

No. 299.—A STORY OF THE REMOVE PAPER CHASE AND WHAT CAME OF IT!

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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 Blackmailed Schoolboy," "The Housemaster's Double," "The Lure of the Ring," etc. February 26, 1921.

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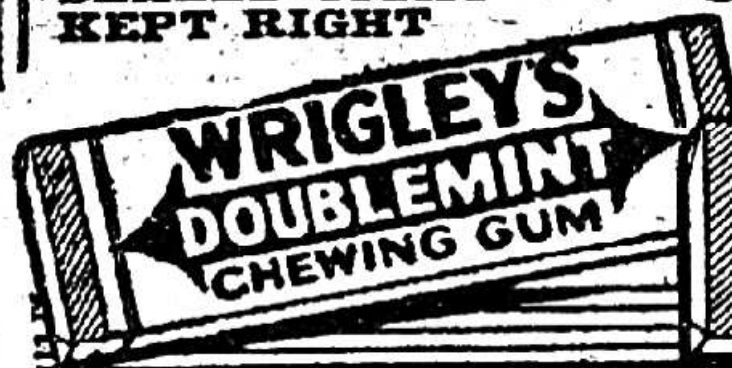
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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

THE REMOVE PAPER CHASE.

"WELL, I don't see it!" said Handforth - argumentatively. "If there's one thing I hate more than anything else, it's favouritism! The best runner in the Ancient House—in the Remove, of course—ought to be chosen for the hare!"

"Well, the best runner has been chosen," said Reginald Pitt.

"Rot!" snorted Handforth.

"But, my dear chap——"

"Piffle!" exclaimed Handforth. "I'm the best runner——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old Handy!"

"Always so retiring and modest!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Edward Oswald Handforth glared.

"Oh, all right!" he said bitterly.

"Have it your own way. I don't care! Rats to your rotten paper chase! I don't care a fig about it! You can go and boil yourself in oil—the whole crowd of you!"

De Valerie grinned.

"Thanks all the same, but we'd rather not," he said. "You see, Handy, this paper chase has got to be carefully arranged. We've got to have an equal number of Ancient House chaps and College House chaps. If we don't, there'll be jealousy. Nipper is the best long-

distance runner on this side, and Oldfield is the best on the other side. Therefore, Nipper and Oldfield are to be the hares. The hounds will consist of a dozen picked fellows—six from each House."

"Don't I know all about it?" snapped Handforth. "I'm only grumbling about Nipper being chosen as the Ancient House hare! It ain't right—when everybody knows that I'm the best runner——"

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Tommy Watson. "There he goes again!"

"Dry up, Handy!"

"Ring off, you ass!"

"Of course, I know that nobody will admit it!" went on Handforth. "I've learned, long ago, that there's no such thing as justice in this world. So Nipper had better run as the Ancient House hare, and I'll be one of the hounds."

"Good!" said Pitt. "Handforth's satisfied!"

"And, what's more, I'll take jolly good care that the hare is collared before he gets home!" said Handforth.

"Seeing that I'm a better runner, it won't be such a hard job for me. I shall leave all the other fellows behind before we finish the first mile. That's my programme!"

Everybody grinned. Handforth was always amusing, particularly when he was riding the high horse—which was so frequent as to be almost continuous.

The juniors were standing round the Ancient House steps, chatting animatedly. It was quite a glorious February afternoon—bright, frosty, invigorating, and what was more to the point, it was a half-holiday.

The Remove had planned to run a paper chase, and it was being entered into enthusiastically by the fellows. Paper chases were not frequent occurrences in the Remove, but when one was organised it was done properly.

It was due to commence very soon, and there was some little argument beforehand. A number of other juniors wanted to join the pack. And, at last, it was decided that all Removites should be admitted—although it was a moral certainty that only a few of them would finish the course.

When the time for starting actually arrived there were fully thirty fellows in running shorts, all ready for the fray. I was feeling quite confident, and Oldfield informed me that I should have to put my best foot foremost, or I should be left behind.

I grinned.

"Don't you worry about that, my son," I said. "You'll have to be jolly careful, or the honours of this chase will go to the Ancient House!"

"You—you fatheaded Fossil!" snorted Oldfield. "I shall be home weeks before you, and you'll get collared by our chaps!"

This did not seem a very cheerful prospect—for me—but I only grinned. And it was quite useless to argue, in any case.

The course which had been mapped out was a long one, and, in parts, difficult. A great deal of it was to be across country—over fields, down lanes. The start would be in the direction of the moor, and the hares would then work round through Edgemore, then to Bannington, through Bannington to Felling, on the coast, and back home by way of Caistowe and a series of tricky footpaths to the school.

The afternoon, therefore, would certainly be a strenuous one.

"How much start are the hares going to have?" demanded Handforth, when he was ready.

"Three minutes," said Morrow, of the Sixth, who was the official starter.

"Oh, then it'll be easy!" said Handforth. "Three minutes? Why, I shall

be able to run 'em down long before they get to Edgemore."

"There's only one chance of your doing that, Handy," I said, shaking my head.

"Only one chance?"

"Yes—for you to cut along the footpaths through the wood, and get to Edgemore in advance," I grinned.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you burbling ass!" snorted Handforth. "You know jolly well that we've got to stick to the trail—we've got to follow the paper——"

"Exactly," I smiled. "So there'll be no chance for you, Handy."

"Now, then—get ready!" put in Morrow. "I'm going to start you in a minute from now. And don't forget, you hares, that you've got to move with a will, or you'll be captured before the course is half completed."

And, a minute later, Morrow glanced up from his watch, and nodded.

"Off you go!" he said briefly.

Oldfield and I raced out through the gateway, turned to the right, and went hurrying along at a good steady speed in the direction of Bannington Moor. The pack of hounds waited impatiently in the Triangle, eager to get on the move.

Pitt was provided with a bugle, for he was appointed whipper-in of the pack. His task would not be a very enviable one.

"What about those three minutes?" demanded Handforth, glaring at Morrow.—"Your giddy watch has stopped, hasn't it?"

"Not yet!" grinned Morrow. "But you can start now—time's up! Off!"

"Hurrah!"

The pack swept across the Triangle, and streamed out through the gateway into the road, eager and impatient. Each fellow wanted to secure the honour of capturing the hares. Those active individuals had completely vanished, but, upon the hard road lay a distinct and clear trail of torn scraps of paper.

It was the task of the pack to follow this paper trail continuously, no matter how it twisted and turned—no matter how it deviated from the correct course. That was the art of the whole thing.

A pair of particularly astute hares could snap their fingers at any pack. For, in laying the trail, a great deal of cunning was required. In places, it would frequently happen that the hares

were in full view of the impatient pack, but the latter could do nothing, except stare in exasperation. For they had to follow the trail—and the trail, perhaps, led onwards for over half a mile, and then turned, coming back perhaps within a hundred yards of the outward trip.

Somehow or other, Handforth was not in the front of the pack, as he had fully intended being. He had got squashed out—at least, he was in the rear of the pack before half a mile had been covered.

It was a gruelling test of endurance, and only the very fittest of the fellows would be able to finish up within sight of the hares. Whether these active participants in the game would be caught, remained to be seen.

"Tally-ho!"

"Stick it, you chaps!"

The hounds swept down the lane at a great pace, considering. They could have gone faster, but they did not waste their energies. It would be necessary to keep a store in hand for the last lap of the race—the most telling period.

Already a number of fellows were trailing off in the rear, and, before long, others would drop out altogether.

The hares were running well, leaving their trail of paper in one continuous, unbroken line. I was particularly careful about this, for it would only cause confusion if there happened to be any break.

The weather was quite ideal for the chase, for there was no wind to disturb the trail. It lay on the ground exactly as we dropped it.

Oldfield and I made our way through a little wood before we got to the moor. It was not exactly in the mapped out course, but we decided to give the pack some trouble. So we kindly zig-zagged in and out among the trees, twisting, turning, and doing everything possible to hinder the pack.

Then, once more, we went on, across the open country and so on to the moor.

The hounds met with great difficulties in that wood, and lost quite a number of precious minutes.

The pack had hardly got clear of the wood, which was upon rising ground, before the clear note of Pitt's bugle rang out. The hares had been seen!

Right down below two specks on the moor were visible—those specks were Oldfield and myself.

And the pack came sweeping down in full pursuit.

Among the leaders of the hounds were Tommy Watson, Tregellis-West, Bob Christine, De Valerie, Ernest Lawrence, and Church. Pitt, of course, was in advance, for he was an excellent runner, and had no difficulty in keeping the lead.

Soon after Edgemoor had been reached the pack was reduced to not more than fifteen juniors, and Pitt was still leading, with Lawrence in his immediate rear. Lawrence, the schoolboy boxer, was running well, and, had he liked, he could have forged ahead of Pitt. But he was quite content with his position.

But then he met with disaster.

The trail led through a spinney, and then across some meadows, twisting and turning in the most exasperating manner possible.

The pack had already decided that the hares ought to be boiled in oil for leading them such a gruelling chase.

There were ditches to be jumped, hedges to be surmounted, and all manner of other obstacles. But the hares had passed that way, the hares had encountered these difficulties, and the hounds were compelled to follow.

Lawrence was a magnificent jumper, and he cleared the second ditch with perfect ease: and it was not his fault that, upon landing, his foot caught in an unseen hole. Grass was growing thickly, and the ground was frozen. Lawrence's left foot twisted under him, and he went sprawling.

"Oh, my only hat!" he gasped.

"Anything the matter, old son?" asked Christine anxiously.

"I—I'm afraid so!" said Lawrence, his face twisting with pain.

The rest of the pack did not wait; it swept onwards, leaving Christine alone with Lawrence. It was impossible for the pack to wait while casualties were being examined.

Handforth by this time was the last man in the pack, and was puffing and blowing considerably.

"It—it's no good!" said Lawrence. "You'd better cut on Christine; don't wait for me. I'm out of it."

"What rotten luck!" said Christine. "We were relying on you to catch Nipper!"

Lawrence grinned.

"Sorry—it can't be done," he said. "I very much doubt if it could have

been done in any case. My ankle's ricked—"

"Badly?"

"Oh, no—only a trifle," said Lawrence. "I think I can walk all right, and if I'm careful it won't swell much. But to keep up the run is impossible. I should do a lot more harm than good, and end up by having a badly sprained ankle."

"Sure you can get home all right?"

"Certain," said Lawrence. "You buzz off!"

Christine went, and caught up with the pack with ease within half a mile. Ernest Lawrence was now left alone—quite by himself. He was very cut up about it, and when he tested his ankle he found that it was possible for him to walk fairly easily. But to run was out of the question.

It was only a short distance back to Edgemore, and Lawrence decided to take the footpath which led across the meadows, and then through Bellton Wood. It was the shortest way home.

He walked quite all right, excepting for a slight limp. His ankle pained him somewhat, but, walking carefully, he avoided making the slight injury worse. He tried trotting for a moment or two, but soon gave it up. He was able to keep going, but only slowly, and his ankle pained him more. So he took the homeward trip in an easy fashion.

"Oh, well, it can't be helped!" murmured Lawrence. "It's a pity, of course, but these things will happen. Thank goodness my ankle wasn't twisted worse!"

He continued walking along. He was following a footpath, which ultimately led on to the road after crossing two more meadows. He reached the end of the first meadow, and then commenced traversing the other.

The road was now within sight, and one portion of it lay down in a little dip. There were a good many trees all round, but Lawrence could see twenty or thirty yards of the road where the hedge was low, just at the bottom of the hollow.

The road was quite lonely and deserted. Edgemore lay just beyond, round the bend, about half a mile away, and, as Lawrence looked round, he saw that he had the whole countryside to himself. Not another soul was visible.

But this state of affairs only lasted for a few moments.

As Lawrence crossed the hedge he saw two figures come into view on the road.

One was that of an old gentleman, attired in a thick overcoat and an old-fashioned, square style felt hat. He was quite an upright old chap, with white hair, a bristling white moustache, and a clean-shaven chin.

Lawrence could see this quite distinctly, although he was still some distance off.

The other figure was exceedingly charming to gaze upon. It was the figure, in fact, of an extremely pretty girl of about fifteen. She was very dainty, rather small, and her hair was gathered together neatly at the back, and secured by a black bow.

It was dark chestnut hair, and delightfully wavy. The girl was very tastefully dressed in a pleated skirt and a woollen jumper, which revealed the fact that her figure was as pretty as her face. Her eyes were dark and sparkling.

Lawrence, of course, could not see all these details at such a long range. But he was quite certain that the girl was exquisitely pretty; and he hung back. Somehow, he did not want to meet these strangers on the road, attired as he was in running shorts, and limping perceptibly.

He had failed, and was returning home, a crock. He didn't quite like it, and he made his pace slower.

Across the meadow came the girl's merry laughter to his ears. As she and her elderly companion were just about to go out of range—that is to say, the hedge would cut them off from Lawrence's view—when two other figures appeared. These latter figures were in striking contrast to the old gentleman and the girl. They were, in fact, two rough-looking men, wearing old ragged clothing, and chokers round their necks. Their faces clearly indicated that they were not entirely unacquainted with liquor.

These fellows stopped in front of the old gentleman and the girl, and barred the way.

"Spare a copper or two, guv'nor?" asked one of the men humbly. "Me an' my mate can't get no work. Ex-service men we are, sir—both of us was at Mons together. It's hard, these days, for fellows as can't get nothin' to do."

The old gentleman nodded.

"I'm afraid you won't find much work by tramping along the road, my man," he said, removing a glove, and feeling in his pocket. "Here you are—and I should advise you, when you get into Edgemore, to walk straight past the public house."

The man took the coin eagerly. It was a two shilling piece, and was quite a generous sum. But the fellow looked up with a sneer as he saw what was in his hand.

"Sure you can spare all this, guv'nor?" he asked, sarcastically. "Two bob! what d'yer think of it, Bill? Two bob! We can get a bloomin' lot for two bob now-a-days, can't we?"

"It ain't enough for a bite," said the other man. "'Ave a 'cart, guv'nor—make it five while you're about it! We're ex-service men, as my mate just said, and we've seen some hard times——"

"You will get no more out of me, my man!" interrupted the old gentleman curtly. "Move out of the way—do you hear me? I have given you all I intend——"

"Steady on, guv'nor—steady on!" interrupted the man who had first spoken, after glancing up and down the lane.

"We don't wish to be rough or anything like that—but we ain't satisfied with this two bob. See? You'd best fork out some more, and save any further trouble."

The old gentleman frowned angrily.

"Upon my soul!" he ejaculated. "Do you dare to threaten me, you rascals? Allow me to pass at once. I regret exceedingly that I was foolish enough to give you any money at all!"

"Oh, do you?" said Bill, aggressively. "We want a quid—understand? A quid, and nothin' less!"

"You will not get another penny from me!" said the old gentleman angrily. "You impudent scoundrels! If you do not stand aside at once, I shall not hesitate to use this stick——"

"Oh, we'll see about that, old gent!" snarled one of the tramps. "We'll give you ten seconds—and if you don't fork out the tin, we'll take it from yer—see? Ten seconds is all you've got!"

"You—you—you——"

The old gentleman paused, quite speechless with rage, and then, at the same moment, both the tramps moved forward, their hands in a threatening attitude. They were about to lay their dirty fingers upon their victim.

But the girl stepped forward with flashing eyes.

"How dare you?" she exclaimed hotly. "If you make any attempt to touch my grandfather, I will——"

"The best thing you can do, missy, is to 'old your tongue!" said one of the men, turning on her. "We don't want no lip from you! If you stand there, un' say nothin' you won't get 'urt!"

"You—you confounded rascal!" shouted the old gentleman furiously. "How dare you address a young lady in such a fashion? Good gracious! If you dare to——"

"That's enough, grand-dad!" interrupted Bill savagely. "Collar 'old of 'im, mate! We'll show 'im whether we're satisfied with two bob, or not!"

Both men seized the old gentleman, and they would probably have handled him roughly. But the girl, with great courage and presence of mind, raised a light cane she was carrying, and brought it down with considerable force upon Bill's back.

Slash! Slash! Slash!

"Ow—yow!" howled the man. "You—you blamed little 'ussy! Why, I'll—I'll——"

He turned upon the girl with a bellow of fury. The next second she was seized in a firm grip, and whirled away. She struggled fiercely, and the other man came to the assistance of his companion. The three figures were struggling in the road with the old gentleman looking on helplessly.

But Ernest Lawrence was now nearly on the spot.

The very instant he had seen the tramps attacking the old gentleman and the girl, he had started running. And Lawrence was now just bursting through the hedge—to the rescue!

CHAPTER II.

AN UNEXPECTED INVITATION.

"STOP that, you dirty hounds!"

Lawrence burst into the road like a whirlwind, and he stood there facing the two tramps with his face flushed, and his eyes flashing. The girl was still being held, and she gazed with mingled relief and appeal at the sturdy-looking junior. The old gentleman, who had been about to interfere, paused, and looked at the newcomer.

"Take your fingers off that young lady, you miserable cads!" said Lawrence hotly. "Do you hear me?"

One of the men turned and looked at Lawrence with a loering scowl.

"Speakin' to me?" he asked gruffly.

"I'm speaking to the pair of you!" retorted Lawrence. "Take your filthy paws off that young lady!"

"Lumme!" said the man. "What d'yer think o' this, Bill? Did you 'ear the kid? I reckon wo'd best give him a taste o' something to go on with!"

"The saucy young monkey!" said the other man.

Lawrence did not wait any longer. The men were still holding their fair victim, and they had taken no notice whatever of Lawrence's command. This was not at all surprising, for Lawrence did not look a very formidable proposition as he stood there in front of the hulking men. The tramps themselves did not consider for a moment that the boy would have courage—or madness—enough to attack them.

But they were wrong.

The College House junior suddenly sprang forward, and he drove his fist with considerable force into the face of the nearest man. It struck the fellow on the mouth, and he staggered back with a wild howl—more of surprise than pain. But he was hurt, too, and his face became livid with fury as he snarled out an imprecation.

"You low blackguard!" shouted Lawrence. "If you dare to swear again in this young lady's presence, I'll give you the hiding of your life!"

The man fairly gasped.

"By thunder!" he stammered. "You—you— Did you hear 'im, Bill? He's goin' to give me the 'idin' of my life? Why, I—I'll— 'Ere, 'elp me to smash 'im up! We're not goin' to be spoke to like that by no cheeky schoolkid!"

And, with one accord, the two tramps released the young lady, and advanced menacingly upon Lawrence. He stood his ground firmly, his shoulders squared, his fists clenched. Lawrence was not the kind of junior to back away in a time of danger.

"Oh!" exclaimed the girl anxiously. "You—you awful men! Whatever shall we do? Oh, grandfather—they'll hurt this boy terribly——"

"You bet we shall, my gal!" snarled Bill. "Grab him, mate!"

The events which happened during the course of the next minute or two were exceedingly interesting—particularly for the old gentleman and the young lady, who were spectators. They could do nothing except watch, and they were gratified by what they saw.

The two tramps hurled themselves upon Lawrence with the assurance that they would be able to settle him before the words "Jack Robinson" could be uttered. Unfortunately—for them—they were not aware of the fact that Lawrence had beaten a champion pugilist named Mike Connor, in the Ring, and that the boy was probably one of the most wonderful boxers of his age, in the country.

"Now we'll learn yer!" snapped Bill harshly.

But, apparently, it was Lawrence who "learned" them.

Crash! Slam! Crash! Biff!

The junior's fists worked like lightning. His opponents know absolutely nothing of the noble art of self-defence. Their guard was non-existent, and Lawrence simply went for them hammer and tongs—and every one of his blows found a mark. Chest, ribs, nose, chin—the tramps were battered unmercifully. Their own blows went wild—their fists simply beat the air in a futile manner.

The fight was short and swift.

Lawrence had not moved an inch. He stood there, as though riveted to the ground. And he was working overtime. The tramps simply could not make any impression on him. Then they commenced backing away—and Lawrence moved at last. He followed his opponents up, sending home blow after blow.

"Blow me pink!" gasped Bill. "This kid's a 'oly terror—— Yow! Yaroooh!" Biff! Crash!

It was more than the fellows could stand. They had caught a tartar, and they knew it. And, having received quite sufficient punishment to satisfy them for a long period, they took to their heels. They simply turned and ran, gasping, grunting, and swearing. They had met their master, and they were not mad enough to remain on the scene. They considered that it was necessary for the good of their health to remove themselves to a less energetic atmosphere. In other words, they bolted.

Lawrence grinned, and lowered his fists.

"I don't think they'll trouble you any more now, sir," he smiled, turning to the old gentleman. "The awful brutes!"

Before the old gentleman could speak, the girl rushed forward, and seized Lawrence's hands.

"Oh, it was just too wonderful!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "You amazing boy! How did you do it? I've never seen anything so gorgeous!"

Lawrence flushed slightly.

"Oh, it was nothing, miss!" he said, looking into her sparkling dark eyes.

"A fellow doesn't need to be particularly clever to deal with a pair of miserable tramps——"

"Oh, but it was clever—it was simply ripping!" said the young lady. "I

don't know how in the world we shall ever be able to thank you. Those beasts had got hold of me, and goodness knows what would have happened if you hadn't come up—they might have killed me! You're wonderful!"

"By gad, Sylvia, that's the right word to use!" exclaimed the old gentleman.

"Wonderful, I should say the boy is! About the prettiest piece of boxing I have ever been privileged to see, by gad! We owe you a big debt, my lad, and I shall be greatly interested to know your name."

Lawrence smiled.

"Oh, I'm Lawrence, of the Remove, at St. Frank's, sir," he explained.

"Ernest Lawrence. I belong to the College House, you know."

"That's very interesting, Master Lawrence!" said the other. "Ernest Lawrence, of the College House, at St.

Frank's—the Remove Form, I think? Good! I shall remember that! And

you must allow me to thank you heartily for the assistance you gave us. I really

don't know what would have happened if you hadn't have turned up at such

an opportune moment. We thank you most sincerely, my boy."

"Rather!" said Miss Sylvia. "It

was stunning of you, Lawrence. You're a brick! But haven't we disturbed you—

haven't we interrupted something?" she added, glancing at Lawrence's running

costume. "You don't usually walk about like that, do you?"

Lawrence laughed.

"Well, no," he said. "As a matter of fact, I was one of the hounds in a paper

chase. But I ricked my ankle, and I was just walking home——"

"By gad!" said the old gentleman,

"You ricked your ankle—and yet you came running to our help! Amazing, by gad! Oh, but I was forgetting myself, Lawrence. I have not told you who I am, or anything about myself. My name is Tarrant—Mr. Grahame Tarrant—and I live at the Mount—not so very far from St. Frank's."

"I am very glad to have been of some help to you, sir," said Lawrence politely.

"And this young lady is my granddaughter, Miss Sylvia Tarrant," went on

the old gentleman. "We have not been at the Mount for long—in fact, we only

came into residence two or three weeks ago. I am quite certain that we shall

like the locality very much. And I am happy to have made the acquaintance

of one of St. Frank's boys. We owe you a great deal, Lawrence."

"I should say we do!" exclaimed Miss Sylvia. "And we're most fright-

fully grateful, Lawrence. The way you went for those two tramps was just too

lovely for words! I shall never, never forget it! The wretched bounders were

beautifully dished! You jolly well deserve a medal, old son!"

"My dear Sylvia!" protested Mr. Tarrant. "Your Language——"

Miss Sylvia laughed.

"Oh, come off it, grand-dad!" she exclaimed, with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Lawrence doesn't mind if I use slang. I know. I expect he's pretty good at

that sort of thing himself. And you can't be stiff and formal now-a-days. I'm

blessed if I know how we're going to thank him properly——"

"Please don't try to!" interrupted Lawrence, who was beginning to feel

somewhat uncomfortable under this fire of gratitude. "I didn't do anything at

all—really, I didn't. There's nothing in giving two scoundrels like that a lesson

—they deserved it! And—and I shall have to be going now—I simply must

get back to the school. Good afternoon, Miss Sylvia—good afternoon, sir! I'm

awfully glad that I was of some use!"

Lawrence raised his cap politely, and limped off. Mr. Grahame Tarrant and

his granddaughter stood for some time, looking after him before he turned off

the road and took the footpath which led to Bellton Wood.

Lawrence smiled to himself as he thought of Miss Sylvia. She seemed to

be a novel sort of girl—and she was undoubtedly very charming. Lawrence decided that she was the prettiest girl

he had ever seen, and he felt rather glad that she was living in the neighbourhood.

He did not regard her as a stranger. It was quite likely that the St. Frank's fellows would see her fairly often—and this struck Lawrence as being eminently satisfactory.

He arrived at St. Frank's, and lost no time in going straight up to the dormitory in the College House. Of course, a good many juniors wanted to know what had happened, and why Lawrence had dropped out. He explained three or four times, and even had a crowd of fellows up in the dormitory, helping him to bandage his ankle.

When this necessary operation had been performed, Lawrence was feeling much better. Then he dressed himself in his ordinary Elons, and sallied out into the Triangle. He found that he could walk fairly well, and he was confident that his ankle would be as strong and sturdy as ever again within three or four days. But Lawrence had been quite right in abandoning the paper chase—he could not have hoped to complete the course, and he would have made his ankle really bad.

"Nearly time for the hares to be due!" remarked Morrow, of the Sixth, appearing from the Ancient House. "But, of course, it's quite likely they've been caught—"

"I don't think so," said Lawrence. "I'm pretty certain that the hares will give the hounds a jolly good run—and they may not be caught at all."

"Hallo! What's that?" exclaimed Hubbard suddenly.

Ta-ra-ra!

It was the clear but distant sound of a bugle.

"My hat!" said Lawrence. "They must be in sight!"

There was a rush for the gates, and a crowd of Removites and fags—and even Fifth Formers—collected out in the road to watch the finish. And a very exciting finish it proved to be. It was touch and go, the hares were still running well, although rather tired now. As a matter of fact, Oldfield and myself had been hard pressed since we left the village. And now we were running all out for the school, determined to win. We had no intention of allowing the hounds to capture us.

It had been a hard run, and I think Oldfield was rather more fagged than I was. But he kept up the pace manfully,

and did not allow me to get ahead. And so, side by side, we plodded on towards the goal.

At our rear, the hounds were coming up in grand style—making a big, tremendous spurt in order to catch us on the very last lap.

The two foremost hounds were Reginald Pitt and Bob Christino. They were running well, and were now only a very short distance behind. At the rear of them came other juniors—De Valerie, Grey, Yorke, and a few more. Church was well in advance, but McClure had fallen away a bit, whilst Handforth was nowhere to be seen. He had fallen out long since.

When within a hundred yards of the gates the chase became tense. There were three hounds now, for De Valerie had drawn level with Christine and Pitt. And they put all they knew into that last terrific rush.

Reginald Pitt surpassed himself. Glancing rapidly over my shoulder I saw him forging up, overtaking us perceptibly.

"Buck up!" I gasped. "Put your best into it, old man!"

"All right!" panted Oldfield. "We'll win!"

I pressed my elbows to my sides, and made an extra effort. Oldfield was unable to keep up with me, and consequently I forged ahead. The next moment Reginald Pitt came up, and his hand caught hold of Oldfield's shoulder.

"Caught!" gasped Pitt triumphantly. Oldfield came to a halt, fighting for breath, and running with perspiration.

"You boulder!" he said huskily. "I thought I was going to whack you!"

"Sorry!" grinned Pitt. "But you did jolly well, old man."

I had taken no notice of Oldfield's fate, and was still tearing on. But De Valerie and Bob Christine were just behind me, and I know it would be a near thing. Once the gates were reached I should be home; and I was within ten yards.

"Go it, Nipper!"

"Keep it up, old man—you'll win!"

"Stick it, Ancient House!"

I stuck it, and just as I hurled myself through the gateway Christine made a last despairing effort, and reached out. His fingers came within an inch of my shoulder, but failed to touch it. De Valerie, too, had done his utmost.

But, by the skin of my teeth, I escaped their clutches, and literally fell headlong into the Triangle, among the excited crowd of fellows.

"Hurrah!"

"Nipper's home!"

"Honours for the Ancient House!"

"Rather!" grinned Hubbard. "An Ancient House chap caught the College House hare, and the Ancient House hare got home. Good!"

"That's the stuff to give 'em!"

"Well, there wasn't much in it!" I panted, after I had had a breather. "Jolly good, Christine, you nearly had me. Hard lines, old son!"

Christine grunted.

"Well, it was a good paper chase, and that's the main thing," he said. "You gave us a run for our giddy money!"

And we all went off to our respective houses to have a rub down and a change. We were aching and tired when we went into our studies for tea shortly afterwards.

But, as Christine had said, it had been a good chase.

The stragglers of the pack came wearily in in twos and threes, half of them not arriving until tea was practically over in the majority of studies. Handforth was one of the last fellows to turn up, and he was not in the best of humours. But he calmly declared that luck had been against him, and if he had been wearing a different pair of running shoes all would have been well—he would, in fact, have caught both the hares without the slightest trouble. Needless to say, nobody took the slightest notice of these humorous remarks.

Lawrence did not say anything to the other juniors about his encounter with Mr. Grahame Tarrant and his granddaughter. The junior did not see any reason why he should talk about the affair—for he would be questioned closely, and he was rather a modest fellow. He would not derive any pleasure from telling how he had beaten single handed, two hulking tramps. Lawrence had a horror of saying anything that might sound boastful.

But the next morning, after a healthy night's sleep, Lawrence was very forcibly reminded of that incident near Edgemoor.

For when Lawrence got down into the lobby he was informed by one of the other juniors that a letter awaited him in the rack.

He went to the rack, and took the letter out with some eagerness—for he half believed that it was from his father. This, however, did not prove to be the case—as Lawrence saw at once.

The handwriting was strange to him, and he further noted that the letter had been posted in Bellton. He wondered who could be writing to him locally, and he felt very curious as he tore open the envelope.

He extracted a piece of vellum note-paper, with a die-stamped heading; and his face flushed with pleasure as he read the following:

"The Mount, near Bellton.

"Bannington, Sussex."

"My dear Boy,—I feel that my efforts to thank you for your great service to my granddaughter and myself were very inadequate. Your behaviour was brave in the extreme, and I can assure you that I am deeply grateful to you for the assistance you rendered this afternoon. I would like to see more of you, my boy, and you will be giving me very great pleasure if you can find the time to visit me.

"Here is a suggestion. Come here to tea and supper to-morrow evening. You may bring your own particular friends—just as many as you like. They will be as warmly welcomed as yourself. You do not know how you will please me if you decide to accept this invitation. In any case, I am dropping a line to your Housemaster. And I am requesting him to give you and your friends the evening off. My grand-daughter will be ready to serve tea at five o'clock.

"Yours sincerely,

"GRAHAME TARRANT."

Lawrence read the letter through twice, and then looked up with a flush of pleasure on his face, and with his eyes sparkling with anticipation.

"Oh, ripping!" he murmured. "What a jolly decent old chap!"

"How much?" inquired Bob Christine, who was standing near by.

"Eh?"

"You've got a remittance, haven't you?" inquired Bob. "You've got about a two quid smile on your face, I should judge. And that letter——"

"Oh," said Lawrence. "No, this letter isn't from home, Christine. It was written by Mr. Grahame Tarrant, of the Mount."

"Grahame Tarrant!" said Bob Christine. "Who the dickens is he? Some author chap lives at the Mount—"

"I think he must have gone—removed from the neighbourhood," said Lawrence. "Anyhow, Mr. Tarrant is there now. I met him yesterday afternoon, and he told me that he had not been in residence for very long."

"You met him?" said Yorke strolling up. "What's he like?"

"Oh, a jolly decent old chap," said Lawrence. "About sixty or sixty-five, I should think. Tall, upright, and active. I met him and his granddaughter yesterday afternoon—"

"Wow-wow!" said Christine with a grin. "What's this? A granddaughter, eh? How old?"

"Oh, about fifteen, I should think," said Lawrence.

"Wow-wow—twice!" grinned Christine. "About fifteen! What's she like?"

"Dark, with ripping eyes," replied Lawrence simply. "Jolly pretty, too—about the prettiest girl I've seen, as a matter of fact. She's small, and dainty, with a ripping figure. She was dressed in a pleated skirt and a woollen jumper, and she looked top-hole!"

Bob Christine and Yorke exchanged glances.

"This is serious!" said Christine gravely. "We shall have to make inquiries, my son! An exceedingly pretty girl, with a ripping figure, and as lovely as a picture!"

"He even remembers what she was wearing!" said Yorke, shaking his head.

"It sounds bad!" went on Christine. "There's only one possible thing to think—Lawrence is in love—"

"You—you ass!" roared Lawrence, turning red. "You—you—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you—"

"Keep your hair on—we were only chaffing you!" grinned Christine. "But, jokes aside, let's hear all about this. There isn't a girl in the whole of Bell-ton who's much good. And you say that this one is all serene? How did you come to meet them?"

"It was after I ricked my ankle," said Lawrence. "I was walking back to the school alone, you know. And I was still a little way from Edgemore when I happened to see Mr. Tarrant and his granddaughter in the road. I was on

the other side of the meadow, some little way off. So I went over there—"

"Attracted by the damsel's beauty?" inquired Yorke.

"No, you duffer!"

"Then what was the reason?"

"Well, the fact is, a couple of miserable tramp fellows were causing some trouble," said Lawrence reluctantly. "I thought I'd better join in—that's all."

And Lawrence walked away and strode out of the lobby into the Triangle—believing that he would escape all further questions. But in this he was quite wrong. Christine and Yorke looked after him, and then they gazed at one another.

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Christine. "What's the idea?"

"Goodness knows!" said Yorke. "He doesn't seem to want to talk about the subject!"

"Well, he'll have to talk!" said Bob grimly. "We're not going to be put off like that—not likely! Come on!"

They charged out into the Triangle, and found Lawrence over by the wall of the gymnasium. He was reading through his letter again, and did not notice that Bob Christine and Roddy Yorke were approaching him.

"Now, then, my son, let's have the yarn!" said Christine, tapping Lawrence on the back.

"Eh? Oh!" said Lawrence. "I—I thought—"

"You thought that you'd escaped from us, didn't you?" said Yorke.

"Well, you haven't! We want to hear about this affair of yesterday afternoon."

Handforth and Co. were near by, and they paused with interest. Reginald Pitt and De Valerie strolled up, too. Lawrence now had an audience, and he realised now that he had made things decidedly worse by coming out into the Triangle.

"Oh, do dry up!" he growled. "There's nothing—"

"Yes, there is!" said Christine. "You met Mr. Tarrant and his granddaughter yesterday afternoon, and you had a bit of a dust up with a couple of tramps. We want to hear the details."

"That's it," said Yorke. "Cough it up, old son!"

"A dust up with two tramps!" said Handforth, coming nearer. "What's this?"

"It's nothing to do with you!" said

Christine, turning. "You can clear off, you Ancient House chaps!"

"Rats!" said Pitt, politely. "We've got as much right here as you have. Lawrence is a pal of ours."

Lawrence nodded. He was thinking rapidly. He fully intended taking advantage of Mr. Tarrant's invitation; and he would be able to take some friends with him. His friends included quite a number of fellows in the Ancient House. So Lawrence thought it would be just as well to tell his story now. He would have to bring it out sooner or later, in any case.

"Well, it's this way, you fellows," he said slowly. "After I petered out yesterday—"

"You mean you ricked your ankle?" put in Christine.

"Yes," said Lawrence; "I happened to see two rough-looking tramps threatening an old gentleman and a girl. This was in a quiet lane, just outside Edgmore. The tramps were awful-looking brutes, and I think they were going to use violence."

"And what did you do?" asked Pitt interestedly.

"Well, there was only one thing I could do," replied Lawrence. "I chipped in, and the blackguards took to their heels almost at once. That's all."

"Rats!" said Christine. "You told us a lot more than that indoors. You said that the girl was jolly pretty, and dainty and neat, and all the rest of it—"

"Well, that's quite right," said Lawrence. "She struck me as being a jolly nice girl. And Mr. Tarrant has written to me now, and suggested that I shall go over to tea and supper this evening—"

"You lucky boulder!" said Christine.

"And who's Mr. Tarrant?" inquired Tommy Watson.

"Oh, he lives at the Mount, just along the road. He's only been in residence a short while," said Lawrence. "Miss Sylvia is his grand-daughter. And he suggests in this letter that I should bring as many of my friends as I like."

"Oh, good!"

"Ripping!"

"I—I say!" put in Fatty Little, pushing his way through the crowd. "Going to be a feed there?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There's bound to be a feed," smiled

Lawrence. "It'll be jolly decent, I should think. Tea and supper, you know."

"Great doughnuts!" said Fatty. "What a chance! I—I say, Lawrence, I'm a friend of your's, ain't I?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bob Christine glared.

"You fat Ancient House ass!" he said, "you ain't coming—"

"Oh, I don't know!" smiled Lawrence. "We'll see about it later, anyway. I think it very decent of Mr. Tarrant!"

"Rather!"

"But, of course, he's exaggerated this out of all proportion," went on Lawrence. "Goodness knows, I didn't do much. I only hope that Mr. Foxe will give us the evening off."

Bob Christine looked doubtful.

"I'm not so sure about it," he said. "Foxey has got his knife into you, Lawrence—you know that as well as I do. He'll do anything he can to spoil your pleasure. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if he refuses to let us go."

"Oh, well, we can go to tea, anyway," said Lawrence. "As long as we're in before calling over, Foxey can't do a thing. But we'll hope for the best."

That was really all the fellows could do.

CHAPTER III.

THE HOUSEMASTER'S DOUBLE.

MR. SMALE FOXE smiled with peculiar enjoyment.

He was standing in front of the fireplace in his study in the College House. The Housemaster held in his hand a sheet of vellum notepaper, and he had read the letter through two or three times.

It was, of course, from Mr. Grahame Tarrant—the letter he had mentioned to Lawrence that he would send. It was not addressed to Mr. Foxe personally, but to "The Housemaster, The College House."

It contained only a few words—merely requesting the Housemaster to permit Lawrence and as many friends as Lawrence chose to select, to spend the evening at the Mount. Mr. Tarrant assured

the Housemaster that the boys would be well looked after.

"Splendid!" murmured Mr. Foxe, with a malicious note in his voice. "So this excellent gentleman wishes me to grant Lawrence a favour? Somehow or other, I don't think the favour will be permitted. Master Lawrence will receive a big disappointment to-day."

It seemed, therefore, that Christine's doubts were very well founded.

Mr. Smale Foxe, in truth, had his knife well into Ernest Lawrence. He possessed an intense hatred for the junior—a hatred which almost amounted to malevolent detestation. If it was at all possible to cause the boy pain or injury Mr. Smale Foxe would not hesitate.

The reasons for Mr. Foxe's attitude were quite simple.

The Housemaster had failed to gain his own ends—he had failed to force Lawrence to obey his commands. Mr. Foxe, in fact, had been foiled all along the line—he had been defied by the junior. And, in consequence, the Housemaster possessed an intense desire to do the junior all the harm he could.

For Mr. Foxe had discovered, by secret means of his own that Lawrence had been performing acts which were against the rules and regulations of St. Frank's. This does not mean to indicate that Lawrence had misbehaved himself. To be quite truthful, Lawrence had acted honourably and with an excellent motive.

In short, he had been leading a kind of double life. For he was not only Lawrence of the Remove—but he was "Young Ern," the wonderful young boxer, who had twice appeared victoriously in contests at the Ring Pavilion, in Heimford.

Young Ern, in fact, was being talked about largely in boxing circles; one or two sporting journals, indeed, had devoted quite a lot of space to him. He was described by several experts as being the most amazing of lightweight boxers England had seen for years. And there was a mystery attached to Young Ern—for nobody knew his name, where he had come from, or where he went to. Only Mr. Norman Rook—Young Ern's backer—knew that his champion was Lawrence, of St. Frank's. And Mr. Rook kept his secret well, for he had given his word to Lawrence that he would do so.

The junior had obtained quite a lot of money from these boxing contests. Not one penny of this money did he keep for

himself. It went to his father—all of it. For Mr. Lawrence was in rather a bad way. A famous boxer in his earlier years, he had retired from the ring, had bought a prosperous business in London, and had progressed so well that he determined to give his son a public school and university education, and turn him out a gentleman, well equipped for life's struggle.

And then, just before Lawrence was due to come to St. Frank's, the crash had come. Lawrence senior had lost all his money in the disastrous failure of Scarbrook's Bank. Somehow or other, Mr. Lawrence managed to keep going, but it was touch and go whether he would be able to make ends meet.

But for the fact that the first term's fees at St. Frank's had been paid in advance, Lawrence would never have come to the school. And so the junior, discovering—quite by accident—that he was capable of making money in the Ring, had continued his career. And he had been able to send his father several substantial sums. But this money had been sent anonymously—for Mr. Lawrence had always told Ernest that he did not wish him to enter a professional boxing arena.

Lawrence himself, however, had the blood of his father in his veins, and the lure of the Ring had proved too strong for him. Under ordinary circumstances he would never have acted as he had done—but he remembered his father's strained, worried expression—and he realised that it was in his power to help. Perhaps the help would be inadequate, but it could not fail to relieve the strain to a certain extent.

Mr. Smale Foxe, knowing that Lawrence had appeared as a professional boxer, had descended to the vicious crime of blackmail—for Mr. Foxe was unscrupulous. At the outset, he had succeeded in extracting ten pounds from Lawrence. But that was his first and last success.

Mr. Foxe had been unable to intimidate the junior further. He had threatened—he had plotted—all in vain. And he could not personally expose the boy, because, by so doing, he would inevitably get himself into hot water.

And that was how the position stood.

Mr. Foxe, unable to harm the junior, and unable to force money from him, had developed an insane hatred for Lawrence. His one desire now, was to see the junior kicked out of St. Frank's in

diagnose. Such a disaster would have caused Mr. Foxe the most complete and intense pleasure.

Therefore he smiled maliciously as he gazed upon that letter from Mr. Grahame Tarrant. Oh no! He would certainly not allow Lawrence to be out for the evening. He would not grant the junior the slightest favour.

The Housemaster commenced walking to and fro in his study. His smile vanished, and he frowned thoughtfully. He was thinking. An idea had come to him—an idea which gave him quite peculiar pleasure.

"Yes!" he murmured, at length. "It might be done—in fact, I rather fancy it can be done. By Heaven! How splendid it would be if I could bring about the boy's downfall at once! It would be the first step! And it would not reflect any credit upon St. Frank's if this boy were to be expelled from the school—branded a thief!"

It was evident a somewhat drastic scheme was taking form in Mr. Foxe's mind. And later on in the morning—when the juniors had been released from the class room—Mr. Foxe met Lawrence in the lobby.

"Ah, Lawrence, just one moment," said the Housemaster.

"Yes, sir," said the junior.

"This morning I received a letter from a Mr. Tarrant," said Mr. Foxe. "He makes the request that I should allow you to be absent for the evening—and to further allow you to take a number of friends with you."

"Yes, sir," said Lawrence again.

"You have my full permission, Lawrence, to pay Mr. Tarrant this visit," said Mr. Foxe, smiling. "But I must make a condition that your friends do not number more than three. You may be absent, if you wish, until bedtime."

Lawrence looked up, genuinely surprised.

"Oh, thanks awfully, sir," he said. "I was coming along to ask you, as a matter of fact——"

"Then I have saved you the trouble, Lawrence," said the Housemaster.

And nodding, he smiled and passed along. Instantly Christine and Co. closed round Lawrence—they had heard everything.

"Great!" said Christine enthusiastically. "He's not such a bad old bird, after all. You'll take us, Lawrence, won't you?"

"Why, of course," said Lawrence. "It's rather a pity about those Ancient House chaps, though. Some of them are particularly anxious to come. I don't quite like telling them that there'll be nothing doing."

Bob Christine grinned.

"You want it here!" he said, tapping his forehead.

"Eh?"

"Brains, my dear chap—brains!" said Christine. "You've got plenty—why don't you use 'em?"

"But I don't understand——"

"Mr. Foxe said that you could take three fellows—and those three fellows will be Yorke, Talmadge, and myself," explained Christine. "What's to prevent you taking three more from the Ancient House—or a dozen, if you want to? Foxey hasn't got any control over there, and if the chaps get Mr. Lee's permission, it'll be all serone. Savvy?"

Ernest Lawrence chuckled.

"My hat!" he said. "I hadn't thought of that! It's a ripping idea, Christy. Yes, we shall be O.K., after all."

And the juniors strolled out into the Triangle, discussing what they should wear for the evening. Lawrence was rather silent, for his own clothing was somewhat shabby. He had not been provided with a brand new outfit when he came to St. Frank's. Funds had not run to it.

Mr. Foxe, meanwhile, returned to his study, smiling mysteriously. He had apparently been very genial. But if Lawrence could only have known what was in the Housemaster's mind, he would have been considerably astonished.

The very instant dinner was over, Mr. Foxe left the school. He hurried down to Bellton, and caught a train for Bannington. And when he arrived at the local town, he went to a quiet road, and tapped upon the door of a small, rather dilapidated-looking house. It was, as a matter of fact, a lodging house—where a certain Mr. Robinson had apartments. Mr. Robinson was in, and the Housemaster was shown to his rooms.

Mr. Foxe was ushered in, and he closed the door after he had entered. A man had risen from an easy chair, and now advanced across the room. This man was of almost exactly the same proportions as Mr. Foxe. His hair was somewhat long and appeared to be shaggy—which was hardly surprising,

considering that it was a wig. He wore large, tinted, horn-rimmed spectacles. And a neat moustache adorned his upper lip.

"Good gracious!" he ejaculated. "What are you doing here, James—at this time of the day? It's decidedly unwise——"

"You needn't worry, Ralph—I'm not running any risks," said Mr. Foxe. "You have succeeded in altering your appearance so admirably, that not even a trained detective could fathom the fact that we are brothers—and twin brothers at that. I have come because I want to arrange something with you."

A frown came over the other man's face.

"Arrange something?" he repeated sharply. "Some more of your under-hand methods, I suppose? Look here, James, it won't do—and I see no reason why I should make myself a further party to your insane——"

"That's enough!" interrupted Mr. Foxe. "You always were a grumbler, Ralph, and I haven't got time to argue with you now. There's no reason why you should worry your head or concern yourself about me. I am paying all your expenses, and you are having quite an easy time of it. Be content with that."

The other man looked rather angry.

"Be content!" he echoed curtly. "I have every reason to be satisfied, have I not? I obtained this position at St. Frank's—a temporary position it is true, but one that is calculated to do me quite a lot of good. I obtained this position, I repeat, and everything was going smoothly when you turned up."

"Like the villain in the melodrama?" suggested Mr. Foxe calmly.

"Exactly," retorted the other. "The simile is decidedly apt—and I am glad you know it! But for you, I should have been at St. Frank's now. I should never have consented to our changing places——"

"But, unfortunately, while we were arguing one evening, I knocked you down," interrupted Mr. Foxe. "And before you could recover, I had filled your shoes—not a soul at the school guessing the truth. Everybody was deceived, and I acted in such a manner that your good reputation was quite marred."

The brother's eyes flashed.

"You have done everything you possibly could to ruin my reputation!" he

exclaimed fiercely. "How can I return to St. Frank's now? Whatever your actions may be, James, I shall receive the blame——"

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Foxe. "When I leave St. Frank's there will be no reason for secrecy, and the whole truth will be revealed—and you will be exonerated. So there is no necessity for you to talk such nonsense. You ought to have realised from the very first that I intended having my way. I came to this district with a certain object—and that object will be achieved."

"In other words, you mean to do all the harm you possibly can to St. Frank's!" said Mr. Ralph Smaale Foxe. "It is a dastardly scheme, James, and I am a fool to stand by and see you plot and plan——"

"My dear fellow, you cannot do anything else," interrupted the Housemaster. "You have got your career to think about. And if you reveal all the facts, my conduct will reflect most unfavourably on your good name. Therefore, your only plan is to keep silent. I know that, and I am satisfied that you will hold your tongue."

The other man looked rather bitter.

"You are wrong, James," he exclaimed. "The truth is, I am too weak—I am too easy going. At the very beginning I ought to have put a stop to this impossible state of affairs. But, having failed to do so, it is now too late to act. My only course is to hold my tongue—and I hope sincerely that you will think better of your insane scheme, and behave like a gentleman."

Mr. James Smaale Foxe smiled—and it was not a particularly pleasant smile, either. He looked at his twin brother in a somewhat sardonic way. One could hardly have imagined that these two men were alike—that they were, in fact, so identical in appearance that it was practically impossible to tell one from the other.

But this was the actual truth. Shorn of his disguise, Mr. Ralph Smaale Foxe was the absolute double of James. They had always been remarkable for their amazing likeness to one another. As boys they had been the wonder and despair of all concerned. But later on in life, when their paths were separated, this trouble had not been so apparent.

It was unfortunate that while Ralph was quite honourable—although weak—his brother should be unscrupulous and

cunning. In appearance the twins were alike: in character they were vastly different. James had the making of a scoundrel in him, and it seemed that he was quite an adept in the art of roguery already. His attempted blackmailing of Ernest Lawrence proved this.

Yet both men were schoolmasters. They had been trained to it since youth, and had held appointments in various parts of the country. But Ralph was by far the more successful, his brother having received many black marks in the course of his career.

Edward Oswald Handforth, some days earlier, had seen the two men together—before Ralph had adopted his present disguise. But when Handforth told the story in the *Remove*, it was laughed to scorn. By all appearances, however, Handforth was absolutely right—although he was seldom right in his “marvellous discoveries.”

Mr. James Smale Foxe evidently had some particular reason for acting as he had done—he had some specific purpose in filling his brother's shoes at St. Frank's. What that purpose was remained to be seen. But, on more than one occasion, Ralph had changed places with his brother, while James had been elsewhere. Ralph had been compelled to do this against his will.

For example, when Lawrence journeyed to Helmford one day—in order to have an interview with the boxing promoter—he had been followed by a mysterious stranger, who was, in fact, none other than Mr. Smale Foxe. It was by these secret methods that Mr. Foxe had discovered the truth about Lawrence, and yet during this little episode, Mr. Foxe had been at St. Frank's. It was really Ralph who remained in the school—his brother having arranged matters beforehand.

When Mr. Foxe wished to be absent on one of his secret expeditions, he placed Ralph at St. Frank's for the time being—in this way providing himself with a perfect alibi. For nobody in the whole district knew that there were two of them. This had been kept secret. Handforth hardly counted.

Ralph detested the idea of being his brother's tool. But he was in a peculiar position. James was his brother, and, naturally, he wished to avoid all publicity and unpleasantness. Until things came to a very serious pass indeed, Ralph would remain silent, and hold his coun-

sel. Furthermore, he was easy-going and rather weak-willed—and his forceful, cunning twin had little difficulty.

“Now, look here, Ralph, I shall want you to be in Bellton Wood at about half-past four this afternoon,” said James. “That is why I have come here now—to arrange this. It is very important that you should be there.”

“Why?”

“Because I want you to take my place in the school for the evening,” replied Mr. Foxe. “Upon second thoughts, you had better not come until half-past six—when it is dark. It will be better that way. I wish to be out—and yet, at the same time, I want the excellent people at the school to imagine that I am in.”

“Some more of your tricky business, I suppose?” demanded Ralph angrily. “Look here, James, I don't like it—and I see no reason why I should encourage you to—”

“What on earth is the good of objecting like this?” snapped Mr. Foxe. “You've got to be there, Ralph, and it's simply a waste of time to refuse. I must have your help this evening. You are to meet me at the usual place in the wood, and I will hand you my cap and gown. It will be quite an easy matter for you to stroll up to the school, and go to my study.”

“It is very good of you to treat me in this way,” said Ralph bitterly. “You seem to forget that that study is mine—the gown is mine—the position itself is mine! You speak as though it were yours—”

“Tut-tut! Why these quibbles?” said Mr. Foxe. “I never knew such a man for wasting time. Be in the wood at six-thirty, and meet me, as I have said. That's all, Ralph. I shall expect you prompt to the minute.”

And, shortly afterwards, Mr. James Smale Foxe took his departure. He returned to St. Frank's, and arrived while afternoon lessons were in progress. He was feeling quite pleased with himself, and the way things were going.

That evening, if possible, he would develop his scheme. He realised that events might not shape themselves to his liking, but he would have to trust largely to luck. And luck, so it is said, favours the wicked.

As soon as afternoon lessons were over there was much activity among certain juniors in the *Remove*. In the College House, for example, Lawrence and

Christine and Yorke and Talmadge made a bee line for the dormitory.

They changed into their "Sunday best," and arrayed themselves in clean collars and other finery. They were looking very spick and span when, at about a quarter to five they emerged into the Triangle.

"I wonder if those Ancient House bounders are ready?" said Christine. "I expect there'll be some trouble. Blessed if I can understand why you wanted to invite 'em, Lawrence. They'll only be a giddy nuisance."

"Oh, I don't know," said Lawrence smiling. "They've been jolly decent to me, and I know they'd enjoy this little jaunt. I sha'n't forget how Nipper helped me when I went to Helmford to fight Mike Connor. I sha'n't forget how the other chaps gave me a hand, too. Everybody acted rippingly—like true sportsmen."

Christine and Co. and Lawrence hurried across the Triangle, and found a group of Ancient House fellows collected at the bottom of the steps. There were four juniors altogether—Tommy Watson, Reginald Pitt, Fatty Little, and myself. We, with Sir Montie, had been invited by Lawrence to accompany him to the Mount.

Of course, quite a number of other juniors had been anxious to go, but, as Lawrence had said, we couldn't very well take the whole Remove.

"Hallo!" said Christine, as he came up. "You chaps ready?"

"Rather—we're only waiting for Montie," said Watson.

"I expect he'll be about half an hour," I grinned. "He's not made up his mind which tie he'll wear, and he's trying some on in front of the mirror in Study C. He's only got to go through another two dozen!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Christine snorted.

"We're not going to be kept waiting by that ass!" he exclaimed. "Come on, you chaps, we'll buzz in and haul Montie out by force."

But this scheme—fortunately for the schoolboy baronet—was not put into execution. For Montie appeared at that very moment, highly pleased with himself, and sublimely unconscious of the fact that he had kept everybody else waiting.

"Oh, here you are, slowcoach!" said

Christine gruffly. "We were just coming up for you!"

"Begad!" said Tregellis-West. "I'm awfully sorry, dear old boys. But I've been having some difficulty with regard to neckties. I rather fancy this one is somewhat too showy, an' I have a good mind to change it!"

"And we've seven good minds that you won't!" I interrupted briskly. "Come on, my sons—this way! Don't forget—there's a young lady waiting to pour out tea at five o'clock, and we've only got about seven minutes. I'm surprised at you, Montie, suggesting that we should all keep a lady waiting!"

"Begad! I—I didn't mean——"

But Montie was unable to go any farther. He was carried along by several of the juniors, and we were soon stepping it out briskly for the Mount, which lay up the road, in the direction of Bannington Moor.

When we arrived we were greeted warmly by Mr. Grahame Tarrant, who shook hands with us all in the hall, and made himself exceedingly genial. He reserved his warmest smile and his heartiest hand grip for Ernest Lawrence.

"I am delighted to see you again, my lad!" he exclaimed. "And these young gentlemen are your friends? Excellent! I only trust that you will all enjoy yourselves. I am afraid it will be a very quiet evening—judged from your standpoint. We will have tea, a little music perhaps one or two songs in the drawing-room to while away the time before supper comes along. Then, as a final, I intend to show you a few of my treasures."

"That'll be ripping, sir!" said Lawrence.

Very shortly afterwards they were ushered by their host into the drawing-room, and here sat Miss Sylvia, presiding over the tea-tray. She was looking even more charming than ever, attired in a silk afternoon frock of exquisite colour and design. I felt inclined to uphold Lawrence's statement that she was the prettiest girl he had ever seen.

"Hallo, you fellows!" she exclaimed cheerfully, as we entered, "I thought you'd turn up to time. Squat down just where you like—— Hold on, though! I shall want one or two of you to pass the teacups round!"

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie.

I think he was rather surprised at the young lady's free and easy style of con-



Crash! Slam! Crash! Biff!
Lawrence simply went for the trampe hammer and tongs—and every one of his blows found a mark.

versation. We were all surprised, in fact. But it was quite evident that Miss Sylvia was not the ordinary type of frivolous young lady.

She loved sport, she was always intensely active, and she was quite domesticated, too. There was nothing coy and shy in her manner--no falseness. She was frank and open, and made all the visitors feel comfortable during the first minute.

But, in spite of this homeliness, she was undeniably as pretty as a picture, and her eyes were simply glorious. But even when she looked at a fellow straight in the eye, she caused no embarrassment. For she was simply genuine right through.

"It's jolly decent of you to come like this!" she exclaimed. "I've often wanted to meet some of you St. Frank's chaps. But, of course, I've never had the opportunity. It wasn't up to me to speak first, you know. Still, everything's O.K. now, and I reckon we shall get on top-hole!"

"Rather!"

"You bet we shall, Miss Sylvia!"

"My dear--my dear!" murmured Mr. Tarrant. "I really must protest--"

"About my slang again, grand-dad?" chuckled Sylvia. "My hat! Haven't you got used to me by this time? You mustn't take any notice of me, you old darling! And I should hate to speak like a blessed dictionary."

Mr. Tarrant sighed.

"I'm afraid you are beyond all hope, my dear!" he said, with a chuckle.

The juniors grinned. They liked Miss Sylvia all the better because she was free and easy. And they came to the conclusion that she must be one of the most stunning girls they had ever come in contact with--and, certainly, there was nobody in the whole district who could compare with her.

The evening passed serenely and happily.

During tea Mr. Tarrant discussed the incident when he and his grand-daughter had first met Lawrence. Lawrence himself was greatly embarrassed, as we could easily see by his attitude.

But Mr. Tarrant was inexorable; he repeated all the details, and told us exactly what Lawrence had done, and how thoroughly he had beaten the two hulking tramps. This was news to us, for Lawrence had given no details whatever.

"You bounder!" said Christine. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"I did!" muttered Lawrence uncomfortably.

"Rats!" said Bob. "You didn't mention anything about a scrap with two tramps. My hat! What a giddy champion you are! With a ricked ankle, you go and give a hiding to two burly ruffians double your size! You're a wonder!"

"I should say he is!" said Miss Sylvia. "You ought to have seen him, you fellows! It was simply ripping! Those tramps were treated to the biggest surprise of their lives! And the way they bunked was a scream!"

Conversation continued in the same strain for some little time, until Lawrence was nearly desperate. But then tea came to an end, and Miss Sylvia was requested to play and sing.

She did both admirably, and she would not be satisfied until some of the guests had shown their prowess in the same direction. It seemed that old Mr. Tarrant and his granddaughter lived quite alone at the Mount, except for an old housekeeper and two servants.

But, later on, it was learned that Mr. and Mrs. Tarrant, jun.,--Sylvia's father and mother--were on a trip to India, and would not be back for several months. When they did come back they would take up their residence at the Mount.

Sylvia had not gone on the trip because she was a somewhat wilful young lady, and she preferred to stay in England with her grandfather. Which was lucky for St. Frank's.

Upon the whole, it was one of the most enjoyable evenings I had ever spent. And I am quite positive that at least four of the St. Frank's fellows were head over heels in love with Miss Sylvia long before the time came for departure.

And it was rather difficult to avoid falling into this condition. The girl was so charming that a fellow simply could not avoid admiring her.

But good things generally come to an end quickly--or seem to--and it was supper time almost before we knew where we were. Supper was as big a success as the tea; and then, just before we got ready to take our departure, Mr. Tarrant took us along to his own sanctum, in order to show us a few of his treasures.

"I don't suppose you'll be interested, boys, but I feel that I must show you a few of my things," he exclaimed genially. "I didn't bring you earlier because I didn't want to spoil the enjoyment of the evening. But now that you are just off, you must give me a few minutes—whether you begrudge them or not!"

"Oh, we shall be awfully interested, sir!"

"Rather, sir!"

Mr. Tarrant had arrived at his sanctum by this time, and when the juniors got inside the room they had no time to feel uninterested. For the apartment was crammed full of the most enthralling curios and trophies.

Mr. Tarrant had been a great traveller, and he had brought all manner of valuable articles from different parts of the world. There were skins, elephant's tusks, curious insects preserved in spirits, a tiny stuffed crocodile, and bird plumage of wondrous hues, and dozens of other specimens of equal interest.

But the most prized possession of all was the unique collection of genuine pearls, which were on view in a glass case. Mr. Tarrant explained that he had brought them from the South Seas, and he had obtained them from the sea bed, opening the oysters with his own hands. It was a wonderful collection of natural pearls, and worth a considerable sum of money. The juniors were greatly interested—particularly Lawrence. And then the fellows took their departure, and got into their overcoats and caps. Lawrence was the last junior to leave the sanctum. By a curious trick of fate, he hung back, and was in the apartment for fully a minute quite alone. Then he reluctantly dragged himself away and joined the others in the hall.

And the instant he left the apartment a curious thing happened.

The window softly and silently opened and a figure appeared. It was that of a man—a man wearing a black mask!

He crossed stealthily over to the case of pearls.

and he extracted the pearls—every one of them. He dropped them loose into his pocket, and then crept out of the apartment as silently and as stealthily as he had entered.

It was a daring robbery, but exceedingly well timed. For, in the hall, Mr. Tarrant was bidding his guests good-bye, and there was considerable bustle and laughter and noise.

Nobody thought of the sanctum, nobody imagined that an intruder would get into the apartment at that particular moment. And the thief had left absolutely no trace; there was no indication that a stranger had found admittance.

Like a shadow in the night the masked man stole away, until, finally, he dropped over the stone wall which surrounded the garden, and found himself in an adjoining meadow. Here he paused and took a deep breath.

"Splendid!" he murmured. "I found it necessary to wait a long time, but my patience was rewarded in a manner which had exceeded all my expectations! Fate has played into my hands—and Lawrence is doomed!"

The man removed his mask, and revealed the fact that he was Mr. Smale Foxe, the Housemaster of the College House. Mr. Foxe had been on the alert the whole evening, waiting for an opportunity to present itself so that he could carry out his dastardly scheme.

His one desire was to bring dire disgrace upon the head of Ernst Lawrence. And events had happened in such a way that Mr. Foxe's scheme was assisted.

Moreover, the Housemaster could see that he would be able to profit to a large extent by the affair. For he would keep many of these wonderful pearls for himself! Mr. James Smale Foxe was not at all averse to such methods.

And he chuckled as he thought of his own cast-iron security. It would be absolutely impossible for anybody to connect the robbery of the Mount with him. For he had been at St. Frank's the whole evening—since six o'clock. He had not moved out once. This, at all events, was what scores of witnesses would be willing to swear. These witnesses were, of course, unaware of the fact that there were two identical editions of Mr. Smale Foxe. It was the twin brother who had filled Mr. Foxe's shoes at St. Frank's. It was an alibi which could never be disturbed.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CUNNING OF MR. SMALE FOXE.

THE intruder worked rapidly. From first to last he was not in the apartment for more than two minutes. And in that period he succeeded in opening the show case,

The juniors, of course, took their departure from the Mount in a merry, light-hearted mood. They had no knowledge of the dramatic incident which had taken place. Lawrence himself was in total ignorance of the matter. And so, to tell the truth, was Mr. Grahame Tarrant.

The old gentleman did not discover the loss at once, for after the boys had departed he went straight into the drawing-room with Miss Sylvia, and they sat discussing for quite a long time, the events of the evening.

Meanwhile, Mr. Foxe was back at St. Frank's. He had arranged it with his brother. The latter merely went out for a stroll, and returned within ten minutes. But, of course, it was James who returned—Ralph had donned his disguise once more, and had taken his departure for Bannington. He was once more Mr. Robinson.

Mr. Foxe was highly delighted with himself as he sat in his study after everybody had gone to bed. Try as he would, he could not see how any hitch could occur. The matter was the simplest one he had ever devised.

Mr. Foxe had never hoped that he would be able to secure such a prize as a collection of genuine pearls. He had hovered about the Mount, gazing at several windows, hoping to be able to annex something of moderate value, so that he would be able to fix the blame on to Lawrence. But, with these pearls in his possession, it would be a totally different matter.

The case, instead of being trivial, would be extremely serious, and, naturally, far greater publicity would be given to it. And this fact afforded Mr. Foxe a most remarkable amount of pleasure.

He remained in his study until quite late. Midnight had boomed out, and Mr. Foxe still remained there. He had already examined the pearls, and had divided them. The bigger and finer jewels he had placed in one heap, and the smaller in another heap. These latter pearls he carefully wrapped in a piece of blank paper, and then tied this round with string. The other pearls, representing at least four-fifths of the value of the whole collection, he placed in a position of safety in the study.

It was a secret receptacle within a locked cash-box. It was a large cash-

box, with an inner tray. Beneath this there existed a shallow space which was presumably the bottom of the box. As a matter of fact, it was a false bottom—there still remained a space underneath. And it was here that the pearls were hidden. The secret cavity was then closed, the tray replaced, and the cash-box locked. Mr. Foxe had no fear that his study would be searched. Even if this took place the search would be futile.

When half-past twelve boomed out Mr. Foxe made a move. But he did not go immediately to his own bedroom. He proceeded to act in a most mysterious manner. In short, he made his way to the Remove passage.

And he came to a halt at the door of Study T—the study which was occupied by Ernest Lawrence.

Mr. Foxe entered, but he did not switch on the electric light. Instead, he soon had a small electric torch glowing, and with that he was able to perform his work quite satisfactorily. The illumination was quite sufficient for his needs.

"Now, we must have a careful look round!" he murmured to himself.

He was searching for a small hiding-place—a spot that would appear to be cunning and unfindable—but which, in reality, could be dropped upon with comparative ease. It was rather a difficult task.

Mr. Foxe went round the study several times. He examined the floor, and came to the conclusion that that portion of the room would not be satisfactory. The table revealed no prospects whatever, and the cupboard was equally unpromising.

There remained only one of the two chairs, or the bookcase. The chairs were quite out of the question, decided Mr. Foxe—although, on second thoughts, he might be able to stuff the little parcel in the padding of the easy chair.

But, somehow, this idea did not commend itself to the Housemaster. And, finally, as he was looking at the bookcase, he got hold of a scheme which would fit the case perfectly. It was by no means an original idea, but perhaps it was all the better for that.

Mr. Foxe had been looking at the books on the top shelf. The bookcase was quite a decent one, considering, for it had a cupboard below, and glass doors on the top. It had been in the study before Lawrence arrived—and a number

of volumes had rested on the shelves for years.

One of these, at the far corner, was an old cloth bound directory. It was for the year 1912, so it was fairly obvious that the book had not been disturbed for ages, and would probably remain undisturbed.

Mr. Foxe opened the bookcase, removed the directory, and noticed that the top was dusty. This proved that the book had not been used for a long time. He opened it out in the centre, and laid it upon the table. His electric torch was also placed on the table, and switched on.

Mr. Foxe produced a large pocket knife. It was sharp and strong, and with the big blade he proceeded to cut out a square from the very centre of the book. It was rather a difficult task, but by taking it by degrees, he at length succeeded.

The directory, when closed, looked precisely the same as it had done before Mr. Foxe had commenced operations. But, when opened, it was discovered that quite a large cavity existed in the centre of the book.

In this cavity Mr. Foxe placed the small parcel of pearls. They were the least valuable of the whole collection. On second thoughts, Mr. Foxe removed the parcel, unfastened it, and put the pearls in the cavity, loose. Then he closed the volume, and held it up. It looked perfectly innocent and ordinary.

"Splendid!" murmured the Housemaster.

He carefully replaced the book on the top shelf—but not until he had placed the mutilated portions of the pages at the back of the shelf. They were hidden by the books, and there was nothing to show, by glancing round the study, that anybody had been there, or that anything had been interfered with.

Mr. Foxe was highly pleased with the result of his labours, and he switched off his electric torch, after a final look round, crept to the door, and emerged into the passage. Then he made his way upstairs to his bedroom, closed and locked the door, and sat down in front of the fire.

"Well, Master Lawrence, I rather fancy that your fate is sealed!" he murmured. "You made a very grave mistake when you defied me—when you pitted yourself against me! The consequences will be very disastrous for you, my young friend!"

Mr. Foxe appeared to be highly delighted, for his face was smiling, and his eyes had a sparkle of enjoyment in them. He made no attempt to undress, but sat there, gazing thoughtfully into the fire. He lit a cigarette, and sat smoking, his thoughts still on the same subject.

It would be easy—quite easy—and there would be no manner of doubt that Lawrence would find himself in awful disgrace. He would, in short, be found guilty of a most serious theft, and he would certainly be expelled from the school. It was more than probable he would be placed in the hands of the police by the outraged Mr. Tarrant.

The latter, of course, would discover his loss in the morning—probably he had discovered it already. But Mr. Foxe would soon know. He would bring forward the fact that several St. Frank's boys had been at the Mount on the previous evening.

Naturally, he would declare that the idea of any one of the boys stealing the jewels was quite preposterous. At the same time, he would suggest that their studies and boxes be thoroughly searched—if only in satisfaction to themselves. Some of the ill-natured people of Bellton might possibly spread a rumour that the boys were responsible—and it would be far better if their belongings were thoroughly examined. Mr. Foxe decided that he would strongly advise the juniors to submit to this search.

And what would be the result?

The boys, readily consenting to a search—since they knew that the search would be futile, would almost be disinterested spectators. But when it came to Lawrence's study, there would be a big surprise. The search would soon reveal that book, and Mr. Foxe would call attention to the scraps of paper at the rear of the shelf—it would give him the opening he required. And then, of course, the rest would be a matter of seconds. The pearls would be discovered—and Lawrence would be branded.

There would be no escape for him. Mr. Foxe thought of all these details with great pleasure. He would immediately institute a full inquiry, and it would not take him long to elicit the information that Lawrence had been the last to leave Mr. Tarrant's sanctum—and that he had had quite a good opportunity of pocketing the pearls unseen by his host. The whole affair would be

so dead easy that Mr. Foxe chuckled when he thought about it. Fato had played into his hands in the most satisfactory manner.

Another point which Mr. Foxe did not forget was the position of Lawrence's father. It would be made known that Lawrence senior was in a bad way—and he urgently needed money. Furthermore, it would be made clear that the junior had been making desperate efforts to obtain money to send to his father. And Mr. Foxe would at once suggest—and it would be a perfectly plausible idea—that Lawrence had dispatched the bulk of the pearls to his father. That would account for their having disappeared, and only the inferior stones remained.

The whole case was cut and dried. There could be no escape. Lawrence's downfall was coming. The chopper was raised—and almost ready to fall!

CHAPTER V.

DEVELOPMENTS.

NELSON LEE looked up from his morning paper.

"Come in!" he called.

It was quite early morning, and breakfast had not yet been served in the Ancient House. But Nelson Lee was generally an early riser, and he always liked to have a glance at the newspapers while he smoked an early cigarette.

The door of the study opened, and Tubbs, the page boy, entered.

"Sorry to disturb you, sir," said Tubbs. "But there's a gent waiting in the lobby—says he wants to see you most urgent. This 'ere is his card, sir."

Tubbs handed over the slip of paste-board, and Nelson Lee glanced at it.

"Oh, Mr. Grahame Tarrant!" exclaimed the famous Housemaster-detective. "I have met Mr. Tarrant before. Show the gentleman in at once, Tubbs."

"Yes sir!" said the page boy.

He went off, and Nelson Lee laid his paper aside. He knew, of course, about the juniors being at the Mount on the previous evening—and it even seemed that he knew more than this. For there was quite a peculiar little smile on his face as he waited for Mr. Tarrant to be ushered in. It seemed as though Nelson Lee anticipated what was coming. He

certainly knew more than he affected to know.

Lee had met Mr. Tarrant once—quite by chance in the village post office. The pair had had two or three words together, but nothing more. Lee merely knew that the old gentleman had recently come into residence at the Mount.

Very soon a tap sounded upon the door, and it was opened, and Tubbs ushered Mr. Grahame Tarrant into the study.

"Really, Mr. Lee, I must apologise for calling upon you at such an early hour," said the visitor. "But the circumstances are very exceptional, and I am greatly worried. If you can be of any assistance to me, I shall be more than grateful. I am well aware of your record, sir, and I know that you are probably the cleverest detective in this country. I wish you to investigate a robbery."

"Please take a seat, Mr. Tarrant, and let me know the details of the affair," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "It will be far better, I think if you begin at the beginning."

Mr. Tarrant shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I do not know that there is any beginning," he said. "I simply discovered that the pearls were missing last night, and the whole affair is most mysterious——"

"The pearls?" repeated Nelson Lee, questioningly.

"Yes—I had quite a wonderful collection of natural pearls," replied Mr. Tarrant. "Curiously enough, I was showing my collection to my young visitors only last night. These pearls were worth, roughly speaking, between eight and ten thousand pounds, Mr. Lee. And they have completely disappeared."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "That is a serious loss, Mr. Tarrant."

"It is, indeed!" said the visitor gravely. "I am exceedingly puzzled over the whole matter, and I hardly know what to think. Perhaps I did not take proper precautions—my granddaughter has frequently told me that I ought to keep the pearls under lock and key."

"And where did you actually keep them?" enquired Nelson Lee.

"Merely in a small glass case in my own sanctum," replied Mr. Tarrant. "They are natural pearls, Mr. Lee—I obtained them in the South Seas. They are just as they were taken from the

oysters. And some of them are wonderful."

Tap-tap.

Nelson Lee frowned as he glanced up at the door.

"Come in!" he exclaimed.

The door opened, and Mr. Smale Foxe entered. He had a sheaf of papers in his hand, and he appeared to be quite unconscious of the fact that Nelson Lee already had a visitor. He took two strides into the room, and then came to a halt.

"Oh, really!" he exclaimed. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Lee—I had no idea that you were engaged!"

"It is quite all right, Mr. Foxe," said Nelson Lee. "You must let me introduce you to Mr. Grahame Tarrant, of the Mount. Mr. Tarrant, this gentleman is Mr. Smale Foxe, the Housemaster of the College House."

"I am delighted to meet you, sir!" said the old gentleman, coming forward, and extending his hand. "I wrote to you a day or two ago—although I did not have the pleasure of knowing your name at that time. I regret to say, Mr. Foxe, that I have sustained a very serious loss."

Mr. Foxe raised his eyebrows.

"I am exceedingly sorry!" he said. "But perhaps I am intruding——"

"No—no—not at all!" said Mr. Tarrant. "I shall be quite pleased if you will remain, my dear sir. I am sure that Mr. Lee will not object."

"Oh, not at all!" said Nelson Lee smoothly.

But, as a matter of fact, the great detective did object. He was inwardly annoyed that Mr. Smale Foxe should have entered at this particular moment, for he wanted to have a private little chat with the owner of The Mount. However, that chat could not take place now—since Mr. Foxe had butted in. It was impossible to send the College Housemaster about his business.

Mr. Foxe had timed his visit well.

He had been at his window in the College House—expecting, to tell the truth, a visit from Mr. Tarrant. Mr. Foxe had calculated that the old gentleman would discover his loss early in the morning—or, perhaps, he had made the discovery late at night. And Mr. Foxe had reckoned that Mr. Grahame Tarrant would come to the school quite early in the morning. These calculations had proved correct—except in one detail.

Instead of Mr. Tarrant coming straight to Mr. Foxe, the owner of The Mount had gone to Nelson Lee! This was entirely in opposition to all Mr. Smale Foxe's ideas. And it rather took him aback. He had not reckoned upon Mr. Tarrant going over into the Ancient House. It simply meant that he would tell his story to Nelson Lee—and that Mr. Foxe would be left out of it. This wouldn't do at all. The scoundrelly Housemaster would never be able to put his cunning scheme into execution.

There was, therefore, only one thing to be done.

Mr. Foxe made up his mind quickly. He hurriedly collected some papers together, and went across to the Ancient House—with the intention of calling in at Nelson Lee's study, ostensibly to speak about some purely school matters. Mr. Foxe was quite certain that he would be asked to remain. Everything would then go exactly as he had planned.

Mr. Foxe had been asked to remain, and he was inwardly delighted.

"I was just telling Mr. Lee about my loss," said Mr. Grahame Tarrant. "It is a most mysterious affair, Mr. Foxe. My collection of pearls, which I value at about eight to ten thousand pounds, has disappeared completely!"

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Mr. Foxe. "This is terrible, Mr. Tarrant—quite terrible!"

"The pearls were intact last night," continued Mr. Tarrant. "There is no doubt on that point, since I was displaying them to a number of boys belonging to this school. They were quite interested in my collection, and the pearls had not been interfered with then."

"At what time was this?" asked Mr. Foxe.

"Oh, shortly before the boys left," replied Mr. Tarrant. "That is to say, at about nine-thirty, or perhaps slightly before then. At all events, it was between nine and half-past."

"And when did you first miss the pearls?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Oh, not until practically eleven," replied the old gentleman. "You see, after my young visitors had left, I went into the drawing room with my granddaughter. We were talking for quite a long while—until, indeed, till we had decided to go up to bed. I went into my sanctum, just about eleven, in order to have a final smoke before turning in. I poked up the fire, sat down, and re-

mained reading for perhaps ten minutes. Then, happening to glance up, I noticed something peculiar about the glass case—where the pearls were usually kept."

"Quite so," said Nelson Lee. "Pray proceed, Mr. Tarrant."

"I rose from my chair, never expecting that anything was wrong," went on the visitor. "You may imagine my consternation, therefore, when I discovered that the glass case was empty, and that every pearl had disappeared! There was not the slightest doubt in my mind that a thief had entered, and had made off with my much-prized collection."

"Was there anything to indicate how the room had been entered?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Well, I certainly discovered that the window was unfastened," replied Mr. Tarrant. "I must admit, Mr. Lee, that I had been grossly careless. You see, I did not imagine that there was a possibility of a theft in such a quiet place as this. I therefore took no special precautions. I did not dream for a moment that anybody would get in——"

"One moment, Mr. Tarrant, please!" interrupted Mr. Foxe. "Did anybody in the district know of these pearls?"

"Not that I am aware of," replied the old gentleman.

"The boys, then, were the first real outsiders to know——"

"Good gracious, Mr. Foxe," protested Mr. Tarrant. "You surely do not suggest that the boys could have—by gad! It is a ridiculous suggestion, Mr. Foxe, if you will pardon me saying so!"

The College Housemaster shrugged his shoulders.

"I am not suggesting for one moment that the boys are responsible, or that they know anything of the crime," he said smoothly. "At the same time, Mr. Tarrant, I am thinking of their safety. Four of the boys, at least, belong to my House. I must think of their welfare."

"But—but——"

"You will surely realise, Mr. Tarrant, that those four boys are now in a somewhat peculiar position," went on Mr. Foxe. "The same applies, of course, to Mr. Lee's boys. But I am not concerned with them. I must merely look after my own pupils. These juniors were the only people, outside the household, who knew of the existence of the pearls. There is no indication as to how the pearls disappeared. They were there

when the boys were examining them—but they were not there when you had a look at the glass case, two or three hours later. Do you know if any of these juniors were left alone in the room?"

Mr. Tarrant looked rather startled.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I did go out with several of the boys, leaving one or two others looking at the pearls," he exclaimed. "Finally, I think, only one boy was left, but I am quite satisfied he did not touch the stones——"

"I am satisfied, too," Mr. Foxe hastened to put in. "At the same time, sir, I must think of the boys' safety. When this story gets abroad there will be much talk—and there are plenty of people in this district who take a keen delight in making unpleasantness. I shall take immediate steps to establish the innocence of my four boys who visited your house last night. I cannot have any suggestions or innuendoes made against them. Their position must be made clear."

"Perhaps you are right, Mr. Foxe," said the old gentleman slowly. "At the same time, I do not quite like the thought that you suspect the boys!"

"By no means!" interrupted Mr. Foxe. "I do not suspect them at all. I am positively convinced that they are innocent. I am merely concerned with regard to their good name. I am looking at this affair from a commonsense standpoint, and I want you to do the same, sir. In fairness to the boys, I am going to suggest that their boxes and their studies shall be searched——"

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Mr. Tarrant.

"The boys themselves will readily agree, I am sure," went on Mr. Foxe. "After this search has been made, they will be quite safe, there will be no possibility of the village gossips pointing the finger of suspicion at these juniors. It is merely for their own sakes that I intend taking this course. They are innocent—I know that—but, at the same time, other people may not share my views. If you will care to come with me now, Mr. Tarrant, we will get the matter over immediately."

Mr. Tarrant looked rather uncomfortable.

"I really wish you would not do anything of the kind, Mr. Foxe," he said. "The boys will probably misunderstand

—they will think that I suspect them—

"I will make it quite clear that nothing is further from your thoughts," said Mr. Foxe. "In any case, we will put it to the boys themselves, and see what they say. That, I think, will be the most satisfactory thing to do. We will let the boys decide."

And Mr. Foxe walked to the door, as though the matter was settled. Mr. Tarrant hesitated for a moment, and then followed. He certainly wanted to be there when the Housemaster put the matter to the juniors. He wanted to make them thoroughly understand that he had no suspicions whatever against them. He followed Mr. Foxe's argument, and he imagined that Mr. Foxe had decided to act in this way from a purely good motive. Never for a second did Mr. Tarrant guess the truth.

"I will be back presently, Mr. Lee," he exclaimed. "Please forgive me for running off in this way."

"That is quite all right, my dear sir," said Nelson Lee quietly. "When you return, we will continue our little discussion, and perhaps we shall be able to arrive at a solution of this little mystery."

"I sincerely hope so, Mr. Lee," said Mr. Tarrant.

He followed the master of the College House out into the passage. Then they went into the Triangle, and crossed over to the College House. As luck would have it a crowd of juniors were standing in the lobby, and that crowd included Bob Christine, Yorke, and Talmadge and Ernest Lawrence. They were the four boys who were required. Mr. Foxe smiled as he observed this.

He would speak now—before all the other juniors. He saw no reason why this matter should be private. Publicity would be far better.

"Good-morning!" exclaimed the juniors, as they saw Mr. Tarrant.

"Good-morning, my boys," said Mr. Tarrant smiling. "I am afraid there is a little trouble—but I want you to fully understand that I am taking no hand in this matter now, it is Mr. Foxe's idea. I do not suspect any one of you—"

"Suspect us, sir?" said Christine. "Of what?"

"Listen, my boys, and I will explain!" put in Mr. Smale Foxe smoothly. "There has been a robbery at the Mount—"

"A robbery!"

"My only hat!"

"A very serious robbery," repeated Mr. Foxe. "In short, a valuable collection of pearls has completely vanished. It was stolen last night, but Mr. Tarrant does not know the exact time. He is only aware of the fact that the jewels were missing at eleven o'clock."

"Why, we were looking at those pearls, sir," said Christine. "They're ripping, too! They're lovely things! What a frightful shame! I wonder who could have done it?"

"That is what Mr. Tarrant wishes to find out!" said the Housemaster drily. "Now, my boys, I do not want you to misunderstand me. I am perfectly certain that you are innocent—"

"Why, great Scott!" gasped Yorke. "Does—does Mr. Tarrant suspect—?"

"No, my boy—no!" put in Mr. Grahame Tarrant hurriedly. "I do not suspect anybody from this school. Please let me make that clear. This suggestion is Mr. Foxe's entirely—and I do not agree with it. I want you to fully realise that."

Christine and Lawrence were glancing at one another with concern.

"We know you wouldn't suspect us, sir," said Lawrence. "There's no need to tell us that."

"Rather not!" said Christine. "Why, what could we do with the pearls?"

"Please let me explain, boys," said Mr. Foxe. "It will shortly be general knowledge that you boys examined those pearls last night, and, further, that you were left alone in the room with them. Mr. Tarrant has said that he was absent when some of the boys remained—"

"That's quite right, sir!" put in Lawrence. "I think I was the last fellow to leave the room. I was very interested in the pearls, and I was the last chap to leave. I was in the room with the pearls for two or three minutes, and nobody else was there. But they were quite intact when I left the room."

"Very well, my dear Lawrence!" put in Mr. Tarrant, patting him on the shoulder. "The suggestion that you could be concerned in this robbery is absolutely preposterous and absurd. Mr. Foxe quite agrees with me, and he is only taking this course so that you shall be safeguarded."

"I—I don't quite understand, sir," said Lawrence.

Mr. Foxe was smiling now—smiling

with triumph, although he did his best to conceal it. Lawrence had admitted that he was left alone with the pearls! Everybody would be talking about it, and, when the pearls were found hidden in Lawrence's study, the evidence would be as black as thunder.

There would be no loophole of escape for the boy. Mr. Foxe was delighted with the way things were going.

"I am quite satisfied, Lawrence, that you are not concerned with this robbery," said Mr. Foxe smoothly. "I am equally satisfied that all the other boys were quite innocent. At the same time, you must realise your position. You were left alone with these pearls—the whole district will know that before long. The pearls are missing. And some people, with evil minds, will begin talking. Suspicion will be cast upon you. It will be hinted that you took the pearls, and I detest anything of that kind. I want your position to be quite plain and open. Therefore, my lads, I am going to make a suggestion to you."

"Really, I strongly object——" began Mr. Tarrant.

"You must allow me to handle this matter as I think best, Mr. Tarrant," interrupted the Housemaster firmly. "My suggestion, boys, is this. Mind you, I do not insist—I leave it entirely to your own discretion. But it will be better for all concerned if you allow your studies to be thoroughly searched, and, furthermore, your boxes and other personal belongings. The search, naturally will be futile, but it will clearly prove that you are innocent. Until the real thief is disclosed, it is highly necessary that you should be safeguarded—that your names should be cleared from all possibility of suspicion."

"Well, sir, that's quite right!" said Christine. "Goodness knows, we didn't take the pearls! And if you think it's better our boxes and studies should be searched—well, we don't object."

"Not at all, sir," said Lawrence. "I think perhaps it would be just as well."

"Good!" said Mr. Foxe briskly. "I knew that you would take the matter sensibly, boys."

Mr. Tarrant looked uncomfortable.

"My dear lads, I do not want you to think I suspect——"

"We don't think anything of the sort, sir," interrupted Yorke. "But these pearls have vanished, and Lawrence and one or two other chaps were in the room

last. As Mr. Foxe says, people might get talking, and when tongues wag there's generally trouble. I think it'll be a lot better if we have our things searched, so that we shall be above suspicion."

"I agree!" said Lawrence, without hesitation.

Lawrence, in fact, was quite keen to have his belongings thoroughly examined. He knew well enough that if any suspicion did fall upon the St. Frank's fellows, he would get the brunt of it, for he had been alone with the pearls, and no other fellow had occupied quite the same position.

If suspicion fell upon anybody it would fall on Lawrence. The junior knew this, and he wanted to make his position quite secure. Quite a number of juniors knew also, that Lawrence had been trying to obtain money to send to his father. That was an additional reason why Lawrence was keen upon following Mr. Foxe's suggestion. The junior, as cute as he was, did not imagine that the Housemaster had laid a careful plot.

"I am exceedingly glad that you take the matter in the right spirit, my boys," said Mr. Foxe. "It is far better that this unpleasant business should be got over at once. Once your studies are searched, and there has been no result, you will be free from all suspicion. Fortunately there are only two studies in this house to be searched. Mr. Lee, I am quite sure, will adopt the same plan in his House."

"Two studies?" repeated Mr. Tarrant. "But there are four boys!"

"Three of them, my dear sir, occupy the same study," explained Mr. Foxe. "They are Christine and Yorke, and Talmadge. Lawrence has a study to himself. *I think, to begin with, we will examine these studies—leaving the boxes and other personal belongings until later."

"Right you are, sir," said Christine. "Perhaps you'd better begin with Study Q."

"Exactly," said Mr. Foxe. "Now, boys, I suggest that you remain outside, in the passage. Mr. Tarrant and I will enter the study, and we will have two disinterested boys with us, to do the searching."

Mr. Foxe glanced round, and he nodded.

"Reynolds, you will do for one," he exclaimed. "And you, Parry, will be required also. Please come with me."

Reynolds, of the Sixth, and Parry, of the Fifth, stepped forward. They were to be official searchers. They did not much care for their task, but there was no getting out of it. And a move was made for Study Q. A crowd of excited juniors followed, and collected out in the passage. This was precisely what Mr. Smale Foxe required.

Naturally, the result of the search in Study Q was precisely nil. Everything was turned upside down, every crevice was examined. But nothing was found. Christine and Co. looked on, from the doorway, with perfect composure.

"Well, they're not here, sir!" said Parry, at length.

"Of course they're not!" said Mr. Tarrant. "I do hope, boys, that you thoroughly understand."

"Of course we do, sir," said Christine, cheerfully. "We don't mind a bit."

"We will now go along to Lawrence's study," said Mr. Foxe. "The task will be much simpler there, for there is less furniture. But the result, naturally, will be exactly the same."

"That goes without saying," ejaculated Bob Christine.

They passed along to Study T, and entered. Lawrence stood near the door, and Mr. Tarrant and Mr. Foxe just inside the apartment. Reynolds and Parry commenced to search. They did the job thoroughly—they examined everything. There wasn't a corner of the room they didn't look into.

"Of course there is nothing here," said Mr. Tarrant. "I think we may as well——"

"One moment, Mr. Tarrant," interrupted Mr. Foxe. "I wish to be perfectly fair to the boy. The search must be thorough. For example, the bookcase. I do not think the volumes have been removed——"

"Oh, we'll soon do that, sir," said Parry.

He opened the doors of the bookcase, and lifted out the few books which rested on the second shelf. Everything behind was bare. The top shelf was treated in the same way. Mr. Foxe was now looking on keenly. It was his intention to draw attention to the cut scraps of paper which would be revealed at the

back of the bookcase. This, of course, would then lead to an examination of the books themselves.

The volumes were removed, and Mr. Foxe waited for his opportunity.

But it didn't come!

The volumes were removed, and it was seen that the bookshelf at the rear was perfectly clear. Those scraps of paper had vanished! They were not there now—as Mr. Foxe had left them during the night! The Housemaster strode forward, filled with doubt and incredulity. He could not possibly understand what this could mean.

"We must make quite certain of this bookcase," said Mr. Foxe, speaking quietly with difficulty. "We must not give anybody the opportunity of saying that the search was not complete. Let me have a look, boys."

"Certainly, sir," said Parry.

He considered it a waste of time, and wondered why Mr. Foxe was so insistent. Lawrence, himself, was rather surprised, too. He stood in the doorway, quite composedly and with perfect confidence. He knew the pearls were not there, so why should he worry?

Mr. Foxe carelessly removed one or two of the books, and idly opened them.

"Good gracious, Mr. Foxe, the pearls are not like wafers!" ejaculated Mr. Tarrant impatiently. "They could not be concealed between the leaves of a book! This is really a waste of time. I am surprised, sir, that you should keep up the search in this manner."

"I rather fancy we have finished, Mr. Tarrant," said the Housemaster smoothly.

He held in his hand the directory dated 1912, which he had mutilated during the night.

The pearls were here, and they would be revealed during the next few seconds. Mr. Foxe opened the volume from the centre, knowing that the cut portion of the book would at once be apparent.

He looked down at the pages, and then started. For a second it seemed as though his head was spinning round. He could see nothing—his brain was in a whirl. Mr. Foxe uttered a little gasp, and it was only by a superhuman effort that he prevented himself from crying out.

The directory was absolutely intact—it had not been tampered with!

CHAPTER VI.

EXTRAORDINARY!

MR. SMALE FOXE was staggered. Yet he dared not show it. He had to stand there, in front of the bookcase, with that directory in his hand, looking quite unconcerned. He never knew how he prevented himself from betraying the whole thing. He was bewildered—flabbergasted—almost stunned. What could it mean? During the night he had entered Lawrence's study, and he had taken that directory down. He had cut the centre out of it, leaving a hollow cavity, in which he had placed some of the pearls. The directory was there just the same—but now it was uncut, and untouched! The pearls were not there, and, apparently, never had been there.

Mr. Foxe felt dizzy, and he wondered, in a vague kind of way, whether he had made a mistake—whether he had placed the pearls in another study. But no—it could not be. He recognised everything in this room.

And then a voice came to him—and brought him to himself.

"Really, Mr. Foxe, there is no reason why we should remain any longer in this study," exclaimed Mr. Tarrant. "Neither do I see that it is necessary to examine the boys' trunks or boxes."

"Oh, yes sir, please have a look at them!" said Christina, from the passage. "The job might as well be done thoroughly while we're about it."

And so the party went upstairs, and the boxes and trunks and other personal belongings were examined. The result, of course, was exactly what had been expected. No sign whatever was found of the pearls. Mr. Foxe, during his search, had been like a man in a dream. He was mystified—he was so amazed that he did not know what he was doing.

He went down before the others, and managed to slip into Study T for a minute or two. And a hasty, frantic search assured him that there had been no mistake. The pearls were not there—the directory had not been tampered with.

It was startling—it was mystifying. There was only one possible explanation. Somebody—Heaven alone knew who—had entered the study, and had changed the directory. The mutilated one had been taken away, and an extra

copy had been substituted. The pearls, then, had gone, too! The whole of Mr. Foxe's clever and cunning scheme had come to nought! Ernest Lawrence would not be suspected of anything!

After leaving Study T, Mr. Smale Foxe went along the passage, crossed the lobby, and then went to his own private room. He closed the door, and locked it behind him. Then he stood thinking for a moment or two, and his expression was grim and set.

"By Heaven!" he muttered. "What can it mean? Where can those pearls be? Who has been in that study during the night? Who has substituted that perfectly whole directory for the one I mutilated? This is terrible—ghastly. Somebody knows—somebody is aware of the whole truth!"

Then abruptly, Mr. Foxe remembered his own pearls. That is to say, the pearls that he had kept for himself—the bulk of the whole collection. But they were safe, of course. They were in the secret cavity of his cash-box—which was locked. And the key was in his own pocket. Those pearls could not have been touched.

But, somehow, Mr. Foxe was suspicious now—he was filled with anxiety. And, taking the key out of his pocket, he was very soon fitting it into the lock of his cash-box. He turned the key, lifted the lid, and took out the inner tray. Then, by the aid of a cunning, concealed spring, he released the little doorway of the secret cavity, at the bottom of the box.

Then Mr. Smale Foxe fairly panted for breath.

The pearls were not there.

"Great Heaven above!" gasped Mr. Foxe, white to the lips. "They—they have gone, too!"

He stared at the cash-box for a moment or two, and then searched again frantically. There was something uncanny about this—something sinister and almost weird. It was the most staggering mystery that Mr. Foxe had ever known.

He had placed the pearls in his cash-box, he had even put them in a secret cavity, and had locked the cash-box up, placing the key in his pocket. Everything was exactly the same—but the pearls were not there!

What could it mean?

Mr. Foxe searched about for an explanation.

He felt dizzy with thinking, and he

could not arrive at any solution. For one wild moment he wondered if he had walked in his sleep. Could he possibly have come down in a kind of trance, and removed the pearls from Lawrence's study—and from his own?

But Mr. Foxe dismissed this idea as out of the question. He had never walked in his sleep, and he was quite certain that he was not capable of such a thing. Moreover, he had only slept fitfully. He had been awake more than half the night.

No! Some other agency had done this—and that other agency had been a human one. Mr. Foxe did not believe in the supernatural. And, in any case, ghosts are not in the habit of taking pearls.

But it was so astounding—and so disturbing—that Mr. Foxe was filled with a desire to run out of the school and disappear from St. Frank's for ever. For somebody knew about this affair—somebody had been aware of it all along. And that mysterious somebody had taken great pains to undo all the work which Mr. Smale Foxe had done.

But, after all, there was not so much mystery attached to the affair as Mr. Foxe imagined.

Over in the Ancient House, Nelson Lee was sitting in his study. He was waiting for Mr. Tarrant to return. The famous detective had been quite keen upon speaking to Mr. Tarrant alone—but Mr. Foxe had spoilt everything for the time being. However, Nelson Lee was patient, and he knew that he would be able to have his private talk very shortly.

And it was highly necessary that he should have a private talk.

For Nelson Lee was engaged in a somewhat curious occupation, as he sat at his desk. To tell the absolute truth, he was examining, with thoughtful interest—the missing pearls! Lee had the whole collection in front of him—every stone. And he had come to the conclusion that they were excellent specimens, and worth a great deal more than Mr. Tarrant had estimated.

The Housemaster Detective knew a great deal more about Mr. Smale Foxe than Mr. Smale Foxe knew about Nelson Lee! That was quite certain.

Over in a locked cupboard, in a corner of Nelson Lee's study, there reposed a directory, with the centre considerably mutilated. By all appearances Nelson Lee had been very keenly on the alert.

And he had been working hard during the night, too. That, also, was obvious. Ernest Lawrence did not know it, but he had a great many reasons to be very grateful to Nelson Lee.

Mr. Tarrant arrived at Lee's study very shortly afterwards—while the juniors were at breakfast. And a confidential chat followed. Mr. Tarrant and Nelson Lee had a nice quiet talk. And, at the end of it, they understood one another perfectly. In fact, Mr. Grahame Tarrant understood a great deal more than he had bargained for. And he and the great detective came to an agreement.

When Mr. Tarrant took his departure, he was still looking worried—but a close observer would have detected the fact that it was assumed. Mr. Tarrant emerged into the Triangle just as the juniors were coming out from breakfast. And the owner of the Mount was surrounded by a number of fellows.

"I hope you get the pearls back, sir!" exclaimed Christine, pushing forward.

"I sincerely hope so, too, my boy," said Mr. Tarrant. "But one never knows, if they have been stolen by a professional burglar, I'm afraid there will be no hope. But I must be going now, my lads—I intend making one final thorough search, and then I shall inform the police."

"Do you think it possible that the pearls might be there, sir, after all?" asked Reginald Pitt.

"I hardly think it is possible, Pitt," replied Mr. Tarrant. "At the same time, we must not be too sure. I will admit that I only searched hurriedly before I came to St. Frank's. I must now go back and investigate in a more thorough manner."

He took his departure almost at once, and the juniors had a lot to talk about before morning lessons commenced. And then, when lessons were over, the fellows found that they had something else to discuss—something eminently satisfactory.

Lawrence was just coming into the Triangle with Christine, when Teddy Long, of the Ancient House, came running over. Teddy Long was the busy-body of the Remove. If there was anything to be learned, Long knew about it before anyone else.

"I say, pax!" he exclaimed breathlessly. "No larks, you know."

"Keep your hair on!" said Christine. "I'm not going to touch you!"

"Heard the latest?" asked Long eagerly.

"If this is one of your little jokes, there's nothing doing!" said Christine. "We're not going to be caught——"

"It ain't a catch, you ass!" said Long, who was bursting with information. "It's true—and I think that Mr. Tarrant is a sissy old josser, to come here alarming everybody over nothing!"

"What on earth do you mean?" asked Lawrence.

"Why, haven't you heard?"

"No."

"Those pearls weren't stolen at all!" said Long, grinning. "They were at the Mount all the time!"

"What?" said Christine. "Well I'm blest! But how do you know this——"

"I've just heard!" said Long. "One of the servants from the Mount came down, and he had a chat with Cuttle. Cuttle told me. Those pearls were only mislaid—not stolen!"

"But how could they be mislaid?" asked Christine.

"Goodness knows!" said Teddy Long. "But that's the fact, anyhow. I believe one of the servants got the wind up, or something, and put the pearls away in a place of safety. Or it might have been Miss Sylvia up to one of her giddy jokes. Anyhow, the pearls are all there—intact!"

"Thank goodness for that!" said Lawrence. "It's settled all arguments, anyway."

Mr. Foxe, who was just passing, came to a halt, and stared at the juniors.

"What was that you were saying, Long?" he asked sharply.

"We were talking about those pearls," said Long.

"I know you were—did I understand you to say that they were found?" asked Mr. Foxe, controlling himself with difficulty.

"Yes, sir—they were at the Mount all the time!" said Long. "Mr. Tarrant was wrong when he said they had been stolen. Anyhow, he's found them, sir—they were in the house all the time."

Mr. Foxe nodded.

"That is quite excellent," he said smoothly. "I am glad to hear this piece of news."

The juniors looked after the Housemaster as he walked away. Somehow, it seemed to them that he had uttered the words through his teeth. It was almost as though he had been holding himself under control. And, as a matter of fact, this was the literal truth.

Mr. Smale Foxe was puzzled and terribly worried. The pearls had been recovered—in fact, they had been at the Mount all the time! That was what Mr. Tarrant imagined.

How had they got back—how had they been replaced?

Mr. Foxe knew nothing of Nelson Lee's activities—and he did not suspect anything. He was worried, and he was dumbfounded. And he decided that he would do nothing—he would take no action. He would wait and see if anything further developed.

But Mr. Smale Foxe had come to one decision.

From this moment onwards, he would proceed with a grim scheme which he had in his mind. And this scheme was calculated to bring the name of St. Frank's down into the dust.

But would Mr. Smale Foxe succeed in his sinister designs?

Nelson Lee was keeping his eyes well open, and was alive to everything.

The events of the next few weeks promised to be of considerable interest! And St. Frank's—although it didn't know it at the time—was in for some amazing excitement!

THE END.

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INTRODUCTION.

Jack Maxwell and Jim Harding are the sole survivors of a shipwreck off the Australian coast. They had come from England to settle in Australia, and were going to Cairns, where lived Jack's uncle, Professor Maxwell, the naturalist and explorer. Hearing that the professor has been away three months in the interior, the two Englishmen decide to go in search of him. Tom Anson, an Australian with whom they become acquainted, makes up the party.

(Now read on.)

On the Trail of the Secret.

FIFTEEN days had passed, days of fierce, dry heat, toilsome marches, and short rations of water. Jack Maxwell and Jim Harding had dropped what little tallow had gathered on them during their voyage and were lean and dried-looking as Tom Anson himself. As they trudged along beside the mules which carried the provisions and water-tanks they looked like regular sundowners.

A little way ahead marched Anson, with Snaplus, the black fellow Burke had found for them, loitering along beside him. He had named himself after a superb bull—Sardanapalus—which had been the pride of a station where he had once worked.

The rolling syllables caught his fancy, but since his tongue could not twist itself properly round them, the name had become Snaplus. The heat, which had silenced the three whites, had naturally no effect on the son of the soil, who jabbered cheerily, though none heeded him.

They had left the well, or water-hole, at Worlee, nearly a day's march behind, and were now making for one which lay far out in the barrens. Snaplus had showed that Professor Maxwell must have come that way. In that rainless waste tracks remain undisturbed, and though neither of the three could see the trail that Snaplus declared

proved that four mules and two men had passed that way, they could readily make out the scratches left on stones by hob-nailed boots which the black pointed out to them.

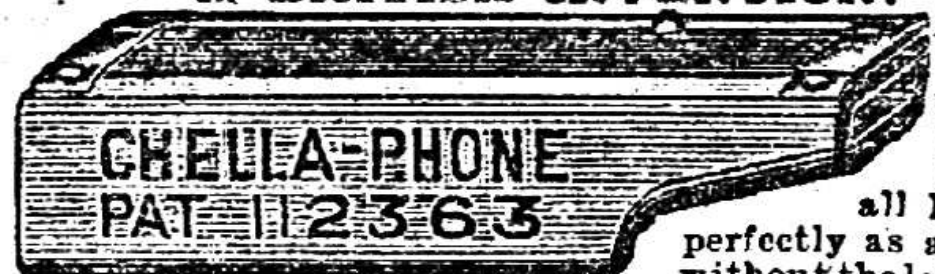
"Ten-fellow mile twice, and five-fellow mile, to one fellow no-name water hole," he chanted monotonously, though once he varied the song with "One fellow tin can, one fellow billy"; and, darting aside, picked up an empty bully tin and a leaky pannikin, which had evidently been thrown away by the previous travellers.

They had set out at dawn from Worlee, and, with only a brief rest, had marched ever since. Now the sun was near the horizon, and still there was never a sign of the 'no-name' water-hole.

For the tenth time Anson questioned Snaplus, only to receive the same answers. He, Snaplus, had never been at the place, but he had heard of it from another black. And there were the tracks of Professor Maxwell and his companion, plain as print, to show that someone had gone that way before them. What more did they want? And with that he went blithely on.

The sun dipped at last, and just as it was about to disappear, Anson pulled up short,

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and pointed to something that notched the glowing disc like a gunsight.

"What fellow that, Snaplus?" he demanded.

"Him stone. Six fellow stone. One fellow no-name water-hole," drawled Snaplus, in an aggrieved tone, as though such a trifle wasn't worth mentioning.

"It's all right, you chaps," called Anson over his shoulder. "The well's right ahead. Only about three miles more."

"Only!" groaned Harding. "I like your notions of a little march. Only three miles more! Can't we have a drink?"

"The more we drink the more we'll want. Suck a pebble," replied the heartless Anson.

"I've sucked one nearly away," complained Harding. "But I s'pose I can stick it. Get on, child of perdition!" And he spanked the flagging mule beside him.

How Snaplus held his line in the darkness that fell on them almost as soon as the sun had set was a mystery, but he did it, and about an hour later the party halted beside the piled rocks set on a ridge above a little depression. The three whites lifted their burdens from the drooping mules, who at once lay down and attempted to roll, though they were so tired that they could not accomplish the feat.

Anson unfastened the stopper of one of the flat water-tanks, and carefully poured a little water into a tin pan. From this he allowed each mule to drink in turn, then served his companions, and lastly himself.

"Now we'll have a look at this well," he said. "I hope it's better than Worlee. Beastly brackish, wasn't it?"

Refastening the precious tank, he laid it beside its fellow, and turned to follow Snaplus, who, with Maxwell and Harding at his heels, was descending towards the bottom of the shallow ravine. The mules, heartened by their drink, moved aimlessly along the ridge. There was no fear of their straying, since they were still thirsty.

The starlight seemed to suffice Snaplus, for he made unerringly towards a couple of rocks, which stood close together, hauled away a big, flat stone that someone had placed there to cover the well, and knelt down, plunging exploring hands into the shadow.

They heard him scratching and scraping. Sand flew from him. He looked rather like a huge black dog rooting at the mouth of a rabbit-hole. Suddenly he stopped, stood up, and turned.

"This fellow water-hole no good," he said. "Him dry!"

"Eh? Dry?" repeated Anson and the others in chorus. "D'you mean to say—"

"Him dry. Dry long time," repeated Snaplus.

"We can dig. I'll get the spade," suggested Harding.

"No use. These blackfellows know. Any good to dig, Snaplus?"

The man shook his head, and that was final. When a water-hole dries up, it dries thoroughly. Perhaps if they could have sunk

a well a few hundred feet they might have found water in abundance, but they were not able to do that. In fact, there was but one thing to do. They must go back to Worlee, and give up the chase of the Professor.

"We'll rest for a few hours—till midnight, say, then start back. We haven't more than enough juice to take us through," said Anson. "It's a pity, but we can't risk going further."

"But what has become of my uncle?" asked Maxwell. "Why didn't he turn about?"

"Because there was water enough when he was here," replied Anson. "He'd be able to fill up and go on. Don't you know of any more wells further on, Snaplus? Any more fellow water-hole?"

Snaplus did not. He suggested that they had better start back soon. They turned to ascend the slope, meaning to lie down for an hour beside their baggage. Suddenly there came an odd sound from the ridge top, half moan, half whinny. The dark form of one of the mules appeared, silhouetted against the sky. It reeled and wobbled, staggered and fell—on something that clanged and clattered.

They raced up the slope to where the mule writhed amidst the baggage, the remains of the water-tanks, and a puddle of water fast disappearing into the thirsty sand. As they came, the animal kicked feebly and lay still.

"Scoop it up! Quick!" yelled Anson, and, picking up the dish from which the animals had drunk, ladled water and sand into it with his hands.

The others seized pannikins and billys, and did the like; but they were too late to save much. The last of the water was quickly absorbed, and they stood up to discover the full extent of the catastrophe.

Maxwell flashed the light of an electric torch over the tanks. The one which had been nearly full was quite empty. The mule had fallen squarely upon it, and, as it was made of thin metal, it had burst at one corner. The other still contained about a pint.

They stood in silence for a minute, then Maxwell spoke.

"Seems to me we're right up against it," he said. "Can we do the march back to Worlee? We're all about petered out now."

"We can only try," murmured Harding. "But what killed the mule? And where's the other one?"

Snaplus pointed to a dark object lying a short way off.

"Them two fellow mule eat guppy," he said. "Heap fellow guppy there."

Anson grunted disgustedly.

"I've heard of it before," he said. "Guppy is a sort of weed, or something. It's bitter, and deadly poisonous. Horses or mules will only eat it when they're famished and thirsty. It worked quickly, didn't it?"

He laughed bitterly, and threw himself down to rest.

(To be continued.)

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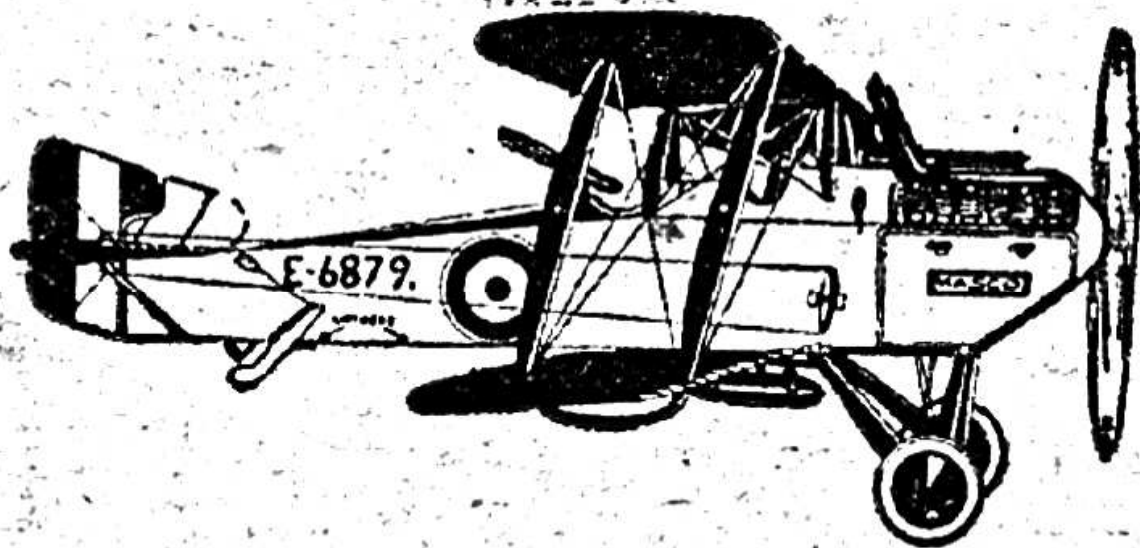
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