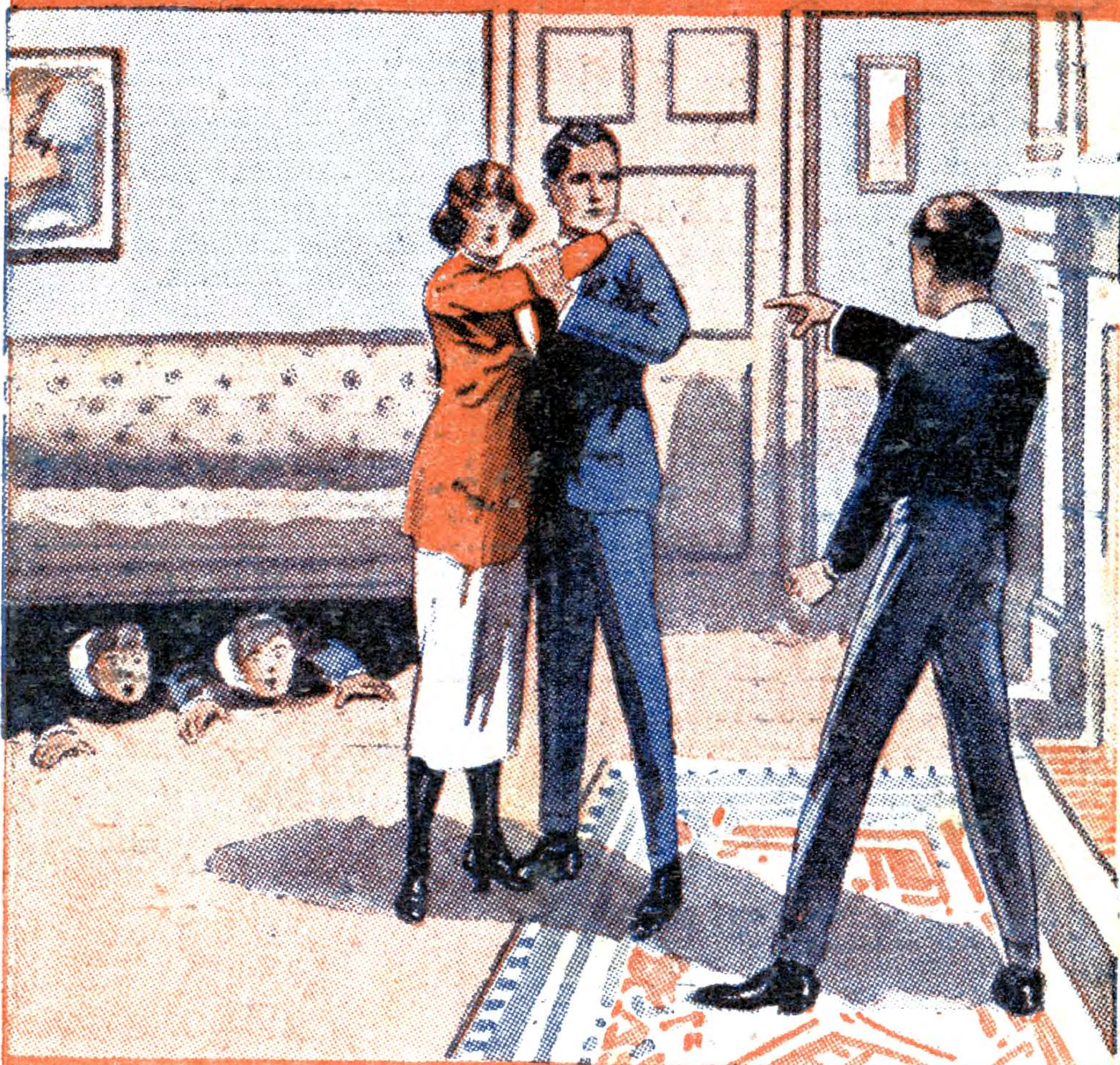


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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED
THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

STRAINED RELATIONS.

CLANG! Clang!
The rising bell sounded noisily and unwelcomely in the Remove dormitory at St. Frank's. Juniors sat up in bed, rubbed their eyes, blinked, and turned out. They were not quite so unwilling to leave their beds as they would have been in the winter-time.

It was a brilliant morning, warm and sunlight, and everything was looking splendid from the excellent view to be seen from the dormitory windows. As usual I was about the first fellow out of bed.

I don't say this because I wish to boast, but it was simply a fact. Somehow or other I generally managed to step on the floor before the other fellows could do so. And I noticed something decidedly peculiar about two juniors near by.

They were Church and McClure, of Study D. They were sitting up in bed, blinking, and they looked rather dazed. Their faces were by no means handsome—in fact, they were positively unpleasant to gaze upon.

I'm not passing insults. Usually, Church and McClure were quite good-looking fellows. But this morning their faces were different. Church, for example, possessed a black eye, which overshadowed all his other features. It was impossible for him to see out of the

eye, and his expression was consequently rather strange.

But this was not all. His left ear was puffy and bruised, and his cheek bore a mark which did not improve his looks.

McClure was no better off. His nose, nominally quite a good-looking member, was of an extraordinary size, and of a flaring red. His underlip was cut and puffed out on the right side, twisting his mouth into a kind of permanent grin—but a very painful grin.

"Begad!" exclaimed Sir Montie. "What on earth has been happenin'?"

He adjusted his pince-nez, having just fished them from underneath his pillow, and the noble Tregellis-West gazed with mild horror at the unfortunate pair who were sitting in the other two beds along the row.

"They seem to have been in the wars," I remarked. "Poor chaps! They've caught it pretty hot, too!"

The first thought that entered my mind was quite a natural one. I immediately suspected Handforth of this diabolical work.

Edward Oswald Handforth was the leader of Study D, and he generally ruled with an iron fist.

But, rough and autocratic as he was, he had never smashed his chums about so drastically as this. Their squabbles were generally of a brief character, a punch on the nose usually sufficed to settle an argument.

It was obvious, however, that Church and McClure had been knocked about

unmercifully on this occasion. It was not the result of a mere tiff.

"It's jolly queer!" said Tommy Watson. "They weren't like this when they went to bed last night. I'll bet they had a fight during the night! That's about the worth of it!"

"Rats!" observed Pitt. "What price Handy?"

"Eh?"

We transferred our attention to Edward Oswald Handforth. That youth had just sat up in bed, and was looking round sleepily. He yawned—or attempted to do so. For, quite abruptly he stopped short, and gave a gasp.

The reason was clear. His mouth was considerably swollen in the region of the upper lip. Not only this, but his nose seemed to be pointing sideways, and his right eye was ominously black.

He was not so badly marked as Church and McClure, but he had undoubtedly seen some heavy action.

"It seems to have been a free fight," I observed.

"When?" asked Pitt. "They were all right last night."

"I expect it must have happened soon after lights out," I replied. "I remember waking up for a minute or two, and seeing Handforth and Co.. But I didn't think they were worth bothering about, so I went to sleep again."

Church and McClure got out of bed, both of them looking pained.

It was very thoughtful of De Valerie to bring over a small handmirror, and he stood by watching with interest while Church and McClure inspected themselves. The two unfortunate juniors did this with expressions of horror and dismay.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Church. "I—I look awful! I can't go down like this. I shall be lugged before the Head!"

"What price me?" groaned McClure. "I'm worse!"

"Rot! You haven't got a black eye like mine—"

"You chaps needn't say much," put in Singleton. "You may be decorated very ornamentally, but I think Handforth can give you a few points!"

The crowd of juniors grinned.

"What have you been up to?" asked Hart.

"What have we been up to!" said Church bitterly. "If you want to know

the truth about this horrible affair, ask Handforth."

"We knew it was Handforth, of course," grinned Hart. "But what the merry dickens made you hammer one another so tremendously? You haven't got any faces left! They're only blobs!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Very funny, isn't it?" snapped McClure fiercely.

"Well, you certainly look rather humorous," admitted Pitt. "At the same time, I expect it must be painful to wear faces in that condition. Did you fight him separately, or was it a general bust-up?"

"Don't speak to those rotters!" exclaimed Handforth warmly.

"Why not?"

"Because they're traitors—they're turn-coats!" said Handforth. "I've learnt a lesson I sha'n't forget in a hurry! They turned against me last night, and defied me! I'm never going to speak to the cads again!"

"We wouldn't speak to you for a thousand quid!" roared Church.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you want another black eye to match the one you've got now, I'll jolly soon give you one!" shouted Handforth, jumping out of bed. "You miserable rotter! If you think you can do as you like with me—"

"Hold on!" grinned Pitt. "I thought you weren't going to speak to them again?"

"I'm not speaking!" roared Handforth. "I'm threatening to punch his nose!"

"If you try that game on again, you'll get the worst of it!" snarled McClure. "Last night we weren't quite prepared for you—but we are now. I wouldn't be seen talking to you if you were the last chap on earth!"

"I wouldn't be found dead with you!" snorted Church.

"Go it!" grinned Hart. "Have another scrap while you're about it!"

"They're too jolly funky!" sneered Handforth. "They wouldn't touch me if I insulted them every minute. They've got a taste of my fists, and they don't want any more! I'm quite willing to give 'em another lesson if they want it!"

Church and McClure moved towards Handforth menacingly.

"Steady on!" I chuckled, grabbing Church. "You can't start scrapping in

the dormitory, you know. I shouldn't advise you to scrap anywhere until you're whole again. What started the trouble, anyhow?"

"Handy started it," said Church grimly.

"Don't tell awful whoppers!" bel-lowed Handforth. "You started it your-selves—by daring to defy my orders——"

"Your orders!" shouted Church fiercely. "Who do you think you are? Nothing but a hulking, great bully!"

"A conceited, ugly, clumsy, swanking jackass!" said McClure, with relish. "All you can do is to boast and swank and bully the other chaps! Why, you're one of the worst cads in the school! I'd rather make a pal of Fullwood!"

"Thanks awfully!" said Fullwood sneeringly.

Handforth rolled up the sleeves of his pyjamas. But, although he had every intention of commencing battle on the spot, the other fellows would not allow him to get busy. He had caused enough trouble, without adding to it.

"Drop all this rot!" I said. "Tell us the truth, Church."

"There's nothing much to tell," grunted Church. "Clurey and I went out last night to do a bit of detective work——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There's nothing particularly funny in it," said Church, glaring. "I don't say that we should have met with success—but we only started the game to take a rise out of Handy."

"And he didn't like it."

"The silly ass rushed out of doors in his pyjamas, overtook us in the lane, and started firing on the spot," said Church. "He was like a blessed steam-hammer! We couldn't do anything with him."

"Well, it's all over now," I said smoothly. "Shake hands, and be pals together."

"Never!" declared Handforth.

"Rather not!" said Church.

"I've finished with the cad for good!" added McClure.

"Begad! It's frightfully serious, then," exclaimed Sir Montie, with deep concern. This is shockin', dear old boys—it is, really. It's appallin' to think of Study D without a leader."

"You can say what you like—you can do what you like, but we're fed up with Handy, and we're not going to have

anything more to do with him. After last night we've finished!" declared Church. "We've finished with him for good! The rotter can find some other chums in future."

"I wouldn't have you chaps under any conditions!" said Handforth bitterly. "I've been disillusioned." He shrugged his shoulders. "I've found out the truth for the first time!" he added. "Chaps like these ain't worth bothering about! They are a terrible nuisance to them-selves and everybody else!"

Church and McClure were not to be beaten. They flung insults upon Hand-forth's head, and he continued to fling insults upon theirs. The rest of the Re-move listened with keen enjoyment, and were really disappointed when Handforth walked out.

The split in Study D looked like being a serious one. And it had not come about without cause.

Handforth was really responsible.

His chums were most peaceful fellows, and it would have been impossible to find two more long-suffering fellows in the whole school. The very fact that they had shared Study D with Handforth for so many terms was very proof of their peacefulness.

They had usually got along very well with Handforth. But, recently he had changed. He had become secretive and close, instead of being open and above board.

For some reason he declined to take his chums into his confidence over a very important matter.

Mr. Clement Heath, the temporary master of the Remove, had been acting strangely since his arrival. At first Handforth had been hot on Mr. Heath's track, and had done everything possible to discover the new master's secret.

The secret was a curious one, judging by the circumstances. Mr. Heath frequently visited a small cottage in the hamlet of Edgemore, not far from St. Frank's. There was something about this cottage which had aroused Hand-forth's suspicions.

At first he had believed that Mr. Heath was a crook, and that he had been en-gaged upon some nefarious work.

Finding no actual proof of this Hand-forth had continued to watch Greyhurst Cottage, but he had achieved very little success. Then, suddenly, he had dropped

all his schemes, and had shown no interest whatever in Mr. Heath or his doings.

Church and McClure were naturally curious, but the more they pressed Handforth for an explanation the more obstinate he became. To add to his mysterious behaviour, he had been at great pains a few days earlier to keep his father away from the school.

All these things aroused the curiosity of the other fellows—particularly Church and McClure.

And, on the previous night, they had decided to watch Edgemore Cottage themselves, in the hope of finding out something of the truth.

But Handforth had discovered their project, and had stopped it—by the drastic expedient of fighting them to a standstill.

It was the limit—the last straw.

Church and McClure had suffered much, but that scrap had decided them. They considered it utterly impossible to remain on good terms with Edward Oswald Handforth. They were fed up to the neck with him.

Because of him they would get into trouble as soon as they went down. Mr. Heath or the Housemaster—Nelson Lee—would not fail to notice their condition, and they would be severely punished for fighting. Their only satisfaction in this thought was that Handforth would be punished, too.

When they got downstairs they found that Handforth was mooching about the Triangle. So they went straight to Study D, closed the door, and discussed the position as calmly as possible.

"I don't feel like staying in this study now," said Church, looking round.

"We've got as much right here as he has," declared McClure. "He can't turn us out! He'd better try—that's all! After the way the rotter treated us I'm not going to speak to him again!"

Church nodded gloomily.

"It'll be rotten, of course," he said. "It's a pity the ass can't take us into his confidence. If he would only do the right thing I might be inclined to overlook last night's affair—"

"Rats!" said McClure. "Handy's a rotter!"

"He has been lately, I know," admitted Church. "But that's only because he's got some secret, and won't let us into the know. He hates keeping anything to himself; that's why he's

been so irritable and ratty this last week. If only he'd tell us all about it, he'd be as happy as anything."

"He won't tell us—so what's the good of talking?"

"After this bust-up he might think differently," said Church. "I'm not going to kow-tow to him, or anything like that; but before having a serious split, I think we ought to give him a chance."

McClure shook his head.

"You're getting soft," he said grimly. "After what's happened, we mustn't have anything more to do with the cad —"

"That's the right view, I know," interrupted Church. "But you know what a ram-headed idiot he is. Anyhow, if we give him a chance to come back, as it were, it would free us from all blame. I think we ought to make peace, if possible. Life won't be worth living like this."

"Well, perhaps we might—"

McClure broke off. The door had just opened, and Edward Oswald Handforth strode into the study. He bestowed a glare upon his two soft-hearted chums, which did not instil much confidence into them.

"Clear out of here!" he said brusquely.

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Don't stand there arguing," roared Handforth. "Get out of this study!"

"Rats!" said McClure warmly. "This study is as much ours as it is yours! You've got no right to order us—"

"This is my study—and I'm not going to allow cads like you to contaminate it with your presence," declared Handforth fiercely. "Clear out before you're thrown out! I'm not standing any of your foolery!"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" said Church. "There's no reason why we should squabble like this—it's kiddish! I'm not a chap to keep up a row; in fact, I like everything to be peaceful."

Handforth glared.

"Are you trying to apologise?" he asked sourly.

"No, I'm not!" roared Church. "I'm providing an opening for you!"

"For me to do what?"

"Apologise to us!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" Handforth laughed with noisy sarcasm. "Apologise to you,

eh? You silly little idiot! I wouldn't apologise to you if you were Prime Minister! I've finished with you—and I've finished with McClure."

It was evidently quite hopeless.

"If you would only explain your movements, everything would be all right," said Church, in a final effort. "We can't go on like this in Study D. Why can't you let us share your secrets, Handy—the same as usual? We won't let anything pass out of this study——"

"That's enough!" snapped Handforth.

"But I just want to point out——"

"I don't want to hear another word!" roared Handy. "If you open your mouth again, Walter Church, I'll kick you out of the study. You're going, in any case—so you'd better make haste! Clear out!"

Church gave it up as a bad job, and snapped his fingers in Handforth's face.

"Go and eat coke!" he said. "I'll go when I like, my son! As a matter of fact, I'm not going at all! McClure and I mean to have this study—so the sooner you find other quarters, the better!"

"That's right!" said McClure.

Handforth fairly goggled at them.

"You—you traitors!" he shouted. "A fine pair of chums, ain't you—proposing to leave me in the lurch!"

"Leave you in the lurch!" gasped Church. "Why, you just told us to clear out—and now you talk about us leaving you in the lurch! The fact is, you don't know what you are talking about lately. You've got your head stuffed full of this Heath business, and you can't think clearly on any other subject. What you need more than anything else is a visit from a brain specialist!"

"And what you need—or will need soon—is a visit to a hospital!" shouted Handforth, rolling up his sleeves again. "Arguing is no good—I'm fed up with jaw! The time for action has come, and if you don't clear out within twenty seconds, I'll chuck you out! That's my last word!"

Church and McClure prepared to withstand the onslaught. They were certainly not going to be thrown out of their own study by Handforth, and this time they had every intention of beating him. The previous night he had got the better of them, but it would be different now.

CHAPTER II.

PARTED CHUMS.

HANDFORTH turned his attention to me, and gave me a freezing glare.

"I don't want any interference from you!" he roared. "Now you've got that door open, you might as well leave it open!"

"What for?" I inquired.

"I'm going to chuck these rotters out into the passage——"

"No, you're not!" I interrupted. "You're not going to do anything so drastic as that, my son. To begin with, they've got as much right in here as you have, and it's quite likely that the boot would be on the other foot. You might get chucked out yourself——"

"Didn't I tell you not to interfere?" demanded Handforth angrily. "This is our quarrel—not yours! Can't three chaps have a quarrel now, without you butting in?"

"My dear chap," I said soothingly, "there's no question about butting in. I hate to see three decent fellows having a split. You've pulled together ever since you've been at St. Frank's, and just because of a little petty squabble, there's no reason why you should have a serious parting which might be difficult to mend."

"It's no good talking!" put in Church wearily. "You might as well go outside and talk to a gatepost! Handforth means to have a row, and there's no getting out of it. But if he thinks he's going to chuck us out of this study, he's jolly well mistaken!"

"Oh, am I?" roared Handforth. "We'll see about that!"

He evidently considered that further words were useless, for he charged forward like a battering ram, hurling himself at Church and McClure. I stepped into the way, however and attempted to ease the position.

"Now, look here," I said. "There's no need to get violent—— Hi! Mind what you're doing with your fists! What the dickens——"

Further words were impossible, for I found myself in a somewhat precarious position. Handforth was hitting out with all his strength, and Church and McClure, thoroughly excited, were retaliating. And as I happened to be in

the middle of them, my position was by no means enviable.

I received about ten sashes before I knew what had happened, and I only just managed to escape from the battle in time. My efforts as peacemaker were hopeless, and I realised that all I could do was to leave the trio to it.

Since they were determined to have another scrap, the best thing I could do was to retire as discreetly as possible, so I slipped out of the study, and closed the door. Sounds of strife floated out into the passage.

Handforth was going strong.

He was absolutely determined, and his rhums happened to be determined, too. The result was a scrap of the first magnitude. The affair of the previous evening was really nothing compared to it.

Church and McClure defended themselves valiantly—but they never got beyond that point. As for assuming the offensive, this was out of the question. Handforth was so violent that it was quite impossible to hold him back.

He hit out right and left, and every one of his blows contained a fifty horsepower touch. There was simply no stopping them. The two unfortunate juniors tried their utmost to guard themselves, but they failed.

Church went down first, fighting game to the last. He would probably have arisen to the attack again, but for the fact that his head struck the corner of the fender with a crack which was distinctly audible.

He lay there, counting the stars.

McClure, left to himself, never exactly knew what happened next. All he distinctly remembered was finding himself in the passage, flat on his back, gasping for breath. He dimly remembered hearing the study door close with a bang, and then he commenced climbing painfully to his feet.

He was practically up when the study door opened again. There was a slithering rush, and Church came out. He collided violently with McClure, and the pair rolled over in a hopeless tangle.

"Now you're out!" panted Handforth. "If you come near this study again, you'll be given a second dose!"

He retired, victorious, and Church and McClure sat in the passage, hardly caring whether the world came to an end or not. And, to make matters worse, Nelson Lee came along the pas-

sage at that very moment. Somehow or other, masters had a most uncomfortable habit of appearing at moments when they were not required.

Nelson Lee paused as he saw the two juniors. An expression of astonishment came over his face, and was quickly replaced by a frown. He stepped forward quickly, and eyed the two juniors with a grim gaze.

"Church—McClure!" he snapped. "What is the meaning of this disgraceful affair? Good gracious! You are in a shocking condition!"

Church sat up, blinking with horror.

"We—we—— That is to say, we

"Get to your feet at once, boys!" ordered the Housemaster sternly. "I have never seen two boys in such a disgraceful condition before. I will see that you are very severely punished for fighting in this beastial manner in a public corridor."

"We—we haven't been fighting, sir!" gasped McClure faintly.

"Not at all, sir!" said Church.

"Then you will kindly explain how you got into this terrible condition!" said Nelson Lee. "You are bleeding, you are bruised, and your clothing is utterly ruined. I should advise you not to fabricate——"

Nelson Lee paused, and glanced at the door of Study D. Just for a second a light of understanding came into his eyes, and then he gazed upon the two juniors again.

"You have not been fighting?" he asked quietly.

"Not—not between ourselves, sir!"

"Then I assume that Handforth is responsible for your present condition?"

The two Removites were silent.

"Answer me, Church!" said Nelson Lee curtly.

"I—I'd rather not, sir!" said Church, shifting his feet uncomfortably.

Nelson Lee did not press the matter. He easily guessed that the two juniors were loyal, and that they would not sneak against their leader—even after he had mucked them about so grievously.

The Housemaster tapped on the door of Study D, and entered.

Handforth was sitting in the easy chair, staring straight before him, totally unconscious of his surroundings.

He made no attempt to obliterate the effects of the recent battle.

His necktie was missing, his collar was crumpled, and one side was torn from its stud, his hair was smothered with dust, his lip was bleeding, and one eye was puffed and blackened.

"Handforth!" rapped out Nelson Lee sharply.

Handforth gave a violent start, and jumped up.

"I—I didn't see you come in, sir!" he panted.

"Apparently not, my boy," said the Housemaster. "I presume that you are responsible for the appalling condition of Church and McClure—whom I have just seen in the passage?"

Handforth's lip curled.

"Oh, they've been sneaking, have they?" he exclaimed bitterly.

"Church and McClure refused to give any account of themselves—so your accusation is without foundation, Handforth," said the Housemaster. "As it happens, however, I am not quite a fool, and it was quite easy for me to draw my own conclusions."

Handforth squared his jaw.

"Well, I don't mind telling you the truth, sir," he said. "I did throw the two rotters out!"

"You admit it?"

"Yes, sir; and if they come back, I'll pitch them out again."

"You must not speak to me like that, Handforth," said Nelson Lee sternly. "You will understand that Church and McClure can enter this study when they please. And if you attempt to touch them again, you will be flogged."

Handforth glared.

"I don't see that, sir!" he shouted. "It's my study, and I've got a right to chuck them out if I want to—"

"It is not your study!" interrupted Lee sharply. "You had better get that idea out of your head at once, Handforth. Church and McClure have as much right to this apartment as you have. I am painfully surprised to find that you are developing into an arrogant bully!"

Handforth nearly fainted.

"A—a bully, sir?" he gasped.

"That is what I said!"

"But—but I was only teaching them a lesson, sir—"

"There are many ways of teaching lessons, Handforth—and I am sorry to see that your way seems to be a violent

one," continued the Housemaster. "Simply because you happen to possess more muscular power than your study mates, it does not necessarily say that you should use that power. By doing so, in fact, you are making yourself into a contemptible bully."

"But—but—"

"I do not say that you have done so deliberately," went on Lee. "To tell you the truth, Handforth, I thought better of you. Perhaps you acted unthinkingly—which is one of your characteristics. Just because you have had a little disagreement with your study companions, it is no reason why you should throw them out. I intend to give you a punishment which will, perhaps, serve as a lesson."

"A—a punishment, sir?" said Handforth, shocked at the thought.

"Yes, my boy," said Lee. "A caning, I fear, would have very little effect, since you are sufficiently brawny to withstand mere physical pain. You will write me five hundred lines, and you will be confined to gates for three days—"

"Great Scott!" said Handforth weakly.

"Furthermore, Handforth, you must understand that Church and McClure are not to be interfered with when they enter this room again," said the Housemaster. "If I learn that you have disobeyed this order, I shall take you straight before the Headmaster, and advise him to flog you. That is all, my boy."

Nelson Lee retired from the study, leaving Handforth like a newly landed fish. This visit of Nelson Lee's had come as a great shock to him—for he had fondly imagined that he could act the autocrat without interference.

He bitterly realised that Church and McClure now held the upper hand. Within a few minutes they would be back in the study, gloating over his helplessness, and sneering at him. It was just the kind of thing they would do.

"I won't stick it!" muttered Handforth. "I'll clear out of the study myself—and then they'll only be able to sneer at the bare walls!"

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee found Church and McClure still in the passage. They were looking rather more alive now, and had arranged themselves to the best of

their ability. Before being presentable for breakfast, they would find it necessary to visit the bathroom, and to don clean collars.

"You may go into your study when you like, my boys," said Nelson Lee. "I've had a talk with Handforth, and I realise that he was mostly to blame in this affair. However, you will each receive fifty lines for taking part in the fight. If Handforth interferes with you again, I shall know of it—and he will be flogged."

Nelson Lee passed on, and Church and McClure looked at one another, and their expression brightened.

"Well, he jolly well deserved it!" said Church. "It's taken a bit of the swank out of him, I should think. He won't dare to interfere with us again."

McClure snorted.

"I'm not going back again into the study," he declared. "We've got a perfect right there, I know, and Handy can't interfere with us now; but I wouldn't dream of sharing the same study with him in future!"

"Yes, I suppose you're right," said Church, nodding.

The door of Study D opened, and Handforth appeared.

"Well, why don't you start?" he demanded sourly. "You know all about it, I suppose. I can't touch you if you come into the study again, and you'll go yelling all over the school—gloating over me—"

"Oh, you needn't worry!" interrupted McClure. "If you think we'll come back into Study D, you're mistaken! We've finished with you!"

"Then you don't know that Mr. Lee—"

"We know everything," said Church. "You daren't touch us now; but that makes no difference. We're not coming back. You can keep the study to yourself, and after this we're not going to speak to you again. We're too disgusted to have anything to do with you. You can go to the dickens."

They walked down the passage, leaving Handforth somewhat taken aback. He had not expected them to adopt this attitude. It was rather like heaping coals of fire on his head, and he felt uncomfortable. He even began to wonder whether he had been really bullying—but he thrust that idea out of his mind.

By breakfast-time the three juniors were looking more presentable, although they still showed many signs of conflict.

Mr. Heath, of course, did not fail to observe the appearance of the Study D trio when morning lessons commenced. He sternly questioned them; but when he discovered that Nelson Lee had dealt with the matter, he said no more.

Mr. Heath certainly did not imagine that the whole trouble had been indirectly caused through him.

By dinner-time the estrangement between the three chums had grown more pronounced; the breach had widened. They avoided one another, and took every precaution to prevent a meeting.

If, for example, Handforth happened to enter the lobby just when Church and McClure were coming in from the Triangle, he would walk straight into the cloak-room—until they had passed. Church and McClure would act in a similar way.

They were busying themselves considerably now—shifting their personal belongings out of Study D. They had decided to make their home in another study at the end of the passage—a little apartment which had stood empty throughout the term. It was really the poorest study in the passage—a small room with a tiny window, and with its distempered walls patchy and drab.

There was no fire-grate in the room, but this did not matter, for it was summer time, and the days were warm. Church and McClure did their utmost to make their place look something like a cheerful study, but the task was a hopeless one from the first. Valiant as their efforts were, they were not rewarded.

The little apartment was looking just as cold and miserable and cheerless when they had finished shifting and arranging their things. But they did not care; they were away from their former leader—and that was the main thing.

They realised well enough that they had every right to continue to live in Study D, and that Handforth was powerless to pitch them out. At the same time, they preferred to leave him in solitude.

They were very bitter against him, and felt how impossible it was to share the same twelve square feet of St. Frank's.

As for Handforth, he did not go about triumphing over the fact that he had succeeded in turning his chums out—as they had expected. He remained very quiet, and said very little to anybody. He never spoke unless he was spoken to, and went about moony and disconsolate.

When he went to Study D he found that famous apartment looking a mere shadow of its former self. Its atmosphere of cheerfulness had vanished. Two-thirds of the books were missing. A dozen little odds and ends—the property of the departed juniors—were conspicuous by their absence.

In fact, Handforth felt a cold shiver run down his spine every time he entered Study D. He took a dislike to the apartment, and avoided it as much as possible. He refused many invitations to tea, and had the meal in the hall, although he had ample supplies of pocket money.

Outwardly, however, he pretended to be cheerful and careless. He wanted the fellows to believe that he didn't care a rap about the parting with Church and McClure; and he tried to make himself believe that he was quite indifferent to their company.

As a matter of fact, Handforth was miserable.

He told himself continually that he was glad that he had finished with his chums, and that there would be no more awkward questions. But, at the same time, he had an uncomfortable feeling that Church and McClure had been justified in their determined action.

The three juniors had never had any secrets, and Handforth did not exactly like being secretive now. But it was a matter of necessity; it was impossible for him to tell the two juniors all that he knew.

Healing the breach would be useless, for, even if this came about, Church and McClure would immediately want to know the truth about the little cottage at Edgemore.

It was better all round, perhaps, for them to remain parted.

But Handforth was utterly at sea. He had nobody to argue with; he had nobody to punch; he had nobody to talk to at all. For he refused to have anything to do with the other juniors. He kept strictly to himself.

And Handforth, before the day was out, began to realise the value of his two lost chums. Now that they had

gone—now that they had left Study D—he discovered that they had been a pair of extremely engaging and useful fellows.

They had always attended to every little matter which was part and parcel of the everyday life in a junior study. They had cleared up the room, they had prepared tea, they had washed up the crockery, they had laid in the supplies—in fact, they had done everything that was necessary to be done.

Handforth had left these things to Church and McClure for so long that he didn't know which way to turn now that they had gone. Whenever he went to Study D he felt helpless and hopelessly at sea.

He didn't like remaining in the apartment—he wanted to get out of it as soon as he entered. By the evening he avoided Study D as much as possible, and only went there to do his prep.

He didn't refrain from joining the other fellows in the Common-room, however. In fact, he made a point of being pleasant with everybody. But he rather overdid it. It could be plainly seen that he was attempting to give everybody the impression that he was quite indifferent about the split.

He treated Church and McClure with lofty disdain; he ignored their existence. And they, on their part, copied these methods. They held their noses in the air whenever they passed their former leader, and they looked upon him as though he didn't exist.

The Remove looked on with interest.

This was the first occasion in history where Handforth and Co. had been parted. Some of the fellows considered that they would never be pals again, others prophesied that an armistice would be declared within a couple of days, and a lasting peace within three.

Personally, I was inclined to share this latter view. I couldn't conceive of Handforth and Co. being at loggerheads for long.

But there was no doubt about the question now. The three hitherto inseparable chums were separated. Individually, they were obstinate—Handforth particularly so. They probably wanted to come together again already, but neither party would make the first advance.

Meanwhile, they drifted further and further apart.

How long would it be before the turning point arrived?

CHAPTER III.

THE COMTE PAYS A VISIT.

"**B**EGAD! I wonder who this strange-lookin' old gentleman is?"

Sir Montie Tregellis-West adjusted his pince-nez, and gazed with polite interest at the figure which had just entered the Triangle. Tommy Watson and I were similarly interested.

"He looks like a foreigner," said Watson critically.

"I am inclined to think that you are right, dear old fellow," agreed Sir Montie, nodding. "In fact, I am sure that the gentleman is a foreigner. A most amiable-lookin' old fellow—he is, really."

We were standing on the steps of the Ancient House. It was the evening of the day following—or, to be more exact, the afternoon. Lessons were over for the day, and tea was the next order on the bill.

We had been on our way to the tuck-shop, to purchase a few supplies, and had paused on the steps to gaze upon the stranger. The afternoon was glorious—brilliant, hot, and exceptionally fine. The air was like crystal, a soft breeze blew, and the sun shone with almost tropical intensity.

The gentleman who had entered the Triangle was a newcomer to St. Frank's. He was attired in light flannel trousers, a grey alpaca coat, and a wide-brimmed straw trilby.

As he came nearer, we were able to see his features more distinctly. He was elderly, his hair was grey, and a neatly pointed beard adorned his chin. His moustache was pointed, too, and he had big eyebrows.

There was undoubtedly a foreign touch about him, and he was something of a dandy, in spite of his age. A gold-rimmed monocle reposed in one eye, with a black cord dropping over his waistcoat. His neckwear was immaculate, his boots were glittering, and a beautiful rose adorned the lapel of his jacket.

"Hallo! Who's this Frenchy old merchant?" asked Reginald Pitt, coming up.

"We were just wonderin' the same thing, old boy," said Montie.

"Just a sight-seer, perhaps," observed Pitt. "If he wants somebody to take

him round the school, you'd better offer your services, Tregellis-West. Your politeness and inborn courtesy will leave a lasting impression."

"Pray refrain from bein' so shockin'ly absurd," said Montie severely.

"He's beckoning to us," exclaimed Augustus Hart, who had come out with Pitt. "I suppose we'd better see what the old chap wants."

He and Pitt moved down the steps, and arrived at the bottom just in time to meet the stranger. The latter politely raised his hat, smiled, and carefully adjusted his monocle.

"This is most fortunate, my dear lads," he said, in a delightfully smooth, pleasant voice. "I should like you to do me a favour, if it would not be too much trouble. May I anticipate your acquiescence?"

Pitt grinned.

"Certainly, sir," he replied. "What can we do, sir?"

"I am anxious to be directed to the private study of one of your masters—Mr. Clement Heath, to be exact," said the stranger. "If you'll be good enough to act as my guide, I shall be deeply indebted to you."

"This way, sir," said Pitt briskly.

"Thank you, my dear lad—thank you."

The courteous old stranger accompanied the two juniors into the Ancient House, passing us on the way. He nodded to us genially, and I looked after him rather curiously as he was crossing the lobby.

"I'll bet I know who he is," I said thoughtfully.

"How do you know?" asked Watson.

"Don't you remember that yarn about Handy getting on the track of somebody he thought to be a criminal?" I asked. "He was a French count, I believe—or an Italian. Anyhow, he was just like this chap who's just come."

"That's frightfully interestin', dear old boy," said Sir Montie. "Don't you know his name?"

"Yes—the Comte de Plessigny."

"What-ho!" exclaimed Watson, grinning. "That's a pretty high-sounding name, anyhow! It sounds like a character out of an historical romance!"

Handforth appeared at that moment, looking rather flushed.

"Half a minute, Handy!" I exclaimed. "Have you just met that old chap with Pitt and Hart?"

"Yes," replied Handforth gruffly; "I have."

"Do you know him?"

"I've—I've met him before," said Handforth uncomfortably.

"Is he the Comte de Kerosene?" asked Watson blandly.

"You—you ass!" said Handforth. "His name's Plessigny!"

"Yes; I knew it was something like that," grinned Watson. "Nipper was just telling us. So he is the old chap you tried to arrest last week? Why, you dotty idiot! You might have got yourself into serious trouble——"

"Oh, dry up!" growled Handforth.

He passed on, leaving us chuckling. My guess had been correct, and I was wondering why the comte—or the count—had come to St. Frank's to visit the temporary master of the Remove.

Meanwhile, the count found himself outside Mr. Heath's study. Pitt paused for a moment before tapping on the door.

"I'll just see if Mr. Heath is in, sir," he said.

"Thank you, my dear lad—thank you!"

Pitt tapped, and was invited to enter. He found Mr. Heath sitting at his desk, busily engaged upon some school work.

"Well, Pitt?"

"There's a gentleman to see you, sir."

"A gentleman?" repeated Mr. Heath curiously. "What is his name?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Well, you had better bring the visitor straight to my study," said Mr. Heath.

"He's here, sir—just outside the door."

Pitt stepped outside, and a moment later ushered the count into the apartment. Pitt closed the door softly, leaving the two men alone. The comte stood, removing his white gloves, and smiling cheerfully. Mr. Heath jumped to his feet, with a somewhat startled exclamation.

"I—I didn't expect to see you, sir!" he exclaimed quickly.

"No?" said the count, with perfect calmness. "I trust that it is an unexpected pleasure, and not the opposite.

I should hardly like to intrude, my dear Mr. Heath. You appear startled, and I am at a loss to understand why."

"I—I am really delighted to see you, sir," said Mr. Heath. "But—but it is so surprising to find you here. I never thought that you would come to St. Frank's——"

"Why not?" asked the count. "Why should I stay away if I wish to come? I have nothing to conceal. I'm a free man. I can go just where I please without the slightest hindrance. I have business to discuss, and so I came. You understand? It is quite simple."

Mr. Heath was still looking rather startled. He invited his guest to be seated, and, meanwhile, he attempted to recover his own composure.

"I was somewhat taken aback because I have been greatly worried," said Mr. Heath, regarding the visitor curiously. "Since our conversation of yesterday, when I saw you in Bannington, I have been considerably exercised in mind regarding the stone. I presume you have come in reference to that matter?"

The Comte de Plessigny nodded.

"So!" he replied. "That is the case, my dear sir. I have come to talk matters over with you—not actually with regard to the diamond, but indirectly because of it. I assume that you have mentioned nothing to any of the good people here?"

"Not a word," said Mr. Heath.

The count lay back in his chair, placed the tips of his fingers together, and gazed rather dreamily at the ceiling. Mr. Heath sat waiting for him to speak, and the new master was by no means at ease.

And there was an excellent reason for his worry.

Some days earlier Mr. Heath had found a magnificent diamond in Bellton Wood—a superb uncut stone, almost as large as a plover's egg. He found it while helping the count to search for some other object.

It did not occur to Mr. Heath that the count might have dropped the stone himself, and had been looking for it when Mr. Heath insisted upon joining the search. For some reason of his own, possibly, the count wished to keep back the fact that the diamond was not new to him.

It pleased the count to play another game.

At any rate, events were working out to his liking. Mr. Heath had mentioned nothing to Plessigny at the time of his discovery of the diamond. And Mr. Heath had not been absolutely certain that the stone was valuable.

Not wishing to consult anybody at St. Frank's—for fear of ridicule—Mr. Heath had taken the stone to the count, and the latter had immediately informed him that the stone was worth at least twenty-five thousand pounds.

Excited and eager, Mr. Heath had left the diamond in the count's possession, to be faced and polished. But then a big shock had come. The count had sprang a bombshell which took Mr. Heath completely by surprise.

Only the previous day he had supplied the information that the diamond was stolen property, and that a reward of five thousand pounds was offered for any information leading to the recovery of the stone. It was actually the property of the Marquis of Layham, and it had been missing for five years.

This news, of course, came as a staggering surprise to Mr. Heath, who, according to the count, was in a precarious position. For, having had the diamond cut, Mr. Heath had laid himself open to grave suspicion.

The count pointed out that Mr. Heath should have taken the stone straight to the police. He would then have obtained the reward. As matters now stood, Mr. Heath could do nothing of the sort, for the diamond was defaced. He would be immediately suspected of theft, and would find it extremely difficult to exonerate himself.

Although Mr. Heath was clever enough at his school work, and although he was a keen young man in most respects, he was quite a simpleton when it came to a matter of cunning and roguery. He was, in fact, an honest, straightforward man, and he knew very little of the wiles of the criminal world. He was easily duped, and he was being duped now by the charming-mannered count. But Mr. Heath did not know it.

He had followed Plessigny's advice all along, being totally unsuspecting of the fact that the count had deliberately paved the way for other plans.

The count opened his eyes after a few moments, and removed his monocle. Then he looked across at Mr. Heath, and smiled.

"With regard to the diamond," he said. "I think it will be better if you

continue to leave it in my hands for the moment. There is no actual danger for either of us, but the position is certainly awkward."

"Will you get into trouble if the police discover anything?" asked Mr. Heath.

The count shook his head.

"I? Oh, no!" he said. "I shall get into no trouble, my dear sir. With you it is a different matter. You found the diamond, you brought it to me, knowing nothing of its history, and I was good-natured enough to get it faced and polished for you. It is your responsibility entirely, and I am merely keeping it in order to help you."

"Yes, I quite understand that," said Mr. Heath. "But you must remember that you advised me to have the stone faced—"

"Quite so, quite so!" agreed the count. "But I knew nothing about the stone, and only discovered when it was too late that the diamond was stolen property. To continue polishing the stone and to sell it would be a criminal act."

"Yes, I know that, right enough," said Mr. Heath, nodding. "But surely it would be possible to explain everything to the police, and to hand it over. I should then be sure of the five thousand pounds reward. I don't like all this mystery and trouble and under-handed dealing—"

"Neither do I like it, to let you know the honest truth, I object to it strongly," interrupted the count. "But, having promised to help you, I am fulfilling that promise. And I am prepared to go further."

"It is very kind of you—"

"Wait. I have something to say which may not meet with your unqualified approval," said the visitor, bending forward slightly. "I take it that we are quite private here?"

"Why, yes, of course."

"Good. Well, my young friend, the position is somewhat curious," proceeded Plessigny. "I wish to help you, and I am prepared to do so if you will go a little out of your way to help me. It has come to my knowledge that a certain English nobleman will shortly pay a visit to this college—to be precise, Lord Dorrimore, the famous explorer and big game hunter."

Mr. Heath elevated his eyebrows.

"This is news to me," he remarked.

"I suspected that it would be," remarked the count. "Lord Dorrimore will be paying a visit to Mr. Nelson Lee—next week, I think. I am a man of direct words—a man who means what he says, and who is against beating about the bush. Consequently, I will not hesitate to tell you my wish. I want you to discover the exact meaning of Lord Dorrimore's visit."

"I don't understand you at all," declared Mr. Heath.

"No? Then I will make myself clearer," smiled the count smoothly. "I am aware of the fact that Lord Dorrimore is interested in a certain trip abroad—a trip which will be undertaken as soon as the St. Frank's summer holidays commence. Mr. Lee will be a member of Lord Dorrimore's party—and I have every reason to suppose that some of the boys will be guests, also. This trip, I believe, is connected with a lost treasure of some kind."

"That's very interesting," said Mr. Heath. "A treasure? I thought the days of hunting treasure-trove were long since over."

The count smiled.

"There are many different kinds of treasure," he remarked, gently rubbing his hands together. "You can have actual treasure—buried gold; you can have a pearl fishery, or a diamond mine, or something of that nature. In any case, this summer trip of Lord Dorrimore's concerns a search of that nature. You can greatly oblige me by using your discretion to discover what his lordship's plan is—to acquaint yourself with all the details, if possible."

Mr. Heath's expression had changed.

"Why do you require this information?" he inquired coldly.

"I have an excellent reason," said Plessigny, shrugging his shoulders. "It could not interest you, my young friend—and I do not intend to discuss my reasons. It is for you to carry out my wishes."

"I think not!" exclaimed the Remove-master curtly. "To be quite blunt, sir, you wish me to act as a spy—a spy on my Housemaster, and upon his guest. I cannot undertake to—"

"Dear, dear! You are such a hasty young man!" interrupted the count deprecatingly. "This show of temper is

hardly what I expected from you. A spy? Good gracious! What nonsense! I am merely curious—I am interested in travel personally—and you are here on the spot. It will be a simple matter for you to obtain this information. You will not be suspected of curiosity. It will be child's play."

"That may be," said Mr. Heath. "But at the same time, I positively decline to participate in this plan. I might mention that I am considerably surprised to find that such a suggestion should come from your lips. I had a better opinion of you, sir."

The count's face wrinkled up, and he chuckled.

"This is really sad—deplorable!" he exclaimed softly. "So your opinion of me has gone down a point? So? I am deeply sorry if I have disappointed you—but you do not understand the exact position. That is all. Please do not be foolish any longer. Come! You will do as I ask you?"

The young Form-master shook his head.

"No!" he said firmly; "I will not!"

"This is childish—and dangerous," said the count, his voice becoming somewhat metallic and hard—a strange contrast to his former silkiness. "Yes, my young friend—dangerous. You apparently forget your own perilous position; you overlook the fact that one word from me will place you in a serious—"

"Good heavens! You don't mean that you would—"

"Tut-tut!" interrupted the count. "Why should we have this squabble? Why is there any necessity for words? You understand me perfectly—and I understand you. So! Let us have no more of this bickering."

Mr. Heath sat silent. He sat in his chair with compressed lips, and his face was pale. He was just beginning to realise that the position was not exactly as he had pictured it.

The count, apparently, was something more than a harmless, genial old naturalist. Mr. Heath even began to suspect that there might be some trickery in connection with the diamond itself.

The count's proposal took his breath away. He was to spy upon Nelson Lee! That, in plain truth, was what Plessigny required. Mr. Heath was absolutely opposed to any such undertaking. But a feeling was creeping over him—a feel-

ing which seemed to numb his brain and to make him cold—that he would be absolutely compelled to carry out the count's desire.

Plessigny had not threatened him in so many words, but his tone certainly implied that the police authorities might get to know something of the diamond if he—Heath—remained obstinate.

The Form-master was innocent of cunning and crime, and he hardly seemed to realise that his present position was the result of a carefully conceived plot—he did not fully understand that the count's proposal was something in the nature of blackmail. Mr. Heath was so astonished at the turn of events that he hardly knew what to think. He was rudely awakened from his thoughts.

"Well?" said his visitor softly. "You have decided?"

"I—I hardly know," exclaimed Mr. Heath awkwardly. "I will do my best to carry out your wishes—but I shall certainly refrain from spying. If I hear anything that would be of use to you, I will let you know."

The count rubbed his palms together.

"Good!" he exclaimed gently. "That is a start, at all events. We will leave it at that, my young friend. I will bother you no more. You give me your promise that you will keep on the alert?"

"Well, yes."

"That is enough, then," said the count, rising to his feet. "No doubt you are busy. I will leave you to your studies. Good afternoon, my dear Mr. Heath. Remember your own peculiar position."

Plessigny smiled with all his old geniality; he fairly bubbled with good nature and charm. And he bowed his way out of Mr. Heath's study, leaving the young master worried and troubled.

Meanwhile, certain preparations had been made.

I found myself in request. To be exact, the gov'nor sent for me soon after the count had gone to Mr. Heath's room, and I went to Nelson Lee, wondering what could be the meaning of his summons.

"Here I am, gov'nor," I said. "What's the trouble?"

"There is no trouble, that I am aware of."

"Then what's in the wind?"

"I will explain, young 'un," said Nelson Lee. "You are probably aware of the fact that Mr. Heath has, at the present moment, a visitor in the person of the Comte de Plessigny."

"Yes, I know that, sir," I said.

"Yes well, I want you to obtain two photographs of the count when he takes his leave—a full faced, and a profile. They must be taken at close quarters, and must be good specimens."

"That's easy enough, sir," I said. "As it happens, my best camera is fully loaded, and it won't take me five minutes to pose the old chap and take his giddy dial! But what's the idea?"

"Not so quick, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "I want you to understand that the count must not be aware that he has been photographed—he must be in total ignorance of the fact that you have snapped him."

I stared.

"And you want one full faced and one profile—at close quarters?" I asked.

"Precisely."

"And the count isn't to know anything about it?"

"That is what I said."

"But it's impossible, sir," I protested. "I couldn't take two photographs of that sort without his knowing of it."

Nelson Lee looked at me squarely.

"Come, Nipper, you evidently do not know your own capabilities," he said. "I want those photographs—and I particularly impress upon you the fact that the count must know nothing. How are you to do the trick? I will leave that to you. I am confident that you are capable of performing a little manoeuvre of that type. I have faith in you, my lad. Don't disappoint me."

"Phew!" I whistled. "It's a tall order, gov'nor—"

"Nonsense! Your wits are more than capable of the task!"

Nelson Lee dismissed me smilingly—but I didn't feel extremely cheerful when I returned to my chums. I told them what the gov'nor required, and they looked at me rather doubtfully when I had finished.

"It can't be done," declared Watson.

"Dear old boy, I'm afraid you're right," said Sir Montie. "You might be able to take a snapshot of the old gentleman's back, Nipper, but not a close up view of his face. Begad! I am

rather surprised at Mr. Lee for expectin' you to accomplish a really impossible feat."

I grunted.

"That's the worst of the gov'nor," I exclaimed. "I've done a few decent bits of work now and again, and because of that he seems to have an idea that I'm capable of magic! It's a bit thick! I'm jiggered if I know how to do the trick!"

"It's impossible," said Tommy firmly.

I sat down and set my wits to work. Two minutes later a keen light came into my eyes, and I grinned.

"I think it can be managed, after all," I said cheerfully.

"Begad!"

"Eh?" said Watson. "Oh, don't talk rot—"

"I'm not talking rot," I interrupted briskly. "The gov'nor was right. This affair will be quite simple—all it needs is a little brain power. If I don't get those two photographs, I'll—I'll eat my own camera! And I'll get them without the old merchant guessing a thing!"

"But how?" demanded Watson. "How's it going to be done?"

"Well, to begin with, I'm going to take several elaborately posed photographs of our noble friend, the august Montie," I said.

"Eh?"

"Really, dear old boy—"

"We can't stop to discuss matters," I interrupted crisply. "The count may come out at any moment, so we must be on the spot. Thank goodness my camera is all ready for business."

I took the instrument out of the cupboard, fixed it on its tripod, and then tucked the whole affair under my arm.

"Come on!" I said. "Follow your uncle?"

My chums came out of Study D wonderingly. Out in the Triangle the afternoon was still as brilliant as ever—perfect weather for good photography. I proceeded to go ahead with my scheme.

Fortunately the Triangle was rather deserted—most of the fellows being at tea. And nobody took any particular interest in our movements. There was nothing exciting in the fact that I was snapping my two chums.

I prepared my stage carefully.

Montie and Tommy were quite puzzled, but they fell in with my suggestions without protest—but with a determined idea in their heads to wring the truth out of me later on.

I placed them some little distance from the steps, in the full sunlight, and then proceeded to waste time in getting them posed. Nothing would suit me.

Actually, of course, I was simply waiting for the count to appear. To my great satisfaction he did so, putting on his gloves as he emerged from the Ancient House doorway.

I was just at the bottom of the steps, and he would have to pass within a yard or two.

"Just wait a minute, sir," I said briskly.

"Certainly my boy—certainly," smiled the count. "A most interesting hobby, to be sure. I am delighted to see that you take such an interest in it."

He came down the steps, and stood watching at close quarters. I didn't even look at him, but gave all my attention to the camera.

"Now, then, you chaps—stand still!" I commanded. "One—two—three!"

Click!

"All over!" I said cheerfully. "I've got you nicely."

I swung the camera round and faced the count.

"That's the way to do it, sir," I said smiling.

"So I observe, my boy—so I observe," nodded Plessigny. "You seemed to be quite a professional. So. Splendid! A most interesting hobby!"

He turned away, and my shutter went for the second time. And as the Comte de Plessigny strolled leisurely towards the gates he was totally ignorant of the fact that I had obtained two very excellent photographs—one full faced, and the other profile. I was delighted with the success of my ruse.

"A fat lot of good, wasn't it?" exclaimed Watson, with a sniff. "Mr. Lee asked you to take the count's photograph, not ours."

"Dry up, you ass!" I said. "He might hear you!"

"Rats! He's gone!"

"Well, it may interest you to know his dial is distinctly impressed upon two half-plates in this camera," I said

smoothly. "I had the focus right to a degree, and I'll bet the photos come out A. 1."

"Dear old boy, I don't understand," said Sir Montie.

"It's easy," I grinned. "I didn't take your photos at all—but you thought I did, and the count thought I did. The click I made was caused by my finger nail—this shutter is noiseless. I dare say I seemed careless and easy when I turned to the count and spoke to him. But I opened the shutter at the right second, and got him full face—without his knowing anything about it."

"My hat!" said Watson. "That was cute."

"And when he turned away, I operated the shutter a second time," I explained. "He thought I was wasting plates on you—but I've got more respect for 'em. They're too expensive!"

"Really, old boy, you are frightfully uncomplimentary," said Sir Montie. "Under the circs., however, I will forgive you. I am quite certain that the count guessed nothing. He couldn't, begad! You did it so innocently, and so quickly that Tommy and I didn't know anythin' about it."

"That was just the idea," I said. "Simply bluff, my sons."

Directly after tea we retired to the dark room, and there I developed my plates, fixed them, and all the rest of it. An hour later I took a couple of gas-light prints—and the result was quite surprising.

Both the snapshots were perfect.

The count was there on the paper—full face and profile. Every line of his wrinkled face appeared. Considering the difficulties under which I had worked, I was more than delighted at my success.

I carried off the prints to the guv'nor, and planted them on his desk.

"There you are sir!" I said. "How's that?"

Nelson Lee examined the prints closely.

"Upon my soul, Nipper, these are better than I had hoped for," he exclaimed. "Good lad! I knew that I should be able to count on you."

"To snap the count," I grinned.

"For mercy's sake don't manufacture any of your terrible puns here, Nipper," exclaimed the guv'nor severely. "You have done well, and I am delighted. I watched you as you took the

photographs, and I am quite satisfied that the count was ignorant of the truth. I hardly expected the photographs to be so perfect, however."

"They're not bad," I admitted. "I've done what you wanted, and I didn't ask you any questions. Now, guv'nor, I want to know things. Why do you require these photographs? What's the brainy idea?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I am afraid I shall have to leave you guessing, young 'un," he said.

"Oh, rats! I want to know the truth——"

"It grieves me to disappoint you, Nipper, but I can't tell you anything further at present," said Nelson Lee firmly. "You have done well, and I am pleased with you. That must be sufficient."

And, try as I would, I couldn't shift the guv'nor from his decision. Why on earth he had got me to take the photographs, and what they were for, were questions which were quite beyond my powers of imagination.

CHAPTER IV.

A FEW DEDUCTIONS!

"JUST the day for a cycle run," declared Handforth, gazing at the sky approvingly.

"Well, I'm not so sure," said De Valerie. "I'd rather lie about in the shade, on the river bank. It's terrifically hot this afternoon, and cycling's too much like hard work to please me."

"Rot!" said Handforth. "I'm thinking of going over to Caistowe."

"With Church and McClure?"

Handforth frowned darkly.

"No!" he snapped. "I'm going alone!"

"Oh! The squabble's still going, then?" grinned Pitt.

"Squabble?" said Handforth stiffly. "There's no squabble, you ass! Church and McClure are nothing to me at all—I disown them. I'm never going to speak to the cads again! I've finished with them for good!"

Handforth walked off, snorting.

It was the afternoon following my



**"There you are!" muttered Church, his eyes gleaming with excitement.
"They're all out."**

little photographic stunt, and it was a half-holiday. The fine weather had not broken, and the sun beat down with pitiless heat from a cloudless sky. Everything was baking, and the roads were thick with dust.

Handforth met some other fellows just inside the lobby.

"I'm going for a cycle run after dinner," he said carelessly. "I was thinking about getting to Caistowe—just for the run."

"You're welcome to it," said Hart.

"Couldn't be a better day for cycling," went on Handforth. "Why, it'll be simply great, pedalling along. When I get to Caistowe I can have a dip, if I feel inclined. And I may not be back until the evening."

"My dear chap, it doesn't interest us when you'll get back," remarked Armstrong. "We're going to squat under the trees, and watch the First Eleven whack Redstone. It'll be a topping match. Why don't you stay and see it?"

"Oh, I'd prefer the cycle run," said Handforth.

He strolled off, and emerged into the Triangle.

In the shade of the old elms he encountered Jack Grey, Somerton, and Farman. And Handforth lost no time in informing the three juniors that he was bent upon going out for a cycle run after dinner.

In fact, Handforth seemed to go to a lot of trouble to make everybody acquainted with the fact that he was going out on his bike—and, more particularly, that he was thinking of making Caistowe his objective.

Some of the fellows talked about it.

"What the dickens do we want to know his plans for?" remarked Hubbard, who was assisting to prop up the wall of the gymnasium. Silly ass! He seems to be going about the giddy school, telling everybody that he means to go to Caistowe."

"Just as if we want to know where he's going!" sniffed Canham.

"What's that?" inquired Church, who happened to be passing.

"Oh, we're talking about Handy," said Hubbard.

He explained, and Church nodded.

"Yes, I've heard other chaps talking about it, too," said Church. "Seems a bit queer why Handy should make a special point of telling everybody."

"Oh, I suppose he wants to impress upon the Remove the fact that he's finished with you and McClure," grinned Hubbard. "He's making it quite clear that he's going out alone. I suppose you'll soon make it up, eh?"

Church shook his head.

"Not likely!" he said. "Handy's too jolly obstinate! Until he apologises we sha'n't have anything to do with him—and there's no hope of him apologising until he's about eighty or ninety!"

Church strolled off, and found McClure in the lobby. But he was unable to discuss anything with his chum, for at that moment the dinner-bell rang. During the meal Church seemed to be very thoughtful.

Later on, McClure understood why.

"I've been thinking," said Church, when he and his chum were in their little study after dinner; "in fact, I've been making a few deductions—and I've come to one conclusion."

"What's that?"

"I'm talking about Handy——"

"Oh, rats to him!" said McClure tartly.

"I've got a pretty keen idea in my head that there'll be something doing this afternoon," went on Church. "I don't profess to be a detective, but if I can't beat Handy at his own game, I'll allow him to punch my nose every time he wants to!"

"What are you driving at?"

"Well, just consider the facts," said Church keenly. "Handy's been telling everybody that he's going out for a cycle run—that he means to go to Caistowe. Well, in my opinion, that's a blind."

"A which?"

"He means to go somewhere else!" declared Church; "but he wants to make everybody think the opposite. It's all right to do a thing like that within reason—a word here and there. But Handforth always overdoes things."

McClure looked thoughtful.

"Yes, there might be something in it," he agreed.

"Might be! I'm jolly certain of it," said Church. "And it's a dead cert. that Handy means to go to Greyhurst Cottage! He's going out on his bike, and he'll make straight for Edgemore—after taking the Caistowe road for a bit. He doesn't want anybody to know where he's really going."

"By jingo! You've hit it!" said

McClure. "For some unknown reason, the ass doesn't want us to go near that cottage. He knocked us about because we decided to go there alone. He's found out something about Mr. Heath that he wants to keep to himself—he seemed positively scared when there was a chance of us discovering something."

"He did!" agreed Church. "So it's up to us to get at the truth. If we can only do that—if we can only discover the secret of Greyhurst—things will be different."

"How do you mean?"

"Why, if we know this secret as well as Handforth, he won't need to keep anything from us," explained Church. "He's been so jolly mysterious lately because of this secret—he's had rows with us for days."

"And if we all know the truth, he may apologise?"

"Of course!" said Church. "Although it's a bit uncertain whether he'll go to that length. He might say a few words which amount to the same thing—and we can waive a complete apology."

"Well, it would be a lot better to have things going smoothly again," said McClure. "I'm fed up with this cat-and-dog life. But I don't quite see how we can learn anything of value."

Church nodded wisely.

"Don't you?" he said. "Well, listen to me."

He outlined a scheme to his chum—a stratagem which fairly took McClure's breath away for the moment. The plot, in fact, was a deep one, and the two juniors discussed it eagerly and with much animation.

"Well, is it a go?" asked Church at last.

"You bet!" said McClure.

They shook hands on it, and two or three minutes later they were rushing about making certain preparations. It was necessary to rush, for Handforth was just fetching his bicycle out—and it would not take him long to get to Greyhurst Cottage, notwithstanding the fact that he would make a detour.

Five minutes later, Church and McClure hurried out.

They cared nothing for the cricket match on Big Side—it had no interest for them then.

They dived straight into Bellton

Wood, hurried through it, and emerged into the little lane which led to Edgemore. A very few minutes later they approached the dark-looking cottage which—in their opinion—was Handforth's real destination.

It was quite easy to conceal themselves near by, for there were dry ditches filled with ferns, overhanging trees, and other handy aids for concealment. They were hot and breathless, and were glad of the rest.

"Well, we've got here," panted Church, mopping his brow. "Phew! Talk about heat! It's like the tropics to-day!"

"Blow the weather!" said McClure. "We've got here, and I'm pretty certain that Handforth hasn't had time to go round by road. He couldn't do much speeding on an afternoon like this."

"Have you got those things all right?" asked Church.

"Rather! Let's hope we shall be able to use 'em."

They sat waiting in the ditch, glancing up and down the road occasionally, and every now and again examining the front of the cottage. It was a very peaceful spot, and extremely quiet.

The only sound of life which came to their ears was the distinct clanging of the blacksmith's hammer on the anvil—his little shop was at the other end of the village. Birds were twittering, and poultry made itself apparent somewhere behind the trees but there was no sign of any human being.

The whole place was lazy and idle.

The insects hummed by, and the sun beat down on the dusty lane. It really seemed impossible that there could be any deep mystery here. But Church and McClure were determined to get at the truth.

Investigations by night were awkward—in fact, almost out of the question; but there was no reason why they should not give Greyhurst Cottage some attention on a quiet half-holiday.

"Hallo!" whispered Church suddenly. "Did you hear that?"

"That tinkle?"

"Yes! It was a cycle bell!" said Church. "Sounded like that rotten bell of Handy's, too!"

The two juniors parted the ferns cautiously, and peered down the lane. They could not see into the little village, owing to a bend in the road. They watched the bend eagerly and anxiously.

A cyclist came into view—and the two juniors gazed at one another in triumph.

"It's Handy!" whispered McClure.

"As large as life!" said Church.

"There you are! My reasoning was pretty sound, wasn't it? Going to Caistowe! What rot!"

"It was a ruse," said McClure.

"Everybody else is diddled—Handy's given the impression that he was really going to Caistowe. But the silly ass couldn't dish us—not likely!"

"Dry up! He's here!"

The two juniors remained silent, and they crouched down low.

Handforth dismounted from his bicycle at the gate of Greyhurst Cottage. He opened the gate, pushed his bike inside, and wheeled it up to the front door. Then he propped it against the porch, and operated the knocker.

Only a few seconds elapsed before the door was opened. The watching juniors caught a glimpse of a bent old man. The bicycle was taken inside, Handforth disappeared with it, and the door closed.

Church and McClure transferred their gaze to one another.

"Well, what do you think of it?" exclaimed Church grimly. "Going into that giddy house as though he owned it—taking his bike in, too! By Jove! There's something fishy about this!"

McClure nodded.

"Yes, and we're going to find out what it is, too!" he declared.

The two juniors were full of curiosity. Their surmise had been correct—Handforth had not gone to Caistowe, but had come secretly to this cottage. What did it mean? What could be the explanation of Handforth's strange behaviour?

Church and McClure were determined to get into Greyhurst Cottage before the afternoon was out—by hook or by crook!

CHAPTER V.

A SMOKY EXPEDIENT!

"FOLLOW me!" whispered Church.

He and his chum had worked their way round to the rear of Greyhurst Cottage. Their movements were completely concealed by the trees and bushes. They moved cautiously, in order to avoid any possibility of being seen.

And now they crouched at the back of the cottage, and could see into the untidy, weed-grown garden. Just in front of them, and standing between the end of the garden and the cottage itself, was a low built shed.

It was a wooden place, old and rotten in places—but still, a serviceable place on the whole. There was a window in it, but the juniors could see no door—proving that this necessary article lay on the other side.

"That's the shed," whispered Church. "We saw it when we came here the other afternoon. There's no reason why my wheeze shouldn't work to perfection—particularly as the wind is in the right quarter."

"The wind?" repeated McClure.

"Yes—it's blowing straight over the cottage from here."

McClure looked up at the trees, and nodded.

"Yes," he agreed. "That will be a big help."

Handforth's chums, as a matter of fact, were really grim this time. They were sick of doing things by halves, and being left in the cold. They meant to find out the secret, one way or another.

In fact, they were prepared to go to considerable lengths in order to gain admittance into Greyhurst Cottage. They were intent upon doing something big—something risky—something which would either result in complete success, or which would get them into serious trouble.

They felt reckless, and didn't care much.

They were just in that mood when they were willing to go to almost any length—the sole object was to get to the heart of the mystery. Handforth wouldn't tell them the truth, so all they could do was to find it out for themselves.

Their plans were already cut and dried, and they only needed carrying out. Church was the chief plotter—and he certainly displayed a considerable amount of ingenuity in his scheming.

The two juniors crept through the hedge at the bottom of the garden, and they worked their way round to the front of the little shed. Sure enough, there was a door there, but, to their dismay, it was padlocked.

"My hat! This puts the lid on the game!" whispered McClure.

They were kneeling in the grass—

order to remain hidden from the house—and they stared at the padlocked door with concern. McClure was deeply worried, but Church only grinned.

He was proving himself to be an able leader, when it came to a pinch.

"That doesn't worry me," he said. "The window is only a flimsy thing, and if we can't get it open within five minutes, I shall be jolly surprised. It'll be all the better to use the window, anyhow."

They crept back, and Church's surmise proved to be correct. The window, although secured after a fashion, was easily prized open, and a minute later the two juniors were inside the shed.

"Supposing somebody comes out now?" whispered McClure.

"Oh, there's no sense in supposing," said Church briskly. "The chances are that we shall be undisturbed—but we'd better get busy as soon as we can, in any case. Fish out those giddy fireworks!"

"Here they are!"

McClure produced some curious-looking objects from his coat pocket. They were certainly fireworks of a kind—to be exact, a patent variety of smoke bombs. They were not very large, but they were capable of creating dense clouds of smoke.

"Jolly good thing Somerton laid in a stock of these things," said McClure. "That's the best of having pots of money—a chap can buy expensive fireworks for Sports Day. And it's a good thing Somerton got them well in advance."

"Oh, it's not long to the end of the term," said Church. "He's got quids worth of fireworks in his box. He happened to mention it in my hearing, and he gave me these bombs without asking any awkward questions."

"He's a jolly good sort," declared McClure.

Church looked round.

"We shall want some tins, or something," he said. "These things are safe enough, but I shall feel more comfortable if we put them in something fire-proof. Here we are! The very articles."

Church went over to the shed, and raked out two rusty old pails.

"Couldn't be better," he declared. "Now, all we've got to do is to put these bombs in the pails, light the fuses, and then clear out. It's as simple as saying the giddy alphabet."

"I suppose there's no danger of fire?" asked McClure doubtfully.

"Rats! They're as safe as houses—there's no flame, not even a spark that matters. Don't get nervous, you ass!"

The two juniors lost no time in placing the two bombs in the pails. The latter were then set wide apart, and Church stood ready with a match.

"Open the window, and get ready to bunk out," he said briskly. "In fact, you'd better get out now, old son. I'll follow as soon as I've lit these fuses. If the trick doesn't work, I shall be jolly disappointed. It's bound to work!"

McClure opened the window, and glanced out.

"Coast's clear!" he announced.

"All right—you get out!"

McClure did so, and Church applied a light to the two fuses. They caught immediately, and burned slowly and steadily. Church gave a final look round, and noted that there were plenty of openings near the roof—through which the smoke would be able to escape. There were dozens of cracks in the woodwork, too.

Without loss of time he slipped out of the shed, and found McClure crouching behind some bushes. As yet there was nothing to be seen—the shed looked just as ramshackle and peaceful as before.

"There's no smoke!" whispered McClure.

"Of course not—yet," said Church. "Give the giddy things time! There will be plenty of smoke in a minute. But we can't stop here—we're in the wrong place. We want to be where we can see both the shed and the back of the cottage."

It did not take them long to find the position they required. Hidden among the bushes, they were nevertheless in a position to see the whole cottage garden, including the rear of the building itself, and the shed.

"Hallo!" whispered Church. "It's started."

They had taken some time to find their new point of vantage, and, meanwhile, the bombs had commenced action. They were only fireworks, of course, and perfectly harmless.

Not a sound had come from the shed, but as the juniors gazed at it, they saw thick smoke issuing lazily from beneath the eaves.

"Well, that's not much to shout

about," muttered McClure. "They'll never see it!"

"Can't you wait, you impatient ass?"

It was the only thing to be done.

And the juniors were soon rewarded; for the smoke increased in volume at an astonishing speed, until there were dense, choking masses coming from every crack and cranny in the old woodwork of the shed.

The light breeze drifted the smoke down the garden, and caused it to surge round the cottage in clouds. It swept into the open window, and obscured the roof from sight.

And Church and McClure watched, tensely and anxiously.

For two minutes nothing happened—then came the change.

An old lady appeared. She opened the door and looked about her wonderingly, gazing at the smoke clouds with a kind of curious alarm. Then she saw that the shed at the bottom of the garden was the cause of the trouble.

"Mercy on us!" she exclaimed, horrified.

She ran forward, quite frantic. Then she checked herself, turned round, and ran into the cottage. The two waiting juniors heard her voice, shrill with excitement, calling for assistance.

"It's worked!" whispered Church. "My hat! I wonder if we shall succeed?"

Everything depended on the next minute.

The juniors had not long to wait. A bent old man—the same they had seen at the front door earlier—came hurrying out of the cottage. Behind him blundered Handforth, and then came a slim, extremely good-looking girl, dressed in a white frock. She gave a little scream as she saw the cloud-choked shed.

She stood for a moment, and was then joined by the old lady. They followed Handforth and the old man up the garden, until they were lost in the dense smoke which surged round the supposedly burning building.

The back door stood wide open, but nobody else came out.

"There you are!" muttered Church, his eyes gleaming with excitement. "They're all out."

"I wonder who that girl is?" exclaimed McClure. "By jingo! I wonder if Handy's fallen in love. That would explain his secretive—"

"We can't stop to discuss that now," snapped Church. "It looks queer, I'll admit—but we're not guessing any more. We've come here to find out for certain—and we're going to do it."

Their next move was a bold one. At any other time the two juniors would never have had the audacity to attempt such a scheme. But, with their leader gone, they were compelled to adopt drastic measures.

It was fairly safe for them to assume that all the occupants of the cottage had rushed down to the shed—to see the cause of the fire. At any moment one of them might return—Handforth or the old man. If one did return, then Church's scheme would be doomed to failure.

So there was not a second to be lost.

"Come on!" he exclaimed tensely.

"Yes, but—"

"If we hesitate, we're lost."

McClure could say no more, for Church had already broken cover. The pair of them raced through the grass to the back door of the cottage—their running figures completely concealed by the barrage of smoke which poured down the garden.

They could see nothing of the shed—but they didn't want to. If the little party at the shed were concealed from them, it stood to reason that they were concealed from the little party.

They found themselves at the back door, and they did not hesitate.

Church plunged in and found himself in a cool, brick-paved passage. Everything was quiet and still. A kitchen lay to the left, and it was quite deserted. Further along there was another door, standing wide open.

It was the door leading into the front room.

Church made for it, careless of whether it contained anybody. If this proved to be the case, they would be discovered, and big trouble would follow. But the juniors were prepared for anything. They meant to do or die.

But fortune was with them.

Dashing into the room they found it to be empty. And they could see at a glance that it had been recently occupied. Tobacco smoke hung in the air, and there was some needlework on a table. To absolutely clinch matters, Handforth's cap was on the table, too.

"Ripping!" gasped Church. "We're in!"

"And nobody knows anything about it," said McClure. "Oh, my goodness, this is a game, if you like!"

"We've got to hide somewhere—quick!" exclaimed Church sharply. "They may be back at any minute, and after succeeding so far it would be simply diabolical to fail. My hat! What price that old couch?"

"The very thing," declared the other junior.

There was no time to pick and choose. There was really no time to glance round properly. Even as Church and McClure stood there, they heard Handforth's voice. It would be necessary to find concealment within an instant.

So the pair threw themselves on the floor, and wormed their way under a big, old-fashioned couch, which stood across a corner of the room. There was plenty of space behind, and plenty of space underneath.

The juniors were accommodated quite comfortably, and they were perfectly concealed from view. There was nothing whatever to show that they had been in the room, and that they were still there.

Church's daring ruse had succeeded.

As to the right or wrong of the thing, the two juniors did not consider the point. It never occurred to them that they were possibly poking their noses into an affair which was no concern of theirs.

Their anxiety about Handforth overruled all other feelings.

He was changed—altered in every way—and they wanted to get at the truth. They were terribly anxious to find out what the exact trouble was. And they had gone to this length in order to fulfil their wish.

It could not be denied that Church's scheme was a smart one—although, of course, not absolutely original. He had lured the people out of the cottage by a stratagem, and while the place was deserted, he and his chum had dashed in. It was undeniably a clever piece of work.

They lay under the old couch, panting hard, and hoping against hope that two people would come into the room at once, and talk. If only one individual entered, he might hear the forced breathing of the intruders—for they were quite out of breath with running and excitement.

Footsteps sounded out in the passage, and then they halted.

"Edith!" called a voice softly, but with an anxious note in it.

"Great pip!" breathed Church. "Old Heath!"

The voice was that of Mr. Clement Heath, the master of the Remove. There was no reply to his call, and the next moment the two juniors heard the door of the room creak, and they saw Mr. Heath's dusty boots as he entered. The intruders caught their breath, and held it with painful anxiety.

Then other footsteps sounded, and a pair of white boots appeared—the vision of the hidden juniors was confined to the lower extremities only. Owing to the low couch, they could only see feet.

But they knew who the newcomer was at once.

"Handforth!" shouted Mr. Heath hoarsely. "Why, what—what—"

"Oh, my only sainted aunt!" ejaculated Handforth, in blank dismay.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SECRET OF GREYHURST COTTAGE.

MR. HEATH stared at Handforth as blankly as Handforth stared at Mr. Heath. For several moments they remained speechless. Handforth was looking almost scared, and Mr. Heath was angry and startled.

"What—what does this mean, my boy?" exclaimed the Remove-master, at last. "How—how did you know—How did you guess—What is the meaning of your presence here, Handforth?"

"Well, I'm jiggered!" exclaimed Edward Oswald. "I didn't expect to see you here this afternoon, sir! Still, it's all the better, perhaps. We've been keeping it a secret, but it's just as well for you to know."

"Do—do you know—everything?" asked Mr. Heath huskily.

"Yes, of course."

Handforth spoke in a more familiar way than usual, and his manner was fast becoming free and easy. He even went so far as to chuckle, and Church and McClure listened with growing astonishment.

"You couldn't diddle me, Mr. Heath," grinned Handforth. "Not likely!"

"What—what do you mean?"

"Rats! You know as well as I do," said Handforth, going over, and digging Mr. Heath in the ribs. "Mr. Clement Heath! Ha, ha, ha! Pretty rich, ain't it? Nobody here guesses you're Mr. Arthur Kirby!"

The Remove-master gave a grunt.

"Oh, well, perhaps it's all to the good that you should know," he said gruffly. "I'm a bit tired of the game myself. I didn't think that you were such a persistent young bounder, Edward. But Edith has been telling me a few things lately, and your character is well-known to me."

Handforth grinned.

"Just fancy being my giddy brother-in-law!" he said. "I call it rather rich, you know! And I thought you were a forger and a crook, and all sorts of things. I nearly had a fit when I discovered that Sis was here!"

"Yes, I suppose you did."

"Talk about a surprise," went on Handforth. "Why, you could have knocked me down with a penholder! I found it out—Hullo, Sis!"

Another pair of feet appeared—extremely dainty ones this time.

"Oh!" exclaimed a charming voice. "I—I didn't know—"

"Oh, it's all right, Edie," said Handforth. "Arthur just came in, and caught me beautifully. I'm glad."

"So am I!" exclaimed the girlish voice. "Oh, this is splendid! You ought to have known it weeks ago, Edward. It's ever so much better now—there's no need for us to be so secretive."

"Well, I don't think Arthur minds," said Handforth. "My hat! It sounds a bit queer to hear me calling my Form-master Arthur. But I don't see any reason why I should say Mr. Heath—or Mr. Kirby."

Church and McClure listened with blank astonishment now. And they were beginning to realise the exact truth—which was startling enough.

Mr. Heath, the new master of the Remove, was none other than Handforth's brother-in-law—the husband of Handy's sister!

The mystery was unravelling itself in the most simple manner. Church and McClure had been expecting something

so different—something strange and underhand.

And here they found that the whole affair was merely a domestic complication!

"Oh, well, there's no sense in making a fuss," exclaimed Mr. Heath. "You know all about it, Handforth, and there's nothing more to be said. But what was the meaning of all that smoke? I saw it as I came along, and I thought the place was on fire. It gave me quite a start."

"It's really awfully mysterious, Arthur," exclaimed the girl. "We thought the shed was on fire—until we examined it—"

"Until I examined it, you mean," interrupted Handforth. "None of your swank, Sis! Smoke was pouring out of that shed, and as the door was locked, I dived through the window. And what do you think I found?"

"Goodness knows," said Mr. Heath. "Some old rags smouldering?"

"No. Two blessed smoke bombs," said Handforth, frowning.

"Smoke bombs?"

"Yes!"

"But who on earth could have put them there?"

"That's what I'm trying to get at," said Handforth. "It's a trick of somebody's, and I don't quite like the look of it. It seems to me that some of our chaps have been up to a lark—and if that's the case, it means that they suspect things. We couldn't see a soul, anyhow."

Mr. Heath frowned.

"H'm!" he said. "I don't like it. What does Miggs say? Has he seen anybody loitering about?"

"Not a soul, Arthur—nor Mrs. Miggs, either," said the girl. "We can't understand it. But I don't think there's anything to worry about. Isn't it just glorious to have Elephant here?"

"To have whom?"

The girl laughed musically.

"Why, I always call Ted the 'elephant'!" she smiled. "He's such a big, clumsy boy that I've called him by that name ever since he was ten!"

"Like your giddy cheek, too!" said Handforth gruffly. "If any of the St. Frank's fellows called me 'elephant,' they'd jolly soon get a dot on the nose! And I ain't sure that you won't get one some day, sis!"

"Oh, you awful boy!" said the girl.

Church and McClure listened rather uncomfortably now. It was a pure family affair, and they felt their position quite keenly. They realised, for the first time, that they were intruders.

But retreat now was impossible.

There was no telling how long they would remain in hiding. They remembered Handforth's anxiety, a week or two back, concerning his sister. She had married a man totally against her parents' wishes, and had run off with him.

They had gone away, and had given no inkling of their address. Mr. Arthur Kirby was not rich enough for Sir Edward Handforth's liking, and he and Handy's mother had put their foot down strongly on the engagement.

Nevertheless, Miss Edith had continued to see her lover secretly, and, finally, they had run off and got married, to the consternation and dismay of Sir Edward and Lady Handforth.

After the deed had been done, the old people were sorry that they had behaved in such an autocratic fashion, and were extremely anxious to discover the whereabouts of their daughter.

She had written once or twice, but had given no address. All their inquiries had been in vain, and the result was that Edith still remained in obscurity. Handforth himself had been as anxious as his parents.

But he had never dreamed of suspecting Mr. Heath, the new Remove-master. But it was now clear to Church and McClure that Mr. Heath was none other than Mr. Arthur Kirby, and the girl in the room was Mrs. Kirby, Handy's sister.

She was not a year older than twenty-one, and extremely charming. As clumsy as Handforth was, she was just the opposite—dainty and pretty. The hidden juniors were delighted to find that everything was all serene; but their one anxiety now was to escape from the cottage undetected.

But no opportunity was to occur yet awhile.

"Well, you know all about it, of course," said Mr. Kirby—or, perhaps, it would be as well to continue to refer to him by his school name, Mr. Heath. "I suppose Edith has told you all the details?"

"Pretty nearly," said Handforth.

"You realise, of course, how important it is that you should keep this matter

absolutely secret?" asked Handy's brother-in-law. "It would be absolutely disastrous if the Head got to know my real identity——"

"Oh, I know that!" said Edward Oswald. "I've been to such trouble to keep the secret that I've had a terrific bust up with my own chums."

"Oh!" said Mr. Heath. "Now I understand why you quarrelled with Church and McClure. You have not spoken to them for a day or two, and they, I believe, have removed from Study D into another. I did not imagine for a moment that my affairs were the cause of your disagreement."

Church and McClure listened with new interest.

"Well, it's a fact," said Handforth rather gloomily. "I didn't want to have any bust-up, but I couldn't avoid it. You see, I had always urged them to help me in tracking you about, but when I came and saw Sis the other night, she particularly asked me to keep the secret to myself—and I promised. Well, Church and McClure wanted to come to this place, and scout about. I couldn't allow that, knowing the truth, so I tried to make them alter their minds. They were firm, I was firm, and a fight resulted. I knocked the poor chaps about terribly, and the silly asses knocked me about, too! After that we had a regular bust-up, and now we won't speak to one another. I tell you, it's pretty rotten."

"Oh, but surely you can make up the quarrel?" asked Edith.

"I could, of course," said Handforth. "But what will be the good? They'd immediately ask me questions again, and I should refuse to say anything—and all the trouble would start afresh. I can't understand why they can't be told; they're as true as steel, and wouldn't breathe a word."

"Good old Handy!" murmured McClure, under his breath.

"I don't think it would be advisable, my lad," said Mr. Heath.

"Well, it means that we've got to keep up the squabble," said Handforth. "It's rotten, I can tell you! They're two of the best, and I ought to apologise to them. It's not often I admit myself wrong, but in a case like this I'm compelled to. They're bricks, as I said before, and it's simply hateful to keep up this row."

"Oh, well it won't last long!" said Mr. Heath. "The term will soon be

over—and I can't afford to take any risks. I had an opportunity of obtaining this position, and I seized it. I realised that Edith and I would be out of the way, and I should have time to get fixed up permanently. It was rather awkward using a false name, but there's nothing criminal in the proceeding.

"And, of course, you couldn't show sis, for fear of the pater and mater getting to know about it?" asked Handforth.

"Good gracious, no!" said Mr. Heath. "We're married now, and your father and mother can do nothing. Moreover, I understand that they are anxious to find us, and to welcome me as their son-in-law. The reason I have been so secretive is that undermasters at St. Frank's are not allowed to marry."

"What rot!" said Handforth indignantly.

"Well, it is a rule in many schools—St. Frank's is no exception," said Mr. Heath. "I expect there are very good reasons for making such a stipulation. In any case, I did not want to lose the position, and I didn't care about leaving Edith in London. This little cottage was empty, and Mr. and Mrs. Miggs were available to act as housekeepers, so I fixed things up. I thought I could keep everything quiet; I wasn't aware of the fact that you were such a persistent young beggar."

"Oh, well, Arthur, it's all for the best!" said Edith. "There's no harm in Elephant knowing."

"Perhaps not," said the young master. "But I'm rather curious to know how he discovered the truth. I suppose you were incautious, and went out into the front garden as Edward was passing by?"

"No fear!" grinned Handforth. "I got hold of a clue!"

"Oh! And what was that?"

"Do you remember giving me some lines a day or two back?" asked Handy.

"I have frequently given you lines!" smiled his brother-in-law.

"Well, you gave me some, and I took them to your study in the evening," said Handforth. "You didn't happen to be there, so I shoved them on your desk. Then I spotted a fountain pen in the rack. It gave me a bit of a turn, I can tell you."

Church and McClure remembered that incident of the fountain pen. They had thought that Handforth was going dotty

at the time. He had brought the fountain pen into Study D, and had stared at it in a dreamy, fascinated kind of way.

"By Jove!" said Mr. Heath. "It was foolish of me to leave that pen there!"

"Jolly lucky, I call it," said Handforth. "Well, I spotted it, and saw the word 'twenty' set in little pearls. I knew the pen in a tick, because I happened to give it to Sis last year, on her twentieth birthday. That's what the 'twenty' meant."

"Yes; I am aware of that," said Mr. Heath. "Edith told me."

"As soon as I saw the pen I got a terrific shock," went on Handforth. "It belonged to Sis, and it was in your study! I could see the nib was broken, and it needed repairing. Well, I began to suspect the truth; but I wasn't sure. I decided to make certain, so I came straight here. You happened to be in Bannington, so it was easy to come without your knowing."

"You cunning young rascal!"

"Cunning? Rot!" said Handforth, with the free and easy familiarity of relationship. "Why, it was jolly cute of me. I don't want to boast, but I must give myself a pat on the back when I deserve one. I didn't want to make a mess of things, so I went to work cautiously. Mr. Miggs opened the door after I had knocked, and I told him to take a message. 'Fountain pen, pearls, twenty, Elephant,' that's what I said. I knew that if Edith was here, she'd understand. Of course, she did, and I walked in. That's all."

Mr. Heath chuckled.

"It only proves how necessary it is to be careful," he said. "I did not suppose for a moment that you would ever catch sight of that fountain pen. But why didn't you tell me you knew?"

"Well, Sis and I thought you might get wild, or something, so we kept it secret," said Handforth. "I didn't know you were going to be in this afternoon, or I wouldn't have come. I've been on your track for weeks. I thought you were a forger at first, and when I caught a glimpse of the mangle through the back window, I believed there was some machinery in here. I can tell you, you've caused a lot of mystery!"

"I rather fancy you caused the mystery yourself," said Mr. Heath. "However, it's just as well that every-

thing is out now. I want you to thoroughly understand that we can't let a soul know."

"Don't you worry," said Handy. "I'll keep mum. I'm tremendously relieved to find that Sis is here, and that everything is all serene. It's a mystery to me why you didn't let me into the know at first—Clear off, Pongo, you ass! Don't keep licking my hands!"

The last remark was addressed to a little dog, a curly, black and white little fellow, which had just trotted into the room, and was proceeding to lick Handy's hands in an affectionate greeting.

"Oh, Ted!" protested Edith. "What a dreadful name to give him! His name isn't Pongo—it's Jacky."

"Oh, he answers to anything!" said Handforth. "I've called him Jupiter and Trotsky and President Wilson, and he answers to everything!"

Heath chuckled.

"He's not a bad little pup," he remarked. "I wasn't very keen about Edith bringing him, but—Have you got anything under that couch, Edith? Jacky seems to be sniffing about very energetically!"

Jacky was not only sniffing, but he was barking now—much to the consternation and horror of Church and McClure.

They had considered themselves fairly safe, until Jacky appeared on the scene. It only took him about twenty seconds to sniff them out. And there he stood, gazing under the couch, his bristles all ruffled up, barking furiously. He had seen what the other occupants of the room were unable to see.

It was a terrific shock to the concealed juniors.

They could do nothing, except wait for exposure. And this was not long in coming. Jacky was so persistent in his barking that he caused full attention to be centred upon the couch.

"I expect there's a cat there!" said Handforth.

He crossed the room, went down on his knees, and pushed Jacky out of the way. Then he found himself staring straight into the faces of Church and McClure—two startled faces, pale with consternation.

Handforth's eyes opened wide.

"Great—great goodness!" he gasped faintly.

"Why, what is it?" asked Edith quickly.

Handforth let out a mighty roar.

"You—you rotters!" he bellowed. "Come out of it! Of all the terrific nerve! Why, this is absolutely the limit!"

"What on earth is the matter?" demanded Mr. Heath. "Who are you talking to—Good heavens! Church! McClure!"

Mr. Heath glared at the two faces which appeared from beneath the couch. He was startled, and further words were impossible for the moment. Church and McClure were absolutely scarlet with shame and humiliation. Discovery had been the last thing they had wanted, and here they were unmasked before everybody!

"Oh!" exclaimed Edith. "Who—who are these boys? It is amazing! I didn't know they were here—"

"Those smoke bombs!" roared Handforth. "They put them there, and they must have dodged into the house while we were up at the shed! Of all the blessed cheek! I never thought they were so brainy!"

Church and McClure stood up, blushing with confusion.

"Boys," said Mr. Heath sternly, "I am absolutely staggered that you should descend to such a disgraceful act as this! You have discovered my secret. There is no need for me to question you, since you have heard everything. I did not dream that you could be capable of such unscrupulous conduct."

"Oh, sir, we're awfully sorry!" panted Church breathlessly. "We—we thought that Handy was up to some other game; we never imagined that the truth would be this! We decided to find out all about it, and we adopted a ruse to get into the house. As soon as we knew the secret, we wished with all our hearts that we hadn't butted in."

Church spoke with such absolute sincerity that he won the sympathy of Handforth's sister on the spot. They daren't look at her, but she went up to them, took them by the shoulder, and smiled into their faces—a dazzling smile which set them into fresh confusion. She was extremely charming.

"And so you are Ted's own chums?" she asked gently. "How splendid! I'm ever so pleased that you came—and that you found out the truth."

"It's—it's awfully nice of you Miss—I—I mean, Mrs. Heath—That is, oh, say, Mrs. Kirby!" stammered Church

"You bounders!" snorted Handforth. "I've a good mind to punch your heads——"

"You'll do nothing of the sort, Teddy!" exclaimed his sister quickly. "The boys aren't to blame at all. It is really better that they should know. There, Arthur! What have you got to say to that?"

"Nothing, I suppose," said Mr. Heath. "The whole Remove will know our secret next, and then we shall be the talk of the neighbourhood!"

"We won't breathe a word, sir—not a sound!" said McClure earnestly.

"We'll keep the secret as tight as a drum, sir," said Church. "You can rely on us all the time!"

"You bet!" said Handforth. "I'll see that they don't get jawing! I'll keep them in order all right! I don't think I'll punch their heads after all; I'll shake their fists, instead."

He was only too pleased to do so, and the three chums were once more reunited. They were all excessively pleased. The quarrel was over, and they were chums, as before. The split in Study D was at an end.

"Well, boys, if you'll take my advice, you'll leave here at once," said Mr. Heath. "I can't blame you for what has happened, and we'll say no more about it. I must trust to your sense of honour to keep this secret. But I do earnestly hope that you will respect my wishes."

"We will, sir."

Five minutes later the three juniors took their departure, Handforth wheeling his bicycle. They were all very content, and they discussed the whole affair as they returned leisurely to St. Frank's, via Bellton Wood.

"It's all serene now," said Handforth. "Thank goodness that mystery's all over! But we mustn't talk about my brother-in-law at the school—not a giddy word. At St. Frank's he's simply Mr. Heath, and nothing more."

A great many Remove juniors were positively staggered when Handforth and Co. appeared in the Triangle, shortly after, arm in arm. Not only that, but they were in high good humour, and they marched off to Big Side, to watch the First Eleven match with Redstone College.

"I thought it couldn't last long!" grinned De Valerie. "Handforth and

Co. are as chummy as ever. Look at them! Like long lost brothers!"

Handforth and Co. were certainly very happy.

Meanwhile, Mr. Heath was still sitting in the comfortable sitting-room of Greyhurst Cottage, with his young wife on the couch beside him. They had been discussing the events of the afternoon—and other things.

"Now, little girl, I want to talk about something else," said Mr. Heath, giving Edith an affectionate hug. "You remember all I told you about that curious old man, the Comte de Plessigny?"

"Why, of course, I remember, Arthur," said Edith. "I'm sure I don't know what it all means. It seems rather terrible to me, and I wish you'd never found that nasty old diamond. It seems to be causing ever so much trouble."

Her husband nodded.

"I'm afraid it is," he said gravely. "You see, that diamond was stolen—it really belongs to the Marquis of Layham—and now it's been tampered with, I can't even claim the five thousand pounds reward. If I go to the police, I shall get into serious trouble."

"Why don't you throw the terrible diamond away?" asked Edith. "Oh, Arthur! I'm so worried about it——"

"You mustn't be, darling," said Mr. Heath. "I shall get out of it all right. The worst part of it is, the count is keeping the stone, and I believe he's intent upon using me to gain his ends—knowing that I can't do anything. I thought he was a splendid old man, but I'm changing my opinion. I'm not at all sure he's not criminally inclined."

"Arthur dear," exclaimed the girl, grasping his arm tightly. "Do please have done with him, and think no more about that diamond——"

"But, my little sweetheart, I've got to think of my own position," said Arthur quietly. "In a way, I'm in the count's hands. He has only to mention a word to the police, and I should be in the very deuce of a mess!"

Tap!

"Come in!" said Mr. Heath frowning.

Miggs, the old retainer, entered.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, sir," he said. "But there's a gentleman at the door wants to see you—quite an elderly gentleman, with a foreign look about him. I thought I'd come and tell you——"

"A foreign-looking gentleman,"

echoed Mr. Heath, with a startled look in his eyes. "Why, it can't be——"

"Do I intrude?" asked a silky voice.

Mr. Heath jumped to his feet, smothering an exclamation. The Comte de Plessigny stood there in the doorway, his monocle in his eye, beaming with supreme good nature in the room.

CHAPTER VII.

AN EXTRAORDINARY DEVELOPMENT.

THE COMTE DE PLESSIGNY came into the apartment.

"Pray do not look so alarmed, my dear young friends," he said smoothly. "I sincerely trust I am not intruding. I was not aware of the fact that a young lady was present, or I might not have taken the liberty——"

"This lady is my wife," said Mr. Heath coldly. "I feel compelled to tell you, sir, that this action on your part is hardly in keeping with the behaviour of a gentleman."

"I am deeply sorry—I apologise with all the sincerity I can express," exclaimed the count gently. "I will retire at once——"

"Oh, there's no need for that," exclaimed Edith. "Now that you are here, I am sure my husband will be only too pleased to talk things over with you!"

"I thank you," said the count gracefully. "Is it agreed, my dear Heath?"

"I can't imagine why you've come," said Mr. Heath.

"I really wished to discuss the matter which was the topic of our conversation when I visited you at the school," said the Comte de Plessigny.

"Oh, you mean about the diamond?" said Mr. Heath. "My wife knows all about it, so you needn't choose your words. I have told her every detail."

"So?" said the visitor. "That is excellent. Well, to be quite frank, I should like you to show me the diamond, if you have no objection."

The Remove-master stared.

"You would like me to show it to you?" he repeated.

"Precisely."

"But you've got it yourself!" said

Mr. Heath. "You know well enough that I gave it into your keeping——"

"Dear, dear! How extremely forgetful of me!" interrupted the count, his face wreathing itself into smiles. "To be sure! I have the diamond, as you say."

"Look here, sir, couldn't you change your mind about that business concerning Lord Dorrimore?" asked Mr. Heath earnestly. "I really don't see how I can follow out your wishes. I'd much rather you gave the diamond up to the police, and tell them the actual truth."

"You are not afraid of the consequences?"

"Why should I be afraid?" demanded Mr. Heath warmly. "I found that diamond in the wood, I showed it to you, and you told me its real value. You offered to get it cut and polished, and then discovered that it is really stolen property. I didn't know that at the time, and if I just tell the police the absolute truth, I don't see how I shall get into any trouble. It's quite likely that I shall earn the reward of five thousand pounds."

"You really think so?" said the count doubtfully.

"Why not?" said Mr. Heath. "I've done nothing wrong—nothing wrong whatever. I found the stone by accident, and it was not until afterwards that I knew it was stolen property. You told me that, and you have the nerve to threaten me with exposure if I refuse to carry out your wishes! I don't see that any exposure can do me any harm. An honest man does not fear the law!"

"That, of course, is quite sane and logical," said the count suavely. "I agree with you entirely, my young friend. At the same time, I insist upon my plans being carried out, exactly as I have outlined. I wish to impress upon you the necessity to obey my wishes in every respect."

"But why——"

"Wait! I have a very special reason for making this request," interrupted Plessigny. "I can assure you that you will come to no harm, and everything will be all right. I have told you to be on the lookout for Lord Dorrimore. Now, please repeat what my wishes are in respect to his lordship?"

Mr. Heath glanced at his wife for a moment.

"I don't see why I should," he exclaimed. "I know everything you told

me, and I shall remember it. That is quite sufficient. But I must confess that I cannot possibly understand your motive."

The count smiled.

"Of course you don't understand my motive," he replied. "But you will later on—after Lord Dorrimore has arrived. Well, if you will excuse me, I will take my departure. When you meet me on the next occasion, I do not wish you to refer to this interview."

"I don't quite understand."

"Doubtless—doubtless," smiled the count. "Please forget that I have been here this afternoon. I shall be greatly pained if you refer to a single word of our conversation at our next meeting. I want you to look upon it as though my last chat with you was at the school. This visit is nothing—it does not exist."

The count bowed himself out, leaving Mr. Heath extremely puzzled. Somehow, Plessigny seemed quite different on this occasion. He even looked slightly different in appearance. What was the meaning of this curious change?

Meanwhile the count walked leisurely down the lane. He entered Bellton Wood, and took the footpath. His pace now quickened. Presently he walked into a wide, sunlit clearing.

And exactly as he did so something astounding happened.

From the other side of the clearing another figure appeared. And, remarkably enough, the figure was an exact replica of the count's!

His clothing—his straw trilby—his monocle—his facial appearance—his limp—in fact, everything! There were two Comte de Plessignys!

They checked in their stride, paused for a moment, and then walked onwards. They met in the centre of the clearing, and without any outward show of emotion.

The Comte de Plessigny—the figure which had just appeared—stood regarding his double with real curiosity, for it may as well be stated at once that Mr. Heath's late visitor was not the Comte de Plessigny at all.

"Well, my dear sir, this is quite interesting!" said the count grimly.

"Quite," agreed his double.

He took out a pocket-book, extracted a card, and handed it to the real count. Then he walked on, and vanished among the trees. The Comte de Plessigny gazed

after him, and then transferred his attention to the card.

Three words were printed on it, in the centre—

"The Seven Stars."

Just that, and nothing more. It was certainly mysterious.

"Dear me!" murmured the count. "This at least, is entertaining!"

He placed the card in his pocket, and continued his stroll through the wood. But he was very thoughtful now, and there was a grim light in his eyes. Now and again, however, he chuckled.

He seemed to be pleased, on the whole. He was almost out of Bellton Wood when he caught sight of a familiar figure. It was Mr. Clement Heath.

"Ah, young man," called the comte. "Good afternoon."

Mr. Heath halted, and the other approached.

"I'm glad I've seen you," said Mr. Heath. "I wanted to have a chat with you alone, sir. I didn't quite like talking in front of my wife. About that affair concerning Lord Dorrimore—"

"Your wife?" asked the count. "I fail to comprehend."

"Oh, I suppose you want me to forget the interview—as you suggested?" asked Mr. Heath. "I can't do it, sir. We had the chat only twenty minutes ago, so it hardly applies. And I really don't see why I should refrain from discussing with you a conversation which you started yourself."

The count adjusted his monocle. "We had a chat twenty minutes ago—and I asked you to forget it?" he exclaimed softly. "So! Clever—decidedly clever! I am glad I met you, my dear Heath. It will surprise you to learn that I have not seen you before this afternoon."

"But we were talking——"

"No. You were talking with another man."

Mr. Heath stared.

"Really, sir, I don't see the idea——"

"Listen," interrupted the Comte de Plessigny. "Five minutes ago I met a man in the wood—my own double! It was he who visited you—it was he who had a conversation with you. He wished to delude you, and succeeded. And, in order to keep me in ignorance of the fact, he requested you to keep quiet about the

conversation. Fortunately, we know the truth."

Mr. Heath was rather staggered.

"But the man was you—you yourself," he exclaimed huskily.

It was some minutes before he could fully understand; and then he was startled and thunderstruck.

"Who was the man?" he asked. "A Scotland Yard detective, I'll warrant! Good Heavens! My position is—"

"Quite secure, if you follow my advice," interjected the count. "The fellow is undoubtedly a crook. Cleverly disguised, he attempted to get the diamond from you. It was a ruse—and it failed. Splendid!"

"Splendid!" echoed Mr. Heath, aghast.

"So!" said the count, rubbing his hands together. "The affair is becoming more interesting—not to say spicy. The game is far more entertaining when there is another gentleman in the field. We must sharpen our wits, and we must foil the schemes of this astute stranger."

Mr. Heath, however, was greatly worried.

Who was the man who had visited him in the cottage? Who was this stranger? He knew Mr. Heath's secret—he knew about the diamond—he knew everything! And Mr. Heath did not know the stranger!

The position was certainly curious.

And the Remove-master was all the more worried because he knew that Lord Dorrimore would be visiting St. Frank's within two days. And when he came Mr. Heath would be required to act as spy.

The outlook was not particularly bright.

Of course, Mr. Heath discovered the whole truth before many days had elapsed, and everything turned out all serene. But there were a good many exciting events destined to happen before the strange affair drew to a close!

THE END.

TO MY READERS.

MR. HEATH'S position at St. Frank's became more embarrassing day by day. Three boys of his class now knew the story of his secret marriage, and one of them is his brother-in-law. There was no fear, of course, that the truth would leak out through the famous trio of Study D, now happily reunited. But there was another individual, far more dangerous, who knew all about it, and who had Mr. Heath in his power over a much more serious matter, of which Handforth and Co. were ignorant. This other, the Comte de Plessigny, could bring forward certain information to the authorities of a most damaging character to the honour of the hapless schoolmaster. In short, it could be made to appear that Mr. Heath had feloniously attempted to dispose of the diamond while knowing that there was a reward for its discovery. The price of silence was to play the part of a spy at the count's bidding, and ascertain particulars of Lord Dorrimore's plans in connection with the proposed holiday expedition abroad, in which a number of boys at St. Frank's were to take part.

In the story just recounted, the wily count has discovered that he is being watched by none other than Nelson Lee, of whose prowess in the world of detection he was not unfamiliar. He knew now that it was to be a battle of wits, and that it would need all his cunning to triumph over the House-master detective of St. Franks.

Further developments in this remarkable series will be disclosed in Next Week's story, "THE SPY OF ST. FRANK'S"

THE EDITOR.

YOU CAN BEGIN READING THIS SPLENDID SERIAL TO-DAY!



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

INTRODUCTION.

Two brothers, Jack and Teddy Royce, with their chum, Gerald Telford, are trying their luck in the wilds of North-West Canada. A plan of a gold mine is stolen from them by three ruffians—Connell, Olesen and Snaith. While attempting to recover the plan Teddy and Gerald are captured by the three men, of whom Connell is the leader. It is decided that the lads should accompany the men and be forced to work for them.

(Now read on.)

A Bid for Liberty.

THREE days later, both Gerald Telford and Teddy Royce were wishing from the bottom of their hearts that the ex-cook, Connell, had not intervened on their behalf, and saved them from the murderous Obed Snaith.

Neither was, under anything like normal conditions, a fellow to be unduly damped in spirits. But now, if ever two boys were heartily sick of life, these two were.

For their life—if such an existence could be called life at all—was worse than that of any dog they had ever known of.

Connell, the ex-cook, might have shown a flash of humanity, and, in his unwillingness to see their blood shed, have caused their lives to be spared; but, after that, all human feeling seemed to be totally absent in him. As a slave-driver he was supreme, and he quite looked upon the two luckless boys as slaves now.

With hands raw and bleeding from contact with the rough paddles of their canoes, those two ungrown youngsters knelt, on the third day, in the bottom of the canoes, and strove their hardest to keep back their cries, though the aching muscles in the backs caused an agony neither had dreamed it possible to endure. Both had had a good breaking in, in the railroad camps, to hard labour. But this was, surely, no man's work that they were being called upon to do.

To be sure, their canoes were going downstream all the time. But the Little Slave River was not as the rivers in England are. It was a broad, sluggishly running stream in the main, except on occasions when the river narrowed wonderfully, and the pace of the stream quickened, and the waters all at once dashed over in mighty cataracts. It was then—and it happened nearly every day—that the canoes had to be dragged out of the water, and carried down the rocky banks of the falls, until level water was reached again. This is called portaging canoes, and Gerald and Teddy had both read of the operation. But never till now had they known the heart-breaking, muscle-tearing work it really could be.

And these hulking brutes of men always made the boys do this heavy work, whilst they themselves strolled in leisurely fashion down the banks, and, when the canoes were set in the water again, would take their places in them, and, by way of reward, would rain blows down upon the boys.

On the whole, Gerald and Teddy had little chance to talk to each other, for

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

they were usually divided. Gerald always paddled in the canoe that also contained Snaith and the ex-cook; Teddy was always in the canoe that Hank Olesen, the big Swede, rode in. And, although Snaith and the cook sometimes took a hand with the paddle, Olesen never did, with the result that sixteen-year-old Teddy had to provide all the motive power to carry along the Little Slave River that twenty-odd stone of flesh and blood that had originally come from Sweden.

The canoes were generally a long way apart. Gerald's canoe always led in the journey. Luckless Teddy's canoe could not keep up with the other.

Ten hours a day had those two boys to toil, and when, at night, their captors landed and pitched camp for the night, their only bed was the bare ground, without covering of any sort. And they were, the first two nights, anyhow, tied up.

Connell, the cook, was now accepted as the leader of the gold-hunting party. Snaith did not seem to object to the leadership of it having been taken out of his hands by a stronger man.

The boys were driven beyond all endurance. They longed to be able to lie down and die. But, even after three days of this, their captors did not succeed altogether in breaking their spirits, it seemed, for they showed a flash of it when, at nightfall, Connell gave the order to pull into the bank and see about pitching camp for the third night of this torment for the boys.

Teddy gave a sigh of relief as he heard the order, and he paddled the canoe shorewards with alacrity. Gerald did the same. By the time they had got their stiff limbs ashore—for paddling a long Canadian canoe has to be done on the knees all the time—they looked forward to blessed sleep, which would make them forget—for a time, at all events—their hard lot.

But Connell did not seem satisfied with the place. He ordered the party to embark and proceed further downstream.

With a groan, Teddy obeyed, and the big Swede, lolling in the stern, chuckled at the lad's misery, nor did he attempt to take the paddle and relieve Teddy.

"I can't work much more to-night!" Teddy gasped, as he dug the paddle in. "The brutes! Why can't they stop here? Wonder how old Jack is by now, and where he is?"

The two canoes came rather close to-

gether at this point, and each of the boys exchanged glances. The faces of both of them were drawn and haggard with their privations. There was no mischief in the hearts of either of them as their eyes met.

But the same thought must have darted to the brains of each at the same instant. Teddy, anyhow, suddenly decided to do a reckless thing. He cared little for the consequences of the act; all he wanted was, in some measure, to get back on his tormentors for all they had put him and Gerald through.

The boy suddenly gave a shrill yell, threw his paddle away, and stood up.

"Hi!" roared Olesen, the big Swede, gripping the gunnels of the canoe, in sudden alarm. "Vot you do? Joost sit down!"

But Teddy did not sit down. Instead, he jumped upwards, and landed on the edge of the canoe with both feet.

The next moment he was floundering in the river. But his plan had succeeded inasmuch as his quick action had caused the canoe to overturn, and Olesen also was floundering, like a great walrus, in the water.

"Bully for you!" Gerald yelled, seeing what had happened.

And he, too, did exactly the same thing as Teddy. Snaith, seeing what was in the bigger boy's mind, and, holding a paddle himself at the moment, aimed a vicious blow at Gerald. Gerald returned the compliment, and his paddle caught the ruffian on the head just about the same moment as that in which the second canoe overturned.

For some minutes there was a deal of splashing going on. But they could all swim well, as it happened. The two canoes, overturned, continued their way downstream on their own account.

Obed Snaith's wet face came close to Teddy's at one point, and the angry ruffian deliberately reached out and seized Teddy by the throat. He dragged the boy under water, and held him there, until Teddy felt sure he would drown. But the lad managed to wriggle away clear from the villain just in time, and after that gave Snaith a wide berth. At length, the five of them reached the river bank and scrambled ashore, breathing hard, drenched through, and, in the case of the three ruffians, almost too angry to speak.

"Perhaps they'll kill us now," muttered Teddy; "and I'll be glad!"

(To be continued.)

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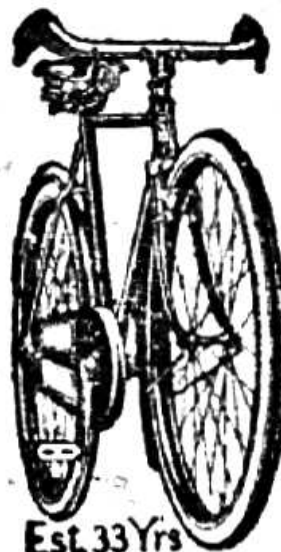
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