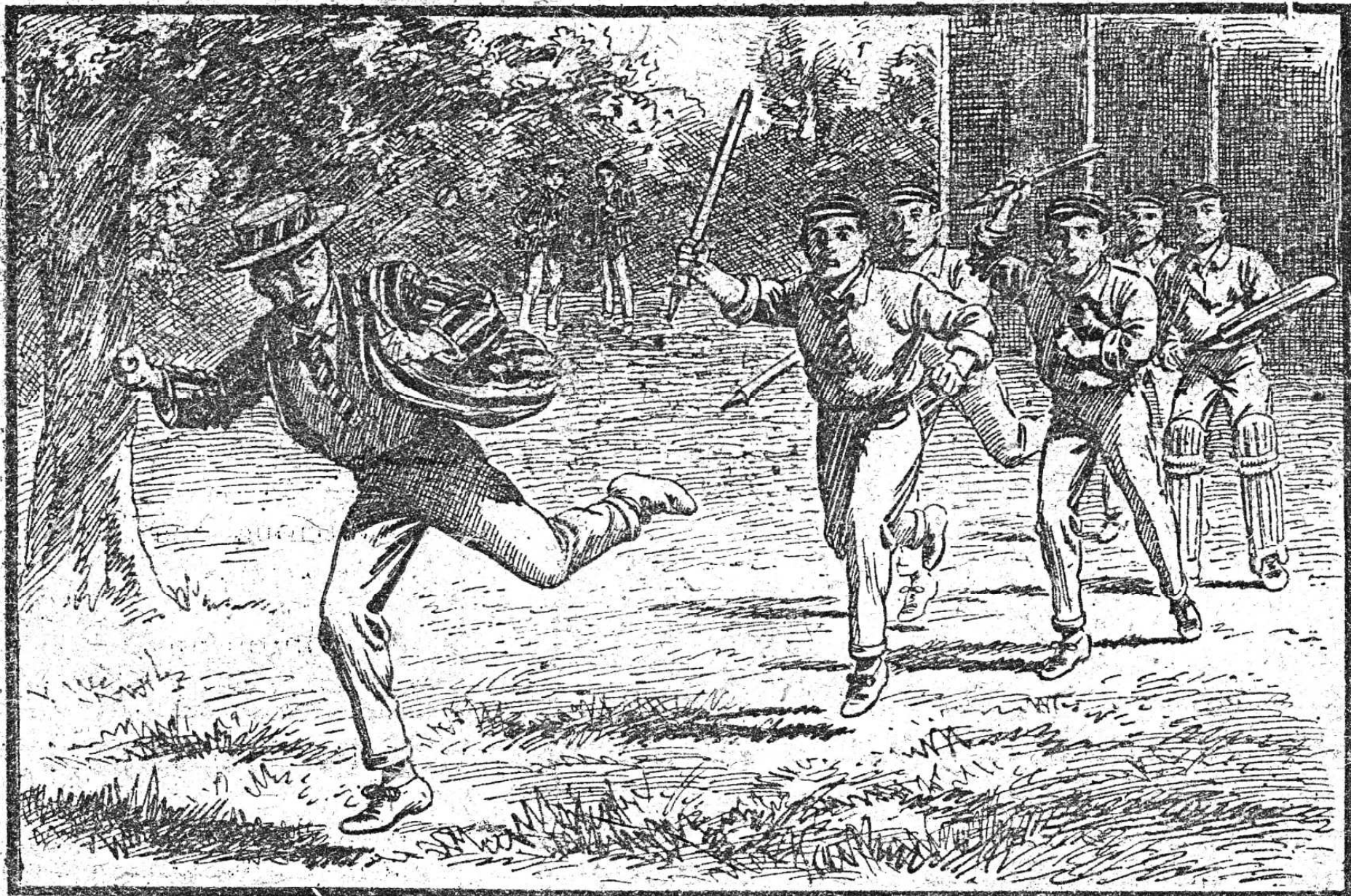
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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

NOT QUITE HIMSELF.

MR. CROWELL rapped his desk impatiently.

"Attention!" he exclaimed, glaring round the Remove Form-room. "I insist upon quietness and order! The next boy who speaks will receive five hundred lines, and will be detained for six hours!"

The Remove listened with grave attention. Nobody had been talking at all, and the Form-room had been deadly quiet ever since lessons had started. It was therefore astonishing that Mr. Crowell should demand attention.

I looked at the Form-master curiously, and I could not help observing that he was not himself. There were hollows under his eyes, and his cheeks were far paler than they had been a month earlier. For several weeks, in fact, Mr. Crowell had been looking somewhat out of sorts.

But, until quite recently, he had carried on with his duties in the same old routine way, with never a change.

Only a day or two earlier the servants' strike had come to an end, and after the excitement of that stirring episode, St. Frank's now seemed comparatively dull. The old staff was back at work, and everything was going smoothly.

We had, of course, plenty of sports to claim our full attention in leisure time. Cricket was just starting in earnest, and rowing was becoming popular. Very soon swimming would be the order of the day, and outdoor sports of every description would need attention.

But during lesson time the Remove found things somewhat dull. Or, at least, things had been dull until a day or so earlier. And then, for the first time, Mr. Crowell had shown signs of altering his behaviour.

He was generally absent-minded and moody now, and his temper, always somewhat razor-like, was becoming sharper.

His school duties could not be responsible for this curious change. Personally, I had an idea that Mr. Crowell was filling in all his spare time by writing. He was compiling some historical work, perhaps, or a book on ancient mythology. We didn't exactly know, and the matter did not interest us in any case.

But the Remove master was seldom seen out of his study, except at meal-times and when lessons called him. Wet or fine, he remained bottled up, and when he emerged he generally had a far-away expression in his eyes—an expression which indicated that his thoughts were in other realms.

During lessons, however, he nearly always came out of his shell, and confined himself to the work in hand briskly, and with all his usual vigour. But within the last day or two, Mr. Crowell had remained absent-minded, even at lesson times. Not only this, but he sometimes acted in a very singular way, and would make the most irrelevant observations.

Only the previous morning he had ordered the Remove to write two lines, and to consider itself detained after lessons, for twelve hours! Naturally, this punishment was not taken seriously, and Mr. Crowell himself apparently forgot all about it. In other ways, too, he was acting very strangely.

On this particular morning things had been going smoothly so far, and Mr. Crowell had given no sign that he was in one of his "dotty" moods. For the Remove had come to regard their Form-master as being somewhat off his rocker. And, certainly, Mr. Crowell's attitude sometimes gave colour to this suggestion.

"He seems to be getting worse!" whispered Handforth, nudging McClure, and causing that junior to make a huge blot on his paper. "Didn't you notice the way he—"

"You—you ass!" hissed McClure. "Look what you've done! I shall get caned for having a blotted paper like this! Why the dickens can't you shut up? You know jolly well that Crowell is touchy about talking in class."

"It strikes me you're doing all the talking!" snapped Handforth.

Mr. Crowell rapped his desk again.

"Handforth!" he exclaimed harshly. "Stand up!"

Handforth stood up, gave a glare at McClure, and then faced the Form-master.

"Yes, sir?" he asked innocently.

"A moment ago, Handforth, you were talking," said Mr. Crowell, with dangerous calmness. "You were not only talking, but you were making grimaces at McClure. In order that you may thoroughly understand my instructions, I command you to write me ten thousand lines of Greek, to be translated into English."

Handforth gasped, and the Remove gasped.

"Ten thousand lines, sir!" repeated Handforth faintly.

"That is what I said, boy!"

"Of—of Greek, sir?"

"Yes."

"But—but we ain't advanced in Greek, sir," said Handforth indignantly. "I couldn't translate ten thousand lines in two years!"

"Unless you take your seat at once, Handforth, I will make your punishment even harder," declared Mr. Crowell. "Remember my words. Ten thousand lines of Chinese to be translated into English!"

"Chinese, sir!" stuttered Handforth.

"Yes!" roared the Form-master.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Remove could not contain itself any longer, and they yelled.

"Silence!" thundered Mr. Crowell.

"How—how dare you make all this noise? As for you, Handforth, I have altered my decision. I will cancel the punishment I just meted out to you."

"Thank goodness!" muttered Handforth.

"Instead of that, you will be placed in solitary confinement for a period of six hours," said Mr. Crowell. "Go to Mars at once, and remain there until I give you permission to return!"

Handforth stared.

"Go—go where, sir?" he asked.

"You distinctly heard what I said, Handforth," said Mr. Crowell irritably. "I detest all these unnecessary questions. You will go up to Mars at once, and you will remain on the planet until I instruct you to return to earth!"

"Oh, my goodness!" said Handforth blankly. "I—I don't mind going to Mars, if you'll tell me how to get there."

Mr. Crowell picked up the duster, and mopped his brow. The Remove, meanwhile, looked on with interest and wonder.

"Clean dotty!" murmured Watson into my ear. "If he goes on like this, we sha'n't be able to have lessons at all. I reckon he'll be fit for a lunatic asylum in less than a week!"

Mr. Crowell looked up, and glared at Watson. He had removed the duster, and his face was decidedly paler—probably because the duster had contained a good portion of chalk.

"Watson," said Mr. Crowell tartly, "you were speaking just now!"

"Was—was I?" asked Watson lamely.

"Yes, you were, and you will write me fifty lines!" snapped Mr. Crowell.

"I have repeatedly said that I will

have quietness in this Form-room, and what I say I mean."

Mr. Crowell glared round, and his gaze became fixed upon the standing Handforth, who was still waiting for instructions before proceeding on his journey to Mars.

"Handforth!" rapped out Mr. Crowell. "What are you doing there?"

"Standing up, sir!" said Handforth brilliantly.

"I can see that, boy! Sit down at once!"

"But you told me to go to Mars, sir!"

"I—I told you——" Mr. Crowell paused, and grasped a pointer. "I will have you know, Handforth, that this is no time for making humorous remarks," he went on curtly. "Come out here!"

"But—but you did tell me to go to Mars, sir——"

"Do not be so absurd, Handforth!" shouted Mr. Crowell. "I told you to go to Mars! Preposterous!"

"Ask any of the chaps, they'll say the same, sir!" exclaimed Handforth warmly. "I'm not trying to be funny; but I thought you were!"

Mr. Crowell gripped the pointer more firmly.

"Pitt, tell the class that Handforth is talking arrant nonsense!" he commanded.

"I—I can't very well do that, sir," said Reginald Pitt, standing up. "The fact is, sir, you did tell Handforth to go up to Mars. Don't you remember, sir?"

"No, I do not!" retorted Mr. Crowell sharply. "Hold out your hand!"

He strode forward, and Pitt received two stinging cuts—for telling the truth. Handforth was treated in a similar manner, and they were both ordered to sit down.

After that the lesson proceeded quietly for another ten minutes. But Handforth and Pitt were by no means pleased. Their hands were smarting, and they failed to see why they should suffer for nothing.

Undoubtedly Mr. Crowell was far from being himself. At times his mind wandered, and the curious part about it was that he didn't seem to be aware of the fact. The result was obvious. The juniors scarcely knew when he was serious, and when he was talking out of his hat—as Watson put it.

"Of course," said Mr. Crowell, "it is an undoubted fact that this phenomenon occurs quite frequently. At the same time, scientists have declared that other phenomena of a similar character only take place once in every thousand years."

"My hat!" I murmured. "He's off again!"

"Dear old boy, it's gettin' serious," said Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "Some-thing will have to be done—it will really!"

"Did you speak, sir?" asked De Valerie politely.

Mr. Crowell started.

"Eh? What is that?" he said. "Certainly I did not speak. Do not be ridiculous, De Valerie. Upon my soul! What are you doing, Fullwood? Is it possible that you are actually chewing?"

Ralph Leslie Fullwood, who was seated in a corner at the back of the room, swallowed very hard, gasped, and stood up.

"Me, sir," he asked. "No, sir, I'm not chewing!"

"I distinctly saw your jaws moving a moment or two ago," said Mr. Crowell angrily. "If you have any article of food in your desk, I order you to bring it to me at once!"

"But I've got nothing, sir!" declared Fullwood. "I think you must be dreamin' again, sir. We ain't on Mars, you know!"

"Dry up, you ass!"

"Shut up, Fully!"

Mr. Crowell smiled.

"No, I quite agree, Fullwood, that we are not on Mars," he said. "It may interest you to know, however, that very shortly we shall be on Jupiter! And unless you are very careful, I will send you off in advance—alone! Sit down, and cease talking arrant nonsense. It is most astounding! Every time I look up one of you boys is standing in his seat!"

"But you told me to stand up, sir," said Fullwood.

"Nonsense! And one more word from you, Fullwood, will compel me to take drastic action!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell. "I have no wish to be harsh, but at the same time I insist upon being obeyed!"

"I wouldn't dream of disobeying you, sir," said Fullwood. "I'll sit down at once, and——"

"I told you not to speak, Fullwood!" interrupted Mr. Crowell. "You appear to think that you can talk to me just as you like. Come down here!"

"But I don't see——"

"Come down here!" thundered Mr. Crowell.

Fullwood left his place, and descended to the front of the Form-room. Meanwhile, Mr. Crowell had turned for a moment, and when he looked round he found Fullwood standing in front of him.

"What are you doing here, Fullwood?" he demanded angrily.

Fullwood gasped.

"Why, you just told me to come down, sir," he exclaimed.

"If this is an attempt to insult me, Fullwood, I warn you that it will not pay," said Mr. Crowell warmly. "How dare you leave your place? How dare you come down here in this disgraceful manner?"

"But—but——"

"I want no excuses! Go back to your seat!"

"Oh, very well, sir!" said Fullwood. "But I don't see how we can know what to do when you contradict your own orders in the same bally breath! It's playin' about with us—that's what it is!"

Mr. Crowell clenched his fists.

"I will not deal with you now, Fullwood!" he said, with ominous quietness.

"I will not interrupt lessons to cane you as you deserve. Go at once to my study, and wait there until I arrive. I will cane you severely, and then perhaps you will realise that it is not permissible for boys to insult their masters!"

"I wasn't insultin' you——"

"Go!" shouted Mr. Crowell.

Fullwood hesitated a moment, and then went. After all, he would miss nearly half an hour of lessons in so doing, so he had no particular objection. And he was booked for a caning, in any case.

He walked out of the Form-room, and slammed the door viciously.

"Now, boys, we will continue," said Mr. Crowell curtly, as he gazed about the room. "Dear me! Is it possible that there is an absentee from lessons?"

He pointed to Fullwood's empty seat.

"Who is missing from there?" he demanded angrily.

"Why, Fullwood, sir," I replied, in astonishment.

"Very well," said Mr. Crowell. "When Fullwood arrives I will punish him severely for being late——"

"But you sent him to your study not two minutes ago, sir," I interrupted.

Mr. Crowell started.

"Good gracious! So I did!" he said. "Of course—of course! How preposterous of me. Well, boys, get on with your geography."

"We're doing arithmetic, sir!" said Pitt.

"Indeed!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell. "Arithmetic. I was under the impression that I was giving you instructions in history! However, get on with your work, and do not delay any further."

The Remove got on, but every junior was feeling somewhat uncomfortable. Mr. Crowell's strange behaviour was by no means pleasant. He seemed quite all right most of the time, but at intervals he would go off into these strange fits of forgetfulness and weird punishments.

Meanwhile, Ralph Leslie Fullwood made his way leisurely to the Form-master's study. He found the apartment empty, of course, and instead of sitting down and waiting, Fullwood saw no reason why he should not use his eyes.

He calmly took possession of Mr. Crowell's own chair, and proceeded to examine the numerous papers which lay on the desk. He discovered that Mr. Crowell was in the midst of writing a heavy scientific work. It was quite dry to Fullwood, but it seemed to offer an explanation of the master's singular behaviour. He was so wrapped up in his writing that it overshadowed his ordinary work.

Fullwood was warned by footsteps in the passage, and he slipped out of Mr. Crowell's chair and stood respectfully in front of the fireplace. The next moment Mr. Crowell strode briskly into the study.

"Ah, good!" he murmured. "Now I can have another hour—— Upon my soul! What is the meaning of this?"

He glared at Fullwood with anger and astonishment.

"What are you doing here, boy?" he demanded.

"I've been waiting for you, sir," said Fullwood.

"Oh, indeed!" snapped the Form-master. "You will write me five hun-

dred lines, Fullwood, for having the insufferable impertinence to enter my study."

"But—but you told me——"

"Silence! Go at once!" shouted Mr. Crowell. "And bring me those lines before eight o'clock this evening, or they will be doubled."

"Dash it all, sir, I don't see why I should write any lines!" roared Fullwood. "You told me to come here, and you can't punish me for obeying instructions!"

"If you dare to say another word, Fullwood, I'll cane you on the spot!" shouted Mr. Crowell hotly. "And remember that I shall require those twenty lines before eight o'clock. Go this instant!"

Fullwood lost no time in going. He had received no caning, and the imposition was suddenly reduced from two hundred to twenty lines. Fullwood thought it better to get out before the impot was increased to a thousand lines. There was never any telling with Mr. Crowell in his present mood.

Fullwood went straight to Study A in the Remove passage, and found Gulliver and Bell waiting for him. They adopted expressions of sympathy as their leader appeared.

"Did you get it hot, old man?" asked Gulliver.

"Hot!" grinned Fullwood. "The silly old ass didn't even touch me—wanted to know what I was doin' in his study."

"But he told you to go there!"

"He'd forgotten it, I suppose," said Fullwood. "Blessed if I can understand what's come over him of late—at least, I couldn't understand until a little while ago. But he's writin' a book of some sort, an' I suppose it's turnin' his poor little brain. Blow the silly old ass! Let's see about tea!"

And Fullwood and Co. dismissed Mr. Crowell from their minds.

CHAPTER II.

IN THE CLOUDS.

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST shook his head.

"Dear old boys, I can't understand it—I can't, really!" he declared. "Mr. Crowell's never been like this before, an' unless things improve——"

"They'll get worse!" grinned Watson.

"Not necessarily," I said. "They might remain the same. Mr. Crowell seems to be half on earth and half in the clouds nowadays, and there's evidently something wrong with him."

"In the head?"

"Of course," I said. "He's all right everywhere else. But it seems to me that he's been doing too much brain-work lately. Before long lessons will be an absolute farce. Even now we can do pretty much as we like."

"That's what I'm so concerned about, dear fellow," said Montie. "It seems frightfully unfair, you know."

"Unfair?"

"Well, some of the chaps are takin' advantage of Mr. Crowell's slackness," said Montie. "Long, for example, has done practically nothin' all day, an' a few others have been slackin' just the same."

I nodded.

"Yes, I've noticed the same thing myself," I said. "Of course, it may be only a passing phase—a kind of spring madness, so to speak. We'll give Mr. Crowell until to-morrow before saying anything about it. But if he's no better, I'll tell the guv'nor."

"But what can Mr. Lee do?"

"Well, I don't know," I said. "He might be able to get Dr. Brett up here, to have old Crowell examined. This kind of thing leads to brain fever unless it's stopped in time."

"You don't think he's dotty, then?" asked Watson.

"Of course he's not dotty," I replied. "For fifty minutes out of every hour he is just himself. He only has these periods at intervals, and I suppose it's caused by preoccupation. He's thinking about something else, and he gets kind of unhinged. But he's not violent, and there's no reason why we should make a lot out of nothing. It's quite possible that he'll be as right as rain to-morrow."

"Begad! Let's hope so," said Sir Montie. "He's a decent old stick, an' I shall be shockin'ly sorry if anything serious happens to him."

It was tea-time, and we were seated in Study C, in the Ancient House. The evening sun was shining in at the window warmly, and we were anxious to be out in record time, in order to get on to Little Side for cricket practice.

Naturally, Mr. Crowell's strange con-

duct was getting talked of by other boys besides Removites. But this was not likely to get to the ears of other masters. They seldom took any notice of the gossip which went round the various Forms. And it was quite probable that the Housemaster—Nelson Lee—knew nothing of the peculiar doings of Mr. Crowell. The Head, of course, was quite isolated.

It was possible that the gov'nor came into contact with Mr. Crowell occasionally, but the chances were that the Form-master would be his normal self at such times. It was only after he had been silent for a period that he displayed his new characteristics. And perhaps they would vanish as suddenly as they had appeared.

We saw very little more of him that evening. He was apparently bottled up in his study, as usual. I passed him in the passage just before supper-time, but he did not seem to notice me at all.

He walked straight on, with his hands clasped behind him, and with his eyes cast down towards the floor.

"Good-night, sir!" I said, as we passed one another.

But Mr. Crowell did not reply. He walked straight on, as though I did not exist. I gazed after him, and then went along to the dining-hall for supper. I could not help wondering what would be the end of the business.

It was a fact that many of the juniors had deliberately skipped their prep., feeling certain that Mr. Crowell would fail to notice anything wrong in the morning. The lazy juniors in the Remove—and there were quite a few—saw no reason why they should not take advantage of the Form-master's unusual slackness.

There was a further discussion in the dormitory, and one or two fellows positively declared that Mr. Crowell was off his head, and that the best thing would be to have him placed quietly in a lunatic asylum. But these fellows were not given any serious attention by the others.

Morrow, of the Sixth, saw lights out, and the Remove was soon asleep. I dropped off almost at once, for I had been practising hard all the evening, and was feeling tired. But although I could drop off to sleep at will, I never slept heavily. It was a habit of mine to awaken at any time I desired. Any unusual sound in the night would

generally have me wide awake in a second.

And it was so on this occasion.

I did not know what the time was, but every fellow in the Remove dormitory was sound asleep, and the moon was shining in at the windows with quite a summer brilliance. The night was perfectly still and peaceful.

I wondered what had caused me to awaken, for no normal sound would bring me out of slumber. I lifted my head a trifle and listened. And I distinctly heard a voice outside in the open.

I was on the point of turning over to go to sleep again, for I imagined that the hour was still comparatively early, and that two of the masters were having a final cigarette before turning in.

But just at that moment the school clock chimed solemnly. And the strokes followed. One, two—I waited for more, but they did not sound, and I sat up in bed curiously.

Two o'clock!

Obviously no masters were taking a stroll at that hour, and now that I was sitting up I could tell that only one voice was sounding. And, moreover, I recognised it at once as the voice of Mr. Crowell!

What on earth could he be doing in the Triangle in the small hours of the morning? The thing was decidedly unusual, and I slipped out of bed and moved across the window. It was wide open at the bottom, and I leaned out and gazed down.

The Triangle was quite clear in the moonlight, but although I looked over every corner of it, I could see no sign of any human figure, and yet the voice was now much more audible, and seemed nearer.

I looked about me with astonishment, but still I could see no sign of Mr. Crowell. It struck me that he might be at one of the windows.

But this did not seem to be the case. I glanced at all the windows, but all those in the near vicinity were bare. I glanced above, and then I uttered a startled gasp. And not without reason!

"Great Scott!" I muttered blankly.

There, high above me, right on the very parapet of the roof, stood Mr. Crowell! His head was lifted towards the sky, and he was talking rapidly. But this caused me no dismay.

It was Mr. Crowell's position that horrified me.

One step, and he would plunge down to certain death. He stood up there, quite careless of any danger, and he talked to the empty atmosphere. The thing was rather uncanny, and I felt a curious creepy feeling pass down my spine.

I hardly knew how to act, and stood there watching, half fascinated.

Mr. Crowell was a somewhat timid man by nature. That is to say, he was not the kind of individual who would spend a holiday in mountaineering, or any other risky, adventurous pursuit.

He was more inclined to take things easily and quietly, and for him to stand on the very edge of the roof in this appalling fashion was the last thing I should have expected of him. It made me feel queer.

And then suddenly a thought struck me.

"I've got it!" I muttered. "He's asleep!"

This seemed the only possible explanation. Mr. Crowell had got up from his bed, and had walked in his sleep to the roof, and at any moment he might take the false step and plunge down to the hard ground far below.

Mr. Crowell had never shown any tendency to be a somnambulist before, but his recent brainwork had probably affected him.

I realised that something would have to be done—quickly.

To shout up to the sleeper would be fatal, for he would probably awaken and fall over the edge of the parapet before he could find out where he was. The only safe method would be to creep up behind him and pull him back before he could awaken; and there was no time to be lost.

I thought it would be just as well to have assistance, although I was quite capable of dealing with the man myself. But it would only take a few seconds to awaken one of my chums.

I crossed quickly to Watson's bed and shook his shoulder.

"Get up!" I exclaimed softly.

"I say, don't be an ass!" muttered Watson sleepily. "What's the idea of getting up now? It's still night——"

"But listen!" I broke in. "Mr. Crowell's walking in his sleep."

"What!"

"He's up on the parapet of the roof, talking to the sky," I said. "He must

be dead asleep, and if he wakes up he'll be killed."

"My goodness!"

Watson sat up in bed, fully awake.

"Do—do you mean it?" he asked huskily.

"Yes, of course," I replied. "Get up, and come with me to the roof. We needn't get dressed; it's as mild as August to-night."

"Dear old boys, what's the trouble?" inquired a sleepy voice. "Is anythin' the matter, Nipper?"

I turned quickly.

"I didn't mean to disturb you, Montie," I said. "Every second that we lose now might mean Mr. Crowell's death."

"Begad!"

I rapidly told Montie what I had seen, and within ten seconds he and Watson were out of bed, anxious to follow me up on the roof. We all liked Mr. Crowell, and if we could do him any service we should be only too delighted.

Without losing a moment we left the dormitory, and passed along the passageway until we came to the staircase leading to the attic. Mounting these, we soon found a door which opened directly on to the flat leads, for in this part of the building the roof was perfectly level, with parapets at each side.

The door, as I had half expected, was unbolted—was even ajar, proving that Mr. Crowell had come up this way some time earlier. We slipped through, and found ourselves under the night sky.

In spite of my reference to an August night, the air was rather chilly, and this was not to be wondered at, considering we only wore pyjamas. However, it was no time to think of such details, and we crept along the ledge, past one or two chimney-stacks, until we came within sight of Mr. Crowell.

He was still there, but he was not actually on the parapet, as I had supposed, or perhaps he had got down within the last minute or two. He was standing close to it, and as it was low there was still danger of his toppling over if he should suddenly awaken. We paused for a moment.

Mr. Crowell was not speaking so loudly now. He seemed rather to be talking to himself, and every now and again he would use his arms, waving them up towards the sky in strange gesticulation.

"He's dotty!" murmured Watson.

"Dear old boy, the poor man is asleep," said Sir Montie. "He doesn't know what he's doin', an' I'm wonderin' if it will be wise for us to wake him up. I've heard that people get frightfully ill if they're roused while they are walkin' in their sleep. What do you say, Nipper, old boy?"

"It can't be helped!" I exclaimed. "Mr. Crowell's in a position of danger, and it's up to us to get him into safety. If we can lead him off the roof without awakening him, all the better. Come on!"

I led the way across the roof, and my chums followed. We slipped along as silently as shadows, and even if Mr. Crowell had been awake he would not have been aware of our presence. We waited until we were actually within arm's length of him, and then we grasped him gently by the coat-sleeves.

The Form-master gave a violent start. "Good heaven!" he panted, turning with a gasp.

He stared at us wildly for a second, then recognition came into his eyes, and his expression changed into one of anger.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded harshly. "Good gracious! Do you realise what the time is? What do you mean by coming on to the roof at this hour of the night, and in your pyjamas?"

"We came to save you, sir," said Watson meekly.

"To save me!" repeated Mr. Crowell.

"You were asleep, sir——"

"Nonsense, boy!" snapped the master. "Asleep! What do you mean by talking such arrant rubbish?"

"It was my fault, sir," I said. "I thought you were asleep, and I woke these other fellows, and told them to come up with me. We meant to pull you back, so that you couldn't fall over the parapet——"

"That is sufficient," interrupted the Form-master curtly. "It seems to me that you have been deliberately spying on my movements. You will all get to bed at once, and write me five hundred lines in the morning!"

"Yes, sir," I said.

It was a bit of a shock to discover that Mr. Crowell had been fully awake all the time. He had not needed saving, and he was perfectly aware of his own actions! But this only puzzled me all the more.

Why on earth had he come to the roof at two o'clock in the morning? Why had he been talking to the empty air? Instead of getting better the Remove master was becoming worse! His actions were getting more and more bizarre.

"Go on—go away this instant!" ordered Mr. Crowell. "I have been disturbed quite sufficiently, and I will not allow you to remain here another second. Go! And do not dare to return under any circumstances."

"All right, sir," I said quietly. "We will obey your orders, of course, but if you will pardon me saying so, I don't think we deserve such a heavy punishment."

"You deserve a flogging, you young rascals."

"But just consider, sir," I said. "I saw you up here, talking to the thin air, and I naturally thought that something was wrong——"

"Fiddlesticks!" interjected Mr. Crowell. "I was talking to friends of mine."

"Friends, sir? Up here?"

"Yes, certainly," said Mr. Crowell irritably. "I have been conversing with the inhabitants of Mars!"

We stared.

"You—you've been talking to people on Mars!" I ejaculated blankly.

"Precisely!"

"But—but that's impossible, sir!" broke out Watson. "You—you ain't well, sir! I—I think you ought to see Dr. Brett——"

"Tush!" snapped the Form-master. "If you do not get out at once, I will send you all to Venus for a week! You interrupted the most interesting conversation with the Martians, and it may take me a considerable time to get into communication with them again."

"Come on, you chaps," I said briskly. "We'll clear!"

"We're frightfully sorry if we've upset you at all, sir," said Sir Montie gracefully. "Anythin' we have done was quite unintentional, begad. If there's nothin' else we can do we'll retire."

"Quite so—go at once," said Mr. Crowell. "Get straight to your lessons, and I will be with you in the Form-room within ten minutes!"

We walked away, leaving Mr. Crowell standing in the middle of the roof. Somehow we were feeling rather queer

about the whole business. Watson nudged me as we were about to enter the doorway.

"Poor old chap!" he murmured. "He's gone—clean gone!"

"He certainly seems a bit off his balance," I agreed. "His mind is mixed up with the planets and lessons, and goodness knows what else! He seems to be safe enough up here, so there's no need for us to worry our heads about him. At the same time, I'm a bit concerned."

"Dear fellow, don't you think we ought to tell Mr. Lee?"

"When, Montie?"

"Now, at once, dear old boy," replied Tregellis-West. "I really fail to see why there should be any delay. Mr. Crowell is gettin' much worse, an' I think it would be only humane if we sent Mr. Lee up to him now. There's no tellin' what he may do on the roof."

I nodded.

"You're right, Montie," I agreed. "We'll go straight to the guv'nor's bedroom, and rouse him up. Mr. Crowell won't send him off easily, and it'll be just as well to let the guv'nor see him when he's in one of his queerest fits. Come on."

We hurried down the stairs, along the passage, and came to a halt outside the door of Nelson Lee's bedroom. I tapped upon the door, and waited.

"Who is that?" came the guv'nor's voice.

"Nipper, sir," I replied. "Can I come in?"

"Certainly—but unless you have a good explanation to lay before me, I shall be very angry," said Nelson Lee. "What are you doing out of bed at this hour?"

I entered the guv'nor's bedroom, and Sir Montie and Tommy followed me.

CHAPTER III.

THE LEGACY OF THE STORM.

NELSON LEE was out of bed, and just slipping into his dressing-gown. He had switched on the electric light, and he regarded us with an expression that was somewhat ominous.

"The hour is nearly two-thirty," he

said. "You boys are out of your dormitory, and you are wearing only your pyjamas. I can see that you are exceedingly cold. What is the meaning of this strange conduct, Nipper?"

"Well, sir, we thought we'd better come to you," I said. "Mr. Crowell's on the roof talking to some pals of his in Mars!"

Nelson Lee frowned.

"This is no time for joking, young 'un," he said severely.

"But I'm not joking, sir," I went on. "Mr. Crowell told us himself—and he ought to know. I saw him from the dormitory window, at first, and thought he was walking in his sleep. He was smoking, too, so I woko up these other chaps, and went on to the roof, meaning to pull Mr. Crowell back into safety."

"Well?"

"We crept up to him, sir, but as soon as we touched him we found he was awake. He was very angry, and ordered us back to bed."

"And he told us that he was holding a conversation with some friends in Mars, sir," put in Tommy Watson. "He seems to mean it, too, and—and—Well, we thought it was very queer, sir."

"So we decided to let you know," I concluded.

Nelson Lee stroked his chin.

"A most extraordinary story," he said. "Mr. Crowell is on the roof, talking to friends in Mars, eh? Dear me! If there were not three of you to support the story I should imagine that somebody had been suffering from nightmare. Is Mr. Crowell still on the roof?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "That's why we came to you."

"Well, under the circumstances, I will not punish you for being out of the dormitory at this time of the night," said Lee. "You have apparently acted for the benefit of Mr. Crowell—and he does not appear to welcome your attentions. But I am exceedingly puzzled, boys. Why should Mr. Crowell tell you such a preposterous story? He is not usually given to joking."

"I think he means it, sir," I said. "He thinks he is talking to somebody in Mars. That's what makes it so uncanny. And Mr. Crowell has been queer like this for two or three days."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, sir. Haven't you noticed it?"

"I have certainly noticed that Mr. Crowell has been far from himself of late," said Nelson Lee slowly. "He has appeared to be absent-minded, and has given me one or two vague answers when I have addressed him. But I have noticed nothing really startling in him."

"He's been overworking his brain, I believe, guv'nor," I exclaimed. "That's about the size of it. But I wish you'd go up to the roof——"

"Yes, Nipper, I intend going at once," said Nelson Lee. "Get back to your dormitory, and go to sleep. If there is anything to tell you, I will have a word with you in the morning. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir."

We all left the bedroom, and Nelson Lee hurried along the passage towards the upper staircase. But we didn't return to the dormitory. Before we had gone ten yards, I came to a halt.

"Come on, my sons," I whispered. "We'll slip up to the roof after the guv'nor—at any rate, to the door. Perhaps we shall be able to hear what goes on. I don't feel inclined to wait until the morning."

My chums were rather doubtful, but they followed me readily enough. And within a minute or two we had arrived at the top of the upper staircase. The door was open, and I gazed out. Nelson Lee was fairly close, and Mr. Crowell was just strolling round a chimney stack. He came to a halt as he caught sight of the House-master.

"Good gracious! Is that you, Mr. Lee?" he asked.

"Yes," replied the guv'nor, moving forward.

"You gave me quite a shock for the moment," said Mr. Crowell.

"I became aware that you were on the roof, and I wondered why you were acting so strangely," said Nelson Lee. "It is between two or three o'clock——"

"Quite so," interrupted the Form-master. "I really couldn't sleep, Mr. Lee, and the night was so brilliant and clear that I fancied a turn on the roof, where everything is quiet and still. I have been greatly interested in studying the stars and planets, and I have found the occupation most entertaining."

I looked at my chums blankly.

"Well, this is about the limit," I said softly. "Old Crowell's absolutely himself now—not a trace of wildness in his talk. The guv'nor will think we've been spinning him a yarn."

"Yes, it's frightfully absurd, dear old boy," said Sir Montie. "I am beginnin' to wish that we hadn't gone to Mr. Lee at all."

"How the dickens were we to know?" I said. "He's been like this all along—he has spasms, so to speak, and forgets all about them within a minute or two. If we showed ourselves to Crowell now, he'd probably say he hadn't seen us before on the roof. We'd better nip back into bed."

So, without any further delay, we hurried downstairs and got back between the sheets. And in the morning I went straight to Nelson Lee's study. The guv'nor looked at me with an amused smile.

"Really, Nipper, I fail to see why you should be so concerned in the night," he exclaimed. "Mr. Crowell is quite rational, and it seemed he was only on the roof for the purpose of taking a stroll."

"I know, sir," I replied. "We slipped up after you, and we heard what Mr. Crowell said. I expect you think we were dreaming, or something."

"I certainly think you allowed your imagination to run somewhat riot," said Nelson Lee, nodding. "It is always possible to get weird ideas into one's head in the dead of night——"

"Oh, come off it, sir," I protested. "I'm not the kind of chap to have ideas of that sort. Mr. Crowell did exactly what I said, and it's a pity he got back into his ordinary manner before you saw him. He has fits like that, and it's a ten-to-one chance that he'll show signs of it in the class-room this morning."

"If Mr. Crowell acts strangely during lessons, make an excuse and leave the room," said Nelson Lee. "Come straight to me, and I will accompany you back."

"Good enough, sir," I replied.

We left it at that, and, of course, Mr. Crowell was almost normal during lessons. The Remove found this out to its sorrow.

The fellows who had skipped their prep. were in hot water, and other juniors who thought they could take things easily made the uncomfortable

discovery that Mr. Crowell was as keen as mustard.

Only once during the whole morning did he go off into one of his strange moods. And this was over within a couple of minutes. I found no opportunity of reporting to Nelson Lee, and when lessons were over the Remove had practically come to the conclusion that the Form-master had completely recovered from his temporary fits of delusion.

It was a half-holiday that day, and as soon as dinner was over everybody hurried out into the open, to enjoy the afternoon's freedom. A good many members of the Remove were booked for cricket practice.

But Sir Montie and Tommy and I, being in better practice than many of the others, decided to go out for a cycle ride, and leave the nets to those fellows who were anxious to improve their form.

It was lovely weather—almost too lovely, in fact. The heat of the afternoon was positively sultry, and reminded one more of August than the latter part of April.

The sun shone from a cloudless sky, and there was hardly a breath of wind. And the sky, although clear, had a look about it which was not absolutely healthy. There seemed to be a foreboding of bad weather in the atmosphere.

"Phew! This is warm work, my sons," I exclaimed, as we pedalled slowly up a hill. "I don't think we'd better go the round we originally planned. We'll take it easier, and get back to Bannington in time for tea."

"That's the idea, old boy," said Tregellis-West. "We'll go in that nice little restaurant, have a rippin' tea, an' then get back to St. Frank's nicely before locking up!"

"Exactly," I agreed.

We took things so easily that it was rather late when we arrived at Bannington, on the return journey. We were perspiring freely, and we thought it just as well to partake of ice-creams before venturing upon the tea. Whether the mixture was good from a health point of view was of no concern to us. By the time we had finished we were feeling quite cool and refreshed, and the ride back to St. Frank's would be easy and enjoyable.

At least, we thought so at first. But soon after we left the restaurant I

changed my opinion. The sky, over in the south, was as black as ink, dense masses of clouds rolling up, steadily and ominously. And, every few seconds, flashes of lightning appeared in the midst of the blackness. Low rumblings were plainly audible. A thunderstorm of considerable violence was coming up.

"We'd better put steam on," I remarked. "If we don't, we shall be provided with a free bath before we get to St. Frank's."

"I felt a spot of rain just now," said Tommy Watson, glancing up at the sky. "My hat! Look at those clouds! I don't think I've ever seen the sky looking so threatening. I believe it'll be even worse than an August thunderstorm."

"Dear old boys, we certainly seem to be in for a period of frightfulness from the heavens," observed Sir Montie. "That cloud bank reminds me of one of those storms we encountered in the tropics, durin' the summer holidays last year."

We pedalled on with all speed, perspiring freely again. The air was very warm, and there was hardly a breath of wind. It neither helped us or retarded us. The atmosphere was astonishingly heavy.

Something extra violent was evidently brewing.

Before we had covered half the distance from Bannington to Bellton, large drops of rain had commenced to fall—huge drops which splashed on our hands with extraordinary force. At first the drops were few and far between, and there was no necessity for us to stop in order to seek shelter.

We arrived at the little turning which cut off the village. By taking this lane we should skirt the back of Bellton Wood, and arrive at St. Frank's ten minutes earlier. It was a short cut the fellows generally took when they were in a hurry. When there was plenty of time to spare the main road was always better. The lane was flinty, the road surface having an ample supply of the very finest puncture mixture.

Still, we chanced it this time, and at length we arrived within sight of the River Stowe. Within another six or seven minutes we should be home.

"Good!" I exclaimed. "I reckon we shall do it comfortably. The rain seems to be holding off for our especial benefit—which is very obliging of it."

But, although the rain was holding off, the sky had become much blacker. The clouds had now rolled right overhead, and, contrary to the usual habit of clouds, they had not thinned out. A cloud bank on the horizon frequently looks solid black, but when it spreads over the whole sky it reveals itself as being quite a harmless affair. In this case it was different.

The thickness of the cloud bank was amazing. It was no longer creeping, but rapidly covering the whole sky. And the darkness increased with every minute that passed—premature darkness, which was rather uncanny.

As we cycled along we could scarcely see fifty yards ahead, except when the blazing flashes of lightning rent the heavens.

Boom—boom—boooooom!

A crash of thunder roared overhead like the combined reports of a dozen heavy pieces of artillery. The reports were so loud that they hardly sounded like thunder, and the echo rolled and reverberated alarmingly.

"Great Scott!" gasped Watson. "That was a crash, and no mistake!"

"Rather, old boy," said Montie. "I'm gettin' quite nervous. I don't remember a storm like this before. It's somethin' quite exceptional."

The lightning was awful—great jagged forks of livid brilliance. And before we had ridden another two hundred yards the darkness was almost like that of a winter's night. Then, without the slightest warning, came the rain.

It simply fell in one solid mass—a blinding, roaring sheet of water, hissing down with appalling force. And with it came a gale which almost brought us to a standstill, and which bent the trees and hedges nearly flat. Riding was practically an impossible proposition, and we fell from our machines, rather than dismounted.

"In here—quick!" I yelled, above the hiss of the rain and the howl of the wind.

By a piece of very good luck, we were just opposite a low shed which stood within a gateway. It was an isolated farm building, and it didn't matter to us whether it was occupied or not. We dashed into it blindly, nearly half soaked, and we found the place empty. It was a shelter, and that was sufficient.

"By Jove," I panted, "only just in time!"

"Only just in time!" echoed Sir Montie. "Dear fellow, you don't seem to realise that my topper is utterly and irrevocably ruined. I shall never be able to wear these trousers again, and my jacket is quite worthless."

"Blow your beastly clothes!" said Watson. "Just have a look outside. Phew! Did you ever see such rain? It's like a flood!"

"It's a fine example of a cloud burst, anyhow," I said, gazing out into the meadow. "I pity anybody who happens to be caught without shelter near by. We're jolly lucky to get in here."

We didn't talk much, for we were fascinated by the extraordinary fury of the thunderstorm. The thunder crashed again and again—terrible booming reports which fairly shook the ground. And the rain descended with such fearful violence that the spray formed a kind of fog fully three feet above the ground. It was impossible to see across the meadow, even when the long lightning flashes made the darkness brilliant.

"My word," said Watson, in an awed voice, "this is horrible! It makes a chap feel so jolly small, you know. When Nature gets busy like this we human beings are as helpless as pebbles on the beach."

"You're right there, old son," I agreed. "The human race can do a lot of wonderful things, but when it comes to something on a large scale, Mother Nature shows us a few—Good heavens, look—look at that!"

Boom—boom—crash!

We all stared out at the black sky. Without the slightest warning it had been parted by a blinding flash of light—a flash which did not seem to be the same as the ordinary glares of lightning. And a crash followed on the top of it which seemed to make the whole ground rock and quiver.

But the most astounding thing was still visible—even after the lightning had quivered out. Something brilliant, a ball of fire, was shooting down from the clouds. It came down in a slanting direction, and we watched it with something akin to consternation. It was certainly startling.

"What—what is it?" gasped Watson. "Do you think an aeroplane was caught in the storm? That lightning might have exploded the petrol."

"That's not a blazing aeroplane," I said grimly. "It's something very different, and unless I'm mistaken—By jingo, look at that!"

The ball of fire, now absolutely ablaze with brilliance, whizzed down, and fell in one of the neighbouring meadows—on the other side of the river, by the look of it. A glare lit the sky for a second when the object struck, and rapidly died down to a glow, which, in turn, vanished altogether.

"Great Scott!" panted Watson. "What was it?"

"Dear old boy, it's no good askin' me," said Sir Montie, shaking his head in rather a bewildered fashion. "I am in a frightful state of amazement—I am, really! Begad, the rain has stopped!"

"So it has!" I said, looking out into the open. "The tap's been turned off as abruptly as it was turned on. But I expect we shall have a lot more wetness before long. I vote we venture out at once."

"To see what fell over there, old boy?"

"It was an aeroplane on fire," persisted Watson. "I'll bet you anything you like I'm right. The thing must have caught fire up in the clouds—and you know what an aeroplane is once it starts burning. It simply shoots to the ground——"

"You're wrong, my son," I interrupted. "That wasn't an aeroplane."

"Then what was it?"

"Well, it's my belief we've witnessed the fall of an aerolite," I replied.

"A which?"

"An aerolite!"

"And what the dickens is an aerolite, you ass?"

"A kind of meteorite," I answered. "They're called fireballs, and the smaller sort are very often the common or garden thunderbolt."

"Rats!" said Watson. "Thunderbolts don't come down like that."

"They do sometimes," I said. "If you look up any encyclopædia you'll find all sorts of information. For example, if I remember rightly, the largest aerolite on record fell in Brazil, and weighed about six tons."

"Begad!"

"But, of course, we don't get that sort of thing in England, so far as I know," I went on. "Anyhow, it looks to me as if that thing we saw was a meteorite—white hot, owing to the

friction caused by the atmosphere. The best thing we can do is to hurry over and have a look at the spot."

"Jolly good idea," said Watson. "That's a lot better than sticking here wasting time by listening to your jaw. I believe the thing was a burning aeroplane, and I wouldn't mind betting a currant bun I'm right!"

I didn't take on the bet, and we left the shed without further delay, leaving our bicycles within. We could easily go back for them, and it was impossible to ride them across the half-flooded meadows, in any case. The water had had time to get away.

We were all somewhat excited, and we lost no time in getting to the foot-bridge and crossing to the other side of the river.

The sky was now clearer, but the thunder still rolled out in tremendous peals, and the lightning was incessant. But the rain seemed to be over, except for one or two drops which fell at intervals.

Over in a corner of the meadow which adjoined the St. Frank's playing-fields we saw a column of thin steam rising in the now still atmosphere, for the wind had died down completely.

And we hurried towards that steam, feeling sure that we should discover something of exceptional interest.

What was it that we had seen falling from the clouds?

CHAPTER IV.

MR. CROWELL'S AMAZING DISCOVERY.

"GREAT pip!"

Edward Oswald Handforth uttered that exclamation, and he did so in a tone of great excitement. He was standing just within the lobby of the Ancient House, staring out into the blackness of the storm.

The Triangle looked very much like a lake, for the torrential rain, which had only just ceased, had descended with such appalling force, and in such large quantities, that the water had been unable to run away.

A good many other juniors were collected about the Ancient House doorway, too, and they were all awed by

the extraordinary violence of the thunderstorm.

Needless to say, Handforth had been startled by the fall of the flaming object which had so astonished Tregellis-West and Watson and myself. Church and McClure, and a good few others, were also witnesses.

"What was it, you chaps?" panted Church excitedly.

"Blessed if I know," said Pitt. "It came right down out of the sky, and it must have fallen in the playing-fields."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "It fell miles away."

"It's my belief it came down in the village," said Singleton.

Opinions differed, but the majority of the fellows agreed that the flaming object had descended a mile or two away. It was very difficult to tell precisely—as, in just the same manner, a burning building in a large town often seems near when it is actually a long distance away.

"It looked just like a burning Zeppelin," remarked De Valerie. "I saw one once during the war and I sha'n't forget it in a hurry. But this thing was altogether quicker—it fell like a stone."

Nobody knew exactly what to think, and hardly any juniors suggested venturing out to investigate—mainly because they were under the impression that the strange object had fallen some miles away.

But the juniors were not the only ones who had been watching.

Mr. Crowell was at his study window. He had been curious in his manner during the earlier part of the storm—nervous, jumpy, and excited. He had talked to himself almost continuously, pacing his study with rather wild eyes.

And as he saw the ball of fire shoot down from the heavens he gave a hoarse cry, and flung open his window even wider. He stared out into the gloom, and then, without the slightest warning, he turned from the window and dashed across his study. He flung open the door and tore out into the passage.

Down the passage he fled, reached the lobby, and pushed his way through the crowds of juniors roughly, and made for the exit.

"Let me pass—let me pass!" he shouted feverishly.

The juniors were astounded, and allowed the Form-master to reach the doorway. He was hatless, wore only house slippers, and had no overcoat.

"You—you can't go out, sir!" exclaimed Handforth. "The Triangle's flooded!"

"You haven't got any hat, sir!"

"Egad, and no boots!" said Singleton.

But Mr. Crowell took no notice whatever. He tore out of the lobby, went down the steps two at a time, and crossed the Triangle at the double—the juniors looking after him with astonishment.

"He's mad!"

"Clean off his chump!"

"Oh, rather!"

Mr. Crowell was unconscious of these remarks regarding his mental condition. He continued to run, and he went over the playing-fields, across a meadow until he reached the river bank, and then he came to a pause, and gazed around.

"It was in this direction—I know it was in this direction!" he panted hoarsely. "I distinctly saw it fall—Ah!"

He suddenly caught sight of three figures in the gloom—the figures of Tregellis-West, Watson, and myself. We saw the Form-master at the same moment and came to a halt. We were just on our way to the spot where we had seen the fireball alight.

"Who's that?" asked Watson, peering forward.

"Looks like old Crowell," I said.

"Begad, I believe it is!" said Sir Montie. "But there is somethin' strange about this, dear boys. He's wearin' no hat, an' he appears to be — Begad, I believe he is beckonin' to us!"

Mr. Crowell was, and we hurried across the meadow.

"Boys—boys!" shouted the Form-master. "Did you see it?"

"Yes, sir," I replied.

"Where did it fall?" demanded Mr. Crowell fiercely. "Tell me! Where did it fall, Nipper? Tell me at once!"

He was feverish in his anxiety and impatient to a degree.

"By what we could see, sir, the thing came down just on the other side of that hedge," I said, pointing. "We were wondering what it could be, and I'm of the opinion it was a meteorite —"

"More likely an aeroplane on fire," said Watson.

"Nipper is right—Nipper is undoubtedly right!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell. "A fragment of matter from the outer space! A portion of— But we must waste no time! Not a second! This object has come straight from Mars! I know it—I am absolutely sure of it!"

"From where, sir?" I asked, staring.

"From Mars!"

"Oh, I don't know, sir—" I began doubtfully.

"But I do know, boy—I *do* know!" shouted Mr. Crowell. "Do you think I am speaking without knowledge? The object we saw has come direct to this earth from the planet Mars! Come, we will investigate!"

"But you haven't got any hat, sir," said Watson. "And you've only got slippers on. You'll catch a terrific cold, sir."

"What do I care about colds?" demanded the Form-master sharply. "Watson, you will write me fifty thousand lines for impertinence!"

Watson gasped.

"Fifty thousand, sir?" he repeated blankly.

"Yes, at least," mumbled Mr. Crowell, as though talking to himself—"at least fifty thousand miles a second! Even at that rate it would have taken many days to travel through the realms of outer space— Eh?" he added suddenly. "Oh come, boys, come! We are wasting time!"

"But about those lines, sir—" began Watson anxiously.

"What lines?" barked Mr. Crowell.

"You just gave me fifty thousand."

"Nonsense—nonsense!" shouted the Form-master, rushing off.

He made straight for the hedge, and we gazed at one another.

"Dear old fellows, he's got 'em again!" murmured Tregellis-West softly.

"He seems a bit wild, anyhow," I said. "I don't mean angry—but strange. I wonder what bee he's got in his bonnet this time? He seems to be a bit dotty on Mars, by the way he keeps talking about it."

We followed Mr. Crowell to the hedge, broke through a gap, and passed into the other meadow. There, not thirty yards away, the Form-master was standing quite still, staring at the ground.

Just at that spot steam was rising, and we could see that the grass was blackened. We ran up, and then we stared at the spot with great interest. The meadow was quite a smooth one, but just in this particular place a considerable hole had been made.

The grass was scorched and burnt, and a fair-sized hole was visible, being partially filled up with jagged pieces of rock-like substance of a curious texture and colour. It was steaming, and the very centre of the hole was filled with a great chunk of the rock which fairly glowed with heat. We could feel the warm air on our cheeks as we stood there.

The air, too, was charged with a pungent smell, which I find very difficult to describe. It was not unlike the smell which results when a white-hot piece of iron is suddenly thrust into a tank of water.

"Extraordinary!" said Mr. Crowell softly.

"An aerolite, right enough," I remarked. "I was right, you see, Tommy. Your aeroplane idea was right off the mark."

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Watson disgustedly. "I thought we were going to see something worth looking at. There's nothing here, only a few jagged chunks of beastly rock. It's a swindle!"

"Dear fellow, were you anxious to see a wrecked aeroplane?" asked Sir Montie. "I am frightfully glad that nothin' worse has happened. A wrecked an' burnt aeroplane would have meant a dead pilot."

"Oh, I know that!" said Watson. "I'm glad there's been nobody killed or hurt. But this thing is rotten. There's nothing to see at all."

"My dear chap, this is of astonishing interest," I declared. "I'll warrant a report of this appears in all the London dailies to-morrow."

"Rats!"

"You don't seem to realise that the fall of an aerolite is an event which only occurs once in a blue moon," I went on. "This seems to be an extra big one, too. Think of it—a fragment of matter from outer space, coming down here, near St. Frank's! My dear chap, it's an event of the utmost scientific importance."

"Well, there's not much to see," said Tommy bluntly.

"You always were a stolid, matter-of-

fact boulder," I grinned. "You've got no imagination, my son. Think of this piece of metallic rock, weighing tons and tons, shooting through space towards the earth! Supposing it had struck a house—supposing it had fallen on St. Frank's! It would have crashed through to the very cellar, and a fire would have started on the instant. It's amazingly lucky that it fell here, out in the open meadows."

"Well, I'll admit that," said Watson, staring at the blackened remains. "But you can't tell me this thing weighs tons and tons——"

"It probably did," I said.

"It did?" asked Watson. "What do you mean—'it did'?"

"Well, I expect it was fifty times this size before it struck our atmosphere," I explained. "It was as cold as ice then—colder. A mere fragment of the countless interplanetary bodies which form a part of the solar system. Then it came into contact with the earth's atmosphere. At that terrific speed the friction must have been terrific, and within a few seconds the mass of rock was white hot to the core, burning itself away and melting into dust, until only a small piece of it remained to hit the ground. That's how I figure it."

"You put it in a frightfully convincin' way, old boy," said Sir Montie. "I don't know anythin' about these matters, an' I wouldn't dream of arguin'. It is certainly exceedin'ly interestin'—— I beg your pardon, sir!"

Mr. Crowell, having been silent and still for several minutes, was now moving about and talking. He bent down, picked up a portion of black rock, and then hastily dropped it.

"Most decidedly a meteorite," he said absently. "I was hoping that it would be something different. However, this is of enormous interest. I must admit that I am greatly curious. I cannot understand——"

He mumbled the rest of his words, and we couldn't catch them. Then he went round the hole, bending low, gazing at the curious-looking rock with intense interest and animation.

"He'll catch the 'flu through this," I murmured. "But it's no good talking to him. Wild horses wouldn't drag him away now. I vote we get off at once, and give the gov'nor a tip. He'll probably come out and make Mr. Crowell go back."

"You ass!" said Watson. "You might be able to give Warren a tip, but you can't do that sort of thing with Mr. Lee——"

"Oh, my hat!" I grinned. "What a literal chap you are, Tommy! I mean a tip—a word in his private ear. Not money!"

"Well, you should say what you mean," growled Watson. "How am I to understand what the dickens——"

"Good gracious!" gasped Mr. Crowell abruptly. "What is this—what is this? 'Pon my soul! A metal casket! Ah! I was right! This is the one moment I have been waiting for! I was right—I was right!"

He fairly shouted the last words.

"What's the matter, sir?" I asked curiously.

Mr. Crowell took no notice of me. He had suddenly pounced down, and he now held something in his hands—something which he tossed about from palm to palm, proving that it was fairly hot.

We looked at him with sudden interest, and we looked at the article he held. It was a smallish metal box, bound strongly at the corners. Its colour was a drab, slaty-blue, with streams of black in it. I could see at once that the box had been subjected to white-hot heat at one time, for it was warped and twisted out of shape in a very remarkable manner.

"Great Scott!" muttered Watson. "What's that?"

"It couldn't have been in that mass of stone, anyhow," I said. "Such a thing is impossible! Yet it seems mighty queer——"

"It was right in the middle of those broken bits, anyhow," said Tommy. "It was in that aerolite, as sure as a gun. I expect it was imprisoned right in the middle, and when the thing broke it liberated this box."

"Oh, rot!" I said. "You can't tell me that that metal box came from outer space! It's a human object—a box fashioned by the hand of man. This meteorite came from some other planet——"

"You are right, Nipper—you are right," declared Mr. Crowell, turning to me. "This mass of rock did come from another planet. It came from Mars. And this box came, too. It may be of the very highest importance."

He was fairly shaking with excitement, and he wrenched eagerly at the warped metal casket. At first nothing



We crept silently up towards Mr. Crowell for fear of awakening him.

resulted, but then we heard a creak, and one more fierce pull did the trick.

The lid came off, and fell to the ground.

Mr. Crowell stared eagerly into the box, and we stared, too, moving nearer with a new curiosity. The sky had cleared a good deal by this time, and the evening light was fairly strong. The thunder only rolled distantly, and away in the south the clear sky was beginning to appear.

"Dear me!" muttered Mr. Crowell. "Dear me!"

The box contained something which looked like blackened paper, but which, on investigation, proved to be a roll of thin asbestos. It was tightly done up, and tied with great security with asbestos string.

"Wonderful—wonderful!" gasped Mr. Crowell, his hands shaking with intense excitement. "This proves conclusively that Mars contains the same substances as the earth! Asbestos! To keep something intact and safe from the white heat of the outer casing of rock! It is clear—a masterly expedient!"

He fairly tore away the string, and then unrolled the asbestos sheet. We watched with wondering interest. What on earth this could be we hadn't the faintest idea. But it had been found right in the midst of this meteorite—which, without the slightest doubt, had come from outer space—and we were naturally curious. But I couldn't bring myself to believe that the metal box had actually broken free from that fragment of another world.

Mr. Crowell succeeded in unwrapping the asbestos, and only a very small object remained—a folded piece of yellow and scorched parchment. The Form-master could hardly hold it from excitement.

"A message!" he muttered feverishly. "A message from Mars!"

"Oh, go easy, sir!" grinned Watson.

"A message from Mars!" repeated Mr. Crowell, unfolding the parchment, and taking no notice whatever of us. "There is not the slightest doubt on the subject. Every precaution was taken to ensure the safe arrival of this parchment. Wonderful! This will be the sensation of the— Ah! Here we are! Yes, I was right—I was right!"

He had unfolded the paper by this time, and was gazing at the face of it. The parchment was ancient, to all ap-

pearances—a piece of old stuff which had seen many summers. It was discoloured, scorched, and torn at the edges. But the face of it bore some strange characters quite distinctly.

We gazed upon them wonderingly.

They were not writing characters, but symbols—hieroglyphics. All were weird and utterly unlike anything I had ever seen. Mr. Crowell fairly yelled with excitement as he saw them.

"Yes, I was correct!" he shouted wildly. "A message—a message from the inhabitants of Mars!"

"But look here, sir—" I began.

"This is a message, I tell you!" interrupted Mr. Crowell fiercely. "I know what I am saying! Do you think I am mad, Nipper? This parchment was contained within the asbestos—within the metal casket! It came from outer space—from the planet Mars! And this is a message to us—the human race! For many years we have been waiting, and at last it has come! Wonderful—wonderful!"

"Begad!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"But what's the good of it, sir?" I asked. "Even supposing it is a message, we can't find out what it means —"

"Nonsense!" shouted Mr. Crowell. "I shall make it my task to decipher this amazing message. I shall not rest—I shall not eat or drink—until I have arrived at the solution!"

He grabbed up the asbestos and the two pieces of metal casket, and then rushed away towards the school, his coat tails flying. We gazed after him, and did not say a word until he had vanished behind the hedge.

Then we looked at one another.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Tommy Watson.

"A bit staggering, eh?" I remarked.

"A message from Mars, my sons—sent to earth within a giddy meteorite!"

"Begad!" said Sir Montie. "You don't believe it, do you, Nipper boy?"

I grinned.

"Of course I don't!" I said. "I was repeating Crowell's words. It's no more a message from Mars than this thing is a chunk of Martian rock! Crowell has gone dotty on the subject, that's all. I don't think we'd better tell the other chaps, or our respected Form-master will be the laughing stock of the school."

"But it's jolly queer how that parch-

ment got into the metal box," said Watson thoughtfully. "All that asbestos, too. You can't get away from it, you chaps. It's thundering queer!"

"So it is," I agreed, nodding. "I've been puzzled over that point myself. It's quite clear that the parchment was carefully placed within the asbestos, and then in the metal box so that it could withstand enormous heat. And Crowell found it all among these fragments of meteoric rock. On the face of it, a fellow would be inclined to think that the little casket had come from the rock itself—but I can't bring myself to believe it. Crowell, being absolutely eaten up with these scientific matters, and being dotty on astronomy, jumped to the obvious conclusion at once. He simply wouldn't hear of the thing being a fake——"

"But how do we know it is a fake?" asked Watson.

"Common-sense."

"Eh?"

"Our common-sense tells us that such a thing is impossible," I went on. "My dear old son, you're not going to make me believe that the inhabitants of Mars have sent down this chunk of rock with a message in the middle of it. I'll agree that everything looks significant, and that there seems hardly any doubt; but there'll be a perfectly natural explanation. But, for the moment, I am not interested in it. I am rather anxious to see what Crowell will make of those weird-looking hieroglyphics."

"An' we'd better lose no time in gettin' back into the House, dear old boys," observed Sir Montie. "I'm feelin' shockin'ly damp, an' I simply must have a change of clobber."

"And don't forget—we mustn't say anything to the other fellows about that casket," I exclaimed. "It's all right about the meteorite—we can cause a bit of a sensation by telling of our startling experiences."

A moment later we were crossing the meadow at a trot, and rather surprised that nobody else had come to the spot in order to make investigations. We got our bicycles, and rode them along the soaking lanes until we reached St. Frank's.

By this time the sky was almost clear, and the air calm again. The storm had passed over us, leaving any amount of damage behind it.

Gardens were in a frightful condition, vegetables being washed out of the ground wholesale. Many trees were over, and quite a large amount of miniature floods had resulted from the terrific rainpour.

Not that these matters concerned us individually.

When we got back to St. Frank's, our first thought was to change into dry clothing. It was well past tea-time, of course—in fact, supper-time, and we had our prep. to do, to say nothing of other duties. For example, I thought it as well to write some lines which Mr. Crowell had presented me earlier in the day. He might forget all about them; but, on the other hand, he would probably remember the impot.

But we found enough time to slip down into the common-room before going along to Study C. It was fairly crowded, and the juniors were all discussing the recent storm. They were greatly interested when they heard that we had been caught in the rain.

"I suppose you saw that thing fall from the sky?" asked Pitt.

"Yes."

"I reckon it came down somewhere near Caistowe," said Grey.

"Wrong!" I grinned. "My dear chap, it fell only one meadow away from the playing fields."

"My hat!"

"Well, I'm blessed!"

"What was it, Nipper?"

"Don't all speak at once," I said. "The thing that came down from the heavens, my sons, was a meteorite—a fragment of matter from outer space, made white hot by its rush through the earth's atmosphere."

"What rot!" said Handforth. "How could the atmosphere make anything hot? Every airman says that the air, thousands of feet up, is freezing cold!"

I grinned.

"My dear chap, that's a different matter," I said. "When a foreign body, travelling through space, strikes the atmosphere of a planet, there is an immediate friction, and, although the atmosphere may be freezing, that friction will cause solid rock to become white hot——"

"We don't want to hear any scientific lectures," said Handforth. "And as for this thing being a meteorite, I'm not so sure that I believe it. I expect you imagined half of it."

"Rats!" exclaimed Pitt. "You saw the thing fall. Handy, and you know as well as I do that it was something totally unusual. It was a meteorite, sure enough, and I've a good mind to pop out and have a look at it. What does it look like?"

"Oh, there's nothing particular to see," said Watson; "only a few chunks of dirty-looking rock splintered about. I'm blessed if I can see anything to make a fuss of."

"There's no telling what that rock may contain," I said. "I remember reading of a case where a meteorite fell, and the rock was full of diamonds."

"Great Scott!" said Handforth. "Let's rush out and look!"

"But hundreds of meteorites have fallen that haven't been worth a ha'penny, except as souvenirs," I added. "You don't seem to realise, my sons, that this is a chance in a lifetime. In the morning you ought to lose no time in collecting little bits to keep. It'll be jolly interesting to have a chunk of matter that came down to earth from outer space."

"Yes, rather," agreed Pitt. "We'd better go out now——"

"Take my advice, and leave it till the morning," I said. "It's dark, and you can't see properly—and, what's more, the rock is too jolly hot to get hold of. It'll be hours before it's cooled down sufficiently to handle."

The juniors took my advice, and spent the remainder of the evening discussing the affair with much animation. Handforth and Co., as usual, commenced arguing almost as soon as they opened their mouths.

They were passing along the passage from Study D to the school library.

"You can say what you jolly well like," declared Handforth, "but I know what I'm talking about. Meteorites don't touch the earth at all—they're shooting stars! And we'll soon see who's right when we look in the encyclopædia."

"A dotty idea, I call it," said Church. "What's the good of wasting time like this? Shooting stars are meteors."

"Well, what's the difference between a meteorite and a meteor?" demanded Handforth.

"A meteorite is a thing that falls on the earth," said Church. "A meteor is the same thing, but it doesn't hit the earth at all—it flies to fragments, or

dust, before it can get through our atmosphere."

"Rot!" said Handforth bluntly.

"Look here, I'm not going to be talked to like that!" snorted Church rebelliously. "I've been stating scientific facts—and you call it rot! If you say another word, I'll refuse to go another step with you!"

Handforth came to a halt.

"Is that so?" he exclaimed with deadly calmness. "In that case, you cheeky rotter, you'll come along whether you like it or not. You'd better understand, once and for all, that I don't stand any rot from you!"

He grasped Church by the back of the neck, and proceeded to run him along the passage. Church naturally resisted, and the result was that the pair finally went to the floor with a thud, Handforth's head striking the panel of a door with a terrific thud. Unfortunately, that door was the door of Mr. Crowell's study.

"Yaroooooh!" howled Handforth wildly.

"You—you silly, ass!" gasped Church. "I ricked my ankle——"

"Ow—yow!" moaned Handforth. "I can see twenty stars——"

"Meteorites, you mean," grinned McClure.

"You—you funny idiot!" snorted Handforth, sitting up with his back to the door. "I'll—I'll—— What the—— Whooooop!"

Handforth suddenly disappeared backwards through the doorway, for he had been leaning against it with considerable pressure. It had been flung open by Mr. Crowell himself, and the Form-master strode out into the passage, whisking a cane.

At least, it was his intention to stride out. He had no idea that Handforth was on the floor. The result was disastrous. Mr. Crowell trod on Handforth's chest before he could pull himself up. Then he stumbled, pitched forward, and fell in a heap. Church and McClure fled.

"Good gracious!" gasped Mr. Crowell. "You—you young rascal! How dare you deliberately make this disturbance outside my door——"

"We—we didn't realise it was your door, sir," panted Handforth, jumping up, and lending Mr. Crowell a hand. "I'm awfully sorry, sir! I—I hope you ain't hurt, sir! I believe my ribs are broken."

Mr. Crowell leapt to his feet, assisted by Handforth. He was labouring under great excitement—not because of this little incident, but evidently on account of something very different.

Swish! Swish! Swish!

“Yowooop!” howled Handforth, jumping high in the air.

Swish—swish!

Mr. Crowell plied his cane with astonishing energy before Handforth could realise what was happening. And the cane sang round Handy's legs in no unmistakable manner. The Removite had no chance to dodge until he was quite sore.

“Go away—leave me in peace!” exclaimed Mr. Crowell fiercely. “Go away, you young rascal! Just as I am in the middle of deciphering this amazing document from another world! Go, go! Write me two million lines!”

“Oh, my only hat!” groaned Handforth, hobbling down the passage. “He's mad! He's clean off his chump! And after I helped him to his feet, too! I never knew he was so jolly ungrateful! Two million lines! Great corks!”

Handforth did not take the impot. seriously. It was impossible to do so. It was apparent—except to Handy—that Mr. Crowell's mind was running on huge distances and calculations of space. Otherwise he would never have presented Handforth with two million lines.

As it happened, I was entering the passage just as Handforth limped out. He was looking rather the worse for wear, and I paused.

“Trouble?” I inquired sympathetically.

“Where are you going to?” demanded Handforth abruptly.

“Crowell's study.”

“Don't go!”

“Why not, you ass?”

“He's mad—absolutely dippy!” declared Handforth. “He just swiped into me for nothing, roared like a bull, and gave me two million lines!”

“Is that all?” I asked. “I suppose you'll get them done by bedtime?”

Handforth snorted, and marched on. Under the circumstances, I thought that it would be better, perhaps, to wait a few minutes before taking the lines to Mr. Crowell. I was not exceedingly anxious to share Edward Oswald's fate.

However, after ten minutes had slipped by I went to Mr. Crowell's study again,

tapped at the door, and entered. The Form-master was sitting at his desk, leaning back in his chair in a thoughtful attitude.

He seemed quite oblivious of my presence, and there was an expression in his eyes which was eloquent of triumph and inward excitement. He looked at me as though he didn't see me.

“I've brought those lines, sir,” I said.

Mr. Crowell started.

“Good gracious!” he exclaimed. “How did you get into this room, Nipper?” he asked.

“I walked in, sir.”

“But I didn't see you—However, I presume I was thinking,” said Mr. Crowell. “What are you doing here, Nipper? Why on earth do you choose this time to come disturbing me?”

“I'm only obeying your orders, sir,” I replied. “I've brought these lines.”

Mr. Crowell waved them aside.

“Never mind the lines now, Nipper,” he said. “I have something of the utmost importance to tell you—something which will amaze you, and which is destined to amaze the whole world, from corner to corner.”

Mr. Crowell rose from his chair, and acted mysteriously. He went to the window, saw that it was fastened, and he pulled the curtains closely together. Then he passed across to the door, locked it, and returned to his seat. He beckoned to me to take a chair opposite. I did so, feeling it better to humour him, for he was obviously in a state of great inward excitement.

“Now, Nipper,” said Mr. Crowell, in a husky whisper, and looking at me with eyes that shone strangely, “listen to what I have to tell you. It is the most astounding revelation that any boy has ever had the privilege of listening to!”

CHAPTER V.

MR. CROWELL'S DELUSION.

MR. CROWELL paused before saying any more.

I waited wonderingly, and came to the conclusion that my respected Form-master was not fully aware of what he was saying. For days past he had been showing signs of weak-

ness in the upper storey, and it seemed that matters were now getting worse instead of better.

"Is it really important, sir?" I said, breaking the silence.

"Important!" echoed Mr. Crowell. "Good heavens! I can safely tell that this is the most important discovery that has ever been made to mankind—and I do not exaggerate. I am giving you the unparalleled honour of being the first outsider to hear the astounding revelation."

"Thank you, sir!" I said.

"Well, Nipper, you must listen carefully, when you will hear this remarkable news," said Mr. Crowell, bending forward in his chair, and speaking in a mere whisper. "I have been examining that parchment which I discovered within the meteorite—or the object which we mistakenly took for a meteorite. It was actually a specially prepared projectile, sent from Mars to this planet."

"Really, sir?" I said, humouring him.

"Yes, really," declared Mr. Crowell. "That object was no chance atom of rock flying aimlessly through space. It was sent to this earth by the highly advanced inhabitants of Mars—and I have proof of it."

"Proof, sir?"

"Yes, Nipper—absolutely unqualified proof," said Mr. Crowell keenly. "Listen! I have been examining that parchment, and I have already deciphered the hieroglyphics which seemed so incomprehensible to us."

"But how could you decipher them without a key, sir?" I inquired.

"I discovered the key—I have been intent on these matters for many years, and I am absolutely convinced that my reading of the message is correct," said the Form-master. "Indeed, it is impossible that it can be incorrect. There is only one reading, and I have discovered it. See!"

He spread out the parchment on his desk, and I gazed at it.

He had made one or two pencillings here and there, but nothing that I could understand. The symbols themselves were weird-looking things—some round, some square, and twisted shapes. And at the very end was a circle with a rough drawing of half the world on it. I could see South America quite distinctly.

"How could that have been drawn in Mars, sir?" I asked. "That's supposed

to be a picture of the world at the bottom."

"Quite so—quite so!" declared Mr. Crowell. "You must realise that the people on Mars can see everything upon earth—that is to say, they could easily trace our coasts, thus a map is easy to make. That symbol was the easiest of all to understand. The others were difficult, but I have conquered them."

"And can you make any sense of the message, sir?" I asked.

"Sense!" echoed Mr. Crowell, rising to his feet, and striding up and down the study. "Good heavens! Can I make sense of them! I will tell you the truth, Nipper, at once. Within twenty-four hours from now—that is to say, at nightfall to-morrow—a messenger will arrive on earth from Mars!"

I stared.

"A—a messenger, sir?" I echoed blankly.

"Yes."

"But that's impossible, sir," I protested.

"It may seem impossible to you, but it is an absolute fact," declared Mr. Crowell. "A Martian will arrive at nightfall to-morrow, and he will alight on exactly the same spot as the casket. That is the purport of the message. My lad, you must realise that this is an event which will be regarded as the most amazing in the history of mankind. This messenger from Mars will arrive—and I shall be the one chosen to interview him, and to introduce him to the world."

"Yes," I said, rather breathlessly.

To tell the truth, I was flabbergasted. I never dreamed that Mr. Crowell—our hard-headed, keen Form-master—would suffer from delusions of this character. For, of course, it was a delusion; it could be nothing else. As Timothy Tucker would have said, Mr. Crowell's brain was moving rather too rapidly.

I couldn't resist the opportunity of questioning the revelation.

"A messenger is coming from Mars, sir?" I asked. "How will he arrive? How will he travel? How will he be able to land on exactly the same spot as the meteorite? And how will he prevent himself being dashed to atoms?"

Mr. Crowell waved his hand.

"Tut-tut!" he snapped. "Those matters do not concern me, Nipper. This messenger is coming—I have conclusive evidence of it. He will come—that is sufficient. See! Here are the

very words which I have deciphered."

He thrust the writing block under my nose, and I saw what was written.

"To the finder of the casket. Prepare to receive a Martian messenger! He will arrive at the fall of night, twenty-six hours following the delivery of this message. Prepare to receive him, for he will await your coming."

There were a few other words which I could not understand, for Mr. Crowell had scrawled them hastily. How on earth he had made up the message was something of a wonder, for it was impossible to see anything in the hieroglyphics to suggest such a solution.

The truth, of course, was that Mr. Crowell's mind was not in perfect order, and the wish was father to the thought. He wanted the message to be there, and so, in his deluded state, he had manufactured it—firmly believing that he had arrived at the correct solution.

"Yes, sir," I said; "it's wonderful."

"That word is not adequate, Nipper," said Mr. Crowell huskily. "We are on the eve of the greatest event in the history of mankind. To-morrow night I shall meet this Martian messenger, and then it will be my duty to introduce him to my fellow-beings. I shall be famous within a week—the most famous man in all the world!"

"Yes, rather, sir!" I said helplessly.

"But remember—not a word!" went on the Form-master, grasping my arm, and speaking mysteriously. "Not a single word! Do not dare to tell a soul of what I have related to you."

"Can't I tell anybody, sir?" I asked.

"Nobody," said Mr. Crowell. "Go from this room, and keep my secret locked within your breast. Your lips will only be sealed for twenty-four hours, and then the whole world will know. Go now, Nipper, for I wish to be alone."

I was rather glad to escape—and I did so without having given Mr. Crowell the slightest assurance that I should keep mum. He had asked me to say nothing, and in one way I should respect his wishes. I had no intention of shouting the story all over the Ancient House.

But there was no reason at all why I should not take Sir Montie and Tommy into my confidence—and perhaps Nelson Lee. I rather fancied that Mr. Crowell should have seen a brain specialist, rather than a Martian.

My chums were frankly incredulous when I told them.

"I say, that's a bit thick!" said Watson. "If you think you can spin us a yarn like that, Nipper, you're jolly well mistaken."

"Begad! It is frightfully tall, I must remark."

"Of course it's tall, Montie!" I agreed. "And, if it comes to that, it's thick, too. But the fact remains that I've told you just what Mr. Crowell told me."

"Then he must be mad," said Watson.

"He's not mad, but suffering from a delusion," I said. "That's the size of it. He's got planets and stars and all those sorts of things on his brain—and the finding of this casket kind of unhinged him a bit. He's rational enough in ordinary things, but this business will drive him dotty unless it's stopped."

"Busy, you chaps?"

Nicodemus Trotwood put his head in at the door.

"Not particularly," I said. "Come in, if you want to."

The elder of the Trotwood Twins entered.

"What's that you were saying about somebody going dotty?" he asked. "I'll bet you were talking about Crowell?"

"We were."

"I just met him in the passage," said Nicodemus. "He was muttering to himself, and talking about Mars, I believe."

"Well, don't get jawing," I exclaimed. "Look here, Trotty, we can trust you—I know you'll keep mum. I'll tell you what the poor old chap's got in his bonnet—he's absolutely deluded."

I explained the position to Trotwood.

"My only hat!" grinned our visitor. "A messenger from Mars, eh? That's certainly tremendously interesting; but I don't understand about the casket and the hieroglyphics. How did that get into the affair?"

"That's what I can't understand," I replied. "But we shall probably arrive at a solution before long. Anyhow, the finding of it has driven poor old Crowell near dotty, and he'll go out to that meadow to-morrow night, looking for the Martian."

"Oh, my goodness!" grinned Watson. "We shall have to be there—it'll be worth seeing, my sons."

"But what will Crowell do when he finds nothing?" I asked, frowning. "It's

no laughing matter, Tommy. He's absolutely certain that the Martian will be there, and when he draws a blank he'll probably go dotty altogether."

Trotwood's face broke into a queer smile.

"We'll be on the spot," he said. "It'll be interesting to see what Crowell does when he finds no Martian—but it will be ten times more interesting to see him having a chat with the messenger from Mars!"

"Oh, talk sense!" said Watson. "You know it's all rot! There's no messenger coming——"

"He'll be there," interrupted Trotwood.

"Eh?"

"The messenger from Mars will be on the spot!"

"Begad!"

"You don't believe this tommyrot, do you?" I asked wonderingly.

"Certainly not!" replied Trotwood.

"But just now you were saying that Crowell might go off his rocker if he doesn't find the Martian. We don't want that, do we? Wouldn't it be a lot better for Crowell to make his wonderful discovery? Wouldn't it be better for the Martian to appear?"

"In a way, it would," I agreed. "The shock wouldn't be so great, afterwards; in fact, the shock would probably do him good. But you know as well as I do that there'll be no messenger——"

"There will be a messenger," interrupted Nicodemus calmly.

"How do you know?" demanded Watson.

"Because we shall provide one!"

"Wha-aat?"

We stared at Trotwood in amazement.

"We shall provide one," he repeated.

"We're the only four chaps who know, so it'll be easy. It couldn't be done with a crowd, but we can manage it nicely. Mr. Crowell will go into the meadow, and he'll find the Martian waiting for him. Afterward he'll discover that it was all spoofo—and it's my belief that the sudden revelation will bring him to his senses."

"Great!" I exclaimed enthusiastically.

"Trotty, you deserve a kiss for that!"

I jumped at him, but made no attempt to kiss him—there was no reason to start a fight in Study C. Instead, I waltzed him round the room, and then plumped him into the easy chair.

"Now we shall have to plan the de-

tails," I said breathlessly. "Somebody will have to dress up as a Martian—but it'll have to be done well, or Crowell will spot the wheeze, even in the darkness."

Trotwood shook his head.

"That's not good enough," he said. "According to all the books I've read, Martians are things like machines—with no semblance whatever to human beings. Of course, these things are only creatures of novelists' imaginations, but they're generally accepted as what Martians may be like. We've got to fake up something with wires and rods, and all that kind of thing."

"But it can't talk!" yelled Watson.

"It'll talk all right," declared Trotwood calmly.

"You—you giddy magician!" I gasped. "You're a ventriloquist, and you mean that you'll throw your voice from the other side of the hedge, and make Crowell think that the fake is talking?"

"Exactly," grinned Trotwood.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"By jingo, what a stunt!" I exclaimed. "It'll be easy enough to fake up something. Now I come to think of it, there's an old gas engine in the boathouse—only a small thing, and we can prop it up with iron legs, and stick wires over it, and fake up a head, and there you are. In the gloom Crowell won't notice anything wrong, and we can make it move by pulling strings."

"Yes, rather," said Trotwood. "It'll talk, too——"

"English!" grinned Watson.

"That won't matter a bit," I said. "Crowell's in such a state that he'll believe any old thing. The best thing we can do is to spend all to-morrow evening at the game. Directly after lessons we'll go and fix up the thing."

We shook hands on the compact, and when we went to bed that night we were quite convinced that the morrow would provide something of unusual interest.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MESSENGER FROM MARS.

AS I had half anticipated, Mr. Crowell did not appear in the classroom for morning lessons—or for afternoon lessons, either. He had remained in his bedroom, indisposed. And one of

the other masters took the Remove for that day.

The fact was, Mr. Crowell was too excited and too nervous to take the Remove, or to do any school duties. He was quite rational enough to realise this, so he remained in his bedroom—waiting—waiting for the great moment.

I had a word with the gov'nor that morning, but I told him nothing about the Martian incident. It was just as well to keep that quiet for a bit. Nelson Lee told me that Mr. Crowell would probably be sent away for a holiday within a few days—if he did not improve. He had been working too hard.

After lessons were over for the day, my chums and Trotwood and I slipped out, and made direct for the boathouse. We wanted to be there first, for the evening was fine, and other juniors would soon be on the spot.

We succeeded in getting the tiny gas-engine out, and taking it to a quiet spot among some trees, where we should not be observed. The engine had been originally used to propel a boat, but had been discarded as useless.

In any case, it served our purpose well.

Within a couple of hours we had faked up a figure which no novelist could possibly imagine, even in his wildest moments.

The thing was extraordinary in appearance, but, at the same time, it bore a kind of resemblance to a human being. The body was the little gas engine, the legs a part of an old farm implement, and two long arms stretched out weirdly. The head was another metal contrivance, with cogs and other things showing.

We had arranged it so that it would be possible to pull invisible strings and move the arms and the head as we liked.

This would greatly add to the deception—and Trotwood had his own ideas to prevent Mr. Crowell making close investigations.

Having concealed our Martian, we retired to the school for tea—very hungry, but satisfied. It was well past the tea-hour by now, but this made no difference. Prep. was the next order on the programme, and we disposed of this unwelcome task as rapidly as possible.

By the time we had finished it was nearly dark, and we left the Ancient House and returned to the meadow. Our

fake was in the far corner, concealed among the trees. Nobody was out now, for it was rapidly growing dark.

"We shall have to buck up," I said. "Crowell might be out here early, and it would properly put the lid on it if he saw us fixing the thing in position."

"Yes, we shall have to hurry," said Trotwood.

"Do you think we could do it alone—you and I?" I asked.

"I suppose so."

"It's a bit weighty—but we'll manage it," I said. "In the meantime, Tommy, the best thing you can do is to go with Montie, and keep a sharp look-out for Crowell—he's bound to come across the playing fields. If he comes almost at once, delay him—do anything you like to keep him back."

"Anything to oblige, dear old boy," said Montie. "I'm game."

Watson didn't care for the task much, but he consented—and, as it turned out, precaution was absolutely necessary.

Our two chums went off, and Trotwood and I wasted no time in fixing up the Martian. It was a somewhat difficult task, for the thing was heavy. We planted it firmly and securely in the ground a few yards from the spot where the meteorite had fallen. There was very little left of the latter, for it had broken up, and almost every fellow at St. Frank's had obtained a piece, as a souvenir.

Fortunately, the hedge was quite clear, so it would be easy for us to crouch behind it, and hear everything that went on. Trotwood, too, would be able to throw his voice with ease.

In the meantime, Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West waited on the other side of the playing fields. After about ten minutes had elapsed, Mr. Crowell came striding up. He seemed to be oblivious of his surroundings, and did not even notice the juniors. He was about to walk straight past.

"Speak to him, you ass!" hissed Watson.

"Begad! I thought you were goin' to do it, old boy."

"I—I don't know what to say," gasped Tommy.

Mr. Crowell had passed by this time, and Montie ran up to him, and pulled on his arm. Mr. Crowell gave a start, and turned.

"What is it—what is it?" he demanded irritably.

"Just a moment, sir," said Tregellis-West. "I was just wondering if you could tell us the name of those stars."

He pointed into the sky—a real brain-wave on his part. It was about the only subterfuge which would have succeeded.

"Those stars, Tregellis-West?" said Mr. Crowell. "Why, yes, I can tell you quite a lot about them. Another time will do, my boy. I'm in a hurry just now——"

"But we're frightfully interested, sir," said Montie. "It won't take you long."

Mr. Crowell condescended to name the stars, and the juniors plied him with all manner of questions.

The result, of course, was that time sped rapidly, without Mr. Crowell realising it. A good ten minutes had elapsed before Sir Montie and Tommy thought it safe to allow the Form-master to continue his walk.

As soon as he had parted from them, the juniors raced round to Little Side, skirted the hedge, and arrived at the agreed-upon spot well in advance of Mr. Crowell. Trotwood and I were already there, waiting.

"Good!" I exclaimed. "Everything's ripping."

We watched with amusement and a touch of anxiety. We really liked old Crowell, and it was a shame to see him in his present state. Our chief hope was that this little trip would do him good—would restore his mental balance.

We saw him striding across the meadow. Suddenly he came to a halt. Then he came on again at a run. For he could see something standing near the hedge—something which was quite still and strange in appearance.

Nearer, Mr. Crowell saw more details. The thing was an extraordinary looking object. It reminded him somewhat of a human being, except for the fact that it appeared to be made of metal, and all the different members of the creature were grotesque in shape and design. The head was almost square, with peculiar cogs and ratchets.

In the very centre something round gleamed and glowed with a greenish light, and from two holes at either side of the head appeared small volumes of wispy steam. At the same time the thing hissed curiously.

This was really an afterthought on our part. We had placed some chemical liquids in the cavity of the head, and these would give off fumes in plenty for quite a long time.

The idea had an additional advantage, for it caused the Martian to give forth a pungent chemical smell. The eye, of course, was merely a dab of phosphorous paint. In the darkness it was impossible to distinguish much—and that was where we were safe.

Mr. Crowell approached, fairly shaking with excitement. It was true! The Martian had arrived, exactly as the message had stated! A messenger had come down to earth from one of the planets—and Mr. Crowell was the first to set eyes upon him!

"Wonderful—wonderful!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell, his voice almost cracking with the intense excitement from which he suffered. "I am here to welcome you——"

"G-r-r-r!"

The Martian made an extraordinary noise—or seemed to. From the region of the head came a fierce kind of growl, and Mr. Crowell halted some feet away. At the same moment a long tentacle-like object rose in the air and stretched out towards the master.

"Halt!" came a deep growling voice from the monster.

As Mr. Crowell had already halted, this advice was unnecessary.

"I am the first to set foot upon this wondrous world of yours," went on the Martian, in perfect English. "I welcome you, my friend of the human race. It is with great pleasure that I address you at this moment."

"I—I'm overwhelmed!" said Mr. Crowell. "This is far better than I had ever dared to hope for! I must——"

"Keep back—keep back!" thundered the Martian.

Mr. Crowell had taken a step forward, but he halted again.

"It will be safer for you to remain where you stand," exclaimed the Martian. "I am not of this earth, and my breath is as poison to the human race. It is unlike yours, as you can see. One breath would probably render you unconscious, and it would be fatal for you to approach close. Death is not pleasant for the human beings of the earth. We Martians never die. We live always and for ever."

Mr. Crowell remained where he was.

"It is just as well that you gave me warning," he said. "I was about to examine you closely, and that would have spoilt everything. But I'm amazed—I am astounded! You, a Martian, to speak the same language as we in England."

The weird-looking object gave forth a chuckle.

"I speak any language of the earth," he said. "Language means nothing to us in Mars. We know everything that occurs on this planet—not the slightest detail escapes our notice. For countless years we have been observing your progress, and wondering at the amazing slowness of it."

Mr. Crowell took a deep breath.

"But I am nevertheless amazed," he said. "That you should speak our language will prove to be of the utmost value later. But why did you not send your message in English instead of by way of symbolical signs?"

This was a poser for Trotwood, but he was ready for it.

"Ah! Your wits are slower than ours on Mars," he said with a laugh. "The symbols were sent with a purpose—as a test for the finder of the casket. It was believed that you would be clever enough to decipher the message, and to know exactly what it meant. That is the position."

"But how did you know that I should find the casket?" asked Mr. Crowell. "What if it had fallen into the hands of an ignorant labourer or a helpless child?"

Trotwood was ready again.

"We on Mars know all," he made the figure say. "We can see into the future, and we know exactly what is about to happen. Thus, we knew that you would pick up the casket, and we planned everything accordingly."

"You must tell me about Mars," said Mr. Crowell eagerly, moving a step forward in his excitement. "You must tell me what your cities are like—what your—"

"We have wonderful cities!" interrupted the Martian. "We have cities that the human mind cannot possibly picture. Furthermore, we are possessed of the most wonderful telescopes. By their aid we can see everything."

"You can see what is happening on this earth?"

"Yes, naturally," said the messenger, waving an arm eloquently. "Our telescopes extend one thousand miles in the air, and by means of their lenses we are able to see everything on earth. We can read newspapers as they are held in the street. We can see every minute detail of the earthly life. For centuries we have been observing these things. And now, at last, we have discovered a method of visiting you in your native element. We are capable of coming to earth in thousands and millions."

"How amazingly interesting," said Mr. Crowell, taking a deep breath. "You have impressed me more than I can say. I can now understand why you know our language—since you can see everything so closely."

"Further than that," went on Trotwood, drawing on his imagination, "we are able to hear all things. Thus, two people walking along an earthly road may talk, and we in Mars can hear everything they say. We have progressed millions of years ahead of you. We are not of flesh and blood, but of machinery, and it is impossible for a Martian to receive injuries, or to be killed. The greatest explosive you possessed would do us no harm whatever. We laugh at your puny efforts at warfare. They could not harm us in the slightest degree."

"Amazing," said Mr. Crowell.

"Furthermore, we are capable of dealing death on every hand," went on the Martian. "My very presence among a crowd would kill everybody within range of my vapour. So, you see, how vastly superior we are to you human beings. You are merely the lowest type of animals compared to the high intelligence of Mars."

"I suspected something of the sort," said Mr. Crowell eagerly. "But, at the same time, I do not altogether approve of your attitude. This is a peaceful visit, I believe, and yet you talk about wars and killing."

Behind the hedge I nudged Nicodemus.

"Draw it mild, Trotty," I murmured.

"Rats!" said Trotwood. "I want to see what he'll do. I'm going to continue on the same tack, because I believe it'll do him good."

"It—it seems rather uncanny," murmured Watson. "Somehow I can't

help but laugh at it—old Crowell standing there talking to that giddy gas engine!"

Sir Montie and I chuckled.

"It's great!" I murmured. "If the poor chap wasn't a bit dotty in the top storey, I should be ready to yell with laughter."

Mr. Crowell came nearer still.

"Remember my warning!" exclaimed the Martian. "Do you wish to be the first to die at the hands of the wonderful inhabitants of Mars? Remember, my friend, that before long the earth will be a different place. We, in Mars, have come to a momentous decision—a decision that will change everything."

"I fail to understand," said Mr. Crowell.

"I will explain," went on the messenger. "We are overcrowded—Mars is not sufficiently large to accommodate us all in comfort. In consequence of this, it has been decided that the earth shall become a Martian colony."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell.

"We have discovered the method of reaching the earth," went on the Martian. "I am the first to undertake the trip, and I shall return to Mars almost at once with the valuable information I have received—with the route fully mapped out and ready for the coming of the Martian hordes. Without me the conquest of the earth would be impossible, for I am the master of Mars—I am the one who has discovered this method of traversing outer space. When I return I shall give my secret to my fellow Martians. If I do not return, they must remain on their own planet. But I am due to start back within the hour, and in a very short time you will discover the result of my experimental visit."

"What will it be?" asked Mr. Crowell, with set teeth.

The Martian laughed.

"You will soon find out, as I have just said," he declared. "But I may as well tell you, for all the preparations you may make will be futile. I shall return to earth with five hundred million Martians, and these will be merely the first contingent of our full army! We shall descend upon the earth in myriads at every corner, and wherever we walk there will be death!"

"Great heavens!" said Mr. Crowell, utterly startled.

"It will be impossible to hold us

back," went on the Martian. "No weapons of yours will harm us, and we shall come just as we are. Within three of your weeks the earth will be cleared of the human race, and it will become the first of the great Martian colonies."

"Upon my soul!" said Mr. Crowell faintly.

"After the conquest of the earth, we shall lay our plans to make Venus our second colony," went on the Martian. "I am telling you all this so that you will be prepared for your end. For, I can assure you, there will be no escape."

"And if you fail to return?" asked Mr. Crowell strangely.

"Then everything will fail—for I hold the key!"

Mr. Crowell clenched his fists, and then made a dash forward.

"Then, by Heaven, you shall never return!" he shouted, in a queer, high, pitched voice. "I will see to it that you never return!"

Before we could do anything, the Form-master rushed at the figure. I had thought that Trotwood had gone rather too far, but this proved it. Nicodemus had been only following up his argument in a spirit of fun, but he had never expected anything of this nature to occur.

Mr. Crowell grasped the figure without dying—and this did not seem to surprise him, although he had been warned. He wrenched at it fiercely, tore it from the ground, and held a portion of it in his arms. The rest had fallen away, although Mr. Crowell did not notice this.

"Great Scott!" I gasped.

"Stop him!" said Watson nervously.

But Mr. Crowell was dashing across the field, staggering, as he went, under the weight of the faked-up figure. He was only able to carry it because of his excessive nervous strain. At any ordinary time he could not have performed the enormous effort.

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Trotwood. "I didn't think——"

"He's making for the river!" I exclaimed, bursting through the hedge. "We shall only just reach him in time. He's going to chuck that giddy engine in the water, and it belongs to Wilson, of the Sixth!"

"Begad!"

We rushed across the meadow, hoping to be in time. But while we were still ten yards distant from Mr. Crowell he

reached the river bank and flung his burden into the water.

Unfortunately, some projection caught on Mr. Crowell's clothing. And before he could save himself, he, too, plunged in.

Both the figure and Mr. Crowell vanished beneath the surface.

CHAPTER VII.

OFF FOR A REST CURE.

"GOOD heavens!"
 "Begad!"
 "Oh, my goodness!"
 "Great Scott!"

We stood on the bank, and stared at the disturbed water in horror and amazement. We knew at once what had happened. Mr. Crowell, caught by the projection, had been pulled down, and the weight of the engine—small as it was—was sufficient to keep the Form-master beneath the surface.

Unless help was quickly afforded, he would drown.

"The water's deep here, too!" said Watson, with chattering teeth. "Oh, we were fools to try this trick! Poor old Crowell will be killed——"

"Not if I know it!" I said grimly.

I ripped off my coat, and noticed that Trotwood was doing the same with his. The next second I plunged into the river, and Trotwood dived in a second later. Sir Montie and Tommy were ready to follow, if they should be necessary.

Four or five times we dived.

And then, more by luck than anything else, I succeeded in grasping Mr. Crowell's coat. Trotwood came to the rescue, and we pulled for all we were worth. A moment later Mr. Crowell was on the surface, gasping and spluttering.

The whole occurrence had only taken about a minute, although it seemed like hours to us. And Mr. Crowell had had sufficient sense to hold his breath as long as possible. The result was he had shipped very little water.

Montie and Tommy hauled him on to the bank.

"Thank you, boys—thank you!" he gasped. "I—I am at a loss! How did

I get into the river? I was in my study—— I—I——"

His voice died away, and he swooned.

"Poor old chap!" I said. "He's come to his senses—and that's one good thing. I don't suppose he remembers anything about that Martian business. He was off his rocker when that happened."

"What—what shall we do with him?" asked Watson. "He may be dying!"

"He's not dying," I said. "He's simply fainted."

Between the four of us we carried the unconscious Form-master across the meadow, over the playing-fields, through the Triangle, and into the Ancient House. By a piece of luck, we met Nelson Lee on the steps, and he halted.

"Good gracious, boys, what is the matter?" he asked.

"Mr. Crowell fell into the river, sir, and we fished him out," I said. "He's fainted. I'd better ring up Dr. Brett at once."

Mr. Crowell was soon taken upstairs into his own bedroom. His wet clothing was ripped off, and he was placed into warm blankets. In the meantime, Dr. Brett had been called up, and he had promised to come post haste.

I explained everything to Nelson Lee, feeling that it was necessary to do so.

"I can quite understand, boys, that you acted in a spirit of fun, and quite innocently," said Nelson Lee gravely. "At the same time, I must condemn your action in the strongest possible terms. It was a dangerous joke to play, knowing that Mr. Crowell was in such a curious mental condition."

"But we thought it would do him good, sir!" I protested.

"It was not your place to do Mr. Crowell any good," said Nelson Lee. "I only hope that everything will turn out all right, Nipper. Ah! I fancy I can hear Brett's car in the Triangle."

Nelson Lee was right, and three or four minutes later Dr. Brett himself came into Mr. Crowell's bedroom. I was obliged to go out with my chums, and we waited in the passage anxiously, and in a state of nerves.

Twenty minutes later Dr. Brett came out with Nelson Lee.

"No danger at all, my dear Lee—not the slightest trace," Dr. Brett was saying. "In fact, I can assure you that Crowell is well on the road to recovery, and all he needs is a long rest."

We rushed up to the pair.

"It's all right then, sir?" I asked.

"According to Dr. Brett's statements, everything is quite satisfactory," said Nelson Lee, smiling. "In fact, your little trick worked wonders."

"Begad!"

"It's a fact, boys," said the doctor. "Crowell was well on the road to insanity, by all I can understand. He's been working altogether too hard lately—combining his duties with a very heavy scientific book on astronomy. The result was that he became slightly unhinged, and was practically on the verge of brain fever, if not positive lunacy!"

"Well, I'm blessed!" I exclaimed. "And is he all right now?"

"He is far from being all right," said Dr. Brett. "At the same time, I am quite convinced that the sudden shock of plunging into the water brought him completely to his rational wits. That trick of yours was beneficial in every way, and, as it has turned out, it was a good thing you played it."

"Well, that's jolly satisfactory," I said. "I hadn't hoped for anything as good as this. And do you think Mr. Crowell will completely recover?"

"I am certain of it," said Brett. "All he needs now is a long rest—a rest from work of every description. He must go away to the seaside, and recuperate his normal health and strength. Within five or six weeks he will be his robust self again."

"With no trace of lunacy, sir?"

"Not the slightest," said Dr. Brett. "It was only a passing phase—a kind of delusion. He will be quite all right now, after this shock. You may congratulate yourself upon having performed a really good service. By the by, what was the interview like?"

"The interview, sir?"

"With the Martian."

We grinned.

"It was a scream, sir!" I chuckled. "Poor Mr. Crowell thought the thing was genuine—and it certainly looked like it. Trotwood made the thing speak out of its mouth, and, with Mr. Crowell in his unhinged condition, he was completely deceived."

"I rather wish I'd been there," chuckled the doctor. "Anyhow, it was all for the best, and I should certainly have advised a sudden shock if I had examined Mr. Crowell earlier. We may be pleased with ourselves."

When we went downstairs we were certainly feeling pleased. Mr. Crowell had been saved from insanity by our little device, and all he needed was a long rest. But there was still one point which was puzzling us.

How had that message in the casket got in among the meteorite remains?

"I'm blessed if I can understand it," I said, as we strolled towards the common-room. "That asbestos, too, to protect the thing from heat. It was done purposely for somebody, and it's absolutely a puzzle."

"We shall have to make inquiries," said Watson.

But inquiries, we soon learned, were unnecessary.

We had only just entered the common-room when we noticed that Fullwood was chatting with a crowd of other fellows, and they were all grinning.

The story had got about that Mr. Crowell had fallen into the river, in consequence of a delusion concerning a messenger from Mars. Nobody knew the exact details, and nobody knew that we had been connected with it. We meant to keep the thing as dark as possible; but the main features of the story were bound to get round.

"So, you see, you chaps, I provided the starting point of it all," said Fullwood pleasantly. "I thought old Crowell would go a bit dotty on it—that's why I did it. It serves the old rotter right for makin' a fool of me the other day."

"Begad! Do you hear——"

"Hold on, Montie," I whispered. "Let them jaw."

Fullwood chuckled.

"You see, when I went into Crowell's study I saw that he was hard at work on a book of astronomy," he said. "His papers were lying all about, an' I had plenty of time to look at them. He was quite dotty on the subject, in fact. An', later on, I got an idea to jape the old merchant."

"What did you do?" grinned Bell.

"You know as well as I do," replied Fullwood. "I got that piece of parchment, drew some symbols on it, and wrapped it in asbestos and put it in an old box, which I found somewhere round the back. It had been there for ages—a relic of the fire in the College House. I thought it would look better to have something warped by fire, to give the

impression of having come through space."

"Jolly cute!" said Merrell.

"Well, my original idea was to drop the thing in the Triangle, and see that Crowell found it," said Fullwood. "Of course, it might have gone wrong, but I was hoping for some fun. Crowell would certainly have suspected that the thing had fallen from the skies—I was going to fake up the yarn, anyhow."

"But you altered your plan?"

"Yes, of course," said Fullwood. "That giddy meteorite fell, and I slipped out immediately afterwards, and dropped that little box in among the hot bits of rock. When Crowell found it—as I knew he would—he naturally thought that it had come from Mars!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Fullwood went on to discuss more details.

"Well, that's all we want to hear,"

I murmured to my chums. "So it was one of Fullwood's beastly wheezes!"

"The rotter!" said Watson. "All this trouble——"

"Hold on!" I interrupted. "As it's turned out, it was a good thing that Fullwood did play the trick. Everything is all serene. Crowell has recovered his normal balance, and to-morrow he will go away for a rest cure."

"And we shall have another Form-master," grunted Watson.

As a matter of fact, we did have another Form-master. He arrived several days later, and his name proved to be Mr. Clement Heath, M.A. He was a quiet young man, and was generally liked by the Remove.

But before long we discovered some peculiar facts about Mr. Heath, facts which were destined to lead to astonishing developments. To tell the truth, there were to be some strange times with the new master of the Remove!

THE END.

TO MY READERS.

POOR old Crowell! Though he had provoked much laughter by his extraordinary behaviour, the boys generally felt very sorry for him, for he was not a bad sort, and it was quite possible that the new master might be infinitely more difficult to get on with. Dr. Brett's reassuring news that the Remove master's breakdown was not so serious as at first imagined, and that after a short holiday he would soon be quite normal again, was received with acclamations of joy.

The coming of a new master at St. Frank's was always a great event, especially with the form over which he was to rule. The Remove was, therefore, in a state of keen suspense, and rumours originating from mysterious sources were current as to what the new master was like.

Mr. Clement Heath, M.A., however, proved to be a very different kind of man to what popular rumour had conceived. He is a young man, who had served during the war as flying officer in the R.A.F. His experience of boys extends no further than his own schooldays, and this is shown by a certain awkwardness or shyness in dealing with the boys. Thus he becomes an easy victim to the mischievous junior who delights in making capital out of a new master's non-acquaintance with the school customs. This will be described with all that wealth of humour and skilful denouement, for which our author has achieved something of a reputation, in Next Week's story: "THE MASTER OF MYSTERY!"

THE EDITOR.

YOU CAN BEGIN READING THIS SPLENDID SERIAL TO-DAY!

Three Boys in Canada.



by S. S. Gordon.

A Tale of Life and Adventure in the North-West.

INTRODUCTION.

JACK ROYCE, returned from Canada, has called to see his brother,

TEDDY ROYCE, a clerk in London. While the brothers are together, they are aroused by a loud summons at the door.

GERALD TELFORD has been set upon by roughs, and seeks assistance of the Royces. The roughs are driven off. Later, Gerald is informed by his guardian, Mr. Cardone, that the money which the lad was to inherit is lost, with the exception of £50. The three lads agree to try their luck in Canada. They set sail for Montreal, and eventually reach Winnipeg. Throughout the journey they are shadowed by a man named Obed Snaith, one of the ruffians who had attacked Gerald in London, and who is believed to be in the pay of Mr. Cardone. While in Winnipeg, the chums rescue a man, nicknamed the Mad Prospector, from ruffians. The man, however, dies of his injuries, but gives the lads a secret chart of a rich gold discovery. The three lads proceed to Medicine Hat, south of Alberta, and after some exciting times at St. Pierre, 150 miles further N.W., they are offered work in connection with the opening up of a new line from Edmonton, N.W. of the Rockies, through the Grand Cougar Pass, and touching Dead Breed Lake, which latter place, being in the vicinity of the Mad Prospector's gold mine, the three young adventurer's were in luck's way. While bivouacking, the chart is stolen by Connell, a rascally cook to the party. He is observed and followed by Teddy and Gerald. (Now read on.)

Tracking the Rogues.

THEY saw the cook come to a halt beside his own cooking equipment. But he did not appear to be hiding anything.

Hiding behind bushes, the two who looked on saw that he merely rummaged about in his kit and produced a revolver, which he slipped into his jacket pocket. He took nothing out of any pocket. Then he began to walk, and

walked right out of the little surveying camp.

"Hallo!" chuckled Teddy. "He's going to take us for a walk. I think we'll follow him till he gets to some nice quiet spot, and then we'll jump on him and go through his blooming pockets, eh?"

Gerald nodded. Greenhorn though he was, he loved an adventure of this sort. He and Teddy set off side by side on the trail of the camp cook.

The cook walked very quickly, and the boys had all they could do to keep pace with him and keep him in sight. On the whole, the going was through somewhat rough country, where deepish ravines and heavy boulders were constantly met with. They went, the lads noticed, back the way they had come with the chain-gang that day.

"Better hurry ahead, and jump on the beast from behind one of these rocks," said Teddy at length.

But Gerald shook his head.

"I've got an idea he's going somewhere particularly," he said. "He's going to hand that chart over to someone, I think; else why should he take this night walk?"

He did not know that a night walk was a regular thing for the cook of the survey party. Nor did he really know why he did not act on Teddy's suggestion. He could only put it down to an idle curiosity to know why this cook should be taking night-walks right in the wilds, where there was not even an Indian to be found for scores of rugged miles, to his knowledge.

"Well, we'll follow him," said Teddy,
(Continued on page iii of cover.)

with a shrug. "But I don't want him to take us far."

The cook led them about three miles altogether, and at length down in the depths of a wide and green ravine, the boys saw the glimmer of a little fire.

It was here that the cook stepped down the bank of the gully, giving a hail as he did so. Dodging behind a boulder, the boys saw two men who had been lying about the little fire raise themselves to their elbows. The cook joined them, and squatted down before the fire.

"Let's get up a bit closer and see what they're talking about," said Teddy. "I seem to know those fellows, too. At least, that bigger one, on the right-hand side of the fire is—why, it's that rotten, big Swede, Hank Olesen, as I live." He walked a little nearer to the fire, and took up his position behind another chunk of rock, peering round the edge of it. Gerald followed him.

"Why, the other's that fellow Johnson, the bounder who chucked you down the Devil's Falls!" he breathed. "Now, what's the old cook got to do with these rotters?"

"Sh!" whispered Gerald Telford, seizing Teddy's arm warningly. "Don't let 'em hear you, you young ass!"

For Teddy's voice certainly had showed inclination to rise in his surprise at this discovery that Obed Snaith and the big Swede were so near them, when all the time they had thought those two choice rascals to be many miles south and east of here.

"What—what are they doin' up here?" Teddy wanted to know.

"Perhaps," suggested Gerald quietly. "we might be able to find that out, if we keep quiet and listen."

There were other boulders between that behind which they now were hiding and the camp-fire that Snaith and Olesen had built. That ring of light cast about the scene by that fire was small enough; the two watching lads were well shielded by the darkness of the night. It was an easy matter for them to worm their way nearer the fire, until, at length, they were sheltering behind a boulder that was little more than ten feet away from the fire.

The riskiness of drawing in on the villains so closely did not occur to either Gerald or Teddy. Both were very young as yet, and very inexperienced in things. The fact that both these men had al-

ready attempted to take their lives meant nothing to the boys. Had Jack Royce been there—but he was now lying unconscious in the survey camp—he would have hesitated long ere going in so close on the scene.

But these lads wanted to know several things. They wanted to know why Connell, the cook, should have walked all this distance back on the trail to meet Snaith and the Swede. They also wanted to know why Snaith and the Swede were here at all, evidently alone, and doing no work. This deserted country was not ideal for travelling in for pleasure, nor was it as yet opened up enough sufficiently to make it worth anybody's while to walk up here looking for suitable land on which to settle. While the chances of getting a job of work here were totally absent.

"I got this from them," the cook could be heard to say, and he waved the paper in his hand which Gerald and Teddy knew he had taken from Jack Royce's kitbag. "Say, I'm an old railroader, an' I guess I knew old Mervyn, the Mad Prospector, well enough when he used to do all his blather about his wonderful mine. Waal, here's a chart showin' the way to that mine, and, accordin' to what I overheard them darned boys sayin', it ought to be worth a pile to all of us."

The man the boys knew as Johnson—Obed Snaith—reached out for the paper; but the cook drew his hand back, and, in the firelight, his face expanded into a cunning grin.

"Guess we got to come to some sort of an agreement in this," he said. "I reckon I wouldn't ha' told you fellers a durn' thing about it, only it would be all bunkum for one man to go alone lookin' for that gold, and, if he found it, fetch it away out."

There was some wrangling. But these three choice scoundrels apparently had some tie that connected them, for, at length, they appeared to come to some agreement regarding the Mad Prospector's mine.

"I guess," Snaith said, in his very unpleasant voice, "if you are right, partner, I'm goin' to drop my original job right now. A thousand British pounds! Pah! Cardone can get somebody else to do his work. I'd rather

(Continued overleaf.)

make a pile out o' this than bother young Telford any more.

Gerald Telford drew in his breath sharply. He had not expected to hear either his guardian's name or his own name mentioned here, in the wilds, by such a man as Snaith.

Teddy, who already knew what Jack Royce suspected about Snaith, and his motive in dogging the little party of Britishers, began to glow with excitement, and he crawled a little nearer the fire, the better to overhear what was being said.

"Cardone—my guardian!" Gerald breathed. "I—I can't quite work it out."

"A thousand pounds, to do in young Telford!" said Snaith again, with a scornful laugh. "And, anyhow, I was beginnin' to get sick of the job. Telford alone might ha' been all right, but with those prying skunks, the Royces, always at the cub's elbow, the job got to be worth a durn sight more'n a thousand British pounds. By heck, Ambros, I'm in with you in this gold

hunt, an' we'll let the cub Telford and the Royces alone from now on! Let's have a look at the chart. Where is the gold?"

Gerald Telford crouched behind his rock, and shook with suppressed emotion, chiefest of which was a dreadful anger against this man Snaith, who, on his own confession, was dogging him, with the deliberate intention of doing him harm. And, according to his own statements, he was doing it in the pay of his—Gerald's—guardian, Septimus Cardone, solicitor, of Bradleyfield.

"What's it mean?" Gerald asked, whispering into the ear of his young friend. "Can you understand it? Why should he want to 'do me in,' old chap?"

Teddy, having learnt Jack's suspicions in this matter, could have told Gerald a great deal, but their present position did not allow of much chance for intimate conversation.

(To be continued.)

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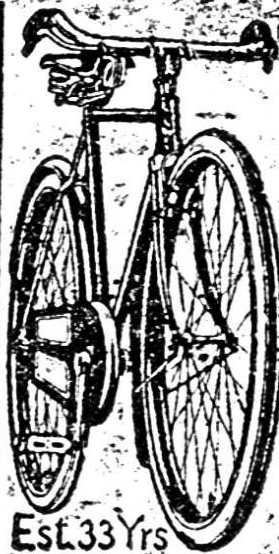
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No. 256. D

May 1, 1920.



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