

THE SCHOOLMASTER SPY!

By

EDWY SEARLES BROOKS



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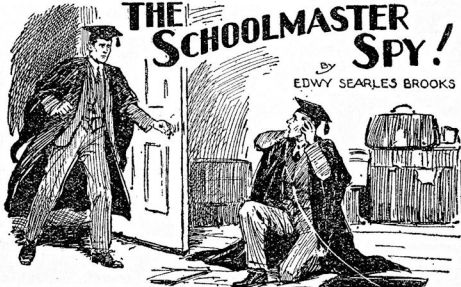
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THE SCHOOLMASTER SPY!

By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS



Lured into the toils of a gentleman crook, Mr. HEATH, the Remove master at St. Frank's, finds that he has to choose between playing the part of spy or disgrace!

(Narrated throughout by Nipper of the Remove.)

CHAPTER 1.

A Little Misunderstanding!

DRIP! Drip! Drip! Everything was weeping with rain. The old trees in the Triangle at St. Frank's were glorying in the downpour; the flowers in the Head's garden were in the seventh heaven of delight.

But in the lobby of the Ancient House a number of juniors were staring gloomily out into the soaking Triangle. It was just after dinner-time and afternoon lessons would shortly be commencing.

"Ghastly weather!" said Hubbard viciously.

"Rotten!" agreed Owen major.

"Well, we must have rain sometimes, you know," said Reginald Pitt, strolling up.

"Oh, rats!" grumbled Owen major. "I was going over to Bannington this evening, on my bike!"

"Perhaps the rain will have stopped by then."

"That's very likely, isn't it—with the glass falling all the time?" said Owen. "Whenever I decide to go out for a bike ride, it always rains!"

Pitt grinned.

"That's because you decide the wrong time," he explained.

"I must remark that I agree with our comrade," observed Timothy Tucker, of the Remove. "Personally, I am highly delighted to see this downpour. The position is this——"

"Oh, blow the position!" snapped Hubbard. "Go and eat coke!"

"Really, my worthy comrade——"

"Go and fry your ugly face—it needs remoulding!" said Hubbard crossly.

T.T. adjusted his spectacles.

"What is this—what is this?" he said, peering forward. "Do I hear aright? Is it possible that I have been advised to fry my face? Are you aware, my friend, that my face is exceedingly handsome?"

"Handsome!" yelled Hubbard. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"Furthermore, my face is perfectly proportioned," proceeded Tucker. "Admitted. You must realise that there are only a few fellows who possess all the natural charms which Nature has so bountifully bestowed upon my own person—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go it, T.T.!"

"I have every intention of addressing this meeting on the subject of the human race, and the various types of humanity," said Tucker, with dignity. "It is a wide subject, and I shall find it necessary to discourse at some length."

"Hear, hear!"

"On the ball, Lunatic!"

Tucker mounted to the third stair of the staircase, and addressed the "meeting"—which consisted of about a dozen juniors. They had nothing particular to do, but they were not prepared to stand much of T.T.'s spouting.

At any and every opportunity Tucker would get on his hind legs and make a speech. It was a mania with him. Just as Fatty Little was always feeding his face, Timothy Tucker was always delivering lectures—and he did not confine himself to one subject.

He would touch upon politics, natural history, Determinism, the origin of species, and occasionally upon such a perilous subject as spiritualism. But, as he was always taken as a joke, it didn't matter much.

"Comrades and friends," said T.T., after clearing his throat, "a moment ago I found occasion to remark upon my own natural beauty—my handsome features—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Dear, dear! It is no laughing matter. I can assure you——"

"Rather not!" said De Valerie. "Your chivvy is enough to make a chap weep!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I deplore this ribald statement," said T.T. severely. "I am addressing you upon a serious subject. It is not my wish to boast or to brag about my own charms, but it must be admitted that the average faces at St. Frank's are strikingly unhandsome—not to say ugly!"

"Is he talking about my face?" demanded Owen major grimly.

"Goodness knows!" grinned Pitt.

"But if he calls his own dial handsome and ours ugly, it's a cert that he's got a loft to let in the upper storey!"

"There are, of course, many types of humanity," went on Tucker, warming to his work. "The lowest type, as everybody knows, exists in Australia. I am referring, of course, to the depraved aborigines!"

"Oh!"

"To the blacks," proceeded T.T. "They are of such a low type that it is almost impossible to describe them as belonging to the human race. It is difficult for me to describe their appearance. Perhaps a comparison will be illustrative of my point. We have in the Remove a certain boy who somewhat resembles an Australian aborigine!"

"Who's that?" inquired Pitt.

"I am referring to Handforth——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Poor old Handy!"

"It's a good thing he's not here—he'd slaughter this ass on the spot!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Exactly, my friends—exactly!" shouted Tucker. "You have grasped my point!"

"Eh?"

"You realise what I have been attempting to describe," said T.T. "Handforth, you declare, would—er—slaughter me! There you have the matter in a nutshell. Handforth is a

savage by nature! His actions prove this to be so. Admitted. The position, therefore, is this: Handforth, being a savage, cannot help his savage actions. It is a great delight with him to punch noses and draw blood. It is the wild, brutal instinct with him which compels this behaviour. One glance at his face is sufficient to tell any observant person that Handforth is of a low type of humanity. I am not blaming the fellow—he cannot help it in the least. I am, indeed, inclined to sympathise with him!"

"You'll need some sympathy of your own soon," grinned De Valerie.

Other fellows were grinning, too—and not without reason. For Edward Oswald Handforth himself was descending the staircase, behind Timothy Tucker! The Lunatic of St. Frank's was quite unaware of his impending fate.

In the rear of Handforth came Church and McClure—and it was fortunate for them, perhaps, that their hard-hitting leader did not see those grins. Church and McClure were inclined to agree with T.T.'s argument. Handforth was undoubtedly something in the nature of a savage when it came to scrapping.

"Yes, I am certainly inclined to sympathise with Handforth," went on Tucker complacently. "In some ways he is a very good fellow—I freely admit it; but, at the same time, it is a matter of common knowledge that Handforth is utterly depraved in his habits and customs."

"Explain yourself, you ass!" grinned Pitt.

"That is quite simple," said T.T. "To begin with, Handforth has a particular liking for punching fellows on the nose—a most depraved custom, you will agree. He takes a particular delight in joining in a gory battle—another savage habit. Then we have his face. It is, as you will agree, a most remarkable face."

"A wonderful face!" said Pitt dryly.

"A face in a thousand!" said De Valerie. "If you went all over the

world, you wouldn't find a face as bad—I mean, a face like Handy's!"

"Admitted," said Tucker. "You have all observed the low forehead—a sure mark of savage nature! Mind you, Handforth himself is not responsible, and never for an instant do I blame him. It is a pure misfortune. His eyes, set closely together, after the manner of a pig—What—what—Dear me! I must insist upon your releasing me—"

"You insulting little worm!" bellowed Handforth into Tucker's ear.

"Ow! I am surprised at you, Handforth!" gasped Tucker. "I was merely passing a few truthful remarks—"

"Eyes like a pig!" roared Handforth. "Low forehead! An Australian aborigine! Great pip! If you get out of this alive, it'll be a wonder!"

Tucker had been taken in the rear, otherwise Handforth would not have gained such an advantage—for T.T. was by no means a fool when it came to scrapping. On the contrary, he was a very formidable customer to tackle.

But Handforth had him firmly.

Coming down the stairs in T.T.'s rear, Handforth had obtained a firm grip on Tucker's collar, and the seat of his trousers. The next second T.T. was being propelled swiftly and ignominiously across the lobby.

"Really, Handforth, I must insist—Yaroooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"This way, my son!" gasped Handforth breathlessly. "You need cooling! Your brain's got overheated!"

Tucker was rushed out of the lobby, he was rushed down the Ancient House steps, and he was rushed across the Triangle. The rain was soaking down, and there were big, muddy puddles everywhere.

"Now!" roared Handforth. "You're a bit tired, I expect—take a seat!"

Splash!

Timothy Tucker was lifted off his feet bodily. Then—plonk!—he descended into a miniature lake with a terrific

splash. He lay there floundering on his back, and Handforth dodged back into the lobby.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Perhaps that'll teach the ass a lesson!" said Handforth grimly.

"It's only strengthened his opinion that you're a savage," grinned Pitt.

Handforth twirled round.

"Do you want to sit in that puddle?" he roared.

"No, thanks!" said Pitt, chuckling. "I wasn't calling you a savage, Handy—I was only saying what Tucker would think. But if you've got an idea that you can sit me down in that puddle—why, you're at liberty to try!"

Handforth looked at Pitt, and decided not to attempt the task.

"I'll let you off," he said loftily. "Come on, you chaps!"

Church and McClure followed their leader to Study D—leaving the unfortunate T.T. to crawl in, a sadder and a wiser youth—to say nothing of being a wetter youth. He was not likely to "spout" again for some time—an hour, at least!

"That ought to teach the lunatic to keep his trap closed," said Handforth grimly, as he and his chums entered Study D. "An Australian aborigine, indeed! Of all the terrific nerve!"

"All the chaps were grinning at him," said Church. "You oughtn't to take these things seriously, old man. T.T.'s a comedian—he can't help it, you know. He must have been born in a lunatic asylum!"

"I don't care where he was born, and I don't care where he dies," said Handforth. "Rats to him! He's one of life's worries. And I've been worried enough lately over my sister."

"Yes, she ran away and got married to a chap your people didn't approve of," said McClure. "And now she can't be found, and her hubby is working in a glue factory, or something!"

Handforth glared.

"You silly ass!" he said warmly. "Mr. Kirby—that's her husband—is a gentleman. I've never seen him, but he

must be a gentleman, or Sis wouldn't have married him. I'm jolly worried about her."

Handforth was telling the truth.

He had been very worried indeed. When he first learned the news he had been almost off his head. But then a note had come from his sister, without any address, and posted in London, saying that she was happy, and that her husband had a good position. She gave no details, but Handforth was relieved.

"Of course," he said, "it was the mater's fault really, although the pater had a lot to do with it. Queer thing, but my dad is a frightfully obstinate sort. He gets an idea into his head and nothing will shift it! And he lashes out at anybody before he knows the whole yarn. He's a terror!"

Church and McClure nodded. They understood where Handy's own temperament came from. But Handforth seemed to be quite indignant about his father; he did not realise that he was as bad himself.

At that moment the bell clanged for afternoon lessons. The discussion ceased and the chums of Study D proceeded to the Form-room.

CHAPTER 2.

The Mysterious "Twenty."

MR. CLEMENT HEATH rapped his desk sharply.

"Attend to your lessons, Handforth!" he exclaimed. "Do you hear me?"

Handforth apparently did not. He was sitting in his seat, gazing unseeingly at one of the oaken beams which supported the ceiling. He was also chewing a pen-holder, and chewing it to such good purpose that there was very little of it left. Church nudged him urgently.

"Wake up, you ass!" he hissed.

Mr. Heath stood watching grimly, waiting for Handforth to come to earth.

The temporary master was quite at home in the Remove now, and most of

the fellows were beginning to like him better than they liked Mr. Crowell—who was away on an extended holiday owing to a breakdown in health.

"Silly bouncer!" grinned Tommy Watson. "He'll get it in the neck!"

"So will you, if you jaw!" I whispered warningly.

"Begad, it is extraordinary," declared Sir Montie Tregellis-West, adjusting his pince-nez, and regarding Handforth curiously. "He must be dreamin'—he must, really!"

I chuckled.

"He gets moony fits like this now and again," I said. "I expect it's because of his sister. Since she bunked from home on that runaway marriage stunt Handy has been a different chap."

"Boys, you will be silent, please," said Mr. Heath sternly. "And when Handforth is ready to attend to my questions I shall be most delighted. Do you hear me speaking to you, Handforth?"

He raised his voice considerably, and Handforth started.

"Eh?" he said. "I—I— Oh, yes, sir!" he gasped. "Speaking to me?"

"I have been speaking to you for some little time, my boy," said Mr. Heath grimly. "I am waiting for you to answer my question regarding the Gold Coast of Africa."

Handforth looked rather blank.

"Oh, I—I see, sir!" he stammered. "The—the Gold Coast? They—they find gold there! It's a great gold-mining country, sir!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It is quite obvious, Handforth, that you have no knowledge of the question I asked you," said Mr. Heath severely. "I wanted you to tell me what mountains exist in that region, if any, and you reply by telling me that gold is found on the Gold Coast! You have been grossly inattentive!"

"Yes, sir," said Handforth meekly.

"You will write me one hundred lines and bring them to my study before six o'clock this evening," said Mr. Heath. "Quite sufficient time has been

wasted, and we will get on with the geography lesson."

Handforth sat down and glared at his chums.

"Why didn't you tell me, you rotters?" he demanded.

"My hat, we kept nudging you until you nearly sat on the floor!" whispered Church.

"You ought to have been more drastic!" growled Handforth. "I've got to do a hundred lines now——"

"Dear me!" said Mr. Heath, seizing a pointer. "It is fairly evident, Handforth, that you wish me to increase that imposition to two hundred lines. Unless you cease talking at once I will be compelled to cane you."

Handforth subsided, and he delivered two further glares upon his chums which were truly ferocious. Not that they had done anything whatever to be blamed for. On the contrary, they had tried their utmost to save their leader from punishment.

Lessons proceeded fairly evenly after that, and when they were over Handforth had practically forgotten all about the hundred lines. He didn't remember them again, in fact, until about tea-time, when he advised his chums to hurry up so that they could get out on to the playing-fields, the rain having ceased. Then Church reminded him.

"What about those lines for Heath?" he asked.

"Oh, rats!" exclaimed Handforth, frowning. "I'd forgotten all about the blessed things!"

"You've got to take them to Heath's study before six," said McClure. "Look here, we'll get tea ready while you do the lines. They won't take you long."

Handforth took his chum's advice and forthwith sat down and commenced scribbling the lines as hard as he could go.

"Finished?" asked Church, after a while.

"No, you ass!"

"Tea's ready, anyhow!"

"Oh, well, I'll have tea, and polish off the last thirty lines afterwards," said Handforth, laying down his pen. "I reckon Heath's a beastly rotter for piling lines on like this. I always thought he was a wrong 'un!"

Although they did not voice the opinion, Church and McClure considered that Handforth had escaped very lightly with a mere hundred lines. But it was useless saying anything like that to Handforth. It would only have given rise to an argument.

Tea over, Handforth wrote out the final thirty, and then sallied out to Mr. Heath's study while Church and McClure cleared up the tea-things.

Handforth arrived and tapped upon the door.

There was no answer.

He tapped again, but, receiving no invitation to enter, he turned the handle and peeped inside. The Form-master's study was empty.

"Naturally!" muttered Handforth, with a sniff.

He wondered what to do for a moment, and then decided that he would be carrying out Mr. Heath's instructions if he left the lines on the master's desk. There was no need for him to hang about waiting until Mr. Heath returned. Handforth wanted to get off to the playing-fields, and he also wanted to avoid trouble by handing in the lines before going.

So he stepped into the room and placed the sheets of paper on the blotting-pad which adorned Mr. Heath's desk.

While he was doing this his gaze rested upon the assortment of pen-holders and pencils which filled the pen-rack. The glance was quite careless.

But certainly Handforth's attention became fixed. At the same time he uttered a little exclamation and bent over the desk eagerly.

He selected a black fountain-pen from the rack and turned it over in his fingers. It was, in the main, quite an ordinary pen. But Handforth seemed

quite dazed as he looked at it. He had started visibly upon picking it up, and now he held it in front of his eyes, his expression being one of blank astonishment and incredulity.

"It's impossible!" he muttered.

Turning the pen over again he noticed that the gold nib was broken, and the pen was practically useless in consequence. It had not been used for some time. But this was not the item which claimed Handforth's full attention.

He seemed to be strangely attracted by a little ornamentation on the vulcanite barrel—the word "twenty" set in tiny imitation pearls.

But there seemed to be no reason for the word being there, let alone for it to be set in those tiny glistening, faked pearls. As Handforth could understand, it was obviously not a standard design, but merely somebody's little freak idea.

He was still standing at the desk when there was a sound from the half-open door, and Handforth looked round quickly. Mr. Clement Heath had just entered. He regarded Handforth with mixed surprise and anger.

"What are you doing here, Handforth?" he demanded sharply.

"I—I——"

"How dare you enter my study during my absence?" rapped out Mr. Heath. "You will understand, Handforth, that I will have no impertinence of this nature. You will explain what you were doing at my desk!"

"I've brought my imposition, sir," he said confusedly.

"What?"

"You gave me a hundred lines this afternoon, sir," and told me to bring them before six," said Handforth. "They're here, sir, on your desk. You weren't in, so I thought I'd better leave them."

Mr. Heath nodded, and his gaze grew less severe.

"Oh, I understand," he said. "You have brought lines, Handforth? Let me see them."

Mr. Heath examined the imposition, and nodded.

"The writing is somewhat careless in places," he said critically, "and I object to these blots and smudges, Handforth. A boy of your age ought to be capable of writing an imposition far more neatly. However, I will excuse you, as I am in a hurry. You may go."

"Thank you, sir," said Handforth.

He turned to the door, but, as he grasped the handle, his eyes suddenly gleamed as though he had thought of something.

"Are you going out this evening, sir?" he asked casually.

The new master looked round.

"Yes, I am," he said. "Why do you ask? I am running into Bannington, as a matter of fact."

"I thought perhaps you were going there," said Handforth. "I was wondering if you'd mind getting a bottle of ink from the stationers?"

"I have no objection, my boy," said Mr. Heath. "Yes; I will certainly get your ink for you. I will give it to you in the morning, unless I happen to see you later on in the evening."

"Thanks very much, sir!"

Handforth passed out of Mr. Heath's study, and he was looking very pleased with himself. But there was something else. Handforth was not only pleased; but also suffering from unusual inward excitement.

What had he discovered?

CHAPTER 3.

The Diamond of Fate!

CLICK!

Mr. Heath quietly turned the key of his study door. Handforth had only just gone, but, for some reason, Mr. Heath apparently wanted to be assured of complete privacy. Having seen that the door was securely fastened, he went across to his desk, and sat down.

A slight change had come over the Remove-master.

He, too, was evidently suffering from inward excitement. There was an expression in his eyes which did not usually find a place there, and which made him look rather less simple than was customary.

He took out a bunch of keys, unlocked the top drawer of his desk, and produced a small cash-box. Another key was brought into use, and the cash-box stood open. Mr. Heath lifted a curious object out of the box, and placed it on his blotting-pad.

There was no fear of his being interrupted, and nobody could glance in through the window. Yet Mr. Heath looked at both the door and the window before confining his attention to the object which lay before him.

"Upon my soul!" he murmured. "It's genuine; there's not the slightest doubt about it! The more I see of it, the more certain I become!"

He picked the thing up, and turned it over between his fingers, examining it closely and searchingly.

At first glance the thing seemed to be quite valueless—a large piece of curiously-formed crystal, and somewhat dull at that. Its shape, in the main, was oval, with one or two rough edges. The stone was quite whole, and perfect in its construction. No flaw of any sort was visible.

"Yes; the thing is a diamond—there is not the slightest doubt," Heath told himself. "And a diamond of such size as this must be worth a fortune."

He continued to turn it over in his hands, and he was not far wrong in his conjecture that the thing was actually a diamond. It was, as a matter of fact, a rough, uncut stone of extraordinary purity and quality, to say nothing of being an immense size.

Mr. Heath recalled the manner in which he had found the stone.

Only a few nights ago, he had had occasion to pass through Bellton Wood, and while there had found the stone

lying beneath an oak tree. He had put it in his pocket quite carelessly, never thinking that it was of any value.

But, upon examination, he changed his view. He was quite certain now that his find was one of the most startling nature. At the time he had been with a curious old gentleman from Bannington, the Comte de Plessigny.

This quaint old fellow had not been in Bannington long, having rented a furnished house for a certain period.

Mr. Heath remembered that he had been searching, with the count, for a specimen—some night insect or other—beneath the oak tree, when the diamond had been seen. Not knowing what it was at the time, Heath had pocketed it, out of pure curiosity.

And now he thought of the Comte de Plessigny.

The Remove master had not cared to confide in anyone at St. Frank's. He did not want to show the diamond to the other masters. He was afraid of being talked about; but, more important still, he was afraid of being made a fool of, for he still had a lingering fear that the stone would prove to be worthless.

And so Mr. Heath thought of the count.

This genial old chap would certainly know something about diamonds, for he had knocked about the world a good deal, and his experience on all subjects was wide. Mr. Heath felt sure that the count would be able to help him.

He carefully wrapped the stone in a piece of wash-leather, placed it in his waistcoat-pocket, and then unlocked the study door.

A few minutes later he was walking briskly across the Triangle. He went to the bicycle shed, and was soon riding away on a machine which belonged to Morrow, of the Sixth—Morrow having been only too willing to lend Mr. Heath his jigger.

It was just as well that Mr. Heath had a bicycle, for the walk was a long one, and by no means pleasant on a warm evening.

It was possible to go to Bannington by train, but the count lived on the extreme outskirts of the town, and far from the station. By bicycle, the trip was a mere twenty minutes' run.

Mr. Heath arrived without mishap, and paused for a moment before pushing his machine through the big gateway of the front garden. The Comte de Plessigny's house was set well back from the road, trees grew in profusion around the building, and the place was delightfully quiet and secluded.

The lawns and flower beds were kept in a state of perfection, everything being exquisitely cared for. The gravel path which led from the road to the house was innocent of even the tiniest weed, and was rolled down perfectly.

Mr. Heath walked up, and propping his bicycle against the stonework of the front porch, he mounted the few steps and pressed the electric bell push.

His ring was answered by a grave-looking manservant.

"Is the count in at present?" inquired Mr. Heath.

"Will you give me your name, sir?" said the servant.

Mr. Heath supplied the information, and was only kept waiting for a few moments. Then he was ushered in, and taken straight to the library. He entered, and found his host reclining comfortably in a big, easy chair.

There was every sign of luxury about the place—beautiful furniture, soft rugs and carpet, antique bookcases, and rich tapestries. The Comte de Plessigny himself was carelessly attired in a flowered smoking-jacket and a smoking-cap to match. He rose leisurely to his feet as Mr. Heath was announced.

"Splendid! This is a most unexpected pleasure, my dear sir," he exclaimed, walking forward with extended hand. "I am delighted to meet you again. Please make yourself quite at home."

"I am afraid I am taking something of a liberty in coming to you in this fashion, sir," said Mr. Heath. "It is

most kind of you to make me so welcome, and I appreciate your courtesy."

The count smiled.

"A man is dull unless he can sometimes share the society of others," he said smoothly. "You have come at the right moment to save me from an attack of extreme depression, my dear Mr. Heath. I was thoroughly dissatisfied with my own company, and your advent is most welcome, I can assure you."

"It is very nice of you to put it that way——"

"You are quite mistaken," the count interrupted. "It is not one of my habits to say things I do not mean. Your arrival is most opportune, and I shall be honoured if you will make yourself perfectly at home. Try one of these cigars—and allow me to get you a little refreshment."

The old gentleman was courtesy itself. Mr. Heath could not remember having met a man who was so absolutely genial and pleasant. Not only in his manner, but in his voice, and his expression—the count was the very embodiment of good nature.

His lined face registered an irresistible smile; his eyes twinkled; and there was just that air about him which set Mr. Heath at his ease during the first moment.

"I have been hoping that you would call upon me, my dear sir," said the Comte de Plessigny. "After our informal introduction in the woods a few nights ago, it is pleasant to be able to meet in more congenial surroundings. I am delighted to inform you that my head is now quite sound again."

"You fell out of that tree with considerable violence," Mr. Heath remarked. "I thought your condition was far worse than it actually was, sir, and I am only too pleased that I was able to be of some trivial service to you."

"Dear, dear," said the count, shaking his head. "That will not do, my young friend. Your service was not trivial. On the contrary, it is more than possible that you saved my life."

"Oh, that's really quite wrong——"

"We do not know," interrupted the count, shaking his head. "I was stunned quite severely, and without your assistance it is quite certain that I should have remained helpless in the wood for many hours. A severe chill would certainly have resulted, and I am sure that my chest would not have survived the ordeal. So I am not exaggerating when I tell you that I owe my life to your excellent services."

Mr. Heath felt pleased—a good opening was being provided for him.

"I must confess that I have not called simply and purely for the mere pleasure of doing so," he said. "I have a selfish motive in being here, and I am hoping that you will be willing to give me the benefit of your advice."

"I shall be only too honoured," said the count gracefully.

"You may remember our little search under the oak tree," went on the Remove master. "You had dropped one of your specimens, I believe, and was rather anxious to find it—although you urged me not to assist you in your search."

"That is quite correct," said the count, nodding. "I was feeling much better after your expert treatment, and did not wish to delay you further. Yes, my dear sir, I remember the incident quite distinctly."

Heath nodded, and failed to observe that his companion's eyes were gleaming rather strangely. Perhaps this was because of the fact that the count sat with his back to the light, thus leaving his face in shadow.

It seemed that he was greatly pleased with the trend of the conversation, and it was just possible that he was anticipating his visitor's next words.

Mr. Heath was undoubtedly shrewd in scholastic matters, but in the wiles of the world he was quite simple.

He probably did not guess for the moment that the count himself might have been searching for something very different from a specimen of insect life on that night.

"Shortly before I left you," said Mr. Heath, "I noticed something on the ground, half hidden by a leaf. Knocking the leaf away, I found the object to be a curiously shaped stone. I slipped it into my pocket, out of mere curiosity, never dreaming for a moment that it might be valuable."

"So," said the count smoothly. "And have you now learned differently?"

"Well, I'm not quite sure," replied Mr. Heath. "This stone did not seem to be of any value at the time; but, after examining it carefully, I have come to the conclusion that it might be—well, I am quite ignorant of such matters, and I would prefer to show you the stone before I say anything further."

The count leaned forward.

"I should be charmed to give you my opinion," he observed.

Again Mr. Heath failed to notice the gleam in his companion's eyes. The count was now even more pleased than before, and he gave a quiet little chuckle to himself—as though he were pleased that an idea of his own had turned out correct.

"One moment," he said. "Have you shown this stone to anybody else?"

"No."

"Good! I am the first to see it?"

"Exactly," said Mr. Heath. "As a matter of fact, I have been afraid of ridicule—for I am by no means certain that my assumption is correct."

Mr. Heath took the stone from his waistcoat pocket, and laid it upon the table. The count's eyes glittered for a second, and he picked the diamond up, and turned it over between his fingers.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed, after a few moments. "This is most extraordinary—most astonishing! My dear sir, you don't seem to realise what this stone actually is, or its true value."

"I suspected it to be a diamond," said Mr. Heath promptly.

The Comte de Plessigny rose to his feet, and paced up and down the room with quick, nervous strides. He ap-

peared to be greatly interested, and Mr. Heath naturally assumed that his companion was seeing the stone for the first time in his life. He certainly gave no sign that the actual truth was very different.

"This stone is, indeed, a diamond," he declared.

The Remove master jumped up.

"You mean it?" he exclaimed rapidly.

"I do!"

"And—and is it worth much?"

"Most decidedly," replied the count calmly. "It is worth anything between twenty and twenty-five thousand pounds."

"It—it can't be true!" gasped Mr. Heath huskily. "Did you say twenty thousand pounds?"

"I did!"

"But—but— Oh! I hardly know what to say!" exclaimed Mr. Heath. "It—it seems altogether too absurd to be true! Twenty thousand pounds! Why, the sum will—will— But are you sure it's a diamond? Don't you think there might be some mistake about it?"

The count shook his head.

"There is no mistake," he said. "I have handled diamonds quite frequently, and I am not in the habit of making blunders, my dear friend. The stone is a really wonderful diamond."

Mr. Heath simply stood at a loss for words. For a few brief moments he went off into dreamland.

In his wildest moments he had only hoped that the diamond might be worth a thousand or so. That sum was splendid enough. But twenty thousand! It would set him up, it would allow him to start a school of his own—it would put him squarely on his feet.

At present he was simply occupying a temporary job—a position he could only hold until the end of the present term. For, after the summer holidays, Mr. Crowell would come back to take up his duties.

Mr. Heath went off into glorious visions of what might be, and he stood

there with face flushed, and with eyes which clearly told of his mental excitement. He was oblivious to his surroundings.

But then the count brought him back to earth.

"Of course," he said gently, "there will be difficulties."

Mr. Heath started.

"Eh? Oh!" he exclaimed. "I—I beg your pardon!"

"There will be difficulties," repeated Plessigny.

"I—I don't understand you."

"My dear sir, you must surely realise that it is impossible for you to sell such a diamond as this without a good deal of trouble."

"Why should there be any trouble?" asked Mr. Heath. "Can't I take the stone up to a diamond merchant in Hatton Garden? He will pay me the correct price, according to market value—"

"Dear me! I am afraid your ignorance on these matters is quite appalling," interrupted the count, shaking his head. "You cannot go to a diamond merchant, as you mentioned, and sell the stone to him without any trouble."

"Why not?"

"Because, my dear friend, diamond merchants are very cautious people," said the count smoothly. "The instant you produced this stone, you would be asked where you obtained it from—a dealer would want to know its origin. And this applies more particularly in the case of a big diamond such as the one in my hand."

"Well, of course, I shall explain that I found it," said Mr. Heath. "Won't that be satisfactory?"

His companion smiled.

"I am afraid not," he said quietly.

"But it is the truth!"

"No doubt," returned the count. "But the truth may not sound—well, plausible. In fact, any diamond merchant would be highly suspicious."

"Suspicious?"

"Not only that, but I can safely

promise you he would inform the police," proceeded Plessigny, "and your position would be most awkward."

Mr. Heath was startled—indeed, staggered.

"The police would want to know how you—a poor man—should be in possession of such an extraordinary diamond," went on the count. "You found it? So! But would that story be believed? I seriously fear not. In consequence, you would be suspected of being in unlawful possession of the stone—and you might even be arrested!"

"Oh, but that's grossly unfair—"

"I am not discussing fairness or unfairness," interrupted the count, smiling. "I am simply telling you what will probably happen if you attempt to sell the diamond. However, there is no need for you to worry. I think I can help you."

"Really?" said Mr. Heath eagerly. "This is awfully good—"

"Tut—tut!" said Plessigny, shaking his head. "Anything I can do for you, my dear sir, will never repay the debt which I owe to you. I am in a different position from your own. I'm influential and I can get things accomplished which would be impossible to one in your circumstances. To be quite frank, I suggest that you should have the diamond faced and polished to begin with. When that is accomplished there would be far more chance of selling it."

"But how can this work be done?" inquired Mr. Heath.

"I will attend to it personally."

"But I could not think of troubling you—"

"So?" smiled the count. "My dear sir, you must not think it will be any trouble to me. On the contrary, it will give me great pleasure to be of any assistance. Once the diamond is faced and polished, there will be much more likelihood of its being readily sold."

"This is very good of you," said Mr. Heath gratefully.

"Not at all," declared his host. "Of course, if you do not care to trust the diamond with me, I will——"

"Oh, that's all right!" interrupted the Remove master. "I am quite certain that the diamond will be safe in your keeping, sir. I am really overwhelmed with gratitude for your assistance. I know very little about these matters—and you know much. I shall want to repay you for your time and trouble—but I fear that I shall insult you if I suggest that you should take a share of the sale."

The count smiled, and shrugged his shoulders.

"I am in no need of money," he said. "I have plenty. Why should I take from you an amount which is a mere trifle to me. No, sir; what I am doing is being done in the faint hope that I may be able to discharge part of the debt I owe you."

Mr. Heath was completely enraptured by the count's charming manner. He deemed his host the best fellow in the world—a true example of nature's gentlemen. And when Mr. Heath took his departure he felt that he was treading on air.

The diamond was real, and he was to reap the profit of the sale.

It seemed too wildly lucky to be true—but there was no doubt about the thing. It was a dead cert, and Mr. Heath simply bubbled with joy. All his troubles would soon be over, and he would be rich.

Meanwhile, the Comte de Plessigny was alone in his magnificent library. He was still sitting down; but now he lolled back among the cushions of his easy-chair, the smoke curling up from his cigar.

"Excellent!" he murmured. "Really most excellent!"

He chuckled quietly, placed the diamond on his knee, and eyed it with extreme satisfaction. He rubbed his hands together, and seemed to be tremendously elated. Somehow, it did not seem that the count had promised to

help Mr. Clement Heath out of sheer good nature!

There was something else behind it—but what?

CHAPTER 4.

The Little Cottage at Edgemoor!

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH was acting mysteriously.

Mr. Heath had been gone some time, and, Handforth judged, was in Bannington by this time. Heavy banks of thick clouds hung in the sky, making the twilight more advanced.

It was, in fact, quite dim as Handforth moved across the Triangle. There were very few juniors about, and just at the moment the Triangle appeared to be deserted. And Handforth was apparently anxious of getting out without being seen.

"I say, Handy!"

Handforth turned round, frowning. That call was most unwelcome, for it came from his own study window. And he saw that Church was leaning out.

"Half a minute, old son!" shouted Church.

"Can't stop!" said Handforth shortly.

Church jumped out of the window and ran to his leader.

"What's the idea?" he asked.

"What idea?"

"Why, you haven't been back to the study yet. What's wrong?" asked Church.

"Nothing," said Handforth curtly. "Don't worry me! I don't want to be bothered just now; I don't want to speak to anybody. Leave me alone!"

"You're going out, aren't you?" asked Church.

"Mind your own business!"

"My hat, you seem to be pretty ratty!"

"That's because you keep poking your nose into affairs that don't concern you," snapped Handforth. "It's a pity if I can't move about without you following me everywhere! Rats to you! Go and eat coke!"

He turned away and strode off across the Triangle. Church was left staring after him with clenched fists. For once Church felt that he would like to give his leader one terrific punch on the nose, and if Handforth had remained he would probably have received that punch.

"Mad!" said Church hotly. "Absolutely dotty!"

He strode back into the Ancient House, and told himself that he didn't care a rap what Handy did, or where he went. But, as a matter of fact, he was extremely curious regarding his leader.

In the meantime Handforth was still acting strangely. Having reached the playing fields he dodged back, slipped along under cover of the hedge, and reached the lane. He seemed particularly anxious to avoid being seen; he wanted to keep his movements secret.

He ran down the lane quickly and soon arrived at the stile.

Then, with a quick glance to right and left, he leapt over the stile and raced through the wood at top speed, as though it were a matter of life or death. Hot, breathless, and untidy, he arrived at the hamlet of Edgemore.

He went straight to Greyhurst Cottage.

The dusk was now very deep and a light was gleaming in one of the lower windows of the cottage. Handforth watched from behind the cover of the hedge and cooled down somewhat. But he was impatient.

Certainly there was nothing to be seen which aroused his suspicions. It was this cottage that Mr. Heath visited so frequently. Handforth had believed the new master to be the head of a gang of forgers, and had been quite certain in his own mind that the cottage contained a plant for manufacturing false currency notes.

Mr. Heath's movements had certainly been suspicious. When he visited the cottage by daylight—and he frequently did on half-holidays—he took the precaution to disguise himself slightly.

This, in itself, was a suspicious action.

But Handforth did not appear to be thinking about Mr. Heath now. His sole attention was centred upon the cottage, and for some moments he stood there, apparently trying to make up his mind.

Finally he did so, and clenched his fists with determination.

"Yes, by George," he muttered grimly. "I'll chance it."

He walked to the gate, opened it, and strode boldly up the little path, and arrived at the door. Having made up his mind he did not hesitate. He seized the knocker and brought it down hard in a series of sharp raps.

Handforth was trembling slightly with excitement. After a brief wait the door opened and a bent old man was revealed. He was a curious-looking old fellow, with rounded shoulders and a straggling beard.

"Well?" he asked wheezily. "Who is it— Lor' sakes!"

He uttered the last exclamation in a tone of astonishment and something like fear. He was staring at Handforth's cap, a prominent advertisement that the visitor had come from St. Frank's.

"Get ye away from here," he said sharply.

"Hold on!" said Handforth. "I'm not going away yet."

"Young man, if you don't go I'll shut the door—"

"I'm not going to stand any rot from you!" interrupted Handforth gruffly. "Go inside and give this message: 'Fountain-pen—twenty—pearls—elephant!' Say those words, and nothing more."

The old man looked at Handforth suspiciously.

"I don't rightly understand," he said.

"Yes, you do!" exclaimed Handforth. "Repeat what I told you."

"Fountain-pen—twenty—pearls—elephant!" said the old fellow.

"That's right," said Handforth. "Just deliver that message."

The old man shook his head doubtfully, and he did not seem to be at all comfortable. However, he withdrew, and closed the door securely, leaving Handforth cooling his heels on the step.

The junior stamped up and down impatiently.

Then the door opened again and the old man stood aside.

"Come ye in, young gent," he said shortly.

Handforth started, took a deep breath, and went in.

The door closed quietly.

What did it mean? What was the explanation of all this mystery?

Half an hour later, at St. Frank's, Church and McClure were mooching up and down the Triangle, both of them looking disconsolate and somewhat anxious. It was nearly supper-time and practically dark. Handforth had not returned, and there was no sign of him. His chums had searched not only the whole Ancient House, but they had looked over the grounds.

"He's buzzed off somewhere," said Church. "I know he had some queer idea in his head when he had that row with me. I wouldn't mind betting a quid he's gone to Greyhurst Cottage, on Heath's track."

"I'm fed-up with his silly detective wheezes," growled McClure. "I wouldn't mind a bit, only I'm afraid he'll get into some sort of trouble. You know what a ram-headed ass he is. There you are—the bell for supper."

"And no sign of Handy," grunted Church.

They went in for supper, but during the meal there was no appearance on Handforth's part. Several juniors wanted to know where the leader of Study D was, but Church and McClure could not tell them.

Supper over, they went straight to Study D, and found that apartment empty and dark. Handforth had not returned.

"I say, this is a bit serious," re-

marked Church. "If the ass doesn't get back before bed-time he'll be in for a terrific row."

"He deserves it."

"Very likely, but I'm a bit concerned," said Church. "Let's go out into the Triangle, and see if there's any sign of him."

They went, but there was no sign whatever.

The minutes passed slowly, and the two anxious juniors walked about aimlessly, glancing at the clock every now and again, and asking everybody they saw if Handforth had been seen.

But all their inquiries were useless, and at last they were compelled to think about going indoors. It would be bed-time in about four minutes, and they did not see why they should get into trouble on account of their leader.

"Come on!" said McClure at last. "Let's go indoors; it's bed-time."

"Wait a tick," said Church. "I thought I saw——"

He stared searchingly into the gloom.

"By jingo," he exclaimed, "here he is!"

Handforth came running breathlessly across the Triangle, having just slipped over the wall from the lane. He ran right into his chums before he knew they were there and pulled up short.

"Where the dickens have you been all this time?" demanded Church.

Handforth could not speak for a moment. He was hot, breathless, and perspiring freely. His eyes were gleaming with a strange light—a light which his chums had not seen there before. It was like a glow of triumph.

"It's not bed-time yet, then?" he panted.

"About another minute," said Church.

"Good!"

"But you've missed supper, and we've been searching for you everywhere," said McClure. "Where on earth have you been to?"

"I've been out!"

"We know that, you fathead! But where——"

"I can't answer any questions," said Handforth firmly.

His chums stared.

"Do you mean to say that you won't explain?" demanded Church warmly.

"Yes, I do!"

"You—you silly ass," snapped Church, "we've been worrying about you!"

"That was your own fault," said Handforth heartlessly. "I didn't ask you to worry!"

"But—but we want to know what you've been doing," said McClure. "It's all rot to say that you won't explain."

Handforth set his teeth.

"I'm awfully sorry, and all the rest of it, but it can't be helped. I can't tell you where I've been, or what I've been doing. 'It's a secret——'"

"A—a secret?"

"Yes."

"But we've never had any secrets in Study D," said Church. "We've always been open, and had confidence in one another. You're not going to start being secretive now, I suppose?"

"I can't help it!"

"That's all rot," interrupted McClure. "You can help it. If you want to tell us where you've been surely you can do so!"

"All right, then," said Handforth grimly. "I won't tell you!"

His chums regarded him with anger and indignation.

"We don't want to be told where you've been," said Church. "We can guess that; you've been to Greyhurst Cottage."

"You blessed spies!" exclaimed Handforth hotly. "You followed me!"

"Ah, I was right, then!" said Church. "As it happens, we didn't follow you at all. But we know now. Why did you go to the cottage? And why won't you tell us anything about it? What did you see there?"

"I'm not going to tell you."

"You—you rotter!" McClure burst

out. "The first time you really find something out you keep it to yourself. After all the times you've dragged us out when we didn't want to go it's only right that you should tell us——"

Clang! Clang!

"Bed-time!" said Handforth briskly. "We can't jaw any more now!"

He hurried into the Ancient House, very pleased with the excuse to get away from his chums' awkward questioning. Church and McClure gazed after him, and then gazed at one another.

Speech at that moment was totally inadequate.

The next morning Handforth was up early. He had taken care the previous night to mix with the other fellows while undressing, to give his chums no chance of questioning him. In the morning he got up and dressed before rising-bell went.

Now he was in the Triangle, pacing up and down, with his hands in his pockets.

Church and McClure came out of the Ancient House and looked round for their leader. They spotted him and strode over to him, and planted themselves in his path.

There had been a good deal of talk among the Remove fellows about Handforth's queer behaviour of the previous evening, and his chums wanted to know what was wrong.

Handforth was so engrossed in his thoughts that he did not notice his chums, and he ran full tilt into Church.

"Look where you're going!" he snapped, glaring. "Oh, it's you! Can't you two chaps leave me alone? What's the idea of following me about like a couple of beastly shadows? Clear off!"

"My hat!" said Church. "He's just as bad as he was last night! I say, Handy, can't you explain to us——"

"No, I can't!" roared Handforth violently.

"Keep your hair on! Don't bite us!" said McClure. "If you like to have

secrets, you're welcome to 'em! But I suppose you know that the chaps are talking about you?"

"Eh?" Handforth started. "What's that?"

"I suppose you know that you're making yourself the talk of the Ancient House?" asked McClure. "Everybody can see that you're moony, and that there's something wrong. Some of the chaps reckon that you've fallen in love."

"What!" bawled Handforth, flaring up. "Who said that?"

McClure backed away.

"I can't give any names," he said. "But it's a fact that you've been acting so jolly queerly that the chaps are talking."

Handforth clenched his fists.

"If I hear any talk, there'll be some nose-punching," he said grimly. "And, what's more, if you fellows don't leave me alone, I'll start on you! I've never known such inquisitive rotters in all my life!"

"Oh, leave him alone!" said Church, with a sigh. "He's hopeless!"

And it certainly seemed that Handforth was. Talking to him was no better than talking to one of the gate-posts. And when he went in to breakfast there was considerable trouble in the lobby.

Hubbard and Owen major genially inquired about Handforth's health, and asked when he was likely to be taken away. Pitt added to this by suggesting that the leader of Study D would be quietly removed in a closed carriage, with padded sides.

The result was somewhat disastrous.

Owen major and Hubbard entered the breakfast-room with visible signs of conflict. Hubbard's nose was much larger than its original size, and Owen major's left eye was in an extremely puffy condition.

No other juniors thought it necessary to inquire about Handforth's well-being, and it was generally accepted that he was dotty. And, certainly, his behaviour gave rise to this supposition.

Even during morning lessons he was different.

Mr. Heath found it necessary to inflict two doses of lines, and, after that, a dose of the cane.

The effect it had upon Handforth was nil.

Strangely enough, he was quite genial towards Mr. Heath. He no longer regarded the Remove master with open hostility, as had been his custom hitherto. And when dinner-time came he marched straight to Study D, and sat in the easy-chair.

Church and McClure followed him there, and regarded him with mixed feelings.

"Well, I must say that you're the limit," said Church. "If you wouldn't tell us where you went last night, you might act like a rational human being now. I can't understand why——"

Church did not wait to say any more. Handforth had sprung to his feet, and was tearing off his jacket. Church and McClure fled, and did not venture to enter Study D again for some time.

CHAPTER 5.

The Count's Bombshell!

AFTER two days had elapsed, the Remove began to accept Handforth's changed attitude as a matter of course. Everybody noticed the difference, naturally, but it was a hopeless task to get him to explain anything. He simply refused, and the fellows got tired of asking. Personally, I was considerably interested. I made no attempt to question Handforth, but I decided to keep my eye on him.

Church and McClure had given it up as a bad job. The trio were still on very good terms, but there was a feeling of restraint in Study D. This secrecy had brought about a change in the three chums. Church and McClure kept more to themselves, and Handforth did not seem to object. Curiously enough, Handforth was quite unconscious of the fact that the fellows were noticing his behaviour.

Mr. Heath was aware of a difference in all three. Church and McClure were generally worried and irritable in class, and Handforth was absent-minded. But the Remove master did not take very particular notice. As a matter of fact, he had thoughts of his own to occupy his mind.

On the third day he received a short note from the Comte de Plessigny, and that evening he went to Bannington, eager and anxious.

The count was as pleasant as usual. He took him into his library, closed the door, and invited Mr. Heath to make himself comfortable.

"You have something to tell about the diamond?" asked the visitor.

"Yes, my dear friend," said the count smoothly. "I am pleased to inform you that work has been progressing. The polishers have given me the diamond to inspect—before completing. I thought you might like to see it."

"I shall be tremendously interested," said Mr. Heath.

The count produced the diamond. It had been faced to a certain degree, and it sparkled and glittered magnificently. There was not the slightest doubt that it was a valuable gem. Heath fingered it almost reverently, and he was overjoyed.

"When will it be finished—ready for sale?" he asked eagerly.

"That is one of the reasons I have asked you to come over," replied the count gravely. "I have discovered something, my dear friend, which, I am afraid, has placed you in a very awkward position."

Mr. Heath looked startled.

"I don't understand!" he said.

"I did not expect you would; but I will explain," said Plessigny, lying back in his chair and regarding Mr. Heath closely through his monocle. "It is my habit to impart bad news bluntly, and I will do so now. So, I must inform you that this diamond is actually the property of the Marquis of Layham, and it was stolen from him five years ago."

Mr. Heath jumped out of his chair with a gasp of dismay.

"Stolen!" he ejaculated hoarsely. "Then—then——"

Words failed him. This bombshell was staggering.

"I regret that it should be necessary for me to disappoint you in this way," said the count gently. "I only discovered the truth by accident. The thief brought the diamond from London, but when he was captured by the police—near Belton—the stone was nowhere to be found. It is clear that he concealed it in the wood—where you found it. The man was sent to penal servitude for five years."

"But—but this is terrible!" said Mr. Heath dully. "I have been counting on the money I should receive, and it all means nothing. I have no right to the stone!"

"So," agreed the count softly. "I am gravely worried, my dear sir, not only because of your disappointment, but of your perilous position."

"But—but I'm in no danger!"

The count shrugged his shoulders.

"I am afraid you are mistaken if you think that," he said. "This diamond has been cut—it has been faced, and you have thus made yourself open to grave suspicion. Indeed, if any word leaks out, you are in danger of arrest."

"Good heavens!"

"It is very unfortunate that the truth was not discovered earlier," continued Plessigny. "I have learned that there is a reward of five thousand pounds offered for the return of the diamond——"

"Oh! Then I can claim it——"

"I'm afraid not."

"But why can't I——"

"Because the stone has been tampered with, and the police would require a very full explanation—an explanation which you could not give them," replied the count gravely. "In fact, if you mentioned one word of this affair to the police—or if I do so—you will undoubtedly be placed under arrest on the instant, and you will have extreme difficulty in clearing yourself. To tell you the truth, it is more than probable that

you would be sent to penal servitude yourself for attempted theft?"

"Good heavens!"

"Not only that, but I myself will be implicated," proceeded the count. "My good nature led me to help you in this matter, and I have only succeeded in mixing myself in this trouble. The whole business is most unfortunate."

If it had been the count's intention to scare Mr. Heath, he had certainly succeeded. The young master was positively staggered by this news, and he hardly knew what to say.

"However, there is just a chance that everything may be all right even now," said the Comte de Plessigny. "I advise you to leave the stone with me for the time being, and wait a day or two. The only solution that I can see is to lose the stone again—so that we cannot be connected with it. However, we must not do anything in a hurry. Do not worry yourself unduly, but trust in me."

Mr. Heath could hardly do anything else. He certainly did not realise that he was now in the count's power—and that the count had actually been working to this end. Mr. Heath was deluded completely.

He took his departure, nervous and worried.

And Plessigny chuckled afresh, and genially murmured to himself that his dupe was nearly ready for the test. Evidently the Comte de Plessigny had not finished with the master of the Remove!

And perhaps the count himself would not have been quite so confident if he had been aware of the fact that a grim shadow was lurking in his wooded garden—a shadow which somehow seemed to bear a striking resemblance to—Nelson Lee!

CHAPTER 6.

The Heavy Hand!

HANDFORTH had completely dropped all interest in the movements of Mr. Clement Heath. He never thought of going on Mr.

Heath's track, and he never suggested embarking upon any detective work.

In fact, Handforth was very quiet indeed. I made a point of visiting him to ask what had changed him so much. But I might just as well have visited a gatepost. Handforth would say nothing. He even pretended to be astonished that we should think that he had changed at all.

And a night or two later Church and McClure sprang a surprise on their leader which considerably startled him. It was just bed-time, and the trio had sallied out into the Triangle to get a breath of fresh air.

The night was beautiful, a full moon rising in a clear sky over the tree-tops. Hardly a breath of wind stirred, and the air was delightful.

"I'll tell you what," said Church. "It's such a jolly fine night that I don't feel much like bed. What price we take a trip to Greyhurst Cottage—just to see if there's anything doing?"

"Good idea!" said McClure. "We'll slip away after lights-out."

Handforth started.

"Don't talk rot!" he said sharply. "You won't do anything of the sort!"

Handforth positively refused—he was distinctly alarmed at the very thought. They did their utmost to urge him to go—but he was firm.

"It's sheer rot!" he declared. "A chap goes to bed to sleep—not to prow about in the moonlight!"

"But you often asked us to go——"

"Never mind that!" interrupted Handforth. "I've learnt more sense now. These night trips are potty. After all, it's none of our business what Mr. Heath does, and the best thing we can do is to leave things alone. Don't be such asses! There goes the bell for bed!"

Church and McClure were not only astonished, but they were enlightened. They had received positive proof that Handforth did not want them to visit Greyhurst Cottage. And, as was only natural, perhaps, they became extremely anxious to undertake the trip.

They were getting impatient, too, and soon after lights-out they slipped from their beds, got dressed, and stole out of the dormitory.

They had decided to go alone!

Unfortunately, the door clicked slightly as they passed out. Handforth usually slept heavily—but recently he had been light. And now he found himself wakeful, and sat up in bed. One glance was sufficient to tell him the truth. Church and McClure had slipped away! They had, in fact, started off for Edgemore! And their intention was to prowl about Greyhurst Cottage!

"Oh, great Scott!" ejaculated Handforth, in great alarm.

Why he should be so concerned was puzzling; but it was quite clear that he was tremendously anxious to prevent his chums from even going near the cottage. He had apparently discovered something which he was very anxious that nobody else should discover.

He hopped out of bed like a jack-in-the-box, dashed across the dormitory, and sped down the passage. He didn't care whether he met a master or not—his sole object was to overtake his chums, and haul them back.

And he had quite forgotten the fact—or he was careless of it—that he was attired only in his pyjamas, and that his feet were bare. He arrived in Study D, and found the window slightly open—a clear indication that his chums had passed out into the Triangle by that means.

Only for a second did he hesitate.

Then he pushed the window open, jumped out, and raced across the Triangle as fast as his legs would carry him. Pebbles bit into his bare feet, but he took no notice. He reached the wall, jumped over, and landed in a bed of nettles.

He was stung, but he didn't care.

Church and McClure were just ahead—in full sight in the moonlight. Handforth rushed after them grimly.

"You—you rotters!" he panted.

Church and McClure turned, startled.

"My only sainted aunt!" gasped Church. "It's Handy!"

"You silly ass!" ejaculated McClure. "You'll catch a terrific cold! Why, you've only got your pyjamas on, and your feet are bare! Have you gone off your rocker? Supposing a master sees you——"

"Rats to the masters—rats to colds!" snapped Handforth. "Where are you off to?"

"Greyhurst Cottage!" said Church.

"You mad asses!" shouted Handforth fiercely. "You mustn't go there! I'm jolly well not going to let you go! You'll only get into trouble! I know something about that place that I can't tell you!"

Church nodded.

"Yes, we know that," he said. "That's why we're going! We're fed up to the neck with your rotten secrecy, and we're not standing any more of it! We're going to Greyhurst Cottage to find out the truth for ourselves!"

"And if you don't like it, you can lump it!" added McClure.

Handforth looked fierce.

"I can lump it, can I?" he roared.

"If you think you're going to Greyhurst Cottage, you're mistaken. You'll come back to bed!"

"We're not standing any more of your rot!" said Church hotly. "We're fed up with you! We're tired of your tomfoolery! We're sick of your secrecy! And, if you want to know the truth, we're acting on our own in future! You can go to the dickens—and you can go and eat coke!"

It was not only insubordination, but open rebellion. Handforth had come out to prevent his chums making the trip—and he had every intention of doing so. His wrath blazed out as he listened to their hot words.

"You—you traitors!" he shouted thickly.

Handforth fairly danced.

"You've asked for it!" he said thickly. "You'll get it!"

Crash! Crash!

His fists landed out, and Church and McClure went down. But they were

upon their feet again almost at once, furious. They were all furious; in fact, if the affair had not been quite so serious, it would have been ludicrous.

A terrific battle ensued, and, somehow, Handforth got the best of it. He was a tremendous fighter, and just now he was in splendid form. He hammered his chums right and left.

He hammered them so well, in fact, they were soon incapable of defending themselves.

Church possessed a black eye, a thick ear, and a bruised neck. McClure's nose was bleeding, and he possessed other injuries which were extremely painful. And Handforth still kept up the battle.

Dancing about in the moonlight, clad only in his pyjamas, he presented an extraordinary sight. But he did not care. Two or three times his chums attempted to break away—to scoot.

But he prevented these moves, and, finally, they were subdued. At any ordinary time they would have been able to defeat their leader, but just now he was unconquerable. His determination to prevent them going was strong.

"Now!" he gasped at last. "Perhaps you'll come back to bed!"

He seized them by the scruff of their necks, and forced them back into the Triangle. They were too exhausted and in too much pain to resist.

They had certainly given up all idea of venturing out on any detective work that night! Handforth went back to bed, thoroughly tired out—but he sat there, watching. And he meant to keep awake until his chums were asleep.

But they were no longer chums.

Why was he so tremendously anxious to prevent them visiting Greyhurst Cottage? What had he discovered which he feared others knowing?

The breach between the chums was destined to widen. They were now at loggerheads—openly and defiantly—and there was no telling when they would come together again.

CHAPTER 7.

Strained Relations!

CLANG! Clang!

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

It was a brilliant morning, warm and sunlight, and everything was looking splendid from the excellent view to be seen from the dormitory windows.

As I got up I noticed something decidedly peculiar about two juniors near by.

They were Church and McClure. They were sitting up in bed, blinking, and they looked rather dazed.

Church possessed a black eye, which over-shadowed all his other features. It was impossible for him to see out of the eye, and his expression was consequently rather strange.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Eh?"

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

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

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

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

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

"I expect it must have happened soon after lights-out," I replied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The crowd of juniors grinned.

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

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

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

"Ha, ha, ha!"

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

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

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

"Why not?"

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

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

"Ha, ha, ha!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Church and McClure moved towards Handforth menacingly.

"Steady on!" I chuckled, grabbing Church. "You can't start scrapping in the dormitory, you know. I shouldn't advise you to scrap anywhere until you're whole again. What started the trouble, anyhow?"

"Handy started it," said Church grimly.

"Don't tell awful whoppers!" belittled Handforth. "You started it yourselves—by daring to defy my orders——"

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

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

"Thanks awfully!" said Fullwood sneeringly.

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

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

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

"Ha, ha, ha!"

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

"And he didn't like it."

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

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

"Never!" declared Handforth.

"Rather not!" said Church.

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

"Begad! It's serious, then!" exclaimed Sir Montie, with deep concern. "This is shockin', dear old boys—it is, really."

"You can say what you like—you can do what you like, but we're fed up with Handy, and we're not going to have anything more to do with him. After last night we've finished!" declared Church. "We've finished with him for good! The rotter can find some other chums in future."

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

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

The split in Study D looked like being a serious one.

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

Because of him they would get into trouble as soon as they went down.

Mr. Heath or the Housemaster—Nelson Lee—would not fail to notice their condition, and they would be severely punished for fighting. Their only satisfaction in this thought was that Handforth would be punished, too.

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

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

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

Church nodded gloomily.

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

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

"He has been lately, I know," admitted Church. "But that's only because he's got some secret, and won't let us into the know. He hates keeping anything to himself; that's why he's been so irritable and ratty this last week. If only he'd tell us all about it, he'd be as happy as anything."

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

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

McClure shook his head.

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

"That's the right view, I know," interrupted Church. "But you know what a ram-headed idiot he is. Anyhow, if

we give him a chance to come back, as it were, it would free us from all blame. I think we ought to make peace, if possible. Life won't be worth living like this."

"Well, perhaps we might——"

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

"Clear out of here!" he said brusquely.

"Eh?"

"What?"

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

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

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

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

Handforth glared.

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

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

"For me to do what?"

"Apologise to us!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" Handforth laughed with noisy sarcasm. "Apologise to you, eh? You silly little idiot! I've finished with you—and I've finished with McClure."

It was evidently quite hopeless.

"If you would only explain your movements, everything would be all right," said Church, in a final effort. "We can't go on like this in Study D. Why can't you let us share your

secrets, Handy—the same as usual? We won't let anything pass out of this study——"

"That's enough!" snapped Handforth.

"But I just want to point out——"

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

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

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

"That's right!" said McClure.

Handforth fairly goggled at them.

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

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

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

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

got the better of them, but it would be different now.

At that moment I looked into Study D, with the intention of trying to patch up the quarrel.

CHAPTER 8.

Parted Chums!

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

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

"What for?" I inquired.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He evidently considered that further words were useless, for he charged for-

ward like a battering ram, hurling himself at Church and McClure. I stepped into the way, however, and attempted to ease the position.

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

Further words were impossible, for I found myself in a somewhat precarious position. Handforth was hitting out with all his strength, and Church and McClure, thoroughly excited, were retaliating. And as I happened to be in the middle of them, my position was by no means enviable.

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

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

Handforth was going strong.

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

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

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

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

He lay there, counting the stars.

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

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

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

He retired, victorious, and Church and McClure sat in the passage, hardly caring whether the world came to an end or not. And, to make matters worse, Nelson Lee came along the passage at that very moment. Somehow or other, masters had a most uncomfortable habit of appearing at moments when they were not required.

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

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

Church sat up, blinking with horror.

"We—we— That is to say, we—"

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

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

"Not—not between ourselves, sir!" added Church.

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

The two Removites were silent.

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

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

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

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

Handforth was sitting in the easy chair, staring straight before him, totally unconscious of his surroundings. He made no attempt to obliterate the effects of the recent battle.

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

"Handforth!" rapped out Nelson Lee sharply.

Handforth gave a violent start, and jumped up.

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

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

Handforth's lip curled.

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

"Church and McClure refused to give any account of themselves—so your accusation is without foundation, Handforth," said the Housemaster. "It was quite easy for me to draw my own conclusions."

Handforth squared his jaw.

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

"You admit it?"

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

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

attempt to touch them again, you will be flogged."

Handforth glared.

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

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

Handforth nearly fainted.

"A—a bully, sir?" he gasped.

"That is what I said!"

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

"There are many ways of teaching lessons, Handforth—and I am sorry to see that your way seems to be a violent one," continued the Housemaster. "Simply because you happen to be stronger than your study mates, it does not necessarily follow that you should bully them."

"But—but—"

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

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

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

"Great Scott!" said Handforth weakly.

"Furthermore, Handforth, you must understand that Church and McClure

are not to be interfered with when they enter this room again," said the House-master. "If I learn that you have disobeyed this order, I shall take you straight before the headmaster, and advise him to flog you. That is all, my boy."

Nelson Lee retired from the study, leaving Handforth like a newly landed fish. He bitterly realised that Church and McClure now held the upper hand. Within a few minutes they would be back in the study, gloating over his helplessness, and sneering at him. It was just the kind of thing they would do.

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

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee found Church and McClure still in the passage. They were looking rather more alive now, and had tidied themselves to the best of their ability. Before being presentable for breakfast, they would find it necessary to visit the bath-room, and to don collars.

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

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

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

McClure snorted.

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

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

The door of Study D opened, and Handforth appeared.

"Well," he said sourly, "you know all about it, I suppose. I can't touch you if you come into the study again, and you can come into the study."

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

"Then you don't know that Mr. Lee —"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Remove looked on with interest.

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

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

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

Meanwhile, they drifted farther and farther apart.

How long would it be before the turning point arrived?

CHAPTER 9.

The Comte Pays a Visit!

"**B**EGAD! I wonder who this old gentleman is?"

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

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

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

We were standing on the steps of the Ancient House. It was the afternoon of the day following. Lessons were over for the day, and tea was the next order on the bill.

We had been on our way to the tuck-shop, to purchase a few supplies, and had paused on the steps to gaze upon the stranger. The afternoon was glorious—brilliant, hot, and exceptionally fine.

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

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

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

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

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

"Just a sight-seer, perhaps," observed Pitt. "If he wants somebody to take him round the school, you'd better offer your services, Tregellis-West. Your politeness and inborn courtesy will leave a lasting impression."

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

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

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

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

"Certainly, sir," said Pitt. "What can we do, sir?"

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

to act as my guide, I shall be deeply indebted to you."

"This way, sir," said Pitt briskly.

"Thank you, my dear lad—thank you."

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

"I know who he is," I said. "I remember reading in the local rag now about a French count coming to live in Bannington. I'll bet that's the Comte de Plessigny."

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

Meanwhile, the Comte de Plessigny—for it was he—found himself outside Mr. Heath's study. Pitt paused for a moment before tapping on the door.

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

"Thank you, my dear lad—thank you!"

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

"Well, Pitt?"

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

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

"I don't know, sir."

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

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

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

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

"No?" said the count, with perfect calmness. "I trust that it is an unexpected pleasure. I should hardly like

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

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

"Why not?" asked the count. "I have nothing to conceal. I have business to discuss, and so I came."

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

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

The Comte de Plessigny nodded.

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

"Not a word," said Mr. Heath.

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

The count looked across at Mr. Heath after a few moments and smiled.

"With regard to the diamond," he said, "I think it will be better if you continue to leave it in my hands for the moment. There is no actual danger for either of us, but the position is certainly awkward."

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

The count shook his head.

"I? Oh, no!" he said. "I shall get into no trouble, my dear sir. With you

it is a different matter. You found the diamond, you brought it to me, knowing nothing of its history, and I was good-natured enough to get it faced and polished for you. It is your responsibility entirely, and I am merely keeping it in order to help you."

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

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

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

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

"It is very kind of you——"

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

"Why, yes, of course."

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

Mr. Heath elevated his eyebrows.

"This is news to me," he remarked.

"I suspected that it would be," remarked the count. "Lord Dorrimore

will be paying a visit to Mr. Nelson Lee—next week, I think. I am a man of direct words. Consequently, I will not hesitate to tell you my wish. I want you to discover the exact meaning of Lord Dorrimore's visit."

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

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

"That's very interesting," said Mr. Heath.

The count smiled.

"You can greatly oblige me by using your discretion to discover what his lordship's plan is—to acquaint yourself with all the details, if possible."

Mr. Heath's expression had changed.

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

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

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

"Dear, dear! You are such a hasty young man!" interrupted the count deprecatingly. "A spy? Good gracious! What nonsense! I am merely curious—I am interested in travel personally—and you are here on the spot. It will be a simple matter for you to obtain this information. You will not be suspected of curiosity. It will be child's play."

"That may be," said Mr. Heath. "But at the same time, I positively de-

cline to participate in this plan. I might mention that I am considerably surprised to find that such a suggestion should come from your lips. I had a better opinion of you, sir."

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

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

The young Form-master shook his head.

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

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

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

"Tut-tut!" interrupted the count. "You understand me perfectly—and I understand you. So!"

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

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

The count's proposal took his breath away. He was to spy upon Nelson Lee! That, in plain truth, was what Plessigny required. Mr. Heath was absolutely opposed to any such undertaking. But a feeling of helplessness was creeping over him—that he would be absolutely compelled to carry out the count's desire.

Plessigny had not threatened him in so many words, but his tone certainly implied that the police authorities might

get to know something of the diamond if he—Heath—remained obstinate.

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

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

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

The count rubbed his palms together.

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

"Well, yes."

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

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

Meanwhile, certain preparations had been made.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Not so quick, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "I want you to understand that the count must not be aware that he has been photographed."

I stared.

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

"Precisely."

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

"That is what I said."

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

Nelson Lee looked at me squarely.

"Come, Nipper, I am confident that you are capable of performing a little manoeuvre of that type. I have faith in you, my lad. Don't disappoint me."

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

"Nonsense!"

Nelson Lee dismissed me smilingly. I was thoughtful when I returned to my chums. I told them what the guv'nor required, and they looked at me rather doubtfully when I had finished.

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

"Dear old boy. I'm afraid you're right," said Sir Montie. "You might be able to take a snapshot of the old gentleman's back, Nipper, but not a close-up view of his face. Begad! I am rather surprised at Mr. Lee for expectin' you to accomplish a really impossible task."

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

"It's impossible," said Tommy firmly.

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

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

"Begad!"

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

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

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

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

"Eh?"

"Really, dear old boy——"

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

I took the instrument out of the cupboard.

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

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

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

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

I placed them some little distance from the steps, in the full sunlight, and

then proceeded to waste time in getting them posed. Nothing would suit me.

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

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

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

"Certainly, my boy—certainly," smiled the count. "A most interesting hobby, to be sure."

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

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

Click!

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

I swung the camera round and faced the count.

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

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

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

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

"Dry up, you ass!" I said. "It may interest you to know his dial is distinctly impressed upon two half-plates in this camera."

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

"It's easy," I grinned. "I didn't take your photos at all—but you thought I did, and the count thought I did. The click I made was caused by my finger

nail on the camera—this shutter is noiseless. I dare say I seemed careless and easy when I turned to the count and spoke to him. But I opened the shutter at the right second, and got him full face—without his knowing anything about it."

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

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

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

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

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

Both the snapshots were perfect.

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

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

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

Nelson Lee examined the prints closely.

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

"To snap the count," I grinned.

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

count was ignorant of the truth. I hardly expected the photographs to be so perfect, however."

"Now, gov'nor, I want to know things. Why do you require these photographs? What's the brainy idea?" I asked.

▲Nelson Lee shook his head.

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 10.

A Few Deductions!

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

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

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

"With Church and McClure?"

Handforth frowned darkly.

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

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

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

Handforth walked off, snorting.

It was the afternoon following my little photographic stunt, and it was a

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

Handforth met some other fellows just inside the lobby.

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

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

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

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

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

He strolled off, and emerged into the Triangle.

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

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

Some of the fellows talked about it.

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

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

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

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

He explained, and Church nodded.

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

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

Church shook his head.

"Not likely," he said. "Handy's too jolly obstinate! Until he apologises we shan't have anything to do with him."

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

Later on, McClure understood why.

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

"What's that?"

"I'm talking about Handy——"

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

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

"What are you driving at?"

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

"A which?"

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

McClure looked thoughtful.

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

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

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

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

"How do you mean?"

"Why, if we know this secret as well as Handforth, he won't need to keep anything from us," explained Church.

"He's been so jolly mysterious lately because of this secret."

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

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

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

Church nodded wisely.

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

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

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

"You bet!" said McClure.

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

Five minutes later Church and McClure hurried out.

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

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

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

"Well, we've got here," panted Church, mopping his brow. "Have you got those things all right?"

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

They sat waiting in the ditch, glancing up and down the road occasionally, and every now and again examining the front of the cottage. It was a very peaceful spot, and extremely quiet. It really seemed impossible that there could be any deep mystery here. But Church and McClure were determined to get at the truth.

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

"That tinkie?"

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

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

watched the bend eagerly and anxiously.

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

"It's Handy!" whispered McClure.

"As large as life!" said Church. "There you are! My reasoning was pretty sound, wasn't it? Going to Caistowe! What rot!"

The two juniors remained silent and crouched down low.

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

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

Church and McClure transferred their gaze to one another.

"Well, what do you think of it?" exclaimed Church grimly. "There's something fishy about this!"

McClure nodded.

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

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

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

CHAPTER 11.

A Smoky Expedient!

"FOLLOW me!" whispered Church. He and his chum had worked their way round to the rear of Greyhurst Cottage. Their movements were completely concealed by the trees and bushes. They moved cautiously,

order to avoid any possibility of being seen.

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

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

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

"The wind?" repeated McClure.

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

McClure looked up at the trees, and nodded.

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

Handforth's chums, as a matter of fact, were prepared to go to considerable lengths in order to gain admittance into Greyhurst Cottage.

Their plans were already cut and dried, and they only needed carrying out. The two juniors crept through the hedge at the bottom of the garden, and they worked their way round to the front of the little shed. Sure enough, there was a door there, but, to their dismay, it was padlocked.

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

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

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

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

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

"Supposing somebody comes out now?" whispered McClure.

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

"Here they are!"

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

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

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

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

Church looked round.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Open the window, and get ready to bunk out," he said briskly. "In fact, you'd better get out now, old son. I'll follow as soon as I've lit these fuses."

McClure opened the window and glanced out.

"Coast's clear!" he announced.

"All right—you get out!"

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

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

"There's no smoke!" whispered McClure.

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

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

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

They had taken some time to find their new point of vantage, and, meanwhile, the bombs had commenced action.

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

"Well, that's not much to shout

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

"Can't you wait, you impatient ass? It was the only thing to be done."

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

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

And Church and McClure watched tensely and anxiously.

For two minutes nothing happened—then came the change.

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

"My goodness!" she exclaimed, horrified.

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

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

Everything depended on the next minute.

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

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

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

"There you are!" muttered Church.

his eyes gleaming with excitement. "They're all out!"

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

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

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

So there was not a second to be lost. "Come on!" Church exclaimed tensely.

"Yes; but——"

"If we hesitate, we're lost!"

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

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

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

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

It was the door leading into the front room.

Church made for it, careless of whether it contained anybody. If this proved to be the case, they would be discovered, and big trouble would follow. But fortune was with them.

Dashing into the room, they found it to be empty. And they could see at a glance that it had been recently occupied. Tobacco-smoke hung in the air, and there was some needlework on a

table. To clinch matters, Handforth's cap was on the table, too.

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

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

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

"The very thing," declared the other junior.

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

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

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

Church's daring ruse had succeeded.

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

Their anxiety about Handforth overruled all other feelings.

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

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

were quite out of breath with running and excitement.

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

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

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

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

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

But they knew who the newcomer was at once.

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

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

CHAPTER 12.

The Secret of Greyhurst Cottage!

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

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

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

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

"Yes, of course."

Handforth spoke in a more familiar

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

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

"What—what do you mean?"

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

The Remove master gave a grunt.

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

Handforth grinned.

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

"Yes, I suppose you did."

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

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

"Oh!" exclaimed a charming voice.

"I—I didn't know—"

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

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

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

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

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

The mystery was unravelling itself in the most simple manner. Church and McClure had been expecting something so different—something strange and underhand.

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

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

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

"Until I examined it," interrupted Handforth. "Smoke was pouring out of that shed, and as the door was locked I dived through the window. And what do you think I found?"

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

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

"Smoke-bombs?"

"Yes!"

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

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

Mr. Heath frowned.

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

"Not a soul, Arthur—nor Mrs. Miggs,

either," said the girl. "We can't understand it. But I don't think there's anything to worry about. Isn't it just glorious to have the Elephant here?"

"To have whom?"

The girl laughed musically.

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

"Like your giddy cheek, too!" said Handforth gruffly. "If any of the St. Frank's fellows called me 'elephant,' they'd jolly soon get a dot on the nose!"

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

But retreat now was impossible.

"Well, you know all about it, of course," said Mr. Heath. "I suppose Edith has told you all the details?"

"Pretty nearly," said Handforth.

"You realise, of course, how important it is that you should keep this matter absolutely secret?" asked Handy's brother-in-law. "It would be absolutely disastrous if the Head got to know my real identity——"

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

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

Church and McClure listened with new interest.

"Well, it's a fact," said Handforth, rather gloomily. "I didn't want to have any bust-up, but I couldn't avoid it. You see, I had always urged them to help me in tracking you about, but when I came and saw Sis the other night, she particularly asked me to keep the secret to myself—and I promised. Well, Church and McClure wanted to come to this place and scout about. I couldn't allow that, knowing the truth, so I tried

to make them alter their minds. They were firm, I was firm, and a fight resulted. After that we had a regular bust-up, and now we don't speak to one another. I tell you, it's pretty rotten."

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh, well, it won't last long!" said Mr. Heath. "The term will soon be over—and I can't afford to take any risks. I had the chance of this position, and I seized it. I realised that Edith and I would be out of the way, and I should have time to get fixed up permanently. It was rather awkward using a false name, but there's nothing criminal in the proceeding."

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

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

"What rot!" said Handforth indignantly.

"Well, it is a rule in many schools—St. Frank's is no exception," said Mr.

Heath. "I expect there are very good reasons for making such a stipulation. In any case, I did not want to lose the position, and I didn't care about leaving Edith in London. This little cottage was empty, and Mr. and Mrs. Miggs were available to act as housekeepers, so I fixed things up. I thought I could keep everything quiet; I wasn't aware of the fact that you were such a persistent young beggar."

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

"Perhaps not," said the young master. "But I'm rather curious to know how he discovered the truth."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You cunning young rascal!"

"Cunning? Rot!" said Handforth with the free-and-easy familiarity

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

Mr. Heath chuckled.

"It only proves how necessary it is to be careful," he said. "But why didn't you tell me you knew?"

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

"I rather fancy you caused the mystery yourself," said Mr. Heath. "However, it's just as well that everything is out now. I want you to understand that we can't let a soul know."

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

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

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

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

Heath chuckled.

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

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

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

It was a terrific shock to the concealed juniors.

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

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

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

Handforth's eyes opened wide.

"Great—great goodness!" he gasped faintly.

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

Handforth let out a mighty roar.

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

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

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

and here they were unmasked before everybody!

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

"Those smoke-bombs!" roared Handforth. "They put them there, and they must have dodged into the house while we were up at the shed! Of all the blessed cheek!"

Church and McClure stood up, blushing with confusion.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We'll be as mum as oysters, sir," said Church. "You can rely on us all the time!"

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

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

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

"We will, sir."

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

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

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

"I thought it couldn't last long!" grinned De Valerie. "Handforth and Co. are as chummy as ever. Look at them! Like long-lost brothers!"

Handforth & Co. were certainly very happy.

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

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

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

Her husband nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

Tap!

"Come in!" said Mr. Heath, frowning.

Miggs, the old retainer, entered.

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

"A foreign-looking gentleman?" echoed Mr. Heath, with a startled look in his eyes. "Why, it can't be—"

"Do I intrude?" asked a silky voice.

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

CHAPTER 13.

An Extraordinary Development!

THE Comte de Plessigny came into the apartment.

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

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

"I am deeply sorry," exclaimed the count gently. "I will retire at once—"

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

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

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

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

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

"So?" said the visitor. "That is ex-

cellent. Well, to be quite frank, I should like you to show me the diamond, if you have no objection."

The Remove master stared.

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

"Precisely."

"But you've got it yourself!" said Mr. Heath. "You know well enough that I gave it into your keeping——"

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

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

"You are not afraid of the consequences?"

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

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

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

"That, of course, is quite sane and logical," said the count suavely. "I agree with you entirely, my young friend. At the same time, I insist upon my plans being carried out, exactly as

I have outlined. I wish to impress upon you the necessity to obey my wishes in every respect."

"But why——"

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

Mr. Heath glanced at his wife for a moment.

"I don't see why I should," he exclaimed. "I know everything you told me, and I shall remember it. That is quite sufficient. But I must confess that I cannot possibly understand your motive."

The count smiled.

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

"I don't quite understand."

"Doubtless—doubtless," smiled the count. "Please forget that I have been here this afternoon."

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

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

And exactly as he did so something astounding happened.

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

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

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

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

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

"Quite," agreed his double.

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

Three words were printed on it, in the centre:

"THE SEVEN STARS."

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

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

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

He was almost out of Bellton Wood when he caught sight of a familiar figure. It was Mr. Clement Heath.

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

Mr. Heath halted, and the other approached.

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

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

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

with you a conversation which you started yourself."

The count adjusted his monocle.

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

"But we were talking——"

"No. You were talking with another man."

Mr. Heath stared.

"Really, sir, I don't see the idea——"

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

Mr. Heath was rather staggered.

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

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

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

"Quite secure, if you follow my advice," interjected the count. "The fellow is undoubtedly a crook. Cleverly disguised, he attempted to get the diamond from you. It was a ruse—and it failed. We must be on our guard in future, and we must foil the schemes of this astute stranger."

Mr. Heath, however, was greatly worried.

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

The position was certainly curious.

And the Remove master was all the more worried because he knew that Lord Dorrimore would be visiting St.

Frank's within two days. And when he came Mr. Heath would be required to act as spy.

The outlook was not particularly bright for the Remove master.

CHAPTER 14.

Fatty Little in Trouble!

"**D**ISGUSTING, I call it!" exclaimed Fatty Little mournfully.

"Well, it might be worse——"

"Might be worse!" interrupted Fatty. "Great doughnuts! Nothing on earth could be worse than a terrific hunger and nothing to satisfy it with! I don't believe I shall be able to get back to St. Frank's—my strength won't last!"

Nicodemus Trotwood grinned.

"My dear old son, your strength is up to the mark all right," he said cheerfully. "You may think you're hungry, but you're not. Nobody can be really hungry on a hot afternoon like this. You're thirsty!"

The fat boy of the Remove snorted.

"You—your burbling ass!" he said, glaring. "Don't you think I know when I'm hungry? A thirst is nothing; you can quench a thirst without spending a farthing. Ginger-pop ain't necessary at all; cold water's fine when a chap's thirsty. But hunger's different. You've got to have grub, and grub costs money."

"But you had a terrific dinner——"

"Dinner!" echoed Fatty, in a hollow voice. "That was hours ago! Even then I wasn't satisfied. I only had two helpings of pudding——"

"And half of my share and pretty nearly all of De Valerie's, and every bit of Pitt's. The pudding wasn't popular to-day. You had about six helpings, all told. And then you complain about being hungry."

"Well, I can't help it! I know when I'm hungry better than anybody else does," said Fatty obstinately. "I feel

like on the point of fainting—my legs are shaky, and I'm weak all over!"

Trotwood grinned.

"I can understand your legs being shaky," he said. "Considering what they've got to carry, it's a wonder they perform the task at all! In any case, it's no good growling and grumbling. When we get back to St. Frank's, we shall be able to borrow some tea from somebody else's study."

Fatty Little groaned afresh. He wasn't worrying about tea-time, the sole topic of thought was the moment. He and Nicodemus Trotwood were in Bannington, and before they could partake of any tea they had to cycle back to St. Frank's.

It was half-holiday, and the pair had run over to the local town in order to make some purchases. They were study-mates, together with Trotwood's twin brother; but Cornelius had stayed at school, preferring a quiet afternoon.

Fatty was rather short of cash. He had been well supplied at the beginning of the week, but the lure of the tuck-shop had been too great for him. It always acted like a magnet, extracting the money from his pocket in the shortest possible space of time.

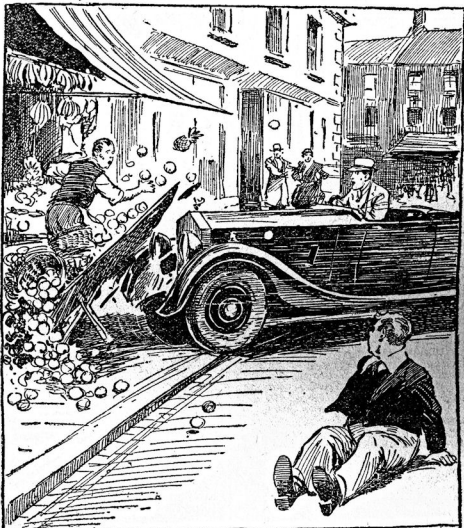
The afternoon was warm, and Fatty attributed his tremendous hunger to the heat. If it had been cold, he would have attributed his hunger to it.

Fatty lived for grub. Grub was in his thoughts constantly—morning, noon, and night. And now, on this particular afternoon, the outlook was dark.

And it was really Trotwood's fault.

Fatty was hard up, but Trotwood had been well supplied with cash when the two juniors started off for Bannington. The plan had been to make the few purchases which Trotwood required, and then repair to a restaurant.

Unfortunately, however, Trotwood had entered a jeweller's, in order to purchase a pair of cuff links. And he had been tempted by a business-like salesman, and had fallen.



Just in time the driver swerved the speeding car off its course to avoid running over Fatty Little. Cra-a-ash! Next moment it mounted the pavement and charged full-tilt into a well-stocked greengrocery stall, sending fruit and vegetables flying.

He came out of the shop with a new watch—and the grub money spent.

Trotwood had been wanting a new watch for some time, his original one having been damaged beyond repair in a recent scrap with the College House juniors. Somebody had trodden on Nisodemus while he was on the ground, and his watch had suffered in consequence.

He emerged from the jeweller's very satisfied with his purchase. But Fatty had had a shock when he learned that the cost of the watch was fifty shillings. Trotwood had had three pounds to start with, and had already made one or two small purchases.

Fatty's consternation was even more pronounced when Trotwood reckoned up and discovered that he possessed only one shilling and ninepence. Fatty himself could boast of nothing but a two-shilling piece.

"Yes," said Trotwood, as they strolled down the Bannington High Street. "The only thing for it is to get back to St. Frank's, and invite ourselves to tea in some other study. Wait a minute, though! I think Corny's got a quid——"

"What's the good of that?" demanded Fatty. "Corny isn't here! I haven't got strength enough to pedal all the way to St. Frank's. I must have a feed!"

"Well, we've got three and ninepence——"

"Great kippers! What's the good of three and ninepence nowadays?" asked the fat junior plaintively. "It'll simply buy half a dozen jam tarts, a couple of buns, and a few cakes! It's not enough for a kid of five!"

"We must be thankful for small mercies——"

"Oh, don't talk rot!" said Fatty crossly. "The fact is, you were a dotty ass to buy that ticker! It isn't worth two pounds ten!"

"I've apologised fifty times for buying it, already," chuckled Trotwood. "The fact is, I forgot all about tea. I didn't realise that we should be hung

up for funds. But it's no good making a fuss——"

"I'm not making a fuss," interrupted Fatty. "But I do think you ought to take that watch back, and get the money returned. Think of the grub we could have—think of the glorious spread!"

"It would last for about half an hour, the money would be gone, and I shouldn't have any watch to show for it," said Trotwood. "No, my son! For once you'll have to go hungry. But you have my sympathy."

Fatty Little looked round despairingly, and automatically came to a halt when he found that the pair had drawn opposite a confectioner's. The window was full of pastry, cakes, and other good things. Fatty eyed them ravenously, as though he hadn't tasted food for days.

"I—I say, couldn't we have a spread on the nod?" he asked eagerly. "By chutney! That's a great idea! I hadn't thought of it before!"

"On the nod?" repeated Trotwood.

"Yes."

"But we don't know any of these shopkeepers well enough——"

"That doesn't matter," said Fatty. "We can work it all right!"

"I'm afraid not," said the other junior, shaking his head. "As soon as we suggested having a terrific feed and leaving the bill owing there would be freezing shakes of the head, and nothing doing."

Little gazed at his chum almost pitiably.

"You brainless ass!" he exclaimed. "Do you think I shall tell the shopkeeper in advance? Rather not! We'll simply spoof him, and our college caps will be all the reference we shall need. We'll simply have all we can eat, and when the bill's presented, we can search our pockets, and then confess we haven't got enough to settle up. See the wheeze? They can't take the grub, because we shall have eaten it!"

Trotwood saw the wheeze all right, and he gazed at Fatty sternly.

"You swindler!" he exclaimed.

"Has your appetite deprived you of all sense of honour and honesty?"

"Oh, don't be potty!" complained Fatty, frowning. "We can promise to settle up the next time we're in town."

"No, my son; it won't do. I put the ban on it!" said Trotwood curtly. "Our best plan is to have a snack with the money we've got, and then get back to St. Frank's."

Fatty Little nodded gloomily.

His inventive powers were exhausted. He could think of no other method whereby a feed could be obtained. Trotwood regarded the whole affair as settled, and he stepped into a bootshop, to collect a parcel which he had left there. The juniors' bicycles were farther up the street, at a garage.

Fatty mooched disconsolately along, waiting for Trotwood to come out. And suddenly he came to a halt. His gaze was fixed squarely upon a notice which was displayed prominently in the window of a small shop near by.

Fatty hadn't seen the notice before, probably because the shop had only been opened during the previous day or so. It had stood empty for some weeks, and had now opened with a bang, so to speak.

The place was a restaurant. It was not exactly the kind of establishment that the St. Frank's fellows usually patronised.

But times were hard, and Fatty was never particular. Grub was the main thing.

And his attention was attracted by that startling notice in the window. He gazed at it in a fascinated kind of way, and read the words over and over again, to assure himself that there was no catch in it.

And this is what he saw:

TRY OUR SPECIAL TEAS!
EAT AS MUCH AS YOU PLEASE!
TAKE IT AT YOUR EASE!"

It was pure doggerel, but it caught the eye, and Fatty Little was positively enraptured with it. Underneath there were some words in smaller type, which

he read eagerly. They stated that, for the inclusive price of one shilling, any person could sit down in the restaurant, and eat as much bread and butter and drink as much tea as he required. Two slices of cake were provided.

But there was no swindle about the bread and butter part of the affair. It was quite plain that any customer could eat to his heart's content, with no extra charge. Fatty Little simply couldn't understand it; it seemed like a dream to him.

He didn't realise that any normal appetite could not manage to consume one shilling's worth of tea and bread and butter at one sitting. The restaurant keeper did not display his notices for fellows of Fatty's type.

At the current price of things, the tea was probably cheap enough, but the new shopkeeper was evidently doing it as an advertisement.

Fatty Little came to himself with a jerk, and he realised that Trotwood would almost certainly put the ban on patronising the establishment. But this was an opportunity which could not be missed—and Fatty dodged into the restaurant before his chum emerged from the bootshop.

He would have preferred cakes and pastry, and other good things, of course—but when times were lean, bread and butter were satisfactory. It was grub, anyhow—and any kind of grub was acceptable to Fatty.

When Trotwood appeared he gazed up and down the street in vain. Fatty Little had vanished, and was nowhere on the horizon. It was not easy to miss seeing his enormous figure, and Trotwood wondered where he could be.

His first suspicion, naturally, was that he had vanished into a confectioner's. But there were only two in the vicinity, and Trotwood soon satisfied himself that Fatty was in neither of these. He did not even suspect the newly opened eating-house. He hardly glanced at the place.

After pacing up and down the High Street for some time he went to the garage, thinking perhaps that Fatty

had gone straight on. But when he arrived he found there was no sign of Master Little.

As it happened, however, Trotwood found some other St. Frank's fellows—to be exact, Sir Montie Tregellis-West, Tommy, and myself.

We had just ridden in, and were storing our machines—our intention being to have a decent spread at the swell teashop in the town. We were all well supplied with cash, Montie being particularly flush.

"Hallo, Trotty, old son," I said cheerfully. "Had tea?"

"No, not yet. Have you seen——"

"Good!" I said briskly. "You can come along with us. We're just going along to the Oriental Cafe. We'll stand you a ripping feed."

"Dear old boy, it's my privilege to pay the exes to-day," said Sir Montie firmly. "I am rather flush, and I insist on doin' the honours!"

Trotwood grinned.

"Thanks," he said. "This has just come handy. As a matter of fact, I'm nearly broke, and I was going without tea. I suppose you haven't seen any signs of Fatty Little?"

"No; the last we saw of him was at St. Frank's, in the tuckshop," said Watson. "Perhaps he's still there—putting the finishing touches to the stock."

"He's here somewhere," said Trotwood. "He was with me ten minutes ago, but he dodged off when I went into a bootshop."

"Oh, he's gorging somewhere——"

"Impossible," said Nick. "He's only got two bob on him."

"Begad! That's frightfully hard lines for Fatty," smiled Tregellis-West. "It seems that we have just come to the rescue in time. We must find Fatty, and take him with us into the cafe."

"He'll be an expensive guest," said Trotwood.

"Dear old boy, that doesn't matter an atom."

But Fatty Little was not to be found.

We walked up and down the High Street twice and saw no sign of him whatever.

As a matter of fact, Fatty was enjoying himself. Had he known the actual truth, he would have been furious with himself for giving way.

Fatty was sitting in the new restaurant, at one of the marble-topped tables, tucked round a little alcove. One plate of bread and butter, a slice of cake, and a big cup of tea had been placed before him.

These, needless to say, vanished in record time, and the somewhat untidy waitress looked astonished when Fatty asked for a second supply. But it was provided without question—four more slices of bread-and-butter, and another piece of cake, and another cup of tea.

The bread was new, and the butter good. Little demolished it with a heartiness which only he could show. He was really hungry, and he enjoyed the food tremendously. But it disappeared at a remarkable speed, and very soon the second supply was exhausted. Fatty looked round.

"I say, miss!" he called out.

The waitress gazed at him in surprise, and came over to his table. There were one or two other people in the place, and they were smiling.

"Another supply, please, miss," said Fatty briskly.

"Why, you've had two lots," said the girl.

"Two which?" repeated Fatty. "Two scraps, you mean! What's the good of bringing a chap three or four thin slices of bread-and-butter? I want something that I can see! Bring a decent lot this time—and some more tea."

"You can't have any more cake!" said the waitress.

"Why not?"

"You're having a shilling tea, aren't you?"

"Yes!"

"Well, you've had your two bits of cake—and enough bread-and-butter, I

should think," declared the girl indignantly. "Still, I'll bring you some more."

"I should think you will!" said Fatty. "I haven't started yet!"

The girl stared hard, and the other people smiled very broadly. A few minutes later the waitress reappeared with a big plate of bread-and-butter, containing at least eight slices. She also brought another cup of tea. And she was smiling; she evidently saw the humour of the situation now.

As a matter of fact, she had reported the matter to the proprietor, who was at the rear, and the latter had instructed the girl to supply the junior with all he wanted. The thing was advertised, and had to be carried out. Fatty would never demolish the whole plateful.

"There you are, sir," said the girl, smiling. "How do you like this?"

Fatty Little eyed the plate indignantly.

"A scrap like that's no good to me!" he exclaimed. "I came in here for a feed—not a snack! 'Eat as much as you please,' that's what you say! Well, I'm going to do it! You might as well be cutting some more bread-and-butter while I'm eating this."

The girl giggled.

"You will have your joke!" she giggled.

She walked away before Fatty could disillusion her. And the way in which he got rid of those slices was really astonishing. They were thin and dainty, and each one was only a mouthful.

They had vanished within four minutes, and Fatty was looking round for fresh supplies. He beckoned to the waitress. At first she could hardly believe her eyes. Then she came over to the table with an unpleasant expression upon her face.

"Buck up!" said Fatty. "Why the dickens can't you keep me going?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The people at the other table laughed outright.

"Look here, you can't have any more!" said the waitress firmly. "You have had more than your shilling's worth, young man——"

"What!" roared Fatty. "I'm going to eat as much as I please!"

A big man at one of the other tables gently rapped upon his table.

"The youngster's quite right," he exclaimed. "You've got to keep to your bargain, you know. Bring him some more, if he wants it, miss."

"Oh, very well!" snapped the girl.

She whisked off, and soon returned with a plate containing three slices. Fatty gazed upon it wrathfully, and rose to his feet, red in the face.

"What's the good of that?" he roared. "This is a giddy swindle! I asked for some more bread-and-butter—not for some crumbs! I want twenty more slices—not three! Bring me another big plate of bread-and-butter, and another cup of tea!"

"You've eaten more than enough for three already!" said the girl angrily. "We can't afford to supply food at this rate——"

"What about your notice outside?"

"That doesn't matter——"

"Doesn't it?" shouted Fatty. "If you don't bring me some grub I'll jolly well fetch it myself! A fine cheek! What's the good of a notice like that outside, if you don't mean to keep to it?"

"The lad's only demanding his rights, miss," said the man opposite.

The waitress looked round as if she would like to eat everybody, and then swept off to the rear of the tea-shop. She did not reappear, but a big, burly man came forward with another supply of bread-and-butter.

"You've got a pretty big appetite, haven't you?" he said in an unpleasant voice. "Either that, or else you're playing some sort of a trick. Have you eaten everything that's been brought to you?"

"Of course I have!"

"The boy's right," said the other customer. "I've been watching him all the

time, Mr. Hooker. A pretty big appetite he's got, too."

"And, what's more," said Fatty, "I can tell you at once that this bit of grub is only enough to start me going. What's the idea of bringing two or three scraps spread all over a plate? I want it piled up!"

"Well, you won't get it!" said Mr. Hooker firmly.

He walked away, and Fatty very quickly consumed the food which had been brought. He knew well enough that he was perfectly within his rights to demand as much food as he could eat—and he did not hesitate to do so. He rapped upon the table noisily, and clattered the plate.

Mr. Hooker came forward again.

"You've had your tea, young fellow," he said sharply. "The best thing you can do is to pay your shilling, and get out of my shop!"

"Here's your blessed shilling!" roared Fatty, tossing down his florin. "I want a bob change, and I want some more grub! A fine idea, advertising that you'll let anybody eat all they please—I don't think! It's only a swindle! A chap with a decent appetite is only given a few crumbs—"

"Why, you greedy young rascal, you've had five or six teas already!" exclaimed the proprietor. "My notice outside only applies within reasonable limits—and not as you seem to think! I should be ruined if everybody was like you."

"Very likely," said Fatty. "But you've got to take the hard with the smooth. Tons of people only have six-pennyworth of grub, I'll bet! I'm taking you at your word, and I demand another plateful of grub!"

"You're not going to get it!" snapped Mr. Hooker, picking up the florin, and tossing a shilling on the table. "There's your change—hook it!"

"Why, you—you— Great pan-cakes! I've never seen such a barefaced swindle in my life!" roared Fatty. "I wouldn't have come into this hole if I'd known. I thought it was a square offer, and not a barefaced fraud!"

"Take care, sonny——"

"I'm going to speak my mind, and you won't stop me!" snorted Fatty. "By to-morrow everybody in the town, will know about this swindle—and I don't suppose it'll do you much good!"

"Are you going quietly, or do you want to be chucked out?" bellowed Mr. Hooker furiously.

"I'm going when I please——"

"We'll see about that!" shouted the proprietor. "You'll come this way, young man! We don't want your sort in here!"

He grasped Fatty by the coat collar, and gave him a shove which sent the fat junior staggering across the floor. Fatty was a big weight to push about, but Mr. Hooker himself was built heavily, and Fatty found it impossible to withstand the onslaught, although he struggled gamely.

Crash!

He charged through the swing doors, roaring, and a final shove sent him spinning across the pavement. Fatty staggered out into the road, tripped up, and sat down.

A shout of horror arose from the passers-by. For a huge touring car was speeding down the High Street at a dangerous pace—and it was rushing straight down upon Fatty Little as he sat dazed in the roadway.

CHAPTER 15.

A Distinguished Guest!

"BEGAD!"

Sir Montie Tregellis-West uttered the exclamation in a tone of startled surprise. We were just about to enter the beautifully carved doors of the Oriental Cafe, having abandoned our search for Fatty Little.

But as we turned we received something of a shock.

Fatty had just appeared. He went spinning across the pavement, staggered over the gutter, and sat down in the middle of the road with a jar which shook him up considerably.

"Great Scott!" I exclaimed huskily. "Look there!"

We could see the huge touring car driving straight down on the helpless junior at a speed which made it impossible for Fatty to get out of danger. We expected to see him run down on the spot.

But something surprising happened.

The driver of the car was evidently a man in a thousand. He swerved across the road, his hand as steady as a rock. There was not sufficient time to pull up, although the throttle was shut off and the brakes applied.

The near-side wheels shaved Fatty by a mere inch, and—

Cra-a-sh!

The magnificent car charged full-tilt into a well-stocked greengrocery stall which stood outside a shop. The whole affair was wrecked in a flash. Fruit and vegetables were sent flying in every direction. The car tore its way into the heart of the wreckage. The big sun blind which had been stretched over the stall fell over the car like a blanket, and the driver was completely enveloped.

Fatty Little staggered to his feet, gasping.

Oranges, apples, potatoes, bananas, and all manner of other things were strewn all over the place. The road was smothered with the debris of the stall.

"My only hat!" said Tommy Watson. "That was a near shave!"

"Begad! Rather, old boy!"

We ran up, and other people crowded round. Shopkeepers came running out of their establishments, and there was general excitement. Fatty Little gazed round him somewhat dazedly.

"Great pancakes!" he ejaculated.

"Jolly lucky there's a sensible man at the wheel of that car," I said. "He didn't hesitate a second, Fatty, or you would have been laid out by this time! What made you sit in the road like that?"

"What made me——" Fatty Little paused, and his face flushed with in-

dignation. "The rotter! The swindler!" he roared. "I was chucked out of that beastly restaurant, and I hadn't finished my tea——"

"Oh, great Scott! Talking about grub, even now!" exclaimed Nicodemus Trotwood. "I believe he'd talk and think of grub if he were on the giddy scaffold! Look at the trouble he's caused!"

"I've caused!" bellowed Fatty. "Why, you—you silly idiot! I'll——"

"Hallo! The driver's appearing," interrupted Watson.

We transferred our attention to the motor-car. The sun-blind was moving, and a figure appeared. It was attired in a light overcoat and a check cap.

"Look!" I yelled. "Look who it is!"

The motorist was gazing round with an air of calm unconcern which was somewhat comical. He stood in the midst of the wreckage, eyeing it all with perfect sang-froid.

"Begad!" exclaimed Sir Montie. "He's—he's Lord Dorrimore!"

"The one and only," I agreed.

I ran forward, and the others followed. It was impossible to get right up to the car, for the smashed fruit stall was all round, in bits of wreckage. The sun blind still lay in a tangled heap over the wind screen of the car.

"Dorrie!" I roared delightedly.

Lord Dorrimore gazed at me, grinned and nodded.

"Hallo, young 'un!" he said calmly.

"What price this for a cinema stunt? I hope there were a few cameras on the job when I charged the fruit emporium. I don't think I could do the trick again, if I practised it for weeks!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Everybody laughed.

"It's a frightful nuisance, all this beastly mess," Dorrie remarked. "Just as I was in a hurry to get to St. Frank's, too! But it was either the fruit or cruelty to animals—and I chose the fruit."

"Cruelty to animals?" I repeated.

"I nearly ran over the elephant!" ex-

plained Dorrie, with a nod towards Fatty Little.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The motorist's easy-going calmness took away all the seriousness of the mishap, and people who had come up expecting to see the result of an awful tragedy, found themselves smiling with amusement.

It was just like Lord Dorrimore to take it easily. Of course, I knew him as well as I knew Montie and Tommy. With Nelson Lee, I had accompanied Dorrie to the far corners of the earth. He was one of Nelson Lee's greatest friends.

I had known that Dorrie was coming down, but it was news to me to see him now—I had not expected him yet. He had turned up just in time to provide Bannington with some excitement.

The proprietor of the fruit and vegetable stall was on the scene now. He was a somewhat elderly man, very excitable, and he was horror-stricken by the havoc which had been caused.

"I'll have the law on you!" he shouted. "It'll cost pounds and pounds to put this right! Folks oughtn't to be allowed to go dashing about in them dratted motor-cars! I allus said they was a nuisance!"

"Hold on, Mr. Grubb," said one of the other shopkeepers. "It wasn't the gentleman's fault. He nearly ran over a boy, and the only thing he could do was to swerve. It was a marvellous piece of work, the way he steered into your stall!"

Mr. Grubb gulped.

"A marvellous piece of work, was it?" he shouted. "Well, it's a piece of work that'll cost a pretty penny! I can't afford to have my stall wrecked and all my stock wasted by the first motorist that comes along—Hi! Leave them oranges alone, you young varmints!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The youth of Bannington had appeared with surprising alacrity, and was equally brisk to seize such a golden opportunity. Fruit and nuts were lying all over the road—but not for long.

Mr. Grubb's precious stock was soon transferred into a dozen or a score of pockets—to be transferred, later, into healthy interiors.

"My dear old chap, what's the good of gettin' excited?" asked Lord Dorrimore languidly. "I accept full responsibility."

"Eh, wot's that?" said Mr. Grubb, becoming suddenly calm.

"I caused the damage, an' I suppose it's up to me to settle the bill," said Dorrie smoothly. "How much compensation do you require? I believe in settlin' troubles as quickly as possible. What's your figure?"

Mr. Grubb considered rapidly.

"It'll cost me nigh on ten pund to repair that stall, an' the stock was worth another ten pund," he said. "I reckon it'll cost you twenty, sir."

"My dear man, you're robbing yourself!" said Lord Dorrimore. "You'll never get on in the world at that rate. Here's thirty pound, an' we'll say no more about it. I'm havin' quite an enjoyable time!"

Mr. Grubb was eloquent in his thanks, but Dorrie took very little notice of him. He seemed far more interested in an altercation which was progressing on the other side of the road. Fatty Little was telling Mr. Hooker a few home truths concerning his "eat-as-much-as-you-please" restaurant.

"It's not my habit to make a fuss about things," Fatty was saying warmly, "but I'm not standing any treatment like this. Swindling me out of my grub wasn't good enough—you tried to kill me!"

"Don't be such a young fool!" roared Mr. Hooker. "I didn't know the car was comin' just then. I chucked you out of my shop because you were insulting—and I'd chuck you out again if you tried them tricks a second time."

Fatty fairly shook with indignation. Then he appealed to the crowd. He explained what had happened, pointed to Mr. Hooker's notice, and gained the sympathy of his listeners. But Mr.

Hooker was not inclined to stand there speechless.

"That notice don't apply to people with appetites like horses!" he shouted. "The young rascal ate four or five plates of bread-and-butter, and I wasn't going to give him no more. I can't afford——"

"That don't make any difference!" shouted somebody. "If you exhibit a notice like that, you ought to stand by it!"

"Hear, hear!"

"The thing's a swindle!"

Mr. Hooker received no sympathy, and he began to realise that he had made a bad mistake. His newly opened establishment could not have received a worse advertisement than the one it was getting.

Not only that, but the crowd stated their views in no uncertain terms, and added with great gusto that they would never patronise the place.

Fatty Little was satisfied.

"Well, I've shown the swindler up!" he said. "That's good enough for me. I reckon we'd better get out of the crowd now!"

"I reckon so, too," said Trotwood firmly.

"If we had some more tin we might be able to go into a decent restaurant," said Fatty, looking worried. "Great buns! Perhaps Lord Dorrimore could lend me a quid! I'm simply starving, and I shall never be able to get back to St. Frank's if I don't have a feed!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Lord Dorrimore strolled forward.

"Judging from what I've just heard, young man, I should imagine your bunkers were pretty well overloaded," he remarked. "However, we might as well drop into a cafe, an' have somethin' to prevent your vitality from oozin' away. I wouldn't like to see you get much thinner, my lad. Your clothin' is simply hanging in folds over your bally bones! It's a wonder you can exist!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Fatty Little grinned.

"I can't help being big, sir," he said apologetically.

We all grinned, and Fatty looked supremely happy. A good feed was in sight, and it was quite sufficient for the fat junior. He didn't care who provided it—that was an unimportant detail. The main thing was the feed.

How he could find room for anything more was a puzzle which nobody could understand. Fatty Little's capacity was weird and mysterious. He appeared to have space for grub without ending.

After Lord Dorrimore's car was pulled out of the wreckage it was found that the damage was quite superficial—merely some scratched paintwork, bent wings and a dented radiator. His lordship eyed the damage complacently.

"H'm! Nothing much!" he observed. "It's an extraordinary thing, but whenever I buy a new car I generally convert it into scrap iron in a short time. This, I suppose, is the first stage. I paid a thousand for this bus only yesterday."

"Phew!" whistled Watson.

But Lord Dorrimore didn't care a rap. He was a millionaire, and money was nothing to him.

The excitement was soon over, and we all entered the Oriental Cafe.

Tea was ordered by Dorrie—but Fatty Little was invited to study the menu, and to order what he required. When his tea was brought we simply roared, for Fatty had ordered enough for half a dozen.

"Amazin'," said Dorrie. "You ought to be in a side show, youngster! 'The Human Hippo.' World's record appetite——"

"Oh, go easy, sir!" grinned Fatty.

"I won't chip you any more," said his lordship cheerfully. "Well, my lads, how have you been goin' on? Still up to all sorts of mischief, I suppose? How's the professor?"

"Do you mean M'sieur Leblanc, sir?" asked Watson.

"No; he means the guv'nor." I grinned. "Dorrie always calls him that. Mr. Lee is fine, Dorrie. Never been better. He mentioned to me that you were coming down this week."

"What brought you down, sir?" asked Sir Montie gracefully.

"The car!" said Dorrie.

"No; I mean——"

"I know what you mean," grinned his lordship. "Well, the fact is, it's a dead secret. I can't tell you anythin' at present. The holidays will soon be here, an' then there'll be rejoicin'. Have you fellows made any arrangements for the vacation?"

"Not yet," I said.

"Good!" chuckled Dorrie, rubbing his hands.

"Why, what's the idea?" I inquired curiously.

"Oh, nothin'—nothin' at all!" said his lordship. "But it'll be rather rip-pin' if we can all go off together——Ahem! But it's a secret! I'm lettin' the cat out of the bag."

We listened with interest.

"I say, sir, are you thinking of going on a summer trip?" I asked. "We had a splendid time last year! That African holiday——"

"We're not goin' to Africa this time," said Lord Dorrimore. "In fact, we shall go in the opposite direction—— There I go again! If I continue at this rate you'll know the whole bally scheme!"

"That's what we want to know," I said, smiling.

"I dare say you do, my son; but it doesn't suit me to go into any details just now," said Dorrie. "The fact is, I don't exactly know what the details are—and I shan't until I've consulted your esteemed gov'nor."

"Well, it's pretty certain that there's something good in store," I said complacently. "You always do things properly, Dorrie. I've been hoping that we might be able to arrange a trip for this vacation—and now you come down, as large as life, and as handsome as ever——"

"That's enough!" interrupted his lordship severely. "I don't want any compliments from you, my lad! I'm suspicious of 'em! They remind me of Umlosi's compliments—the old rascal generally means something else."

I looked up.

"Yes, by Jove!" I said. "I'd forgotten Umlosi for the moment. Is he booked to come with us?"

"You bet your sweet life!" said Lord Dorrimore elegantly.

I grinned.

"Ah! Then we are going on a trip?" I asked.

"Oh, by gad!" groaned Dorrie. "I'm tellin' you everythin'!"

"Rats!" I said. "You simply whet our appetites for more. Talking about Umlosi, I suppose you've left him in Africa—at the head of his own tribe—in Kutaland?"

"Not likely!" said Dorrie. "Umlosi is in London, and what the deuce he'll get up to durin' my absence is more than I dare to imagine! I might mention that he's comin' down here in a day or two. I thought he might as well stir some life up at St. Frank's, just for a change."

"Begad! That will be frightfully interestin'—it will really!" declared Sir Montie. "I think Umlosi is a rip-pin' old chap. It'll be splendid to see him again, and all the other fellows will be delighted."

I had no doubt that Sir Montie was right.

Umlosi was a huge black man—the chief of the Kutanas—a king in his own country and an extraordinary warrior. His feats of bravery and daring were too numerous to be remembered.

In addition, Umlosi was a cheerful, good-natured old sort, and he generally succeeded in making everybody feel comfortable in the most dismal circumstances. I was quite bucked up at the thought of seeing him again.

"Of course, I'm not goin' to drop any hints," went on Lord Dorrimore as he sipped his tea. "But it's quite likely you remember the good old Wanderer?"

"Yes, rather," I said. "Your yacht?"

"Exactly."

"Do we remember her?" I went on. "Why, we had some fine adventures in

that ship, Dorrie, and we're not likely to forget her."

"Well, my son, if there's anythin' doin' this summer the Wanderer will take a leadin' part in the adventure," said his lordship smoothly. "You see, I'm giving you hints all the time—which is just like me. I came here with the intention of keepin' my tongue still. An' what do I find?"

He gazed at me and the other grinning juniors.

"I come here, an' I'm wrecked in the High Street," he continued. "I am lured into this cafe, and information is dragged out of me by sheer force. I shall have to put my foot down hard—and seal my lips."

"But why the necessity of being secretive?" I asked.

"Well, it's not absolutely necessary, but I don't want to tell you anythin' that might fall to the ground," said Dorrie. "There's nothin' worse than raisin' a fellow's hopes over a mere dream. I've been idiotic enough to say somethin', so there'll be no harm in sayin' a bit more. Here you are, in a nutshell. I've got an idea. Personally, I think it's a first-class, gilt-edged, number one size scheme."

"That sounds all right, then," I exclaimed.

Lord Dormimore shook his head.

"Ah, but wait, my son—wait!" he exclaimed. "Before I decide upon it finally I want the advice of the one man in the world who knows everythin'—an' that's the professor!"

"You mean Mr. Lee?" asked Watson.

"Right on the nail!" said his lordship eagerly. "I am visitin' St. Frank's with the sole intention of layin' my plans before Mr. Nelson Lee. If he approves everythin' will be rosy and sublime."

"And what if the guv'nor disapproves?" I asked.

"In that case there'll be nothin' doin'," replied Dorrie. "If your guv'nor puts the lid on the idea I shall be humbled and humiliated, and there

won't be any trip. It'll be a disappointment if he puts the ban on the game."

"I reckon you've said enough to make me feel pretty keen," I remarked. "If you've mapped out a programme, it's a ten-to-one chance that the guv'nor will agree."

"That remains to be seen," said Lord Dormimore. "You're well aware of the fact that I occasionally get ideas that ought to convince most people that I am only fit to take up a permanent residence in Colney Hatch. However, we'll see what the oracle says—the oracle, in this case, being personified by Mr. Nelson Lee."

Dorrie paused, and stared over at Fatty Little's place.

"By gad!" he ejaculated. "Can it be true?"

"Eh?" said Fatty.

"Have you really demolished that pile of grub?"

"Oh, that lot?" said Fatty, indicating the empty plates. "That was only a beginning, sir. I was just thinking about ordering some more—"

"Well, you'd better keep thinking about it, my son," interrupted Trotwood. "You're not going to have anything else just now. We don't want to have the horrible task of carrying you home!"

"It's all right! You'll all come in my car," said Dorrie.

We did. Our bicycles were left in Bannington that day, and we returned to St. Frank's in style. The distinguished guest was a very welcome visitor, and, somehow, I felt absolutely certain that his coming was to portend something of an extremely interesting nature.

CHAPTER 16.

The Story of the Wang Hi Treasure!

"THIS is splendid, Dorrie!" exclaimed Nelson Lee heartily. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming to-day? I should have made proper preparations for your arrival—"

"That's exactly why I didn't send you word," explained Lord Dorrimore blandly. "If there's one thing I hate, it is to have people makin' special preparations for me. I prefer to dig in anywhere; I'm not particular. I shall be here two or three days, an' you can shove me in the coal-cellar if you like!"

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"Same old Dorrie!" He smiled. "I think we can find you better accommodation than the cellar, old man! It's splendid to see you again. What wild-cat notions have you got in your head this time?"

Dorrie turned to me and grinned.

"There you are—he's guessin' it before I've got time to open my mouth!" he exclaimed. "Well, never mind. If he doesn't agree to my plan first time I'll think of some diabolical plot, drug him, and force him to agree."

We were standing on the steps of the Ancient House. The evening sunlight was still streaming over the Triangle, and Dorrie's car was standing a short distance away. We had only just arrived, and had attracted considerable attention already—at least, Dorrie had.

He was rather well known at St. Frank's, having paid several visits to the old school. Once seen, Dorrie was not easily forgotten. He was famous throughout the country as an intrepid big game hunter and explorer. Lord Dorrimore was a very well-known character, and at St. Frank's, among the juniors, he was tremendously popular. His free and easy style made him a kind of hero.

"Well, let's get inside to my study," said Nelson Lee. "We have lots to chat about, and I happen to have the evening free. I am pretty certain that you have a good deal to talk about, Dorrie."

"Oh, a shockin' amount!" said his lordship. "I've got a scheme that'll simply make your hair stand on end and remain there for good!"

"I sincerely hope not," smiled Nelson Lee. "Well, we will retire to my study. You boys won't be able to come, I'm afraid," added the guv'nor, addressing

Montie and Tommy and me. "But if there's anything that you'll be interested in I'll tell you about it later."

"Oh, good!" I said. "Thanks, guv'nor!"

Nelson Lee turned to enter the lobby, and saw that Mr. Clement Heath was standing there, looking on with interest. The young master made as if to pass.

"Oh, one moment, Heath," said Nelson Lee. "Now that you are here I should like to introduce you to Lord Dorrimore. Dorrie, this gentleman is Mr. Heath; he is taking charge of the Remove during Mr. Crowell's temporary absence."

"Pleased to meet you, old man!" said Dorrie genially. "You have my deep sympathy, I can assure you!"

"Your sympathy, sir?" smiled Mr. Heath.

"You're in charge of the Remove!" explained his lordship.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors laughed, and Mr. Heath smiled.

"They are rather a handful, perhaps; but I get on with the Remove quite well," he said. "I am greatly honoured to meet you, sir, and I hope to have the pleasure of having a little chat with you a little later on, if you will grant me that favour."

"My dear chap, I shall bore you to sleep," said Dorrie. "My conversation is limited. I can't talk about learned topics, such as algebra and Euclid, and all those funny intricacies. If I get talkin' I shall jaw about elephants an' tigers an' things of that kind. You'll wish you'd never set eyes on me!"

Mr. Heath smiled, and took his departure. Nelson Lee and Dorrie repaired to the former's study and soon made themselves comfortable.

Meanwhile, Mr. Heath made his way back into the Ancient House almost at once. He lost no time in going into a small box-room upstairs, and locked himself in.

Immediately beneath him was Nelson Lee's study, as he well knew. His next procedure was really astonishing. For,

as quietly as possible, he took up a couple of loose boards, and gazed down into the laths and plaster which composed the ceiling of Nelson Lee's study.

Right in the centre of the space there was a perceptible hole, which had once been filled up by a gas-pipe. When electricity had been installed at the school the hole had been neglected.

Mr. Heath had found it very handy.

He could see very little, of course—merely a small circle of Nelson Lee's desk, to tell the truth. But he really had no wish to see. His object in coming here was a different one.

From an old trunk he produced a small microphone with a pair of ear-phones attached to it. The "mike" he placed over the hole in the ceiling. Then he put on the earphones. And the voices of the two men in the room below came up to him quite audibly.

There was no chance of his being discovered—there was no chance of the men beneath guessing that their words were not private.

Lord Dorrmore made himself very comfortable. He sprawled in Nelson Lee's easy-chair, with a cigarette in his lips, and with a glass of whisky-and-soda beside him. And he grinned at the detective amiably.

"So you want to hear the yarn?" he inquired.

"I should very much like to know what your scheme is," said Nelson Lee.

Mr. Heath, above, listened to every word.

"Well, this yarn is just about the limit," said Lord Dorrmore. "It'll really make your hair stand on end, as I said before. To begin with, would you very much like to have a million quid or so?"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I should have no material objection," he replied.

"Good!" said Dorrmore. "I think I shall be able to put you in the way of pocketing that sum with very little difficulty. What I'm goin' to tell you may sound like a fairy tale."

"Fairy tale?" repeated Nelson Lee.

"I'll leave you to judge for yourself,"

said Dorrie. "The whole thing is so strange that it'll need a bit of believing."

"Well, get busy with the story," said Lee.

"Have you ever heard me refer to a cheerful merchant named Wang Hi?"

"I don't remember having heard the name before."

"Well, this gentleman, as you'll probably guess, is a native of that land which is generally illustrated on willow pattern crockery," explained Lord Dorrmore. "I think willow pattern crockery is Chinese, isn't it? If it's Japanese, I'm at sea. Anyhow, this old fogey lived in China."

"I assume that he is now dead?" asked Lee.

"Considerin' that he's been under the ground for about five centuries, your assumption is probably correct," said Dorrie smoothly. "I can't tell you the exact details now, because it'll take too long. Anyhow, Mr. Wang Hi was a rich mandarin. He was a kind of lord an' master an' tin god, an' everythin' else put together."

"A despot, probably."

"My dear man, the word's too gentle," said Dorrie. "Wang Hi, if the stories I've heard are true, was about the most accurate personification of Mr. Mephistopheles that ever walked the earth."

"Very interesting, I'm sure."

"Quite so," said Dorrie. "Well, Wang Hi was able to have a few retainers put to death every day, just as a pastime. This kind of thing was all very well from Wang Hi's point of view, but not from the retainers'. They didn't consider the affair entertainin' at all, especially when their turn came round."

"I don't quite see what you're getting at—"

"You'll see soon—unless you fall asleep in the middle of my discourse," said Lord Dorrmore. "I won't bore you more than I can help. Well, one day a nice little bunch of these Chinks came to the conclusion that Wang Hi would be far more interestin' with a

couple of daggers inside him. So they plotted a plot,, the net result bein' that Mr. Hi took a speedy departure from earthly realms."

"In short, he was murdered?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Exactly—but you put it so frightfully blunt," said Dorrimore. "I always prefer to talk of these things in a more entertainin' way. But I wouldn't dream of arguin'. Wang Hi was murdered—an', accordin' to all accounts, it wasn't half good enough for him."

"And where do we come to the millions?"

"I'm just gettin' to that point now," said Lord Dorrimore. "It seems that Wang Hi was a first-class thief in addition to his other accomplishments. For a great many years he had been in the habit of pinchin' things wholesale—particularly jewels. He had a collection of precious stones that would make a West End jeweller look like a rag-and-bone man."

"And this treasure, I presume, was hidden away?"

"It's amazin' how you guess these things," said Dorrie; "but you've hit the nail on the head. Wang Hi concealed his treasure so closely that nobody knew where it was. An' it's remained hidden to this day."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Are you suggesting that we should attempt to find it?" he inquired.

"I am."

"And it has remained hidden for centuries?"

"Yes."

"Then what hope have we of succeeding after so many have failed?" asked Lee.

"Ah! That's just where it comes in," said Dorrie mysteriously. "I have discovered a secret map—a piece of parchment which gives all the details, and all sorts of things. We've simply got to go to the spot, open up the treasure chamber—and there you are."

"It sounds ridiculously simple," said Nelson Lee. "But where does this spot happen to be?"

"Right in the heart of China."

"Hundreds and hundreds of miles from the coast, I imagine?"

"Not only that, but it's miles and miles from civilisation," said Lord Dorrimore. "These Chinks are hostile, and if we take an expedition inland, we shall have to go jolly easy. Still, it can be done, an' so long as we take a handy crowd, well armed, we shall be all right. As a net result we shall come away with barrels full of diamonds and rubies and emeralds. We shall be able to startle the world—and not a soul can dispute our right to the treasure. The first man on the spot gets it."

Nelson Lee looked thoughtful.

"I'm not sure that I entirely agree with your idea, Dorrie," he said. "We must think it over. I am certainly impressed, but I must remark that the whole yarn appears to be flimsy."

"That's because I haven't told you the inner facts," said Dorrie. "I'll go into all those later on—when you feel strong enough to stand the strain."

Mr. Heath had listened throughout the conversation, and he was quite impressed. He would, at all events, have something to report to the Comte de Plessigny. At the same time, Mr. Heath was determined, sooner or later, to give Lord Dorrimore a warning that his plans were known to others.

Mr. Heath could hear nothing more of any interest, for the pair in the room below did not continue the conversation. So the eavesdropper replaced the floorboards, put the microphone and earphones back in the old trunk, and went down to his own study.

CHAPTER 17.

The Count's Ruse!

THE Comte de Plessigny nodded.

"Yes, show Mr. Heath in at once," he said, in his smooth, silky voice.

As a matter of fact, the count had been expecting Mr. Heath that evening, and he was pleased when his man-

servant informed him that the young St. Frank's master was waiting. Mr. Heath was soon ushered in.

"Ah, my dear young friend, this is a delightful pleasure," purred the count, as he walked forward with outstretched hand. "Sit down, my dear chap—make yourself comfortable."

"Thank you," said Mr. Heath coldly.

"So?" You do not appear to be cordial!" exclaimed Plessigny.

"I do not see why I should be," said Mr. Heath. "I have consented to undertake certain work for you, and that work is absolutely against my inclinations. However, you have forced me to do it, and I am helpless. I have come because I have something to report—and I consider that it will be your duty to release me from all further promises."

The count rubbed his hands together softly.

"If you have obtained the information I require, you will be bothered no more," he said. "In short, your troubles will be at an end. Good fortune will be yours, and there will be no danger from the diamond."

"I cannot help feeling that you have tricked me," said Mr. Heath. "Having got me into your power, you have compelled me to act in a disgraceful fashion. I do not care for eavesdropping, and for—"

"Tut-tut!" interrupted the count. "What you have done is for the good of humanity. Lord Dorrimore is not the gentleman he appears to be. If you knew the exact truth, you would be heartily in favour of my own plans. Well, you must tell me what you have learned. Sit down, and take your time."

Mr. Heath did so, and, after lighting a cigar, he proceeded to tell the count of what he had overheard.

His host listened eagerly and interestedly, although he displayed no sign of emotion. And when Mr. Heath had finished, the count rose to his feet, and paced up and down for a few minutes.

"Good—quite good!" he declared.

"You are satisfied?"

"I did not say that," went on Plessigny. "I merely mentioned that your information is good. At the same time, it is scanty. It will not do. No, my dear young friend, it will not do."

"What do you mean?"

"Surely my meaning is obvious?" asked the count. "You have overheard much, and you have proved yourself to be ingenious. I require much more information—"

"Eh?" exclaimed Mr. Heath, starting in his chair.

"Dear, dear! Did you imagine that I should be content with this mean supply of facts?" asked the count. "By no means, Heath. I must know more."

Mr. Heath looked impatient.

"But I've told you everything I know!" he declared.

"I do not doubt you," said the Comte de Plessigny smoothly. "But you merely talk of Wang Hi and a vast treasure—you tell me no actual information. Where is this treasure?"

"In the interior of China."

The comte chuckled softly.

"My dear young friend, you might as well tell me that a shelled pea is in the centre of a cornfield, and request me to find it," he said. "It will not do. China is a vast place. Its population is enormous, and its towns, villages and cities are legion. Do you know the name of the place where this treasure exists?"

"No."

"Then, as I said before, you have much more to learn," declared the host. "It will also be necessary for you to obtain the parchment Lord Dorrimore referred to—or, better still, a copy of it. It is absolutely essential that I should be acquainted with all the facts—and not with a mere outline."

Mr. Heath clenched his fists.

"But I have done my best—" he began.

"No doubt—no doubt!" interrupted the count. "But you have really had no time to perform your work thoroughly. You must come to me with

the complete story; then I will release you from your position."

The Remove master rose to his feet.

"In plain words you want me to continue this spying game?" he asked bluntly.

"I do not care to hear you speak in such bold language——"

"I don't feel inclined to beat about the bush now," interrupted Mr. Heath curtly. "I have been a spy—and you wish me to continue in that role. Is it the truth, or not? I want a plain answer."

The comte shrugged his shoulders.

"Since you insist," he murmured, "yes, you must continue to—spy!"

"I refuse!"

"Come, come, my dear young fellow——"

"I tell you I refuse!" snapped Mr. Heath. "I've carried out your wishes, and I listened to a private conversation. I'm not going to degrade myself further. You can say what you wish—do what you wish; but I am firm."

"You positively refuse to proceed?"

"I do."

The comte smiled genially, and rubbed his hands together.

"This is absurd," he murmured. "My dear Heath, you cannot afford to talk in that strain. You seem to overlook the fact that you tampered with a stolen diamond. You quite ignore your peril. One word from me and you will be in the hands of the police——"

"And so will you!" interrupted Heath hotly. "You have the diamond——"

"Perhaps so—but this is of no matter," said the count. "I am a gentleman of wealth, and it will be quite easy for me to clear myself with the police."

Mr. Heath laughed harshly.

"You think so?" he exclaimed. "If so, you're mistaken! I have discovered, Plessigny, that you are an arrant scoundrel, and an unscrupulous rogue! I will have no further dealings with you—and you are at liberty to go to the police this very minute! Be hanged to you!"

"So? A revolt!" smiled the count. "This is, indeed, quite amusing—quite entertaining. I am afraid your revolt will be of no avail, my dear young man. You must do as I say——"

"And I declare that I will not!" shouted Mr. Heath hotly. "I would rather go to the police and face the consequences of the diamond affair, than continue this infernal blackguardism. I have done nothing wrong—I am innocent of anything unscrupulous. Then what have I to fear?"

The comte bent forward.

"You have to fear—me!" he said softly.

"Indeed!" snapped the young master. "I do not fear you—not in the slightest degree! You can only do one thing—and that is, to tell the police about the diamond."

"You think so?"

"I know so," declared Mr. Heath.

"Then I am afraid I must disillusion you," said the comte softly. "I have other methods of compelling you to do as I wish. But, come! Why should we quarrel? Let us talk peacefully and quietly, my young friend. I am anxious to obtain this information, and you can supply it. Is that not sufficient reason that we should work together, peacefully and amiably? You are on the spot—you can obtain this information without the slightest difficulty. Personally, I can do nothing. Therefore, it is to your interest and to mine to continue——"

"I will listen to no more!" exclaimed Mr. Heath curtly. "You will not influence me, Plessigny. I have finished—I am going, and you can do your worst. That's all I've got to say. Good-evening!"

Mr. Heath walked towards the door, his jaws set, and his eyes gleaming with determination. He reached the door, grasped the handle, and turned it. Then he received a slight shock.

The door was locked!

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded the visitor angrily.

"It is not my wish that you should

leave me so soon," smiled the count. "I was most anxious to be on good terms with you. However, since that seems to be impossible, I suppose I must give way. Come, my friend."

The comte moved softly across the room, and went to another door. He opened it, revealing a lighted passage beyond.

"Good-evening!" he murmured.

Mr. Heath said nothing, but strode through the doorway.

Immediately afterwards the door closed, and it went with a click. Mr. Heath looked round with a start. Then he saw that the place was not a passage, as he had first supposed, but merely a long cupboard, with no other exit.

He had been tricked!

A single electric light glowed high in the ceiling. And as Mr. Heath glanced up at it, the metal filament lost its glow, showed dull red for a second, and went out. He was plunged into darkness.

"The scoundrel!" he muttered thickly.

He thumped upon the door loudly.

"Let me out of this, you rogue!" he shouted. "If you think this kind of trickery will do any good, you've made a mistake!"

No reply came from the count. Mr. Heath paused, breathing hard, rather bewildered by this sudden turn of events. Then he heard a bell tinkle, and after that came a pause. He waited, filled with fury.

"Let me out!" he shouted again.

Still there was no reply, and again he listened.

Then he heard voices penetrating the door from the room beyond.

"You rang, sir?" said one voice.

"I did, Duncan," said the count smoothly. "I have a little commission for you, and I want you to attend to my instructions carefully."

"Very good, sir."

"You will make all haste, and you will go to the small village of Edgemore," went on the count. "Having arrived

there, you will have no difficulty in locating a building known as Greyhurst Cottage—"

"I know it quite well, your Excellency."

"That is splendid!" said the comte smoothly. "Very well. Go to Greyhurst Cottage, knock upon the door, and insist upon seeing Mrs. Heath. When you mention that you have come from her husband, she will see you. Tell her that Mr. Heath is in great need of her—urgently; tell her that the matter is extremely vital."

"Yes, your Excellency."

Mr. Heath listened with growing fury.

"I have not finished my instructions, Duncan," said the comte. "Having persuaded Mrs. Heath to leave the cottage with you, you will take her to the nearest station, and you will take her to London."

"I quite understand, sir."

"Good," said the comte gloatingly. "Once in London, you will take Mrs. Heath to this address. You will keep her there to await further instructions from me. That is all."

"Very good, your Excellency."

"Oh, one moment, Duncan," said the comte. "Come back to me in five minutes' time. I have something else to tell you."

"Yes, sir."

Heath heard the sound of a door closing, and then came silence. All his pent-up feelings came to the surface. He thumped upon the door panels fiercely—feverishly.

The comte had won!

Knowing that he could not persuade Mr. Heath to obey his will, he was determined to play a scoundrelly trick upon Mrs. Heath in the Edgemore Cottage! And the very thought of his wife being mixed up in this dreadful business caused Mr. Heath to become nearly frantic.

"Let me out! Let me out!" he shouted thickly. "I will agree—I will do what you want!"

He heard the comte come to the door.

"What did you say, my young

friend?" came the silky voice. "Do I understand you to intimate that you will obtain the further information that I require?"

"Yes, yes!" shouted Heath. "But you must cancel the orders you just gave to your manservant! I will not have my wife interfered with."

The count chuckled.

"Do as I wish, and your wife will know nothing. You must give me your word of honour that you will continue to act as my scout——"

"As your spy!"

"As it pleases you—yes," said the comte. "Have I your word?"

"Yes," said Mr. Heath, between his teeth. "I give you my word!"

"Good—splendid!"

Mr. Heath heard the bell tinkle again. Had he been able to see through the door panels he would have been somewhat surprised. The count was standing in the middle of the room, a smile upon his genial face. He spoke.

"You rang, your Excellency?" he exclaimed, in a changed voice.

"Yes, Duncan, I did," he said in his normal tones. "The instructions I gave you three minutes ago are cancelled. You must forget them."

"I will, sir," he said, in the other voice.

"All right, you may go!"

The comte walked across the room, opened the door, and closed it with a slight bang. Actually, of course, he had been alone from the very start. The manservant was an imaginary being.

But Mr. Heath could not know this. He could not guess that the comte had merely performed the ruse in order to extract the promise from his dupe. Mr. Heath certainly thought another man had been present. The comte had gained his end in the easiest possible manner.

The door was unlocked and Mr. Heath emerged.

"You—you rogue!" he said fiercely.

"Dear, dear, I object to that violent language!" said the comte softly. "I can assure you, my dear sir, that my intentions are all for the good. Do this

little favour for me, and you will never regret it. You cannot refuse now, since I have your word of honour—and you profess to be a gentleman."

"Yes, you have my word of honour—and that is good enough," said Mr. Heath coldly. "I will do my best to obtain the information you require. But, after I have succeeded, I shall act as I think best. I have given you no promise as to what I shall do later. If I remain here a moment later I shall lose my temper."

"The door is unlocked—you may go!" purred the Comte de Plessigny.

Mr. Heath went, and was glad to get into the open air.

There was no help for it. He was tied hand and foot, and he would have to do as the count told him. The position was galling—awful, but there was no getting out of it.

The master of the Remove was to continue his unwilling duty as—spy!

CHAPTER 18.

Caught!

LORD DORRIMORE lay back in his chair.

"So you want to hear some more details about the decease of Mr. Wang Hi?" he asked lazily. "Right you are, old man, I'll get busy. The fact is, I don't exactly know where to begin, and the yarn is rather a difficult one."

"Tell it in your own way," said Nelson Lee.

They were comfortably seated in the latter's study in St. Frank's. It was evening of the following day. Nelson Lee and Dorrie were intent upon having another chat.

And, above them, in the little box-room, Mr. Heath was listening with the aid of the earphones. He had easily learned that Nelson Lee and Dorrimore were together, in private—and he guessed the reason why.

So, soon after tea, Mr. Heath had taken up his position. The voices of the

two men below were amplified by the "mike" to such an extent that Mr. Heath did not miss a word.

"Of course, you want to hear all the inner details?" came Dorrie's voice.

"Exactly."

"Good! Just sit tight, and don't interrupt," said his lordship. "I don't want you to say a word. Your job is to sit there and say nothing."

"That is quite understood," smiled Nelson Lee. "Go ahead."

"Well, this treasure, as I told you before, is hidden right in the interior of China," said Dorrie. "It's a vast undertaking, I can assure you, but any expedition will be well rewarded. For example, the danger will be practically nil—we shall only have the tedious journey to worry us. Of course, there may be one or two scraps with the Chinks, but that's all in the order of the day."

Nelson Lee made no comment, and Mr. Heath listened eagerly.

"A scrap or two will help to make things lively," proceeded Dorrie. "Now, if you'll look at this chart, you'll follow my line of reasoning exactly. I maintain that we shall be able to get the booty without a ha'porth of trouble. You see, we start from the coast here, and then we work up this river, till we're stopped by rapids. Then it'll be quite easy to go overland, and to get to the spot. Just look here."

Mr. Heath heard a chair shifting, then came silence. Obviously, Lord Dorrimore and Nelson Lee were examining the chart.

"See how easy it'll be?" came Dorrie's voice again. "My dear man, it'll be a splendid trip in every way, and there'll be a reward at the end of it that'll make us millionaires. Of course, I'm a millionaire already, but that's merely a horrible detail. Money doesn't interest me at all."

Mr. Heath turned abruptly. He fancied he heard a slight sound at the door. Then, as he faced round, he uttered a startled exclamation.

Nelson Lee was standing before him.

"Why, I—I——" The words froze on Mr. Heath's lips.

"You thought I was downstairs in my study?" asked Lee smoothly. "Quite so, Mr. Heath—quite so. I intended you to have that impression."

Mr. Heath was silent with conscious guilt. The voice of Lord Dorrimore was still coming through the earphones.

"I think, Mr. Heath, that an explanation is due from you," went on Nelson Lee. "This behaviour of yours is hardly in keeping with the dignity of your appointment in this school."

Still Mr. Heath could not speak. He was staggered into dumbness. He realised what this all meant. He was exposed as a spy—disgraced, ruined! He would never be able to lift his head up again.

"Mr. Lee," he muttered hoarsely, "I swear I didn't want to listen——"

"I think it will be better if we have an explanation downstairs," interrupted Lee quietly. "We must have a little chat, Mr. Heath. I have caught you red-handed, and I think it is necessary for you to explain matters."

Mr. Heath removed the earphones and they walked downstairs, the Remove master apparently in a dream, and utterly and absolutely miserable. He hardly knew where he was walking, and he certainly didn't care.

"Oh, good!" exclaimed Lord Dorrimore, as the pair entered the study. "I was just beginning to dry up."

Lee closed the door, and Mr. Heath sat down heavily.

"I can't tell you anything, Mr. Lee," he said in a whisper. "I'm sorry, but I have no explanation to give. You will, of course, put the worse possible construction on my behaviour, and I can hope for no mercy."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"You are quite wrong there, my dear sir," he said gently. "Perhaps I know even more than you do. I advise you to be quite frank. To begin with, you were urged to undertake this unpleasant task by the Comte de Ples-signy——"

"How do you know?" asked Mr. Heath, startled.

"I do know," replied Nelson Lee. "Furthermore, it may interest you to learn that I was aware of your little game from the very first, and allowed it to progress. The story about the Wang Hi treasure was a mere piece of fiction, invented by Lord Dorrimore and myself. I wanted you to take the count a false story. No such treasure exists, and Lord Dorrimore has no intention of going to China. We discussed the subject merely to hoodwink you."

"Good gracious!" said Mr. Heath blankly.

"Now, please be quite frank. I want to hear everything," said Nelson Lee. "I am quite convinced, Heath, that you are an honourable man at heart. This lapse was due to the fact that the count has a hold over you—or, at least, you fancy he has. Let us have the truth, and there will be no further complications."

Mr. Heath's eyes gleamed.

"By Jove, I will tell you the truth, Mr. Lee!" he exclaimed fiercely.

He did. He explained all the circumstances concerning the finding of the diamond in Bellon Wood; he explained how he had taken it to the count, and how the count had advised him to have it cut; then he went on to describe the count's disclosure that the diamond was stolen property, and that Mr. Heath was liable to find himself in the hands of the police.

Nelson Lee listened with great interest. He could tell that Heath was sincere, and that the young master was completely under the sway of the Comte de Plessigny. And Lee was inclined to be lenient.

"On my honour, Mr. Lee, I did not want to listen to your conversation with Lord Dorrimore," declared Heath earnestly. "At first I positively refused to undertake the task."

"And the count threatened you?"

"Yes, he did!" said Mr. Heath grimly. "He said if I refused he would see that I fell into the hands of the police. I was scared—mainly because

of reasons which I cannot speak of now—"

"Such as your wife, at Edgemore?" asked Nelson Lee.

Mr. Heath started.

"You—you know?" he asked huskily.

"Yes," replied the schoolmaster-detective, smiling. "My dear fellow, it was quite an innocent piece of deception—and I do not blame you. It was natural that you should like your wife with you. However, we will discuss that matter later. With regard to the Comte de Plessigny, you have been needlessly alarmed."

"But he had injured me——"

"Nonsense, my dear fellow," said Lee. "You succumbed to his will, thinking that you were in his power. You are not in his power. I blame you for acting the part of a spy, but the circumstances are exceptional. If Lord Dorrimore feels inclined to let the matter drop, I will do the same."

"Count on me, old man," said Dorrie. "I'm an oyster."

"It is extremely good of you!" said Mr. Heath gratefully.

"And now, to tell you about the comte," proceeded Nelson Lee. "He is a very clever man; a criminal who has never allowed himself to be mixed up with the police. Scotland Yard has suspected him of many clever crimes, but they have never been able to obtain evidence. The comte is a master-crook, and he always works alone. He is a charming individual, with a wonderful personality, and it is almost impossible to realise that he is noble and good. I have had my eye on him ever since he came to Bannington—and I know why he came."

"To poke his nose into my affairs, by the look of it," remarked Dorrie.

"That was one reason, possibly," said Nelson Lee. "But he was mainly after the Layham Diamond. This wonderful stone was stolen over five years ago, by a man named Harding. He found the police on his track, and boarded a train bound for the south coast. Arriving at Caistowe, he eluded the detectives, and

seized a bicycle that was standing outside the station. He was eventually captured at Bellton, but the diamond was not on him, nor would he speak.

"He was sentenced to five years' penal servitude. Meanwhile, the Marquis of Layham offered a reward of five thousand pounds for any information leading to the recovery of the stone. That reward has not been claimed."

"I thought about getting it at one time," said Mr. Heath ruefully.

"I have been putting two and two together," went on Mr. Lee. "I have discovered that Harding came out of prison a month or two back. He was knocked down by a car just outside London and taken to hospital, where he died. Now, this is the significant point. That car was driven by the Comte de Plessigny!"

"By gad!" murmured Dorrie. "The plot thickens!"

"It is a simple matter to deduce that Plessigny obtained the story of the diamond from the dying man—as they were driving to the hospital probably," said Nelson Lee. "In fact, Harding doubtlessly volunteered the information. Well, the comte came down here and proceeded to search Bellton Wood for the diamond. It was certainly concealed there. He fell out of a tree, dropping the stone; then, when you picked it up, Mr. Heath, the comte allowed you to think the stone was yours. He did so in order to get you into his power."

"Yes, I can see that now," said the Remove master.

"He wanted you to obtain certain information about Lord Dorrimore," went on Lee. "I have not the slightest doubt that the comte disbelieves the Chinese yarn—it is, as I said, a pure fake. He knows this, and wants to get the real information. My advice to you, Heath, is to ignore the comte entirely."

"But he will inform the police——"

"Nonsense!" laughed Lee. "Plessigny does not love the police, and he will not voluntarily approach them. Even supposing he did inform, he could do you no harm. You have not even got

the diamond in your possession. To put it bluntly, Heath, you have been fooled. Take my advice, and have nothing more to do with the man. You are quite safe."

"It is very good of you——"

"Not at all," interrupted Lee quietly. "I have simply enlightened you with regard to the comte's true character. Do not see him again—go about your school duties, and do not worry. Leave the count to me."

Mr. Heath was overwhelmed with gratitude, and he could think of no adequate words to express his feelings. He passed out of Nelson Lee's study shortly afterwards feeling a new man.

CHAPTER 19.

T. T. on His Hind Legs!

"SPIRITS!" exclaimed Reginald Pitt, with a sniff.

"Eh?"

"What's that?"

Jack Grey and Augustus Hart regarded Pitt curiously. The three juniors were standing in the lobby. It was evening—a dull evening, with a promise of rain in the air.

"Spirits!" repeated Pitt. "I'm not referring to the fiery brand. I'm talking about the other kind of spirits."

"Ghosts?" asked Grey, staring.

"Yes."

"But you're not a believer in spiritualism, you dotty ass!" exclaimed Grey. "Only a day or two ago you were saying what a lot of rot it is."

"That's quite right," said Pitt. "But I was just thinking about Tucker's meeting this evening—in the Common-room, you know. It's due to start in about five minutes, but I can't see much of an audience flocking about!"

Hart and Grey chuckled.

"T. T. will probably lecture to the thin air," grinned Hart. "Or there might be a few spirits knocking round to lend him their ears. I can't imagine why the ass is always wanting to spout."

"Oh, it's a kind of craze with him."

said Pitt. "He tries it on in the study sometimes, but Jack and I generally close him up with a snap. Last week it was ancient history, on Monday he was jawing about anthropoid apes, and now he's branched off on to spiritualism. He'll end up in a lunatic asylum, I expect."

"Shall we listen to the ass spouting for a bit?" inquired Hart.

"Not likely!" said Pitt. "I'd rather have a bit of fun—there seems to be nothing doing at present, and it would be a good opportunity. But who could we work a jape on?"

"Blessed if I know," said Grey. "It might be funny to hear T. T., after all."

They stood talking for a few moments, and then got into conversation with several other juniors. Other grins were apparent, and many of the grins turned into roars of laughter.

Meanwhile, Timothy Tucker was in the Common-room. The school clock had just chimed eight, and that was the time fixed for the lecture. Owing to the dullness of the evening, it really seemed as though the time was nearer nine than eight.

Timothy Tucker consulted his own watch after hearing the big clock chime, and he came to the conclusion that the clock was right, because it corresponded with his own watch.

"Dear me!" he murmured, blinking round the Common-room. "This is most remarkable! It seems that nobody has turned up! It is just possible that there has been a mistake; the fellows don't seem to realise how important this subject is."

He turned over one or two of his notes, and just then Handforth & Co. strolled in, talking noisily.

"There's a set of chessmen in the cupboard," said Handforth briskly. "I'll bet my best Sunday boots that I'll have you 'checkmate' before supper."

"Rats!" said Church. "I can play chess."

"And so can I."

"Comrades and brothers!" com-

menced Timothy Tucker, seizing his opportunity. "No doubt you will wonder why I am standing upon this platform—"

"We shan't wonder for long," remarked Handforth grimly. "You'll only be standing there for about two ticks, my son! Clear off!"

"My dear sir—"

"We don't want any of your beastly tommy rot here!"

"The position is this—"

"Oh, I don't care what the position is," said Handforth. "Somebody was saying that you were going to deliver a lecture on spiritualism; and if you think we're going to stand any rot of that kind, you've made a bloomer."

"But my dear Handforth, you fail to comprehend the exact position," exclaimed Tucker, blinking at the chums of Study D through his big spectacles. "I wish to enlighten my schoolfellows on a most important subject. And I intend to give this lecture—"

"And we intend you to scoot!" said Handforth. "If you're not down from that giddy table in twenty seconds I'll yank you—"

"Hold on!"

Reginald Pitt made that remark as he came in the doorway. He was followed by fully fifteen or sixteen other Removites, and they were all looking as grave and solemn as owls.

It was obvious that something was in the wind.

"We're the audience," said Pitt gravely. "We have decided that it will be to our benefit if we listen to the learned words of our trusted comrade, Professor Timothy de Brainless Tucker!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hush!" said Pitt severely. "This is no time for hilarity."

Handforth glared.

"You dotty idiot!" he exclaimed. "What's the idea of all this twaddle?"

"Fair youth, you must not use such expressions," said Pitt, with an elaborate wink. "You must stay here and listen to the wondrous words of the oracle—I mean the orator! Let him

get busy, and we will present him with our ears!"

"Professor Tucker, proceed!" said Hart solemnly.

Timothy Tucker beamed.

"This is most welcome, my dear comrades!" he exclaimed. "I hardly expected to obtain such splendid support as this. It exceeds all expectations. The subject is a serious one—admitted. Quite so. However, I think that you will be able to compose yourselves for a sufficient length of time to hear my lecture over. I can assure you it will be most interesting and instructive. H'm! Quite so!"

"Well, get on with it!" said Handforth, dimly realising that something special was afoot.

This was quite clear, for such a crowd of fellows would never have attended one of T. T.'s lectures otherwise.

"Well, comrades and brothers, Spiritualism is a subject which has been under repeated discussion recently," began T. T., waving his hand eloquently. "I do not wish you to suppose that I am standing upon his platform for the purpose of preaching the doctrines of Spiritualism. By no means!"

"That's one good thing!" said Church.

"On the contrary," explained Tucker, "the position is this: Spiritualism, in my opinion, is a form of mania. Those people who believe in spirits and ghosts and visitations from beyond the veil are on the verge of lunacy!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Furthermore, I would like to mention that it has been generally noticed that when a person embraces Spiritualism as a hobby, it generally becomes his religion," proceeded T. T. firmly. "I declare that no such things as spirits exist. People who see ghosts are merely sufferers from hallucinations and delusions. They are figments of the brain, and have no real existence."

"Don't you believe in ghosts?" asked Pitt curiously.

"No."

"Don't you believe in spirit rappings?"

"My dear sir, I must request you not to be so absurd!" said T. T. "If I were a believer in ghosts, I should not be standing upon this platform talking as I do. Ghosts, I repeat, have never existed—they have never been seen. People only imagine they see ghosts."

"Supposing a ghost walked out of the corner cupboard now?" asked Pitt. "Would you believe it was a real ghost, or that it didn't exist?"

"My dear sir, your questions are quite absurd; in fact, they are preposterous!" said T. T., blinking. "When I hear you make such remarks as those, I can feel only pity for you!"

"Smash him!" advised Handforth.

"Let the learned gentleman proceed," said Pitt. "Talking about ghosts, I've just been wondering if there is any truth in the old story that two monks were once buried alive immediately under this room!"

"Good heavens!" gasped De Valerie. "What's that?"

Everybody held their breath.

From beneath the floor came a horrible low groan. It was hollow, long drawn out, and ghostly. The juniors looked startled, and Timothy Tucker seemed to swallow something hard. His spectacles dropped from the bridge of his nose, and he adjusted them hastily.

"Did—did you hear something?" whispered Pitt huskily.

T. T. gave a nervous laugh.

"My dear sir, you are giving way to your imagination!" he declared. "What sound was there to be heard?"

"Didn't you hear a horrible groan?"

"Dear, dear!" said Tucker. "What absurd nonsense! Merely because we are talking of spirits, that is no reason why you should allow your imagination to get the better of you. I heard nothing—at least, I—I——"

He paused, for the groans were apparent again.

"This is getting awful!" muttered Pitt. "We—we can't stand it! I suppose all this talk about ghosts has

set the beggars off! I shouldn't be a bit surprised if we saw one next. In this dim light——"

"Look!" screamed Hart suddenly. "Look!"

He pointed with a shaking finger to a dim corner of the room.

"Good—good gracious!" gasped Pitt. "I—I don't see——"

"The ghost of the old monk!" panted De Valerie hoarsely.

And, sure enough, something dim and almost shapeless appeared in the corner. Timothy Tucker stared at it, gulped, and shook in every limb. He could faintly see that the form resembled that of an old monk.

"Good heavens!" he gasped. "I—I—I——"

Considering that he did not believe in ghosts, his behaviour now was somewhat contradictory. He determined to stand his ground, although the other juniors were streaming out of the room.

But the thought of remaining there alone, with that dim thing with him, was altogether too much for his nerves. With a wild howl he leapt down from the table and dashed headlong out of the Common-room.

"Dear, dear!" he panted, as he ran. "This—this is truly appalling!"

He pushed his way through the juniors, and sped down the passage as though a thousand demons were at his heels.

Some of the fellows had remained in the Common-room, and their scared expressions left them, and they grinned, and finally roared.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old T. T.!"

"The chap who doesn't believe in ghosts!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors yelled, and the ghost walked towards them. He threw his cloak off, and the grinning face of Nicodemus Trotwood was revealed. Pitt grabbed hold of Nick, and hugged him.

"Great, my son!" he exclaimed. "You did it first-class!"

"Still, it was a bit of a dirty trick on the poor chap!" said Trotwood. "I didn't think he'd take it so jolly seriously. I was expecting him to make a rush at me."

"Those groans of yours did the thing," grinned Pitt.

"Why, they nearly scared me," said De Valerie. "How on earth you made them sound underneath the floor is more than I can imagine. I always knew you were a ventriloquist, but this fairly takes the bun!"

"There was nothing in it," said Trotwood modestly. "I'd better shove these togs back in the property-room before anybody sees me. Poor old Tucker was properly dished. I feel a bit sorry for him."

"Rats! A lesson like that does him good!"

The juniors passed out of the Common-room, chuckling. T. T.'s great speech on the subject of Spiritualism had not been an unqualified success.

Meanwhile, Tucker himself reached the open, and dashed across the Triangle, his one idea apparently being to get as far away from the Common-room as possible. He reached the gateway, and was about to dash out into the lane, when he came to a full stop. A startled gulp left his lips, and he stood there with staring eyes.

A strange apparition faced him.

A huge man, attired in a white drill suit which appeared to be too small for him—a man of gigantic proportions. And he was black—absolutely black! His face looked awful to Tucker in his present state of nerves.

"Dear, dear!" he exclaimed faintly. "It's another ghost!"

He fell back against the gatepost, too weak to run another yard. But this ghost was just as solid as the other. It walked forward solemnly, grasped Timothy Tucker, and lifted him from the ground.

"Thou art scared, O simple youth!" came a deep, rumbling voice. "Am I so fearful to gaze upon?"

CHAPTER 20.

The Chief of the Kutanas!

TIMOTHY TUCKER wriggled convulsively.

"This—this is absurd!" he panted. "I must request you to release me, my dear sir. My attitude is most undignified. Admitted. Furthermore, your face frightens me! It is a face one only sees in terrible nightmares!"

"Wau! Thou art complimentary, O youth of snakelike wriggles!" exclaimed the black giant pleasantly. "It is not my intention to harm thee, and thou need fear nothing. It is well."

Tucker wriggled more convulsively than ever.

"It is far from being well!" he declared. "It is certainly a relief to find that you are solid flesh and blood. But, at the same time, I must insist upon being released. How dare you handle me in this disgraceful fashion? Unless you release me on the instant, I shall be compelled to take disciplinary measures——"

"Thou art using wondrous words, my son!" interrupted the black man gravely. "I am acquainted with many strange and extraordinary words in thy bewildering language, but there are many which puzzle me mightily. Wau! Thou may rest upon the ground once more. Mayhap you can tell me where it is possible to find N'Kose, my father?"

Tucker panted rather heavily, and attempted to straighten himself.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed. "I must tell you, my dear sir, that you have upset me considerably—quite considerably. Exactly. As for knowing where your father is, I have never seen the gentleman!"

The black giant gave a rumbling chuckle.

"Thou art surely mistaken, fair youth," he said. "Thou hast not seen N'Kose, my father?"

"I've never heard of Kose, or whatever you call him!"

"I refer to He of the Shimmering Eye!" said the visitor gravely.

"He of the which?" gasped T. T.

"In thine own language my father is known as a great chief, passing under the name of Lord Dorrimore," said the black giant. "Mayhap thou canst tell me——"

"Oh! Lord Dorrimore!" said Tucker, staring. "Dear, dear! I am absolutely staggered, my dear sir! I am positively bewildered! It is indeed astonishing that you should be a son of Lord Dorrimore!"

"Hallo! Who's the visitor?" asked Tommy Watson, strolling up to the gateway at that moment. "I don't admire his tailor, anyhow! Why, great Scotland Yard! It's—it's old Umlosi!"

Tommy Watson fairly jumped with excitement. He didn't rush up to Umlosi, but he turned round, and waved his arms as though he had suddenly gone crazy.

"Nipper!" he roared wildly. "Montie!"

Sir Montie Tregellis-West and I were chatting against the Ancient House steps—in fact, we were learning about the jape which had just been played upon Tucker, and we were duly grinning. But Tommy Watson's wild gyrations interrupted things, and attracted our attention.

"What's up with him?" asked Pitt curiously.

"Begad! I think the dear fellow must have been stung by a wasp!" remarked Sir Montie.

"Nipper!" roared Watson again. "Come here—quick! Umlosi's arrived! He's here! Come and give him a yell!"

"Umlosi!" I gasped. "Oh, great!"

I streaked across the Triangle, with Montie and a host of other juniors after me. I arrived at the gateway, and fairly hurled myself at the king of Kutanaland — Umlosi, the great warrior.

"Wau! It is indeed wondrous to see thee again, O Nimble One!" exclaimed Umlosi, grasping me, and squeezing

my shoulders until I nearly winced. "How art thou, my brave son? It is a great and glorious pleasure to see thy shining countenance once again. I greet thee. Manzie!"

"Good old Umlosi!" I said heartily. "Welcome to St. Frank's!"

"And thou, too, O noble youth of the glass eye!" said Umlosi, addressing Sir Montie. "And thou, whom thy brothers call Tommy—it is well to see thee so sprightly and alive. I am pleased, my young masters."

Umlosi was undoubtedly pleased to see us—just as we were delighted to see him. The other fellows crowded round, eager to hear the black giant talking. For he was indeed a distinguished guest at St. Frank's.

Umlosi was a native of Africa—a king in his own country, Kutanaland. He was the constant companion of Lord Dorrimore, when that famous explorer was in any part of Africa. He regarded Dorrie as some superior kind of being, and was his willing slave. The adventures they had passed through would fill a dozen volumes.

"This is most astounding!" said Tucker, blinking. "Really, I fail to understand."

"What can't you understand?" I asked.

"I have seen Lord Dorrimore, and I respect him highly—notwithstanding the fact that he is a member of the bloated aristocracy!" said T. T. "I must admit that he is a gentleman, and a fine man. But it is wonderful that he should be the father of this enormous black man."

"The—the father?" I ejaculated.

"Exactly!"

"Dorrie is Umlosi's father?" I yelled.

"My dear sir, this black gentleman informs me so, at all events——"

"Ha, ha, ha! You—you ass!" I roared. "Umlosi always calls Dorrie his father—but that's merely a sign of respect. You must be dotty to think that Lord Dorrimore can have a son of this colour!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Thou art joking at my expense, O Nimble One!" said Umlosi, his black face wrinkled into a smile. "No matter. I know thee well, O imp of mischief, and I forgive thee. Mayhap thou canst take me to N'Kose?"

"Yes, rather!" I said. "This way, old man. You'll see Umtagati, too!"

"It is well!" said Umlosi. "I am almost as eager to see Umtagati, the great wizard, as I am to see N'Kose. It is indeed well. Lead thou on, Manzie, and I will follow. This is a great day!"

We passed across the Triangle in a sort of triumphal procession, the Removites hanging round in crowds. When we got into the lobby the electric lights were blazing, and Umlosi's appearance caused everybody to grin hugely.

His white drill suit was much too small for him, and it seemed perilously near to the point of bursting in several quarters. He had evidently failed to have his suit made to measure. Clothing of any sort was a bore to Umlosi—but convention compelled him to attire himself fully when living in England. A panama hat was stuck at the back of his head, and a flaring green tie adorned his neck. He had apparently quite overlooked such an unimportant detail as a collar.

I directed Umlosi to Nelson Lee's study, and tapped upon the door and entered.

"A visitor, guv'nor," I grinned.

Umlosi stalked in, and Nelson Lee and Lord Dorrimore jumped to their feet. Dorrie stared for a moment, and then grinned.

"You black chunk of Silkstone!" he said severely. "What's the meanin' of this? Who told you to find your way down here to-day? I was comin' up to town to-morrow to fetch you——"

"It is even as thou sayest, N'Kose," said Umlosi, shaking his head. "But I grew weary of waiting. I was bewildered by the great noises and bustle of thy vast city. So I entered upon the wondrous kraal that moves with the speed of lightning, and came hither, to seek thee."

"You old boulder!" said Dorrie. "By 'the kraal that moves with the speed of lightning' I suppose you mean the train? How the dooce you managed to get down here without killin' yourself fairly beats me. Didn't you fall out of the train? Didn't you push the engine off the rails?"

"Thou art pleased to be humorous, my father," said Umlosi. "I will admit that I left the moving kraal before the time, thinking I had arrived at the station, as thou callest it. Wau! I fell with many bumps, and there was much excitement. However, I am unhurt, save for one or two bruises in spots which may not be mentioned!"

"There you are!" said Lord Dorrimore. "I knew he couldn't get down here without falling out of the train!"

"It is splendid to see thee again, Untagati, my master!" exclaimed Umlosi, shaking Nelson Lee's hand. "I am with my honoured friends, and I forget my worries. I long to be back in the great forests; but I fear that the time is far distant ere I shall have my wish granted."

"We don't know, old friend," said Nelson Lee. "It's quite possible that we shall be in the forest sooner than you imagine. It all depends upon the plans of N'Kose. We shall see."

"It is well," rumbled Umlosi. "I await the time with patience."

Umlosi was enormously popular with the majority of the fellows, and the next day he enjoyed himself tremendously. He went all over the school, escorted by willing guides. He tried his hand at cricket, and caused shrieks of laughter.

The fellows merely regarded this visit in a humorous light; but I knew better. Lord Dorrimore and Umlosi were not at St. Frank's just for the fun of the thing. Dorrie had come with a specific object in view.

Meanwhile, the affairs of Mr. Clement Heath, the master of the Remove, were reaching a head.

While the juniors were interested in

the doings of Umlosi, Mr. Heath made his way to Greyhurst Cottage, in Edgemore, to have tea with his young wife. He arrived somewhat warm, for the day was baking.

Edith was looking very charming in a white silk afternoon gown, and nobody would have believed that she was Handforth's sister. Handforth was big, clumsy, and rugged of countenance. Edith was small, dainty, and extremely pretty.

"Well, dear, I've finished with that infernal count—thank goodness!" remarked Mr. Heath, as he sipped his tea.

The youthful master of the Remove had already told his wife how he had been forced to act as a spy for the Comte de Plessigny, and how Nelson Lee had caught him and told him to ignore the count altogether.

And naturally both Mr. Heath and his wife felt very bitter towards the count in consequence, especially after the way Mr. Heath had been treated in the Comte de Plessigny's house.

"All our dreams have fallen to pieces—like most dreams," said Edith, with a little sigh. "You had made me so hopeful, Arthur; but, of course, we were very foolish to build such castles in the air."

Mr. Heath smiled ruefully.

"I suppose we were," he confessed. "But now that we know everything, it's quite impossible for us to think of having that five thousand pounds reward. You see, little girl, I didn't really find the diamond—it was only planted there for a purpose. In any case, the count has got the diamond, so we may as well dismiss him from our thoughts."

Edith sighed again.

"Yes, that's right," she said slowly. "Oh, but I know everything will be all right, Arthur. And I'm ever so much happier because we shall never be troubled with the count again— Oh, I wonder who that can be?"

A knock had sounded upon the front door, and a few moments later old Mrs. Miggs, the housekeeper, entered the comfortable sitting-room.

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

She handed Mr. Heath a card, and the Remove master glanced at it rather curiously. Then he started, looked at the card again, and uttered a low exclamation.

"What is it, Arthur?" asked Edith quickly.

Mr. Heath handed the card across the table.

"The Comte de Plessigny," he replied grimly.

"Oh!"

The girl took the card and regarded it wonderingly. Then she looked up at her husband's firm, frowning face.

"Please, Arthur, don't be hasty!" she exclaimed. "I don't want you to—"

"It's all right, Edith—don't get excited," said Mr. Heath. "I feel like taking the count by the scruff of his neck and pitching him into the road. But I shan't do that. I'll let him come in, and I'll talk to him quietly."

The Remove master was furious, but he held himself in check. Mr. Heath knew that he could not make a scene in Edgemoor, and so he remained calm.

"Please ask the gentleman to come in, Mrs. Miggs," he said quietly.

The old housekeeper left the room, and almost immediately afterwards ushered the Comte de Plessigny in. He was looking the same as ever—neat, scrupulously attired, and immaculate to a degree. His monocle was in his eye, and he was smiling with all his old charming geniality.

"I am grateful, my dear young friend," he said, extending his hand to Mr. Heath. "I thank you for your kindness in admitting me."

Mr. Heath ignored the proffered hand.

"What do you want?" he asked bluntly.

"So? You are offended with me?" asked the count. "I understand—and I am not angry. It is a pity. And this delightful young lady is your wife? I am most charmed to meet—"

"Look here, Plessigny, I don't want you to pass any remarks concerning my

wife," interjected Mr. Heath coldly. "In fact, there is no time for pleasantries of any kind. What is your business here? I'll tell you plainly that I think you are a scoundrel, and I don't want you in my house!"

The comte smiled, and shrugged his shoulders.

"You are frank, my dear sir—you are delightfully candid," he murmured. "So. It is all to the good. Perhaps, when I have finished, you will be rather more moderate in your tone. I hope so sincerely."

"Why have you come here?" demanded Mr. Heath.

"Well, in the first place, I wish to offer you a humble and complete apology," said the comte smoothly. "I realise that I have treated you badly—even worse than that—and I am hoping that you will be able to forgive me."

"It is rather too late for this sort of thing," said Mr. Heath.

"Dear me! I hope not. I earnestly trust that you will accept my apology," said Plessigny, his expression full of concern and trouble. "Listen. I will explain. I took advantage of you in a manner which, I suppose, was rascally and unprincipled. I have realised that I acted like a scoundrel."

Mr. Heath nodded.

"I am glad you know that," he said coldly.

"I do know it, my dear young friend—I do know it," declared the count. "Furthermore, I have been seeing the whole matter in a different light. I have had the truth brought to me. I blackmailed you. I forced you to undertake work which was distasteful to you, and which would be distasteful to any gentleman. I am deeply sorry, Mr. Heath. You were right to refuse to spy upon Lord Dorrimore."

"I fail to see what you are driving at," interrupted the Remove master.

"Am I so involved?" said the comte. "I am attempting to explain. I will be more straightforward. My young friend, I have come to the conclusion that it is distasteful to you to undertake the task

I set you. You were fully justified in your anger and your refusal to carry out my instructions. I admire you exceedingly for your courage."

"That's very nice of you," said Mr. Heath.

"I see you are still angry with me!" exclaimed the count regretfully. "It is a pity—yet I do not blame you. A man who has acted wrongly is never trusted. You do not trust me. I am sorry. I admire you for your determination—for your pluck. You were right from the very start, and I beg that you will forgive me for my own misguided actions. Please believe me when I say that I am torn with trouble and anxiety concerning this hateful affair. Can you not forget it? I am deeply sorry for what has happened."

Mr. Heath glanced at Edith, and she smiled at him. It was clear to see that the girl had already granted the count's request. She had forgiven him. And Mr. Heath had great difficulty in remaining cold.

Plessigny's voice was so charming, his expressions of regret so sincere and deep, that it was impossible to turn a deaf ear to his appeal. His whole attitude was one of humiliation and sorrow.

"I appreciate this action on your part, of course," admitted Mr. Heath. "I am glad that you have come, sir. Certainly, I forgive you; I cannot very well do anything else, since you have expressed such earnest regret."

The comte rubbed his hands together. "Splendid—splendid!" he exclaimed. "Ah, my dear friend, you have delighted me! You have lifted a weight from my mind. You forgive me! So! It is well. And now I come to a more pleasant subject. I wish to prove to you that I am indeed grateful for your kindness. I wish to make full reparation—to show that I am not a mere talker."

"What do you mean?" asked Mr. Heath.

"Ah, I will explain!" smiled the comte. "I have done you an injury—not physically, perhaps. Nevertheless, I have injured your honour, in your own eyes. I have been forgiven, but now I

wish to convince you of my sincerity—of my heartfelt gratitude. I am rich, you are—well, I do not wish to be indelicate, but I am afraid you do not possess many of this world's good things—"

"If you are suggesting that I should accept money from you, sir, I am afraid you are wasting your breath," interrupted Mr. Heath firmly.

"I am sorry. I was thinking of offering you a little present—a matter of a mere thousand pounds" said the comte gently. "You will accept—so? You will do me this honour?"

The Remove master shook his head.

"I cannot accept money from you, sir," he said. "I appreciate your kindness, and I am beginning to see you are honestly sorry for your previous behaviour. At the same time, I cannot accept money. You have apologised, and I have accepted that apology. It is sufficient."

"Oh, no!" said the comte quickly. "It is not sufficient. My dear sir, I must offer you something—a present of some other nature. You will allow me to buy something for you—"

"That, of course, is a different matter," said Mr. Heath. "At the same time, I beg of you not to spend a penny—not a farthing. I want nothing, sir. The whole matter is over and done with."

"One moment," said Plessigny, with a little chuckle. "Ah, a wonderful idea! You will accept a little present if it costs me nothing? Yes? Of course! I will give you the Layham diamond—"

"What!" exclaimed Mr. Heath, with a start.

"I will give you the diamond—"

"But it is stolen property!"

"Yes, yes—to be sure!" smiled the comte. "I am not suggesting that you should be dishonest—I know you too well to do anything of that nature. But there is a reward offered—five thousand pounds. You will claim that money."

"I don't quite see how you can suggest that," said Mr. Heath. "The diamond has been tampered with—"

"Tut-tut! It is nothing!" declared

Plessigny. "I have made it right. So! At nine o'clock this evening there will be two detectives from Scotland Yard in Bannington. They will bring the reward with them—they will pay it to you. I have arranged it. I originally intended to meet these gentlemen personally, and fixed the time and place. But you will be able to go in my stead—it will make no difference."

"It is really too much——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted the count, waving his hand. "I am only too eager to do some slight service in return for my further questionable conduct. I wish to make some reparation. In this manner I can do so. You have merely to be in the smoking-room of the Grapes Hotel at nine o'clock precisely—that is all."

"How will these officials know me?"

"Oh, that is a mere detail," said Plessigny. "The smoking-room is generally quiet at that time, and you will easily recognise the two strangers when they appear. There can be no mistake—and there will be no questions asked. You will simply hand over the diamond, and you will receive the reward. It is simple. You will accept?"

Mr. Heath smiled.

"Since you put it that way, sir, I can scarcely do anything else," he replied. "Yes. I will certainly accept this offer of yours."

The count jumped up and grasped Mr. Heath's hand.

"Thank you—thank you!" he exclaimed with warmth. "I shall feel now that I have discharged my debt. The diamond? Yes, yes, of course! It is here! I have it with me."

He produced a little leather case, opened it, and revealed a white bundle of cotton-wool. From this he extracted the magnificent Layham diamond—a wonderful stone of glorious purity, without a flaw, and as large as a plover's egg.

"Isn't it splendid!" exclaimed Edith, in spite of herself.

"That stone is worth a fortune," declared the count. "It's intrinsic value

is perhaps thirty thousand pounds—but the Marquis of Layham values it at a much larger figure. It is yours, Mr. Heath, to deliver to the police."

He prepared to depart, and it was easy to see that he was quite delighted. A few minutes later he had gone, and Mr. Heath and Edith were left alone with the Layham diamond. It really seemed that the Comte de Plessigny had turned out trumps.

But would everything turn out all right?

CHAPTER 21.

Umbrosi to the Rescue!

"I'll race you!" yelled Chubby Heath of the Third.

"Rats! I'll be in hours before you!" roared Owen minor.

The two fags had just left the dressing-sheds, and they raced towards the river bank at full speed.

Splash! Splash!

Owen minor was in the water a shade before his companion, and they struck out with much commotion. The fags generally enjoyed themselves in the water when the weather was amenable—and this evening the air was mild, and the sun was shining with full glory. Bathing was a necessity, in order to keep cool.

Chubby Heath and Owen minor were good swimmers, and they were soon having an impromptu race down the stream. Their objective was a small boat which had just pushed out from the landing-stage. It contained Lemon and Dicky Jones, of the Third. The pair were attired in swimming costumes, although they hadn't been in the water up till now. The other two fags raced neck and neck.

"Yah! I'll whack you hollow!" gasped Owen, as he swam.

"Will you?" spluttered Heath. "You wait, you boasting bounder!"

They forged on with renewed efforts, and Chubby Heath succeeded in grabbing hold of the boat a fraction of a second before Owen could do so.

"Whacked you!" he roared triumphantly.

"You—you ass!" gasped Owen. "My foot got caught in some reeds——"

"Rot! I beat you fairly!"

The two Third Formers were on the point of having a wrestle in the water—at least, Owen minor was inclined to be somewhat warlike. He grabbed his chum, and Heath grabbed the boat.

The result was disastrous.

"Look out, you silly asses!" howled Lemon wildly.

"You'll pitch us out if you aren't careful!" shrieked Jones.

They were unable to say any more. For Heath was rocking the boat to such an extent that it was impossible for the two fags to keep their feet. One after another they pitched into the water.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Owen minor.

Dicky Jones could swim well, but Lemon was not quite so expert. In fact, he had been rather backward in swimming until just recently. He now considered himself to be as good as any other fellow, and was inclined to be over confident.

He could certainly swim, but the one thing he lacked was endurance. He was quite good for a short period, and in a sharp spurt he was probably capable of beating even Owen minor himself.

And because he had given several displays of his speed, Lemon had an idea that he was the best swimmer in the Third. This was totally wrong. He had only swum in shallow water, and had always had a crowd of other swimmers near him.

This evening he felt somewhat venturesome, and he struck off down the stream at full speed—just to show off. He wanted to make the other fags realise his superiority. He simply shot down-stream with the current.

"My hat!" exclaimed Heath. Lemon's going it!"

"The silly ass!" exclaimed Owen, frowning.

"What's the matter?"

"Why, he's going straight down to the Pool," said Owen. "I warned him

about it before. It looks lovely on a calm evening like this—but it's jolly dangerous, except to strong swimmers."

"Oh, Juicy can swim all right," said Jones.

"Well, I don't like it," replied Owen. "Hi, Lemon! Come back, you ass."

But Lemon took no notice. Probably he didn't hear. At all events, he kept straight on, swimming towards a wide part of the river, where the water was clear and deep. It looked quite peaceful and safe.

But it wasn't.

The Pool was very deceptive. The water was clear and perfectly still, and nobody would have dreamed that there was any danger. But just at that point there was a very strong undercurrent—a current which pulled a fellow down, in spite of all his efforts. And the water was so deep that some of the superstitious villagers declared that there was no bottom.

This was sheer twaddle, but I knew well enough that the river bed was a long way down. If once a fellow got into difficulties at that spot, and help did not happen to be at hand, it was a serious business.

"I don't like that silly young ass going down to the Pool," said Owen, looking worried. "There's a rotten current——"

"Oh, rats!" said Heath. "He can swim all right."

"For short distances—yes," said Owen minor. But he'll be pretty well fagged out by the time he gets there, and when he turns to come back he'll find the current too much for him."

"Well, let's swim down to him," said Jones.

Owen minor shook his head.

"Not me," he said decidedly. "I'm not a funk, or anything of that sort, but the Pool's no place for me. I wouldn't risk it. And you chaps had better not go, either."

"Oh, he'll be all right," said Heath. "He knows the danger as well as we do, and he won't be ass enough to swim in the dangerous part."

But Lemon was feeling particularly reckless, and he swam vigorously, feeling fit for anything. He felt in the mood to swim the Channel just then. Nothing was too difficult for him.

He felt a contempt for the Pool, and grinned as he struck out for that particular portion of the river. He would prove to all the other fags that he was better than the best of them.

Afraid of the Pool? What rot!

There was nobody there at the moment—not anybody on the towing-path, even. The other Third Formers were far behind, up in the safe part of the river. Some of them had decided to fetch the boat, and row down—in case Lemon got into trouble.

But the boat had drifted into the reeds, and the fags had some difficulty in getting it out. In any case, they would not be able to get down the river in time to render any assistance, if Lemon found himself in danger.

They were too far away.

Lemon realised this, but not from any thought of possible danger. He simply wanted an audience. He wanted the other fags to know that he had swum right across the treacherous Pool, and that he was such a good swimmer that the current had no effect upon him.

He was in the Pool now, and he revelled in it. The water was delightfully cool and refreshing. Willow trees overhung the stream, and a more peaceful spot could scarcely be imagined.

Just a little farther down the river was narrower and the current faster, but quite safe.

It was in this smooth, placid-looking spot that the danger existed.

And the foolhardy junior soon found this out.

He was right in the centre of the river, and it was his intention to swim farther down, turn back, and cross the Pool once more on his way back. He succeeded in getting over the danger zone quite easily, and scarcely knew

that there was any possibility of a fellow being dragged under at that spot.

He turned just where he had intended, full of confidence, and struck up-stream vigorously. But his stroke did not contain that energy which it had done five minutes earlier. His big spurt had taken some of the strength out of him, and now that he found himself fighting against the current he had a different proposition to deal with. It came to him as a surprise.

He turned back, feeling fit to swim for ever. Then he felt the tug of the current. He discovered that it was necessary to strike out with all his strength in order to make any headway.

On the top of this, he was rather fagged—more fagged than he would like to admit. He did not fully realise that he was attempting a task which was far too heavy for his powers.

And then, as he entered the Pool, he felt the undercurrent. He felt something tugging at his feet—something intangible, which appeared to be pulling him down into the dark, mysterious depths.

For the first time, Lemon's confidence failed him.

The banks seemed to be miles off, instead of within an arm's reach. His companions, high up the river, were in another world. A few minutes earlier they had been close at hand. The fag felt that he was isolated—alone—almost helpless.

He did not give way to panic, but it came to him that the task of swimming up the river again was too much for him, and he wisely decided to give it up. So he struck out as strongly as possible for the bank.

But he was too late!

He had used his strength, and he was incapable of swimming with sufficient energy to carry him through that deadly current. His feet sagged lower, and he made no headway.

The current was pulling him down—pulling him into the depths!

He realised, with a gasp of horror, that, in spite of all his efforts, he remained in the centre of the stream. He was simply splashing about, and not approaching the bank at all.

"Oh, my goodness!" gasped the fag.

He gazed round wildly, and knew that help was far distant.

With a feeling of sickening horror, he knew that the Pool was too much for him—he knew that he would never be able to get into safe water unaided. He would not be able even to reach the bank!

"Help!" he screamed wildly. "Help—help!"

His voice was shrill and high with terror—for, at last, he had given way to sheer panic. It was the worst possible thing he could have done, for he made no further attempt to swim steadily.

He splashed about wildly, and went under. Down he went, into the dark water. But only for a few moments. Struggling, kicking, fighting with all his waning strength, he came to the surface.

And he screamed for help.

Then once again he went under the surface. The other Third Formers, up the stream, faintly heard his scream, and they stared down towards the Pool in absolute horror.

They had only just got the boat freed, and they instinctively knew that it would be impossible for them to reach their Form-fellow before he went under for the last time. Nevertheless, they used every effort.

But other ears had heard that scream, too.

A Third Former was in the meadow, bordering the river. He was a youngster named Kerrigan—quite a mild, inoffensive kid. He generally kept to himself, and did not join in with the numerous japes and escapades for which Owen minor & Co. were famous.

Kerrigan heard that scream, and he looked up, rather startled.

He had been searching for a few specimens, for Kerrigan was a youthful naturalist, and he had quite a unique collection in his desk. He generally spent all his available time on fine days in roaming about the fields and woods.

But now all thoughts of specimen hunting left him, and he ran swiftly to the river bank, just opposite the Pool.

At first he could see nothing, except a disturbance in mid-stream. He knew well enough that this spot was pretty dangerous, and he was not much of a swimmer himself. He would not even risk an ordinary swim up the safe part of the river, and he regarded the Pool as a truly terrible place.

"I thought I heard somebody yelling," he muttered. "I know I—Oh, my hat!"

At that moment Lemon appeared. He came to the surface, splashing and kicking, but with weakened efforts. He saw the junior on the bank, and he gave a gasp of hope and relief. He waved his hand weakly.

"Help!" he gasped faintly. "Oh, help!"

Just for a moment Kerrigan's heart came into his mouth. He knew that it was courting disaster to enter the water at that spot; but he also knew that Lemon was drowning before his eyes. And there was nobody else near.

The fag did not hesitate.

Without even pausing to throw off his jacket, he dived straight into the water—or to be more exact, he jumped. Then he struck out clumsily—awkwardly—for the centre of the Pool.

Handicapped by his clothing, it seemed that he would make no headway. But he did. Somehow or other, he forged towards the drowning junior.

"Hold up!" he panted. "I'll be there in a jiff!"

Lemon, by sheer desperation, kept to the surface. Then, even as his strength was completely giving way,

he felt a hand grasping his hair. He had used his last ounce of energy, and he simply became limp.

The other fag, already battling fiercely with the current, felt the dead weight of Lemon's form dragging him down. But Kerrigan set his teeth, and struck out for the bank. The boat, with several juniors in it, was still a long way off.

It was touch and go, and if help had not been quite near at hand, both Lemon and Kerrigan would have been drowned. The lad would have given his life in a plucky attempt to save the other.

But, suddenly, without any warning, a huge form came charging down the river bank. It was a black form, clothed in white drill. Umlosi had seen the peril of the two juniors as he and Lord Dorrimore strolled along the towing-path. And Umlosi did not wait to ask any question and make any comments.

He simply jumped into the river, gave about six enormous strokes, and reached the struggling pair.

"Have no fear, O young reckless swimmers!" he exclaimed. "You are safe now. It is well! Struggle not, and you will be safe."

"Oh, thank goodness!" said Kerrigan faintly.

It was amazing the way Umlosi handled the fags. The current had no effect upon him whatever. He was like a fish in the water, and supporting both juniors, he swam towards the bank, where Lord Dorrimore was waiting.

"Good man!" said Dorrie approvingly.

A moment later the two fags were lying on the grass in the sun, and Umlosi was shaking the water from himself as though he were a great dog.

"Steady on with that splashing!" said Dorrie. "You thunderin' idiot! You're simply ruinin' this suit of mine!"

"What is a mere suit of clothing compared to two young lives?" demanded Umlosi. "Wau! I am full of admiration for the child who is clothed. His bravery was even as the bravery of the great Kutana warriors."

"Yes, the kid's got plenty of pluck," agreed Dorrie. "Well done, young 'un! You're made of the right stuff!"

Kerrigan sat up, looking somewhat dazed and pale.

"Is—is he all right?" he asked faintly.

"Of course he is!" laughed Dorrie. "Now then, you young scamp, sit up and look happy. You've got this brave chum of yours to thank for saving your life. If he hadn't lugged you up at that moment, Umlosi would have been too late."

Dorrie's last words, of course, were addressed to Lemon. The fag was just sitting up, quite unhurt, and only a little scared. He had probably swallowed some water, but it would do him no harm.

"I—I thought I was drowning!" he muttered.

"An' so you were, my son," said Dorrie severely. "What the dooce do you mean by monkeyin' about in a dangerous spot like that?"

"I—I thought I could swim the Pool, sir!"

"Well, you shouldn't think these things," said Dorrie. "The best thing you can do is to look lively and take a run along the towing-path. By the time you get to the boathouse you'll be yourself again. And don't forget that you've to thank this youngster here for saving your life."

"Yes, I know it, sir," said Lemon huskily, turning to the other fag. "Kerrigan, you're a brick!"

"Oh, rot!" said Kerrigan. "I didn't do anything!"

"You silly ass! You lugged me out just as I was going down for the last time," said Lemon. "When I get dressed I'll give you my pocket-knife."

It's a ripping thing, with five blades. I saved up for weeks to get it, but I'll give it to you. You're a good 'un!"

Lemon ran off—somewhat unsteadily, but there was nothing really wrong with him. There was not the slightest fear of his catching cold, for he was glowing from his exertions, and the sun was still hot. Kerrigan stood with a pool of water forming round his feet; and he pulled out his watch, and gazed at it ruefully. There was even a suspicion of moisture round his eyes.

"It—it won't go any more now!" he exclaimed. "I only had it put right a week ago, too! Still, it can't be helped."

"Don't you worry about the ticker, my son," grinned Dorrie. "I'll buy you a new one to-morrow—a better one than that."

"Oh, will you, sir?" said the fag eagerly. "Thanks awfully, sir! And I've got to thank Mr. Umlosi for pulling me out of the river."

"Good!" said Dorrie. "Mr. Umlosi, step forward!"

The black giant showed all his teeth in a grin.

"I need no thanks, O brave one of small years!" he said. "Thou art indeed possessed of much courage. I did nothing. For me the task was a trifle—there was no danger. Have I not swum in deadly currents—in treacherous rapids in shark-infested seas? This is nothing; it is not to be mentioned. Wau! I have spoken!"

"Well, it was jolly decent of you, all the same," said Kerrigan. "I suppose I'd better go and change now. These togs are pretty well messed up."

"Don't worry about togs," said Lord Dorrimore. "You can get another suit at any old time. But think of Umlosi! Where's he goin' to get another rig-out the size of this one? I'm afraid he'll be in a hole!"

"I'm very sorry!"

"That's all right, young 'un," said

Dorrie calmly. "Umlosi doesn't care much about clothing. He'd rather be without any, if the truth must be told. By the way, what's your name, kid?"

"Kerrigan, sir."

"Kerrigan, eh!" said Dorrimore. "There was a famous explorer named Kerrigan. He died five or six years ago. You're lucky to be named the same as a fine man like that. Colonel Kerrigan was——"

"My father, sir," said the fag quietly. Lord Dorrimore became serious.

"What!" he exclaimed. "You are the son of Colonel Kerrigan?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Good!" said Dorrie. "I'm proud to meet you, sonny. As a matter of fact, I knew that Colonel Kerrigan was your father as soon as you spoke. I've been intending to rout you out ever since I came to St. Frank's. But I didn't expect to find you in this way. You're a true son of your father, lad!"

"I—I hope so, sir!" said the fag.

"An' what are your other names?"

"Stanley Livingstone, sir."

"Splendid! Two of the most renowned explorers, eh?" said his lordship. "Stanley Livingstone Kerrigan. It's a name to be proud of, my son. One of these days, perhaps, you'll be as famous as your father. I want you to tell me about your dad——"

"It is not for me to interrupt thee, N'Kose," said Umlosi. "But, methinks the lad will become ill unless he changes his clothing. Mayhap, thou hast forgotten his wet condition, and thou art keeping him talking——"

"Just like me!" said Lord Dorrimore. "You'd better get along, sonny. Rush indoors and change your things. I'll have a jaw with you later."

"Thank you, sir," said Kerrigan.

He ran off, and Dorrie looked after him thoughtfully.

"I'm jolly glad!" he said. "I'm jolly glad I met the kid in such a way. He's true grit—just like his father!"

CHAPTER 22.

On the Stroke of Nine!

MR. CLEMENT HEATH walked into the Grapes Hotel at exactly ten minutes to nine that same evening. It was still broad daylight, of course, and everything was dry and dusty and hot. The saloon was well filled with thirsty customers, but the clink of glasses and the hum of conversation did not attract the Remove master.

He walked straight through to the smoking-room, and looked round.

"Good!" he muttered.

The apartment was quite empty, except for himself. One or two newspapers were lying about, and Mr. Heath seized one of these and seated himself upon a lounge. He glanced at the clock, and compared it with his watch.

"Well, I shan't have long to wait," he murmured.

He did not feel like reading, and, actually, he did not read at all. He merely held the newspaper in order to appear at his ease. He was thinking hard, and his thoughts were very busy.

He kept a constant watch upon the clock, and at last it pointed to the hour of nine. Still the smoking-room was empty, and Mr. Heath wondered if there was any truth in the count's promise that two detectives would arrive from Scotland Yard in order to take delivery of the Layham diamond.

Mr. Heath fingered it as it lay in his pocket. He was naturally eager to obtain possession of the five thousand pounds reward; but, at the same time, he felt one or two doubts.

Was the count playing squarely with him?

In any case, it was too late to think of withdrawing, and Mr. Heath knew that his only course was to sit tight until something happened. But the count had given the diamond into his charge, and that was certainly an evidence of good faith.

The door of the smoking-room opened, and two men entered. They

were somewhat grim-looking men, short and stocky. Both were attired in blue serge suits. One wore a bowler, and the other a soft felt.

But Mr. Heath knew at once that they were the men he wanted to see—detectives from Scotland Yard.

The Remove master rose to his feet, and the two men approached him. They seemed pleased that they were alone, and they lost no time in getting to the point.

"Excuse me, sir," said one of them. "Is your name Heath?"

"Yes," said the Remove master.

"Thank you. I am Detective-Inspector Watts, of Scotland Yard. I may as well inform you at once that I hold a warrant for your arrest—"

"A—a warrant for my arrest!" ejaculated Mr. Heath.

"Yes, and it is my duty to tell you that anything you may say will be taken down and used as evidence against you," said Detective-Inspector Watts, using the formal preliminary. "I should like you to come—"

"Wait a moment," interrupted Mr. Heath grimly. "You say you hold a warrant for my arrest?"

"I do."

"On what charge?"

"It's not necessary for us to enter into any discussion here," said the Scotland Yard man. "I should advise you to walk out of here quietly, and accompany us to the police-station. You want to avoid a fuss, and I want to avoid it. There's no necessity for the whole hotel to know our business. If you come quietly, the whole thing will be kept private."

"Yes, I quite understand that," said Mr. Heath. "But I want to know what the deuce you mean by holding a warrant for my arrest. I've done nothing—"

"Come, come!" said Watts. "This won't do, Mr. Heath. The charge against you is one of blackmail and conspiracy—"

"Indeed!" interrupted Mr. Heath, remaining quite calm. "That's very in—"

teresting. Blackmail—eh? I should be grateful for a few details. We might as well speak here—there's nobody else in the smoking-room at the moment."

"Just as you wish," said the Yard man. "Bates, you'd better search this gentleman's pockets at once——"

"One moment!" interjected the Remove master. "Why am I to be searched?"

"We suspect you of having possession of the Layham diamond."

"There's no need to search me for that," said Mr. Heath. "Here it is."

He produced the stone, and handed it over. Detective-Inspector Watts took it with some surprise, and examined it closely.

"You seem to be taking this pretty coolly, my friend," he said. "I don't exactly know what your game is, but I'd better warn you that we're not inclined to stand any nonsense!"

"You won't have to," said Mr. Heath. "You've got that diamond, and I give you my word that I don't intend to do anything foolish. At the same time, I must tell you that I'm perfectly innocent of the charge you prefer against me. Who have I been blackmailing? And what evidence have you got that I am guilty?"

"Quite sufficient evidence, I assure you," replied Watts grimly. "Do you admit having written this letter?"

The detective put a letter into Mr. Heath's hand, and the Remove master gave a quick start. It was not a guilty start, but one of surprise.

The letter was in his own handwriting.

He read it through quickly, and was somewhat staggered. For the communication was addressed to the Marquis of Layham, and it demanded the sum of fifteen thousand pounds!

The letter made an appointment in the smoking-room of the Grapes Hotel for nine o'clock, and the marquis was informed that if he brought the money he would have the diamond returned to

him. If he failed to do so, or if he informed the police, his life would be in danger. The letter, in actual fact, threatened the marquis' life—if he failed to comply with the demand. And the letter was written in Mr. Heath's own calligraphy, and it contained his own signature!

"Well?" said Watts. "Did you write that?"

"No," said Mr. Heath. "I did not."

"I'm sorry that you should find it necessary to deny something which is absolutely obvious," said the detective grimly. "We can serve no good purpose by remaining here. You must come with us——"

"I'm not coming with you," interrupted Mr. Heath warmly. "I did not write this letter, and I never saw it before in all my life!"

"Do you admit that the handwriting is yours?"

"No; but it looks like mine."

"In fact, you maintain that this is a forgery?"

"I do!"

"Well, I'm afraid it won't do for us," said the Scotland Yard man. "The letter fixes an appointment in this hotel, at this hour. You are here, and the diamond is with you. You must be mad to deny the truth!"

Mr. Heath said nothing. He realised that the Comte de Plessigny had shown his claws! He had come to Mr. Heath apologetic and penitent. Yet actually, he was simply setting a trap which had apparently caught Mr. Heath in its toils.

However, things were not so serious as they seemed.

"You will come with us immediately," said Detective-Inspector Watts. "If you refuse, I shall be compelled to use handcuffs——"

"One moment!" said Mr. Heath smoothly. "Mr. Lee!"

He turned and spoke in a louder voice, and a door at once opened on the other side of the room. Detective-Inspector Watts evidently expected

some trickery, for he grasped Mr. Heath's arm.

"Hold him, Bates!" he ordered sharply.

Bates took the other arm, and Mr. Heath was held. He was quite calm, however, and he smiled as Nelson Lee approached the little group. The famous schoolmaster detective was looking perfectly at ease.

"Why, it's Watts!" he exclaimed cheerfully. "Pleased to see you, inspector. A good few months since I dropped into the Yard for a chat."

"Hang me if it isn't Mr. Nelson Lee!" exclaimed Watts. "Why, this is great. I didn't expect to see you here, Mr. Lee. I suppose you were after this young man, too? We've got him all right."

"So I observe," said Nelson Lee. "But I am afraid there is something slightly wrong, Watts. Mr. Heath is not the type of man you believe him to be. I can vouch for him with perfect confidence."

The Scotland Yard man looked serious.

"I'm afraid you don't realise the position, Mr. Lee," he said. "This man wrote a threatening letter to the Marquis of Layham, and fixed this appointment for to-night. The marquis is out-side now."

"Splendid!" said Nelson Lee. "It is just as well to have him here. I shall be quite pleased to have a chat with him, Watts. And you might let me see this letter which Mr. Heath has written."

"Mr. Lee, it's all wrong!" protested Heath. "I didn't—"

"My dear man, don't excite yourself," said Lee calmly. "May I have a look at that document, inspector?"

Watts hesitated.

"I wouldn't show it to anybody else, but I know you're all right, Mr. Lee," he said. "I'm sorry to find that you've been hoodwinked by this fellow. He's not what you think him to be, I'm afraid. I might mention that we found

the Layham diamond on him a few minutes ago."

Nelson Lee nodded, and took the letter. After reading it through he examined it more closely, held it up to the light, and scrutinised it through a powerful magnifying lens. Finally, he handed it back to Watts, and smilingly shook his head.

"It's not genuine," he announced.

"Eh?"

"This letter is a forgery——"

"I told them so!" exclaimed Mr. Heath warmly.

"I can't believe that you are right, Mr. Lee," said the inspector doubtfully. "We've had specimens of Heath's handwriting, and this letter was undoubtedly written by him. Quite apart from the letter there's the fact that Heath came here at nine o'clock to keep the appointment—with the diamond on his person. You can't get over that!"

"I think I can," said Lee. "I may as well tell you, Watts, that I advised Mr. Heath to come here, and to have the diamond on him. So, you see, I'm a party to the little deception. I hope you won't arrest me too!"

The detective-inspector stared.

"I don't understand," he said bluntly.

"I think you will in a moment or two," said Lee. "To begin with, Mr. Heath came here with a very different object in view. He knew nothing about this threatening letter—I am certain of that. He was sent by the Comte de Plessigny in order to obtain possession of the five thousand pounds reward which the Marquis of Layham has offered for the return of his diamond."

"Yes, but——"

"Wait!" interrupted Lee. "I will go into details."

He did so, and Mr. Heath listened with interest. Lee explained how the comte had come to Mr. Heath, and how he had told him to keep the appointment at the Grapes Hotel. He also explained that Mr. Heath had been suspicious.

The Remove master had pretended to

swallow the whole yarn, and the count had left him feeling quite confident that his cunningly laid trap would succeed. But Mr. Heath was not quite so simple as he had been at one time.

Inwardly, he had felt that there was something wrong in this offer. He instinctively knew that the comte was not genuine. And so, instead of blindly keeping the appointment, he had gone straight to Nelson Lee.

He had told Lee everything, and the detective had advised him to keep the appointment—just in order to see what would happen. It was quite obvious, now, that a very cunning scheme had been devised in order to get Mr. Heath into serious trouble. That was the long and the short of it.

Fortunately, Mr. Heath had smelt a rat, and he had not been so easily caught. He had been very wise in going to Nelson Lee.

Lee pointed out to the Scotland Yard man how absurd it was to suppose that Mr. Heath had written a letter to the marquis, and had then requested Nelson Lee to be on the spot. The thing was obviously a fake.

And Detective-Inspector Watts, after a short talk, realised that this was the truth, and that Mr. Heath was quite innocent.

In short, there had been no attempt at blackmail, and that forged letter had only been sent to the Marquis of Layham in order to get Mr. Heath into grave trouble.

The inference was that the Comte de Plessigny had written the forgery; but there was no evidence of this. It was impossible to have Plessigny arrested for there was no proof against him.

The wily count had made himself quite secure, even if his scheme went wrong—as it had done. So the only thing was to let the matter drop. Mr. Heath was all right—he had got into no trouble—and the Marquis of Layham had his diamond back again. So everything was quite in order.

The marquis was there, and after Watts had withdrawn for a time, he re-

turned to the smoking-room with the old nobleman. The marquis was a breezy, genial individual, and he shook hands with Nelson Lee and Mr. Heath very warmly. It was easy to see that he was overjoyed at the turn of events.

"My dear young sir, I am delighted to find that you are the victim of a plot, and not the originator of a plot," he said, addressing Mr. Heath. "Owing to you I have got my diamond back, and I shall be glad if you will accept the reward which I have—"

"I'm afraid it is quite impossible for me to do that, sir," interrupted Mr. Heath.

The marquis raised his eyebrows.

"Eh?" he asked. "How is that?"

"Well, it is hardly for me to claim any reward—or even to accept any," he said. "Plessigny found the stone, although, of course, he used it for his own nefarious ends. But for my part in the affair, I have no doubt that he would have disposed of it, and you would never have seen it again. But I did not find the stone, therefore I cannot claim—"

"You are not claiming anything," interjected the marquis. "I have got my diamond back, and it was owing to your efforts that I have done so. Therefore, I regard it as only right and proper that you should accept the reward. Regard it as a present, if you wish. It doesn't matter to me. I shall be honoured if you will favour me by accepting—I shall be deeply offended if you refuse."

Mr. Heath could hardly do anything further. Moreover, he was overjoyed at the thought of receiving the five thousand pounds. Personally, he considered that he was not entitled to it; but, at the same time, he knew well enough that the comte would have stuck to the stone if Mr. Heath had not been aware of its existence.

The marquis wrote out his cheque for five thousand pounds, handed it to Mr. Heath, and there was quite a little celebration. Mr. Heath succeeded in getting away at last—highly delighted

with the result of the evening's work. Nelson Lee went with him, and the pair directed their footsteps towards the house occupied by the Comte de Plessigny.

CHAPTER 23.

Dorris Lets Out the Secret!

NELSON LEE offered Mr. Heath a cigarette as they walked along. "I don't suppose that we shall obtain any satisfaction from this visit," he remarked. "At the same time, we may as well have the matter out with the count. There are one or two points I should like to discuss with him."

The Remove master looked stern.

"I'd like to see him handcuffed!" he exclaimed. "The infernal rogue! Deliberately attempting to get me arrested on a charge of blackmail and conspiracy. Why, he's liable to a long term of imprisonment."

"He would be if there was any chance of proving that he wrote that forged letter," said Nelson Lee. "But how can we prove it? How is it possible, indeed, for us to bring forward any evidence to show that the count has been conspiring against you?"

"It's rather difficult," admitted Mr. Heath.

"The Comte de Plessigny has been snapping his fingers at the police for quite a number of years," said Nelson Lee. "When he was younger he was a constant thorn in the side of Scotland Yard, and they could never lay a finger on him. For the last five or six years he has been very quiet, and evidently possesses a large amount of money. Somehow, I suspect he came down to the neighbourhood of St. Frank's with a definite object—not entirely connected with the Layham diamond. He seemed enormously anxious to learn what Lord Dorrimore's plans are for the summer holidays."

"I can't understand it," said Mr. Heath, shaking his head. "There's another point which has been puzzling me, too. Several days ago, the count

came to the little cottage in Edgemore—at least, I thought it was the count. Shortly afterwards, however, I discovered that the man was a fraud—apparently a criminal in disguise, who had attempted to obtain the diamond from me—"

Nelson Lee laughed softly.

"Thank you!" he said.

"I don't quite understand."

"You just referred to me as a criminal," smiled Lee.

Mr. Heath looked rather surprised, then an expression of astonishment came into his eyes. He paused in his walk.

"It—it wasn't you?" he asked quickly.

"Yes."

"But—but—"

"You must forgive me for playing the little trick," smiled Nelson Lee. "But I had been observing your connection with the count for some little time, and I wanted to satisfy myself that your own activities were perfectly honourable. During that little visit I learned quite sufficient to satisfy me—and, incidentally, I met your charming wife. You're a lucky man, Heath!"

Mr. Heath blushed.

"I—I didn't want anybody to know!" he said lamely.

"Not exactly a question of modesty, but of wisdom—eh?" chuckled Nelson Lee. "You didn't want the school authorities to know of your little secret. Well, I don't blame you, and now that the term is nearly over it won't matter so much if the truth does leak out—although you may rely upon me to be discreet. On that day you mention, I ran into the Comte de Plessigny myself."

"Great Scott! That was rather unlucky," said Mr. Heath. "What did he say when he saw his double?"

"I didn't give him much opportunity to say anything," replied Lee. "I simply took out a card, handed it to him, and passed on. There was nothing on the card except the three words 'The Seven Stars.'"

"What did those words mean?"

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"I really don't know," he confessed. "The card was given to me by somebody a few months ago, and I passed it on to the count for no other purpose than to appear somewhat mysterious. Well, here we are, I think."

They had arrived at the Comte de Plessigny's residence. They walked up the path, arrived at the door, and Nelson Lee rang the bell.

The door was opened by the comite's manservant.

"We wish to see the Comte de Plessigny!"

"I'm sorry, sir, but his excellency left for London this afternoon," broke in the man, speaking as though he were repeating well-learned lines. "I do not know where his excellency is at the moment, and he has left no definite address."

"One moment," said Nelson Lee. "You say the count has gone to London? Have you any idea when he will return?"

"His excellency will not return at all," said the manservant. "The tenancy of this furnished house expires at the end of this week and everything is now left in my hands. His excellency will not be in Bannington again, sir."

Nelson Lee and Mr. Heath knew that it was quite useless to remain, so they took their departure, and commenced the walk to St. Frank's, which was quite pleasant on such a glorious evening.

"So the comte has slipped away—eh?" said Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "H'm! I suspected something of the kind. Well, Heath, the best thing we can do is to forget all about him. You may consider yourself very lucky that you have come to no harm owing to your dealings with the man."

"Harm!" echoed Mr. Heath. "Why, I'm five thousand pounds to the good, so I can't grumble!"

"Hardly," smiled Nelson Lee.

Mr. Heath was supremely happy, and when near to St. Frank's he begged Nelson Lee to excuse him, and he rushed off to tell little Edith of his good fortune. Everything had turned out

splendidly, and there were many rosy prospects for the young couple.

Nelson Lee walked on to St. Frank's in a cheerful mood. When he arrived he went to his study, and found it already in the possession of Lord Dorrimore. Dorrie had a visitor in the diminutive person of Stanley Livingstone Kerrigan.

"Hallo, old man," said Dorrie, looking up. "I'm just havin' a chat with this youngster. Just like you to come in and interrupt. It's past his bed-time already, an' he can't be here long——"

"My dear fellow, I'm not interrupting," said Lee. "Go ahead."

"I'm hardly started yet," said Dorrie. "Now, look here, young 'un; I don't want you to think that I'm nosin' into your business or anythin' like that. I'm just interested in a professional kind of way, although it's a bit strange to refer to explorin' as a profession. You see, I've done a lot in that line myself, an' I'm naturally greatly interested to hear about your dad."

"I'll tell you everything I can, sir," said the fag.

"You won't be hurt at all?" asked Dorrie. "I don't want to bring up painful memories, you know."

"Oh, that's all right, sir," said Kerrigan. "I was only seven or eight when my dad went over to South America, and I don't remember him very distinctly. You see, he'd been in Africa for years, and he only came home for a few months."

"An' you've always lived with your aunt?"

"Yes, sir—Aunt Janet."

"Poor kid," said Dorrie. "You never had any mother, an' only a father for a month or two? Your mother died before you could understand things, didn't she?"

"Yes, sir. She died when I was a little baby."

"It's pretty rough," said his lordship. "Now I'd like to hear about your dad. Is there any definite information about where he died?"

Kerrigan shook his head.

"Nothing very definite, sir," he replied. "My dad went out to explore the Amazon, in Brazil, about five years ago. He wanted to go into the forests and find out all sorts of things. But he never came back," added the fag simply.

"He died out there?"

"Yes, sir."

"How?"

"Well, I don't know exactly," said the fag. "Aunt told me all about it, but it doesn't seem very clear to me. Dad caught fever, or something, and died before any help could reach him. He was thousands of miles up the Amazon at the time, far away from civilisation."

"H'm! It's pretty bad," said Dorrie. "As it happens, I was thinking about taking a trip up the Amazon this summer——"

"Oh, sir!" said the fag, flushing with excitement.

"Makes you start a bit—eh?"

"Yes, rather, sir! I've often wanted to——"

"Well?" asked Dorrie. "You often wanted what?"

"I—I didn't mean——"

"Nonsense! Carry on!"

"I don't like to be cheeky, sir, but it would be simply grand if you could find out where dad died," said Kerrigan, his eyes gleaming. "It's impossible for me to go out to the Amazon, but if you're going——"

"Nothin' impossible, my lad," interrupted Dorrie. "I am going. An' a party will probably go with me. Everything's ready; my yacht's waitin' with steam up, an' there's nothin' to do but to get on board. I've been makin' plans an' arrangements for weeks past, an' now all the project needs is Mr. Lee's approval and a party. Once everything is fixed, it won't take five minutes to get the party up. I was just wonderin' if you'd care to come."

Stanley Kerrigan's eyes opened wider.

"To—to the Amazon, sir?" he asked blankly.

"Yes."

"The real Amazon, sir—in Brazil?" asked the fag incredulously.

"Of course."

"I'd—I'd do anything to go, sir," panted the junior eagerly. "Oh, my hat! Just think of it—going out to the Amazon, where dad went to. Oh, it—it's glorious!"

"An' you'll come?"

"Rather, sir—thanks awfully, sir!" gasped Kerrigan. "I—I don't know what to say; it—it seems like a dream! Oh, but—but——"

"But what?"

"Aunt Janet may not let me go," said the junior, with blank dismay.

Dorrie grinned.

"Don't you worry about Aunt Janet. I have already met the good lady, and my proposal has the seal of her approval. She has intimated that she would have no objection to your comin' with us, Stanley. So, if you like to accept the invitation, you'll be an honoured guest."

Kerrigan was too overcome with excitement and joy to say anything for the moment.

"Oh, sir, I—I don't know what to say!" exclaimed Stanley, after a pause. "It's—it's wonderful! We're going to the Amazon—to—to dad!"

"Steady, youngster!" said Lord Dorrimore gently. "You mustn't get too excited about it. We shall go to the Amazon, and it's quite possible we shall learn something concernin' your father."

Stanley looked at Dorrie, with his face flushed and his eyes gleaming.

"Oh, I know we shall!" he said. "We shall find the place where he was—where he explored. I've been dreaming about going out to Brazil for years, but I didn't think I should be able to go until I was a man!"

"Then it's all the better," smiled Dorrie. "You won't be alone, of course; there'll be plenty of other youngsters on board, an' we shall have a really rippin' trip—just a fine holiday adventure. If I can please you, it'll

please me, too—because I have a tremendous respect for your father. One day you'll make good; you'll become a bigger explorer than any of us."

"Oh, rather, sir!" said Stanley, with boyish enthusiasm. "I mean to explore everything—the North Pole, and all the places where people haven't been to!"

"But people have been to the North Pole," smiled Lord Dorrimore. "Besides, that's a nasty cold place to go to. Well, you'd better come along to bed, an' don't get dreamin' all sorts of things. Go straight to sleep, like a good boy. To-morrow we'll have another talk, an' you'll soon have to be gettin' ready for the trip."

"Yes, sir," said the fag. "Oh, it's fine!"

He went out of the study, hardly knowing where he was, or what he was doing. He was rather dazed by the glorious news.

CHAPTER 24.

Glorious Prospects!

STANLEY KERRIGAN of the Third did not fall asleep until the school clock chimed out the hour of midnight. He lay in bed, thinking over all that Lord Dorrimore had said. Once or twice he half believed that he had been dreaming.

All the other fags were asleep, of course. And when Kerrigan awoke in the morning his first thought was that he had imagined all that had occurred the previous night. He couldn't believe that Lord Dorrimore's invitation was actual reality.

By the time he had half dressed, however, he knew that it had been no dream, and that he was really booked to go out to the Amazon for the summer holidays—booked to go out as a guest on a magnificent steam yacht. There would be every luxury; he would be with a party, and everything would be simply great.

Stanley simply couldn't keep it to himself.

"I say, you chaps," he said, addressing Owen minor and Heath.

"Hallo!" said Owen. "Feeling all right this morning?"

"Yes, of course I am," said Kerrigan. "Why shouldn't I?"

"That ducking you had——"

"Oh, that didn't hurt me, you ass."

"It was jolly plucky of you, and we're going to hold a celebration to-day," declared Owen. "We're pooling funds in the Third, my son, and we're going to stand a terrific feed—and you'll be the guest of honour."

"Rather!" said Lemon. "He saved my life!"

Stanley looked uncomfortable.

"Oh, I say, chuck it!" he protested. "There's no need for you to make a fuss over nothing. I was just going to tell you something. I'm all fixed up for the summer holidays."

Chubby Heath sniffed.

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"That's nothing to boast about," he said. "I'm fixed up, too; and I'll bet my holiday will whack yours into a cocked hat! I'm going out to Italy with my people. We shall see Naples, and Rome, and Lisbon——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You ass!" grunted Owen. "Lisbon's in Spain."

"Rats! It's in Portugal!" yelled Jones.

"Well, I don't care where it is," said Heath. "Perhaps it isn't Lisbon, after all. But I jolly well know I'm going to Italy with my people—and that beats anything you chaps can talk about!"

Owen grinned.

"We've heard nothing but Italy from you for days," he said. "I'm blessed if I'd go to a beastly place like Italy, even if I was invited. There's nothing else there but onions, and garlic, and macaroni!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly ass!"

"You funny idiot!"

Chubby Heath and Owen Minor nearly came to blows.

"You haven't let me finish what I was saying," exclaimed Kerrigan, in time to divert the quarrel. "I'm not going to Italy, but I'm going somewhere better."

"Better?" said Heath. "What rot!"

"I'm going out to Brazil."

"What!"

"I'm going up the Amazon in Lord Dorrimore's private yacht," said Stanley. "Some other fellows are coming, too, and we're going to have a ripping holiday."

The fags stared.

"I suppose you dreamed all this?" asked Heath.

"No, it's true."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It is true, really," persisted Stanley.

But his Form-mates were not inclined to take the story seriously. It seemed rather too tall a yarn. Kerrigan gave it up at length, and when he got downstairs he found Handforth & Co. chatting in the lobby.

Or, to be more exact, Handforth was roaring, and Church and McClure were listening. Handforth was laying down the law, as usual, and his faithful chums were suffering in silence.

"I say, Handforth!" said Kerrigan.

"Clear out of the way, you kid!" said Handforth warmly. "I don't want to be interrupted by any beastly fag!"

"I didn't mean to interrupt you, Handforth," said Stanley. "I was only going to tell you something."

"Well, what is it?" demanded Handforth.

"I'm going out to Brazil for the summer holidays."

"That's frightfully interesting!" said Handforth. "And what are you going for—to pick some nuts?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth seized the fag firmly, which he considered fairly smart.

"We may find some nuts there, of course," said Kerrigan. "I'm going out in Lord Dorrimore's private yacht, and there'll be some other fellows, too. We're going up the Amazon—right into the heart of the forests."

Handforth sized the fag firmly.

"Are you trying to pull my leg?" he asked.

"No, of course not."

"Then what's the idea of this tosh?"

"It's not tosh!" said Stanley. "Lord Dorrimore told me all about it last night. It's true, Handy; honest Injun! Lord Dorrimore's yacht is going up the Amazon, and he's promised to take me with him. Oh, it'll be a splendid holiday!"

Handforth & Co. were all attention at last.

"My hat! It's really true, then?" asked Church eagerly.

"Yes, I told you it was."

"Great pip!" said Handforth, taking a deep breath. "A trip up the Amazon! A giddy holiday in Brazil! Oh, my goodness! Don't some chaps have all the luck? I can't believe it's true, though; somebody's been spoofing the kid."

"I don't know so much about that,"

said McClure. "Lord Dorrimore went out to Africa last year, and we had a magnificent time. I wasn't hoping for anything like it again, but—but——"

"Oh, this is too good to be true," said Handforth flatly. "Africa was decent enough, but Brazil! Think of it! Right up the Amazon, into the heart of the untrodden forests! Why, I simply can't believe it!"

"Did Lord Dorrimore say anything about anybody else coming?" asked Church.

"Yes," said Stanley. "He said there would be some other fellows."

"Then we might stand a chance!" yelled Church. "Oh, my hat! If only we can get invited, think of the ripping times——"

"Hallo! What's the excitement about?" asked Reginald Pitt, strolling into the lobby. "What's happened?"

"Nothing—yet," said Handforth. "But we're going to Brazil——"

"Eh?"

"For the summer holidays," explained Handforth, taking things for granted, as usual. "Lord Dorrimore is going up the Amazon in his ripping yacht, and we're going with him. Just a little trip, you know," he added carelessly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Pitt roared, and De Valerie roared, and Jack Grey and two or three others roared. They certainly didn't take Handforth seriously.

"What's the matter, you cackling asses?" demanded Handforth.

"Oh, nothing," said Pitt. "We appreciate the joke, that's all!"

"What joke?"

"Well, you can't kid us with a yarn like that," grinned Pitt.

"But it's true, Pitt—it is, really," said Stanley. "Lord Dorrimore told me all about it, and I'm going. But he didn't say anything about Handforth."

"Oh, well, it's only natural that I should go," said Handforth. "You don't expect me to stop behind, I suppose? Not likely! If there's going to be a trip up the Amazon, I'm going to be there!"

It was some few moments before the other two juniors could believe the story, and even then they were rather sceptical. When they discovered that the only source of information was a Third Form fag, they naturally concluded that it was nothing more than a rumour.

"Nipper ought to know about it," said De Valerie. "He's pally with Lord Dorrimore, and if Nipper doesn't know anything about this Amazon stunt, it'll be pretty certain that the whole thing is spoof."

"Good!" said Handforth. "Let's find Nipper!"

This was not a very long task. The crowd of juniors came along the Remove passage, burst into Study C, and found me there, chatting with Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregellis-West. Curiously enough, we were just discussing the coming holidays, and wondering if there would be anything special doing.

The crowd surged into the study.

"Here, steady on!" I said. "What's the meaning of this invasion?"

"Begad!" said Sir Montie, backing away. "Pray be careful, dear old boys! You are frightfully rough, Handforth—you trod on my toe——"

"Blow your toe!" said Handforth. "Are we going up the Amazon?"

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Amazon?" I repeated. "Explain yourself, you ass!"

"There you are—he doesn't know anything," said Church. "It's all spoof."

"What's spoof?" I demanded.

"Why, young Kerrigan is spreading a yarn about that Lord Dorrimore is going on a yachting trip up the Amazon," said Pitt. "We wouldn't believe it, so we came to you for information. Is it true?"

"I don't know," I said. "There's no telling what Lord Dorrimore will do. A trip up the Amazon sounds first class. I've heard nothing about it from Dorrie or the guv'nor, and it's quite possible that the whole thing's a yarn."

Handforth snorted.

"Where's that fag?" he roared.

"Kerrigan?"

"Yes."

"He's just outside the door——"

"Collar him!" roared Handforth.

"We're going to bump him. We'll teach cheeky Third Formers to spread yarns about like that. The awful nerve!"

"Hold on, Handy!" I put in. "It's quite likely that the kid's been telling the truth. I heard nothing about the trip, I'll admit, but I'll rush along to the gov'nor's study and make inquiries."

"Good wheeze!"

"Buzz off, my son—and buck up!" said De Valerie.

I lost no time in hastening down the passage. To tell the truth, I was rather excited on my own account. I knew well enough that Dorrie had some project in his mind.

A trip up the Amazon would be something novel and interesting. There would be plenty of excitement and adventure in Brazil, particularly if Dorrie intended any exploration. I wanted to learn the truth.

But at that moment it was utterly impossible for me even to guess at the amazing adventures which were destined to befall Lord Dorrimore's party. It would start as a mere holiday trip; but it was destined to become famous all over the world as the most wonderful exploration tour ever entered upon.

I reached Nelson Lee's study and burst in. The only occupant of the apartment was Umlosi. He was lolling luxuriously in the easy-chair, looking extremely bored. He sat up, and regarded me appealingly.

"Thou art a wise youth, Manzie," he rumbled. "Know thou when we are destined to leave this wondrous kraal? My spirit longs for the forests, for the sun of tropical climes. I am weary."

"That's because you've got nothing to do," I explained. "Time hangs heavily on a chap's hands—especially if he happens to be an active beggar, like

you. We will soon be starting on a trip, Umlosi. We're going to Brazil, aren't we?"

Umlosi shook his head.

"I know not," he said. "N'Kose, my father, he is even as the mystery man. He speaks no word, but nods his head in a strange manner. There is something brewing, O nimble one. My wits are incapable of learning the truth."

"Hasn't he mentioned anything about the Amazon?" I asked.

"N'Kose has mentioned many things and many places," replied Umlosi. "Thou must have patience, even as I. When it suits my father to speak, he will speak. Ere long, he will gladden our hearts; but I gather that his scheme must have the approval of Umtagati, thy master."

"Well, here's Umtagati now," I said. "I say, gov'nor!"

Nelson Lee was just entering the study, and behind him came Lord Dorrimore.

"What is it, Nipper?" asked Lee.

"I'll speak to Dorrie now, sir," I said. "Young Kerrigan, of the Third, is going about with a yarn that he's been invited to go on a holiday trip up the Amazon. The fellows won't believe it."

"Then the fellows ought to be swished!" said Dorrie. "It's true enough, Nipper. We're goin' to the Amazon—always providin' that your gov'nor agrees. It's just possible that he may set me down as an escaped inmate of Colney Hatch, and flatly refuse to have anythin' to do with me. I've got to chance that."

"Then—then we're really going to Brazil?" I asked eagerly.

Dorrie nodded.

"I think we may look upon it as settled," he said.

I didn't wait for any more. I simply rushed out of the study and pelted back to the crowd of juniors in the lobby. They were eagerly awaiting for the result of my inquiries. They pressed round me as I came up.

"Well?"

"What's the news?"

"Is it true?"

"Every word of it," I said. "We're going up the Amazon——"

"Hurrah!" roared Handforth.

"I shouldn't start cheering until I knew a bit more," I said. "It's quite likely that you won't be invited, Handy—so you'd better not be too previous."

"Of course I shall be invited!" said Handforth. "If I'm not invited, I'll jolly well come without any invitation! The Amazon! I've been longing to go there for years! I wouldn't miss it for quids!"

I winked at Watson.

"The Amazon!" I said. "Anybody who wants to come back alive had better not risk a trip up the Amazon. It's a terrible river! Hundreds of miles from its mouth, it's like a sea, and the heat there is awful. Mosquitoes, beetles, flies, insects of every description—they simply swarm in millions. Then there are poisonous snakes, and scorpions, and goodness knows what else!"

"That makes it all the more exciting," said Handforth. "But what about the fever?"

"Oh, the fever!" I said. "My dear chap, fever out there is awful. If a party of fifty goes into the forest, it's a lucky thing if twenty return! Take my advice, Handy, and stay in England—go to Bournemouth, or Ilfracombe, or Brighton!"

Handforth glared.

"You—you ass!" he said. "Trying to scare me off, I suppose? Well, it won't work. I know jolly well that Brazil is a rummy place—especially up the Amazon. But we shall be as right as rain in Lord Dorrimore's yacht—simply a glorious treat—miles better than going to Africa!"

"Well, I agree with you there," I said. "It's not absolutely certain that the trip is going to be made yet, so I should advise you to say as little as possible. Don't get shouting too much."

"And, in any case, nobody has been invited—except Kerrigan, of the Third," said Pitt. "It's queer that he should know about it first."

"Lord Dorrimore told me about it last night," said Stanley.

"Cheek!" snorted Handforth. "Of all the beastly nerve! A blessed fag being invited before anybody else! I suppose he pushed himself forward——"

"I didn't, Handforth—honestly, I didn't," said the fag.

"Then what's the meaning of it?"

"If you'd only use your brains, you'd know," I said. "Kerrigan's pater went out to the Amazon four or five years ago, and he died out there."

"Oh!"

"It's only natural that Dorrie should invite him before anybody else," I said quietly. "Colonel Kerrigan was a famous explorer, and he went up the Amazon to make fresh discoveries. But he never came back alive—and I expect Dorrie means to go there to see if he can discover any trace of him."

This was very near the mark. Lord Dorrimore was not intending the trip to be a mere pleasure cruise. He had a very definite object in sailing from England to Brazil. In his own mind, he had an idea that Colonel Kerrigan, D.S.O., was not dead, and he wanted to go up the Amazon to search thoroughly.

It would not do, however, to say anything about this to Stanley, for if it turned out that the colonel was actually dead, it would be rather painful for the youngster. There was no reason why his hopes should be raised for no purpose.

There were other events connected with that trip, too—events of which I knew nothing at the time. But, as I hinted before, we were destined to pass through many thrilling adventures.

And the trip was nearly due to start!

THE END.

Next month: "THE ST. FRANK'S EXPLORERS!" Look out for the gripping adventures of Nipper & Co. in the wilds of Brazil.

DEATH IN A FRYING PAN!

THE egg sizzled in the pan, frying a crisp brown, and the eyes of the three men watching it glistened with triumph. Just an egg, frying like the one your mother cooks for your morning breakfast, but it told those three scientists that their research had been crowned with success. For there was no flame beneath the frying-pan; there was no electric heating element. The heat which was cooking that egg had been transmitted to it by invisible rays from an apparatus six yards away—an apparatus which was an experimental form of a new death-ray machine.

It took those New York scientists three years to perfect their device sufficiently to cook that egg; but by the end of that time they knew they had an apparatus which, built on larger scale, could fling invisible heat through the atmosphere for far greater distances, burning to destruction everything in its path.

The Nerve-Numbing Ray.

But that is only one form of the death rays which are now being sought after by those who wish to produce even more terrible weapons than the poison gas and other ghastly implements of modern warfare. The Germans are working on a "hush-hush" device for transmitting rays which numb every nerve in a man's body.

Behind locked doors they have built machines which emit rays capable of stunning mice and other small animals into a state of insensibility. These rays react on the nerve system, producing complete paralysis. But the machine, horrible as it sounds, is more humane than some of these death-ray apparatuses, for its effects are not permanent, and a term in hospital will cure the patient.

You have probably read in fiction of

an apparatus which transmits rays that demagnetise the vital electric parts of cars and aeroplanes. These are not mere flights of fancy on the authors' part, for, although nobody has yet succeeded in making a machine of this type which can operate over long distances, there is one in existence in a French laboratory which will stop any petrol engine up to distances of fifty feet.

It acts in this way: the ray jams the electric current flowing through the wire coils of the magneto, and thus prevents the sparking plugs from firing the mixture in the cylinders.

A nation's army equipped with this machine would, in war time, be able to paralyse the transport of the enemy, to bring down its fighting planes, and to put its field radios out of action.

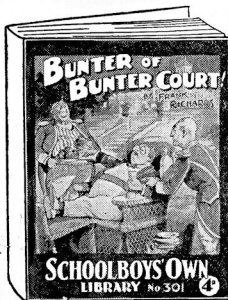
Making Use of Lightning.

Even the terrific force of atmospheric lightning has not been neglected in the search for discovering a new death ray. One plan is to attract the million-volt flashes from the clouds, and then reflect them into the enemy trenches. Lightning, of course, can leap great distances, as we see when it flashes between sky and earth; and if a death-ray machine of this type can be successfully produced, the great sizzling discharges will be sent directly at the enemy, destroying men and guns where it lands.

The havoc wrought by these "lightning-guns" would be almost incalculable; certainly each "shot" would be as effective as the full broadside from a battleship's nine sixteen-inch guns.

But the war of the future is still a long way away, we hope, and the fact that these terrible machines are possible may bring peace instead of war, when men realise what the troops will have to face in battle.

DON'T MISS THESE GRAND COMPANION NUMBERS!

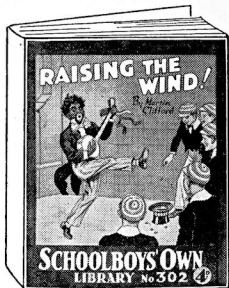


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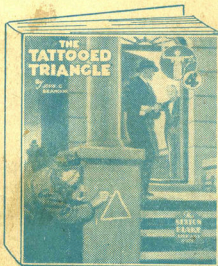
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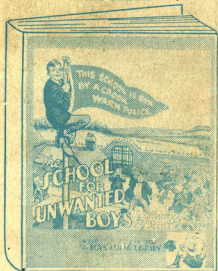
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