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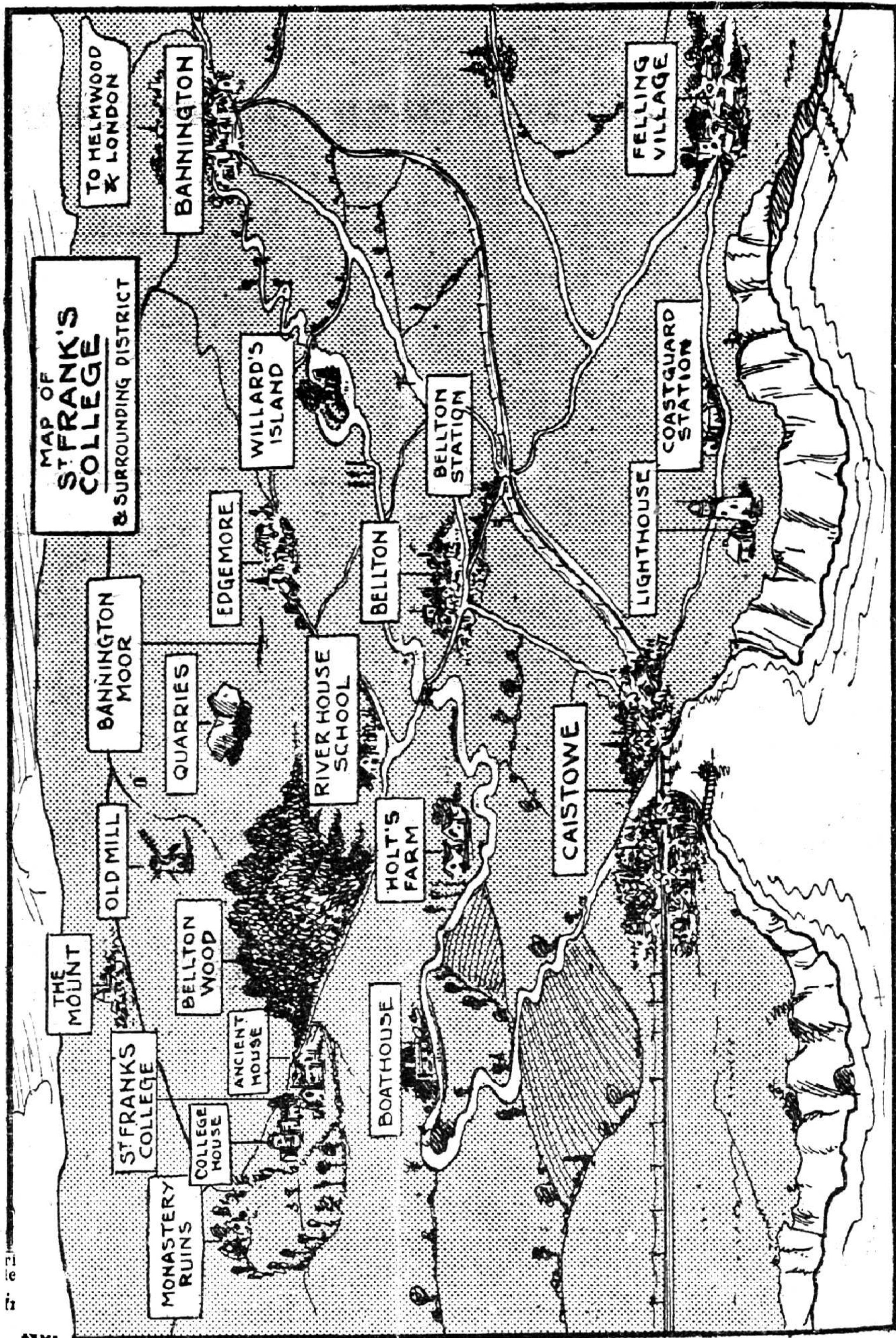


HANDFORTH MAKES A REMARKABLE DISCOVERY.

THE COLLEGE HOUSE MYSTERY

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's. By the Author of "The School Builders," "The Cinema Strikers," "Solomon Levi's Triumph," and many Stirring Tales.

January 22,





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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

BOB CHRISTINE'S GREAT IDEA.

BOB CHRISTINE glared. "What's the good of trying to explain things to you asses, and you keep interrupting?" he demanded warmly. "Just like a couple of chimpanzees—jabber—jabber, all the time! I'm doing the jawing, don't forget!"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" said Talmadge. "And I don't think it's quite the thing to call us chimpanzees! We can speak if we want to, I suppose?"

"Without your giddy permission!" added Yorke tartly.

The chums of Study Q in the College House at St. Frank's, were engaged in a little argument. Tea was over in the junior studies, and the heroes of the College House Remove ought, strictly speaking, to have been commencing their prep. But there was evidently something of a more important nature on hand.

"I'm not going to argue," said Bob Christine. "If we get slanging one another, it'll end in a scrap, or something—and that won't do. We've got to pull together. Things have been pretty quiet since the beginning of this term

"In this House, perhaps!" admitted Yorke. "But those Ancient House bounders have had some excitement, if

you like. That affair over at Bannington, when Levi brought the strike to an end, for example. Then Webb—that beastly cinema proprietor chap—came over here at dead of night and tried to do Levi in. That was pretty exciting, too."

"All that happened over a week ago," said Christine. "We took a hand in the Bannington affair, so we can't grumble. But, strictly speaking, that was Levi's affair. Here, at St. Frank's, everything has been deadly dull."

Talmadge nodded.

"So it has," he agreed. "Of course, we've got a new Housemaster, but that doesn't affect us at all. Old Foxey keeps to himself, and we hardly see anything of him. He's just the same as Stockdale used to be, for that matter. Things have been going along smoothly, and without any excitement."

"My argument exactly," said Christine. "So I reckon it's about time we started something."

"Started something?"

"Exactly!"

"What do you mean, you ass?"

"Can't you understand plain English?" demanded Christine. "It's high time that we gave those giddy fossils one in the eye. House rivalry is healthy—it helps to make things better all round. And last term House rivalry was almost allowed to die out. We've got to buck things up—and the best way to begin

is to work a first-class jape on the Ancient House bounders."

Yorke and Talmadge became all attention.

"Well, there's something in that," admitted Yorke. "But we've got to remember that those Fossils are jolly cute. Nipper's a hard nut to crack, and if we worked a jape which failed, the whole thing would only recoil on ourselves."

Christine grinned.

"There'll be nothing of that sort happening," he declared. "This idea of mine is absolutely a stunner—it's too gorgeous for words!"

"There's nothing like modesty!" remarked Talmadge.

"Oh, dry up!" said Christine. "There's no need to be modest over an idea like this one. You wait until you hear it, and you'll agree with me. But, first of all, we'll call some of the fellows in."

"What for?"

"Because we shall need them," said Christine. "We can't do this job on our own—and I might as well tell the whole crowd of you at once. About half a dozen will do. It might be a mistake to let too many chaps into the secret."

Yorke and Talmadge passed out of the study feeling rather curious. And they soon returned with a number of other juniors, including Clapson, Oldfield, and Billy Nation. They were all impatient to hear what Christine had up his sleeve.

"Now, you chaps, it's a jape up against the Fossils," began Christine.

"Good!" said Clapson. "Funny thing—I was thinking that we ought to get something up against those bounders. And one thing's pretty certain. If we don't work a jape on them, they'll work one on us. So we might as well be first in the field."

"That's exactly my idea," agreed Bob Christine. "Well, look here—before we discuss the matter thoroughly, I want to show you something. I think you'll find it jolly interesting."

"What is it?" inquired one of the juniors.

"An ancient piece of parchment."

"Eh?"

"Which?"

"A piece of parchment—the real, genuine stuff," said Christine mysteriously. "Not paper, you know, but dried

skin. I found it, quite by accident, among some musty old volumes in my pater's library—during the Christmas holidays. I thought it might be useful, so I took charge of it."

"But what the dickens is the good of a piece of beastly old parchment?" inquired Bill Nation, staring.

"I'll show it to you."

Christine opened the drawer of his desk, and removed from it a leather wallet. He unfastened this, and produced an old crumpled piece of parchment. It was torn in one or two places, and the edges were ragged. The whole thing was a dull yellowy brown in colour, and formed almost a square, about the size of a sheet of typewriting paper. Christine unfolded it, and placed it on the table.

"Have a look at it!" he said briefly.

The other juniors crowded round, and bent over the table. Then Len Clapson grabbed at the parchment, his eyes gleaming with excitement. For he had been reading some faded words which were written upon the parchment in stumpy, crabbed characters.

"You assi!" shouted Oldfield. "We can't see—"

"My only hat!" ejaculated Clapson. "This—this might be important! It says something here about doubloons—"

"Which?"

"Doubloons, and pieces of eight—"

"What!"

"You asses!" yelled Clapson excitedly. "Don't you know what pieces of eight are? That's the name of an old coin that used to be used in Italy—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You mean Spain, you fathhead!" grinned Christine.

"Well, it's all the same!" said Clapson. "I knew it was one of those Southern countries. Doubloons and pieces of eight! It reminds me of a ripping pirate story my pater gave me for Christmas."

"But—but why are those things mentioned on that parchment?" inquired Nation.

"There's a treasure!" exclaimed Clapson excitedly. "It says so here, as plain as my face!"

"Well, that's pretty plain, anyhow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, don't rot!" said Clapson gruffly.

"Listen to this—'And ye shall find, by following ye directions, a vast and goodly treasure, consisting of many doubloons and pieces of eight—'"

"My goodness!"

"A treasure!"

"Oh, ring off, you fatheads!" grinned Christine. "But I'm glad to see you've taken the bait all right. It proves that those Ancient House chaps will take it in just the same way."

All the other juniors stared.

"The—the bait?"

"Precisely."

"But—but—"

"My dear chaps, this is my idea," explained Bob Christine blandly. "You don't seem to realise that that writing on the parchment is all spoof!"

"Spoof!"

"Pure and unadulterated bluff!" said Christine calmly. "I wrote those words, and I'm pretty pleased with myself, too. I reckon I've done the job rather thoroughly—and it took me hours to fake out that ink so that it should look faded and old."

Clapson snorted.

"What a giddy fraud!" he declared. "I thought we were on the track of something! You ass, Christy! Why didn't you explain at once—"

"You didn't give me a chance," said Bob Christine, chuckling. "But it's just as well it happened—I shall know that the Fossils will be caught in just the same way. That old parchment tells about a secret treasure."

"We know that—but where's the jape?"

"That is the jape, you fatheads!"

"Eh?"

"Explain, you ass!"

"I'm explaining as rapidly as I can," said Christine patiently. "On that parchment are full directions for the finding of a hidden treasure. If you'll examine the parchment thoroughly, you'll find that the treasure is buried in the floor of the old tunnel which leads from the monastery ruins to the deserted quarries!"

"Oh!"

"And is the treasure buried there now?" inquired Oldfield.

Christine grinned.

"No, you ass," he replied. "That's why I've called you chaps in here. We're going down into the old tunnel presently—"

"What the dickens for?"

"To bury the treasure, of course," explained Bob. "Don't you see the wheeze? We'll arrange it so that some Ancient House fellows discover this parchment. They'll be terrifically excited, and a great crowd of them will go rushing down into the tunnel to unearth the loot!"

"And they won't find anything at all, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, they will!" said Christine quickly. "But they'll find something which they don't exactly bargain for. In any case, it won't be the kind of booty they expect!"

And Bob Christine went into further details—and the rest of the juniors went into hysterics. They yelled for all they were worth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, gorgeous!"

"Stunning!"

"It'll be worth a guinea a box!" grinned Clapson. "Oh, my hat! Just to think of those Ancient House chaps digging for a treasure, and then finding

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's too jolly rich for words!"

"And it can't fail—that's the beauty of it!" said Bob Christine. "We'll go down into the old tunnel almost at once, and then we'll prepare things. I've explained my idea about forcing the Fossils to find the parchment—and it can't go wrong. The asses will be the laughing stock of the school."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors went into fresh yells. And in the midst of it the door opened, and Mr. Smale Foxe looked in. This gentleman was tall, slim, and his nose was the most prominent feature on his face. A bushy moustache, with waxed ends, was a further decoration. The juniors became as silent as deaf mutes, and Mr. Foxe frowned.

"Upon my soul!" he exclaimed severely. "What is the meaning of all this commotion in here? I heard it right in my study, and—"

"We were only laughing, sir!"

"Just a little joke, sir."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Mr. Foxe. "You must remember, boys, that it is hardly necessary for you to make such a noise over your jokes. I cannot allow this kind of disturbance to proceed

You will please control yourselves in future."

Mr. Foxe nodded curtly, and departed. He closed the door, and two or three of the juniors made extremely disrespectful grimaces.

"Of all the giddy nerve!" exclaimed Cobb, of Study P. "Just as if we can't laugh in our own quarters!"

"Well, we were making a bit of a din, you know!" exclaimed Christine, with a grin. "I think Foxy is a pretty decent old bird, on the whole. He's quiet, and doesn't interfere with us as a rule, so we can excuse one or two little lapses of this kind."

"Well, we can't waste any more time here," put in Turner. "If we're going to work this giddy jape, we'd better not waste any time. 'It won't be long before the bell goes for supper, and then we shall have to—'"

"Keep your hair on!" said Christine. "There's about an hour yet—two hours, I believe. We've got heaps of time to do everything that's necessary. It won't take so long, once we get on the job. Now, I want at least half a dozen fellows."

"Good!" said Clapson. "I'll be one!"

"You can count on me, Christy!"

Everybody in the study volunteered for service, and Christine had more helpers than he needed. However, this matter was soon arranged, and very shortly afterwards eight juniors emerged into the Triangle. It was dark, and extremely gloomy. It was, in fact, just the kind of evening for the purpose.

"Now, we've got to go cautiously!" whispered Christine. "We mustn't allow any of those Ancient House fat-heads to see us, or they'll smell a rat. Some of the bounders are jolly cute, and we've got to be wary."

"Oh, we won't let anybody see us," said Talmadge. "Now, we've got to go right through the shrubbery to the monastery ruins—"

"Wrong!" interrupted Christine. "To start with, we're going to old Cuttle's wood shed."

"What the dickens for—"

"To borrow a few tools, of course," said Bob. "How do you suppose we're going to dig up that tunnel without any tools? We shall want some spades, a pickaxe, and one or two other things. There are plenty of them in the wood-

shed, and old Cuttle won't know anything about it."

It did not take the juniors long to go over to the little shed which was considered by Mr. Josh Cuttle, the school porter, to be his own domain. Mr. Cuttle kept many tools there—spades, shovels brooms, etc.

And, very shortly afterwards, Christine and Co. stole out, with spades, a pickaxe, a shovel, and one or two other very necessary tools. Then they made their way through the shrubbery to the ruins of the old monastery. These stood out stark and sinister against the night sky. The wind was howling rather mournfully about the old masses of broken masonry, many of which were covered with ivy. In the daytime it was a very picturesque scene—but at night it was very gloomy and forbidding. The juniors were rather subdued as they made their way in among the ruins.

"My hat!" muttered Page. "This is a jolly shivery place, to my mind—it gives a fellow the creeps!"

"Nobody asked you to come," said Christine. "I didn't think you were nervous—"

"Who's nervous?" demanded Page warmly. "I wouldn't mind being here all by myself, if it comes to that. But some of the fellows—particularly the Third Form kids—wouldn't be here alone for a term's pocket money. Some people say these old ruins are haunted—"

"Oh, shut up!" muttered Cobb, glancing somewhat nervously over his shoulder.

The juniors fell silent, and, after they had made their way into the very centre of the ruins, they came to an opening. Here they entered a part of the old building which was still fairly intact. The walls were all standing, but the roof, of course, was gone. And there, in the very centre of the floor, yawned a gaping hole. A flight of circular stone steps led downwards into the very earth itself.

The juniors went down in single file, Christine leading. And after he had passed down ten or twenty steps, he flashed on a powerful electric torch, with which he was armed. Things did not seem quite so gloomy now, for the light was a brilliant one. The juniors went down, down right into the depths.

And, before long, they came into the old vault. There were two or three

vaults, to be exact, but one very large one. And, out of this, was the opening of the old tunnel which led right under the fields and roadways to the disused quarries of Bannington moor. It was a long tunnel, and, in days past, there had been all sorts of excitements connected with those subterranean burrows. But now, and for months past, they had been absolutely deserted.

Bob Christine was just about to cross the vault, in order to reach the tunnel entrance, when he came to a stop. For, at that very moment, another figure had appeared—a figure which emerged from one of the smaller vaults. And the juniors came to an abrupt halt, staring breathlessly.

The appearance of this figure was so unexpected, that the juniors could only stand there. It was the figure of a man, and he, too, was armed with an electric torch. It was because of this, doubtless, that he had had no warning of the juniors' approach. His own bright light had prevented him from seeing the reflection of the other light.

And now the man stood stock still, the brightness of the light preventing the juniors from seeing his face distinctly.

But Bob Christine, who was in the forefront, was quite certain of one thing—and he was staggered into speechlessness.

The figure was that of Mr. Smale Foxe, the master of the College House.

CHAPTER II.

DEVELOPING THE PLOT.

BOB CHRISTINE was more astounded than he could say—but before he could utter a word the figure disappeared suddenly and abruptly. It dodged back into the smaller vault, and there was not a sound.

Christine shook himself, and wondered if he had been dreaming. Was it really the case that he had seen Mr. Smale Foxe? He was not positively certain—for he had only caught one glimpse, and that was only a faint one, owing to the dazzling effects of the electric light which the figure had held. But, somehow, the leader of the College House juniors was

quite certain, in his own mind, that the man had been Mr. Foxe, and none other.

"I—I say!" muttered Talmadge. "Who—who the dickens was that?"

"Blessed if I know!" said Yorke. "But there's somebody down here—he disappeared into that vault. There are two or three vaults here, you know, one leading out of the other. It's a beastly creepy place, this is. I almost wish we hadn't come down, Christy!"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" said Christine gruffly. "There's nothing to be scared about. I believe it was Mr. Foxe."

"Eh?"

"What rot!" put in Cobb. "How the thunder could Mr. Foxe get down here? We saw him up in the College House

—"

"He had plenty of time to get down here, if he wanted to come," interrupted Christine.

"But why should he want to come—what possible reason is there for Mr. Foxe to be down in these old vaults?" asked one of the other juniors. "That's all piffle, Christy! You must have been mistaken!"

"It's just possible I was mistaken," admitted Christine. "But, anyhow, we'll have a look into these vaults, and find out who the chap is. If it had been Mr. Foxe, he wouldn't have dodged back like that—that's pretty certain. It was somebody who didn't want himself to be seen. Come on—we'll explore."

Christine led the way into the smaller vault, through the great archway. But, when all the juniors were at that apartment, they saw nothing. They had two or three electric torches blazing out, and the place was well illuminated, but there was no sign of any human being. They passed on into the next vault, which was smaller. This, too, was barren of results. The juniors found nothing—the vault was deserted and bare. There was only one other now to be explored—the end one of all. This was somewhat larger, but in a state of considerable decay and dampness. Water was oozing through the walls, and the floor was slimy and green.

Bob Christine passed through the archway, and flashed his torch about. But, to his astonishment he saw nothing—nothing whatever. This vault, too, was empty.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" muttered the leader of Study Q.

"Anybody there?" whispered Talmadge, from behind.

"No—not a soul!"

"But—but we saw him come here!" protested Yorke. "He can't have got away—there's no exit! I—I say! I wonder if the thing we saw could have been a spirit——"

"You'd better wonder again, then!" snapped Christine. "Spirits don't go about with electric torches, my son—and, in any case, these old vaults aren't haunted."

"Then what's the explanation?"

"There's only one, so far as I can see," said Bob. "There must be a secret passage here, perhaps another passage, or a hidden chamber. We know for a fact that there are two or three down in these old vaults. But I could have sworn that the chap I saw was Mr. Foxe—it's very queer. What was he doing down here? And why should he be afraid to let himself be seen? I can quite understand Mr. Foxe being here—although hardly at this time of the evening. It's only natural that he would like to explore the old monastery ruins, and the vaults underneath them. He's a new-comer at St. Frank's, and he'd naturally be interested. But why didn't he do it in the daytime? And why did he dodge out of the way as soon as he spotted us? It's jolly mysterious, my sons!"

Charlie Talmadge nodded.

"It's not only mysterious," he said. "But it's uncanny. Where did the figure go to?"

The juniors had more confidence now, and they went in and out of the vaults, searching every corner and every cranny. But the result of their search was—nil. They found absolutely nothing—no sign. And it was rather significant that there were no footprints upon the green, slimy floor, of the inner vault. It was clear that the mysterious figure had not passed that way.

"Well, we can't waste all our time here," said Christine, at length. "We shall have to give it up—and, after all, it's none of our business. If Mr. Foxe chooses to act in this way, I suppose he can do so."

"But I've been thinking," said Page. "Don't you consider it's possible that the man was a burglar—a chap who was waiting about down here until he got a chance to break into the school?"

"No, I don't," said Bob. "A burglar

wouldn't be such an ass as to wait down here. He wouldn't come near the school until the small hours of the morning. I tell you, I'm pretty certain the man was Mr. Foxe. And I don't feel inclined to waste any more time. Let's get into the tunnel, and finish that job of ours. It won't take long."

And so the juniors retraced their steps, and were soon passing along the old tunnel. This was dry, and the air was quite pure, for a continuous current passed through. The walls, for the most part, were of brickwork, and the floor was sandy. The juniors passed along, and, at length, Christine came to a halt. He flashed his electric torch about him.

"This spot will do fine," he declared. "There are some loose bricks in the wall, there, too—just what we want."

And, without delaying further, the juniors set to work.

Just about half an hour later, they all emerged from the monastery ruins. And now they were chuckling immensely, for they had completed their task, and they were feeling pleased with themselves. They had done everything entirely to their satisfaction.

"Ripping!" declared Christine. "If that don't dish those Fossils, you can call me a Chinaman! This is going to be the best jape of the term, my sons!"

"Rather!" agreed the other juniors.

"The best stunt we ever worked!"

But the College House Removites had barely got clear of the monastery ruins—they were, in fact, passing through the shrubbery which grew between the ruins and the Triangle—when a figure came to a halt, and stared at the boys. The figure was attired in a cap and gown, and he was obviously a master. He stood quite still waiting for the juniors to come up.

Christine and Co. instinctively dropped their tools, and, when they emerged from the trees, they pretended to be careless and unconcerned. And then a voice cut through the night air.

"Halt! Boys, come here—every one of you!"

It was the voice of Mr. Smale Foxe, and when Christine and Co. were facing him, they could see that the College House master, for some reason, was looking rather alarmed. Without a doubt, he was nervous. This was proved by the fact that he did not stand still, but dodged about, and there was a note of alarm and anger in his voice.

"Where have you been, boys?" he demanded harshly.

"Only down in the vaults, sir," said Christine.

"Good gracious, down in the vaults?"

"Yes, sir."

"What were you doing there—what were you doing, I say?" demanded the master fiercely. "How dare you go down there, boys? What do you mean by—"

"Dash it all, sir, we've always been allowed to go down into the monastery vaults, if we want to," protested Talmadge. "We were only doing a bit of exploring, for fun. We went along the old tunnel, you know—"

"Along the tunnel!" ejaculated Mr. Foxe. "Upon my soul!"

Christine and Co. stared at him rather wonderingly. Why was Mr. Foxe so alarmed? Why should he be perturbed because he learned that the juniors were exploring the old tunnel which led from the vaults to the College? What possible interest could it have to Mr. Smale Foxe?

"I don't see why you should be wild, sir," said Christine. "There's no harm in exploring that underground tunnel—"

"No harm!" said Mr. Foxe. "I forbid you to go down there—do you understand? I forbid you!"

"But the vaults ain't out of bounds, sir—"

"From this moment they are out of bounds!" interrupted the master curtly. "Do you understand that, boys? From this moment the vaults and the tunnel are out of bounds—and if I ever catch you down there, I'll punish you with the utmost severity!"

"My hat!"

"Well, I'm blessed!"

"I am extremely angry with you, boys," went on Mr. Foxe, his voice quivering. "I am in control of the College House now, and I mean to have my orders obeyed. I do not want you boys to go down into those dismal old vaults and tunnels—it is not right that you should be there. You will get nervous, and it will have a bad effect upon your health. So take heed to my words. The most drastic punishment will follow if I ever discover any one of my boys down in the vaults!"

And Mr. Foxe, with a swish of his

gown, strode away—leaving Christine and Co. rather flabbergasted.

"Something seems to have stung him!" remarked Christine. "I'm pretty certain, now, that we did see old Foxy down in the vault—that's why he's so wild. He was doing something down there that he didn't want us to see. Of course, he pretended to know nothing about that episode—but the fact that he was wild proves that I spotted him."

"Well, I call it pretty rotten!" declared Yorke. "Why should the tunnel be placed out of bounds? We've always been allowed to go down there—just when we liked. I don't think Foxy has got the power to place it out of bounds. In any case."

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter much now," said Christine. "We've completed our work, and the rest remains with the Ancient House chaps. Foxy hasn't got any authority over them—and they can go down all right. Our little plan is working all serene, and I'm quite satisfied so far."

"But we didn't expect to see anybody down in the vaults, did we?" asked Talmadge. "And we didn't expect Foxy to go off the deep end. There's something queer about it all, and I'm pretty puzzled."

As a matter of fact, all the juniors were puzzled, and they thought quite a lot about the matter before bedtime came. The jave was the most important thing, after all, and schoolboys are not particularly addicted to thinking very deeply. Therefore, by the time the next morning arrived, Christine and Co. had almost forgotten the incident of Mr. Smale Foxe.

They had their own affairs to proceed with.

As it happened, they had no opportunity of developing their plot until dinner time. Morning lessons were over, and the Triangle was crowded with juniors,—for the day was quite fine, and rather mild, considering the time of the year. Some of the fellows were punching a football about, others were standing in groups, chatting.

Christine and Yorke and Talmadge were against the College House steps, and they were watching for an opportunity. It did not come for some little time—for they were waiting until five or six Ancient House fellows got together in a knot. At last this occurred. Handforth and Church and McClure com-

menced to argue, and Handforth, as usual, became excited, and pushed back his sleeve. It was his intention, then and there, to wipe up the Triangle with his two faithful chums.

But, fortunately for Church and McClure, I happened to be near by with Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson. I grinned as I saw Handforth turning back his coat-sleeve.

"Look at that ass!" I exclaimed. "He's going to start a scrap here—in the Triangle. He'll only get himself into trouble. Come on; we'll soon put a stop to it."

We strode forward, and I grasped Handforth by the shoulder.

"Don't be an ass, Handy!" I said. "You can't do any scrapping here, you know."

"Who told you to interfere, Nipper?" demanded Edward Oswald warmly. "Mind your own giddy business! I'm going to smash Church's nose——"

"My dear chap, you can't do any nose-punching here," I interrupted. "Wait till you get into your own study, and then you can go at it as much as you like. That'll be your trouble—or, to be more exact, Church's trouble."

"The ass will argue!" said Church. "I simply said that he was wrong when he declared that Rangoon is in India. It ain't in India at all; it's in Burmah!"

"Quite right," I agreed.

"What!" snorted Handforth. "You—you fathead! Rangoon is in India; it's an inland city, situated on the Ganges——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You'd better look up your geography, old son," grinned Watson. "And, in any case, there's no sense in punching Church's nose about it. Go and have a look at a map, and that'll soon settle the question."

"Hallo, what's the excitement here?" inquired Bob Christine, strolling up with his chums. "Anything we can do to help?"

Handforth glared.

"No; unless you buzz off," he said. "We don't want any interference from you!"

The leader of the College House juniors bowed.

"Sorry!" he exclaimed humbly. "If I've offended you, Handforth, please accept one thousand apologies!"

"Oh, that's all right!" growled Handforth. "Don't be an ass!"

"What was the discussion?" inquired Christine. "Were you talking about ghosts or spectres, or something of that kind?"

"No, of course not!" I smiled. "What makes you think that, Christy?"

"Oh, nothing!" said Bob, rather vaguely. "But, talking about ghosts, Talmadge and Yorke and I were having a bit of an argument. I maintained that the old tunnel, which leads from the monastery ruins to the quarry, is haunted."

"What rot!" said Handforth.

"Oh, I don't know so much about that!" said Christine. "It's just as likely to be haunted as any other place. Anyhow, I don't think that I should care to pass along that tunnel by myself—or, for that matter, with a crowd of other fellows."

"You nervous ass!" said McClure. "There's nothing to be afraid of——"

"I'm not talking about being afraid!" interrupted Bob Christine. "But it's creepy, you know, and it's as dark as pitch down there. Of course, I wouldn't mind going if I had lights—electric torches, and all the rest of it. I mean in the dark."

"Well, nobody's going to ask you to do the trip, so you needn't worry," I smiled. "I expect it would be a bit of an ordeal, as you say, to do the trip without any lights. It's an awfully dark place, and I suppose it would be a bit creepy."

"You bet it would!" said Christine. "Of course, we shouldn't mind doing it, we Monks. Haunted or not, we ain't nervous of things like that. I'm talking about you Ancient House chaps. I don't think you'd have enough pluck to do it."

"Enough what?" roared Handforth.

"Keep your hair on!" grinned Christine. "No offence, old man!"

"If you call me a funk——"

"I didn't call you anything of the sort," said Bob. "I don't believe you are a funk, Handy. But to go on with what I was saying, I reckon that three or four Ancient House fellows would never have enough pluck to pass down that tunnel, starting from the vaults and going right through to the quarries."

"We shouldn't have enough pluck?" repeated Handforth grimly.

"No—in the way I mean," said Christine. "I should want you to go down without any lights, except a matchbox with only three matches in it."

That would prevent you from striking too many. You mustn't have any electric torches, or anything of that sort, which means that practically the whole trip would have to be done in pitch darkness. I maintain that you Ancient House chaps wouldn't do it."

Handforth fell into the trap instantly.

"Oh, wouldn't we?" he shouted warmly. "You fathheaded ass—you gurgling idiot! I'll show you! I accept that challenge, Christine!"

"Oh, but it wasn't exactly a challenge —"

"Yes, it was!" exclaimed Handforth grimly. "And I'm not going to stand here and let it pass by! I'll go down in that tunnel as soon as you like, and I'll pass along it from the vault to the quarries, and Church and McClure will come with me!"

"Thanks, awfully!" said Church. "I'm not keen on making an ass of myself like that!"

"I'm blessed if I can see why you should take any notice of this College House ass, Handy!" protested McClure. "If he likes to talk out of the back of his neck, let him. Why should we worry?"

"Of course, I quite understand," said Christine. "I don't press the matter at all. I realise that you feel nervous, and it would be hardly fair to make you go. We'll let it rest as it is now—that you don't care for the idea, and that you're a bit afraid."

"You rotter!" roared Handforth. "We're going. We'll do the trip immediately after dinner, and you've got to watch us enter by the monastery ruins, and then you've got to cut across the fields to the quarry. Wait there, and you'll see us come out. That'll prove whether we've got enough pluck to do the trip in the darkness, with only three matches between us!"

Handforth spoke warmly, and Christine, Yorke, and Talmadge exchanged glances of satisfaction. The plot was working even better than they had expected. For Handforth and Co. to fall into the little trap was eminently satisfactory.

"I know it's no good arguing with you, Handy," I said, with a chuckle; "but if I were you, I shouldn't take any notice of these Monks. They're only pulling your leg, and it's a potty idea to go down that tunnel without any lights. There are holes in the floor, and all that

sort of thing—blind turnings; you might get lost. And, as Christine says, it's a pretty creepy place without any lights to help you. Take my advice, and don't go down."

Handforth snorted.

"You can keep your advice to yourself!" he snapped. "I've been challenged, and that's good enough for me! Directly after dinner we're going down to that tunnel—Church, McClure, and myself. It's settled!"

And it was.

Directly after dinner Handforth, Church, and McClure prepared for their trip. It was only Handforth, of course, who was enthusiastic about it. Church and McClure considered the whole thing to be a waste of time, and a silly affair. But they couldn't help themselves—Handforth had passed the decree, and there was nothing else for it.

A number of College House fellows waited at the monastery ruins to see the heroes off. Handforth and Co. were thoroughly searched before they were allowed to go down into the vaults. They had no electric torches on them, and no matches—except one box, which contained but three sticks. This was a stipulation which was absolutely necessary.

Handforth was full of confidence, and when he reached the old vault he struck out boldly across to where he thought the tunnel entrance lay. As a result, he only bumped himself rather severely into the wall and hurt his nose. This did not improve his temper.

"Better strike one of those matches!" he snapped. "You've got them, Church, haven't you?"

"Yes," said Church. "But we don't want to waste one here, Handy; there are all sorts of tricky places along the tunnel, and we'd better reserve them. We can easily find the entrance by feeling along the wall. We know approximately where it is."

"A dotty idea, I call it!" growled McClure. "In the end we shall have to give it up and come back, and then we shall look fine asses! We shall never be able to get to the other end of the tunnel in total darkness all the time."

"Oh, yes, we shall!" said Handforth. "And don't think that I'm an ass, my son! I've got an idea in my mind. After we've come out in the quarry I'm going to challenge Christine to do the trick alone. Don't you see? We'll have

him there, and we'll force him into the tunnel and make him go right through the ruins here without any companions at all. If he won't do it, then he'll be labelled a funk, and the whole thing will recoil on his own head."

"Well, that's not a bad idea," said Church. "It's pretty good, in fact. I hadn't thought of that."

"A chap can't very well think unless he's got a brain," said Handforth witheringly.

Somehow or other they found the entrance to the tunnel, and then they felt their way along, cautiously and carefully. Once they were fairly on the job it was not so difficult. They knew that the flooring was good for at least half the distance. Then there were one or two pitfalls. They knew, roughly, where these existed, and they would then go very cautiously. Just now they were striding along at a fairly rapid speed, their hands touching the walls.

It was certainly rather uncanny down there in the total darkness. It was as black as the catacombs, solid and intense. Church, who brought up the rear, did not particularly care for this position. He was not a nervous junior, but somehow this old tunnel had a strange effect upon one.

And then before they had proceeded far something strange happened.

Handforth was leading, and he uttered a little gasp. Something had touched his hand. He could not tell what it was, but it felt extremely ghostly. Then, abruptly, came the sound of tumbling bricks—extremely startling.

"Great pip!" gasped Handforth, with a start.

"What—what was it?" demanded Church huskily.

They could not tell, and they all came to a halt, quivering. The darkness hemmed them in and closed about them.

"I—I felt something touch me!" muttered Handforth shakily. "It touched my hand first, and then went to my chest. It—it was like a bony hand! Something cold, you know."

"Oh, shut up!" panted McClure. "Don't—don't be an ass, Handy!"

"I—I believe there's somebody here!" muttered Handforth. "He touched me, and then must have dislodged some bricks or something. Oh, my hat! I—I feel a bit queer, you know. Strike

one of those giddy matches, for goodness sake!"

If Handforth had only known it, the explanation was quite simple. A thin thread had been stretched across the tunnel, and, naturally, Handforth came into contact with this, since he was leading. That thread had felt like something very different in that pitchy darkness. And then the pressure of Handforth's body had caused several bricks to fall. This was not surprising, considering the fact that the thread was secured to those loose bricks.

It was here that the cuteness of Bob Christine's idea came in. He had not allowed the juniors to have any lights, or otherwise they would have spotted the trick. In the darkness they knew nothing, and were not likely to discover anything by the aid of two or three matches. They would never suspect the truth; they would never know how the bricks had come dislodged.

Scrape, scrape!

A match flared out as Church drew the head along the matchbox. The light was absolutely dazzling in its brilliance—after that total darkness the flare of the match seemed to be a perfect glare—and as Church held the light aloft, he and his companions gazed about them.

They were quite alone—they could see that at a glance—and there lying on the floor of the tunnel were several loose bricks, which had evidently become dislodged from a portion of the wall, about breast high.

"Oh, it was nothing!" said McClure. "I expect you brushed against it, Handy, as you went by—one of the bricks must have been projecting. Nothing to make a fuss about."

"What's that lying down there?" demanded Handforth abruptly.

He pointed, and the others could see a curious-looking piece of old parchment. It was lying in full view, as though it had fallen down with the bricks. Handforth picked it up, and was examining it carefully when the match snuffed out.

"Oh, rats!" snapped Handforth. "Strike another one; I want to see what this is."

"But we can't spare another match."

"Strike it, and don't argue!"

Church sighed and struck another match. He held it close, and Handforth examined the parchment with great interest. He had guessed at once that it had fallen down from the wall with

those old bricks, and Handforth was curious!

The parchment was old—ages old, by the appearance of it, and there was some writing on it—curious, crabbed characters in faded ink. And Handforth made out one or two words—words which filled him with excitement.

"My only hat!" he ejaculated. "This—this seems to be important!"

"What—what is it?" asked Church.

"It says something about treasure!" said Handforth. "Just look at this—Oh, rats! What the dickens did you want to put that match out for? You fathead!"

"Matches don't last for ever!" said Church tartly. "There's only one left now, Handy, and we'd better not strike that; we shall need it later."

"Yes, I suppose we shall," said Handforth. "We'll have a look at this parchment when we get out into the open—into the daylight. But I'm pretty certain it's important; it must have been lying down there behind those old bricks. They came down just as we were passing, and then the parchment was revealed. I suppose it's been lying behind there for centuries, and it would never have been discovered if we hadn't come down. This—this might be of terrific importance, you chaps. One never knows! I've heard of great treasures—huge fortunes—being found from old parchments of this kind."

"Oh, draw it mild, Handy," protested McClure.

"Well, you never know," said Edward Oswald. "I distinctly saw the word 'treasure' on this parchment. There appeared to be a kind of chart, too. We'd better keep this thing to ourselves, you know—we won't say a word about it to anybody until we've made sure. Then, if we find it really does concern treasure, we shall set the whole giddy school talking. It will be a terrific feather in our caps. And those College House chaps will be dished completely."

Church and McClure did not share their leader's enthusiasm. They had not seen the parchment, and so they were not particularly impressed. They thought that Handforth, as usual, was spouting for nothing. It was really astonishing the number of wild goose chases that Edward Oswald entered into. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that Church and McClure did not become excited.

They continued their journey through the tunnel. It was a tedious, tiresome business. They stumbled on, falling into holes in the floor, grazing their hands against the walls, and bumping their heads on the roof.

They turned corners, and they twisted about with the tunnel. But, at length—after a journey which seemed never ending—they arrived within sight of the exit. A gleam of daylight came to them—then they were able to move much faster. And, at length, they emerged into a big cave. Passing through this, they found themselves in the open air, where the sun was shining brilliantly, and where Christine and a good many other fellows were waiting.

Handforth and Co. were positively dazzled by the daylight for a moment or two—but they were triumphant.

"Bravo!" said Bob Christine, running forward. "You've done it!"

"Well, didn't you expect me to do it?" demanded Handforth. "I said we should do it, and we have! And now we'd better buzz back to the school as quickly as we can—or we shall be late for afternoon lessons."

Handforth had apparently forgotten all about his idea of sending Bob Christine through the tunnel alone. As a matter of fact, Handy was excited—he was tremendously anxious to have a close look at that parchment which lay in his pocket. He could not examine it in the presence of the Monks—so he wanted to be alone. And he knew that the only privacy that could be obtained would be in Study D, in the Remove passage. Once there he and his chums would be able to examine their find at leisure.

And Bob Christine read the signs.

He knew, at that moment, that his plot had succeeded. Handforth's very attitude—his excitement—proved that the parchment had been found. Christine was delighted, and he winked once or twice at his chums.

He was full of praise for Handforth, and the latter felt rather better, and then all the juniors hastened back to the school.

The Monks were extremely satisfied, for their plan had succeeded. The parchment was in Handforth's possession. Only one thing could possibly result. Handforth would fall deeper into the trap, and he would lose no time in searching for the treasure.

It would only be necessary for Christine and Co. to keep a sharp watch on the heroes of Study D, and then everything else would be plain sailing.

The affair, in fact, was proceeding quite well.

Handforth's great discovery, however, was destined to lead to events which Christine and Co. never anticipated.

CHAPTER III.

THE TREASURE SEEKERS.

MCCLURE glanced at his watch.

"We can't stop to have a look at that parchment now, Handy!" he said. "Lessons start in about seven minutes, and there's no time—"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "What do you think we've come here for? We've got plenty of time to look at the thing—and see whether it's valuable or not. Is that door shut tightly?"

"Yes."

"All right—lock it!"

The three juniors were in Study D, in the Ancient House. Church locked the door, grinning as he did so. He was fully expecting that parchment would prove to be of no value whatever. Handforth was a most optimistic fellow, and he always hoped for the best. He liked to make himself believe that something was important when, as a matter of fact, it was precisely the opposite.

Handforth sat down at the table, pulled the parchment out of his pocket, and spread it out in front of him. It had been folded, but it was made of very tough stuff, and it was obviously tremendously old. It was yellow and discoloured, and the edges were torn. But there, upon the parchment, were many words—quite clear and distinct, although very much faded. A cleverer person than Handforth would have declared that those words had been written ages previously. It was not surprising, under these circumstances, that the mighty Edward Oswald was deceived.

He read for two or three minutes, Church and McClure looking over his shoulders, trying to read, too. Then, suddenly Handforth gave a start and

jumped up. His eyes were glittering with excitement.

"Doubloons!" he ejaculated huskily.

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Doubloons!" said Handforth. "Pieces of eight!"

"My only hat!" said Church. "He's gone dotty!"

"Pieces of eight!" repeated Handforth dreamily. "They're coins, you know, and they used to be used hundreds of years ago, on the Spanish Main, or somewhere—"

"What the dickens are you driving at?" demanded Church, staring.

"This—this parchment!" said Handforth excitedly. "Don't you understand? There's a message on it—telling all about a treasure. And the treasure is buried in that tunnel! It consists of doubloons and pieces of eight—old gold coins! I tell you, this is a terrific discovery, you chaps—we shall be rich before long—we shall be giddy millionaires!"

"Oh, my goodness!" said McClure.

"It—it can't be true!" muttered Church.

But the pair of them were beginning to be infected by Handforth's excitement and enthusiasm. And they certainly did not suspect the parchment. They believed it to be old, and they believed that it had fallen from behind that brick in the old tunnel. Handforth ran on, before either of his companions could say any more.

"It's as clear as daylight!" went on Edward Oswald. "Hundreds of years ago this treasure was buried in the tunnel—perhaps there were some enemies about—and a fight was near at hand. So they buried this treasure, and then put the details of it on this parchment, and then hid it in a brick in the wall. And then I suppose the whole blessed crowd was wiped out in a scrap. And so this parchment has been lying there ever since—for hundreds of years—and we're first to discover it, and when we get the gold, it'll be treasure trove!"

"My goodness!"

"Great Scott!"

Handforth gazed at the parchment again, and this time, Church and McClure were permitted to read it, too. The parchment was placed upon the table, and all three juniors stared down upon it. And what they saw was this:

"Ye directions for ye finding of ye vast treasure which is ye rightfule property of Master Joshua Hemingway, of ye old baronial hall, situated in ye city of Bellton, Sussex. Enemies are at hand, and it is necessary to hide ye gold, or it will fall into ye clutches of ye tyrannical rascallions.

"Heed ye these words—whosoever findeth this piece of goodly parchment. For it tells of a vast treasure, forsooth. Ye shall be rich, and ye shall have power in ye land. Take heed!

"And ye shall find, by following ye directions, a vast and goodly treasure, consisting of many doubloons and pieces of eight. It is a fortune which will enable ye finder to buy much land, and to become a great master. Ye gold is buried in ye floor of ye old tunnel, which does extend from ye monastery to ye freshly opened quarries. Ye tunnel does burrow under ye earth, and ye treasure will be secure from ye enemies of ye Baron.

"Ye treasure consists of many hundreds—ay, thousands—of gold pieces. Ye full directions are given below—in ye diagram. Ye spot is easy to find.

"Ye parchment is placed behind a stone in ye wall. Proceed along ye tunnel for twenty paces—ye paces of a man—and this will be ye spot. Ye wall is marked, and it will be no difficulty to discover ye exact place. Then ye must dig, and, only a short distance below ye surface, shall ye find ye clue to ye treasure."

Immediately below this somewhat extraordinary message a rough diagram was drawn—representing a portion of the tunnel. It showed a cross scraped into one of the stones of the wall. And the treasure, according to these directions, was placed in the floor exactly opposite that cross. Nothing could have been more simple. And Handforth and Co. stared at the parchment as though it were bewitched.

"Don't you see?" inquired Handforth excitedly. "It's as plain as anything, you chaps! The treasure's there, and all we've got to do is to find it—"

Clang! Clang! Clang!

"And there goes the bell for afternoon lessons," said McClure. "What shall we do? Don't you think we'd better get the other fellows—"

"Rather not!" said Handforth. "We found this treasure, and we're going to

stick to it! We're not going to say a word until we've brought the doubloons and the pieces of eight to the surface. Then we'll spring a surprise on the chaps—we'll go about with our pockets filled with gold. My only hat! What a surprise we'll give the chaps!"

"We'll create a sensation," said Church. "And we shall be rich, too, Handy! If this parchment is true—if there is really a treasure of doubloons and pieces of eight, they'll be worth a tremendous amount. Gold is scarce now-a-days, and we shall be able to get a fine price for our share—"

"What do you mean, our share?" demanded Handforth. "We shall have the lot!"

"You ass!" said Church. "The Government will take a lot of it!"

"Government!"

"Of course—treasure trove!" explained Church. "Chaps ain't allowed to keep everything they find—they're given a certain percentage of it, and the State collars the rest!"

Handforth stared.

"But—but that's robbery!" he declared. "If we find the gold, we're entitled to it! We shan't say a word to the Government about it—"

"My dear chap, we shall have to report the thing—we can't keep it to ourselves," said McClure. "How can we get rid of these gold pieces, anyhow? And we ought to consider ourselves jolly lucky if we get anything at all. If this treasure is anything worth taking, we shall pocket two or three hundred quid each, I should think—that would satisfy me, anyhow!"

They were so excited that they hardly knew what to do. And, when they went into the Form room it was noticed immediately by all the juniors that something had come over Handforth and Co. They were looking flushed, and their eyes were sparkling. All the College House juniors were filled with glee. They knew the exact truth—they had been watching for signs, and they were perfectly well aware of the fact that Handforth and Co. had fallen into a trap. Nothing could have pleased them better. It was extremely gratifying that the heroes of Study D were to be the victims of this jape.

The Ancient House juniors, of course, knew nothing—so they could only guess. And it was really impossible to guess

why Handforth and Co. were looking so flushed and excited. It was nothing unusual for Handforth to be in this condition—but for Church and McClure to share his symptoms was decidedly unusual.

Lessons started, and Mr. Crowell was not long in finding out that three of his pupils, at least, were not paying the slightest attention. Handforth and Co. had their minds filled with doubloons, pieces of eight, and ancient gold coins of all descriptions. They had no thought for lessons. They considered it absolutely the limit that they should be compelled to attend afternoon lessons at all. It was sheer idiocy to waste their time here when a treasure was waiting for them down in the old tunnel. But they could not explain things, and they were compelled to proceed with their work.

"Really, Handforth, I cannot understand what has come over you!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell testily. "You are not attending to me in the least!"

Handforth looked up with a dreamy expression in his eyes.

"A thousand quid each, very likely!" he said absently.

"What?" exclaimed Mr. Crowell. "What did you say, Handforth?"

"A thousand between us wouldn't be so bad——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Bob Christine, unable to contain himself.

Handforth started.

"I—I—— Did you speak to me, sir?" he asked, with a gasp.

"Yes, Handforth, I did speak to you," snapped Mr. Crowell. "Your mind appears to be wandering, and you must realise that such a thing as that must not occur while you are in the class-room. You will write me fifty lines for inattention."

"Yes, sir," said Handforth weakly.

He paid more attention after that, and Church and McClure livened up, too. And I could not help noticing that Christine and Co., and other College House fellows exchanged glances now and again—they winked at one another, chuckled, and behaved very incautiously. I suspected something—I read the signs, and I was inclined to believe that the Monks were up to some mischief.

Afternoon lessons were over at last, and then Handforth and Co. went straight to their own study without

answering any of the questions which were put to them. For many of the juniors were curious, and they inquired of Handforth and Co. why they were so excited, and what the mystery was about.

The heroes of Study D did not want to answer any questions, for questions were awkward. And so they went straight to their study, and then discussed the situation.

"What do you think is the best thing to be done?" asked McClure.

"Well, there's no sense in being in too much of a hurry," said Church. "I suggest that we have tea now—at once—just for the sake of appearances, you know. If we go rushing off now, all the other fellows will wonder what the dickens is up—and they'll probably follow us, or something of that kind. We'd better have tea in the usual way, and then we'll slip out and go down into the tunnel."

Handforth nodded.

"Perhaps it will be just as well," he said. "I'd like to go off straight at once—without wasting any time at all. But we've got to think of appearances. And we don't want all the other fellows buzzing about, nosing into the affair. But we won't take much time over tea."

Tea in Study D that evening was a very hasty affair. The three juniors were not particularly hungry. At ordinary times they had excellent appetites, and they made great inroads into the food. But this evening they did not care for much—they were filled with excitement instead. However, they managed to make some tea, drink it, and to eat a few slices of bread and butter and some cake. Then they sallied out into the dark Triangle—for by this time, of course, night had fallen.

"Good!" muttered Handforth, when they were outside. "Not a soul about—all the chaps are having tea still, and we shan't be noticed."

"Are we going straight over to the ruins now?"

"Yes, of course——"

"What about some tools?" asked Church. "We can't dig up the floor with our hands, you know. I think we ought to take a pickaxe and a spade, at least. We can easily borrow them from old Cuttle's shed."

"That's a good idea," said Handforth. "Run along and fetch 'em."

Church and McClure went to the woodshed, obtained a pickaxe and a spade, and they joined Handforth at the old ruins. This time the juniors had come prepared. They had no electric torch, not possessing one of these articles—and they did not care to borrow one. But they had a supply of candles, and plenty of matches.

And they went down the circular stairway until, at length, they stood in the vault.

Church was carrying the candles, and he set these down, selecting two of them. These two were lit, and long, flickering shadows were cast over the grim old walls. It was a somewhat creepy adventure, but Handforth and Co. did not care about that. They were too excited, and too eager to be scared or even nervous.

And, without delay, they proceeded along the tunnel until, at length, they came to the place where the stone had been dislodged. Handforth had the parchment, and he was not long in getting to work. He counted exactly the number of places that were given in the directions. Then, searching closely at the wall of the tunnel, he was not long in discovering a cross marked upon one of the stones. It seemed to be very old, for Bob Christine had done his work well, and Handforth's eyes gleamed as he looked at it.

"Here you are!" he ejaculated triumphantly. "Exactly as the parchment says. The treasure is here—right under our feet! Light some of those other candles, Church, and we'll get to work. We can't see properly with only these two!"

Church fumbled in his pockets, and then looked round.

"Oh, my hat!" he exclaimed. "I've left them in the vault!"

Handforth snorted.

"You ass!" he exclaimed. "What's the good of leaving anything to you? You'd better go back and fetch 'em at once, and we can't spare one of these candles, either."

"Oh, that's all right," said Church. "It won't take me half a tick—and I can easily feel them—they're just down by the wall, against the tunnel entrance. I sha'n't be two minutes."

Church hurried off, and Handforth and McClure lost no time in getting to work on the tunnel floor. Handforth used the pickaxe, and McClure got busy with the spade.

Meanwhile, Church arrived at the vault, and, feeling down in the darkness, he soon discovered the missing candles. He was just about to re-enter the tunnel when he paused. A curious feeling went down his spine, and he felt his hair tingling.

For he had heard a sound—a strange, mysterious sound in the darkness of the old vault. The junior's first impulse was to flee—was to dash back along the tunnel to his two chums. But he gripped his fists, and held firm. He was almost sure that he had only imagined something, and—

And then Church uttered a little gasp. For, without warning, a streak of light had appeared at the other end of the vault. It was caused by the opening of a door—a door which Church did not know anything about. And, framed in the door, was the figure of a man. He was holding a little lamp in his hand, and he peered out into the vault.

Church remained as still as a statue, flat against the wall. It was almost impossible to see him there, and he could observe many things. The figure he was looking at was a strange one. It was clothed in a long cloak, with a peculiar cowl over the head—making it absolutely impossible to recognise the wearer.

The figure seemed strangely in keeping with the old vault—for it looked something like a monk. And, at one time of day, these vaults, and the building overhead, had been occupied by monks. Church wondered whether this thing was an apparition—whether it was a kind of ghost. But he was convinced that this was not the case, for the figure gave a little cough, and then it pulled out a watch, and glanced at it. Certainly, it was no ghost.

Apparently satisfied that everything was all right, the man turned back into the secret cavity, and the door closed, shutting out all the light. Church was left in total darkness once more.

"Well, I'm blessed!" he muttered. "Of all the queer happenings! Who was it? What was the chap doing? And why was he wearing that cowl?"

These were questions that Church could not answer.

He turned for a moment or two, and made his way into the tunnel. It was quite easy for him to progress now, for the light cast by the two candles in the distance made it easy for him to see his way. And when he arrived he found

that Handforth and McClure had dug down quite a good way. Handforth looked up, with a perspiring face.

"You've been long enough!" he said tartly.

"I saw a figure there!" said Church breathlessly. "It came out of a secret doorway in the vault—a cowed figure, like a monk. He was holding a lamp, too—"

"You silly ass!" said Handforth. "I thought your nerves were all right, Church—fancy you imagining things of that sort!"

"I didn't imagine it, I tell you!" said Church. "It was there—the figure of a man. It came right out, holding the lamp, and he looked at his watch. It was somebody who oughtn't to be here—you can bet your boots on that! What the dickens is he doing down in that secret cavity in the vault? Why should that man be here dressed all up like that?"

Handforth snorted.

"How do I know!" he demanded. "What's the good of asking me? As a matter of fact, I don't believe it—I think you've been seeing things."

"I tell you—"

"Oh, don't argue!" said Handforth. "We've got something more important to do. Light some of those candles, and then give a hand."

Church realised that it was hardly the time to go into details. Both Handforth and McClure were very excited—and, to tell the truth, Church was excited on his own account. They had found the spot where the treasure was supposed to be buried, and they did not want to lose any time. And so, with a will, they proceeded with their digging.

It was not a very long job.

After going down eighteen inches, or two feet, Handforth's spade struck something metallic. He glanced at his chums triumphantly, and then fell down upon his knees, fairly quivering with excitement.

"Hold those candles nearer!" he gasped. "We struck something then—an old box, I believe. Hold those candles, you asses!"

The candles were held, and Handforth bent down, and dislodged an iron bound box.

It was not very large—being only about six inches by four. Handforth was astonished to find that it was fairly light. His face clouded somewhat as he drew it up.

"Of all the swindles!" he ejaculated. "There can't be many doubloons and pieces of eight in this giddy box! It's light, too—there's no gold in here!"

"Open it, and see!" said McClure feverishly.

Handforth found no difficulty in getting the box open. By wrenching at it hard, the catch gave way, and the lid flew up. All three juniors craned their necks as they stared into the interior of the rusty box. Then they uttered exclamations.

"Empty!"

"Oh, my only hat!"

"It's a swindle—a fraud!"

They all felt decidedly weak after all their excitement and hope. Then Handforth dived his hand into the box, and withdrew it—clutching another piece of parchment. This piece was much smaller, but of the same texture and quality. And upon this, too, was writing.

"What's this?" said Handforth keenly.

"Look at it, there's writing on here! It's not a swindle, after all, you chaps! I suppose the man who buried this treasure didn't feel safe in burying it here, and so he only buried some directions—and, by reading these, we shall find the right spot!"

"What does it say on that parchment?" asked Church quickly.

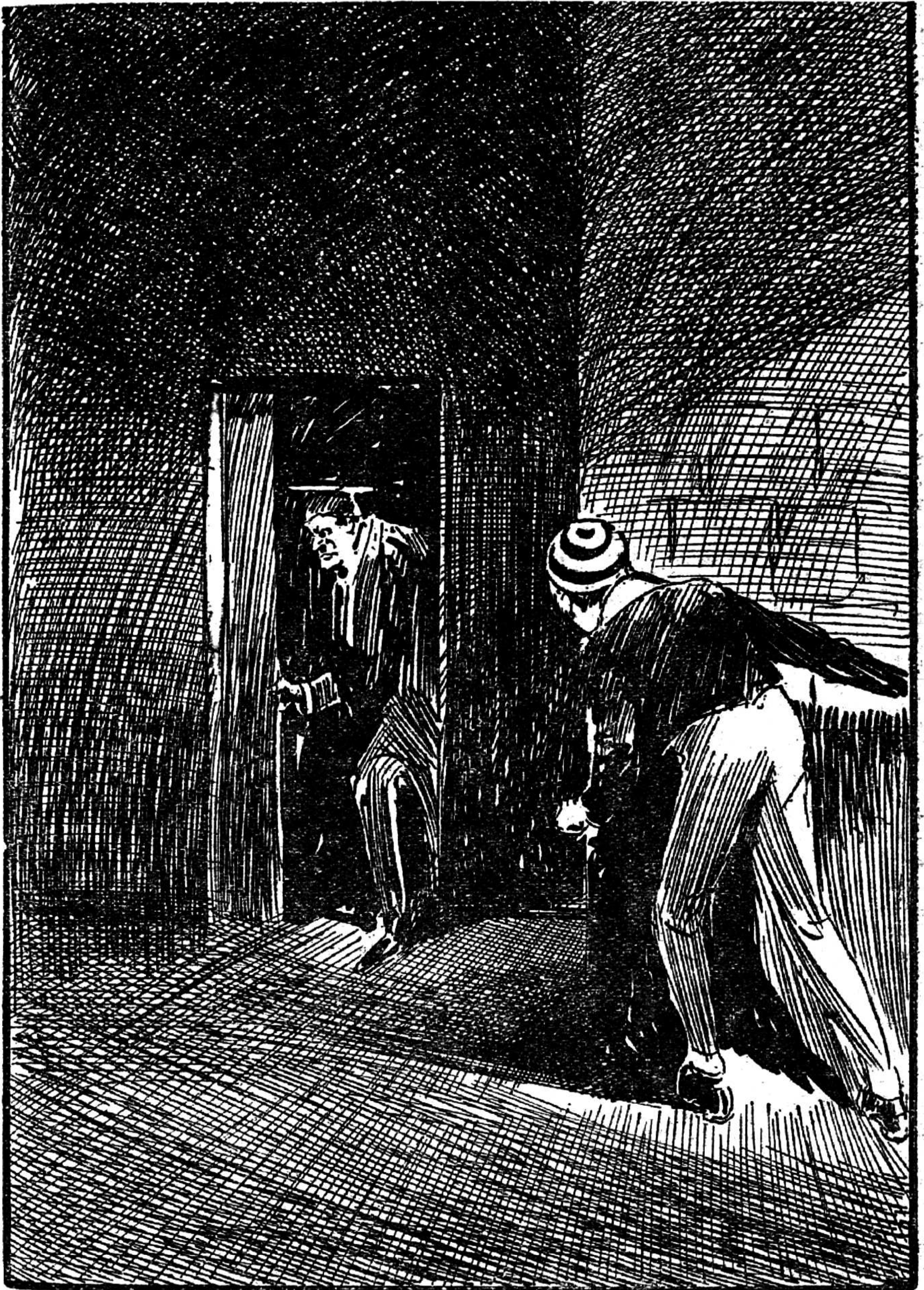
Handforth attempted to read. Then he frowned, and snorted.

"It's all foreign, I believe!" he said at length. "No—I've got it! It's a cipher! These words are written in code, or something!"

"Oh, goodness—that's done it!"

"Rot!" said Handforth. "It won't take me long to get to the bottom of this cipher, I can tell you—I'm pretty smart at anything of this kind. The best thing we can do is to take it up into the study, and puzzle it out there. We don't want to stop down here a minute longer than is necessary."

The three juniors had not found what they expected to find—but, at the same time, they were still excited. The finding of the cipher message was, if anything, rather mysterious, and it gave promise of further revelations. And it certainly kept the thing going. Handforth and Co. were quite convinced that a treasure existed, and that they were hot on the track of it. But they had now met a stumbling block. Before they could do anything else, it would be necessary to decipher this message.



" Bob Christino, who was in the forefront, was quite certain of one thing—the figure was that of Mr. Smale Foxe, the new master of the College House.

Without loss of time, they filled up the hole in the floor of the tunnel, and then they went along to the old vault, and mounted the stairs to the open air. At length they arrived, and extinguished their candle. Then they passed through the ruins, and made their way in between the trees of the old shrubbery towards the Triangle. All was gloom and darkness.

But just as the three juniors were about to emerge from the shrubbery, they paused. For they became aware of the fact that they were not alone. Just in front of them, and quite near, were two men.

"Hold on!" muttered Handforth. "Go easy, you chaps!"

They looked on with interest. The two men were facing one another, and they were talking together in low tones—obviously angry. And then something rather dramatic took place.

One of the men landed out with his fist without warning. He crashed it heavily into the other's face. The unfortunate man went down with a crash, falling headlong. And he lay quite still, groaning slightly. That blow had been a fierce one, and the man was floored.

His attacker stood over him in a threatening attitude. Then, to the indignation and fury of Handforth and Co., he brought up his foot, and kicked the helpless man on the ground.

It was a cruel, vicious kick—and the victim groaned again.

"The cad—the miserable, rotten cad!" exclaimed Handforth hotly.

Again the man raised his foot, and again he kicked. The juniors could even hear the thud as the man's boot came in contact with the helpless man's body. This was altogether too much for Handforth and Co. With one accord, they rushed forward. And the next moment they were upon the rascal, and had him down. They simply swept him off his feet, fell upon him, and held him tight. Handforth sat astride his chest, and banged his head hard upon the ground.

"You cad!" shouted the leader of Study D. "You cowardly brute! Kick a man like that—when he's down——"

"Release me—release me at once!" gasped the prisoner. "Upon my soul! You—you infernal young brats!"

"Oh, my only Sunday topper!" muttered Church, feeling faint.

For he had recognised that voice—

and, a moment later, McClure struck a match. It flared out, and the flickering light played upon the features of the man who was held down a prisoner. And the juniors were startled and horrified to find that they had attacked and knocked down—Mr. Smale Foxe!

CHAPTER IV.

NOT ACCORDING TO PROGRAMME.

CHRISTINE AND CO. were on the watch.

They had been on the watch, as a matter of fact, ever since tea-time. They were well aware of the fact that Handforth and Church and McClure had gone down into the old tunnel. They had kept their eyes well open, and they had seen the three Ancient House juniors steal across the Triangle, borrow the tools from Mr. Cuttle's shed, and then vanish towards the monastery ruins.

And now Christine and Co. were waiting for the treasure-seekers to return.

"Well, they've had time enough!" exclaimed Talmadge at last. "I suppose we couldn't have missed the bounders——"

"Of course not," interrupted Bob Christine. "They must come this way—and, after all, they haven't been so long at it—give them a chance, Charlie. Perhaps they've found the box, and they're trying to get to the bottom of the wonderful cipher!"

Bob's companions chuckled.

"Handforth's a brainy chap!" grinned Yorke. "It ought not to take him long!"

Just then there was a bit of a commotion in the shrubbery, and the three College House juniors gazed in that direction. Then they saw three juniors' forms come rushing out, and these forms hurled themselves upon a man. It was too dark to distinguish very much, and Christine and Co. decided to run along and investigate.

They did so at once, and when they arrived they found that Handforth and Church and McClure were just getting to their feet. The man they had knocked

down was just scrambling up, too—not another soul was in sight.

"You young hounds—you confounded, wretched young brats!" snarled Mr. Smale Foxe harshly. "How dare you lay your fingers upon me—how dare you——"

"We—we didn't know it was you, sir!" said Church boldly. "We saw you kicking that other man, and we thought——"

"Silence!" hissed Mr. Foxe.

He looked round, and he was apparently relieved to find that his late victim, the man he had kicked—was no longer within sight. The fellow had evidently crawled off among the trees when the juniors appeared. At all events, he had gone—he had vanished. And this was a great relief to the master of the College House.

"You interfering young dogs!" snarled Mr. Foxe. "How dare you lay your hands upon me—a master——"

"We didn't know you were a master, sir, in the dark!" replied Handforth disgustedly. "We saw you kicking that other poor chap. You knocked him down first of all, and then used your boot. You kicked him in the ribs, as he lay there helpless. We were hardly likely to think that you were a master—behaving in that fashion. We thought you were some rotten hooligan!"

Church and McClure nudged their leader. After all, it was hardly the thing to speak to a master in this fashion—no matter how brutal the master had been. Handforth was only asking for trouble.

But Mr. Foxe simply clenched his fists, and muttered an oath.

"Listen to me, my boys!" he exclaimed, his voice quivering with rage. "If I hear a single word of this affair breathed among the other boys—I will make it hot for you! You have got to keep it quiet—understand? Under no circumstances must you say a word to anybody about what occurred here this evening. Go! And remember what I have told you. I am not inclined to stand any nonsense!"

The master of the College House stalked off leaving Handforth and Co. staring after him. Mr. Foxe had not given them any punishment—he had not touched them. The reason for this was obvious. It would not be very pleasant for Mr. Foxe himself if the truth of this affair came out—if Handforth and Co. reported to the Headmaster that he,

Mr. Foxe, had been kicking a man after he had been knocked down. It was a disgraceful business, and Mr. Foxe evidently realised it.

"The brute—the miserable cad!" exclaimed Handforth hotly. "Only a beastly cur would treat a man that way."

"I didn't see it," said Christine.

"What happened?"

"Why, we were coming through the trees and we saw two men having a bit of a row," explained Church. "We didn't know who they were, but we suddenly saw one of the men land out his fist and floor his companion. Then before the man could get up the other chap started kicking him, kicking him with brutal force."

"My hat!" said Christine blankly.

"Of course, we weren't going to stand that," put in Handforth. "Not likely! We simply threw ourselves forward, jumped on the chap, and smashed him to the ground. Then we discovered that he was Mr. Foxe!"

"Then who was the other fellow—the chap who was kicked?"

"Goodness knows!" replied McClure. "We only saw him indistinctly, and he must have crept off somehow. I haven't had much to do with your giddy House-master, Christie, but I always thought he was pretty decent."

"That's what we thought, too," said Christine. "But, according to this, he appears to be a brute."

"That word doesn't describe him," said Handforth. "Foxy is a cad—a coward! He ain't fit to hold the position of Housemaster!"

"Well, I shouldn't spread this tale about, if I were you," said Christine. "Not that I want to shield Foxy; he's a rotter, as you say! But the chaps wouldn't believe us, Handy, and it would only lead to a lot of trouble. By the way, what were you doing over here?"

Handforth started.

"Oh, nothing much!" he replied vaguely. "Which reminds me, we've got to get indoors. You old Monks can get back to your own kennel as soon as you like!"

Christine and Co. chuckled as the three Ancient House juniors marched off to their own quarters. The little incident was over, and it had served to show Handforth, Church, and McClure that Mr. Smale Foxe was by no means a gentleman.

Once in the privacy of Study D, Handforth fished out the piece of parchment, and then he examined it. He frowned as he did so, and puckered his forehead deeply.

"I'm afraid this is going to be a teaser!" he said. "Of course, ciphers ain't very hard to me; when a chap's got brains he can see through these things. Just leave it to me, my sons, and everything will be all serene."

"Three heads are better than one," said Church practically. "We'll all have a shot at it, Handy."

Handforth laid down the parchment on the table, and the juniors regarded it with much curiosity. And this is what they saw upon the paper:

RAER FO LEPAHC TSEW EDIS
HTNET KCIRB MORE THGIR
HTNEVELE KCIRB MORE DNUORG
SSERP ERUSAERT LLIW TNESERP
FLESTI.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Church. "We can't make head or tail of that, you know. It looks like Chinese, or something of that kind."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "It's only a cipher. We oughtn't to have any difficulty at all in making out what it means."

Handforth continued to frown as he gazed at the message. The characters were faded and weak, but quite distinct, nevertheless.

"I think the best thing we can do is to try a few simple ideas first," suggested McClure. "For example, don't you think it would be just as well to try and get the key——"

"I don't want any suggestions from you!" interrupted Handforth irritably. "Leave this to me. Why don't you keep quiet? It requires brains to decipher a thing of this kind, so you two might as well give it up at once. Leave it to me, and everything will be all serene."

"Yes, but look here——"

"Rats! Leave me alone!" snapped Handforth. "I'm doing this job; you can get on with your prep."

"But——"

"Are you going to leave me alone?" roared Handforth.

"Yes, if you like; but——"

"Another word and I'll biff you on the nose!" snapped Handforth grimly.

"I'm going to make out this cipher

myself, without you chaps butting in. Clear out, unless you want to get chucked out!"

Church and McClure had no alternative. Handforth would not take any advice, so his chums allowed him to wrestle with the problem single-handed.

But a little later on Handforth began to wish that he had not been so hasty, for the minutes passed and he was still staring almost vacantly at the parchment. He could not make head or tail of it; he could not obtain the key. Brainy as he was, Handforth met with no results.

He tried all sorts of complicated methods of arriving at the correct solution, but they were all barren of results. His mighty brain was incapable of dealing with the problem, and he would not ask Church and McClure to help him now. He had told them to clear off, and so he could not very well request them to help.

Handforth had declared that he would read the cipher alone, and it was up to him to do it.

"This is a teaser, and no mistake!" he said at last. "I'm blessed if I can see how to get to the bottom of it, you chaps. It's an awful jumble——"

"If you'd let us have a squint at the paper at first, we might have been able to help you," said McClure tartly. "But your brain is better than ours, Handy; you'd better go ahead. We're only asses; we don't know anything. You're the clever chap, and I'm rather surprised at you being all this time——"

Handforth nearly exploded.

"You—you burbling idiot!" he roared. "How do you think I can get to the bottom of a complicated cipher in less than half an hour? Some people take days and days to decipher a message—a message which isn't half so complicated as this one. We shall be lucky if we decode this thing by the end of the week!"

"If I were you, I'd show it to Nipper," said McClure. "He's had a lot of experience of ciphers. He's been with Mr. Nelson Lee for years, and Nipper knows a thing or two. If I were you, I'd give it to him——"

"Hallo! Who's using my name?"

The voice came from the doorway, and, glancing up, Handforth and Co. saw me standing there. I had just walked in with the intention of speaking to Hand-

forth about the football, and I smiled at the chums of Study D inquiringly.

"Oh, nothing!" said Handforth. "These asses were talking out of the back of their heads, as usual!"

"I say, Nipper, just have a look at this piece of parchment, will you?" inquired Church. "Perhaps you might be able to give us a hand."

And before Handforth could protest, Church snatched at the parchment and passed it across to me. Handforth made one wild grab at it, but was not successful in gaining possession of it.

"You—you rotter!" he shouted. "Don't you show that parchment to Nipper; he's not in the know."

"That doesn't matter," said Church. "He might be able to help us. I say, Nipper, do you think you could tell us what it says on that paper?"

I glanced at it, frowned, and then grinned. About twenty seconds later I looked across at the chums of Study D and nodded.

"Yes," I replied calmly, "I can tell you what this is."

"Eh?" said Handforth faintly.

"Certainly," I went on. "Do you want to know what it says on this paper? All right, I'll read it out! Here you are: 'Rear of chapel, west side. Ten bricks from right. Eleven bricks from ground. Press. Treasure will present itself.' That's what it says on this paper, although I'm blessed if I know what it means."

Handforth staggered, and nearly fainted.

"How—how did you find it out?" he gasped. "You—you must have seen that paper before. You must know the secret of this particular cipher."

I nodded.

"That's it exactly," I said. "I know the secret of the cipher."

"Well, then, there's nothing particularly clever in finding out the truth so easily," said Handforth gruffly.

"But I didn't know anything about the cipher until I saw it a minute ago," I went on, grinning. "Then I discovered the secret at the first glance."

"Ha, ha!" yelled Church and McClure.

Handforth glared.

"And Handforth has been trying to get to the bottom of it for the last half-hour!" chuckled Church. "I know his mighty brain was overtaxed."

"My dear chap, there's nothing in it,"

I said. "Don't you see? There's no need to be puzzled at all—those words I read out are simply written backwards, that's all."

Handforth smiled in a sickly way.

"Written—written backwards!" he repeated. "My only hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, this is rich!" grinned Church. "Handy called it a cipher, and he wouldn't let us have a good look at it. And do you mean to tell us, Nipper, that there's no key to the cipher at all?"

"My dear chap, it's not a cipher," I said. "Any kid could find out what this means. Look at it yourselves and you'll see. The words are simply spelt backwards, and there you are. But what the dickens is it all about? Where did you find this parchment?"

"Mind your own giddy business!" snapped Handforth. "We didn't ask you to interfere, although it's good of you, Nipper, to get to the bottom of the thing for us. Thanks! You'll close the door after you, won't you?"

"Certainly!" I said, taking the hint.

I removed my presence from Study D, chuckling, and Handforth and Co. were left alone. The mighty Edward Oswald was looking rather sheepish; but only for a moment. Then he assumed his air of importance.

"Of course, it was pretty keen of Nipper to get at the truth so quickly," he admitted reluctantly. "But I was just on the point of getting at the truth—I should have deciphered the thing within the next minute or two, so it makes very little difference. Simply spelt backwards—eh? Well, I'm jiggered! Fancy being so jolly simple as all that!"

"And fancy you not discovering it before," grinned Church.

"Oh, dry up!" growled Handforth. "Now, what does it say? Let's write it down, and then we shall know exactly."

They did write it down, and they gazed at the words rather excitedly.

"Rear of chapel," said Handforth; "that means the school chapel, of course. It's only two or three hundred yards away, and we can get there in no time. West side; that's the side against the Ancient House. We've got to go to the tenth brick from the right-hand side, it seems, and the eleventh brick from the ground."

"That's it!" said Church eagerly. "Then we press that brick and the treasure will appear."

"Good!" said Handforth. "I can see the wheeze now. The old chap who buried the treasure was pretty cautious. He was a cuto old bird. He didn't mean to take any risks. We shall find this treasure buried in the wall of the chapel. It must have been lying there for centuries and centuries! My only hat! What a discovery!"

Certainly Handforth and Co. were destined to make a remarkable discovery before long, but it was not the kind of discovery that they were looking for.

To be exact, Christine and Co. were on the alert—they were on the watch, and the heroes of the College House were waiting at the rear of the old chapel. They were concealed by many bushes, and were not to be seen. But they were there all the same, fully prepared.

There were nine of them altogether—Bob Christine, York, Talmadge, of Study Q; Oldfield, Clapson and Nation, of Study Z; Cobb of Study P; and Turner and Page of Study X. There were three juniors to each of the enemy. Handforth and Co. would find themselves quite helpless when the time arrived. They would be pounced upon, and then the fun would begin.

For Christine and his merry men had not come unarmed. There were two or three paste-pots handy, to say nothing of another pot which contained an awful mixture, mainly composed of soot and lamp oil. By all appearances, Handforth and Co. would be changed beings by the time they had escaped from their captors. Christine had prepared this jape well, and he intended to make the school ring with it on the morrow. He would make Handforth and Co. the laughing stock of St. Frank's, and it would certainly be a big feather in the cap of the Monks.

It was a jape which would do them much credit.

"Well, the asses are a long time," said Yorke, at length. "They don't seem to be coming. Christine."

"It's that cipher of ours!" grinned Christine. "You know what a brainy chap Handforth is! I don't suppose he's got to the bottom of it yet. But he's bound to sooner or later!"

"Hist!" whispered Cobb. "I can hear somebody coming now!"

All the Monks remained perfectly

still, and, sure enough, three figures approached. They were the figures of Handforth, Church, and McClure. The heroes of Study D were quite unsuspecting, and they went to the west side of the wall and searched for the tenth brick from the right. This was the first step.

"Here we are!" said Handforth. "No difficulty at all, my sons!"

"But is this the eleventh brick from the ground?" inquired Church.

"We'll soon see," replied Handforth. "This won't take us long——"

"Look out!" yelled McClure suddenly. "My hat! We're—we're surrounded! Monks, by Jove! Bolt, you asses—bolt!"

But it was too late to bolt—Christine and Co. were upon their victims. And, a moment later, Handforth and Co. were sprawling on the ground, on their backs. And there they were held perfectly helpless by Christine and his fellow conspirators.

Bob Christine was grinning hugely.

"'Come into my parlour,' said the spider to the fly!" chuckled Christine. "My dear chaps, you've done everything beautifully—and you've been spoofed up to the neck, just as we required."

"You—you rotters——"

"Spoofed!" gasped Church, suspecting the truth. "Do—do you mean to say——"

"Exactly," grinned Yorke. "That parchment, you know. Awfully interesting, wasn't it. Frightfully exciting, and all the rest of it. I suppose you've come along here to look for the vast and goodly treasure, consisting of doubloons and pieces of eight——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Do—do you mean to tell me that—that it's all spoof?" demanded Handforth, with a gulp. "That—that parchment—did you do anything——"

"My dear, poor old Handy!" grinned Christine. "We prepared that parchment, and we arranged the whole thing from beginning to end. The adventure has now reached its climax. You have now come to the part where you obtain the treasure. This will consist of various kinds of paint, artistically adorned upon your handsome features. We're going to improve your looks, my sons!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The College House juniors howled. The joke was out now, and they were revelling in it. Handforth and Co., however, were not revelling at all. They saw how completely they had been done, and they were filled with rage and alarm. It was altogether too much! After all the trouble they had taken—after all their high hopes—this was the result! Thus to be collared by Monks, and japed!

Secretly, Handforth and Co. admired Bob Christine for his astuteness, and they would probably have ye'led with laughter—if any other three juniors had been concerned. But they didn't feel much like laughter now. They were about to "get it in the neck." And they instinctively knew that "it" would be something worth remembering.

But, just then, a startling interruption came.

Without the slightest warning—just as the Monks were about to get busy on their victims—a swarm of mysterious cloaked figures appeared. All these figures wore hoods, and it was impossible to tell who they were. And there were not only nine of them—but dozens. They came swarming up from all sides, and, before Christine & Co. could know what had happened, they were prisoners—they were held securely.

"Great Scott!" gasped Bob Christine. "What—what the dickens is the meaning of this? Who—who are you? What's the idea of collaring us in this way—"

"Silence, O thou wretch!" said a deep voice. "Thou hast played contemptuously with the goodly parchment, and thy reward will be severe."

"Begad! Rather!" said another of the cloaked figures. "It'll be frightfully severe, you bounders—it will, really!"

"Montie!" yelled Handforth. "Oh, my hat!"

"Well, you've done it now, Montie!" I said, grinning and drawing my cloak back. "Why on earth did you want to speak? You knew jolly well you'd give the game away!"

Sir Montie Tregellis-West grinned.

"Dear old boy, I'm awfully sorry!" he exclaimed. "But it doesn't matter, does it? The Monks might as well know the truth, by gad!"

Bob Christine felt rather hot.

"You—you rotters!" he gasped. "Let me go! This is a jape—"

"Exactly," I agreed. "A jape upon you chaps!"

"Rats!" It's up against the Ancient House!" snapped Christine. "We planned it all out from start to finish—"

"It was up against the Ancient House, you mean?" interrupted Reginald Pitt. "The boot's on the other foot now, my son—the laugh is against you. Fearfully galling, and all the rest of it, but that can't be helped. The fortunes of war."

Christine nearly choked.

"You—you rotters!" he exclaimed thickly. "After all the trouble we took—we were going to make the bounders the laughing stock of the school—"

"And, instead of that, you'll occupy that position yourselves," I put in. "You don't know how sorry we are to disappoint you, Christine."

"Don't we look sorry?" grinned De Valerie.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The hapless monks were unable to move. They were all pinned down, and then, without delay, they were roved up with their own cord. They did not suffer this humiliation without protesting—not that this did any good.

"I reckon that'll do nicely," I said, at length. "He won't be able to get away now, and the others are in just the same position. This jape was started by these asses, and it was intended to be up against the Ancient House. But we've turned the tables, and the joke is on our side."

"Rather!"

"These fatheads are done brown!"

"Absolutely, begad!"

Christine and Co. were certainly helpless—and their feelings were not exactly pleasant. After all the trouble they had taken it was decidedly galling to have their victory wicked from them. Christine had spent much time in thinking out the plan, and he had told himself that no hitch could occur. In fact, no hitch had occurred. What had happened was a sheer calamity.

"Well, I suppose it's no good growling!" exclaimed Christine wrathfully. "You chaps have got the upper hand, and we've got to sing small. But how

the dickens did you get on to the wheeze?"

I grinned.

"Oh, I put two and two together—that's all," I explained.

And that was the literal truth.

That wonderful "cipher" message that I had read in Handforth's study had given me a good clue. I knew that Handforth and Church and McClure were intending to go to the rear of the old chapel, in search of a mythical treasure. Then I remembered how Christine and Co. had been chuckling in the form room, and I also called to mind that it had been the College House fellows who had persuaded Handforth and Co. to make that trip down the old tunnel. It was not such a difficult matter, therefore, for me to piece the whole thing together.

The Ancient House fellows had worked the jape, intending to entrap the heroes of Study D. They had certainly succeeded in their object—and Handforth would probably have fallen an easy victim. In point of fact, he had done so.

In any case, I thought it just as well to collect a number of fellows together, and to appear unexpectedly on the scene. The result was quite satisfactory, for now the Monks were properly in the cart.

And the cream of the joke was that they were to be decorated with their own paint. They had provided the material for use on the Ancient House juniors—but, instead, it would be utilised to beautify themselves.

"Now then, my sons, there's no sense in wasting time," I exclaimed briskly. "We'd better get busy at once—there's plenty of paint here—to say nothing of some awful looking mixture which seems to be mainly composed of soot. Let's get busy on the job without any delay."

We did.

And, about ten minutes later, Christine and his unhappy followers presented a truly extraordinary spectacle. Their faces were adorned in a startling fashion, mainly with red paint and soot. They looked absolutely a scream, and we fairly howled as we looked at them. Christine and Co., however, did not howl. Strangely enough, they appeared to miss the point of the joke completely. They didn't find anything to laugh at.

They remained silent, and only sputtered and breathed awful threats.

"Good!" I said, at length. "This is what I call a first-class jape. It's just the kind of affair that will set the school talking. And it's a great victory for the Ancient House. When you're ready, Christine, old man, we'll have great pleasure in escorting you over to your own door."

Bob Christine breathed hard.

"You—you awful bounders!" he exclaimed. "You—you ain't going to take us into the College House like this, are you?"

"My dear chap, you've got to go home," I said blandly. "So you might as well do it in style. And think of the sensation you'll cause!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Christine and Co. did not like it at all. But they had only one alternative—they had to lump it. And so they were marched across the Triangle towards the College House. They presented an extraordinary appearance with their painted and blackened faces.

At last the College House steps were reached. The Monks had an idea of rushing straight through, and up into the bathroom—where they would lose no time in attempting to make themselves presentable.

But, before they could even enter the lobby, a figure appeared—a figure attired in cap and gown. Christine, who was leading, came to an abrupt halt.

"Oh, corks!" he gasped. "Old Foxy!"

The new Housemaster stared at the juniors in blank astonishment for a moment or two. And Christine and Co. held their breath. They wondered what awful punishment was now about to descend upon them.

But Mr. Smale Foxe, to their surprise and mortification, burst into a chuckle. The chuckle changed into a laugh, and the laugh became a roar. The Housemaster stood there, gazing at the juniors, fairly yelling. It was not exactly dignified, but Mr. Foxe appeared to appreciate the joke quite keenly.

"Oh, my goodness!" groaned Christine. "This—this is awful!"

He would have much preferred Mr. Foxe to frown, to demand explanations, and to deliver punishments. For Mr. Foxe to stand there, roaring with laugh-

ter, was humiliating in the extreme. The feelings of Christine and Co. were too deep to be described in mere words. They felt absolutely faint.

"Really, boys. I do not know what this is intended to be, but it is decidedly amusing," smiled Mr. Foxe. "I suspect that there has been a little joke played upon you, and I must admit that I appreciate it. It is quite splendid. You had better go indoors at once, and change into other clothing—and your faces, I believe, could do with a slight wash."

Mr. Foxe went on his way, chuckling, and Christine and Co., feeling almost exhausted with mortification, streaked into the College House, and vanished in the direction of the bath room.

And, meanwhile, sounds of much hilarity floated up to them from the Triangle. If the Monks could not appreciate the point of the joke, the Fossils certainly could!

CHAPTER V.

* RATHER ASTOUNDING!

GRAYSON, of the Fifth, kicked the fire with his foot, and then stood with his back to the grate. The bully of the Fifth was not looking exactly pleased. And his study companion, Shaw, was in very much the same mood.

"What's the use?" demanded Grayson. "We can't do anything between ourselves, Shaw. We've got to wait until we can get some other fellows here."

"I suppose it would be better," admitted the other senior. "But who can we get—in this House?"

"It doesn't matter to us which House, so far as that goes," said Grayson. "But we can't very well have a gamble unless we get hold of some chaps with cash."

"What about Fullwood and his pals?"

Grayson shook his head.

"Hardly dignified," he said. "We're seniors—and they're only juniors. It wouldn't be the thing to invite them to our study. A bit lowering, you know. That's my opinion, anyhow."

"Oh, I don't see why we should be so particular as all that," said Shaw. "I know for a fact that Fullwood and Co.

are pretty flush just now. They've got heaps of tin—I think they backed some winners the other day. We could do with a little cash, too, Grayson."

"Oh, well, perhaps it'll be all right," said the Fifth Form bully. "We'll lower ourselves for once, and see how the asses behave. If they don't show us proper respect, we'll pitch 'em out of the study."

"That's the idea," said Shaw. "By the way, what about old Foxy? Do you think there is any possibility of him sticking his nose in here?"

"Rats!" said Grayson. "He's a mild bird, and I don't suppose he'll ever come trotting along the Fifth Form passage. Anyhow, we'll chance it. Just buzz along, and bring those other chaps. We're wasting time."

As a matter of fact, Grayson and Shaw were rather hard up, and they considered it would be a good idea to "raise the wind" by inducing somebody to indulge in a little game of cards. The Fifth Formers were quite certain that they would, by superior play, obtain quite a large supply of funds.

Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell were certainly quite flush at present. They had made this known to everybody—as was their usual custom. And they condescended to go over into the College House upon being asked.

"I suppose we might as well humour the bounders," said Fullwood, yawning, as he and his chums crossed the Triangle. "An' there's no tellin'—we might be able to make a bit for ourselves."

"Perhaps," said Bell. "Those two chaps are sharp—and we shall have to keep our eyes pretty wide open, or they'll rook us."

Ralph Leslie Fullwood grinned.

"I expect they think we're a set of mugs," he remarked. "But we'll soon show them what we're made of, by gad!"

They presented themselves at the Fifth Formers' study. It was nice and cosy in there, with a cheerful fire burning in the grate, and with a handy supply of cigarettes on the table.

"Good!" said Fullwood approvingly. "I hear you want a game, Grayson? We're quite willin' to oblige."

"Thanks awfully!" snapped Grayson. "We did it as a favour to you, if you want to know. You Remove kids don't

often get the chance of playing with seniors. Help yourselves to the fags."

Fullwood and Co. did so, and then the little party sat down, and playing cards were produced. The air was already beginning to become somewhat blue, and the atmosphere of the study was thick.

"Well, what's it to be?" asked Grayson, as he shuffled the cards—"Nap, Poker——"

"Oh, poker's not bad," said Fullwood.

Poker it was, and the young rascals were soon busy at the game. Piles of silver appeared on the table, and even one or two currency notes. Once or twice Fullwood glanced over at the door.

"I suppose it's locked?" he said, at length.

"No."

"But supposing a prefect comes along?"

"Rats to the prefects!" said Grayson contemptuously. "Besides, they never come along this passage in the evening, and if they do happen to smell smoke, they don't take any notice. They've got more sense."

The air in the study was now extremely hazy, for all five fellows were smoking cigarettes, and the game proceeded animatedly. Fullwood kept a perfectly straight face as he discovered that he held four kings in his hand.

And, as it happened, Grayson had a "full hand"—three jacks and two sevens. Grayson was perfectly certain that he would rake in a nice little amount now, providing he could get some of the other players to back against him.

Fullwood backed, and backed heavily. The others looked on with great interest, having fallen out.

"Raise you ten bob!" said Fullwood carelessly.

"Good!" said Grayson. "I'll see that, and raise you another ten."

"Right you are; I'll raise it ten more," said Fullwood.

"I say, you asses, go easy!" put in Gulliver, looking rather scared. "There's about four quid on the table now. You can't go at it like this!"

"Dry up!" interrupted Fullwood.

"Well, look here!" exclaimed Grayson. "I'll equal your bet, Fullwood, and I'll see your cards. I rather fancy I've won."

He flung down his own cards and reached out for the money.

"Hold on!" said Fullwood calmly.

"How does this suit you?"

"By gad!" said Grayson blankly.

"Four kings!"

"You—you ass!" snorted Shaw.

"You were dotty to go ten bobs like that——"

"Not at all—not at all!" interrupted a smooth voice. "It is always advisable to bet heavily on three of a kind and a pair."

The occupants of the study sat absolutely rigid. Their faces went pale, and the cigarettes dropped from their lips. It was as though they had suddenly become petrified. They almost stopped breathing.

For there in the doorway stood Mr. Smale Foxe!

The new Housemaster had evidently come in quietly, for the juniors and the two seniors had heard nothing. But they had all been excited during those few tense moments, and had paid no attention to other sounds.

It was an appalling situation.

The gamblers had visions of being hauled before the Head—a flogging, a public expulsion, dire and utter disgrace!

They had been caught redhanded!

They had been found there, smoking and gambling for high stakes. It was an offence which Mr. Foxe could not possibly deal with himself. It was certain that he would haul the five immediately before Dr. Stafford. And the boys knew well enough what they were to expect from the Head.

"Hard luck, Grayson!" said Mr. Foxe smoothly, as he came in and closed the door. "But you did quite right to bet heavily. Perhaps you'll have better luck next time. Poker is always rather exciting."

"You—you see, sir——"

"We—we——"

"Strictly speakin', sir, we ain't playin'!" gasped Grayson. "Only a bit of sport, sir; this money doesn't mean anythin'——"

"No?" said Mr. Foxe, smiling. "You surely do not expect me to credit that, young man? I'll take one of these cigarettes, if you don't mind."

The Housemaster sat down, helped himself to a cigarette from the box and lit it. His face was not looking quite so stern as usual, and he appeared to be in a very good humour. And the gamblers were too staggered to say anything at the moment.

What could it mean?

Why was Mr. Foxe acting in this way? Why was he pretending to be so genial when, in all probability, he was even then preparing to bring down the chopper with a tremendous bang?

"Well, boys, go on!" said the Housemaster pleasantly. "Don't worry about me. Help yourselves to the cigarettes, smoke away, and get ahead with the game. Who's the dealer?"

Gulliver tried to speak, but could not; he only gulped.

"You?" said Mr. Foxe, looking at him. "Very well, you might as well deal me a hand while you're about it. I'll join in for a few minutes, if you will permit me to do so. Make yourselves comfortable, boys! I enjoy a bit of sport as much as anybody. You needn't look alarmed."

Mr. Foxe brought out a handful of loose change and placed it on the table in front of him, and Fullwood and Co. and their hosts felt dazed. The Housemaster was actually suggesting that he should join in the game! He was sitting down at the table with them! He was smoking one of their cigarettes!

If an earthquake had suddenly happened the young rascals could not have been more astonished, and Mr. Foxe sat looking at them, highly amused. Not one of them had moved, so far; they had not recovered the powers of action.

"I'm still waiting, my boys," said Mr. Foxe, at length. "I've already told you that you needn't worry. You probably think, because I am Housemaster, that I disapprove of this kind of thing. Nothing of the sort! We are a nice little party together, and we may as well enjoy ourselves."

"We—we were only doing it for fun, sir," stammered Grayson. "We—we hope you won't report us to the Head."

The Housemaster interrupted with a laugh.

"Report you to the Head?" he repeated. "Good gracious, no! Why should I report you, just because you are having a little innocent fun? Smoking is against the rules, of course, but we mustn't mind about that. All rules can be stretched a little now and again."

"Do—do you mean that you're not going to punish us, sir?" gasped Fullwood.

"Of course! After all, why should I punish you?" said Mr. Foxe. "You have done me no harm that I know of.

And as for this little game—well, what is it, after all? Just a little sport to pass the time away."

The boys began to recover themselves. Was it possible—was it conceivable—that Mr. Smale Foxe was winking at their conduct? It certainly seemed as though the new Housemaster was positively approving of this game of poker.

"I—I can't understand, sir!" said Grayson. "We thought you were going to get ready, sir—"

"We thought you were going to take us all to the Head, sir!"

Mr. Foxe chuckled.

"My dear boys, I am not a man of that kind," he said. "Neither am I one of these namby-pamby hypocrites who pretend to be so very, very good. There is no harm in a game of cards, neither is there any harm in smoking. You can proceed with your little game with my full approval."

"Oh, my hat!"

"Great Scott!"

"Do—do you mean it, sir?"

"Certainly, I do," said Mr. Foxe. "But, of course, I want you to understand that it won't do for you to talk about this outside the study. It would not be healthy for you, my boys, and it might be awkward for me. But we are talking privately now—just between ourselves. Therefore, we can be confidential, and we are simply wasting time. Let's get on with the game."

Gulliver dealt out the cards in a dreamy kind of way.

And he and the other fellows played mechanically for a hand or two. They could not believe it—they could not credit it. They were dumbfounded!

"Smoke away, boys! Help yourselves to the cigarettes!" said the Housemaster pleasantly. "I'm afraid that my presence here has a dampening effect upon you, and I don't like to think that."

As the minutes passed, so the feeling of restraint dissipated, and at the end of a quarter of an hour the young rascals were playing as freely as ever, and Mr. Foxe was joining in heartily.

He joined in to such good purpose, in fact, that he lost the sum of fifteen shillings after five more minutes had elapsed. But he seemed to take his loss in quite good part, and joked and laughed continuously. Then he rose to his feet, put the remainder of his money in his pocket, and tossed his cigarette-end into the fire.

"I'm afraid I can't spare any more time, boys," he said. "I'd like to remain, but I've a certain amount of work to do. I hope you'll excuse me."

"Oh, yes, sir!"

"And thanks awfully for being so jolly decent, sir!"

"We—we thought you were going to slaughter us all, sir."

Mr. Foxe chuckled.

"Well, you'll know differently in future," he said. "I may be acting somewhat strangely for a Housemaster, but I am not the only one, I can assure you. However, remember what I said, and do not talk about this matter to any of the others. It would probably be bad for you if you did."

The Housemaster nodded and took his departure. And as soon as the door closed behind him Fullwood and Co. stared at Grayson and Shaw, and Grayson and Shaw stared at Fullwood and Co. Their expressions were rather blank.

"Well, I'm hanged!" said Grayson weakly.

"A Housemaster—joinin' in a game of poker!" ejaculated Fullwood.

"Great Scott!"

"I—I think we must be dreamin'!" muttered Bell. "It—it can't be true, you know. I thought we were all in for the sack! I thought we were goin' to get the order of the boot! An'—an' instead of that, he joins in!"

"An' even smokes one of our fags!" said Shaw.

"Oh, it's no use—I refuse to think about it!" said Gulliver. "It's—it's beyond me! I'm absolutely bowled over, by gad! A Housemaster——"

Gulliver broke off, simply because he could not think of anything else to say. Words failed him, and it was the same with the others.

There had been some curious facts discovered about Mr. Smale Foxe since his arrival at St. Frank's, but surely this was the most staggering of all. Handforth and Co., for example, had found out that Mr. Foxe was a brute and a cad—the kicking incident in the Triangle proved this.

And Mr. Foxe had been up to some mysterious behaviour down in the old monastery vault. But, surely, this was the most astounding revelation of all! That he—a Housemaster—should approve

of boys smoking and gambling was positively the limit.

Fullwood and Co. lit fresh cigarettes, and, after discussing the amazing affair for some little time, again went on.

And then once again the door opened. This time it was to admit Reynolds, of the Sixth. Reynolds was a prefect, and a very decent fellow. He frowned angrily as he sniffed the air and as he eyed the table.

"Put those cigarettes out!" he ordered sharply.

"Eh?"

"What?"

"You heard what I said!" exclaimed the prefect. "You know as well as I do that smoking is strictly forbidden. And I'm surprised at you, Grayson, for encouraging these Ancient House youngsters to indulge in such practices!"

"Go hon!" said Grayson sneeringly. "And what the deuce has it got to do with you? Take my advice, Reynolds, and mind your own confounded business!"

Reynolds turned red.

"It's my duty to see that you fellows don't make fools of yourselves," he said curtly. "Fullwood—Gulliver—Bell!"

You can leave this study at once, and return to your own House. I shall make it my duty to report you to Mr. Lee."

Fullwood glared.

"We'll leave this study when we're asked to leave it—by Grayson!" he said.

"You can't turn us out of it, anyhow! You've got no authority over us at all, so we'll do what we please!"

The prefect's eyes glinted rather dangerously.

"Very well," he said grimly. "I had it in my mind to let you all off, if you did as I ordered. But since you choose to be obstinate, there is only one course that I can adopt. I shall go straight to Mr. Foxe and report the whole affair."

Fullwood and Co. and the two Fifth-Formers grinned. Then they burst into a peal of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go to old Foxy; we don't care!" said Fullwood. "He ain't our Housemaster, and he can't do a thing——"

Reynolds stalked out of the study without waiting to hear any more. He was angry, and he was determined that Mr. Foxe should deal with this matter personally. It was the only thing that could be done.

Arriving at the Housemaster's study,

Reynolds tapped upon the door and then walked in. He found Mr. Foxe seated at his desk. The Housemaster looked up sharply and frowned.

"Who the deuce told you to come in?" he snapped sharply.

The prefect was rather taken aback by Mr. Foxe's tone.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I tapped —"

"Very possibly you did, but I gave no permission to enter!" snapped Mr. Foxe. "Well, what is it? Hurry up, I'm busy!"

"I wish to report, sir, that two members of the Fifth Form—Grayson and Shaw—have been smoking and gambling in their study," said Reynolds. "Not only that, sir, but they have brought three juniors from the Ancient House —"

"Confound you, Reynolds! Haven't you got something better to do than to come to me with this infernal nonsense—this tittle-tattle?" shouted the Housemaster, jumping to his feet. "Let me tell you, once and for all, that I won't have it! I detest this kind of thing! I have a great dislike for tale-bearing!"

Reynolds was rather staggered.

"But—but it is my duty, sir!" he protested warmly. "As a prefect, I must report any breach of the rules to you."

"Nonsense!" interrupted Mr. Foxe sourly. "You have no proof—no evidence, and I will not listen to these cock-and-bull stories. You're a prefect, I believe?"

"I am, sir."

"Very well, Reynolds," said the Housemaster, "when you leave this study you will no longer be a prefect."

Reynolds started.

"Why, sir—"

"I want no arguments—I want no insolence!" interjected Mr. Foxe.

"From this moment, you are deprived of your prefectship. That is all; you may go."

"But—but—"

"Get out of this room!" shouted the master fiercely.

And Reynolds went, no longer a prefect. He was not only bewildered and startled, but he was simply boiling with rage. Not that this was much good. Mr. Foxe's word was law in the College House.

The new Housemaster was proving himself to be a man of novel methods!

And what was this mystery connected with the College House? Who was the man that Mr. Foxe had knocked down and kicked? Why had the new Housemaster prowled about in the old monastery vaults?

These were questions which could not be answered at the moment. But before long Mr. Smale Foxe was destined to give St. Frank's many more big surprises.

The new Housemaster of the College House, in fact, would very shortly prove himself to be more mysterious than ever!

THE END.

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INTRODUCTION.

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 employs Lin on some dangerous missions in order to give the lad an opportunity of displaying his detective abilities. On one of these exploits, Kit and Cora, the brother and sister detectives, with Lin as their assistant, discover that a dangerous gang of foreign desperadoes have planned to rob the Casino of Monte Carlo, and are about to smuggle arms in packing-cases from England for this purpose. Lin's job is to lie concealed in a dummy packing-case in the warehouse where the other cases are awaiting shipment.

(Now read on.)

Lin's Narrow Escape.

FOR a moment Lin was daunted, as weird silence fell, denoting that his last friend had gone, and he had now to wait out his vigil alone, with all its perils. It was the silence, the strange, unnatural silence, that chilled and oppressed him. That, and the strain of waiting inactively in the utter darkness.

He knew that his real peril would not begin until he heard the arrival of the conspirators; yet he longed for their coming, to put an end to the tension of suspense.

Leaning from the cradle, with his ear close to the holes in the side of the case, he listened intently.

The only sounds that he could hear—all weirdly subdued and uncanny, like sounds heard in a dream—were the moaning of the night-wind as it swept along the river, the creaking of some heavy craft moored alongside the wharf and straining upon a strong tide; these, and the gurgle and wash of water, far below, as if deep among the timber foundations of the building.

For a long, long time there were no other sounds than these; with now and then the

scampering of the huge wharf rats, and their eerie squealing as they played their strange gambols around the case in which he lay.

Then suddenly, with louder shrieks, the rats seemed to fly, as if alarmed.

Lin heard the click of a lock. The planks of the floor on which the packing-cases rested vibrated under the tread of heavy feet. Then he heard voices, and knew that there could be no mistake—the conspirators had come! For the chief voice was that of the burly, blind ruffian called Sapt; a harsh, guttural voice, raised in a tone of impatient command:

"Now to work, and quickly! The tide is on the turn, and we cannot get the barge down in slack water. Four of you will be enough to bring out the cases. Two would suffice, were they such men as are bred in the land I come from; but you are puny wretches, the best of you!"

One of the men resented the taunt by a muttered oath.

"Take that!" growled Sapt, and there was the sound of a blow. Then he continued his orders, in the same hectoring tone: "You, Rideau, you are more rabbit than man! But you have ears, and can listen. Post yourself at that door on the landward side. It is from there, if anywhere, we have to look for danger. We have nothing to fear from the river. That will leave four to bring out the cases and two with me on the barge to stow them: I may have grey in my beard, but I have still the strength of any two of ye! Now to work! Take the cases in the order as they stand. Show no light; do not even dare to strike a match. You will have all the light you need for such work when yonder doors are opened. Open them, Wetzler. Now lead me down to the barge. I am not minded to miss my step, and slip into yonder flood!"

Lin heard the grating of bolts, and even felt the freshening of the air in his queer cell as the wide doors at the riverside were opened, letting in the keen night wind.

Then footsteps came nearer to where he lay. He heard the laboured breathing of the four men as they lifted the first of the packing-cases, and their heavy tread as they bore it away. After an interval that to him seemed immeasurably long they returned, and the second case was removed.

But one remained! Then there was only the case in which he lay concealed. Would it escape their notice in the gloom long enough for him to leave it and give that signal?

After that? But that was all he cared for—to do his part in that night's work, and not fail this time! What happened afterwards couldn't matter to him then. He would have done his bit. For it still rankled in his thoughts that he had once failed—that night on the Embankment—failed at the critical moment, and he did not want to see again that look of stern reproof in the eyes of the man who had trusted him, nor hear again those bitter words: "He failed. The moment came, and he failed!"

It should never happen again!

He felt in his pocket, to assure himself that the electric torch was there. He even tried it under the folds of his jacket. It was ready.

Then, with every nerve tense under the strain, scarcely daring to breathe, he turned on his elbow, with his face close to the tiny spyholes at his side, and waited.

He heard returning footsteps—the men coming back for the third case. He heard their grunting intake of breath as they raised it from the ground, and could even see their figures, and the dark shape of the bulky thing they carried, pass like shadows across the spyholes level with his eyes. Then came the burning question. Had they noticed the fourth case?

He did not know. They had given no sign.

He waited until he knew by the sound of their tread that they had passed out on to the landing-stage with their burden, and heard the gruff voice of Sapt, from the water's edge, giving some curt, half-bullying orders.

The moment had come!

His brain, never more clear and alert than in that packed instant of suspense, rapidly combed over his chances, for and against—his chances of reaching the loophole at the farther side and giving the signal. Of his chances of escape if things went wrong, and he was detected, he took no count.

He did not, in fact, want to escape. He wanted to give that signal, then see what happened.

He reached for the little lever near his left hand in the angle of the case, and pulled it over. The front of the case noiselessly dropped down, until its upper edge touched the floor.

Lin slipped from the cradle, and, still within the shadow of the case, peered around him in the wan light that came in through the wide open doorway on the waterside. It was a dark night, yet he could make out the moving figures at the edge of the landing-stage and the spars and cordage of the barge, as it heaved and fell on the strong tide.

Within the gloom was deeper, but at the farther side of the wharf he could see a

small, square patch of light which must be, he knew, the loophole Mr. Twyford had described. For it looked up the river, as he had said, and it was, besides, the only opening. To reach it he would have to cross the shaft of light that came through the open doors, with the risk that one of the men outside might turn and see him, or that Rideau, on watch at the landside door, somewhere in the gloom behind him, might be nearer than he knew, and catch a glimpse of his moving figure.

He hesitated only for that one swift glance around, then, stooping low, crossed the floor with a rapid, gliding step that was almost noiseless.

He reached the loophole. With a steady hand he made the signal. A momentary flash of light, like a tiny star, seemed to answer it from far upstream.

He turned from the loophole sharply, as he heard raised voices and sounds of more stirring movement on the landing-stage outside. It was agitated movement, almost amounting to the commotion of alarm! Had the men out there seen the flash of his signal? From the position of the loophole that seemed impossible, but that sparklike flash up the river might have been seen, and raised their suspicion.

At any rate, they were coming back into the wharf, and in a hurry!

He threw a keen glance around. There was just light enough to see that Mr. Twyford had gauged the resources of the place with his usual sound judgment. There was no hiding-place but the case he had just left.

He dived swiftly across the shaft of light from the open doors, regained the case, and scrambled into the cradle. Then he reversed the lever, and the movable front rose into its place, just as hurried footsteps shook the floor, and he heard the harsh voice of the burly ruffian called Sapt exclaim:

"A fourth case, you say? Impossible! There were but three."

"Yet it is here, Herr Sapt, and exactly the same as the rest," another voice protested. "You have eyes in your fingers—touch it and see."

Sapt strode to the case, and struck it heavily with his huge fist. The boy within heard a muttered ejaculation, and knew that the ruffian's suspicions were aroused. His tone, low, harsh, and full of dark meaning, confirmed Lin's fear.

"I know nothing of this," he said. "If madame has added another case without consulting me, she has been a fool for her pains! We have no room for another aboard the barge. It cannot go. Nor can it be allowed to remain here. Quick, some of you! Wrench open that trap in the floor, and heave it down!"

And Lin heard him add, in a horrible undertone, close to the side of the case:

"The river flows beneath, and it will sink like a stone! For there are holes here and here and here, and ours had none!"

Then came a hurried tread, and a man cried, in a tone of alarm:

"A boat is pulling this way. It is the river police! I know their stroke!"

"Perdition! Then we have been betrayed, and the mischief is here!" growled Sapt. "Quick! Two of you run, and cut the barge adrift. These cursed police may follow that. Have you that trapdoor open yet? Then quick, quick! Bear a hand here! We'll heave this case down first, whatever happens!"

Lin felt the case lifted from the ground, and the rough swaying motion as the men bore it to the edge of the yawning opening in the floor.

He seized the lever, prepared to throw open the case and spring out. Better a swift end by knife-thrust or bullet than to die horribly, like a rat in a trap, in the deep black water under the wharf!

The lever failed to act!

The mechanism was thrown out of gear by the violent swaying; or, quite as likely, Lin thought, Sapt had guessed the secret of the thing with fiendish cunning, and was holding the side down in his iron grip. The hapless boy pressed with all his strength against it. But it was immovable!

For one bitter moment the lad's brave heart failed him. He sickened with a deadly chill as his vivid imagination forestalled the horrors of his coming fate.

"Are we near enough?" he heard Sapt ask. "Then stop! One heave, altogether!"

The case was swung back. Then—a sudden quick movement of the feet, and a voice that rang among the old timbers like a bugle-call:

"Hold there! Set that case down, or I'll drop every man of you with my Mauser!"

Closely followed by several stout fellows in the uniform of the Thames police, Twyford dashed in from the open doors, his automatic pistol out for use!

The Bulgarian swore a savage oath, as his startled men let fall the packing-case with a violent crash and ran for the land-side door, only to be met by another body of police who already had Rideau in their hands.

The shock burst open the case and flung him, tottering out at the very brink of the open trap in the floor. He must have reeled backward into the flood below, but that Twyford sprang forward and seized his arm as he actually swayed upon the edge!

Then—although he had nothing but the sound of that rapid step to guide him—the blind ruffian sprang at Twyford with the ever-ready knife unlifted to strike. Twyford evaded the murderous downward thrust by swerving sharply aside, dragging the boy with him.

Sapt struck at the empty air, and, losing his balance with the furious violence of his blow, pitched through the open trap, and plunged headlong to his death in the swirling waters far beneath!

Lin Guesses At Last.

"LISTEN, Kit—and you, Lin! Can either of you, I wonder, throw any light upon this?"

It was at a late breakfast in that wonderful double room at Hampstead, on the morning following that lively night's work at the old wharf down the river. Lin—whose appetite was not in the least impaired by his thrilling experience—laid down the knife and fork with which he had been making excellent play, and prepared to listen.

With a gay smile upon her charming face, Cora Twyford read aloud from the newspaper in her hand:

"GUN-RUNNING IN THE THAMES! BOLSHEVIST PLOT SUSPECTED."

"A drifting barge went ashore at Grays, Essex, early this morning. No one was found aboard, and it appears to have been abandoned with its cargo, which, upon investigation, was discovered to consist of rifles, with side-arms, revolvers, and automatic pistols, with ammunition in large quantities, and several cases of live bombs—all well packed in crates, and labelled 'Sports Requisites.' Much mystery surrounds the affair, and a plot of Bolshevist agency is hinted at, but the police are very reticent."

"No wonder," laughed Twyford, "considering that the police know precious little about it themselves, and are instructed not to disclose even that little just yet. It's a pity though," he added, as he filled his briar; "for it would have made a grand 'scoop' for the first enterprising paper that got hold of the whole story as we three know it! We should have found ourselves famous! There might even have been a picture of my humble self as the late Charles Peace; with a smudge of you, Cora, as the 'Worst Woman in Europe; otherwise 'Madame Otterio'."

"And Lin featured as 'The Boy in the Box!'" cried Cora gaily. "Think what you've missed, Lin! Aren't you sorry?"

"Jolly glad it's off!" said the boy, with a wry grin. "It would about settle me with old Sam Wade if I got my name up in that way! As it is, he believes I'm leading a bad, bad life, because I keep late hours. And after being out all last night! That will finish me! He won't stand me as a lodger after that. I shall be ordered out of the place! It will be awful! I quite tremble when I think of old Sam's terrible look when I walk in!"

And he grinned again. Late events had stiffened his fibre. He was not an outcast boy now. "Mr. Mysterious" was as much of a mystery as ever; but he was a friend, and a powerful one—of that Lin felt certain. And then there was Miss Cora! With such friends at his back he felt that he could laugh at the world—including the highly respectable Mr. Sam Wade.

As they rose from the breakfast-table the telephone-bell rang loudly from the other—or "business-end," as Lin called it—

(Continued on page iii of Cover.)

of that queer compound room. Cora went to answer it; returning presently with a curious look upon her face, half amused, half serious.

"Rather odd," she said; "we were speaking of Sam Wade, and the call is from his coffee-shop! It is our friend Jess who rang up. She wants us to warn Lin, if he is here, not to go back to Red Lion Street, as she thinks there is trouble awaiting him."

"Oh, that's nonsense!" laughed Lin. "I owe a week's money for my room, and I'm going to walk in and pay it this morning. Old Sam may bristle and scowl all he wants, but he sha'n't be able to say that I bolted without paying him!"

"Quite the right thing, of course," said Twyford. Then, in a graver tone, "But I fancy the trouble your friend Jess alludes to isn't with Mr. Wade; he doesn't count much after all. It is something rather more serious, my lad."

"What, sir?" asked the boy quickly. "Something serious! What?"

"Don't look so alarmed, Lin," said Cora. "After all, you are blameless. Tell him all, Kit. It is best that he should know at once."

And with that strange smile that Lin had seen before, warm and friendly; yet with a shadow of pity in it, she put her hand on the window-sill and sprang lightly out.

Then Twyford said, turning to him:

"For some time past there has been a great number of cleverly forged Treasury notes in circulation, and the police have been busy trying to trace them to their source. They were successful at last, and the result was a raid the night before last—whilst we were busy burgling, Lin—on a certain house in Cowl Street, Blackfriars."

"Our friend P.-c. Joe Dale, took part in the raid, and gave me these particulars. The police found a complete plant for the production of spurious notes on the premises and captured two men red-handed, so to speak—actually at work. A third man was also arrested, though he will be charged only with passing the forged notes. There was also a woman in the house, suspected of playing the same part; but nothing definite was known against her, and she was allowed to depart—which she seems to have done very promptly!

"The chief prisoner was your guardian—and a queer sort of guardian he has been to you, my lad! But he is no more your uncle than his wife is your aunt! They are no relations of yours whatever."

"Not my relations!" panted Lin, looking up in amazement.

"No kith or kin to you whatever, Lin," repeated Twyford. "The facts are these: Your father did not die extremely poor and leave you to Benjamin Pawley's charity, as your supposed uncle has no doubt told you many a time. On the contrary, your father was fairly successful in business as a tradesman, and did well, though he never became rich. He was a widower—your mother died when you were a mere infant. And feeling that he would not long survive her—he followed her, in fact, in little more than a year—and having no near relations living, your father appointed this man, Benjamin Pawley, to be your guardian. Pawley was his assistant, and must either have been an honest man in those days, or clever enough to win the entire confidence of his employer."

"But Pawley had a yet stronger motive at the back of his supposed 'charity' to you. For there is a sum of several hundred pounds to come to you on your sixteenth birthday, to pay for your training in any profession you may choose. Doubtless, Benjamin Pawley hoped to finger that money himself, but he will not do so now!"

"I am sixteen next year, sir!" said Lin.

"And I will take care that the money duly comes to you," Twyford said. "So you have only to choose your career, my lad."

"I have already chosen," said Lin, with sparkling eyes. "I'm going to be what you are, sir!"

"What—an amateur burglar!" laughed Twyford.

"No, sir. A detective!"

Twyford clapped a hand on the boy's shoulder, and laughed so heartily that Cora came to the window and looked in.

"What is the fun? Do tell me!" she cried.

"The secret is out! Lin has guessed at last!" said Twyford. "I am no longer just 'Mr. Mysterious!'"

THE END.

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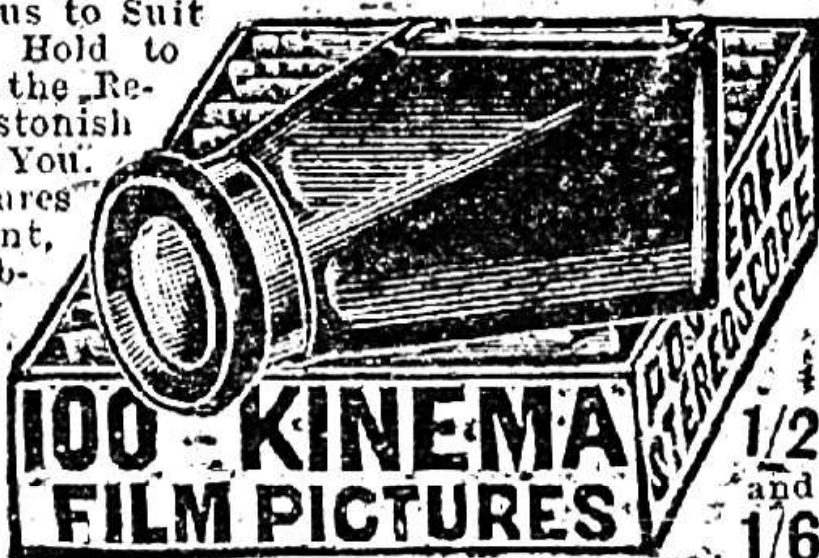
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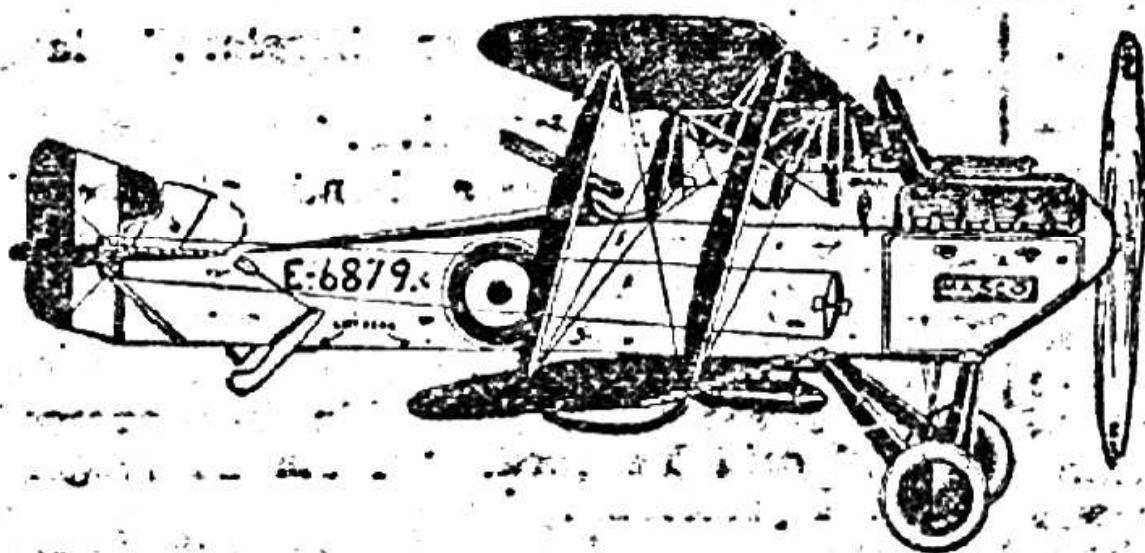
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