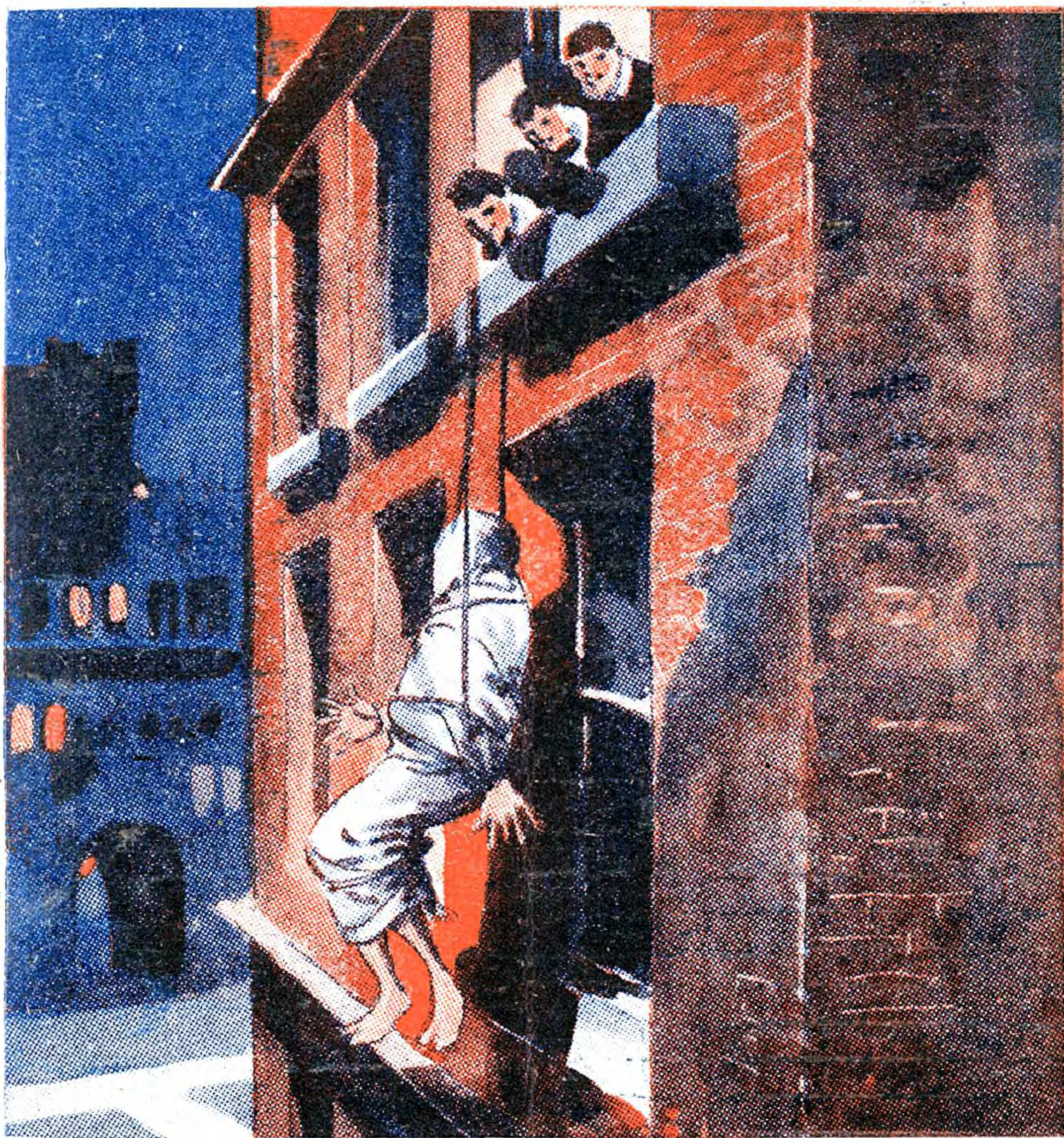


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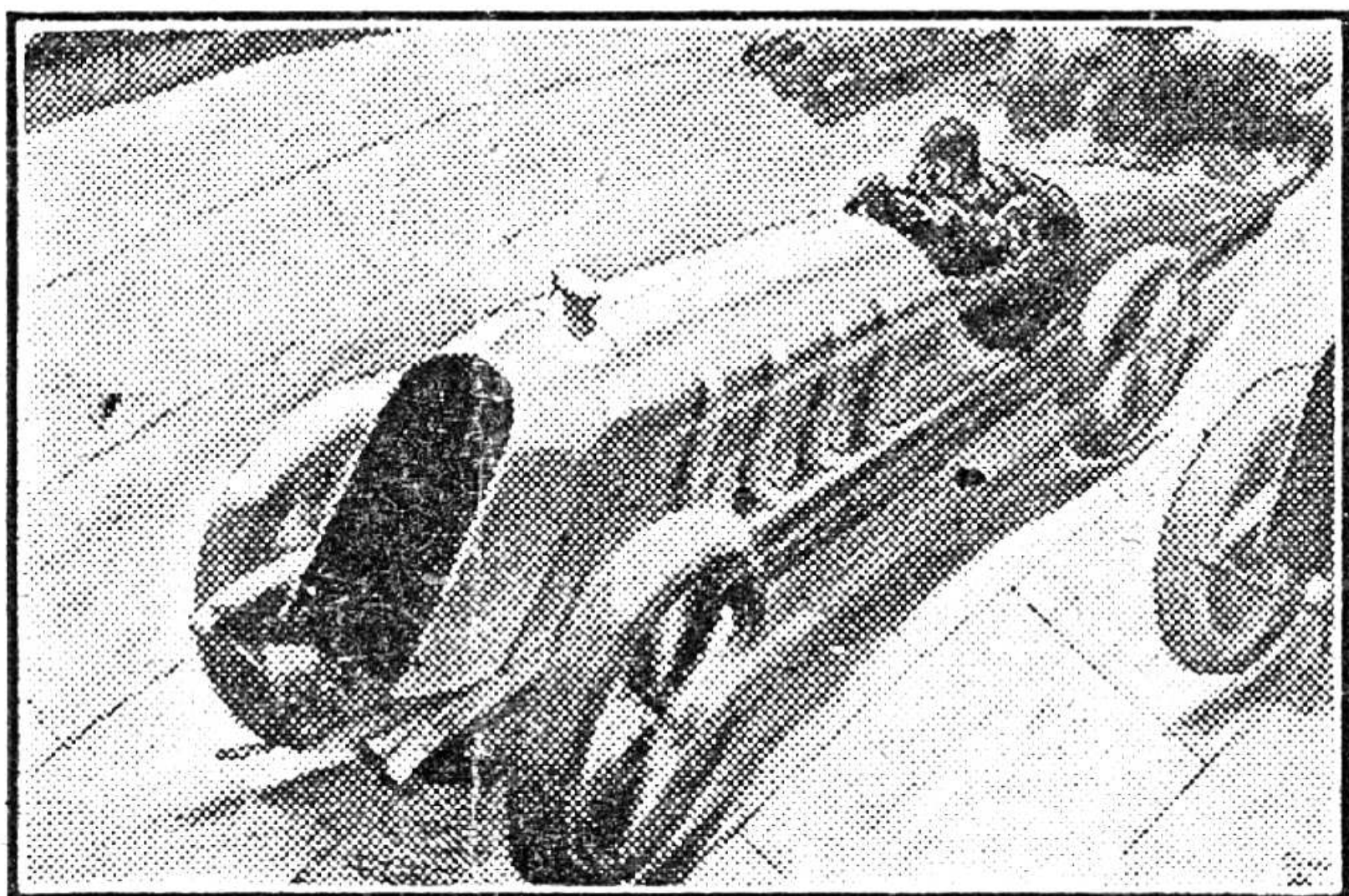
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(THE NARRATIVE RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

A WELCOME VISITOR.

CLAPSON, of the Remove, descended the staircase at express speed.

He dispensed with the use of his feet during this operation—quite a simple performance. For Clapson merely sooted himself on the balustrade, and let himself go. He descended towards the College House lobby with ever gathering velocity. And, of course, at that very moment, Mr. Smale Foxe appeared.

Clapson landed at the foot of the staircase, with a thud, and nearly staggered into the arms of the Housemaster, who was standing looking on rather grimly.

"How dare you, Clapson?" said Mr. Foxe.

"Why, I was only coming downstairs, sir!" gasped Clapson.

"In future, Clapson, you will descend the stairs like a human being, and not like a thunderbolt!" said Mr. Foxe sternly. "On this occasion, you will write me fifty lines!"

"Yes, sir!" said Clapson meekly.

The Housemaster passed along, and Clapson stared after him, scratching his head. And just then, Bob Christine and Yorke appeared, from the Triangle.

"Fifty lines for sliding down the

giddy balustrade!" said Clapson. "How the dickens was I to know that old Foxey would appear just then?"

Bob Christine grinned.

"You've got to be more careful now, my son," he said cheerfully. "Things ain't the same in the College House as they were last week—not by long chalks. We're ourselves again, thank goodness. And you ought to be jolly glad to get fifty lines for sliding down the giddy balustrade!"

Clapson grunted, and did not look very pleased. There had been big alterations in the College House during the last day or so. Mr. Smale Foxe was in charge—but not the same Mr. Smale Foxe. This gentleman was the real Housemaster. His rascally brother who had taken his place for several weeks, was now a fugitive from justice, his evil schemes having come to nought.

There had been a good deal of excitement of late, with the twin brothers—Mr. Smale Foxe the genuine, and Mr. Smale Foxe the impostor. But all the trouble was over now, and things were running along nicely.

Dr. Stafford himself had returned, and he had learned all the facts from Nelson Lee. The school itself, as a whole, did not know the exact truth. The school certainly did not know that Mr. James Smale Foxe had burgled a house in Bannington, and had been compelled to flee from the police—

although a few juniors of the Remove knew all about it. But Nelson Lee had warned them to say nothing, and the boys had given Lee their promise.

And so it seemed that the whole matter would blow over without becoming public.

And now the fellows had something else to occupy their thoughts. Before many days, the Easter holidays would commence. And already all sorts of preparations were being made for the great event. Within a day or two, now, the school would "break up," and the fellows would disperse to their various homes.

Lessons were over for the day—in fact, tea had been dispensed with—and quite a number of fellows were gathered out in the Triangle. For it was a beautiful evening, mild and bright. And practically the sole topic of conversation among the various groups of juniors was the forthcoming Easter holidays. All sorts of plans were being made, and other plans were being discussed.

"The question is, what shall we do with ourselves?" enquired Tommy Watson, who was helping to prop up the wall of the gymnasium. "We shall have to fix things up, you know. You're going to be in London, Nipper, ain't you?"

"Yes, I think so," I replied. "The guv'nor and I will go up together, and we shall probably make straight for our place in Grays Inn Road. We're bound to meet during the holidays, at some time; but it's just as well to have things cut and dried."

"Rather, dear old boy!" said Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "We don't want to have any misunderstandings, begad! I sha'n't go down to Tregellis-Castle this trip. My aunt is in London, you see, and I shall join her there. We ought to be able to have some pretty decent outings, you know—we ought, really. It's only a question of makin' plans in advance."

"That's all," I agreed. "Now, look here——"

I paused abruptly.

For at that moment, a low, sporting motor car had come worming its way into the Triangle, through the big gateway. It was a magnificent car—a powerful racer, rakish looking and painted a brilliant yellow. It contained one solitary occupant, who lounged back

behind the wheel as though he were in an easy chair.

"The car was almost noiseless, and it came gliding across the Triangle with delightful smoothness. I started forward, my face flushed, for I recognised the occupant of the car at once.

"Great Scott!" I yelled. "It's Dorrie!"

"Begad!"

"Lord Dorrimore!" said Tommy Watson excitedly. "Oh, good!"

We raced across the Triangle, and arrived near the Ancient House just as the car came to a standstill. We were glad to see Lord Dorrimore, for he was one of the best. The sporting peer was Nelson Lee's greatest friend. They had been together in all parts of the world, had shared dangers and had passed through many perils side by side.

As a matter of fact, I had been with them—to say nothing of a good many other St. Frank's juniors. Not one of us had forgotten the wonderful trip to the Amazon on Lord Dorrimore's steam yacht, the Wanderer. We had had many exciting times there, and we had liked Dorrie enormously.

He looked just the same as ever, as he sat there in the car—tall, broad, clean-shaven and scrupulously attired. He wore the same old expression of lazy good humour, and he grinned cheerfully as we climbed up on the foot-board.

"Dorrie!" I ejaculated, grabbing for his hand. "This is great! We didn't expect to see you!"

"No; I suppose not," said his Lordship languidly. "But these sort of shocks do come occasionally. You've been having a frightfully quiet time down here, so I thought it was about time for me to stir things up a bit. When you've finished treading on the engine, you might make way for me to get out!"

"Same old Dorrie!" I grinned. "My word, it's splendid to see you again! I suppose you've come down to see the guv'nor?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I was thinking of having a few words with the Professor," replied Dorrie lightly. "If he's knocking about handy, there's no reason why I shouldn't bother him with my presence. How's his hair?"

"His hair?" I repeated.

"Exactly," said Dorrie. "How's it gettin' on?"

"It's just the same as it always was, as far as I know——"

"Oh, I'm glad to know that," interrupted his Lordship. "You see, I thought it might be turning grey. I know what a shocking job he has got here, looking after you terrors!"

"Oh, it would take more than that to turn the gov'nor's hair grey!" I chuckled. "I wondered what the dickens you were getting at, Dorrie. How long are you going to stay?"

"Oh, about an hour," replied Lord Dorrimore, lighting a cigarette.

"Only an hour——"

"Well, I might stay until to-morrow," went on Dorrie, grinning. "There's no tellin', you know. It all depends whether I'm kicked out or not. It's quite likely that Leo will groan when he sees me, and present me with the order of the boot. Whenever I come to St. Frank's, I generally upset all the works and create havoc in general. It's a queer thing, but that's how it happens. And yet, I'm quite an inoffensive chap!"

All the juniors were grinning, and they listened to Dorrie with enjoyment. He was always the same—always light-hearted and full of jokes. I had never seen Dorrie in a real temper—but when the occasion demanded, he could be as grim as Nelson Leo himself, and intensely active, too. But it was only in times of extreme emergency that Dorrie ever emerged from his natural languor.

"You'd better come along to the gov'nor's study at once," I said. "He's there now, I know, and he'll be delighted to see you. Come on, Dorrie! I'll escort you!"

"Frightfully good of you, I'm sure, young 'un," said Lord Dorrimore. "And it's just as well that I should have a guide; because I might go blundering into some study where I don't belong. I haven't chained Lizzie up; but I don't suppose she'll run away!"

"Lizzie?" I repeated.

"The old bus!" explained Dorrie, with a jerk of his head. "I call her Lazy Lizzie, because I can't get more than seventy miles an hour out of her!"

I grinned.

"Oh, she'll be all right!" I said. "The fellows won't interfere—they daren't. Now you come along."

Dorrie was obedient, and he followed me though the lobby and along the passages until we arrived at Nelson Leo's study. Quite a number of other juniors followed, out of sheer curiosity. I tapped upon the study door, and entered.

"Somebody to see you, sir!" I said cheerfully. "The one and only!"

"Why, Dorrie, this is a delightful surprise!" exclaimed Nelson Leo, jumping to his feet. "Come in, old man!"

A moment later the pair were shaking hands vigorously, and Dorrie was forced into an easy chair. Nelson Leo was genuinely pleased to see his old friend, and I stood by smiling. The door was closed, and we were quite private.

"Well, what has brought you down, Dorrie?" asked Nelson Leo, after the greetings were over.

"Oh, nothin' much," said his Lordship. "As a matter of fact, Lizzie wanted some exercise, so I thought I would bring her out. And as I felt rather depressed, I thought I might as well come in this direction, to catch a glimpse of your smilin' faces. It's bucked me up wonderfully, by gad! I'm feeling top hole already!"

"And you had no other motive in coming?" smiled Nelson Leo.

"Well, to tell the truth, I was thinkin' about scatterin' a few invitations," said Dorrie. "These young gentlemen are comin' out on bail for the Easter, aren't they?"

"On bail?"

"Oh, beg pardon," said Dorrie. "I was forgettin' for the moment, I thought this was a prison! That's where the majority of these young rascals ought to be, you know! They're going away for the holidays, soon, I believe—some-thin' seems to tell me so!"

"That's quite right!" said Nelson Leo. "Within two days, to be exact."

"Good!" exclaimed the visitor. "Well, my idea was this. I thought some of the young bounders might like to spend a few days at my little shack in Suffolk. I don't often go there, but when I do I like to have company. An' it would be rather like old times to have a few dozen of these jape experts about me!"

I was eager at once. Dorrie's shack in Suffolk—as he called it—was really

a magnificent mansion. Dorrimore Hall, in fact, was one of the most beautiful buildings in Suffolk, and it was surrounded by a wonderful park.

"Of course, I should want you to come as well, Lee old man," went on Dorrie. "I couldn't think of being there without you. What do you say? Is it a go?"

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"Well, Dorrie, you're rather sudden," he smiled. "Personally, I shall be only too delighted to accept the invitation. A week at Dorrimore Hall would be most enjoyable, I am sure. But you said something about two or three dozen boys. You did not mean that literally, surely?"

His Lordship nodded.

"Why not?" he asked. "The more the merrier, by gad! I'll leave it entirely to Nipper. He can bring as many fellows as he wants to—or as many as want to come. They're all welcome. He can bring the whole bally school if it would please him! There is plenty of room at the Hall, and there'll be plenty of grub, too. Just let me know, a day or two before you arrive, how many to expect, and then things will be all serene. I'm gettin' up a big party, and things of that sort, and we'll have quite a merry old time."

"Ripping!" I exclaimed. "You can bet we'll be there, Dorrie; and I sha'n't have any difficulty in finding a number of fellows to come—they'll all be falling over themselves to be invited. And when do you want them—now, at once, as soon as the holiday starts?"

"Well, not exactly," said Dorrie. "We must give the chaps a chance to go to their own homes first, you know. We don't want to spoil their holiday altogether. Those little things can be arranged later on. But I came down now just to give you the tip."

"Good!" I said. "You're a brick, Dorrie!"

"Of course, I'm doin' it from a purely selfish motive," went on his Lordship, lying back languidly. "I'm properly fed up with London, by gad! Nothin' to do—nothin' to see! It's the most deadly dull spot on the face of the earth!"

"Opinions differ, old man," smiled Nelson Lee. "It would be unfortunate for London if the rest of humanity shared your opinion. But, of course,

you would prefer to be prowling in the depths of an African forest, or staggering along under a blinding sun in the Sahara, or sweltering in the humid heat of the Amazon——"

"Anythin' like that," interrupted Dorrie, nodding. "But don't keep on talkin', Lee, you fairly make my mouth water. Gad! I'd love to go on some more adventures—somethin' really thrillin'. I suppose there won't be time for us to take a trip abroad during the holidays?"

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"It all depends what you mean by 'abroad,' Dorrie," he smiled. "We could run over to the Continent, perhaps, for a day or two; but as for going further afield, I'm afraid it is quite out of the question."

"Of course," sighed Dorrie. "That's just what I expected. By the way, Lee, when I come to look at you closely I can see a remarkable difference in you. You're gettin' frightfully thin!"

"Thin?"

"Yes; an' your face is lean an' haggard!" said his Lordship gravely. "You haven't got any colour, an' you're nothin' better than a physical wreck. I don't like to tell you these things, old man, but I feel that I must."

"All I can say, Dorrie, is that my feelings belie my looks," smiled Nelson Lee. "I was never fitter in my life!"

Dorrie wagged his finger reprovingly.

"You mustn't take any notice of your feelin's," he said. "It's your looks that give you away. What you want, Lee, is a thunderin' long rest—a change of air—tropical climate, by gad! I advise you to chuck up this school stuff for a month or two, and put yourself in my hands. I have mapped out a rippin' trip——"

"My dear Dorrie, you might as well save your breath!" interrupted Lee, with a grin. "I fully understand your game now, and I can tell you that it won't work. Moreover, if I put myself in your hands for a 'thundering long rest' as you call it, I'm afraid I should find myself in for a very strenuous time. I'm sorry, old man, but I can't think of any prolonged trip abroad just now."

Dorrie shrugged his shoulders.

"Just what I expected," he said. "What's the good of tryin' on any

wheeze with you, Leo? It's too bad of you to stick here, month after month, leavin' me in the lurch. Can't you do somethin' with him, Nipper?"

"Nothing at all!" I grinned. "But look here, Dorrie, let's drop the subject, and talk about something that matters. Now, with regard to this party. Do I understand that I can invite as many fellows as I choose?"

"Exactly," said Dorrie. "I leave it entirely in your hands."

"And can't we come to some definite decision now?" I asked.

"Definite decision?"

"Yes; about our time of arrival at Dorrimore Hall, and all that kind of thing," I said. "There's no reason why we should leave these things in a state of uncertainty. If we fix things up now I can tell all the fellows before they go home for the holidays, and that will save no end of trouble later."

His lordship nodded.

"That's quite right," he admitted. "In fact, it's a brain wave. Now, lemme see. I'll tell you what, Nipper. I'll have a chat with your guv'nor, and I'll let you know exact details later, before I go. How will that suit?"

"First class!" I replied. "It's awfully decent of you, Dorrie, to ask us down to Dorrimore Hall."

His lordship politely requested me not to talk out of the back of my neck, and I withdrew. And I found Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson waiting for me. We went along to Study C at once.

"Good news, my sons!" I said. "Dorrimore wants us to spend a part of the Easter holidays at his country place in Suffolk. It's left to me to invite as many chaps as I choose, and it's going to be a bit of a problem, I imagine."

"Oh, I don't know," said Watson. "This is ripping of Dorrie—I've often wanted to see his country place. Have you ever been there, Nipper?"

"As it happens, I haven't," I replied. "You see, Dorrie is never at home, generally speaking. He's a restless chap, and for nine months out of the year he's dodging about in different parts of the world. I don't suppose he'll ever settle down to the quiet life of an English nobleman."

"It'll be jolly interesting," went on Watson. "But I can't quite see where you'll find much difficulty in choosing

the guests. The chaps will be only too ready to accept invitations."

"Begad! That'll just be the trouble," remarked Sir Montie.

"You've hit it, Montie," I said. "There'll be a lot of jealousy and that kind of thing. I daresay I could invite fifty or sixty chaps, and they would all be only too willing to accept. But I reckon we must limit the number to about two dozen, and they must all be from the Remove. Hang it all, I couldn't have the nerve to take more than twenty-four chaps with me."

We discussed the situation with interest, and practically decided who should be invited, and who should be left out.

And then, Dorrie looked in.

"About the little party," he observed languidly. "We must give the fellows a chance to spend some time with their people, an' so I suggest that you all come down to Dorrimore Hall on the first day of next month."

"Good enough!" I said. "That'll do fine, Dorrie!"

"You might as well all come down together—by the same train," went on his lordship. "There's no reason why you should straggle in by twos and threes throughout the day. There's a good train from Liverpool Street at two-thirty. You'd better tell all the chaps to collect together at Liverpool Street at two o'clock. Then you'll all be able to come down together, and I'll meet you at the other end."

This was eminently satisfactory, and I had nothing to say against it. And so the plan was decided upon. We should all go down to Dorrimore Hall on the first of the new month, by the two-thirty train from Liverpool Street. The plan was simple and straightforward. Misunderstandings would be impossible.

After Dorrie had left the study, I made out the list of guests, and it ran as follows: Ancient House:—Watson, Tregellis-West and myself; Handforth, Church and McClure; Reginald Pitt, Tom Burton, Justin B. Farman, the Trotwood twins, Fatty Little, Cecil de Valerie, the Duke of Somerton and Dick Goodwin. College House:—Bob Christine, Yorke and Talmadge; Oldfield, Clapson and Nation; Turner, Page, Harron and Ernest Lawrance.

Upon examination, this list revealed the fact that there would be fifteen

Ancient House juniors, and ten College House juniors. By a process of acute calculation, I came to the conclusion that there would be twenty-five altogether.

"I don't think we can improve on this list," I said, after looking it over. "Solly Levi would be included, but I know for a fact that his people are taking him over to Paris for the vac. Of course, there are a lot of others we could include, but we must draw a line somewhere."

"What about Jack Grey?" asked Watson. "He's a decent fellow, and——"

"His pater is taking him straight off to Scotland, so he'll be out of it," I interrupted. "Then there's Hart. He can't come, because he's booked for a holiday in Norway. It's the same with a lot of the chaps. But all these on the list are free, I imagine; but we shall soon know for certain."

For the remainder of the evening we were engaged in going round the various studies, scattering invitations broadcast. The lucky juniors were delighted, for Dorrie was universally popular, and they knew that they would have a first-class time at Dorrimore Hall.

And by the time the bell clanged out for bed, practically all the arrangements were made. The invitations had been accepted, and it was fixed that the whole crowd should collect together at Liverpool Street Station on the first of the new month, at two-thirty.

But if the juniors could only have known what these apparently simple invitations were ultimately to lead to, they would have been filled with wonder and amazement.

CHAPTER II.

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH came to a halt in the middle of the upper corridor, not far distant from the door of the Remove dormitory. And he glared ferociously at Church and McClure, his faithful and long suffering study-mates.

"You—you prize asses!" he said witheringly.

Church and McClure stared.

"What's the matter now?" asked Church in surprise.

"You dummies—you've got memories like sieves!" snapped Handforth.

"Didn't we arrange to bring up a writing block and a pencil, so that we could map out our movements for the holidays—with exact times, and all the rest of it? Where's the writing pad? Where's the pencil?"

McClure grunted.

"We can't be expected to remember everything," he said. "In any case, it doesn't matter now. We're the last fellows up, and we shall be the last in the dormitory. We'd better make haste, or we might get into a row——"

"Rats!" interrupted Handforth. "This is what comes of trusting to you chaps! I might as well trust——"

"Yourself?" suggested Church sarcastically.

"Eh?"

"Oh, it's no good getting your rag out, Handy," snapped Church. "You jaw about our memories. What about your own? Why couldn't you remember to bring up the pad——"

"I'm not going to argue, and if you fellows give me any more of your cheek, I'll punch you on the nose!" said Handforth aggressively. "The best thing you can do is to buzz down to the study and get those things! Buck up, one of you!"

"No fear!" said Church. "I'm not going to be collared by a prefect——"

"Are you going or not?" roared Handforth.

"Not!" said his chums in one voice.

Handforth glared. Defiance of this kind was not usual.

"Oh, all right, we'll soon see!" he snorted. "Take that!"

He lunged out at Church, but that exasperated junior ducked in the nick of time, and Handforth went sprawling forward. His momentum caused him to sail headlong over Church's back, and he hit the floor with a thud, and rolled on his back. Without wasting a second, Church fell upon his leader.

"Lend a hand, Clurey!" he gasped. "It's a ripping chance to get some of our own back."

"Good!" said McClure, with enthusiasm.

Practically the whole evening they had been listening to the sound of Handforth's voice; they had been worried and troubled by his constant

orders. And now, for him to blame them for his own forgetfulness was rather more than they could stand. They had been exasperated beyond ordinary endurance, and their endurance was, as a rule, quite remarkable.

"You—you traitors—you turncoats!" snorted Handforth hotly. "Lemme go! If you don't get up, I'll half slaughter you when——"

"Don't take any notice of him!" panted Church. "That's right—hold his feet. Now, I'm going to slosh him in the eye until he promises——"

"Hallo, hallo! What's this!" exclaimed a voice from the rear. "Two of you kids smashing another? You don't call that cricket, do you? All right, Handforth, I'll rescue you from these bullies!"

It was Chambers of the Fifth, who had appeared upon the scene. Chambers was a big fellow, and an amiable sort of ass, and it was one of his favourite habits to butt in when he wasn't required. He seized Church by the coat collar, and yanked him backwards. The next moment, Handforth was on his feet, fuming.

"That's all right," said Chambers kindly. "No need to thank me, Handforth. I'm always ready to lend a hand when I see a youngster in trouble!"

"Trouble?" bellowed Handforth fiercely. "Who was in trouble? You—you interfering fathead! Who told you to lend me a hand?"

Chambers stared.

"Steady on!" he said, in a patronising voice. "None of your nonsense, Handforth. I did you a good turn, and the least you can do is to thank me!"

"You—you did me a good turn?" gasped Handforth. "Why, you prize dummy! I was just going to knock these idiots down the stairs! I was going to slaughter them! Take that for interfering!"

Biff!

Handforth's fist landed squarely in the centre of Chambers' chest, and the Fifth Former went staggering backwards. He was taken by surprise, and he gazed at Handforth blankly. Then he frowned.

"You—you ungrateful young sweep!" he said hotly. "I'll never do you a good turn again!"

His dignity was upset, and he hurled himself forward. Handforth wasn't

exactly looking for an attack; and before he knew what had happened, Chambers' fist caught him a beautiful swipe on the nose.

"Yaroooooh!" howled Handforth wildly.

He was in pain, and by the time he recovered himself, Chambers was walking sedately into the Fifth Form dormitory. His dignity was satisfied. He had avenged the insult. And Handforth fairly foamed at the mouth.

"By George!" he gasped. "I'll—I'll——"

"Steady on, Handy!" muttered Church. "You can't go after Chambers now!"

"Can't I?" roared Handforth. "You'll soon see! I'm going to——"

"Cave!" hissed McClure suddenly. "Old Crowell!"

Before Handforth could say anything further, Mr. Crowell, the Remove master, came round the corner of the corridor. McClure had recognised his footstep. Mr. Crowell frowned severely as he surveyed the juniors.

"Are you responsible for the extraordinary noise I heard a moment ago, Handforth?" he asked sharply.

"I—I—I——" began Handforth.

"You will take fifty lines, Handforth, for creating a disturbance," said Mr. Crowell curtly. "And you will get into your dormitory at once—all three of you. You are late already. Now, boys, obey me!"

Handforth clenched his fists, looking helplessly at his chums, and then went along to the Remove dormitory. As soon as he was inside, he turned and glared at the other two juniors.

"I'll deal with you to-morrow!" he said darkly. "There's something more important to do to-night! As soon as the lights are out, I'm going into the Fifth dormitory, and I'm going to knock that ass Chambers into the middle of next term!"

"Oh, don't be an idiot, Handy!" whispered Church anxiously. "Forget it! If you go into the Fifth dormitory and pommel Chambers, you'll have half the Fifth on to you, and then you'll be——"

"I don't care about that!" snorted Handforth. "He swiped me on the nose, and I'm going to repay him with interest. I don't care what happens to me afterwards. The main thing is to wipe up Chambers!"

Church and McClure gave it up. It was obviously useless to argue. When Handforth made up his mind there was no holding him. And he had certainly decided to invade the Fifth Form dormitory—whatever the cost might be.

Accordingly, shortly after lights-out, Handforth rose from his bed. Most of the juniors were already asleep, and the others were dozing off. Handforth didn't trouble to dress. He crept out of the room attired only in his pyjamas.

All was quiet out in the corridor. He padded his way along the cold linoleum until he came to the door of the Fifth Form dormitory. He turned the handle, and entered. Dead silence reigned.

Then a startling thing happened.

A brilliant light flashed into Handforth's eyes completely dazzling him.

"Thought so!" muttered a voice. "Now then, you chaps!"

A blanket, appearing from nowhere, enveloped Handforth's head and shoulders. It fell upon him heavily, and the next moment the valiant leader of Study D was on the floor, held down by many strong hands.

He tried to struggle, but the odds were too great. He tried to yell, but the blanket drowned his voice and rendered it into a dull muffled murmur. The blanket was drawn tight round his neck and round his waist.

"Got him!" chuckled a voice, which Handforth had no difficulty in recognising as Chambers'. "Can you hear me, Handforth, old son?"

"Mmmmm!" came from behind the folds of the blanket. "Grrrr!"

Chambers grinned.

"I had an idea that you would come along, Handy, and so I prepared things," he said cheerfully. "We're going to teach you to be a good little boy. 'Oo mustn't show 'oo's 'ickle temper! Naughty, naughty!"

Handforth literally writhed; but that was all he could do.

He was lifted from his feet, and then he felt a rope being passed round his waist. It was drawn tight. Then Handforth was carried some way and hoisted up. He wondered what was going to happen; and he was considerably startled when he felt himself dangling in space. The coldness of the atmosphere round his feet and ankles—which were bare—told him that he was in the open air.

Then his feet came into contact with some hard, icy, stony substance, which

he recognised as gravel. He was in the Triangle! He had been lowered from one of the upper windows, and was now stranded.

This was the Fifth Formers' idea of a joke. Handforth fumed as he rolled over, for he found it impossible to keep his balance. Dimly, the sound of chuckles came down to him, and then a window was softly closed.

It took Handforth exactly five minutes to extricate himself from that blanket. And then he was perspiring enormously above, and chilled below. Chambers & Co. were not at all particular.

"The rotters!" gasped Handforth breathlessly. "I shall probably catch a cold over this, and then it'll turn to 'flu, or pneumonia, or—or even scarlet fever! The cads! I'll smash Chambers for this!"

He drew the blanket round him closely, and then moved forward. Then he gasped afresh, for the gravel was painful to his bare feet. He was more careful after that, and he picked his way like a ghost towards the window of Study D. By chance it would be unlatched, and Handforth would be able to get in.

Fortunately, he saw that the window of Study B was not fastened, so he did not investigate any further. He was just about to push up the sash when he fancied he heard a slight sound—as though a boot had grated on the gravel.

He turned, his heart in his mouth. If a master saw him in this plight he would be unable to give any explanation; for, of course, it was impossible to sneak. Handforth would have bitten his tongue in half before sneaking.

In the gloom he saw a figure in the Triangle. It was crossing to the College House. And curiously enough, it was not making for the door, but in the direction of a lighted lower window. It was the window of the Housemaster's study.

Handforth stared, filled with curiosity. Behind that lighted window sat Mr. Smale Foxe. This gentleman was the Mr. Foxe who had been appointed temporary Housemaster during Mr. Stockdale's prolonged absence from St. Frank's.

It was the other Mr. Foxe—the Housemaster's twin brother, who had recently been causing such trouble at

the old school. And as Handforth stood there, he had a vague suspicion that the dim figure he had seen belonged to none other than the rascally twin brother himself.

And so, Handforth waited.

He thought it quite likely that James had come back to have a quiet word with his brother while the school was asleep. And Handforth was filled with indignation at the thought. He knew well enough that Mr. Ralph Smale Foxe would not welcome any further intrusion by his brother.

Almost immediately afterwards, Handforth's suspicions were confirmed.

For the figure reached the lighted window and tapped upon the glass. After a very short interval the lower sash was pulled up and the Housemaster's form appeared. Handforth stood stock still, listening.

"James!" said Mr. Foxe, in surprise.

The word came distinctly over to Handforth, and he knew that his suspicions had been justified. And as he watched, the visitor slipped in through the window, the sash was lowered, and the blind fell into place.

"By George!" muttered Handforth, his eyes gleaming. "So that rotter's had the nerve to come back—after all that's happened! The Remove will have something to say about this!"

Without waiting any longer, Handforth slipped into Study B, passed through, and was soon mounting the stairs. He entered the Remove dormitory without any attempt to be silent. And I was awake on the instant. I sat up, staring into the gloom.

"Who's that?" I demanded.

"Me!" said Handforth ungrammatically. "I say, Nipper—"

"You ass! Why aren't you in bed?" I asked. "What games have you been up to now, Handforth? You'll have a master on your track—"

"Oh, do dry up and let me get a word in!" snapped Handforth. "I've just been out in the Triangle—those Fifth Form rotters had the nerve to lie me up and lower me down from one of the upper windows!"

I grinned.

"Well, I daresay you asked for it!" I said calmly. "If you go about looking for trouble, Handy, you won't have much difficulty in finding it. Perhaps you'll have the sense to get into bed now, and—"

"Am I going to speak or not?" snorted Handforth. "Never mind about those Fifth Form asses—I'll deal with them to-morrow! There's something that must be attended to at once, and you, as Captain of the Remove, ought to be enthusiastic. Old Foxe is here! The rotten Foxey, I mean!"

"I'm not very enthusiastic about that," I answered. "But how do you know?"

"I just saw him out in the Triangle, creeping across to the College House—to the Housemaster's study window!" said Handforth. "By George! The rotter! Having the sauce to come here again! You can bet your boots that the decent Mr. Foxe doesn't want him. I vote we rise in our night, pounce upon the cad, and kick him out!"

I considered for a moment.

"Are you sure about this, Handy?" I asked suspiciously. "You're a famous chap for giving false alarms, you know. I agree that we ought to chuck Mr. Foxe off the premises; but we don't want to make asses of ourselves!"

"Oh, you make me tired!" snapped Handforth. "There's no doubt about this, at all!"

And he explained the exact circumstances. When he had finished I was convinced that on this occasion, at least, he had made no blunder. He had distinctly heard the visitor greeted by name, and that was good enough.

I slipped out of bed.

"Wake some of the chaps up," I said briskly. "Your own chums, Tregellis-West, Watson, Pitt and some of the others. We'll swoop down on Mr. Foxe's study, and relieve him of the presence of his beautiful brother. He may not like it, but he'll be grateful to us afterwards."

And in less than three minutes, the Remove dormitory was alive and active.

Meanwhile, Mr. Ralph Smale Foxe was regarding his unscrupulous brother with decided disfavour. James had just entered the study, and he looked very different now. His clothing was untidy and muddy, his collar was dirty, and he had a three days' growth of beard on his chin. And there was a wild, hunted look in his eyes. There was not the slightest difficulty in distinguishing one brother from the other. There was now a great deal of difference between the two.

"Why have you come here, James?"

demanded Ralph angrily. "Heaven knows you have caused me enough trouble already——"

"Don't start your snivelling!" snapped Mr. Foxe. "You've got to help me, do you understand?"

"Help you?"

"Yes; to get away from this district!" said the other. "I've been waiting for an opportunity to speak to you, and at last I have been compelled to come here. For days I have been half starved. I have lived in the woods—unable to show myself. There's no sense in mincing matters. You know all about that burglary, and everything else. Curse that interfering brute, Nelson Lee, for upsetting my plans! Now I'm hunted, and I'm afraid to show myself——"

"If that's your trouble, you may as well set your mind at rest," put in Ralph curtly. "It may interest you to know that no proceedings will be taken, James. You can walk out of this district freely, and you won't be interfered with by the police. I have no sympathy with you. You made your own bed and you must lie on it. Don't come whining to me. But if you need a little money. I will give you some."

"What false story is this?" snarled Mr. Foxe. "Do you think you can deceive me? Do you think I believe this story—that the police will not interfere, and that proceedings have stopped? You are simply doing it to get rid of me, Ralph, and I tell you at once that I won't put up with any nonsense!"

"If you'll only listen——"

"But just at that moment an interruption occurred—an interruption which was as startling as it was unexpected. The window sash was flung up abruptly, and a swarm of juniors came surging into the room. I led the way, and Handforth and many others swarmed after me. There were no College House fellows; but this was only because Christine and Co. could not be reached. They would be sorry, afterwards, that they had taken no part in the affair. But it couldn't be helped.

"All right, Mr. Foxe, don't worry!" I said, as I tumbled into the study. "We've come to relieve you of this gentleman here!"

"Rather!" said Handforth grimly. Mr. Foxe started back, scowling.

"You young hounds!" he snarled. "If you dare to lay fingers on me——"

"Boys—boys!" protested the House-master. "You must not——"

"But no notice was taken of him. Mr. James Smale Foxe was seized by many strong hands, and resistance was useless. There was no possibility of our making a mistake, for it was obvious which was the right Mr. Foxe and which was the wrong."

Struggling, cursing and protesting, Mr. Smale Foxe was dragged to the window and hurled outside. There were at least a dozen juniors on the job, and Mr. Foxe had not the slightest chance. And we had no pity; we were going to teach him a lesson which he would not forget.

"The frog-march!" shouted Handforth.

"That's a good idea, begad!"

"Rather!"

Mr. Foxe was flung into an inverted position, and spreadeagled out, he was carried round the Triangle. The fellows had forgotten all about caution now, and they were shouting lustily. A complete circuit of the Triangle was made, and by that time, Mr. Foxe was feeling the effects.

"Good!" said Handforth. "Now we'll duck him in the fountain!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But I put the veto on this drastic treatment, and Mr. Foxe escaped a ducking by a very narrow margin. As an alternative, I suggested that he should be compelled to run the gauntlet. This idea was at once accepted.

And Mr. Foxe, in spite of all his protests, was forced to run. Two lines of fellows were formed up, and Mr. Foxe was given a start from the end. And as he dashed by he received jeers, punches, and blows from knotted handkerchiefs. It was drastic treatment, perhaps; but the rascal deserved it.

Handforth was at the end of the line, and when Mr. Foxe reached that section, the leader of Study D thoughtfully assisted him on the way with a boot. And Mr. James Smale Foxe was literally kicked out of St. Frank's. For he reached the Triangle wall, gasping and swearing, and gave one leap upwards. He clutched the top, swarmed over, and dropped in the darkness beyond.

And that was the last that St. Frank's ever saw of the rascal.

CHAPTER III.

OFF FOR THE HOLIDAYS.

CURIOSLY enough there was no inquiry as to the cause of the disturbance that night. It was obvious that Dr. Stafford must have known about the affair, for the whole school had rang with the shouts of the excited juniors.

After Mr. Foxe had gone—for good—the Removites scuttled back to the dormitory, and they were very astonished to find that they met no master on the way. I had been quite prepared to receive a flogging for my part in the escapade; but I received nothing. The matter was not even mentioned.

And we could easily understand it.

Mr. Ralph Foxo had obviously intercepted the Head and any other master who had happened to come on the scene. Brief explanations had followed, and it had been decided to let the juniors finish their job. It was most irregular, no doubt, but the Head probably thought it wiser to wink at it and say nothing. It would save all inquiry and trouble. And so the affair blew over.

Lord Dorrimore left that day, after promising that he would meet us all at the local station in Suffolk, on the first day of the new month. And on the following day, St. Frank's was in a turmoil. For it was holiday time, and the school would "break up."

There were no lessons, of course, and the fellows had all their time occupied in packing etc. Yorke and Talmadge, of the College House, with their arms full of various items of personal property, went charging into Study Q shortly after breakfast. And they were rather astonished to find Bob Christine sitting there, staring straight before him in a dreamy kind of way.

The other two juniors set their things down, and stared at their leader.

"What's the idea?" asked Yorke curiously.

"Eh?"

"Why the boiled owl expression?" demanded Talmadge.

Christine started.

"What's that?" he said absently.

"Who's looking like a boiled owl?"

"You are!"

"Since you've never seen a boiled owl, you must be talking out of your

hat!" exclaimed Christine. "As a matter of fact, I was thinking!"

"Oh!"

"I was thinking deeply," went on Christine. "In fact, I've got a wheeze!"

"Connected with the holidays?" asked Yorke. "We've made all our arrangements!"

"Yes, I know that, but this is something else," interrupted Bob. "It's a jape, my sons. A first-class, gilt-edged, number one-sized jape, against those giddy Fossils. It's going to be the jape of the season."

His chums stared.

"You must be dotty!" said Talmadge. "Who ever heard of japes on the last day of term? We've got no time for messing about like that, Christy! Don't be an ass! Japes are all very well in the middle of term——"

"If you'll only listen, instead of jawing so much, you'll understand," said Christine patiently. "I'm not suggesting that we should jape the Fossils to-day; but later on. Go and fetch some of the fellows together—Clapson and Page, and some of the others. We're going to hold a conference."

His chums couldn't quite see the point; but they did not argue. They went out and searched for a number of other Monks, and presently returned with a fairly large crowd. Study Q was packed with impatient juniors.

"This is a bit too thick, Christy!" protested Oldfield. "We're right in the middle of packing, and——"

"Never mind the packing," said Christine. "I've been thinking things over, and I've come to the conclusion that we've been presented, free gratis and for nothing, with a ripping opportunity to jape those Ancient House chaps. We've all been invited to go down to Lord Dorrimore's place, haven't we—every fellow here?"

"Yes, except me," said Steele. "I should have been included, too, I suppose, but my people are carting me off to the Riviera."

"Well, you needn't stay," said Christine. "This affair doesn't concern you, Steele, old man. You can buzz off as soon as you like."

Steele buzzed off, as he was busy and wanted to catch an early train.

The other Monks looked at their leader expectantly.

"You know the arrangement, don't you?" said Christine. "We're all to be at Liverpool Street Station at half-past two, on the first day of next month. We shall all gather there, Monks and Fossils alike."

"Yes, of course," said Yorke. "Well, what about it?"

"Hasn't it ever struck you that the date is a significant one?" said Christine mysteriously. "Think of it, my sons!"

The juniors thought.

"Well, it's All Fools' Day, if that's what you mean," said Yorke.

"Of course!" said Christine. "And, what's more, we're going to fool the Fossils! Do you get me, Steve? We're going to fool these Ancient House fellows properly!"

"My hat!" exclaimed Talmadge. "I hadn't thought of that. Now you come to mention it, Christy, it will be the first of April. But what's your scheme? How do you reckon we shall be able to fool the bounders?"

"I've thought it all out," said Christine carelessly. "After all, the idea is a simple one. The best wheezes are always simple. But it'll come a bit expensive, that's all."

"Then it's off!" said Yorke firmly. "Those Fossils ain't worth spending a lot of money over!"

"We can fool them without incurring any expense!"

"Of course!"

"We shall have to get some other idea, Christine."

"A cheap one!"

Christine glared round.

"Am I going to speak, or not?" he roared. "When I say expensive, I don't mean that it'll cost us very much, after the exs. have been divided up. Half a crown each, or something like that. In my opinion, it'll be well worth the money!"

"Well, let's hear it!" said Yorke. "We can't stay here all the morning, you know. We've got to finish our packing, and get to London, and——"

"Well, I'll put it in a nutshell," said Bob Christine. "Early on the morning of April the first, all the chaps who are going down to Lord Dorrimore's place will receive a telegram."

"Eh?"

"A telegram?"

"Who from?"

"From Lord Dorrimore," replied Christine calmly. "And each telegram will run something like this: 'Plan altered. Be at Victoria Station noon. Join others there. All will catch twelve-twenty to Brighton. College House boys coming later. Look out for me outside station—Dorrimore.' How does that strike you?"

"Go to Brighton?" said Yorke, staring. "Meet at Victoria Station? What on earth are you talking about?"

"We're not going to Brighton, you ass!" said Clapson. "We're going to Suffolk——"

"Oh, you poor, pitiful asses!" said Christine witheringly. "It's only spoo! Can't you understand? Those telegrams will be part of the jape!"

"Then Dorrie won't send them at all?"

"Of course he won't!" said Christine. "As a matter of fact, Clapson will send them."

"Oh, shall I?" said Len Clapson. "This is the first time I've heard about it!"

"You'll send them, my son, because your home is in Suffolk," explained Christine. "You'll be in Suffolk for the holidays, won't you?"

"Yes," replied Clapson. "Then, on the first of April, I shall just get on my bicycle, and take a run to Dorrimore Hall—it's only about ten miles from my place. You chaps, of course, will come along by train from London."

"Exactly," said Christine. "That's why you will have to send those telegrams, Clapson. You'll be in Suffolk, so the telegrams will be sent from Suffolk. Then, when the Ancient House fellows get them they won't suspect anything. They'll take it for granted that Dorrie himself had sent the wires off."

"But I don't quite understand, even now," said Yorke, frowning. "What's the idea of sending all the chaps to Brighton?"

"To fool them, of course!"

"Oh!"

"And I suppose this is the jape?"

"Of course it's the jape, you duffers!" snorted Christine. "Don't you think it's a good one? Personally, I reckon it's top hole! Those giddy Fossils will be fooled completely. They'll assume that Dorrie had decided

to entertain them at Brighton, and they'll all go off by the twelve-twenty train; but when they get to Brighton they'll find themselves stranded. Dorrie won't be there, and they'll be all upside down until they realise the truth. Then they'll be kicking themselves."

Several grins broke out on the faces of the juniors.

"It's a pretty good wheeze, I must admit!" chuckled Talmadge. "Yes, by Jingo, those Fossils will be fooled beautifully. It's a great idea, Christine, to send them off on this wild goose chase. They'll look as small as microbes when they finally turn up at Dorrimore Hall, late in the evening!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Jolly good!"

"First class!"

"Well, I'm glad you think so," said Bob Christine, smiling. "But, as I said, it will come just a little bit expensive—those telegrams will cost something, you know. So I was going to suggest——"

"Hold on!" interrupted Oldfield. "I've a suggestion to make."

"Oh? Let's hear it!"

"First of all, I want to ask you a question," said Oldfield. "Are you reckoning to send Nipper a wire, just the same as the others?"

"Yes, of course!"

"Then don't do it!" said Oldfield firmly.

"Why not?"

"Because, for one thing, Nipper is a jolly cute bird!" said Oldfield. "He might think there was something fishy about his wire, and it wouldn't take him long to make the other chaps suspicious, too. Then our scheme would fall to the ground, and the laugh would be on us. We don't want anything of that kind, you know."

"Why should he suspect?" asked Christine doubtfully. "He may be cute, but there'll be nothing to lead him to suppose that the wire is a fake——"

"We don't know about that," interrupted Oldfield. "Lord Dorrimore is a special pal of Mr. Lee's. For all we know, Dorrie might send Nelson Lee a wire on that very morning, and then Nipper would know that something was wrong. He might even go so far as to send through a trunk call on the tele-

phone, and speak to Dorrie about it. My advice is to leave Nipper out of it—it'll be safer."

"Well, perhaps you're right," said Christine, after thinking for a moment or two. "We don't want to endanger the whole thing, do we? And if Nipper knows it—if Nipper's left out, it won't work. The other chaps would probably assume that he's gone on with Mr. Lee. I'd better leave it at that."

And so it was decided.

Christine proceeded to do some reckoning, by the aid of a scrap of paper and a piece of pencil—to say nothing of his brains. And he reckoned out exactly how much the jape would cost, and then divided it by ten, since there were ten College House fellows invited to Dorrimore Hall. In the end it worked out that every Monk would have to contribute two or three shillings. The juniors did not object, but paid up willingly. Like Christine, they considered that the jape was well worth the money.

"Now, Clapson, my son, you've got to take charge of this little pile," said Christine, pointing to the money on the table. "You'd better put it in your pocket, and forget all about it. It's left in your charge, and what you've got to do is to send off all the telegrams at about eight o'clock on the morning of the first of April."

"Right you are!" said Clapson. "You can leave it to me—I won't fail. But what about the addresses? Have you got them?"

"Not yet," replied Christine. "I've got some, of course, and you'd better put them down now. And I'll have the others within an hour, don't you worry. It won't be hard to get the addresses out of the chaps. I can make any old excuse—say I want to send them a picture-postcard, or something. I shall send a picture-postcard, of course, but that'll only be a blind."

Bob Christine was busy for about an hour, buttonholing Ancient House juniors. He obtained all the addresses without much difficulty, and he was exceedingly pleased to find that every one of the fellows who had been invited to Dorrimore Hall would be in London. The only exception was Clapson, and he was a College House junior. All the Ancient House chaps would either be with their people or with relatives in London; therefore it would be quite

easy for them to get to Victoria Station by noon.

"My sons, it'll be easy!" said Christine to his two chums. "It'll be the jape of the season! Those Fossils will be fooled as they've never been fooled before. They'll never suspect us; they'll never dream that we planned the whole thing before going home for the holidays. That's the beauty of it."

Throughout the morning the Monks continued to chuckle with glee. Not much notice was taken of their high spirits, since high spirits were general on this particular morning. The Ancient House juniors had something better to do than to watch Christine and Co.

But I noticed their grins. I noticed Christine and his chums whispering together, chuckling, and suddenly yelling with laughter. And these outbursts generally occurred when there were some Ancient House fellows in sight. Clearly, the Monks were amused at something connected with the Fossils. What was it?

"Montie, my son, I'm suspicious!" I said, as I stood looking out of the window of Study C.

"Dear old boy, why are you suspicious?" inquired Sir Montie Tregellis-West mildly. "Is anything the matter?"

"Well, I'm pretty certain that something is on," I replied. "It's only a vague guess, but I don't believe I'm far wrong."

"Something on?" repeated Montie. "Begad! What do you mean, old boy?"

"Haven't you noticed the way Christine and the other monkeys are grinning?" I asked. "They've been at it for an hour past. Just look at that crowd out there now; they're cackling like a set of old hens! It smells like a jape to me."

"Begad! Surely Christine is not thinking of playing a practical joke to-day?" asked Sir Montie, in alarm. "That would be frightfully inconsiderate, dear old boy! We shall have to be on our guard—we shall, really!"

"That's just what I was thinking," I said. "I advise you to keep your eyes open, my son. Be on the look-out all the time. There's mischief afoot!"

The study door opened, and a fat face appeared. It was the face of Jimmy Little, of the Remove.

"I say, Nipper," he said, edging his way into the study. "Just a word."

"What's the trouble?" I asked. "Have you lost your appetite, Fatty?"

"Great bloaters!" said Fatty Little.

"Have I lost my appetite? Why, I'm as hungry as a hunter—I'm half starving! There's nothing like packing up and bustling about for giving a fellow an appetite. I had a decent breakfast, I'll admit, but I am famished again. How the dickens I shall last out until I get to London, goodness only knows!"

I grinned.

"I dare say you'll survive," I said.

"Well, what's the idea of coming here? What's the word you want to say?"

"About our trip to Dorrimore Hall," said Fatty anxiously. "Have you ever been down to Dorrie's place?"

"No."

"Then you don't know what the grub's like?"

"No; but you can bet your best Sunday topper that it'll be first class."

"Plenty of it?" asked Little.

"Even enough to satisfy you," I replied. "There's no need for you to worry your head about grub at Dorrie's place, my fat porpoise. As a matter of fact, there'll be too much; you'll over-eat yourself, and be ill for a week. Dorrie always does things on a large scale, and he doesn't care a rap about expenses. This party of his will be a first-class affair, and the grub will be of the highest possible quality. Now you'll be able to sleep peacefully!"

Fatty Little grinned.

"Well, it is a bit of a relief," he admitted. "I was uncertain about it, you see. Great doughnuts! If there was any likelihood of a shortage of grub, I should make some excuse and fail to turn up. But if you say the grub's all right, I'll take your word about it. When a fellow's got an appetite like mine, he's got to be careful. I—I suppose you haven't got anything in the cupboard now—just a snack, for example?"

"Well, hardly a snack," I replied, shaking my head. "There are one or two things left in here which we sha'n't want—two or three jam tarts, half a dozen sausage rolls, three doughnuts, and a scone. But a bite like that isn't any good to you, Fatty. It wouldn't last you for more than a minute!"

Fatty Little's eyes lighted up.

"Oh, I don't know!" he said. "I

might as well clear it up for you, Nipper. 'There's no sense in leaving it here, to go bad. Thanks awfully, old man. Those sausage rolls are A1.'

Fatty had already commenced operations, and we left him in the study working at full pressure. I chuckled as I went down the corridor with Sir Montie.

"If Dorrie isn't ruined by the time Fatty ends his stay, I shall be surprised," I grinned. "Anyhow, Fatty's people will be tremendously pleased to get rid of him, I should say. I reckon they'd rather keep him a week than a fortnight!"

And so, not long afterwards, we left St. Frank's for the holidays. We were off to enjoy Easter. I had mapped out quite a long programme with Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West. We had arranged to meet in London on Easter Monday, and then we were going on the spree.

When we left St. Frank's that day we were all feeling very happy and content. For we had a very pleasant prospect in front of us, and we were quite certain of an excellent finish up to the holidays by our visit to Dorrimore Hall, in Suffolk. But before we arrived at Dorrimore Hall, a few surprising events were destined to happen.

CHAPTER IV.

NOT QUITE A SUCCESS.

I STARED blankly at Nelson Lee as he entered the consulting-room at Gray's Inn Road.

"Good heavens!" I ejaculated, in horrified tones.

"My dear Nipper, what on earth is the matter?" asked the guv'nor. "What are you staring at?"

"Your—your face, sir!" I gasped. "Have you just been shaving?"

"Yes."

"But—but what have you been doing to your face?" I asked huskily. "Look at it, sir! Oh, my goodness!"

Nelson Lee, wearing a puzzled expression, turned round and gazed at his countenance in the mirror. Then he looked at me again.

"Really, Nipper, I do not see the reason for your startled----" he began.

"Caught you, guv'nor!" I grinned. "April Fool!"

Nelson Lee burst into a laugh.

"Upon my word, Nipper, you did catch me!" he chuckled. "I had forgotten all about the date. Yes, to-day is the first of April, my lad. I shall have to make a point of catching you before long!"

"You'll have a job on hand, sir!" I smiled. "I'm on my guard, and you weren't."

Nelson Lee, still chuckling, walked over to the window, and gazed out upon the busy thoroughfare below. The sun streamed in the windows gloriously, and the sky was blue, with a few fleecy clouds here and there.

"Quite glorious weather, Nipper," commented Nelson Lee. "It seems that we shall have a nice journey down to Suffolk to-day."

"Looks like it, sir," I agreed. "I'll bet we'll have a ripping time at Dorrimore Hall. I'm enjoying the holidays tremendously!"

So far everything had gone smoothly. I had spent a very enjoyable Easter with Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson. I had taken them out for motor-car rides, and we had had a really ripping time all round. On two or three evenings Nelson Lee had taken us to theatres, and we had seen some splendid shows.

Now it was the morning of the first of April, and we were due to go down to Suffolk to Dorrimore Hall.

And while we were in the middle of breakfast, my thoughts were interrupted. I had planned with Tommy and Montie to meet them at Liverpool Street Station, according to the programme. They would be there at two o'clock, which would give us plenty of time. And just as I was thinking of these things, the interruption came.

A light step sounded on the stairs, and as I looked up, the door of the dining-room opened, and Dorrie appeared. He was attired in a motoring coat and a check cap, the peak of which was at the back of his neck. He grinned at us, and nodded.

"Lazy bounders!" he said, as he entered the room. "I had my breakfast hours ago. How goes it, professor?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Quite an early visitor, Dorrie," he said, laying aside his newspaper. "You

surely don't mean to say that you have come up from Suffolk this morning?"

"I can assure you that I have," said Dorrie. "I did the trip at an average speed of thirty-eight miles an hour. Not so dusty, what?"

"Man alive, you'll break your neck one of these days!" said Nelson Lee. "But what's the idea?"

"Oh, one of his usual harebrain stunts, gov'nor," I grinned. "But I'm filled with amazement. How the dickens did you manage to turn out so early, Dorrie? How many people were you obliged to hire to haul you out of bed?"

His lordship frowned.

"I don't want any sarcastic remarks, young man!" he said cheerfully. "It was such a glorious morning that I simply couldn't resist running up to London to see your smiling faces. Lizzie is behaving splendidly, and I'm going to give her a long drink soon. By gad! She's got a terrific thirst, you know, and she has a strong partiality for spirits!"

"Meaning petrol?" I grinned.

"Well, I don't know about petrol," said Dorrie. "They call it petrol, I believe, but it isn't! But we don't want to go into any arguments concerning the quality of motor spirit. The question is—are you ready, Lee?"

"Ready?" said Nelson Lee. "What for?"

"I'm going to carry you off in triumph," said Dorrie. "I've come up here specially to take you down to the Hall in my car. So you'd better buck up, and throw one or two things into a valise, and come along."

"Oh, that's ripping!" I said. "So we're going down by car, Dorrie?"

"No, we're not!" said his lordship promptly.

"But you said——"

"I was speaking to your respected gov'nor—not to you," said his lordship. "You'll stick to the original arrangement, my son. You've got to go to Liverpool Street, and catch the two-thirty train, with all the other fellows. I couldn't think of allowing you to desert them. The professor and I will go down by road—alone."

"Oh all right; have your own way," I said. "Be selfish, if you want to. I don't care!"

Dorrie chuckled.

"But, jacking apart, Nipper, I think you had better come down by train," he said. "I don't want to hurry you particularly, Lee, but the sooner we're off the better."

Nelson Lee had no objections to make, and before ten-thirty he and Dorrie had left. I was now in sole command of the establishment, so to speak. I was left quite alone, and I had two or three hours to kill before it was necessary to make my way to Liverpool Street Station. I was somewhat surprised, therefore, when Sir Montie Tregellis-West strolled in at about half-past eleven. He was attired in all his glory, with a particularly fine fancy waistcoat. His topper was glittering, and his shoes were like mirrors. He was spotless from head to foot.

On the other hand, I was dressed anyhow. I had not yet commenced changing. Of course, I had no intention of going down to Dorrimore Hall in Eton. I had a Norfolk suit all ready, and I had been on the point of strolling into the bedroom when Sir Montie arrived. He regarded me with some show of consternation.

"Begad!" he ejaculated. "You'll be frightfully late, dear old boy!"

"Late?" I said. "What the dickens are you talking about? And what's the idea of your blowing in now? I'm glad to see you, Montie, but I thought we arranged to meet at Liverpool Street?"

Sir Montie nodded.

"So we did, dear old boy," he agreed. "But that was before we knew of the new arrangement. You haven't started dressing yet, and you'll never be able to do it in time!"

I laughed.

"I'm not like you, Montie," I said lightly. "I don't take three hours to dress. And I've got a good two hours, anyway. We needn't leave here before half-past one!"

"Half-past one!" echoed Sir Montie, staring at me through his pince-nez. "Begad! What are you talking about, dear old fellow? The train leaves Victoria at twelve-twenty!"

"Victoria?" I said wonderingly. "I think it's up to me to ask what you're talking about, Montie? What do you mean—Victoria?"

"But Victoria is the station for Brighton, Nipper boy!" said Montie mildly.



And then suddenly Bob Christine started back, his mouth wide open.
"Good heavens! It's—it's—Nipper! The driver is Nipper!" he roared.

"Brighton?" I yelled.

"Begad! You don't seem to understand!" said my noble chum. "Haven't you had a telegram?"

"Not this morning," I replied.

"That's frightfully queer—it is, really," said Tregellis-West. "I received a wire this morning, and I assumed that you had had one, too. Begad! I've got it in my pocket now. It came about half-past nine, and I thought I might as well call for you. I've got a taxi waiting outside."

I looked at Montie rather queerly.

"Let's have a squint at that wire?" I said abruptly.

Sir Montie took out a crumpled envelope from his pocket, and handed it over to me. I extracted the flimsy sheet, and spread it out. And this is what I read:

"Sir Montie Tregellis-West, West House, Grosvenor Square, London, W.—Holiday arrangement altered. Join others Victoria Station noon. Party catching 12.20 to Brighton. College House boys coming later. Look out for me outside station.—DORRIMORE."

I read the telegram in surprise, and then looked up at Sir Montie.

"Is this a joke?" I asked. "Are you trying to fool me, you duffer?"

"Begad, no!" protested Sir Montie. "That telegram came, and I assumed that Dorrie sent it. As you see, dear old boy, it was dispatched from Suffolk this morning."

I had a look at the form, and saw that Sir Montie was right. The telegram had certainly been handed in at Stowmarket, at eight-five a.m.

"Well, this is rather curious," I remarked, staring at the telegram. "And it's certainly a hoax!"

"A hoax?" said Montie, nearly dropping his pince-nez.

"Yes, my son—a hoax!" I repeated. "My only hat! Who's been getting up to this game? Surely Dorrie hasn't attempted to fool us? He's not above that kind of thing, you know—he's a born practical joker—and to-day's All Fools' Day!"

"Begad!" said Tregellis-West. "I'm frightfully bewildered, dear old boy!"

I thought for a moment or two, and then I whistled.

"I don't think Dorrie would have done this," I said at length. "And if

he meant to fool the whole crowd of us, why didn't he send me a wire? Oh, wait a minute, though!" I added. "He couldn't have sent that wire—and I'll guarantee that he knows nothing about it. Dorrie was here only about an hour ago!"

"Here?" said Sir Montie. "Really, old boy, I'm more puzzled than ever!"

"Dorrie came up from Suffolk this morning, by car," I went on. "He and the gov'nor went off only about an hour ago. And I'll guarantee anything you like that Clapson, of the College House, sent you this wire. And he's probably sent a similar wire to every other Ancient House fellow—that is, every fellow belonging to the party."

Tregellis-West passed a hand over his brow.

"My brain ain't capable of standin' it!" he said protestingly. "It's too bad of you, Nipper—it is, really. Why can't you explain? Clapson! Why should you conclude that Clapson sent this telegram? I know you're frightfully cute, and all the rest of it, and I know that you can make amazin' deductions. But this seems a bit too thick, old man!"

"It's not too thick, when you come to think of it!" I said. "Clapson lives just outside Stowmarket, you know—his people have got a whacking great country seat there. Clapson's pater is lord of the manor, or something. And it would have been quite easy for the ass to run into Stowmarket this morning and send off a sheaf of telegrams."

"But what for?" asked Sir Montie.

"Don't you remember how Christine and Co. were chuckling and cackling on the last day of term?" I said keenly. "Well, nothing came of it—until now. I'll guarantee anything you like that Christine planned out this wheeze then. It's a dodge, my son—a trick to fool us. Christine's idea is to send us all down to Brighton on a wild goose chase. And when we get there we shall find that we've been fooled. It's the first of April to-day, don't forget!"

Tregellis-West took in a deep breath.

"Dear old boy, I believe you're right—I do, really!" he said. "What a frightfully deep scheme, begad! I didn't think Christine was capable of it. But what shall we do?"

"What's the time?" I said sharply.

"About twenty minutes to twelve, dear old boy."

"Good!" I said. "I'll be dressed in about ten minutes, and then we'll rush off to Victoria."

"But you ain't thinkin' of catchin' that train to Brighton——"

"Of course not," I interrupted. "But we're going to Victoria to prevent the other fellows catching the train! You can be quite certain that they've all had telegrams, and they'll all collect together at Victoria. We've got to put a stop to this scheme, old son, and then we'll get busy on our own account. We'll beat Christine at his own game!"

It didn't take me long to get dressed. And while I was engaged in this occupation I thought of that telegram and exactly what it meant. And I was more than convinced that Bob Christine was at the bottom of the whole scheme.

Dorrie was certainly not responsible. If he had actually sent the wire, he would not have shown himself at Gray's Inn Road that morning. For he knew well enough that Sir Montie or Tommy Watson might probably drop in, and then the whole thing would be ruined. No; Dorrie was not the culprit.

Who else, then?

Christine and Co. were the only people left—and I not only suspected them, but I was positively certain. I remembered their behaviour at St. Frank's on the last day of term, and then I remembered something else.

"The last link!" I said, with conviction.

"Eh?" said Sir Montie, who was watching me as I dressed. "A link, dear old boy? But you put them on only two or three minutes ago——"

"I'm not referring to my cuff links, you duffer!" I grinned. "I'm talking about the last link in the chain of evidence. I've solved it. Christine and Co. are the jokers. Don't you remember how the Monks were grinning and chaffing before we left St. Frank's?"

"Yes, I remember that, old boy."

"Do you remember if Christine came up to you, and asked for your address in London?"

"Begad, yes!" said Sir Montie, with a start. "He said that he wanted my address, so that he could send me a picture-postcard, or something. As a matter of fact, he did send me a postcard——"

"That was only just for the sake of appearances," I interrupted. "Chris-

tine went round to nearly every fellow in the party—every Ancient House fellow—for their addresses. Why should he be so anxious to know where we were all staying? Simply for this one reason—so that he could send these telegrams this morning!"

"Nipper, old boy, you've hit it!" said Sir Montie. "And what a frightfully lucky thing I decided to call upon you. Otherwise we should all have gone down to Brighton on a fool's errand! How shockin'ly ridiculous that would have been!"

I nodded.

"Yes; and the Monks would have had the laugh of us for days," I said grimly. "You see, they missed me out—probably because they thought that Dorrie might look in here. Anyhow, we'll show Christine that what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander!"

And within another five minutes we were off. The taxi was still waiting outside, and we jumped into it and drove straight away to Victoria. We arrived there at about ten minutes past twelve, and, sure enough, just inside the station, against one of the larger platforms, we found a group of St. Frank's juniors. All the Ancient House fellows were there, including Tommy Watson, Handforth and Co., Reginald Pitt, De Valerie, Farman, and the others. They spotted us at once.

"You asses!" said Pitt. "We thought you were going to lose the train. I suppose you got telegrams, the same as we did? I wonder why Dorrie has changed his plans like this. I'm not particularly disappointed, anyhow. Brighton will suit me all serene——"

"I thought as much!" I said grimly. "Have you all got your tickets?"

"Yes," said Tommy Watson.

"All right; we shall have to go to the booking-office and get the money returned," I said briskly. "We're not going down to Brighton to-day!"

The juniors collected round me, asking all sorts of questions.

"What's the matter, Nipper? Why aren't we going?" asked Pitt. "Has anything happened?"

"Not yet—and it's not going to happen!" I replied. "My sons, this is just a genial attempt on Bob Christine's part to make fools of you all!"

"What?"

"An attempt to fool us?"

"Precisely!" I said. "Dorrie didn't

send those telegrams at all. They were dispatched by Clapson, of the Remova, who lives just outside Stowmarket, in Suffolk!"

"My only hat!"

"Great Scott!"

"The—the awful rotters!" roared Handforth indignantly. "I'll give Clapson a punch on the nose when I see him next time! As a matter of fact, I was suspicious of those telegrams all the time, and I don't suppose I should have gone to Brighton——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It did not take me long to explain the situation, and when I had done the juniors were excited. Another ten minutes, and they would have been on the train for Brighton—they would have been fooled!

"It was jolly cute of you, Nipper, to see through the wheeze!" said Pitt.

"Rats!" I replied. "I know all along that Dorrie hadn't sent the telegrams. There was nothing cute about it. I was suspicious at the very start."

"Of course, Christine and Co. will go to Liverpool Street, as arranged," said De Valerie. "They'll be a bit surprised when we turn up, as large as life, and with smiling faces!"

I grinned.

"That's just it!" I said calmly. "We sha'n't turn up at all!"

"Eh?"

"We sha'n't be at Liverpool Street at 2.30!"

"But—but——"

"I'm going to pay Christine and Co. back in their own coin," I said cheerfully. "I've got an idea, my children, and those giddy Monks will be beautifully dished before long. Leave it to your uncle, and everything will be all serene!"

The juniors looked at me curiously.

"Yes, but what's the idea?" asked Pitt. "You might let us know!"

"Say, hand out the information!" put in Justin B. Farman, in his easy Western drawl. "I guess we're sure puzzled a heap. Come across with the idea, Nipper!"

I shook my head.

"I can't tell you all about it, now," I said briskly. "There are one or two things to be done. But I may as well tell you this—we sha'n't go down by the two-thirty train at all, but by the four-thirty!"

"I've got you," said Farman. "But what's the all-fired stunt?"

"Well, for one thing, we can't show ourselves at Liverpool Street at half-past two, because Christine and Co. will be there, and they would know that their own scheme had failed," I went on. "We shall have to arrange a meeting place, and then all you fellows will catch the four-thirty from Liverpool Street to Stowmarket—that's where Dorrie is going to meet us."

"Exactly!" said Tommy Watson. "Dorrie will be at the station to meet the first train——"

"No, he won't," I interrupted. "I'm going to send Dorrie a wire now, saying that we can't come down until four-thirty. He'll know what to do then, and we'll easily explain things afterwards. Christine and Co. planned to leave us stranded at Brighton, but we'll go one better."

Having dispatched the telegram to Lord Dorrimore, I thought it just as well to let the rest of the fellows into the secret. I told them of my scheme, and it was received with chuckles, grins, and, finally, yells of laughter.

CHAPTER V.

FOOLED!

BOB CHRISTINE chuckled.

"Just ten past two!" he remarked. "Those Ancient Housebounders have been in Brighton for a long time now, and I'll bet they're feeling small, too! What a joke, my sons!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The other Monks who were gathered round Christine roared with laughter. They considered the joke to be an excellent one, and they were hugely enjoying it.

They were all gathered together in Liverpool Street Station, almost under the great clock. Their train was not due to leave for another twenty minutes, so they did not see any reason why they should get on the platform. Besides, they were waiting for Billy Nation, who had not yet turned up. All the others, with the exception of Clapson—who lived at Stowmarket—were there. They comprised Christine, Yorke, Tal-

madge, Ernest Lawrence, Oldfield, Turner, Page, and Harron. And they were all grinning delightedly over the hugely successful jape which had been perpetrated on the Ancient House juniors. For, of course, by this time the Fossils were in Brighton, kicking their heels, and probably kicking themselves. They had been fooled in a glorious manner.

"Of course, we shall get down to Stowmarket at the right time," said Christine. "Dorrie will meet us, and we'll explain what happened. He's a sport, and he'll enter into the joke. And Handforth and Pitt, and all the rest of them will probably turn up about nine o'clock this evening!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We'll chip them to death!" grinned Talmadge.

"Rather!"

"Yes, but what about Nipper?" asked Yorke. "He didn't get a wire, and therefore he didn't go to Brighton."

"Oh, I suppose he'll go by this train, the same as us," said Christine. "He ought to be turning up soon, then we'll explain things to him. My hat! Won't he stare when he hears how his pals have been dished?"

"Rather!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Christine and Co. went off into fresh outbursts of hilarity.

And they were in the middle of this when Nation appeared, hurrying up with a rug over one arm, and a port-manteau in his hand.

"Oh, good!" he panted. "Have I kept you fellows waiting?"

"You have," said Bob Christine. "Never mind, there's heaps of time. If you chaps will give me your tin, I'll dash along to the booking-office, and get all our tickets. There's no need for us to go separately. We're going first class, I suppose?" he added with a grin.

"Rather not!" said Yorke. "We'll order a special train while we're about it, including a Pullman car, with lounge chairs!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Third class is good enough for us, with fares at the prices they are now!" said Oldfield. "Money is none too plentiful nowadays!"

The juniors proceeded to shell out, and they were in the middle of this occupation when an alert little man

appeared. He was attired in smart livery, and he touched his cap with respect as he came to a halt in front of the juniors. Christine looked up, and regarded the man curiously. His face was red, and he wore little side whiskers, and his teeth were prominent.

"Beg pardon, young gents!" he said apologetically.

"That's all right," said Christine. "What's the trouble?"

"Can you tell me if there's a young gent here named Master Nipper, sir?" said the man.

"No; Nipper doesn't seem to be here just now," said Christine. "He hasn't turned up yet. What do you want him for?"

"It's awkward, Master Nipper not being here," said the man, scratching his head. "Mebbe you could tell me if Master Bob Christine is here, sir?"

Christine grinned.

"Yes, he's here all right—talking to you now!" he replied. "What do you want me for?"

"Oh, you're Master Christine, sir?" said the man in livery. "That's good! I've got instructions to take you all away, sir!"

The juniors stared.

"To take us away?" asked Christine. "What the dickens do you mean?"

"Well, you see, young gents, I am employed by the Hadley Motor Coach Company, of Kensington. Our manager received instructions this morning to send two big motor coaches to Liverpool Street Station to collect a party of boys. I'm to take you all to Dorrimore Hall, sir, in Suffolk—just near Stowmarket."

Christine and Co. looked at one another in astonishment.

"But—but we're going down by train!" said Yorke.

"If you'll pardon me, young gents, you're going down by charabanc," said the man in livery. "Them's my instructions. I can't say for sure, of course, but it looks to me as if there might be some upset near Stowmarket. Maybe there's been a railway accident, or something, blocking the line. Anyhow, I've got instructions to take you down by road."

The critical moment had arrived.

Would Christine and Co. suspect? Certainly, there was no reason why they should; but, if they had their wits about them, they might be able to

detect something rather suspicious in this circumstance. Why had the arrangement been altered at the last moment? Why were they being taken down by road, instead of being allowed to go by train?

Christine himself looked rather thoughtful, but, fortunately, the other fellows started speaking.

"So we're going down by charabanc?" asked Page. "I say, that's ripping! I'd ten times rather go by road than rail—and, besides, we sha'n't have any fares to pay!"

"My hat!" said Yorke. "I'd forgotten that! It'll be heaps better to go by road. We shall be taken straight to Dorrimore Hall. There won't be any trouble or anything—and a charabanc is nearly as quick as the railways nowadays!"

Bob Christine nodded.

"I suppose Lord Dorrimore must have planned this out at the last minute," he said. "Have you got the charabanc outside?" he added, addressing the man in livery.

"Yes, sir, waiting now," said the man. "My name is Reppin, sir, and I've been instructed by the manager to take you all away."

"All right, Reppin, you'd better get busy," said Yorke. "We're ready—and it's a jolly good thing we didn't buy our tickets!"

"But I understood, young gents, that there would have been twenty-four of you altogether," said Reppin, looking round. "There seems to be only nine."

"Yes—er—exactly!" said Bob Christine hurriedly. "The fact is, the other fellows are delayed, and won't be along until later on in the afternoon. It's no good waiting for them, Reppin."

The driver shook his head doubtfully.

"Well, I dunno whether I'd better start, young gents," he said. "My instructions was to take twenty-four schoolboys. And nine ain't twenty-four, are they? It don't hardly seem worth while to use a big charabanc just to take nine of you."

Christine winked.

"The fact is, Reppin, we've played a joke on the other fellows—it's April Fools' Day, you know," he said confidentially. "It doesn't make any difference to you, does it, whether you take twenty-four or nine?"

And Christine slipped five shillings

into the man's ready palm. Reppin winked and nodded.

"Right you are, young gents," he said briskly. "I savvy. Then we'd best be going straight away."

And, followed by the animated juniors, the man led the way out of the station into the yard. Then, standing there, was a big red charabanc. It was not one of the very largest, although a brand new vehicle. It was fitted with huge pneumatic tyres, and looked capable of attaining a high speed. It was, in fact, a splendid conveyance.

Christino and Co. tumbled in with enthusiasm, and before long the driver took his place and started off. He went very easily and very cautiously through the West End, making his way along Aldwych, and then straight through Mile End Road to Stratford.

It was a glorious day, and the juniors were delighted with the change of plan. Travelling by road was far better than travelling by rail, and, after Romford had been passed, the driver put on speed, and he fairly made the charabanc romp along.

If Bob Christine had had any suspicions, he had cast them aside. It was too late now, anyhow, to say or do anything. They were well on the road to Suffolk, and the juniors were certainly enjoying themselves. On every hand the countryside was awakening, and the green fields were superb in the sunlight of the spring day.

"This is glorious, you know," said Yorke enthusiastically. "Miles better than the blessed old railway! These modern charabancs are making the railway companies look a bit sick, you know. Why, we shall get down to Dorrimore Hall practically as quickly as if we had gone by train."

"Rather!" said Oldfield. "This beats everything. And what a ripping motor coach!"

The road was unfamiliar to nearly all the juniors. They were greatly interested in the countryside as they passed along.

The charabanc fairly roared up the hill into Brentwood, and passed through that quiet little town at a greater speed than the inhabitants cared for.

And then straight on through Shonfield, and then toward Ingatestone.

The driver hardly said a word. He sat behind the wheel, all his attention

centred upon the driving. But, now and again, a quiet little smile appeared in his eyes—unobserved by the juniors.

Through picturesque villages the charabanc roared its way until, finally, Chelmsford was reached. The driver went cautiously through this town, but as soon as the open country was reached he opened the throttle again. And so the charabanc went straight on through Hatfield Peverel to the fairly large town of Witham.

So far, everything had gone smoothly, and the juniors had nothing whatever to complain of. There had not been a single stop—the charabanc had been on the go ever since it had left Liverpool Street Station.

But at Witham a slight halt was called for refreshments. The driver was tipped, and instructed to go off and find himself some beer. But he winked, and said that the beer would do later—he had his charabanc to look after.

A fresh start was made, and everything went well at first. The motor coach fairly roared on its way to Kelvedon, but, soon after passing through this place, the driver turned off the main road. The juniors wondered why he was doing so, and one of the fellows ventured to ask the reason.

"It's all right, young gent," said Reppin. "Makes the journey shorter."

"Oh, a near cut!" said the junior.

They went on, down lanes where the hedges were bright green, and where flowers were springing out under the influence of the warm spring sunshine. The air was fresh, and the juniors breathed in with keen enjoyment.

"Suffolk seems to be a fine county!" remarked Christine. "Not particularly grand when it comes to scenery, but jolly home-like and old-fashioned. And this air is as good as a giddy tonic!"

"Rather!"

"Why, this ride beats the railway trip into a cocked hat!" remarked Yorke. "We've come along without a trace of mishap——"

"But there seems to be something a bit wrong with the engine now," put in Christine. "It's spluttering a good deal, anyhow."

There was no doubt that the charabanc was not running as smoothly as it had been, and, after going several hundred yards further, it appeared to be missing fire badly. The driver applied

his brakes, and drew into the side of the road.

"Carburettor trouble, I expect, young gents," he said. "But it won't take me more than five minutes to adjust. Most likely a speck of grit in the jet. I should advise you to get out and stretch your legs a bit."

"Oh, good!" said Clapson.

The other fellows were pleased, too, and they all tumbled out of the charabanc. The driver climbed down, went to the front, and lifted one side of the bonnet. Then, armed with a spanner, he began to make his adjustments, whistling cheerfully.

Four or five of the juniors wandered some distance away into an adjoining meadow, but two or three remained in the lane. After a few minutes the driver closed down the bonnet, and climbed back into the seat.

"All ready now?" asked Turner.

"Well, I'm not quite certain yet, young gents," said Reppin. "I'm just going to give her a try. I'll run up the road and back—there's a place just ahead where I can turn her round. I'll let you know when to climb in."

The juniors watched with interest. The engine now seemed to be running smoothly, and when the charabanc moved off, it did so without a trace of a splutter. It fairly roared up the lane.

But, a short distance away, the waiting juniors saw that the somewhat cumbersome vehicle was turning; but, after it had turned, the driver brought it to a standstill. And now he proceeded to behave in a somewhat curious manner. He left his seat, climbed over the backs of the other seats, and proceeded to throw all the luggage on to the grass, beside the road. Bags, portmanteaux, suit cases—everything, in fact, went overboard. And then, with an astonishingly agile leap, the driver regained his seat.

"My only hat!" said Oldfield, who had noticed the man's actions towards the last. "What the dickens has he been up to? What's the idea of chucking all our bags out? He must be dotty!"

"It's a mystery!" said Christine, frowning.

And then the charabanc came shooting towards them at ever-gathering speed. It did not seem as though Reppin intended coming to a stop.

Zurrrrr-zrrrr!

The electric buzzer sent out a jarring note of warning—a prolonged bark. Obviously, the driver meant to indicate that the road must be kept clear. And the charabanc came sweeping up, the juniors staring at it wonderingly.

And then suddenly Bob Christine started back, his mouth wide open.

"Good heavens!" he gasped. "It's—it's—Look!"

"But—but I can't see——"

"Nipper!" bellowed Christine hoarsely. "The driver—is Nipper!"

"Oh, my only aunt!"

"Great Scott!"

"But—but it can't be——"

"It is—Nipper himself!"

And there was no doubt that the Monks were quite correct. The driver of the charabanc was little me. With a few deft strokes I had pulled off my wig and false whiskers—a disguise which had been prepared with particular care. But it is far easier to remove a disguise than to don one.

I continued to buzz the hooter, and I knew that I should not endanger any of the fellows by dashing past at full speed.

And, as I came opposite, I grinned all over my face, and waved my hand.

"April fools!" I roared. "Ha, ha, ha!"

Bob Christine fainted. He collapsed helplessly into the arms of Talmadge and Yorke. And upon his face there was a sickly expression of consternation and alarm. He recovered his strength after the charabanc had shot by.

He gazed down the lane, but all he could see was a cloud of dust. The motor coach had gone, leaving the College House fellows stranded, with their luggage in a heap on the grass further up the lane.

"Nipper!" panted Yorke. "It—it was Nipper all the time!"

"Great corks!"

"And—and we didn't see through his blessed disguise."

"Oh, what asses—what hopeless idiots!" snorted Christine wrathfully.

"Well, you were just as bad——"

"I'm including myself!" rapped out Christine. "I'm blaming myself as much as anybody. I'm an ass—I'm a duffer—I'm a dolt! And we're all the same! There ain't words in the English language fit to describe us. Nipper!

And we've been dished—fooled! Oh, what a yell they'll have over us!"

"I don't know!" said Yorke. "We fooled the other Fossils, anyway!"

"What's that on the road?" asked Page suddenly. "I thought I saw something flutter down. I believe Nipper threw something out."

One of the juniors dashed forward, and picked up an envelope. The other Monks crowded round him at once, eager, excited, and curious.

"What is it?"

"Let's have a squint?"

"Open it, you ass!"

On the envelope were the words: "Bob Christine and Co." Christine himself tore it open, and extracted a single sheet of notepaper. And the Monks read the following message with mingled feelings:

"My dear Fools (this is only meant in the April 1st sense),

"It may interest you to know that your little game did not work. Not a single Ancient House fellow went to Brighton. Your jape was sat on from the very start. How do you like the tables being turned?

"I have selected the spot where you now stand with great care, and you will soon discover that you are just over five miles from the nearest railway station—which happens to be Mark's Tey. The Ancient House fellows are leaving Liverpool Street by the 4.30 train, and I shall join that train later. It stops at Mark's Tey, and if you step out lively, you'll just manage to catch it. If you don't catch it, you'll have to wait for about three hours. So it's up to you to put your best foot foremost! And we shall all be able to arrive at Stowmarket together, where Dorrie will meet us.

"By the way, have a go at spelling 'Reppin' backwards. Don't you think you've been dense?

"Don't forget to walk fast!"

"NIPPER."

Bob Christine looked at his chums sheepishly, and they looked at him with expressions which were too deep for words. Their own plan had failed, and they had fallen into a trap of the simplest variety!

Bob Christine drew in a deep breath.

"April fools!" he said bitterly. "I reckon we're April idiots!"

CHAPTER VI.

FOOLED AGAIN!

WHEN the four-thirty train left Liverpool Street it carried all the Ancient House members of the St. Frank's party—with the single exception of myself. Tregellis-West and Watson were there, Handforth and Co., Pitt, Farman, Fatty Little, and all the others. And they were in high spirits. At the same time, they wondered whether I had succeeded in my scheme.

Clearly it had started well, for there was no sign of Christine and Co. at Liverpool Street. But, in any case, the juniors were not left in doubt for long. For when the train pulled up at Chelmsford—the first stop—I strolled along the platform, smiling cheerfully. I found a number of heads projecting from the carriage windows, and a dozen waving arms greeted me.

"There he is!"

"Good old Nipper!"

"Begad! How did it go, dear old fellow?"

"Did you fool them?"

"It was as easy as rolling off a form," I grinned, as the juniors tumbled out and crowded round me. "They've been dished, to a turn—done brown, in fact. And now I expect they're trudging wearily along, trying to get to Mark's Tey in time."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"How did you manage it?" asked Watson.

"Only just," I replied. "I had time to get back to Chelmsford, and slipped the charabanc into a garage. I raced up here at full speed, and got my ticket as the train came in. Cutting it pretty fine, eh?"

"Rather!" said Reginald Pitt. "But still, you did it."

"And, although it cost a few quid, it was jolly well worth it," I grinned. "They know me at that motor coach company in London, or I couldn't have wangled the thing at all. They're sending a man down to take the charabanc back."

I climbed into the train with a crowd of other fellows, and very soon we were speeding along our way. And we were not separated, even now, for the coach was a corridor one, and our party occupied two adjoining compartments. Everybody was grinning at the way in

which Christine and Co. had been caught in their own trap—for this is what it practically amounted to.

And, before so very long, the train steamed into Mark's Tey Station—a small but important junction near Colchester. Many heads were projecting from the carriage windows, and a series of yells went up when nine weary looking figures were seen upon the platform. Christine and Co. had managed it!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"April fools!"

"How are your poor feet?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Poor old Christine! Poor old Monkeys!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The train came to a stop, and the grins on the faces of the Mossils were of the broadest variety. But there were no answering grins from Christine and Co. They glared at the train ferociously. All the nine of them were dusty and untidy. Their shoulders were drooping and it was clear that they were tired. Their long walk burdened with their luggage had told upon them.

"You awful bounders!" said Christine fiercely. "You—you rotters—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm going to fight you for this, Nipper!" went on Christine grimly. "I may get whacked, but I'll give you something to be going on with before I am! By Jingo! You horrible rotter—"

"Rats!" I grinned, grabbing Christine's hand. "Don't take it like that, old son. You tried to fool us, and it failed. But we returned the compliment, that's all. Laugh, you ass! Don't you think it was funny?"

"Oh, it was a scream!" said Christine bitterly.

But, in spite of himself, he could not help realising the truth, and a faint grin spread over his face.

"Well, I suppose there's no sense in making a fuss about it," he said reluctantly. "You fooled us, and you fooled us well! We might as well admit it. Have your giddy laugh, and get it over!"

Christine's spirit was echoed by the other fellows, and soon after the journey had recommenced we were all joking together. There was no ill-feeling. The Monks realised that it was up to them to sing small and grin.

And so, by the time the train finally arrived at Stowmarket Christine and Co. had forgiven—but not forgotten. But they took it all in good part. However, I felt quite certain that Christine himself would seize the first opportunity to get his own back—with interest. Not that we should mind that.

Unfortunately, the brilliant afternoon had changed into a dull evening, with threatening clouds sweeping over the skies. And now, as we stepped out on to the platform at Stowmarket, rain was falling. It was quite dusky, and the lights of the station were not particularly bright.

"Just our luck!" grunted Christine, as he turned his coat collar up. "Still, I expect Dorrie has got a whole fleet of cars outside, to carry us up to the Hall. And then for a jolly good time."

Fatty Little smacked his lips.

"Great doughnuts!" he exclaimed. "It's the feed I'm thinking about. I'll bet we'll have a gorgeous tea. I've half a mind to dash into the refreshment-room for a snack——"

"Nothing doing!" said Nicodemus Trotwood grimly. "My only hat! I've been looking after you ever since we left London, and you've eaten enough for a dozen already. If you have any appetite when we arrive at Dorrie's place, it'll be a wonder."

"Appetite!" snorted Fatty. "Why, I'm half starved!"

We all moved down the platform, towards the exit. The rain was falling steadily but it would probably be of short duration. The clouds would soon roll over and then the stars would shine.

We passed out through the booking-office, much to the interest of the few local inhabitants who were gathered round. So many boys at once seemed to be a bit of a novelty in Stowmarket.

And, just as we got outside, we heard a hail in a cheery voice and Lord Dorrimore came marching up attired in thick boots, and mackintosh, and carrying a stout walking-stick. He nodded to us genially.

"So here you are!" he exclaimed. "Anybody missing?"

"No; we're all here, Dorrie," I replied. "We've had a few diversions on the way, but they're all settled now. You'll hear the yarn later."

"Right you are," said Dorrie briskly. "Got your luggage? Good! It's only

about a three mile walk. Pity it's raining."

"A three mile walk!" said Christine blankly.

"Oh, my hat!"

"Ain't—ain't we going to ride?" muttered Pitt.

"It doesn't seem like it," said Do Valerio softly. "But we mustn't say anything—we can't grumble. We're Dorrie's guests, you know."

But there was a general feeling of dismay among the juniors. Lord Dorrimore, the millionaire, was making us all walk! I was considerably astonished on my own account, for I had expected something very different.

We were all carrying heavy bags, and the prospect of a three mile walk in the rain was not at all alluring. The College House fellows, indeed, were positively thunderstruck. Weary as they were, they already funk'd the trudge.

But they knew better than to grumble—aloud, at all events. What they muttered among themselves was a totally different matter.

And so we set off from Stowmarket, in the gathering dusk and the falling rain. Before we were fairly out of the town our bags and suit cases felt as though they were filled with lead. And Dorrie strode cheerfully on in advance, puffing at his pipe, and chatting genially.

Fortunately, the rain was not heavy—a thin sprinkling which was not sufficient to wet us through. At the same time it was very uncomfortable and we soon found ourselves out in the country lanes, struggling hard to keep to the pace which our host was setting.

"Come along, young 'uns—come along!" said Dorrie, glancing over his shoulder. "Only about another two miles now!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Two more miles?"

The groans were general—a particularly loud one coming from Fatty Little.

"I shall drop before we get there—I know I shall!" he said hoarsely. "My strength will give out! I'm no good, unless I have something to eat——"

"Never mind, boys! Once you get to the Hall you'll have some hot tea and plenty of good food," said Lord Dorrimore. "That'll set you up, and after that you'll go up to bed, and sleep like

tops until the morning. I'm giving you something particularly good to-night, as it's a special occasion."

"Oh, ripping!"

"By the way," went on Dorrie, "I might as well tell you now. I thought perhaps you'd rather all sleep together, so I've had twenty-five beds put in one huge room. You'll be as cosy and comfortable as birds in a nest!"

The juniors all thought this to be a first-class idea, but just then they were not in a mood to enthuse over anything. They walked on, growing more tired every minute—and hungrier, too.

The journey had given them appetites, and now the chill evening air was making them enormously sharp set. They all felt that they would be able to eat a truly record meal—a Fatty Little meal, as De Valeri put it.

But all things come to an end in time—even wearisome trudges on a wet evening. It was quite dark now, and a chill wind blew over the countryside. At the top of a little rise Lord Dorrimore came to a halt, and lifted his stick, pointing.

"Home, sweet home!" he announced lightly.

"Thank goodness!"

"We're nearly there now!"

Dorrie's stick was pointing to a collection of warm lights which glowed through the trees some distance ahead. Those lights looked particularly attractive, for they gave promise of comfort, luxury, and a ripping feed.

"We shall be all right, soon!" said Tommy Watson. "Warm fires, hot tea, sandwiches, beef pies, cakes and pastries—"

"Great cocoanuts—don't!" said Fatty Little. "I can't bear to think of it. It makes me weak all over. I'm nearly dead with exhaustion!"

"And, after a terrible tuck in, we'll go up to bed and sleep like tops!" went on Watson. "The beds are bound to be comfortable and warm, and I expect we'll have a huge fire burning in the room. Dorrie always does things on the grand scale."

At last we arrived at a pair of big gates. Dorrie pushed one of them open, and we all trooped in upon a wide gravel drive, and Dorrimore Hall lay before us, some way back from the road. It seemed to be a huge, rambling old building, with many warmly lighted windows.

"By the way, Nipper," said Dorrie, taking my arm. "You won't see your guv'nor to-night. Lee isn't here."

"Why—how's that?" I asked, in surprise. "I thought—"

"Never mind what you thought," interrupted his lordship. "Your guv'nor couldn't manage to be here this evening; but I'll explain all that later."

Those last few steps up the drive seemed easy, for we were within sight of warmth, rest and food. Dorrie arrived at the big door first. He mounted the steps, and flung open the door wide, revealing a dimly lighted interior.

"Enter, boys!" he said genially. "Welcome to Dorrimore Hall!"

"Thanks, sir!"

The juniors all spoke at once, and they trooped in. And their first feeling was one of surprise and keen disappointment. It was not at all as they had anticipated. They looked about them wonderingly.

For they found themselves in a big lounge hall with a low ceiling. Great oaken beams were above, but the only light was supplied by two dismally burning oil lamps. There was no fire, and the air struck chill as the juniors stood, divesting themselves of their overcoats.

And of comfort there was no trace. The floor was covered with cold linoleum, and the only chairs were hard, uninviting looking objects of dark oak. There were no lounges—no soft chairs.

And after the youthful guests had taken off their overcoats, a butler appeared—a grim, gaunt-looking man with a face which revealed neither good humour nor welcome. He was a forbidding person altogether.

"Now, I dare say you all want a wash, just to make you feel comfortable," said Lord Dorrimore. "James will show you the way upstairs, and you can have a comfortable wash and brush up. Then you'll come down to a good spread."

The fellows felt much better now. The journey was over, and they were within sight of the welcome feed. Many of them thought it most unnecessary to wash, but they could not object. Fatty Little considered the idea to be mad in the extreme, and it nearly broke his heart to go upstairs.

All the juniors followed James, the butler. The staircase was dark and cold. True, it was richly carpeted, but

the light was dim, and there was not that warmth and comfort which the juniors had expected.

And when they got to the bathroom they found it to be a long, cheerless apartment with a number of wash-basins lining the walls. Two candles were burning, casting a flickering light upon the dismal scene. And the water in the basins was icily cold. Many of the fellows looked at one another queerly.

"Dash it all, I expected something different from this!" muttered Pitt. "Who said that Dorrie was a millionaire? All this looks awfully poor and mean."

"We're all tired," I said. "It'll seem different to-morrow."

The wash was not a great success, but it was soon finished with, and then we trooped downstairs, and were ushered into the dining-room. Dorrie stood by the doorway, smiling and chatting genially with the fellows as they went in.

And now the guests were not only surprised, but they received an unpleasant shock. The room was a huge one, but it was only dimly lit by a number of candles. In the centre stood a great table, covered with snowy white linen, and surrounded by hard oaken chairs. But it was not the table or the chairs that the juniors gazed at. It was the contents of the table that attracted their attention.

Great plates were piled with thick bread-and-butter—even thicker than was usually served at St. Frank's. And the butter was meagrely spread. There were no dainties, no pastries, no hot dishes. The juniors had been expecting to see the board covered with every manner of delicacy—with huge hams, roast joints, fruits and sweet dishes.

And there was nothing—except piles of thick bread-and-butter!

Fatty Little's eyes nearly started out of his head.

"Great jumping lobsters!" he gasped. "Is—is this what we're going to have?"

"Shush, you ass!" muttered Pitt, nudging him.

Grumbles were impossible. It would have been the height of bad form and ill-breeding to make any remarks concerning the fare which Lord Dorrimore

provided. But to say that the juniors were surprised would be putting it mildly. They were staggered.

"Now then, boys, sit down, and pile in!" said Dorrie, rubbing his hands together with much enjoyment. "I knew you would be hungry, and so I had the table well filled. The tea will be along in a minute."

The juniors sat down, feeling rather dazed. Words failed them. But they were so hungry that even the bread-and-butter—shockingly stale as it proved to be—was welcome. They piled in with gusto.

And presently the tea arrived—at least, Dorrie had called it tea. It was a weak concoction with very little flavour, half cold, and with scarcely any sugar in. As one of the fellows remarked, coffee-shop tea was glorious by comparison.

And Dorrie walked about, smoking, and talking animatedly all the time. The piles of bread-and-butter vanished in record time—which was not surprising, considering that there were twenty-five fellows to be fed.

The table was completely cleared, and the guests were still very hungry. Fatty Little hoarsely declared that he was on the verge of starvation; but, apparently, there was no food to follow.

"Now, the best thing you boys can do is to go straight to bed!" said Dorrie. "You've had a good meal, and what you need is a good sleep. Off you go. James will show you to your bedroom. Good-night, youngsters—good-night!"

Only a few juniors replied—the others felt that words were impossible. They rose listlessly and followed the forbidding looking butler upstairs once more. Several of the juniors were inclined to be rebellious. They wanted to ask for more food; but they had no opportunity.

They were hustled upstairs and they soon found themselves in their bedroom. They received a further shock. It was a chill barren apartment with cold oilcloth on the floor and with a single candle to illuminate it and round the walls there were twenty-five beds of the most uninviting-looking description.

"Oh, great pip!" said Handforth, looking round.

The door closed with a slam, and the juniors were alone. Somebody felt one

of the beds, and it proved to be as hard as a board. They were all the same. The blankets were coarse, and few in number. The beds in the Remove dormitory at St. Frank's were havens of luxury compared to these prison-like articles.

"I've never been so surprised in all my giddy life!" said Reginald Pitt, in a low voice. "What does it mean? Did you ever see anything like it? Fancy giving us beds like this——"

"Blow the beds!" moaned Fatty Little. "What about the supper? I sha'n't live until the morning—I shall simply expire from starvation——"

"Oh, you'll be all right, Fatty," said Christine irritably. "But I can tell you one thing—I'm off home to-morrow!"

"Hear, hear!"

"We won't stand this!" went on Christine warmly. "Dorrie invited us to spend a week with him, and we thought we should have a good time. But this—this! I've never been treated so rottenly in all my blessed existence!"

"We'll all make excuses, and go!" said Handforth. "So this is your marvellous millionaire!" he went on bitterly, addressing me. "This is your wonderful Dorrie! A jolly fine host—I don't think!"

"Oh, don't grumble!" I said. "I suppose that Dorrie thinks that plain food and absence of comfort are good for us. The best thing you chaps can do is to get into bed, and go to sleep. You'll feel different in the morning!"

In the morning two or three fellows awakened at about the same time, and the rest were soon sitting up. They were refreshed, but they ached in almost every limb. And their hunger was positively painful.

"No beastly doorstep breakfast for me!" said Bob Christine.

"Nor for me!" said De Valerie. "Look here, you chaps, let's come to a decision. It's early yet—only just seven. Lord Dorrimore is bound to be in bed. I vote we get dressed as quickly as possible, slip out quietly, and go to Stowmarket. We'll have a good feed

there, and then catch the next train back to London."

"Hear, hear!"

The voices of approval were unanimous. They went quietly along to the stairs, and descended into the hall. And the first thing that the foremost junior saw was a huge white painted board, with two black words upon it. And these were the words:

"APRIL FOOLS!"

The juniors simply pelted downstairs, excited and wondering. In less than five minutes they discovered that they had the place completely to themselves. Dorrie wasn't there—the butler wasn't there—and no servants were visible at all!

And, happening to go outside, one fellow made the astounding discovery that the building was a big orphan school, which had been shut up for the holidays! It wasn't Dorrimore Hall at all!

And then, in the midst of it, Dorrie himself appeared in a big motor-car. He was grinning with huge enjoyment, and finally yelled with laughter. And then the fellows realised that it was all a practical joke—they had been fooled by Dorrie himself!

I had been in the know—for Dorrie had whispered it to me the previous night, on the way from Stowmarket—and I had kept mum. It had been easy for Dorrie to make his arrangements and to occupy the industrial school for a single night.

Dorrimore Hall was close by, and there the St. Frank's guests found warmth, comfort, and luxury. They enjoyed a breakfast of unsurpassed excellence, and even Fatty Little had enough. And then the juniors were able to appreciate the point of the joke, and they roared with laughter at the recollection of their discomforts.

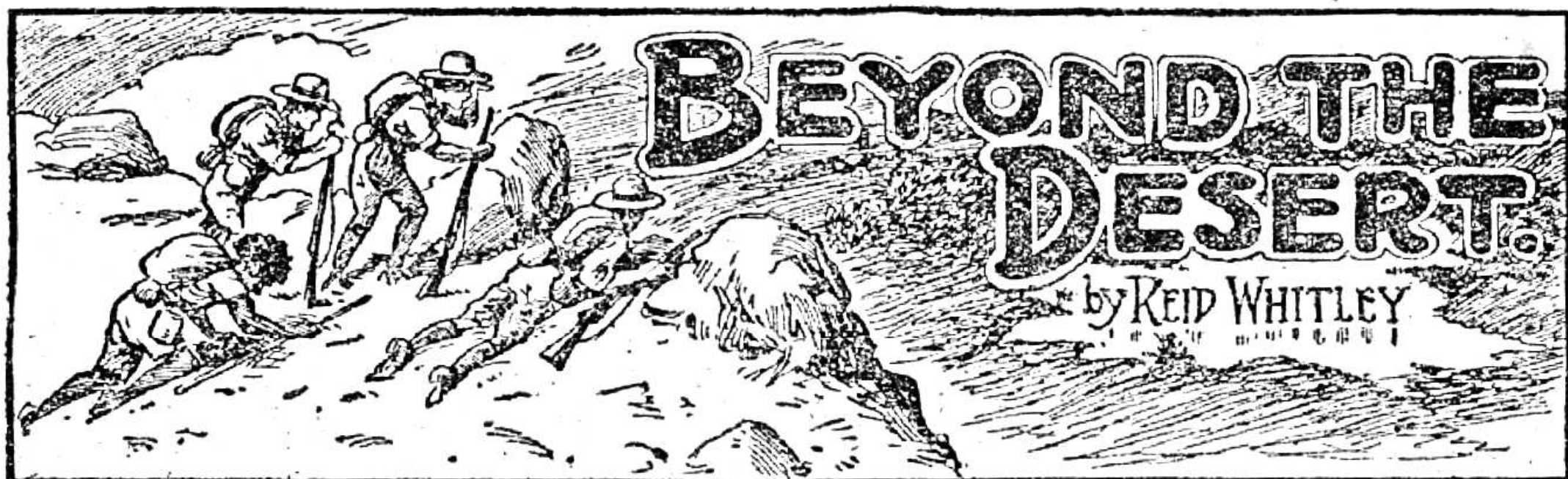
And so the stay at Dorrimore Hall commenced, with everybody feeling happy and gay and cheerful. They little realised what startling, staggering adventures were to befall them in the very near future!

THE END.

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AUSTRALIAN TALE OF ADVENTURE BY AN AUSTRALIAN AUTHOR

INTRODUCTION.

Jack Maxwell and Jim Harding have come to settle in Australia from the Old Country. They go to Cairns, where Jack has an uncle, Professor Maxwell, the naturalist and explorer. Hearing that the professor has been absent in the interior for some months, the young Englishmen decide to try and find him. They are joined by Tom Anson, an Australian, with whom they have struck up a friendship. Accompanied by Snaplus, a black tracker, they start off across the desert until they come to a dried up water-hole. Here they find a message from Jack's uncle, directing them to the Secret Valley, some of the wonders of which you will read in the ensuing chapter.

(Now read on.)

The Overlords.

MAXWELL sped up, expecting at any moment to see a rock hurtling down upon him, but none came. He reached the ledge, and halted to gain his breath and look about him. As he had noted from below, the cliff bulged out above the ledge, so that it was impossible for anything to be dropped from above.

In the direction from which they had come it ran for only a short distance, narrowing away to nothing within a hundred yards or so, though there were others above it. But the other way, down the valley, he could see it, now broad, now narrow, following every curve of the cliff till it disappeared round a corner.

The others joined him.

"This is mighty convenient," said Anson. "One or two men could hold their own here till the cows came home. If those riggers happen to have any long spears like those the Kanakas used to use in the islands, we'd have a sweet time."

"Let's hope they haven't," returned Maxwell. "Anyhow, I haven't seen the long

spear yet that is as fast as a bullet. Come on!"

They moved cautiously forward, keeping as close to the rock wall as they could lest they be seen from below. By now it was very hot and the sun-baked cliff reflected light and heat so that they were half-blinded and very nearly baked.

"Still, this is better than crawling along below," said Harding. "D'you think this is a natural road, Anson?"

"No. Too regular. But I think most of it was natural to start with, and that it has been worked at in places. Where we came up was almost like a ladder. Few animals but a bear could climb that. But it beats me to think these little darkies did everything so intelligent. See those marks there? They were made by tools, I'll bet!"

Harding agreed. The rock had been cut away at the spot without doubt. Equally without doubt, the stupid-looking tailed men could not have accomplished such work without direction.

Snaplus, who was a little way in advance, halted and held up his hand. They were close to the spot where the way turned the corner of the cliff.

"Blackfellow near here," he remarked in a whisper, and held his hatchet ready as he peered round the cornice.

Then he beckoned. The three joined him.

Beyond the turn the ledge narrowed till it was little more than a foot wide and continued thus for a hundred yards or so. There it widened out again to a platform beyond which was a gap of some thirty or forty feet. On the other side was a similar platform, upon which lay a great plank, rough hewn as though with stone hatchets.

"Well, I'm jiggered! A drawbridge!" exclaimed Harding. "And see, that chunk of stone is tied to it for a counterpoise. I believe it's made to swing on a pivot and bridge the gap."

"It is," confirmed Maxwell. "Look! A bit of the rock has been left in place midway, to support it. The only trouble is that we are on the wrong side of the ditch."

"I think we can fix that," muttered

Anson. "There seems to be no one on guard. Pity we can't get a glimpse of what's beyond."

"Heap blackfellow," grunted Snaplus. "Big heap. Smell um."

Indeed, the air was heavy with an acrid, rancid odour, a smell as of ancient butter shot through with the fragrance of long dead fish. But since the cliff turned away beyond the further platform they could not see anything of what lay beyond, except that the lake waters must come right up to the cliff foot.

Anson grunted impatiently. He had unwound a length of thin, but very strong, rope which he had worn coiled round his waist, and was knotting a loop at one end.

"I'm not very great on the cowboy stunts, but I can throw a rope a bit," he said. "If I can get a noose over the projecting end of that plank, I think we can swing it over. Let's try, anyhow!"

He strode forward and the others followed, not without qualms, for the path was narrow, and a single false step would have dropped them to death on the rocks beneath. However, they reached the platform in safety, and, measuring his distance, Anson threw his rope. He missed again and again, but soon a lucky throw dropped the noose over the end of the plank, and hauling it taut, he began to pull.

The strange bridge swung with unexpected ease, though it squealed a great deal.

"Stand by to cover anybody," said Anson. "Here she comes. Whoa, Emma!"

The plank came steadily round, touched the ledge, and was hauled into a niche worn by long usage, and at the same moment, one of the little blacks turned the corner, and stood staring. Maxwell beckoned, but at the movement the little man swung about and disappeared.

"Enemy outposts on the alert! Over we go—and luck go with us!" cried Maxwell, and led the way.

Anson brought up the rear, coiling his line, and swung the plank back into place as he reached the platform. No matter who or what might be behind them, they were safe from an attack from the rear. Then they turned the bend and halted.

Before them was a broad shelf that ran for some distance before it narrowed to a mere path again. The cliff was honeycombed with cave mouths, in and out of which popped the little people in wild confusion. At the further end, beyond a low wall of stones built right across the ledge, the caves seemed larger, and there was no coming and going at their mouths.

"No violence, remember, except they attack us," said Maxwell. "Keep close together. Let us go right to the end."

Unconcernedly, as though they were strolling through a park, the four walked forward while the little men squealed and ran blindly before them. One or two, who seemed petrified with fright, stood rigid, with their backs to the cliff. The others dived into their dens as the travellers drew near, and as the four passed these caves, from which

came a reek as bad as any from a hyaena's den, they could see frightened eyes glaring at them from the gloomy interiors.

But none of these badly-scared little folks tried to resent this invasion of their domain. They behaved exactly as children might have done in the presence of ogres, except that they made no noise but a low, terrified squealing. Only when the four reached the low wall, and Maxwell stepped over it, something like a moan of horror burst from every throat.

"By Jove, I hope we're not trespassing in their holy of holies!" exclaimed Maxwell. "They've got the wind-up about something. Perhaps we'll find a big Ju-Ju or a diamond-eyed idol in one of these bigger caves. They don't smell so foul, at all events. Hallo, there! Anyone at home?"

There was an instant response, in two kinds, for, while a muffled shout echoed from the further cavern, a threatening voice, very harsh and savage, boomed from another.

Maxwell did not hesitate. He dashed to the cave from which another shout followed and plunged in, closely followed by his friends. Sunlight slanted through the door, and the cave, though fairly deep, was yet well enough lit to show a strange sight.

At the further end was a queer, misshapen figure of stone, an odd thing, which, if it looked like anything at all, resembled a man with a snake's head. It was daubed with red and yellow, and its head was crowned with bright plumage.

But all this savage frippery only held the attention of the adventurers for a moment, since almost at once they saw something bound to a post set upright in front of the image, something which groaned and tried to speak through gagged lips—a man with pale face and beard and hair of iron grey—a white man!

"Hold the door, Anson!" cried Maxwell, and, whipping out the knife at his belt, slashed at the man's bonds, then caught him as he reeled and would have fallen.

Carefully he lowered him to the ground and loosed the gag; then he whistled his astonishment, for he had found the man they had come out to seek. His uncle, Professor Derwent Maxwell, the eminent member of a host of learned societies, lay before him.

"Water!" moaned the professor, from lips so swollen by the gag that he could barely articulate.

Jack Maxwell poured a little down his throat from his canteen, paused to allow the parched throat to regain its power of swallowing, and poured again. The professor gulped and opened his eyes.

"How are you, uncle? I have come all the way from England to see you, and it seems I got here barely in time. But it's rather a long way, you know."

"Little Jack! But you're a big Jack now. How did you— But that can wait! Have you a strong party?"

"Three whites and a black boy all told, but enough for these little chaps with tails.

"They won't do any harm. They're scared blue."

"They'll attack fast enough if the Worgees set them on. Give me another drink and help me up. Get my gun and bandolier—they're behind that stone libel. So! Now, I'll go stop those Worgee beasts. I warned them, and they retorted by having me tied up. Follow me, boys!"

He loaded his gun, and, leaning on Jack's arm, walked from the cave. The little folks were gathered in a compact body just beyond the wall, but at sight of the white men their hearts failed them and they scuttled for shelter. Above the noise of their pattering feet and squeals rose the harsh, savage voice rolling from the neighbouring cavern.

Taking no notice of the little people, Professor Maxwell turned into the door of this place and halted with his gun swung forward.

"If I fire, pick your men and shoot!" he said. "Shoot to kill! These are the most merciless, murderous, and cruel-hearted tyrants the world can show. They are cowardly and very treacherous. Be ready!"

While he was speaking, the three friends and Snaplus, who had followed them close, had time to survey the extraordinary inhabitants of this cavern. It was a large place, very much bigger than the temple next door, and several doors in the inner wall hinted that there were other chambers beyond.

In the midst of this place was a raised dais covered with skins, on which reclined several old and loathsomely fat men. On the floor of the cave lay many others of various ages, while beyond them were more than twice their number of women. Altogether there were perhaps a hundred or a hundred and ten folks present, including a number of children. None were black, the prevalent tint being a sickly yellowish brown, an unwholesome colour like that of those insects which spend their lives under stones. All were gross, while the elders were mostly so fat that they could not have moved quickly even to save their lives.

The entry of Professor Maxwell and the others was the signal for confusion. The younger women snatched up their podgy children and waddled towards the doors in the rear, screaming at the top of their shrill voices, while one of the obese old monsters on the dais howled something that sent the nimbler of the younger men scrambling to the outer door.

The professor shouted something in a voice like the roar of a lion. At once all movement ceased. Everyone halted, rivetted to the floor by that imperious call. Then he began to speak, and though neither of the three young men nor the open-mouthed Snaplus could make head or tail of his words, it was evident that these strange, bloated beings understood.

They writhed and grunted, twisted and groaned, while some of the women whimpered and several children would have yelled

if their mothers had not hushed them. Finally, the professor pointed at the oldest and fattest of the men on the dais, and thundered out something that made him writhe and whine.

At the same moment he wheeled to the marvelling young men.

"Boys, go seize that wretched old villain and drag him into the cave where you found me. If any seek to hinder, shoot them. Be quick! It may mean life or death to us all."

They leapt forward, hurling fat men to right and left, and, seizing the fellow Maxwell had indicated, dragged him from the dais and over the floor towards the door. Only one of his followers attempted to aid him—a middle-aged fellow not quite so gross as most. He threw himself across the door, clutching at the elder. Jack whirled upon and struck out with his fist. The blow, beautifully timed and aimed, took the would-be rescuer cleanly on the point of the jaw. With a gasp he collapsed on the floor, and the subsequent proceedings interested him no more for some time to come.

As he dropped, the rest howled in sympathetic fear and grovelled with their heads touching the ground, while a quavering yell from the victim of this strenuous treatment echoed mournfully to the roof.

Outside, the three saw the little people still hovering beyond the wall, but at sight of the bloated one they screeched and bolted to their holes. A minute later Maxwell had dumped his end of the burden against the post to which his uncle had been tied and turned to the professor, who had followed hard on their heels.

"Shall I tie the old iniquity up, sir?" he asked.

"Yes, make him fast, and from now on till we contrive to leave this place, we must guard him constantly. He is our hostage, you understand? So long as we hold him we are safe. He is the chief of the Worgees, and they will not dare set the Bheels on us for fear of what we may do to him."

"You hear, boys? Snaplus, you understand? We must take it in turn to guard the old squab. Snaplus, take the first turn."

As the black fellow took station by the prisoner, Professor Maxwell went behind the image and returned, dragging his pack. From it he took a pistol which he handed to Snaplus.

"If any of the fat yellow men come, shoot—and see that you aim straight," he said. "And now, my lads, tell me how you happen to have arrived so opportunely for me."

Jack began his story after introducing Anson and Harding, telling briefly the whole story up to their meeting.

"And now it is your turn, uncle," he concluded. "Let us hear all about everything. Here are mats and our blankets. Let's sit down and be comfortable."

(Continued on page iii of cover.)

So, squatted at ease on the cave floor in a position convenient for watching the door, they settled to listen to the professor's narrative.

Worgees and Bheels.

"THE very beginning of things occurred rather more than a year ago," began the professor. "When Jud—my black boy—brought me a piece of hide and several fragments of bones which he had had from another black fellow. More than once he had thus acquired rare specimens for me, and, indeed, all the natives of his acquaintance knew that if they found anything unusual they were certain to get something by bringing it to him.

"Well, no sooner had I examined this latest trove than I saw that I had something quite extraordinary, for neither bones nor skin belonged to any living animal with which I was acquainted. I saw, of course, that they were reptilian and comparatively fresh. Indeed, I judged that the beast to which they had belonged must have died not more than a year or so before.

Yet the creature must have been of great size, very much larger than any living reptile known to science, and, in fact, a near relation to some of the tremendous brutes which roamed the earth before the evolution of mankind, of which we occasionally find the petrified bones.

"Jud found the man from whom he had had the things. He told a very confused story about a big bird dropping a fragment of meat near a waterhole. He had kept the skin and bones for luck or as a charm. I managed to find out that the waterhole in question was some distance from Wurra-Wurra, and I resolved to follow up the clue. I did so, though the man grew scared by my questions, and disappeared."

"I reached Worlee, then made on to the dry water-hole where I left my message. There, as I said, we found an old gin dying, and she said enough to assure me that I was on the right trail. After she died we made a forced march, during which two of the mules succumbed. To cut this part short, we reached the shale slope and descended.

"Unfortunately, one of our two surviving mules rolled down and started an avalanche of rock, part of which overwhelmed Jud. He was dead when I got him out. The remaining mule was killed and partly eaten by something during the night while I slept in a tree, too utterly exhausted to light a fire, as I should have done.

"Very shortly after I sighted a party of the little black men and followed them here. The Worgees had fits at sight of me, but I managed to make truce with them which lasted till yesterday."

Here Professor Maxwell stopped to drink from a pitcher of water, while his audience waited breathlessly. Presently he continued in suave, even tones, as though he had been addressing students in a class room.

"The Bheels, as their masters call them—the little, black-tailed people—are undoubtedly the original inhabitants of this valley. They are a connecting link between the very far-off, apish ancestor of mankind and the human race, much lower in the scale than the Australian native or the Andaman Islanders. I do not think that they knew the use of fire or had any tools, or fed on anything but fruits and such things as they could catch with their hands, before the coming of the Worgees. Probably they lived on these rocks and in tree-tops. They had nothing that could be called the beginnings of civilisation.

"When the Worgees came I cannot say. They have only the vaguest traditions, but I think it could not have been more than three or four centuries ago. So far as I can make out they were a party of Malays flying from their enemies. They had women with them. Probably they entered the valley much as we did, though, of course, there may have been another way. They speak a very debased language, but I know enough of the present Malay speech to talk with them."

"But these are fairly big people, and the Malays are rather small," objected Harding. "The climate suited them, I suppose."

The professor smiled.

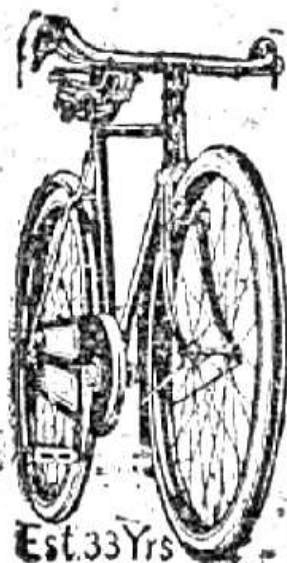
"The point is well taken. But there is another strain. They have Dutch blood in their veins. The Hollanders were great voyagers and settlers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, you know. Somehow some of these adventurers got here and stayed. The Worgees use many Dutch words—gone somewhat wrong, perhaps, but still recognisable.

"Well, the inevitable happened. The Worgees enslaved the Bheels. They taught them the use of weapons and made them hunt and fish and do everything necessary to their comfort. These simple, semi-humans obey all their commands, and take all the risks of life here while their masters loll around and devise new tortures for those of the unfortunates who displease them. In the beginning of my stay here I saw some horrible cruelty. I have put a stop to it as far as I was able. I believe the Bheels are grateful. They always wag their tails when I pass them."

"But how did you come to be tied up as we found you, sir?" asked Harding.

"Oh, the Worgees hated me. For some time they have been restless, but they are very cowardly. I think you must have been seen coming down the slide yesterday, though I knew nothing of it. Anyhow, as I was examining the rocks at the foot of the cliff, at the place where you ascended to the ledge, a noose was suddenly dropped over me from above, and a swarm of Bheels, under the command of two Worgees, bore me down. I had shot a pigeon some while before near the place, and had only one cartridge in my gun. I gave one the benefit of it and killed him."

(To be continued.)



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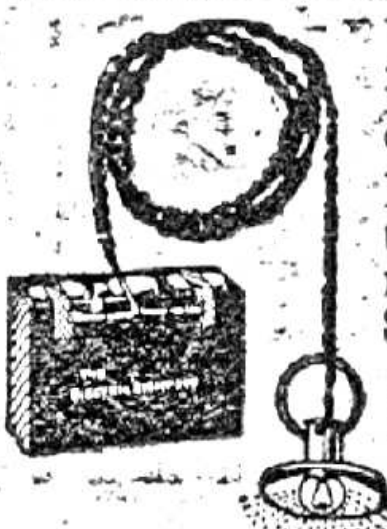
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