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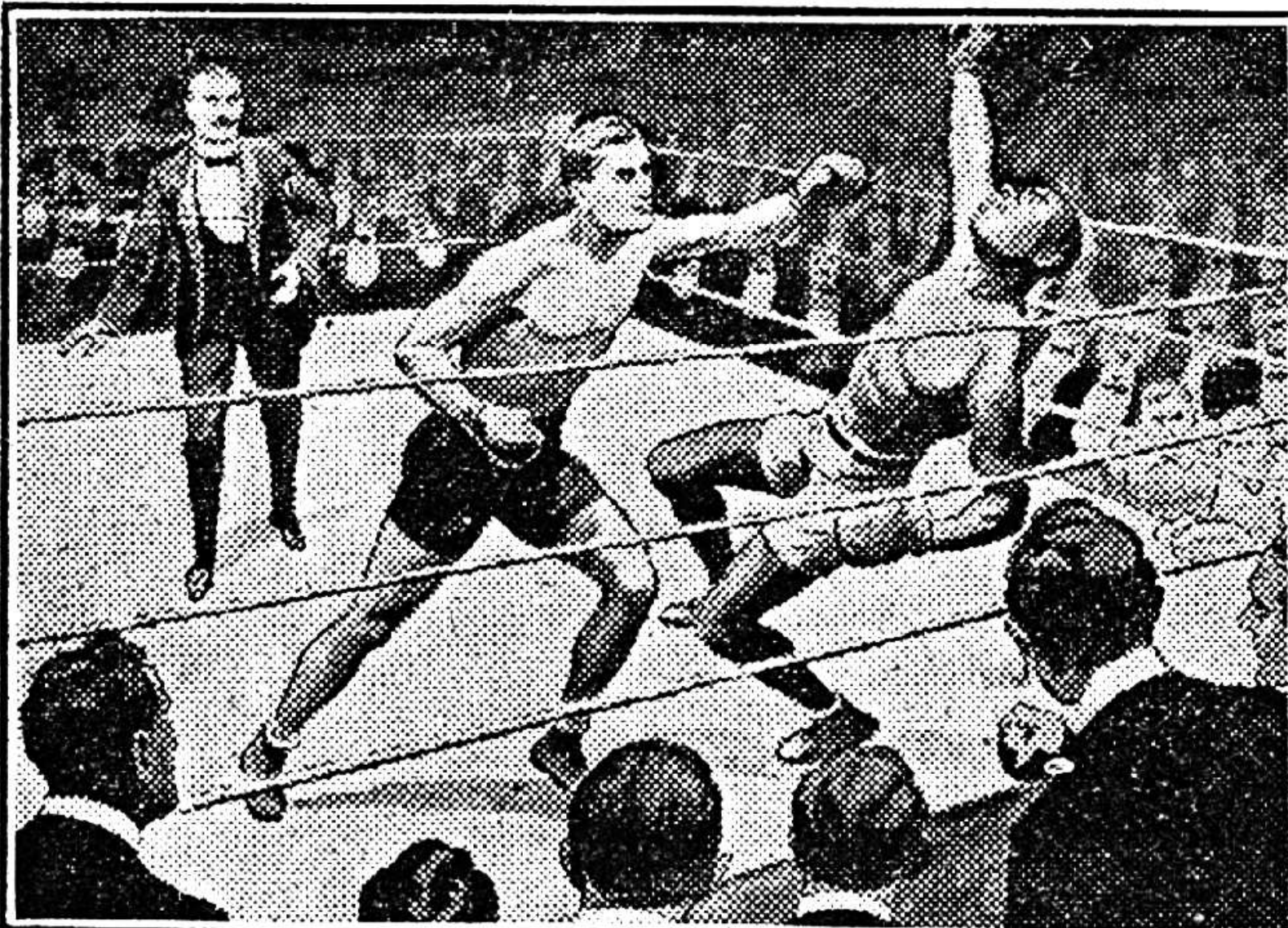
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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

AN UNCANNY EXPERIENCE.

"**S** NOW!" said Tommy Watson approvingly.

"Good luck to it!" exclaimed Edward Oswald Handforth.

"Let it all come! The more snow the merrier! It is nearly Christmastime, and it doesn't seem right unless everything is covered with snow."

"Well, we appear to be in for a good fall now," I remarked, glancing out into the Triangle. "The sky has been heavy and leaden ever since yesterday afternoon, and any weather prophet would have told you that a big fall of snow was about to arrive. It will probably last for twenty-four hours."

"Begad!" said Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "That will be frightfully bad, dear old boys. Everythin' will be snowed up, you know—roads and railways an' everythin'! An' that will make it shockin'ly awkward for all the fellows when they go home for the vacation!"

I chuckled.

"I don't suppose we shall have as much snow as all that, Montie," I remarked. "Just enough to give the countryside a good Christmassy appearance, but not enough to stop the railway traffic."

It was afternoon—a half holiday—and the Christmas vacation was drawing

very near. Within a day or two St. Frank's would "break up" for the Yuletide holidays. And the boys of St. Frank's—the juniors particularly—were already feeling the holiday spirit. They had no inclination to work, and were only waiting for the time when they would go away to their various homes.

I was standing in the lobby of the Ancient House, with a group of other juniors. Snow had commenced to fall about half-an-hour earlier, after everybody had been expecting it to come all day long. A few fleecy flakes had appeared first of all, driven by a cold, cutting wind. But now the flakes were more numerous, and they were swirling down in great clouds. Already the Triangle was covered with a white sheet, so to speak, and it was difficult to see across to the College House. Winter was upon us in earnest, and practically all the fellows were glad to see the snow.

"Let's hope the weather keeps frosty and cold over Christmas," remarked Handforth.

"There's nothing like plenty of frost and snow at Christmastime. It makes things more realistic, you know—and it's ripping to have a great log fire burning."

"Rather!" said Teddy Long. "We shall have some fine old times down at Long Hall—my pater's country seat, you know."

"Long Hall?" repeated Handforth. Teddy Long nodded carelessly.

"Yes," he replied. "That's the ancestral home of the Long family, you know."

"Oh, I see!" said Handforth. "Long Hall! I suppose it's situated in Short Alley—somewhere in Peckham——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Teddy Long scowled.

"Oh, you're sure to be funny!" he snapped. "But I don't care about you, Handforth—you can say what you like! I can afford to turn my nose up at your sneers. Your family's nothing compared to mine. You don't seem to realise that my people came over to England with the Conqueror!"

Handforth nodded.

"There's nothing very startling about that," he remarked. "I suppose your people were the great William's servants or lackeys?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Teddy Long realised that his bluff wouldn't go down, and he marched off with a sniff. The insufferable little beggar was always attempting to boast about his people or his ancestors—but, somehow or other, none of the other fellows would ever believe him. This was not at all surprising, since Teddy Long was about the biggest liar in the Remove.

"His people came over with William the Conqueror!" said Handforth scornfully. "What rot! Thank goodness I ain't one of those sort of chaps—I don't boast about my people. We're just plain human beings—and we're just as good as anybody else. What does it matter whether your ancestors were noble knights, or dustmen? They've gone, anyhow—the thing to look at is the present generation. Some of the noble old families of England haven't much cause to gloat over their giddy ancestors. There are lords and dukes living to-day whose ancestors were murderers and traitors and all sorts of things like that!"

I chuckled.

"Well, there's no need to continue the argument, Handy," I remarked. "And it's not particularly comfortable, standing here looking at the snow. This wind is pretty chilling, and I rather fancy the study fire will be welcome just now."

"Dear old boy, I was about to suggest the same thing," said Sir Montie, nodding. "There is a ripping fire in

Study C. and it will soon be time to get tea ready."

It was a half-holiday that day, but there had been no football, owing to the frozen state of the ground and the snow.

Sir Montie and Tommy and I turned away from the Ancient House doorway, and were about to make our way down the Remove passage when a well built junior with dark hair and keen eyes confronted us. This junior was Solomon Levi, of the Remove. He halted in front of us.

"Well, what about it?" he inquired cheerfully.

"Eh? What about what?"

"Your promise!"

"My promise?" I repeated. "What are you getting at, my son?"

The Jewish boy grinned.

"Didn't we arrange to go over to Bannington?" he asked. "Only yesterday we were talking about Bannington Grange—the old place that my pater is going to buy, so that it can be turned into a cinema. We arranged to run over to Bannington this afternoon, so that I could take you chaps over the old place, just to have a look round."

"Yes, that's right," I agreed. "I'd forgotten it for the moment, Levi. But surely you don't suggest we should go now?"

"Why not?"

"Well, it's snowing, for one thing," I said. "And we sha'n't get there until dark. Don't you think it would be better to put it off until another time?"

Solomon Levi shook his head.

"There's no time like the present," he said. "If we put it off, you may not see over the old place at all. I suggest that we go now—on our bikes. The snow won't hurt us—we're not made of sugar. And a brisk bicycle ride will do us all good, and give us a tremendous appetite for tea."

"Well, I don't think much of the idea," said Tommy Watson bluntly.

"There's a nice little cafe in Bannington," went on Levi. "That Japanese place I mean. I was going to suggest that we should look over Bannington Grange, and then go along to the cafe, and have a good blow out. I'm standing treat, you know. What do you say?"

"Well, that's not so bad," said Watson, reconsidering his decision. "A feed in the Japanese cafe? I've heard

that's a jolly decent place. Well, I'm game."

"Well, a promise is a promise, Levi," I said. "We'll come along with you now, if you like. But I have an idea that this snow storm will grow worse, and we shall probably catch it hot, coming home to-night—or, to be exact, we shall catch it cold. But, after all, it'll be a bit of fun."

And so it was decided.

I had overlooked the arrangement for the moment. Only the previous evening we had been chatting with Levi, and he had suggested that we should all go over to Bannington on this particular afternoon, in order to have a look over the old house in the centre of Bannington High Street. Levi himself, of course, had seen the place two or three times—but my chums and I had never been within those grim-looking old walls.

For Bannington Grange was empty and deserted. It had been in this condition for many, many years. And the old house had a bad reputation in the town. It was locally reputed to be haunted, and none of the Bannington inhabitants would dare to enter the building after darkness had fallen. Indeed, many of them would not care to enter the house in broad daylight.

The old place had been empty for so long that its owner, a certain widow named Mrs. Cubitt, had given up all hope of selling the property. And then, without any warning, she had been approached by Solomon Levi—and the latter had obtained an option from Mrs. Cubitt which did not expire until the last day of the year. This option arranged for the sale of the old house and the grounds for the sum of two thousand pounds. And, soon after this business had been transacted, Mrs. Cubitt had been approached by two strangers, who had offered her a larger sum for the property. But, of course, she had been unable to do any business with them, owing to the fact that the option had been given. Until that expired, or until Levi's father closed the deal, nothing further could be done.

The whole idea had been Levi's to commence with. There had been some trouble at the Bannington Cinema, which was owned by a rascally man named Stanley Webb. This cinema had been banned by the Headmaster—it was out of bounds for all St. Frank's boys.

And this ban had been placed upon the cinema because Mr. Webb was in the habit of exhibiting very questionable films.

So Levi had got the idea of building a cinema of his own—a cinema which would provide clean, healthy entertainment, and would be partly owned by the Remove. It was an ambitious scheme, and Levi had put the whole thing before his father—Mr. Isaac Levi. The latter had already been down to St. Frank's, and he had looked over the property. The idea met with his approval, and it had been finally decided that the property should be bought, and converted into an up-to-date cinema. In this way Mr. Webb would be completely ousted, and his wretched little picture theatre would be closed for all time. Levi and his father would be doing a very good service to the town of Bannington—and also a good service to St. Frank's.

Solomon Levi was as keen as mustard on any matter connected with business. And he had seen at once that there were great possibilities in that old haunted house in the Bannington High Street. It was a large place, and it occupied the finest position in the town. As a site for a picture theatre, it could not possibly be beaten. And it would not be necessary to build an entirely new place, for the thick walls of Bannington Grange could be used as the shell of the new cinema. Great alterations would be necessary, of course, but it was not an insuperable task.

It was quite likely that other people had thought of that site as a good one for a picture theatre, but they had been deterred from spending any money on the venture because the old place was haunted, and it had a very bad name in the town. They feared, perhaps, that even after the new picture theatre was built, it would be shunned by the superstitious country folk.

Levi and his father, however, had decided to risk it. They were convinced that when the new place was built, and when it was blazing with electric lights, the townspeople would forget that it had once been a haunted house, and they would flock in in great numbers.

Mr. Webb, discovering that he was about to be subjected to keen competition, had become alive to the fact that action was necessary, and he had done his utmost to obtain that option

from Solomon Levi—he had joined forces with a rascally American named Mr. Hooker J. Ryan, who was the president of a large syndicate for building picture theatres. These two had plotted together, and they had made two unsuccessful attempts to obtain that option by force. For they knew well enough that once the sale was completed, the present Bannington cinema would be a dead letter. And Mr. Webb and Mr. Ryan wanted to build this new picture theatre themselves. They had awakened to the fact that a great deal of money was to be made. With such opposition it was evident, therefore, that Solomon Levi and his father would not have a very easy task.

The Jewish boy was very cheerful about the whole business. He wanted to see something done—he was anxious to get the actual scheme commenced. But nothing could be started, really, until after the Christmas holidays. And so, for the time being, the whole thing was in abeyance. But, directly after Christmas, there would be a great deal of activity.

It was not long before we had started out on our cycle ride to Bannington. There were four of us—Levi, my two chums, and myself. This was really about the only opportunity we should have of looking at Bannington Grange before the Christmas holidays. And we were certainly interested in the matter.

The snow was descending with steady persistency—just as though it would go on for ever, as Tommy Watson put it. Already the ground was covered with an inch or two, and it clung to the bicycle tyres, and made the going rather hard.

It was by no means late in the afternoon, and ordinarily, it would have been bright, but owing to the heavy pall of clouds overhead, and the descending snow, a premature dusk had fallen. When we arrived in Bannington we found that nearly all the big shops in High Street had their electric lights blazing at full power. This had the effect of making it appear that night had already fallen.

"It'll be too dark to explore that old house now!" said Tommy Watson, as we dismounted from our bicycles. "I reckon we better go straight into that Japanese cafe, and have some tea. We'll give up the other——"

"Not likely!" said Solomon Levi.

"We came here to explore that house, and we're going to do it. I've been over it two or three times, but I'd like you fellows to see it. I want your opinion, Nipper—I know you're a keen chap, and I want you to tell me exactly what you think about the whole scheme."

I nodded.

"Right you are!" I said. "If my opinion is of any value to you, you're welcome to it."

We stored our bicycles at the usual place—a big garage in the High Street—and then we went on foot to the house agent's office. This was only a few hundred yards away, and Levi was given the key at once—for he was well-known to the clerk in the office, and it was regarded as a certainty already that Levi and his father were to become the owners of Bannington Grange.

We went along in the snow, and at length we came to the old house. It looked extremely gloomy and forbidding in the dim, dying light of the winter's day. The snow was still descending in steady whirls, and after we had opened the gate, and were within the property, we found a white, snowy path leading up to the front door.

We walked along it, and at length arrived at the building. As Solomon Levi inserted the key in the lock, Tommy Watson looked about him, and shivered slightly.

"Well, I don't much care for looking over the old show now!" he exclaimed. "It's nearly dark, and we sha'n't be able to see properly."

"Afraid of the ghost?" I grinned.

Watson glared.

"No; I'm not afraid of the ghost!" he retorted promptly. "Don't be an ass, Nipper! There's no ghost here. I don't believe in ghosts, if it comes to that. But we sha'n't be able to see properly."

"Oh, well, we sha'n't be very long," said Levi.

The door was opened, and we walked into a wide, lofty hall. Our footsteps echoed hollow and loud on the old, uncovered boards. It seemed quite intensely dark in there, after the gloom of outside.

Levi closed the door, and then led the way into one of the front rooms.

"Now, you see the idea?" he exclaimed, his mind full of the scheme. "These outside walls are tremendously

thick, and if we can only get all the interior walls and floors taken out, the whole building will make a splendid hall—a cinema. You know a good bit about building and architecture, Nipper. What's your opinion?"

I studied the outer walls, walked round the room for a moment or two, and then pursed my lips.

"Well, I'm rather out of my depth here," I admitted. "But I don't see any reason why the idea shouldn't be carried out. In any case, a first-class architect will know exactly what can be done."

"Well, of course we shall employ an architect!" said Levi; "that stands to reason. The whole place will necessarily have to be planned out and designed."

We moved towards the door, and once more emerged into the hall.

"Now, if we go into the other room," he said, "you'll see that the width of the window is tremendous. It's deep, too. The whole house is a huge square, built as they knew how to build in those days. I reckon it ought to——"

Solomon Levi came to a halt abruptly. He had walked into the other room—the one opposite—and he had only gone a few paces before he came to a standstill, and the words froze on his lips. We were standing out in the hall, watching him rather curiously.

"What's the matter?" I inquired.

Levi started.

"I—I don't know," he said, with a peculiar little laugh. "But—but I feel very queer in this room. By my life, what an awful smell! It's—it's ghastly!"

His words were not very reassuring, and I noticed that Tommy Watson gave an apprehensive glance up the wide staircase. Tommy was as brave as a lion under ordinary circumstances, but this old place seemed to send a chill right down his backbone. I knew this to be the case, because I felt a chill down my own. Sir Montie Tregellis-West was very quiet.

Levi was still in that room, but suddenly he gave a jump, and came rushing out to join us. And I noticed, with some surprise, that he was extremely pale, and he was shaking slightly.

"You're scared!" said Watson bluntly.

The Jewish boy nodded.

"Believe me, I am scared!" he

agreed. "I don't mind admitting it, either. There's—there's something in that room that grips hold of you. I—I don't know what it is, but it feels awful!"

"Did you see anything?"

"No."

"Did you feel anything?"

"Not actually feel it," said Levi.

"But—but I had a sensation that—that—— Well, I don't know how to describe it. But I was shivery all at once. I had a feeling of horror—and the room simply reeks!"

"What of?"

"I—I don't know," said Levi queerly.

We looked at one another.

"Let's get out of this!" muttered Tommy Watson. "It was a fat-headed idea to come in now, anyhow——"

"Hold on!" I said grimly. "We're not going to rush out like a crowd of frightened kids, Tommy. We'll go into this room, and do our utmost to fathom the mystery. Are you game to come in again, Levi?"

"If you go, I'll come with you," replied the Jewish boy.

I walked boldly into the apartment. Levi followed me, and Sir Montie and Tommy brought up the rear. Watson, I knew, did not care for the experience at all, but he could not very well stand out in the hall by himself.

I had only gone a few steps forward into the room before I came to a halt. And I began to understand why Solomon Levi had turned pale, and why he had shivered.

For there was something terrible about that apartment.

I can't describe it—I don't exactly know what the feeling was. But I was horrified. The very fact of being in the apartment brought over me a peculiar sense of horror, and an unaccountable feeling of dread. It was like cold hands passing over my forehead and my eyes. It seemed to grip me.

And, at the same time, there was a dank, overpowering smell—earthy and reminiscent of a graveyard. Somehow or other, I felt rooted to the spot—I dared not move another step forward. And I hardly dared move backwards, either.

"Begad!" came a mutter from Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "This—this is frightful, dear old boys. I—I feel awfully nervous—I do, really!"

"Let's—let's get out!" chattered

Tommy Watson. "Oh, my goodness! It—it seems that something is in here with us—something uncanny——"

Suddenly Tommy Watson broke off, and he uttered a loud scream—a scream which chilled the blood in our veins. It was so unexpected and so startling that we trembled as we stood. Tommy Watson staggered back, and he was clinging to the doorpost, as white as a sheet.

"What—what's the matter?" I panted, turning to him.

"Oh, I—I don't know!" moaned Watson. "Something—something brushed against my face. I didn't see anything, either, but it came right over my cheek—something cold and clammy, like bony fingers——"

Tommy Watson broke off, gasping heavily. He rushed out of the room, flung open the hall door, and literally hurled himself down the front steps. He stumbled on the way, and landed in the snow of the drive on all fours. And, impelled by a sudden impulse, we followed him, helter-skelter out of that awful apartment.

CHAPTER II.

NELSON LEE INVESTIGATES.

TOMMY WATSON sat up, smothered with snow, and he was breathing heavily.

We stood round him, rather breathless for a moment, and I felt somewhat ashamed of myself. Now that I had left that uncanny apartment, all the feeling of dread had left me. And I flushed slightly—I realised that I had acted in a manner which was not quite courageous.

"What awful asses we are!" I exclaimed impatiently. "Fancy dashing out of that room in that way, like a crowd of scared kids!"

"Dear old boy, there is no need for you to talk in that way!" said Sir Montic, fumbling with his pince-nez. "There is somethin' frightfully wrong about that room—there is, really! I don't call myself a nervous chap, an' I ain't generally frightened. But, begad, I was shiverin' all over while I was in that room! It fairly made my flesh creep, begad!"

"That's how I felt!" said Solomon Levi. "I—I can't understand it, either—it's so mysterious! But, believe me, that room is ghastly!"

Tommy Watson picked himself up rather shakily.

"Feeling better now?" I inquired.

"Not—not much!" said Tommy Watson, in an unsteady voice. "Anyhow, I'm—I'm not going back in that house! It's haunted! All these stories that have been going about are true! I've always laughed at them, and said they were old wife's tales, and all that sort of thing. But I know different now. There's something about this place which is uncanny!"

"Oh, you've got an attack of nerves!" I said. "That's what's the matter with you, Tommy."

"Well, you rushed out pretty quick!" retorted Watson.

"I had an attack of nerves at that moment—I admit it!" I said. "But I wasn't so bad as you, my son. I'm willing to admit there's something queer about that one particular room; there's an awful smell, and there's that eerie feeling——"

"But something touched me, I tell you!" said Watson. "Something brushed against my face!"

"You were in a state of nervous tension," I said. "It was your imagination, Tommy——"

"My imagination?" shouted Watson.

"Yes, of course!"

"You—you ass!" roared Watson. "I tell you I felt it—distinctly! I don't imagine things of that sort—I'm not a nervous kid!"

"Honestly, Nipper, there is something about that room which I don't like," put in Levi. "Mind you, I don't believe in ghosts, and I've always laughed at the supernatural. But this thing is beyond me. I was the first to go into that room, and I felt the sensation at once. I was horrified! I felt rooted to the floor. And I had an almost uncontrollable desire to run away—to fly for my life!"

I nodded.

"That's how it struck me," I said. "And I can't understand it. It's a mystery. I don't like it at all, Levi. And, what's more, I'm not going to let the thing rest at this stage. I'm going in there again, if you chaps will come with me——"

"Not likely!" interrupted Tommy Watson. "Once is enough for me!"

We stood there in the snow, rather undecided. I wasn't particularly keen about entering that room again, but, at the same time, I didn't like to feel that I had been scared. My own common sense told me that there must be some natural explanation to the curious phenomenon, and I wanted to find out what that explanation was. And then I had an idea.

"I'll tell you what," I said. "This affair can't be left where it stands at present. And I think it would be a good scheme to get Mr. Lee on the job."

"Mr. Lee?" repeated Levi.

"Yes!"

"But—but he wouldn't come!" said the Jewish boy. "We couldn't expect our Housemaster to——"

"You don't know the guv'nor," I said. "He's always interested in anything mysterious. Mind you he's not a ghost hunter or anything of that sort. Criminals are more in his line. But I'm pretty certain that he would like to have a look into this little problem."

"Dear old boy, what do you suggest?" inquired Sir Montie.

"Well, you chaps stop here, and I'll just run down the road, and pop into the telephone call office," I said. "It won't take me two minutes to get through to St. Frank's, and I'll have a chat with the guv'nor. I'm pretty certain that he will agree to come straight along! If he does so, he'll be here within half an hour, and then we could all go into the house again, and thoroughly investigate. With Mr. Lee here, we shall feel all serene."

"Dear old boy, it's a rippin' wheeze—it is, really!" said Sir Montie, nodding.

"It's not bad—if Mr. Leo will come!" said Tommy Watson.

"Oh, he'll come all right!" I declared. "I know the guv'nor better than you do."

"Right you are, then—buzz off!" said Solomon Levi. "I'm pretty curious myself; but, at the same time, I don't fancy entering the room again. If Mr. Lee is with us, it will be different."

I wasted no more time, but hurried off into the High Street. I was puzzled and inwardly alarmed. For it made me uncomfortable, that incident in the old

haunted house. I had always prided myself upon my strong nerve, and it worried me to realise that my nerve had given out. Yet that room had been so awful, so awe-inspiring, that I did not blame myself for rushing out into the open as I had done. And somehow I did not feel inclined to enter the place again; but, with Nelson Lee there, it would be a totally different matter.

There was a public telephone in the High Street, situated in the post-office. I was soon enclosed in the box and I called up Nelson Lee's number—that is, the number of the telephone which was situated in Nelson Lee's study in the Ancient House. Almost at once I was requested to drop three pennies into the box. I did so, and then I was through.

"Hallo!" I called. "Is that you, guv'nor?"

"Well, Nipper, what's the trouble?" came Nelson Lee's voice across the wire. "It is not often that you ring me up. Where are you—in Bannington?"

"Yes, sir," I replied. "I want you to come over here at once."

"I am sorry, Nipper, but that is impossible," replied Nelson Lee. "I am very busy at the moment, and I do not feel inclined to stir out in all this snow——"

"But you must come, sir!" I persisted. "Something extraordinary has happened here."

"Something extraordinary?"

"Yes, sir. Levi took Tregellis West and Watson and I into Bannington Grange," I went on. "You know the place, sir, don't you?"

"Of course I know it, Nipper!" replied Lee. "Levi and his father are, I believe, contemplating purchasing this property, with a view to opening it as a new cinema. An excellent idea——"

"Yes, we know that, guv'nor," I interrupted. "It's a ripping stunt. Well, Levi took us into the old haunted house, and when we went into one room we had an awful scare."

"A scare?"

"That's it, sir; we were frightened out of our wits!" I declared. "At least, Tommy Watson was. He said that something brushed against his face, and he ran out of the room with a scream. And it's an absolute fact, guv'nor, that we felt something terrible in that room. We can't account for it. It's—it's uncanny. We want you to come along to investigate it at once."

Nelson Lee did not answer for a moment.

"Well, sir?" I asked.

"I'm not sure whether I shall agree to this proposal of yours, Nipper," said Nelson Lee, at last. "I think you must be mistaken, somehow. You knew the house was haunted, and you were naturally rather nervous——"

"It's not that at all, sir," I interrupted. "There's something really queer about this room. I do wish you'd come and have a look at it. I'm not suggesting that I believe in ghosts, or the supernatural, or anything of that kind. It's very likely that there is a natural explanation. That's why I want you to come along, sir. It's really very urgent."

"Oh, all right, Nipper, I'll come," said Nelson Lee. "I will meet you outside the gates of the old house. And you may expect me in about twenty minutes from now."

"Good!" I exclaimed heartily. "Thanks, guv'nor! We shall feel as safe as houses if you are with us. And, I say! Don't forget to bring a powerful electric torch with you, sir. It's nearly dark now, and it will be pitchy by the time you arrive."

Nelson Lee promised, and a moment later he rang off. I returned to my chums in a very contented frame of mind. I found them waiting in the street, against the gateway of the old house.

"It's all serene," I said, as I came up. "Mr. Lee is coming along now."

"That's good!" said Levi. "But I'm bothered if I can see what Mr. Lee can do!"

"You don't know—until he arrives," I said. "The guv'nor is rather a wonderful chap, you know."

Nelson Lee turned up within the time limit. He appeared after about eighteen minutes had elapsed, and he came in his little two-seater car. He stood down and regarded us somewhat curiously.

"Now, boys, what is this extraordinary tale you have been telling me?" he said. "You are not asking me to believe that this house is actually haunted, are you?"

"Well, not exactly, sir," said Levi. "But—but it's queer. I've never been in a haunted house before, but, believe me, this place is really terrible."

"Did any of you see anything?"

"No, sir."

"I felt something, sir," put in Tommy Watson. "Something brushed against my face, you know—something cold, like bony fingers."

"Now, Watson, do not allow your imagination to run riot," put in Nelson Lee sharply. "Such an assertion as that is preposterous. Bony fingers could not come out to you from the thin air. Possibly a stray cobweb floated through the air and happened to catch your face, or a dead leaf was caught up by a gust of wind. Anything of that nature might cause you to imagine the rest. In any case, boys, let me urge you to keep a level head in such matters as these."

"But, sir, I'm sure I felt something—something ghostly," put in Tommy Watson. "I'm not an imaginative chap, sir; I think you know that. I'm generally just the opposite."

"Yes, I am aware of that, Watson," said Nelson Lee. "Well, we will waste no further time here, but will investigate matters at once. Are you coming in with me, boys?"

"I'm coming in, sir," I said promptly.

"Same here!" said Solomon Levi.

"Dear old boys, I shall certainly be with you," said Sir Montie.

Tommy Watson looked at the gloomy building rather apprehensively. It was very dark now, and Bannington Grange looked far more sinister than it had done half an hour earlier.

And, in face of what had just happened, Tommy Watson was undecided.

"I—I think I'll wait out here for you," he said.

"Rats!" I put in. "My dear chap, you're not going to show the white feather, are you?"

Watson glared.

"The white feather!" he snorted.

"Are you calling me a funk?"

"Now, don't get touchy!" I said. "Everybody knows you're not a funk, Tommy. But if you stand out here while we all go inside, it will look a bit queer, that's all. Pull yourself together and come with us!"

Tommy agreed at length, and we went up the snow-covered steps of the gloomy building. Arriving at the front door, Nelson Lee led the way in, and soon we were all standing in the dark, lofty hall. It was very chilly in there, and all sorts of queer sounds came to us—creakings and crackings. But this was

only natural, for all old houses, particularly empty houses, give out curious sounds, and things were made much better when Nelson Lee switched on a powerful electric lamp which he had taken from his pocket.

"Now, boys, which is this uncanny apartment?" inquired Nelson Lee cheerfully. "You mustn't think I am ridiculing your story, or that I look upon it in a joking spirit. I know you well enough to realise that there must be something very special here. At the same time, we must not make too much of it."

"It's the room on the left, sir," said Levi. "This other room, the one opposite, is quite all right. There's nothing uncanny about that at all. You go in, sir, and have a look round."

"I am to go into the normal room first?" smiled Nelson Lee.

"Yes, sir."

The gov'nor entered, and I know well enough that he was in a good-natured, tolerant kind of humour. He entered the apartment and we followed close behind him. Nelson Lee walked to the very centre of the room, and then stood there, playing the light from his torch all round; and, although I knew that this house was reputed to be haunted, and it was now quite dark, I felt no discomfort whatever. My pulse was as steady as a rock, and I had no desire to glance over my shoulder.

"There's nothing wrong here," said Nelson Lee, at length. "The room is certainly dilapidated, and decidedly chilly. But I feel no unpleasant effect."

"Neither do we, sir," I put in. "It's the other room that affected us so strangely."

We walked out in the hall again, and Nelson Lee crossed over and entered the opposite apartment. Levi was the first to follow the gov'nor, and the Jewish boy came to a halt after he had progressed two or three paces. Then he turned, his eyes rather large and his face pale.

"It's—it's still the same!" he muttered. "By my life, I—I——"

Levi did not finish. He came running out of the room and stood out in the hall, trembling.

"I don't know what it is," he exclaimed huskily, "but—but the very atmosphere seems to be haunted, you know! I wonder if Mr. Lee can feel it?"

Nelson Lee by this time had penetrated right into the centre of the apartment. He was standing there, flashing his electric torch about him, and his hand was steady, and he did not appear to be suffering from any ill-effects.

"Well, sir," I called out, "what's the verdict?"

Nelson Lee turned towards us.

"I agree with you, boys, that there is something very extraordinary about this apartment," he said grimly. "There is not only this dank, earthy smell, but the very atmosphere has the effect of chilling one's blood in one's veins. I have an uncontrollable desire to dash out of this room into your midst. I feel nervous and shaky. Are they the symptoms that you felt?"

"Exactly, sir," I said. "It's—it's amazing!"

Nelson Lee still stood there. Then, after a moment or two, he came out, rather hurriedly. And when he was in the midst of us, we regarded him with curious, inquiring eyes.

Nelson Lee took a deep breath and shivered slightly.

"Strange—very strange!" he exclaimed, as though to himself. "Really, boys, I cannot account for this. But I am perfectly convinced that there is no supernatural agency at work. There is some rational explanation of this mystery, and, if possible, I intend to solve the problem."

Nelson Lee inhaled a very deep breath. Then, without wasting a moment, he walked into the room again, holding his breath tightly. I understood, and I followed the gov'nor's example.

And when I got into the very centre of the room I found that I had no uncanny sensation whatever. The room appeared to be quite normal to me. I could smell nothing, of course, since I was holding my breath, and I had no desire to rush headlong out into the hall.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" I exclaimed. "The room is all right now, sir!"

I broke off, for in speaking I had breathed again, and at the first lungful of air I clenched my teeth, and I could feel my hair almost standing on end. That dank, horrible smell surged into my nostrils, and I gave an involuntary shudder and hurried out into the hall.

Nelson Lee followed me almost immediately.

"Well, Nipper, that is one point," he said. "This sensation is caused by something in the atmosphere—something in the air itself. I think that proves quite clearly that there is no haunting here—there is no supernatural agency at work. It is surely a natural phenomenon, which we must solve."

"Do you think there's something in the air, sir—some gas or poison, or something?" I inquired.

"There is no telling, Nipper," said Nelson Lee grimly. "But I am by no means at the end of my investigations."

Nelson Lee was himself now; he was the keen, astute master-detective. He was no longer a schoolmaster; he was no longer Mr. Lee of St. Frank's. He was the celebrated criminal investigator of Gray's Inn Road. His eyes were gleaming, and his jaw was firmly set. I knew at once that the gov'nor suspected trickery of some kind.

"I wish to ask you a few questions, Levi," he said. "I think you have an enemy?"

"At the school, do you mean, sir?" said the Jewish boy.

"Hardly that, Levi," replied Lee. "I am referring to your plans with regard to this old building. Your father intends to purchase the property, I think, and to build a cinema on the site?"

"Yes, sir; that's the idea," said Watson.

"But there is a rival—a certain Mr. Webb?" went on Lee. "I have met Mr. Webb, and my opinion of him is not precisely a good one. This Mr. Webb has proved on two or three occasions that he is something of a rogue?"

"He has, sir, believe me!" said Levi grimly. "He'd give his right hand if he could oust my father and I from this scheme. But he sha'n't, sir; we've got a tight hold of it, and we mean to keep that hold!"

"H'm! Do you know if Webb has ever been in this building?" asked Lee.

"I don't know, sir; but he could easily get in if he wanted to," replied Levi. "There is nobody here from morning till night; it is generally locked up. There's no caretaker, and nobody would take much notice if Mr. Webb came into the place."

Nelson Lee was thoughtful for a short time, and then he once more went into that haunted apartment. This time he remained in there for a much longer period, and we saw him bending down,

examining portions of the floor. He went over the walls, scrutinising them carefully. He went to the fireplace, stirred some ashes which were in the grate, and finally he came out into the hall once more.

And he was looking more satisfied now.

"Well, my boys, I think we may as well leave these premises," he said. "We can do no good by remaining here."

"Have you discovered anything, sir?" I asked.

"Quite a lot, Nipper."

"Do you know why that room feels so horrible, sir?"

"At the present moment, my boy, I am not in a position to say anything further," replied the gov'nor, in that exasperating way of his. "I can assure you all, however, that I shall not let the matter rest at this present point. I shall pursue my inquiries in my own way, and I shall probably have something of interest to tell you a little later on."

And with that we were compelled to be content. The gov'nor would say no more, and before very long we were on our way back to St. Frank's, still very puzzled with the whole business.

Meanwhile, we had left Nelson Lee at Bannington Grange. The gov'nor had not told us his plans, and I had no idea what his intentions were. But Nelson Lee went prowling round the old place in a most inquisitive fashion. He examined every apartment and every cellar. He seemed particularly interested in the cellars; and when at last he left the premises there was a satisfied expression in his eyes.

"Very interesting!" he told himself. "Very interesting indeed! I shall make it my duty from now onwards to keep a very sharp eye upon Mr. Stanley Webb!"

It certainly seemed that Nelson Lee had made a few discoveries.

CHAPTER III.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER.

RALPH LESLIE FULLWOOD pulled his woollen muffler tighter round his neck, and stamped vigorously up and down the platform. The leader of Study A was on the station at Bannington. He had been to the town in order to make a few pur-

chases—cigarettes, and so forth. It was rather risky to buy cigarettes in Bellton, for the villagers were inclined to talk; and now Fullwood was waiting for the local train which would take him back to the village. The train was already in the station, but it would not start just yet, and the compartments were cold and cheerless. Fullwood was killing time by stamping up and down the platform.

He had been doing this for a minute or two when a man, attired in a long, thick overcoat, with a trilby hat, came past. He paused for a moment, and then went up to Fullwood.

"Good-evening, my lad!" he said genially. "I hardly expected to see you here."

Fullwood looked at the stranger and then nodded.

"Oh, good-evening, Mr. Webb!" he said, extending his hand. "Jolly pleased to meet you! I should have probably come in to see your pictures this evenin'; but two of our masters are in town, an' the place is banned. Awful rot, of course, but there you are!"

Mr. Webb nodded.

"I agree with you, Fullwood," he said. "It is indeed rot, as you call it. However, there is no accounting for what these schoolmasters will do—eh? It is very lucky I happened to see you on the platform here, for I am rather anxious to have a chat with you."

"A chat?" repeated Fullwood. "What about?"

"Well, it is a private matter," said the cinema proprietor. "A very private matter, my boy. It was my intention to send you a line, so that we could arrange an interview; but this is altogether better. If you can spare the time now I should like to have a talk with you, and that may have the effect of speeding up my plans."

Fullwood looked at Mr. Webb curiously.

"What's the idea?" he said bluntly. "Somethin' up against Levi?"

Webb nodded.

"Well, yes," he agreed. "You apparently know that Master Levi and myself do not agree. The young fool has set his will against mine, and I intend to break him. It is ridiculous, of course—this scheme of young Levi's to build a cinema in the High Street. I intend to frustrate that mad idea, and I shall do it in my own way. I don't think you care for Levi, do you?"

Fullwood laughed.

"I like Levi just about as much as I like arsenic!" he replied. "If you've got some scheme up against him, Mr. Webb, I shouldn't mind lending you a hand—providin' everythin' is safe."

"Good!" said Webb. "I can assure you, Fullwood, that this little idea which has come into my head will not endanger you in the slightest degree. But we cannot talk here. What do you say to the idea of coming into the waiting-room? I think it is quite deserted at the moment, and there is a cheerful fire burning there."

"Right you are, sir," said Fullwood. "But my train goes in a few minutes—"

"There is another train in an hour's time, I believe."

"Well, yes, but—"

"Then let this train go without you," said Mr. Webb. "I can promise you, Fullwood, that I will make it worth your while. I am quite sure that you can do with a little pocket-money, eh? I am not attempting to bribe you, or anything of that sort."

"Of course not!" said Fullwood. "You couldn't bribe me if you wanted to, Mr. Webb. Well, let's get along to the waitin'-room. I'm rather curious to hear what this idea of yours is. I'd do anythin' to smash that Jewish cad!"

Mr. Webb smiled cunningly, and he led the way along the platform to the waiting-room. Arriving there, the pair found that the apartment was quite empty. A fairly warm fire glowed in the grate, and the ordinarily cheerless waiting-room was made quite cosy.

Fullwood and Mr. Webb seated themselves upon one of the benches near the fire.

"Now, what's this giddy idea?" asked Fullwood curiously. "How do you want me to upset Levi's apple-cart?"

Mr. Webb smiled.

"It will be quite simple, Fullwood. I can assure you," he said. "I was going to suggest that this little affair should take place to-morrow night, but there is no reason why it should not occur sooner—to-night."

"What little affair?"

"The one I am about to suggest," went on Webb cunningly. "I want, if possible, to get Levi into the old haunted house—say, between the hours of eleven o'clock and one o'clock at

night. I require him to be there over midnight."

"What on earth for?" demanded Fullwood.

"Just a fancy of mine," said Webb carelessly. "If you want to know the truth, my boy, I might as well take you into my confidence. If I succeed in scaring Levi—for I do not hesitate to tell you that I shall provide certain manifestations—it is quite possible that he will drop this hair-brained scheme of his. I want to convince him that Bannington Grange is haunted, and he may possibly give up this whole game of his."

"An' you want me to get him to enter the Grange to-night?"

"Exactly."

"I don't see that it can be done," replied Fullwood. "An', in any case, I don't suppose it'll scare him to that extent, Mr. Webb. He might be frightened for an hour or two, but he won't give up this cinema stunt of his."

As a matter of fact, Ralph Leslie Fullwood did not quite believe Mr. Webb's story. The leader of Study A, to tell the truth, was rather suspicious—he had an idea that Webb wanted to get Levi into the old house for quite a different purpose. Fullwood knew that Levi had the option of the property, and he also knew that Webb was particularly anxious to lay hands on that option. Perhaps this was something to do with the idea.

"Well, I fancy that the game will succeed," said Mr. Webb. "I do not suppose for a moment that it will be possible to get Levi to enter the old house alone; therefore, you can suggest that he should go in with one companion. It will be quite easy for me to deal with the companion, I imagine."

"An' how do you suppose I am goin' to do this?" asked Fullwood.

"It will be quite an easy matter," replied Mr. Webb. "And do not imagine that I am doing this for the mere fun of it—it is a business matter, you understand, and I always pay for business."

"How much?" asked Fullwood practically.

"Well, I will pay you five pounds if you will do this task as I require," replied Mr. Webb. "I will give you three pounds now, and two pounds later on. And you must understand that I

absolutely rely upon you carrying out my instructions."

"Done!" said Fullwood. "I can do with a fiver, Mr. Webb. An' if it's up against Levi, I don't mind. I hate the cad, and I'll willingly take a hand in scarin' him, particularly if it will do him some harm. But what I want to know is this: How can I compel Levi to spend an hour in that old house with only one companion?"

"Two hours!" corrected Mr. Webb. "From eleven o'clock to-night until one o'clock, after midnight. The best way for you to get to work is like this. When you get back to the school, you will probably have an opportunity of talking to Levi, in the presence of a good many other boys."

"That's quite right," said Fullwood. "They'll all be down in the common room, I expect."

"Very well, then," said Mr. Webb. "What you must do is this. Sneer at Levi—taunt him. Call him a coward—anything you will, and dare him to spend those two hours in the haunted house to-night, with only the companionship of one other boy. It is almost certain that Levi will take the bait, and will agree to the proposal. Taunt him until he consents."

Fullwood's eyes gleamed.

"Well, that's a pretty good idea," he admitted. "I think I shall manage it, too. Levi is a touchy beast, and he's bound to take the bait directly I call him a funk. He'd look jolly small in the eyes of the other fellows if he refused. Yes, Mr. Webb, I think it can be done."

The cinema proprietor nodded.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Very well, Fullwood, we will call that settled. I will give you three pounds now, and, if you succeed in this matter as I require, I will give you the other two pounds to-morrow. Is that quite satisfactory?"

"Quite!" said Fullwood.

The money was handed over, and Fullwood stowed it into his pocket.

Mr. Webb watched him with interest, and with a certain amount of concern, for much depended upon Fullwood's success. If he taunted Levi into spending those two hours in Bannington Grange, it was more than likely that Mr. Webb would be able to carry out his design. It was very lucky that the pair had met on the railway station, for it had enabled Mr. Webb to put his

scheme in operation at once, without any delay.

"Now, remember, Fullwood," said the cinema proprietor. "What you must do is this. When you get back to the school, find Levi, make sure that a good many other boys are present, and then taunt him into spending these two hours in the haunted house. Make him a bet—do anything you like—but compel him to agree to this proposal. He can choose one companion, that is all. I would have it that Levi must spend the two hours in the house alone, but I do not think that scheme would work. The boy would not agree at all under those circumstances, so we had better make it easier for him. He can have one companion."

"Anybody?" asked Fullwood.

"Well, I won't go so far as to say that," said Webb. "When I say one companion, I mean one other junior boy—a member of the same Form as Levi is in himself."

"Right you are," said Fullwood. "I'll put it to him like that, and you can take it from me, Mr. Webb, that the thing will go through. I'll absolutely force the cad to agree."

Not long afterwards, Fullwood and Mr. Webb parted. Fullwood went to St. Frank's, and Mr. Webb returned to his cinema in the town. The man was feeling well pleased with his interview, for he was quite certain that Fullwood would succeed. And that night, shortly before twelve, he would be able to try his scheme. Webb knew well enough that Solomon Levi always carried that option about with him; the Jewish boy did this for safety's sake. Well, on this occasion he would find that he had made a big mistake. Mr. Webb required that option, and he would get it.

Fullwood did not trouble himself much about Mr. Webb's reason for requiring Levi in the haunted house. After all, it was not Fullwood's business, and he was not particular what he did if it was against Solomon Levi. Fullwood hated the Jewish junior, and he was ready to enter any plot for the sake of doing Levi a bad turn.

Meanwhile, at St. Frank's, the junior common room in the Ancient House was rather crowded. And the majority of the fellows were talking about Bannington Grange, and the strange experience which had befallen the juniors that

evening. It was as though the stage had been set in readiness for Fullwood's arrival.

Levi had been telling the other fellows of what had occurred. Many of them were sceptical, particularly Handforth and Church and McClure, and two or three others. They declared that it had been all fancy on Levi's part.

"I thought you'd say something like that!" exclaimed the Jewish boy. "But you can take my word for it, Handforth, that this is absolutely true. It was only evening—not quite dark, in fact—and yet the awfully creepy feeling which came over us was terrible."

"That's because you know the place was haunted," said De Valerie.

"Oh, rats!" put in Tommy Watson. "Nipper was there—and Nipper ain't the kind to be scared over nothing!"

"Nipper wasn't scared!" I exclaimed. "Don't be an ass, Tommy."

"Well, if you weren't scared, you were a bit startled!" said Watson.

"Startled isn't scared," I said. "I'll admit I was startled—anybody would have been. There was something in that room that was positively uncanny. I don't know what it was, and I'm still jolly mystified. I wish I could discover the truth, that's all."

"Do you mean to tell me that you believe the place to be haunted?" demanded Handforth, staring at me.

"No!"

"But you just said——"

"I didn't say anything about the place being haunted," I exclaimed. "There was a feeling of uncanniness about the room, if you know what I mean. We didn't see anything, and we didn't feel anything—at least, I didn't. And yet all the time there was that awful feeling of dread—a kind of sensation that made me want to run for my life. It was something in the atmosphere—I know that much."

Handforth sniffed.

"It only shows how far the imagination can go," he exclaimed. "Why, I wouldn't mind spending an hour in that giddy old place—not likely! I'm not scared about ghosts, and I bet I'd be as calm when I came out as when I went in!"

"There's nothing easier than to talk like that, Handy," I said. "You know jolly well that nobody's going to ask you to go into the place now. But to-morrow, if you like, I'll take you to the

Grange, and then you'll see you've made a bloomer."

"I'll go with pleasure," said Handforth promptly. "I'll show you bounders up! I'll make you understand——"

"Hallo! What's the argument about?"

It was Fullwood who asked that question. He had just entered the common room, and he knew very well what the discussion was about, for he had listened for a moment or two. And he was inwardly pleased, for it gave him a splendid opening for his own scheme.

"Oh, these asses are talking about Bannington Grange," said Gulliver. "You've heard all about it, haven't you? Two or three of them were scared out of their wits this afternoon——"

"Rats!" interrupted Solomon Levi. "Nobody was scared. The whole thing was queer, that's all. And, in any case, there's no reason why we should go into any details to satisfy Fullwood."

"Hear, hear!" said Tommy Watson.

"Fully, you can go and fry your face!" said Handforth politely.

Fullwood lounged further into the common room, with his hands in his pockets.

"I've got as much right in here as anybody else!" he said. "An' as for this ghost yarn, it's all tommy rot!"

"Sheer piffle!" said Gulliver.

"Nobody asked you for your opinion, and the best thing you can do is to keep quiet," said Handforth grimly. "Are you going to keep quiet, Fullwood, or do you want to have your head squashed into the coal-scuttle?"

"Oh, don't try to be funny!" snapped Fullwood. "With regard to this ghost idea, I call it all rubbish! I've heard the whole yarn. People say that Bannington Grange is haunted, but I don't believe it. Has anybody seen a ghost?"

"No!" I said. "But there are plenty of houses haunted that haven't any ghosts."

"Well, I never heard of one," sneered Fullwood.

"Which only shows your ignorance," I said smoothly. "There are haunted houses which have sounds, groans, and all sorts of things. There are other haunted houses which are unlucky to go into—which cause people to die, and that kind of thing. Naturally, I don't believe these yarns—I'm simply repeating what people hear now and again.

I've entered all sorts of haunted houses in my time, but I've never seen a ghost yet."

"An' yet you say this Bannington Grange is haunted?" remarked Fullwood.

"I don't say anything of the sort!" I retorted. "All I know is that there is something very queer about the place. Watson knows that, and so does Tregellis-West. And Levi was there, too. We didn't see anything, and we didn't feel anything, only there was something in the atmosphere which made us feel creepy."

"Nerves!" said Fullwood, with a contemptuous air.

"You—you sneering cad!" shouted Tommy Watson warmly. "It wasn't nerves. We were as cool as anything when we first went in there. And I was all right until something brushed against my face——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The yell of laughter came from Fullwood and Gulliver, and one or two others of the same breed.

"Somethin' brushed against his face!" grinned Gulliver. "I expect it was a dead leaf, or somethin' of that kind!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Don't take any notice of the cads, Watson," put in Solomon Levi. "You might have known that we should get something of this kind when we told our story. Don't take the trouble to answer him; don't let them crow over you. Ignore them——"

"Who told you to interfere, you Jewish cad?" exclaimed Fullwood, scowling. "You ain't wanted at St. Frank's, and the best thing you can do is to go back to Whitechapel!"

Solomon Levi smiled.

"That kind of talk is quite stale by now, Fullwood!" he said smoothly. "It's about time you thought of something else, isn't it? If I thought I wasn't wanted at St. Frank's, I should go, and pretty quickly, believe me!"

"You ain't wanted!" snapped Gulliver.

"Not by you, perhaps; but there are quite a number of other fellows in the Remove, I am sure," said Levi. "I don't think you are the most important persons at St. Frank's. As a matter of fact, I don't notice your existence. I simply regard you as though you didn't live!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But we won't go into any arguments," went on Levi. "There's no need to have any rows or any squabbles. We were talking about this haunted house, and——"

"Well, you can't get away from the fact that you're a funk!" exclaimed Fullwood sneeringly.

"What?"

Solomon Levi faced round, his eyes gloaming.

"You heard what I said!" exclaimed Fullwood.

"Did you call me a funk?"

"Yes, I did!"

"Then I should advise you to apologise within one minute!" said Levi. "If you don't, I shall be obliged to knock you down!"

"Hear, hear!" said Handforth. "I'll do it, if you like, Solly!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I think I can manage it myself, thanks!" said the Jewish boy quietly.

He looked at Fullwood with a calm light in his eyes.

"Now, Fullwood, I'm waiting for you!" he said. "You've got to apologise for calling me a funk——"

"Oh, don't be a touchy ass!" snapped Fullwood. "I'm not going to apologise. You keep talkin' about ghosts, an' you say this old Grange in Bannington is haunted, an' all the rest of it. It's not up to me to apologise—it's up to you to prove you ain't a funk!"

"Hear, hear!" said Gulliver and Bell.

"Rats!" shouted Handforth. "If you don't apologise——"

"Nobody asked you to butt in!" snapped Fullwood. "If Levi isn't a funk, he won't object to my calling him one. He says that he ignored me, and he looked upon me as if I didn't exist. But when I call him a funk he hears me—even now I am not in existence!"

I couldn't help grinning.

"That's one for you, Solly!" I chuckled.

Levi nodded.

"Perhaps it is!" he said. "And, under the circumstances, I won't pursue the matter further. Fullwood's right—he doesn't exist, so therefore he couldn't have insulted me. I think I can afford to ignore his sneers."

Handforth glared.

"Ain't you going to punch his nose?" he roared.

"Well, no——"

"You—you silly ass!" shouted Handforth. "You fathheaded jossers! I was expecting to see Fullwood come over backwards——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, don't try to be funny!" sneered Fullwood. "But I maintain what I said before—an' Levi can't get away from it. An' I'll bet ten to one in quids that Levi wouldn't go into Bannington Grange at dead of night, and stay there for an hour or two."

"There's nothing doing, thanks!" said Levi, with a smile. "I don't see any reason why I should spoil my beauty sleep by spending an hour or two in Bannington Grange."

"Well, it would prove whether you were a funk or not," said Fullwood meaningly. "I say that you daren't do it, Levi—even if you had another chap with you. There you are—that's an idea! I'll dare you to spend a couple of hours in Bannington Grange, from eleven o'clock at night till one o'clock. You daren't do it—not even if you had another chap with you. You can have any chap you like—any Remove fellow you care to choose. Is it a go?"

"No, it's not a go!" said Levi shortly.

"Yah!"

"Funk!" roared Bell.

"Of course he's a funk!" sneered Gulliver. "We knew it all along—he's absolutely afraid to go into that haunted house at night—even if he has another chap with him!"

Gulliver and Bell were assisting Fullwood's scheme quite admirably although they didn't know it at the time.

"It's no good continuing the discussion," said Fullwood, with a heavy tone of contempt in his voice. "I know it all along—that Jewish cad ain't got any pluck in him!"

"Not a giddy ounce!" said Merrell.

"It's a wonder he's got the sauce to stand there and say anythin' at all."

"Quite a number of juniors joined in, and Solomon Levi flushed hotly as he heard all these boys casting doubts upon his courage.

"I am not afraid to spend two hours in Bannington Grange at midnight," he said quietly. "But there's no sense in doing such a thing—there's no object to be gained. It would simply be a waste of time—it would mean nothing. And

"I don't do things unless there's an object at the end of it."

Fullwood shrugged his shoulders.

"All right--there's an end to it!" he said carelessly. "But you know what the chaps will think about you, don't you? I dared you to spend a couple of hours in Bannington Grange--and you refused. That means one thing--you're jolly well afraid of it. That's the truth, Levi, and you can't deny it! Do you believe in ghosts?"

"No, I don't!" replied Levi.

"Then why are you afraid to spend a couple of hours--"

"I'm not afraid--only I don't see the sense in doing it!" repeated Solomon.

"Oh, that's very easy to say!" sneered Fullwood. "You don't believe in it--we ain't going to swallow that, my son! No, it's as clear as daylight--you're afraid!"

"Don't take any notice of the asses," I put in. "Let them talk, Solly. We know you're all right--and there's no need to--"

"Wait a minute!" interrupted Levi, with a gleam in his eyes. "I'm not going to have those fellows say that I'm a funk, Nipper. Fullwood says I daren't spend a couple of hours in Bannington Grange to-night. Well, I'm going to do it!"

"What?"

"Eh?"

"I'm going to accept this challenge," said Levi grimly. "I am going to spend two hours in Bannington Grange this very night with only one other fellow to keep me company. That's the bargain, isn't it?"

"Yes!" said Fullwood, delighted with the success.

"Don't be a silly ass, Levi!" I exclaimed. "Don't take any notice of Fullwood--we sha'n't think any the worse of you if you refuse this ridiculous challenge--"

"I suppose that Nipper's afraid that Levi will ask him to come!" grinned Fullwood. "He thinks he'll be the chosen one!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" cackled Gulliver and Bell, and one or two others.

"No, I'm not thinking about asking Nipper," said Levi. "I understand that I can take any fellow I choose--I can select anybody in the Remove?"

"Yes--that's the bargain," said Fullwood.

Solomon Levi nodded.

"Right you are!" he exclaimed grimly. "I'll take on this thing, and I'll spend those two hours in Bannington Grange, alone, except for one other junior. It's a bargain--and I'll see it through."

"Who's going to be your companion?" I inquired anxiously.

"Fullwood!" replied Solomon Levi.

CHAPTER IV.

THE GHOST HUNTERS.

FULLWOOD!"

"Oh, my only hat!"

"Great pip!"

"Yes--Fullwood!" said Levi.

"He entered this challenge, and he told me that I could select any fellow I liked, in the Remove. Well, he's in the Remove himself--and I choose Fullwood. He can't get out of it--because he made the challenge himself. And the bargain is that he shall spend two hours with me alone in Bannington Grange to-night--from eleven o'clock to one o'clock!"

Ralph Leslie Fullwood started, and turned slightly pale.

"You--you-- I--I didn't mean that!" he stuttered hastily. "Any fellow except myself--"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, this is rich!" roared Handforth. "It's recoiled on his own giddy head!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And he can't get out of it, either!" grinned De Valerie. "Good for you, Levi! Fullwood made this proposition, and he's got to stick to it now--he can't back out!"

Fullwood was looking alarmed. He knew well enough that there was no backing out of this position--as De Valerie had said. He had made the proposition, and he would be compelled to stand by it. But Fullwood had never expected for a second that Solomon Levi would select him as a companion. Such a possibility had not entered into his calculations. But it was too late now to make any alteration. And he decided that it would be better for him to agree at once. After all, it wouldn't matter much--Fullwood knew that Mr. Stanley



As though out of the very blackness itself, a figure came into view—a figure which almost made Levi's heart stop beating for a moment. It came closer, gliding over the floor noiselessly.

Wobb would be responsible for any strange manifestations that took place. Therefore Fullwood would not be at all scared.

The other juniors were delighted. Without the slightest doubt, Solomon Levi had turned the tables very smartly upon the cad of the Remove. I was particularly pleased. It was a keen thought on Levi's part. Fullwood had made this challenge, and he had left it open to Levi to select whosoever he chose. And, Levi, with a rare sense of humour, had selected Fullwood himself. Nothing could have been more fitting.

"Well," said Levi calmly. "What do you say, Fullwood? We'll slip out of our beds after lights out, and we'll get over to Bannington at about eleven o'clock. Then we'll stay in the haunted house until one o'clock."

Fullwood nodded, trying to look unconcerned.

"All right—I'm game!" he declared. "I didn't expect anything of this sort, but I'm not going to show the white feather. You've chosen me as a companion for the trip, and I'll go with you. It's settled!"

"You—you agree?" exclaimed Gulliver, staring.

"Yes!"

"He can't do anything else!" grinned Reginald Pitt. "He's in a corner, and he knows it, my son. Fully simply must go on this trip—otherwise he'll be the laughing stock of the whole school for months to come! We'll see what his courage is like—and I'll bet that he's the first one to run if there's any queer manifestations in the house!"

"Rather!" said Handforth. "I don't believe Fullwood will stay in the place for more than ten minutes! That'll make him look a bit small, by George!"

There was a considerable commotion in the Remove over the sensational challenge and its acceptance.

The fellows excitedly discussed the possibilities, and a great many of them were quite certain that Fullwood would not have sufficient stamina to remain the specified two hours in the old haunted house. Undoubtedly, the leader of Study A had never bargained for such cuteness on Levi's part—he had never imagined that he would be the chosen one.

The juniors had been particularly warned not to speak too much about the affair—for if it got to the ears of a

prefect, or any of the masters, it would be all up with the whole programme. As it had been arranged at first, Solomon Levi and Fullwood would get up at about ten-thirty—an hour after going to bed. They would creep down, get their bicycles out, and go straight off for Bannington.

But Handforth meant to improve upon this. In Study D he was having quite a little argument with his chums, Church and McClure.

"Levi's as keen as mustard!" Handforth was saying. "It was ripping the way he turned the thing against Fullwood. When the cad called Levi a funk, he didn't reckon that he'd have to go on this giddy ghost hunt himself!"

"Rather not!" chuckled Church. "I wonder which of the pair will be the first to give way to an attack of nerves!"

"Oh, we shall see, anyhow," said Handforth.

"We shall see?"

"Yes."

"We shall hear, you mean!" said Church. "When they come back at one o'clock, though, I suppose all the Remove will be asleep, so we sha'n't know anything until the morning——"

"You dotty ass!" said Handforth witheringly.

"Eh?"

"You silly fathead!"

"Look here——"

"Sha'n't we be there!" shouted Handforth. "You stand there talking about to-morrow. We're going on this trip with Fullwood and Levi——"

"We're—we're going?" said Church faintly.

"Yes, rather!"

"But—but——"

"Of course we're going!" went on Handforth. "Didn't you know that?"

Church and McClure gazed at one another, and then they gazed at Handforth.

"But we can't go, Handy!" said McClure. "Only Levi and Fullwood are going—it would spoil everything if we butted in. Besides, I don't fancy——"

"It's not what you fancy—it's what I order!" interrupted Handforth grimly.

"We're going, and there's an end to it. If you're going to argue with me——"

"Dash it all, Handy, be reasonable!" put in Church. "You know jolly well we can't go in that haunted house with Levi and Fullwood——"

"Who's talking about going in?"

"Eh?"

"We're not going in, you ass!" said Handforth. "We shall simply escort the bounders to the Grange—that's all."

"Oh!"

"I'm going to get some of the other fellows to come, too—Nipper, and Pitt, and one or two more," went on Handforth. "We'll make up a regular escorting party, we'll see that everything goes off all right. We'll be the judges, so to speak."

"Well, that's different, of course," admitted Church. "I don't mind confessing that I shouldn't like to spend a couple of hours in that rotten old place—it would give me the creeps. I'm not nervy, and I'm not a coward, but I don't see the fun of staying two hours in a haunted house at dead of night. It won't be so bad waiting outside—although it will be jolly cold!"

"We shall be well wrapped up, so that won't hurt us!" said Handforth. "Now my idea is for us to stand outside, and we shall be able to see if Fullwood rushes out. We shall know the truth—"

"But if we're there, the effect won't be the same," put in McClure.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, these chaps will know that we're outside, and they won't feel so jolly lonely," explained McClure. "It won't be a proper test, you see—"

"Oh, yes it will," said Handforth. "That won't make any difference—besides, we can make them think we're going straight back to St. Frank's. Anyhow, we're going."

And a little later on Handforth put his proposition before me. At first I was rather doubtful, but then I agreed. I had already decided that I should be on the spot—but not exactly in this way. I had determined to get up shortly after Levi and Fullwood had left, and to arrive at Bannington almost at the same time as they did. But perhaps it would be better if a big party of us went. As Handforth said, we should be able to stand outside, and watch the proceedings. It would be a cold job, but we should be able to make every preparation for that.

Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West, of course, decided to come with us—and Reginald Pitt and Dick Goodwin also planned to arrive at half past ten. And by the time we went to bed, all the preparations had been made.

Overcoats and mufflers and boots had been left in the cloak room, all in readiness. Thus, when we came down, later on, we should find our things waiting for us.

The prefect who came and saw lights out that night in the Remove dormitory evidently thought there was something special on. For he looked round the dormitory rather suspiciously, and he gave the Remove a warning.

"If you juniors have got something on to-night, you'd better call it off!" he said grimly. "I can see you all look a bit excited—and I fancy you've got some idea of making a raid, or something of that kind. Take my advice, kids, and stick to your beds. If there's any trouble in this dormitory, there'll be a heap more trouble later on!"

And, with this warning, the prefect switched off the lights, and took his departure.

"And that's that!" said Handforth in the darkness. "A fat lot of notice we shall take of the ass!"

"Well, we'd better be careful," I remarked. "We don't want the whole thing spoilt by somebody butting in at the last minute. My advice, you chaps, is for you all to go to sleep. I'll keep awake, and I'll arouse you at half past ten exactly."

"Oh, that's a dotty idea!" said Handforth. "We might as well all keep awake."

But, as it happened, Handforth was about the first fellow to doze off. And he went into a deep sleep until ten-thirty sounded. All the other fellows were fast asleep by this time, too. There would have been very little doing in the ghost-hunting line if I had not remained on the alert. At the last chime of the school clock, I slipped out of bed, and shook Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson. They turned over in bed, blinked at me sleepily, and protested that the whole idea was ridiculous.

"I knew you'd say that!" I grinned. "But you've got to turn out, my sons—we're going to see this thing through."

"But, dear old fellow, it's frightfully cold!" said Sir Montie, shivering. "I believe it's snowing, I do, really! And it's freezin' frightfully, begad!"

"Rather!" muttered Watson. "I say, Nipper, let's chuck it all up—"

"There's a jug of water over on the side-table," I said carelessly. "I think

you'd better get out pretty lively, my children!"

Sir Montie and Tommy thought so too. And after that I had a little trouble with Handforth and Co. The famous leader of Study D did not quite appreciate the fun of turning out at dead of night—although it had been his idea to begin with. He could not back out of it, however, and he commenced dressing with shivering limbs.

But the two principal actors in the affair—Solomon Levi and Fullwood—were out of bed at once, and they did not waste much time in dressing. Very little was said, and at length everybody was ready.

We crept silently out of the dormitory, and then, with stealthy steps, we descended the stairs into the lobby. It did not take us long to get into our overcoats, mufflers, and caps. Then, still without making a sound, we went along to Study C, and emerged into the Triangle by means of the window.

Everything had been left in readiness in the bicycle shed—bikes placed handy, with all the lamps trimmed and fitted.

As quietly as so many shadows, we wheeled our machines out into the Triangle, and then crept over to the school wall. It was rather a difficult task getting the bicycles over, but it had to be done—since all the gates were locked. However, at last we were successful—and then we started off.

We did not go through Bellton, for it was possible that we should meet a master, the hour being still fairly early. We took the by-roads and lanes, going through Edgemore and joining the Bannington road later on.

"Good!" I exclaimed when we came out on the main road. "Everything's all serene so far. I don't think we shall have much trouble now. It'll be just about eleven o'clock by the time we arrive at the Grango."

As a matter of fact, the clock of the old Bannington Church was just chiming the hour when we arrived outside the gates of the old haunted house. We could not have timed it better.

Snow was falling again, and the Bannington High Street was absolutely deserted. Not a soul was to be seen anywhere, for, after all, it was only a smallish town, and the inhabitants retired comparatively early. But, of course, it was quite likely that somebody

would appear before long—a straggler or two or a constable.

"We'd better slip inside quick!" I said softly. "We shall only cause comment if we are seen hanging about here. Come on, my sons—this way!"

The gate was not locked, and it was quite an easy matter for us to push it open and to slip through into the grounds. We left our bicycles just there, against the wall, then stole forward silently towards the building itself. At last it loomed up through the snow—dark, forbidding, and gloomy.

If the place had been ghostly in the evening light, it now seemed positively sinister. A dead silence reigned over everything, and it was not difficult to imagine why this old house had the reputation of being haunted.

We came to a halt some little distance from the front door.

"Now, then, my sons!" I said cheerfully. "This is where we leave you. You go in now, and we shall wait for you until one o'clock—two hours. If there's no sign of you then, we shall come in and investigate—we shall have a search round for your remains!"

"Ugh!" shivered Watson. "Don't talk like that, you ass!"

I grinned.

"Feeling a bit nervy?" I asked. "Well, this place does make a chap get the creeps, I admit. But we're all right, Tommy—we've got to remain outside. How would you like to go in with Levi and Fullwood?"

"Oh, I'd go if necessary!" replied Watson. "But there's no need for me to go—that's not in the bargain. You chaps had better hurry off!"

"I'm ready!" said Solomon Levi, quietly. "How do you feel, Fullwood?"

The leader of Study A pulled his overcoat tighter around.

"Oh, I—I'm all right!" he said, with an assumption of careless ease. "I'm not afraid of these fatheaded haunted houses!"

But I knew that Fullwood was only talking in this way in order to give himself confidence. The cad of the Remove was positively shivering—and it required a great effort of will on his part to accompany Levi towards the front door. But this had been Fullwood's own idea, and he could not possibly back out of it now without making himself look small for all time.

The two juniors entered, and they

found themselves in the gloomy, icy hall. It was pitchy black here.

Levi came to a halt and stood listening. Fullwood halted too.

And to their ears came the many strange and unaccountable little sounds which are always associated with empty houses. A creak now and again, a shuffling noise on an upper floor, and all manner of sounds of that description. It was quite possible that rats were responsible for some of these sounds.

"Oh, by Gad!" muttered Fullwood, shivering. "Ain't—ain't it creepy in here?"

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Levi with a slight touch of amusement in his voice. "I thought you had a great contempt for ghosts, Fullwood."

"I'm not talking about ghosts, you fool!" snapped Fullwood. "It's creepy—that's all! I don't believe in ghosts—I don't mind being here in the least bit. I'm—I'm quite enjoying it—I like to feel that creepy sensation!"

Levi grinned in the darkness.

"Oh, of course!" he said. "Well, here we are, Fully, and we've got to remain together for a couple of hours. And it won't do us any good if we stand still like this—the best thing we can do is to move about."

"Move about?" said Fullwood unsteadily.

"Yes."

"But—but we can't move far——"

"Why not?" enquired the Jewish boy. "We've got the whole house; we can march into every room, upstairs, and then down again—anything, in fact, to keep moving."

Fullwood was near the front door, and he stopped there.

"No—it's silly to move about," he said. "We might as well stop here, you know. We're well wrapped up—we shall be all right."

Solomon Levi laughed.

"Oh, I see!" he said. "I understand!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Fullwood, gritting his teeth.

"Why, it's fairly obvious," replied the other junior. "You must be a bit nervy about entering any of the rooms—that's the truth, Fullwood, if you would only admit it. You think it's better to remain here, near the front door—eh?"

Fullwood pulled himself together with an effort.

"Oh, don't be an idiot!" he snapped. "I—I don't mind where we go. If you want to go marching about the house—you can go—and I'll come with you. I'm not going to be beaten by you!"

"Good!" said Levi. "We'll go into this room first!"

It would not be quite truthful to say that Solomon Levi was feeling perfectly at ease. He was not. The effect of this house was rather disconcerting, and the Jewish boy would be very glad when the time limit was up. But he was not nervous—and his pulse was beating only slightly faster than usual. Certainly, he wasn't scared. But Fullwood was—the leader of Study A was nearly scared stiff. He had a mad impulse within him to dash out into the snow—among the fellows who had been left outside. But with an effort Fullwood mastered this impulse.

Levi led the way into that room which had so scared Tommy Watson. As a matter of fact, the Jewish boy was curious—he wanted to find out whether the apartment still had the same strango effect. And it was not long before he discovered that this was not the case. Levi walked straight into the room and took several deep breaths. A slight feeling of creepiness came over him, but it was nothing compared to the sensation of horror which had assailed him during that earlier visit.

But it was quite enough for Fullwood.

He shivered, and his teeth chattered so much that Levi could hear the sound.

"Let's—let's get out of here!" muttered Fullwood harshly. "There's—there's something queer about the room—oh, by gad! I—I feel awful! Let's get out, I tell you!"

"Just as you like!" said Levi calmly.

He had been thinking about this curious phenomenon, and he came to the conclusion that it had been caused by some gas or chemical matter in the air. Most of this had now evaporated, leaving the atmosphere quite clear. Levi could think of no other explanation which would fit the case.

The two juniors passed into the hall, and then made their way into the opposite room. It was pitchy black, and as they entered several uncanny creaks came from the other side of the apartment. Fullwood came to a halt just in the doorway.

"That—what was that?" he demanded with a gulp.

"Oh, nothing—a rat, possibly!" said Levi. "It's no good taking notice of those kind of sounds, Fullwood. We haven't been here long, so you must pull yourself together!"

"Oh-o, oh-h!" Fullwood staggered back, uttering a startled, peculiar cry.

"Something—something touched my face!" he gasped faintly. "I—I felt it distinctly——"

"By my life!" muttered Solomon Levi.

He, too, had felt something against his face—something icy cold and gentle. It only touched his face for a second, and then the air was clear again. In spite of himself, Levi felt a shiver run down his spine. There was something horribly uncanny about this place—something eerie and terrible.

His heart was beating fast now, and he saw that Fullwood was clutching at the door, having almost lost control of himself. And then, before either of the juniors could speak, a strange, ghastly sound came to their ears. It was a moan—a low, long-drawn-out moan!

And this terrible sound came from the other side of the apartment—muffled, indistinct, it throbbed on the still air in a disconcerting manner. Levi stood rooted to the spot, and Fullwood clutched desperately at the door post.

"Did—did you hear anything?" he panted huskily.

"Yes!" whispered Levi. "What was it?"

"I—I don't know!" gasped Fullwood. "It—it sounded—oh, by gad! I'm going to get out of this place, Levi! I can't stick it any longer——"

"You've got to stick it!" interrupted Levi quietly. "This was your arrangement, Fullwood, and you must stand by it. We stay in this house until one o'clock!"

"I won't—I can't!" shivered Fullwood. "There's—there's something queer about it—I admit it. The—the place is haunted!"

It was rather surprising that Fullwood should go on in this way. Since he had made this arrangement with Mr. Stanley Webb—and Fullwood knew well enough that Webb would get up to some tricks in order to scare Levi. But, in spite of this knowledge, Fullwood was frightened of his life.

The very atmosphere of this old house—the loneliness of it—the utter blackness—it all contributed towards making Full-

wood a nervous wreck. He began to tell himself that the place was really haunted—that Webb was not responsible for that ghastly moan. Fullwood was becoming more and more convinced, in fact, that Bannington Grange was a place of horror.

He wanted to rush out—he wanted to escape—but, somehow, he couldn't control his limbs. He was held there—he found that he couldn't move. Fright had taken complete hold of him.

And then something else occurred.

Both Levi and Fullwood thought they heard a slight sound over the other side of the apartment, right in one of the deep, dark corners. And, as they watched, something seemed to appear.

As though out of the very blackness itself, a figure came into view—a figure which almost made Levi's heart stop beating for a moment. It came closer, gliding over the floor noiselessly.

And Fullwood's heart nearly stopped beating. This figure was ghastly to look upon—it seemed to have no particular shape, but the head was that of a skeleton! It seemed that a skull was mounted upon a whitish, indistinct form.

Ralph Leslie Fullwood's nerves deserted him.

Uttering a terrible scream, he turned, rushed into the hall, tore open the front door, and hurled himself into the night.

CHAPTER V.

THE SCARER SCARED.

SOLOMON LEVI stood his ground.

As he afterwards admitted, he was nervous—for a moment or two he had an uncontrollable desire to follow Fullwood's example, and to dash holter skelter out of the house. But Levi pulled himself together and held himself in check. He knew—his common sense told him—that this was no ghost. Indeed, Levi suspected the truth.

And, instead of running away, he ran forward!

Without giving the ghost time to retreat or to dodge, the Jewish boy hurried himself at the figure. His right fist thudded towards the skull-like head. And Levi's knuckles met something solid!

Crash!

The ghost uttered a hoarse cry and fell headlong upon the floor—hitting the

boards with such force that the whole room shook. In that one second all Levi's nervousness vanished. For there was not the slightest doubt that this "ghost" was very solid indeed!

Levi did not give the man time to rise. He fairly jumped upon him and sat astride his chest. And at such close quarters as these Levi could see that the marauder was attired in a long, white, flowing robe, which had a peculiar sheen. His face was painted up with some white stuff, which appeared to be half luminous. But at close quarters there was nothing whatever to be scared about. Indeed, the man's appearance was ludicrous.

"Not this time, my friend!" said Levi grimly. "Now, what's the game?"

"You—you infernal young hound!" snarled the "ghost."

Levi uttered a short laugh.

"Oh! So it's Mr. Webb," he said pleasantly. "What a nice little meeting, my dear Mr. Webb! Somehow or other, I half expected that you would be up to some dodge of this kind. I'm awfully sorry to disappoint you, but your little wheeze didn't work. Fullwood was frightened out of his life, but I thought I would investigate. Now, what's the idea?"

Webb struggled fiercely.

"Let me get up, you young fool!" he snapped. "It—it was only a joke!"

"Quite so!" said Levi. "Just a joke—eh? And quite possibly you hoped to gain possession of that option—is that it?"

"You infernal young brat——"

"You said something like that just now," interrupted Levi. "The fact of the matter is, Mr. Webb, I haven't got that option on me at present—so I'm afraid I can't oblige you. You see, I suspected some trickery—so I didn't bring it with me. I always believe in being on the safe side. When there's a matter of business at stake I don't take chances. Believe me, you've made a little error this time."

Webb said nothing for a moment or two. He lay on the floor, breathing hard. And, during that short period of silence, a distinct creak came from a corner of the room—an eerie, uncanny kind of sound. Webb started, and he breathed hard.

"Let—let me get up!" he panted hoarsely.

"There's no hurry!" said Levi. "And

you mustn't worry about these queer sounds—the house is haunted. I expect the real ghost will appear before long. It would be rather interesting if he came along and showed himself to us, wouldn't it?"

Webb cursed beneath his breath.

As a matter of fact, the man himself was nervous. He had been concealed in the haunted house for almost an hour, and the place had thoroughly got upon his nerves. He had heard all manner of queer sounds during his vigil—particularly before Fullwood and Levi had appeared. And Mr. Webb had had to pluck up all his courage in order to remain in the house so long.

His one desire now was to get out—and to get out as soon as possible. He was filled with fury and chagrin at the non-success of his scheme. He had not believed that Solomon Levi would have the nerve to attack the "ghost." Now, of course, the game was up.

Another creak came from the corner of the room, and, upstairs, a faint, thudding sound could be heard. What it was caused by neither Levi nor Webb had the slightest idea; but in all probability it had quite a natural explanation.

"We—we'll get out of this!" said Webb. "I—I'm sorry, Levi. I was only having a bit of fun, that's all. You're quite wrong about the option; I didn't want to take it from you——"

"Oh, no—of course not!" said Levi. "I quite understand that, Mr. Webb."

"I—I won't interfere with you any more—on my honour!" went on Webb desperately. "I will give you best, Levi; you have beaten me. Let me get up, I tell you!"

Levi rose to his feet, and allowed Mr. Webb to rise, too. There was no reason why the Jewish boy should prolong this interview. He had completely spoiled Webb's game, and he knew it. And he rather enjoyed the situation. He could do nothing, of course; he could not accuse Webb of anything, since the man had not committed any felony. Webb was about to say something, when he stood stock still in his disguise. He was staring blankly across the room to one of the dim, dark corners. Something seemed to be moving there, and Webb felt his hair tingling. This old house was certainly getting on his nerves.

Levi looked, too. Yes, there was

something moving—something dim and indistinct. It was a figure, a shapeless form. And it came out into the room. Webb uttered a hoarse cry, and he was just about to move when something touched his ear. It fluttered round his face, cold, and causing a draught. Then this strange something struck Mr. Webb on the cheek.

It was too much for him.

He uttered a scream—a scream which really rivalled Fullwood's effort—and he dashed to the door and fled into the night.

Levi was feeling creepy himself now; the scarer had been scared; and it stood to reason that Webb knew nothing of this new manifestation. What was that figure? Who did it belong to?

"It's all right, Levi! Do not be alarmed," said a quiet voice.

"Mr. Lee!" said Levi faintly.

"Quite so!"

Nelson Lee came forward. The famous detective was not disguised, and he was not wearing anything unusual—merely a big overcoat and a muffler. But his dim figure, appearing out of the gloom, had scared Webb more than he could say.

"I—I didn't know you were here, sir!" said Levi uncertainly.

"I can well believe that, my boy," exclaimed Nelson Lee. "You must allow me to compliment you, Levi, on your pluck. The manner in which you attacked the ghost was quite admirable. It was Mr. Webb, as you now know."

"Yes, sir," said Levi. "But—but what were you doing here?"

"I came here because I suspected that something of this nature would take place," said Nelson Lee grimly. "You see, Levi, I am not quite blind to what has been going on. I have kept my eyes open, and know quite a good deal. You need have no fear with regard to Webb; he will have no opportunity of harming you. I will see to that."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" said Levi. "It's fine to know that you are alive to the game. You—you see, sir, I came along here because somebody said I was afraid to spend a couple of hours—"

"Yes, Levi, I know all about that!" said Nelson Lee drily. "These things are supposed to be kept secret by the juniors, but this is not always the case. Word gets round, you know. And I thought it would be just as well if I

came on the spot. You need not tell the others that you have seen me—and I shall not punish you for this escapade. The best thing you can do is to get outside, and return to St. Frank's as quickly as possible. Take all the other boys with you, and return to the dormitory."

Levi's eyes sparkled.

"Oh, Mr. Lee, you're a brick!" he exclaimed. "I—I thought you were going to punish us severely for this."

"I cannot very well do so, Levi," said Nelson Lee drily. "I am not supposed to be here, and I do not want anybody to know that I have been here—particularly Mr. Webb. Therefore it is far better that you should say nothing. You quite understand that; don't you?"

"Yes, sir," said Levi. "Thank you very much for the interest you are taking in this matter. Webb was tremendously frightened just now—something touched his face, I believe. Did you do anything, sir?"

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"No, Levi," he replied. "I fancy a bat was disturbed by the little commotion, and it fluttered—accidentally hitting Mr. Webb upon the face. It was the finishing touch, and the man fled."

"But I felt something on my face not long ago, sir."

"That, no doubt, was a little trick of Mr. Webb's," said Nelson Lee. "I think he had a string hung across the room in the darkness, and he was able to work this so that it touched your faces as you entered the room. A slight thing of that description, Levi, is apt to make a fellow nervous—when he knows that he is in a haunted house. With regard to that strange feeling in the other room, I am convinced that some chemical substance is responsible. I have not made any definite discovery yet, but I shall do so before long. Mr. Webb, of course, is responsible—and his one object is to get the better of you."

"He won't, sir!" said Solomon Levi. "My dad and I are going through with this plan right to the finish! We're not going to be defeated by a scoundrel like Webb!"

"That's all right, Levi. We cannot stop here discussing the matter any longer," said Nelson Lee. "Do as I told you, and get back to St. Frank's

as quickly as possible. Good-night, my boy!"

"Good-night, sir!"

Solomon Levi left the house feeling very light-hearted. The adventure had been quite a good one, after all.

Meanwhile, other events had been happening.

Webb was really terrified by what he had seen—and by that fluttering against his face. He rushed out into the night, careless of the consequences—and quite forgetting that he was attired in a very strange way.

He appeared at the back of the house, and he suddenly remembered himself, almost immediately after he had got out into the open. The contact with the chilly night air brought him to himself, and several shouts rang out immediately in front of him.

Fullwood was there, and Handforth and Co., and Tommy Watson and Sir Montie and myself—to say nothing of Goodwin and Pitt.

We had been interested in Fullwood, for the Nut of the Remove had come rushing out shortly before, scared out of his wits. And now, before we could get any story out of him, the ghost appeared.

At a little distance it certainly looked very terrifying. Fullwood uttered another scream, and almost fainted.

"There it is!" he shouted hoarsely. "Do you see it? There!"

"Hold on!" I interrupted grimly. "There's some trickery about this, Fullwood. That's not a real ghost!"

"Begad!" muttered Sir Montie. "It—it looks frightful, dear old boys!"

Mr. Webb could see our figures dimly in the gloom. He did not wish to come right amongst us, and so he hurried away through the grounds of the old house. He looked a ghastly figure, in his white robe, and with his death's head.

And, by a peculiar chance, the local constable was in the road at that moment; and he was chatting with one or two townspeople, who had probably been out visiting, and were returning very late. It was quite likely that they had imbibed rather too freely.

In any case, these people and the constable were horrified by what they saw.

Everybody knew that Bannington Grange was haunted, and here—right in the grounds—a strange, terrible figure

was to be seen. It was white, and it had the head of a skeleton! It flitted along over the snow, and finally vanished among some trees.

The ghost had appeared at last—the ghost of Bannington Grange!

Two of the men did not wait—they simply took to their heels, and rushed down the Bannington High Street for all they were worth. The constable, rather more dignified, stood his ground—but only for a moment or two. He, too, turned pale and fled—towards the police-station, in order to report the affair.

Within a minute the High Street was deserted, and consternation reigned in several breasts.

There was not the slightest doubt that on the morrow the news would be all over Bannington—and there would be some big trouble before very long. The ghost had been revived, and the Bannington folk would make the most of the story.

Meanwhile, Fullwood, Levi, and the rest of us did not waste any time in jumping on our bicycles, and making straight for St. Frank's.

We had had quite enough excitement for one night!

CHAPTER VI.

OFF FOR THE CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS.

"I SAY, is it true about the ghost?" Owen major asked that question soon after the rising-bell had rung the following morning. The whole Remove, in fact, was agog with the news. There was a great deal of excitement, and the story had already got all over the school.

Handforth, naturally, had lost no time in relating all the details of the affair. And he had enlarged upon them considerably during the process of telling the story.

"Is it true?" I repeated. "Of course it's not true!"

"Handforth says——"

"Never mind Handforth!" I interrupted. "Handforth is an ass!"

Edward Oswald glared at me.

"Look here, Nipper——" he began.

"You're an ass, Handy!" I repeated. "You know as well as I do that that ghost was only a fake. I don't know who it was, but it was somebody dressed up and painted up. Such things as ghosts don't exist—"

"I never said the thing was a real ghost!" roared Handforth. "I've only been telling the story just exactly as it happened to us. I'm jolly certain it was a fake—it couldn't have been anything else. But who was it? Who was the silly ass who played the joke? That's the point we're trying to get at."

Solomon Levi listened to all this talk with much enjoyment. He, of course, knew the exact truth; but he did not say a word. He followed Nelson Lee's advice, and kept his own counsel. The Jewish boy knew that Webb was responsible for all that had happened, but it was to the advantage of everybody to say nothing.

Nelson Lee had the matter in hand, and that was good enough for Levi. But even Solomon had not the slightest notion of the commotion which was to follow that little affair at midnight in Bannington.

Before the day was well advanced the whole district was talking about the occurrence. Wildly exaggerated tales got about, and the townspeople, who really knew nothing of what had actually happened, made all sorts of conjectures for themselves. The one or two people who had seen the "ghost" maintained all along that it had been the genuine article, and not a faked-up affair. In fact, the very idea of the ghost being a fake did not occur to anybody.

The whole story of Bannington Grange being haunted was revived, and Bannington and district had something to talk about.

Not only the people, but the local newspaper, was full of the affair. It devoted three or four columns to the haunted house, and it went into the history of the whole place, explaining how it had become haunted and when the ghost had been seen—or, at least, when people had seen something which they took to be the ghost.

This last affair, however, beat all the others. There were three or four witnesses to prove that the ghost had actually appeared—that it had been seen. This was not the case of one isolated

individual who fancied he had seen the spectre. Even the policeman on duty in the High Street had witnessed the thing, and he was as convinced as all the others that the object had been supernatural.

Consequently, the excitement in Bannington was intense—and, as a result, Bannington Grange was avoided even more than ever after that. During the daytime people looked at the place in a scared kind of way, and hurried as they went past it.

Mr. Webb was secretly pleased because of all this commotion. He might be able to make capital out of the local gossip.

If he failed to obtain that option—if he did not succeed in defeating Solomon Levi and his father—then it might be a very good idea to keep up this story of Bannington Grange being haunted. It was possible that the superstitious country people would refuse to enter the new cinema after it had been built. So, upon the whole, Mr. Webb was satisfied with his plan.

Meanwhile, at St. Frank's, the juniors had other things to think about—things which were of far greater importance than any silly old ghost. For the Christmas holidays were near at hand—and, on the following day, all the boys of St. Frank's would leave the old school.

It had been arranged that I should go to London with Nelson Lee—and we were to spend several days before Christmas at our old place in Gray's Inn Road. It would be rather a change for us, as we should enjoy the experience.

Then, later on, just before Christmas, the gov'nor and I would go down to Tregellis Castle—the old ancestral home of the noble Sir Montie. His aunt, Lady Helen Tregellis-West would be the hostess at the Castle, and there was to be quite a big party.

Tommy Watson had been invited, and, of course, a good many other juniors—Dick Goodwin, Handforth, and his two chums, Reginald Pitt, Jack Grey, and several others—not to mention Fatty Little.

We had heard, much to our satisfaction, that our old friend, Lord Dorri-more, was in London. And Dorrie had promised to run down to Tregellis Castle while we were there. So, upon the whole, the party looked like being a very successful one. It was quite likely, too, that Dick Goodwin's father would come along from Lancashire.

I could see, however, that Sir Montie was worried over something. At tea time that day he went about frowning, and he was very quiet.

"What's the matter with you, Montie, my son?" I enquired as I sipped my tea.

"Eh?"

"What's the weighty problem?" I asked.

"Begad!" said Montie. "There is nothing the matter, Nipper, my boy—nothing at all."

"Then why are you looking like a stray duck without a pond to go to?"

Sir Montie adjusted his pince-nez.

"Really, dear old fellow, I sincerely hope I do not look like that!" he protested. "I have a great objection to ducks, and I should dislike to resemble——"

"That's all right, my son!" I grinned. "To put it in blunt language—what's on your mind?"

Sir Montie hesitated.

"Well, the fact is, dear boy, I've just been wonderin'," he said—"I have been wonderin' if it would be advisable for me to invite another fellow to the party at Tregellis Castle."

"There's no reason why you shouldn't invite another three or four if you want, Montie," I said. "But who's the particular fellow?"

"I was thinkin' about Levi!"

"Oh!"

"Don't you think it would be all right?"

"My dear chap, I expect Levi would be only too jolly pleased at the invitation," I said. "Ask him, and see—he ought to be honoured."

"The fact is, I was wonderin' if it would be a good idea to invite Levi and his pater," went on Sir Montie. "They can come down for two or three days at Christmas time and join us, don't you see. But I am a bit doubtful about religious matters. I don't want to tread on any corns, begad!"

"Religious matters?" repeated Tommy Watson.

"Yes, dear old boy. You see, Levi and his father are Jewish, and they don't believe in Christmas——"

"Rats!" I grinned. "They'll be only too pleased to come down, Montie, you see! After all, it's only a party—we sha'n't be in Church all the time! There's no difference in this party to any other sort of party."

"You think it will be all serene, then?"

"Of course, you ass!"

And, later on, Sir Montie put his proposition before Solomon Levi. The Jewish boy's eyes glittered as the invitation was tendered to him, and he responded without any hesitation.

"Thanks awfully, Tregellis-West," he said. "This is ripping of you—believe me, I appreciate it. And I am quite certain that my father will be pleased, too."

"You'll come, then?"

"You betcher," said Levi, nodding. "We'll be right there—on the giddy spot! It is very good of you to invite us."

"Nothing of the sort, dear old boy—pray, don't mention it!" said Sir Montie gracefully. "It will be quite rippin' if you come down—it will, really. I can promise you that you'll have a jolly fine time—everything will be A1. There will be plenty of sport, if only the frost holds. There's a magnificent lake in the grounds of the Castle, and the skatin' is first class."

"What's the grub like?" enquired Fatty Little anxiously.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Don't insult the noble Montie in that way!" said Handforth severely.

"I wasn't insulting him!" said Fatty. "But grub's an important thing, you know. I've been invited to this party, and I'm always interested to know what the grub will be like——"

"Dear old boy, you need not worry about that point!" smiled Sir Montie. "My aunt has charge of everything, and she is frightfully lavish, you know. She always provides about four times as much food as is required—and it is generally food of the most rippin' description."

"Good!" said Fatty, licking his lips. "That's the style!"

And so it was settled.

Solomon Levi would come down to the party at Tregellis Castle—and, if possible, he would get his father to come, too. It was practically certain that Mr. Isaac Levi would accept the invitation, and would run down for two or three days at Christmastime.

In the meantime, of course, all work on the cinema idea in Bannington would be shelved. There would be nothing doing until after Christmas. Neither Webb, nor his companion, Mr. Ryan,

would be able to do anything during the interval—for Levi had the option on the property, and the two Bannington rascals were helpless.

However, it would seem that Mr. Webb would have a chance of indulging in some more plotting before long. For he happened to meet Fullwood in Bannington that very evening—the day before the holidays commenced.

The pair walked along, chatting.

"I am afraid that affair last night went rather badly," said Webb. "In any case, Fullwood, why did you enter that house? Why did you go in with Levi—"

"Why?" repeated Fullwood. "I couldn't help myself!"

"I don't quite understand."

"Well, you told me to say that Levi could take any fellow he chose—and the rotter selected me!"

"By George! That was rather smart of him!" said Mr. Webb grudgingly. "The whole of Bannington is talking about the affair now—and I'm convinced, Fullwood, that there is something very strange about that house."

Fullwood nodded.

"I'm convinced, too," he agreed. "I believe it's really haunted—and I wouldn't go in there again for a ransom!"

"I don't want you to—"

"By the way," interrupted Fullwood. "I think you owe me a matter of two pounds, Mr. Webb."

The cinema proprietor frowned.

"But the affair was not a success," he said. "Levi wasn't frightened, as I anticipated."

"That's nothing to do with me," said Fullwood. "You arranged with me to get Levi to enter that house at eleven o'clock—and I did so. You promised to pay me three pounds on the spot, and two pounds afterwards. I've had the three—and now I want the remainder. It's your concern if the affair failed—not mine."

Mr. Webb nodded.

"Perhaps you are right," he said. "Very well, Fullwood—I will pay you the money. Here you are."

He handed over two currency notes.

"Thanks," said Fullwood, grinning. "If there's any other little thing I can do for you, Mr. Webb, I'm always ready to oblige. But I'm not going into that

old haunted house again—not if you offer me a hundred quid!"

"You needn't worry—I am not going to ask you anything of that nature," said Webb grimly. "But perhaps you can tell me something. Perhaps you can tell me what Levi's plans are for the Christmas holidays."

"I don't know—he's going home, I suppose."

"And where does he live?"

"Oh, somewhere in Whitechapel—"

"Do not talk nonsense, Fullwood," said Webb. "I am quite sure that Levi does not live in Whitechapel."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I believe he hangs out somewhere in the region of Maida Vale," said Fullwood. "But I don't know his exact address, if that's what you want to know. Oh, but half a minute. I've heard that Levi is going down to Tregellis Castle."

"To where?"

"Tregellis Castle—it's the old country seat of the Tregellis-West's," said Fullwood. "Quite a number of fellows are going—and Mr. Levi himself will be there, I think. Solly's pater, you know."

Mr. Webb looked thoughtful.

"Oh, indeed?" he said slowly. "So Levi and his father are to spend the Christmas holidays at Tregellis Castle? This is very interesting, Fullwood—very interesting indeed!"

"You think so?" said Fullwood, yawning. "I don't. It doesn't matter to me where Solomon Levi goes—I'm fed up with the cad!"

Shortly afterwards he parted from Mr. Webb, and the latter did not return to his cinema. Instead, he went to the Grape Hotel, and before long he was talking with Mr. Hooker J. Ryan. This gentleman was associated with Webb in the cinema scheme—and, if possible, the pair wanted to drive the Levi's out of the running, and build the new cinema themselves.

"Look here, Ryan, there is perhaps one chance for us left!" said Webb, after he and the other man were seated. "We have failed so far—there is no sense in blinking at the truth. Young Levi has got that option, and we have been unable to obtain it. Until we do obtain it, it's absolutely impossible for us to secure possession of Bannington Grange."

"I guess that's correct," said Ryan,

nodding. "As a matter of fact, Webb, I'm getting plumb tired of this old business. The best thing we can do is to quit."

"Nothing of the sort!" said Webb quickly. "You don't seem to realise that if we quit I shall go under—completely. We can't quit, Ryan—at least, I can't. And I need your help urgently—I shall not be able to get on without it."

"Well, what do you suggest?" said the other man.

"Levi and his father are going to Tregellis Castle at Christmastime," said Webb significantly. "Tregellis Castle is a very lonely place, and it is situated in a very quiet part of the country. An idea has suggested itself to me—and it is quite possible that we shall be able to obtain that option, after all. It will mean one last desperate throw, Ryan. If we succeed, all will be well—and, even if we fail, we shall still have another card to play."

"Say, you're cute!" said Ryan admiringly.

"I've got to be cute—I'm in a corner!" retorted Webb. "If we fail in this business, we must adopt new tactics. We will make our last effort to secure the property, so that we can build this cinema for ourselves. If we cannot do

that, then we will confine ourselves to the task of ruining Levi's plans."

And the two men continued to talk for some little time. What the nature of this chat was remained a mystery. But it was quite obvious that the holiday party at Tregellis Castle would not have things smooth all the time. It was apparent, in fact, that some grim excitement was to occur.

The following day St. Frank's "broke up."

All the juniors went their various ways, and everybody was light-hearted and cheerful. Snow was descending again, and the whole country was covered by a thick, white mantle.

It was Christmastime in earnest—a regular, old-fashioned Christmas.

Nelson Lee and I arrived in London, and we were delighted to find, when we got to Gray's Inn Road, that Lord Dorrimore was there, awaiting us.

Later on, in a very few days, we should all go down to Tregellis Castle—where we should meet the others, and where there would be a regular joyous Christmas party. But if we had known of the excitement and perils which were to follow us to Tregellis Castle, we should have been distinctly interested.

Great events were shortly to happen.

THE END.

TO MY READERS.

The welcome approach of the Christmas holidays, though temporarily interrupting the progress of Levi's cinema scheme, unfortunately provides an opportunity for Webb and Ryan to make another attempt to secure the option. In the story you have just read, it is hinted that the Bannington cinema proprietor and his accomplice will contrive to pay a visit to Tregellis Castle. Consequently, in next week's Grand Christmas Story—"The Christmas Plot"—you will expect some extraordinary happenings to enliven the happy holiday party, not that this will be necessary with Lord Dorrimore among the distinguished guests. Among the many attractions will be a Fancy Dress Skating Carnival on the big lake of the Tregellis estate. How Handforth and Co. play Christmas carols with a trombone, a cornet, and a big drum, Handforth fancying himself on the trombone, is only one of several amusing incidents in the story.

Altogether it is a top-hole Christmas Number.

THE EDITOR.

Thrilling New Serial of Brother and Sister Detectives!



KIT & CORA

Mysterious Detectives

A TALE OF DETECTIVE
ADVENTURE IN LONDON.

INTRODUCTION.

LIN FLEET, a lad of fifteen, wrongfully accused of stealing, loses his job at a motor garage. His parents being dead, he lives with an unscrupulous pair known as Uncle and Aunt Pawley, the former being better acquainted with the thefts at the garage than he would care to admit. Lin meets a stranger in a grey suit, who takes an interest in him, and the boy nicknames him "Mr. Mysterious." The stranger sends him on an errand to deliver a packet to a Mr. Crawson-Crake, who behaves like a madman and threatens to shoot the lad unless he discloses the name of his employer. Lin escapes and recounts his experiences to "Mr. Mysterious" at the latter's house in Hampstead. Later Lin is employed to shadow Crawson-Crake on the embankment at midnight in an interview with Cora, and give a low whistle when he sees danger. In his excitement Lin forgets to give the signal, and is thrown over in disgust by his employer. While looking for work, he gets into trouble with an old enemy, and has to appear before the magistrate. The charge is black against him, and he is only saved from imprisonment by the unexpected and timely intervention of "Mr. Mysterious."

(Now read on.)

A Strange Message.

NO; he had done with him! Then, all of a sudden, there swept over Lin a great longing for another of those queer, thrilling adventures. Something mysterious, with a spice of danger in it, to give him once again that curious, delightful quiver of excitement all over.

Strange, but he felt that he could never care now for any other sort of work; never settle down to any commonplace, hum-drum kind of job, without any mystery or thrill in it. But, of course, he would have to. He must look out for work and take any that he could get. For at the end of the week he would have to pay for his room and such meals as he may have had. And when that was done he would hardly have a shilling left!

He took out his small store of cash and spread it on the tiny dressing-table, carefully separating from his own the four shillings and the few coppers which remained

of that money. "Mr. Mysterious" had thrust into his hand that memorable afternoon. From some strange freak of boyish pride or obstinacy, he was still determined not to touch that money for any other purpose than that for which it had been given—to pay his fares and such expenses when on an errand for the man himself. He thought, with more than a touch of regret and a shade of bitterness, too, that he would never have such another errand to do. He had failed—just failed once—and the man had dropped him as worthless!

Now, more than ever, he was determined not to touch that money. Perhaps—but this he did not realise, being too young to analyse his own feelings very deeply—the real motive at the back of his resolve to keep those few coins, was that they seemed to form a last link between him and the two people of mystery and charm in that strange old house at Hampstead.

That brief visit there and the glimpse of a new world it had opened to him, seemed almost like a dream now; but that money, so long as he kept it untouched, would always remind him that it had been a reality.

There was a touch of boyish romance in the idea which pleased him. He even decided not to carry the money about with him any longer, in case he should dip into it by chance. Then, moved by an odd whim at which he smiled himself, he took a sheet of paper and made out quite a formal account to "Mr. Mysterious," giving the amount he had spent in fares and the balance remaining. Laying the coins upon the paper, he left it on the shaky little table by the window, where it was still fairly light, though the rest of the room was already in shadow with the approaching twilight. Then he went over to the corner behind the bedstead, to get an envelope out of the drawer—the one place where he could keep such things—in the combination wash-stand and dressing-chest that stood there.

It was a trashy piece of furniture; the drawer had a way of sticking obstinately. It stuck now, and Lin had a contest lasting several minutes before he could induce it to come out. Then it came out suddenly altogether, shooting its contents all over the floor.

"Bother the thing!" muttered Lin.

And he stooped to gather the scattered articles. This took some time, as a pencil had rolled one way, a pen another, and loose sheets of notepaper and envelopes were scattered far and wide under the bedstead. When he had collected as many of these as he could see in the partial gloom, and put the drawer back into its place, he turned towards the window and was startled to discover that he was not alone!

A man was standing over there by the little table!

He looked like a workman of the lower type, loose-limbed, round-shouldered, and shambling of build, with a coarsely-lined face that was badly in need of a shave and a wash. He was roughly clad, and looked a rough sort of individual altogether. Lin could not recall ever having seen him before, and he certainly did not like his appearance.

"What do you want in my room?" he asked sharply, for he was annoyed as much as startled at the intrusion. "You might at least have knocked before you came in!"

"Why, so I might," said the man, with a slow grin—"so I might, come to think of it! 'Owsomever, I'm 'ere now, so what's the odds? Is yer name Fleet? Lin Fleet?"

"That is my name," said Lin. "And now, what do you want?"

"No more'n I did a moment ago," responded the intruder, grinning again; "and that's only to give yer this bit of a letter, if you're the party—Lin Fleet—as it's made out to."

He drew from his pocket a small note, folded and sealed. Lin came round from behind the bedstead and took it. As he did so he looked closely into the stranger's face. The fellow made no attempt to evade his scrutiny, but merely grinned at him in return over his shoulder, as he shambled towards the door.

Lin was suspicious. He thought of his uncle and of Blimber, and wondered if this was some trick of theirs to make sure of his whereabouts, with a view to getting him into their power again.

"Stop!" he cried. "Who is this from?"

"Why, from the party as sent it, I should say!" grinned the man.

And with that he went out and closed the door. Lin crossed to the window, where the twilight still lingered, and examined the sealed letter with mingled curiosity and suspicion. It simply bore his name "Lin Fleet" in bold handwriting, without any address. The tiny seal at the back was more difficult to see clearly in the waning light. But he made it out at last. The device was an old-fashioned lantern, and reminded him at once of the real one he had seen, hanging in that queer old watch-box which formed the entrance-gate of that wonderful house at Hampstead. But, as yet it suggested no connection in his mind.

After some little hesitation, he broke the seal and opened the letter. But the light was now so dim that to read it he had to lean over the little table, and, in doing

so, he got the second sharp surprise of that evening.

The sheet of paper with his odd little account made out "To Mr. Mysterious" had vanished, together with the money he had left lying upon it!

In its place was a £1 note, and upon it lay a heavy gold ring.

Wondering, and still suspicious that there was treachery or trickery behind all this, Lin picked up the ring and examined it. It was a signet-ring, and had, no doubt, been used to seal the letter, for the device engraved upon it was the same—a watchman's lantern. He then remembered the letter, which he had dropped in his surprise. It might throw some light upon this new mystery!

It was very brief, and did not help much to solve the puzzle.

"Special work. A boy with active limbs and steady nerves wanted. Rough, dark clothing; dark cloth cap; no white collar. To-night, 11.30. Corner Red, Lion Street, Holborn end."

That was all, except that the solitary letter "T" stood under the last line, as if for the initial of the writer.

A thrill ran through Lin Fleet as he read it.

"It is from him. It's from Mr. Mysterious!" he ejaculated, with quite a throb of delight. "He has not thrown me off! He wants me again—and I'll go!"

A Night Ride.

MYSTERY! It was the air of mystery about that letter, and the strange manner in which it had come to him, that thrilled and excited Lin, and made him resolve to keep the appointment and see the thing through at any risk.

His mind once made up, his preparations were soon completed. He had, in fact, no choice in the matter of clothes; having none but those he was then wearing; his "best suit," like the rest of his slender outfit in that line, being left behind when he fled from his uncle's house at Cowl Street. But those he had on were of the dark, serviceable sort made for working wear. And his cap, the one thing in the way of head-gear he possessed, was also dark. He had only to take off his collar and substitute his dark grey woollen scarf, and he had made all the change he could.

This did not take many minutes; and he had then to wait until the appointed time.

The waiting tried his patience—for it was early as yet; he had several hours to get through, and in his eager, excited frame of mind he could settle to nothing. The hours seemed to drag out to an amazing length. But at last eleven sounded from the clock on the landing downstairs! He waited another quarter of an hour; then, opening his door quietly, crept out and down the stairs noiselessly. He did not want to see Sam Wade's bald head appear at the edge of

his door this time. He had shocked the little man badly enough as it was!

But he had the luck to encounter no one. Letting himself out by the private door, he walked down Red Lion Street rather slowly, so as not to reach the corner too soon, and then, by having to lurk about, possibly attract the unwelcome attention of a policeman.

He was just in time. A church clock chimed the half-hour as he reached the appointed spot. He looked around, eager to see if anyone was awaiting him. He hoped to see the tall, athletic figure of Mr. Mysterious approach, and flattered himself that he would recognise him even if disguised.

But, as it happened, no one was waiting at the corner of Red Lion Street. It was not a night for loitering at street-corners, being chilly, with a fine drizzle—half mist, half rain. The few people who were about hurried past him without word or sign, or even a glance his way.

Then—so suddenly that he started, for he had not heard it approach—a small, closed motor-car glided into the kerb, and stopped exactly opposite to where he stood.

The driver—a stranger to Lin—leant sideways from his seat and beckoned to him.

"Lin Fleet?" he asked, in a curt undertone.

"Yes!" answered Lin. "But—"

At the sight of that strange face his suspicions revived, and he wanted to question the man. But the driver—a grim-looking individual, with a face that might have been carved from a bit of knotty wood—waved his hand sideways towards the door of the car, and said curtly:

"Questions barred! If you're going, jump in sharp! I'm touching her off!"

Lin hesitated no longer, but opened the door and sprang in. A slight lurch threw him into a seat. The car was already in motion, and not crawling by any means, as the shop windows along Holborn, spinning past in a confused blur, showed through the misty glass of the door.

It was dark inside the car; but the pungent odour of rather strong tobacco, and the red glow of a pipe in the corner of the opposite seat, told him that he was not alone. And presently the light of a street-lamp, slanting in, shone on the face of a man seated there.

Lin started. It was the same rough-looking fellow who had paid that surprise visit to his room earlier in the evening!

"Why d'yer jump like that?" laughed the man. "Seen me afore?"

"Yes! You came to my room this evening!" exclaimed Lin.

"So I did," chuckled the man in the corner, with a change of voice that made Lin start again. "And I helped myself to a business document and a trifle of money, which I fancied were intended for me."

A street-lamp helped Lin to a clearer view of the man in the corner, and he cried out in amazement:

"Oh, I never dreamt it was you, sir! I can hardly believe it now!"

"No? Well, I fancy the make-up is pretty good; for you have sharp eyes, and had a close look at me up there, in your room, my lad, and yet you had not even a suspicion! Ha, ha!"

And Kit Twyford laughed with genuine pleasure at the boy's profound amazement. There was no mistaking that mellow, genial laugh. Lin had heard it before, that queer, jolly evening at Hampstead; and it scattered his last doubts.

"But the pound-note, and that gold ring, sir?" he said. "I—I don't understand why you left them."

"The note is by way of payment for work already done," said Twyford. "It is not the last, or the least, I hope, that will pass between us, Lin. But the ring I will take back. And now, my lad, remember"—here his voice became more serious and impressive—"that whenever you receive a message accompanied by this ring, you will know that it is genuine, and really comes from me, or from my sister. For it is the nature of our peculiar business to make many dangerous enemies. We have always to guard against trickery, and a faked message is a common form of snare."

"I shall not forget, sir," said Lin. "I am glad that I brought the ring with me; for I have no safe place to leave it in my room."

Twyford took the signet-ring; then, leaning nearer to the boy, and speaking in a low, earnest tone, said:

"Now, as to this night's work. It is, I warn you, Lin, both difficult and dangerous—very dangerous. I wish you to realise that fully. For you are not bound to come. There is still time to make your choice. I can stop the car and set you down."

"Oh, no!" cried Lin eagerly. "I want to go with you, sir! I've been longing for more of that—that queer, thrilly kind of work. I like it, and it seems the sort that I was meant to do. I don't mind the danger; and if it comes, I promise that I won't lose my head and forget orders this time!"

Twyford smiled at the boy's eagerness as though it pleased him well. But his tone was again very earnest and impressive, as he said:

"That is well, Lin; for such is the nature of our work to-night, that if you fail me our lives will certainly pay the forfeit! But I believe you will not fail. At any rate, I am going to trust you, my lad. For I place three lives in your hands with each order that I may have to give you."

Lin Fleet's heart swelled with pride. He inwardly vowed that he would not fail that night!

But he was only a boy, and burned with curiosity as to the work before them. He longed to ask questions—which perhaps Twyford saw, for before Lin could speak he said rather curtly:

"No questions, lad! There is no time for

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

D/Y

explanations now. All that you have to do is to take your orders and obey them. Wonder at nothing that you see or hear; and, whatever happens, keep your head. That is all. Do not interrupt me; I have some thinking to do before we come to action."

He relit his pipe and leant back in his corner. The rest of the drive was passed in silence.

Meanwhile, the car had been making rapid running. When, left to himself, Lin cleared the misty glass with his cuff and looked out, he was surprised to find that they had already left the City behind, and were running through the more open streets of the suburbs. Then the continuous rows of houses became detached ones, standing farther and farther apart. Then the open country, with only the lights of solitary houses, dotted here and there in the deep, misty gloom, like the lights of ships at sea.

They seemed to be running along a broad road lined by tall trees. But presently the car swung off this, and he knew by the gleam of their headlight on wet hedgerows that it had turned into a narrow lane—or, rather, an avenue, such as might once have led to a house of some importance, for it was also bordered with trees on each side; but they had long been untrimmed, and formed a matted arch above; some of the lower branches actually scraping the roof of the car as it swayed with a rocking motion over the uneven ground, full of ruts and weed-grown hollows.

Twyford lifted a trap in the front of the car, and Lin heard the low-spoken order: "Headlights off, Crabb! We cannot risk them after the next bend."

"Ay, ay, sir!" came the gruff response from the front.

(To be continued.)

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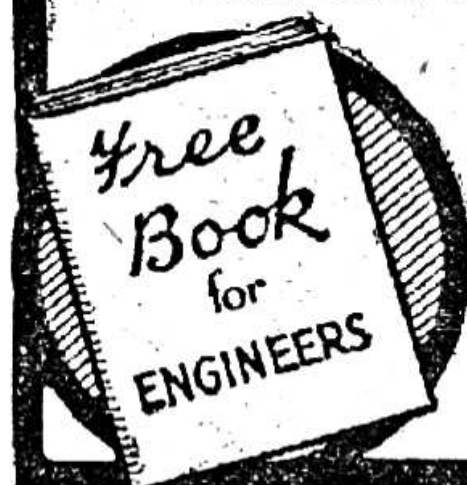
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