

THE GREAT FIRE AT ST. FRANK'S!

by EDWY SEARLES BROOKS



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The GREAT FIRE at ST-FRANK'S!

by EDWY SEARLES BROOKS



A thrill-packed story of NELSON LEE, NIPPER and the Chums of St. Frank's, telling of a new boy's malicious act of revenge and its amazing consequences.

(Narrated throughout by NIPPER himself.)

CHAPTER I.

The Stranger in Study M!

"AND if he says a thing like that to me again, I'll punch his skinny nose!" declared Handforth warmly. "The cheek of the cad!"

"But I don't understand, Handy," said Church.

"Neither do I," put in McClure.

Edward Oswald Handforth glared.

"Haven't I just told you?" he demanded wrathfully. "Haven't I just explained what took place in the passage a couple of minutes ago?"

"If you call that explaining, I don't," said McClure, picking up the teapot. "You charge in here, roaring something and then you expect us to understand. Were you referring to the new chap?"

"Yes, I was, you prize ass!" snapped Handforth. "Move yourself, and let me sit down. Do you want all the giddy table?"

He gave McClure a shove, McClure gave a howl, and the tea splashed all over Handforth's trousers.

"Yaroooooh!" howled Handforth violently. "Ow-yow! You—you clumsy fathead! I'm scalded! Ow! I'll—I'll—"

"Look out, you duffer!" gasped McClure, as Handforth rushed at him. "It was your fault! You pushed me just as I was pouring your tea out—Hi! Can't you be sensible?"

If Handforth hadn't been in pain he would have wiped up McClure on the spot. They were in Study D, in the

Remove passage at St. Frank's, and tea was just on the point of being served.

Disturbances in Study D were the usual order of the day; nobody took any notice of them.

"You—you dummy!" said Handforth fiercely. "You clumsy lunatic! Look at my trucks!"

"Well, it wasn't my fault," said McClure. "Don't make a fuss, for goodness' sake!"

Handforth sat down at the table.

"Yes," he said; "that chap ought to be kicked!"

"Who?" asked Church. "Alexis?"

"Yes, that's his dotty name—Titus Alexis!" sniffed Handforth. "What the dickens do we want chaps with names like that here for?"

"We don't want 'em," said Church. "They come. It isn't in our power to chuck chaps out of the school. If it was, I could see a few going immediately! Fullwood, for example, and Gulliver, and Bell, and Kenmore—"

"Oh, dry up!" interrupted Handforth. "I was talking about that new kid in the Remove—Alexis. He's a greasy Greek. I believe. Greeks are all right, but a Greek kid ought to go to a Greek school. And for the cad to speak to me like that, too!"

"Like what?" asked McClure.

"Oh, I suppose I shall have to tell you again," said Handforth resignedly. "When I was coming along the passage just now, I turned the corner rather sharply, and that Greek bouncer bumped into me—"

"You bumped into him, you mean!"

"What's the difference?" demanded Handforth. "We bumped into one another, if that suits you better. His toe got under my foot, and he howled like a kid. Then he flew round on me—just as I was saying 'sorry'—and called me a clumsy English pig! Me, you know!"

Church and McClure looked grim.

"The rotter!" said Church. "Didn't you slaughter him?"

"I didn't have a chance," replied

Handforth. "He buzzed off like a streak of lightning. But I shan't touch him when I see him next time, although he deserves a licking for his nerve. He's foreign, and he's a new kid. I'll give him a week to shake down, and then, if he slangs me like that, I'll make him see stars!"

"But it's a bit thick for a foreign chap to come to an English school and call a fellow an English pig," said Church. "He ought to be punched, just to teach him manners. I don't like the beast, anyhow. He's too snakey for my liking."

The subject of Handforth & Co.'s discussion was at that moment standing in Study M. He was a new fellow in the Ancient House. He had arrived at St. Frank's only a few days earlier.

His name was Titus Alexis, and he was undoubtedly a curious youth. Slim and elegant in attire, his appearance was spotless. His hair was coal-black, and his eyes were piercing.

Alexis was a queer customer to get on with. He seemed to be hostile, somehow, and both De Valerie and Somerton, his study-mates had failed to get on with him. He had a habit of clearing from the study as soon as they entered it.

But the original owners of Study M were genial youths. They liked to be on good terms—especially with a fellow who was with them throughout the term.

So they attempted to be friendly, and they overlooked many little irritating incidents. Alexis was not a nice fellow, and they knew it. But they wanted to make the best of him.

It had been Somerton's idea to provide a specially good spread for tea that evening. Hitherto, the Greek junior had taken his tea in Hall, but he had announced the fact that he would in future, enjoy the meal in Study M. So De Valerie and Somerton splashed somewhat.

They had been very busy, and the table was looking inviting. A clean cloth was spread upon it; some extra

crockery had been borrowed for the occasion, and the dishes were filled with dainties of all descriptions.

It was certainly a fine spread.

But Alexis was eyeing it without favour. He had a small parcel in his hand, and he proceeded to push the plates back, and to turn up the tablecloth. Then he took two or three of the plates, and laid out some food of his own.

Less than a minute later the genial Duke of Somerset sauntered in. He and De Valerie had been looking for Alexis for some minutes past. The duke smiled and nodded as he entered.

"So you're here, old chap," he remarked. "De Valerie and I have been looking for you, and— By Jove! What's the idea of spoiling the appearance of the table?"

"I share the study," said Alexis. "I have a right to a third of the table. I have my third here."

Somerton stared mildly.

"But the table was set for all of us," he said. "This is the first time you're having tea in the study, so we've got something particularly decent. You're our guest for this evening. See the idea, old chap?"

"I do not wish for it," replied the Greek junior stonily.

"Eh?"

"I provide my own tea," said Alexis. "That is all. I do not want your food. You can eat it. I shall not interfere."

"But we've invited you——"

"I do not care," interrupted the new boy. "Your invitation is not welcome. You can invite your friends, but not me. I did not ask you to provide tea for me. That is enough."

Somerton nodded.

"You have a most delightful way of expressing yourself," he said calmly. "You're so frank, by Jove! Don't you think it would be as well to decline the invitation with thanks? There's no real necessity to chuck it in my face, old chap. If you don't want to partake of our food——"

"I do not!" snapped Alexis. "Your

food is not mine. I accept nothing from you—nothing whatever!"

"You'll probably accept a punch on the nose when De Valerie comes in," said the duke smoothly. "He's not so available as I am, and if you talk to him like this you'll find yourself accepting all sorts of things!"

The Greek junior's eyes flashed.

"He would not dare to touch me!" he exclaimed. "You would not dare to touch me, Somerton. You think I would allow you—you, an English boy—to lay a finger on me? You make a big mistake!"

"Do you happen to be a god?" asked Somerton, who was keeping his temper well. "Am I so degraded and low—because I'm English—that I mustn't touch your august person? This is really frightfully interesting!"

"You sneer at me!" snarled Alexis. "But you will be careful! I will stand only a little insulting from you—an English pig-boy! I will not listen to many of your words!"

Somerton bit his lip.

"I'm an awfully hard chap to upset," he said calmly. "But when a fellow goes too far I generally start in earnest. I'd better remind you that you are of Greek nationality—you are a foreigner in this country—and you are at a British school. It is a shocking pity that you haven't the decency or the manners to treat your British school-fellows with the respect they deserve—and require."

"You will say no more!" snapped Alexis. "I will no longer listen."

"I think you will," said Somerton quietly. "Just now you called me an 'English pig-boy.' Now, I don't mind a fellow calling me an ass, or a fathead, and I wouldn't object if he called me an idiot. But I draw the line at pig-boy, especially when it is uttered in a tone of stinging contempt. You'll apologise to me within a minute, Alexis, or receive a hiding. You can choose."

The Greek junior shrugged his shoulders.

"I speak what I think," he said.

"You are an English pig-boy. You are one of the nation of braggarts and boasters—the nation of treacherous criminals. All the English are pigs, and—"

"That's about enough, you insulting cad!" said Somerton angrily. "You must be mad to come to this school with such ideas. I'll try to knock a few of them out of you. Put up your hands!"

"I refuse—"

Smack!

The duke's hand came into contact with Alexis' cheek with a resounding smack. The Greek junior leapt to his feet, his dark eyes blazing.

"You will suffer for that, you sewer-rat!" he shouted fiercely.

"By Jove!" said Somerton. "That's rather worse than a 'pig-boy'! I'm going to punch your nose, and I'm going to blacken your eyes. Up with your hands—unless you want to take the licking lying down!"

The duke was really angry now—and he certainly had excellent cause to be angry. He had been insulted in the most outrageous fashion, and he was bent upon making Alexis realise that he could not use his tongue exactly as he liked.

Crash!

Somerton's fist hammered into Alexis' face. The Greek staggered back, gave a low cry, and hurled himself forward. He simply sprang at the duke, kicking and clawing with all his strength.

Somerton was not quite prepared for it.

The Greek's feet beat against his shins, and his finger-nails dug into his neck viciously. The fellow was like a wild-cat.

"You—you cur!" gasped the duke.

He exerted all his strength, and Alexis was flung aside. Again Somerton punched, and this time his fist crashed upon the other junior's nose. Alexis toppled back, and he clutched at the table.

His fingers encountered a table-knife.

and a fierce light entered his eyes as he gripped it.

"Now!" he panted. "You will pay—you pig-dog!"

The knife flashed aloft.

"Drop that!" shouted Somerton sharply. "You madman!"

Slash!

The knife shot down in a deadly fashion and it would have pierced Somerton's shoulder if he had not dodged. And in dodging his foot slipped, and for a moment his back was towards Alexis.

"Ah!" hissed the Greek.

The knife was again raised, but fortunately the door opened at that moment, and Cecil De Valerie entered, grinning cheerfully.

"What the—"

De Valerie paused. His expression changed, and he looked amazed and furious. Then, with one swift movement, he grasped the Greek's wrist, and forced the knife out of his grasp.

"What's this?" rapped out De Valerie. "A game? It's a bit too dangerous!"

"Thanks, old chap!" said Somerton huskily. "He was going to stick that knife into me—I missed it once by dodging! The murderous hound! He ought to be put into a strait-jacket!"

Alexis sat down in a chair, breathing heavily.

"It is over," he said. "I lost my temper, but you compelled me."

"You ought to be kicked!" said De Valerie angrily. "Great Scott! You don't mean to say that Alexis was really trying to stab you, Somerton? I thought it was just make-believe!"

"He meant it," said the duke quietly. De Valerie was startled.

"We can't let a thing like this pass," he said. "You'd better hurry along to the Head, Sammy—"

"I don't want to speak."

"It wouldn't be speaking," said De Valerie. "My hat! We might be stabbed at any time if this chap is like that! He ought to be sent away—he's dangerous! How did it start?"

CHAPTER 2.

Making an Enemy!

"I invited him to tea," replied Somerton. "He rejected the offer with contempt. I stood that, but when he called me an 'English pig-boy' I thought it about time to start doing something!"

"I eat my own meals," said Alexis fiercely. "I want nothing from you—nothing! You understand? It was a mistake to take that knife, but I was excited. I regret the incident. That is enough."

"Is it enough?" said De Valerie grimly. "I'm not so sure about it!"

"Oh, let it drop," said the duke. "He's apologised, in a way. And I suppose he's an excitable beggar. We shall have to be careful, that's all. We mustn't start punching him when there are knives about."

Alexis smiled sneeringly, and left the study.

"I don't like it," said De Valerie slowly. "That chap makes me feel uneasy. There's something so jolly mysterious about him. He hates us, old man—he hates everybody in the school, I believe."

"It is strange why he came," remarked Somerton. "But I'm not going to worry about the beastly spitfire. Thanks awfully for saving me, old chap."

"Rats!" said De Valerie. "I didn't know I was saving you. I thought Alexis was playing a joke, and as it seemed dangerous I jumped on him. I'm blessed if I quite believe that he was serious, even now."

"I think he went mad for a minute," said Somerton. "He hardly knew what he was doing. These Greek chaps are terribly excitable, you know, and they have frightful tempers. But Alexis seems to be an unusual specimen."

De Valerie nodded grimly.

"Well, we'll let this affair drop," he exclaimed. "But if Alexis tries any more of his murderous games I shall go to Mr. Lee, or to the Head. The fellow seems to be dangerous."

And thus Alexis was dangerous!

"WHY that worried brow, fair youth?"

The Duke of Somerton turned as I addressed him. Tea had been over for some little time, and I was just sauntering out into the triangle, en route for Little Side. My study chums, Tommy Watson, and Sir Montie Tregellis-West, were with me.

"By Jove!" said Somerton mildly. "Was I looking worried?"

"You were," I replied. "And you are now, as a matter of fact. Has anything occurred to upset the tranquillity of your mighty mind?"

The duke grinned.

"As a matter of fact, old chap, something has happened," he said. "But it's nothing much, and I'd rather not explain, if you don't mind. But to be insulted by a new kid— But we'll say no more."

"I think you've said enough," I chuckled. "So Alexis is the cause of the wrinkled brow? I don't wonder at it. He seems to be a queer kind of proposition, by all that I can see—and I haven't had much to do with him, either. If your hair begins to turn grey, we shall know the cause."

Somerton smiled, and walked on.

"I'm frightfully afraid that there is trouble in Study M," observed Sir Montie, shaking his head. "Alexis has got into trouble with a good many fellows, I believe—mainly through snapping at them—so it stands to reason that he must be a shockin' trial to his own study-mates."

"Oh, let him alone," said Watson. "He's a new kid, and he's foreign. He doesn't understand our giddy ways yet. Before long he'll understand how things go, and I expect he'll settle down."

We strolled across the Triangle in the direction of Little Side, and I noticed that the object of our discussion was standing beneath one of the elms, glaring moodily across at nothing in particular.

Titus Alexis did not seem to be very

happy at St. Frank's. But, if it comes to that, most new boys are unhappy, until they shake down.

I also noticed that two shining members of the Third Form were amusing themselves with an aged cricket-bat and a still more aged ball. They were Heath and Lemon, and they appeared to be highly interested in their occupation.

Heath had the bat, and he struck hard as Lemon tossed him the ball. It whizzed away, and I gave a start as I noticed the direction it was taking.

"Hi! Look out, Alexis!" I yelled.

The Greek junior did not turn; he took no notice of me at all. And the cricket-ball struck him fairly on the chest—not with any particular force, and he was not at all hurt.

But the expression of fury which came into his face was rather startling. He glared round, flushed and quivering.

"Sorry!" shouted Heath, grinning. "This way, please!"

My chums and I were walking along during this little incident, but we paused as Alexis picked up the ball. There was something about his attitude which caused us to halt. He looked enraged.

"You little rats!" he shouted. "Here is your ball!"

He hurled it with all his strength, and it was easy to see that he had deliberately aimed it at Chubby Heath. The fag was not expecting such a move, and he had no time even to dodge.

Thud!

The hard cricket-ball struck him on the head, and Heath sunk to the ground with a low moan.

"You will not throw balls at me again!" exclaimed Alexis fiercely. "You understand? If you are hurt, all the better!"

Lemon turned pale.

"Oh, you brute!" he yelled.

Heath lay upon the ground, still and silent.

"Begad! What a frightful ruffian!" exclaimed Sir Montie, his eyes flashing behind his pince-nez. "He threw that cricket-ball deliberately at Heath's

head! He ought to be kicked out of here—"

"He's going to be knocked down!" I said grimly.

I was simply boiling with rage. The exhibition of violent temper had aroused me to fever-heat, and I rushed across to the spot where Alexis was standing. Watson and Montie hastened to the side of the fallen fag.

"You cad!" I exclaimed hotly.

The Greek junior turned on me with baleful eyes.

"It is not your business," he muttered. "I will stand no nonsense from —"

Smash!

My fist shot out, and it landed fairly between Alexis' eyes. He gave a wild howl, and measured his length in the Triangle. But he was on his feet again in a second, and he sprang at me with the fury of a wild beast.

I hit out with all my strength. Alexis received three powerful blows, and again he went over.

"Nipper!"

I turned, panting, and saw Nelson Lee striding rapidly towards me. As the Housemaster of the Ancient House, it was the gey'nor's duty, of course, to punish me if I broke any of the school rules. I had certainly broken one now, for it was strictly forbidden to indulge in fighting in the Triangle.

"Yes, sir?" I said respectfully.

"What is the meaning of this, Nipper?" said Nelson Lee, in a stern voice. "How dare you make such a disgraceful scene as this in public? Good gracious! Alexis has been brutally hurt!"

I looked at the Greek junior, and nodded.

"Yes, he does look a bit groggy," I said, with much satisfaction.

Titus Alexis stood near by, his nose streaming with blood, his left eye rapidly closing, and with his lip cut. He was smothered with dust, and he was decidedly a wreck. I was scarcely touched.

"You will attend in my study im-

mediately, Nipper," said Nelson Lee angrily. "I have half a mind to take you before the headmaster."

"Yes, sir," I said meekly.

"This is the first occasion on which you have forgotten yourself to such a disgraceful extent," went on the governor. "I shall cane you severely and impose a heavy imposition——"

"That is not enough!" interrupted Alexis savagely. "He must be flogged—I insist! Nipper must be flogged until he begs for mercy——"

"Silence, Alexis!" said Nelson Lee.

"I will not be silent! I have a right to speak——"

"One more word, my boy, and I will cane you, too!" said the governor sharply. "I have not the slightest doubt that you provoked Nipper before he struck you; but Nipper had no right to——"

Somebody was tugging at the governor's sleeve, and he paused and looked round. Lemon was there.

"Well, my boy?"

"Can—can you come over to Heath, sir?" asked Lemon with a gulp. "I—I believe he's badly hurt!"

Nelson Lee turned to me.

"I will attend to you later, Nipper," he said crisply. "Come, Lemon!"

They went off together. Tommy Watson and Sir Montie grabbed hold of me. They were both fairly excited.

"Why didn't you explain, you duffer?" said Tommy warmly.

"Begad! It wouldn't have been sneaking——"

"Mr. Lee will find out the truth soon enough, Montie," I broke in. "I don't mind much if I do get a caning, anyhow; I've made this cad's face look a bit silly! He ought to be horae-whipped!"

Alexis was standing alone, dabbing his nose and eye.

And, meanwhile, Nelson Lee had walked over to the spot where a little crowd of fags and Removites had collected round the prostrate figure of Chubby Heath. They parted at once as Nelson Lee appeared.

"He's getting better now, sir," said Owen minor. "But it's a jolly good thing you came. I believe the poor chap was stunned."

Nelson Lee looked grave as he gazed down upon Heath. The latter was sitting up now, looking dazed and bewildered. He had a very ugly bruise almost in the middle of his forehead, and he was feeling it with much tenderness.

"Good gracious, Heath!" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "What on earth have you been doing? How did you obtain that injury to your head?"

"A cricket-ball hit me, sir," said Heath weakly. "Oh, I do feel rotten, sir! My head's aching terribly, and I'm all dizzy——"

"I don't wonder at it, Heath," said Lee. "Let me see."

He bent down, and examined the bruise.

"Yes, it is rather severe, but you need not be alarmed," he said, after a moment or two. "You must tell me how the accident occurred."

"It was done deliberately, sir!" snorted Lemon.

Nelson Lee looked incredulous.

"That statement can scarcely be correct, Lemon," he said. "I cannot believe that any boy would deliberately injure another boy in this fashion."

"But it's true, sir!" exclaimed Owen. "That foreign beast——" He paused.

"Well, Owen?" hinted Lee.

"I—I don't want to sneak, sir——"

"Dash it all, it's not sneaking in a case like this!" broke in Lemon. "It was Alexis, sir. Heath and I were having a game, and the ball happened to hit that Greek chap—only a light touch. And the vindictive beast threw it with all his strength at Heath's head."

"We all saw it, sir," said many voices.

"It wasn't an accident, sir!"

"It was deliberate!"

"The chap ought to be kicked out of the school!"

Nelson Lee helped Heath to his feet. The fag was not hurt half so seriously

as the other juniors had at first believed. Within an hour or two he would probably be as lively as ever. But he certainly had a very ugly bruise on his forehead, and he was pale.

"You think you will be all right now, Heath?" asked Lee gently.

"I—I think so, sir."

"Perhaps you'd better go to the matron," went on the Housemaster, in a kindly voice. "She will bandage your head—"

"Not likely, sir!" said Heath. "I don't want to go about looking like a—*a wounded soldier*. I shall be all right before long, sir."

Heath walked off with a crowd of fags round him. And Nelson Lee turned and came back to the spot where I was waiting with my chums.

"Tell me exactly what happened, Nipper," he said quietly.

"But you know, sir," I said.

"Did Alexis throw that ball deliberately at Heath?"

"Yes, sir, he did!" broke in Watson. "Nipper went for him, as he deserved. And if Nipper hadn't gone for him, I should have wiped him up!"

"I shall not punish you, Nipper," said the gov'nor. "It seems to me that you were fully justified in knocking Alexis down. You were provoked, and I cannot blame you for losing your temper." Nelson Lee turned. "Alexis!" he said sharply.

The Greek junior did not even look round; on the contrary, he walked away.

"Come here, Alexis!" ordered Lee grimly.

Still the new boy took no notice.

"The idiot!" exclaimed De Valerte. "He's asking for trouble!"

Nelson Lee strode after Alexis and grasped him by the shoulder.

"Did you hear me, boy?" he rapped out.

"Yes, I did!" snarled Alexis. "I will take no notice!"

"Indeed!" snapped Nelson Lee. "You appear to forget, Alexis, that I am

your Housemaster, and that it is your duty to obey me. You may be strange to this school, but you are fully aware of the rules—"

"I will not be touched by you!" shouted Alexis, shaking himself free from the Housemaster's grasp. "I am injured! That dog of a boy assaulted me—"

"Silence!" thundered Nelson Lee.

"I will not be silent!"

"For this insubordination, Alexis, and for your vicious action in hurling a cricket-ball at Heath, you shall be severely punished," said Lee grimly. "You will come with me to my study."

Alexis quivered with rage.

"I will not come!" he yelled. "He hit me, and I hit him. What is the difference? Why should I be punished? I will not come!"

"I think you are mistaken," said Nelson Lee sternly.

He fairly lifted Alexis off his feet, and sent him hurrying towards the Ancien House. The Greek junior screamed and shouted, and all the fellows who were watching could feel nothing but contempt for the enraged boy.

He was forced along the passages until, at length, he arrived at Nelson Lee's study. He was pushed in, and Lee followed, closing the door after him. The Housemaster-detective was very incensed.

"I intend to thrash you!" he said. "You may count yourself lucky, for you deserve to be taken before Dr. Stafford and flogged. But as you are new to the school I will deal with the matter myself. Hold out your hand!"

Alexis stamped his foot upon the floor.

"I will not hold out my hand!" he screamed.

"Hold out your hand!" thundered Lee.

Alexis looked about him wildly, picked up a book, and hurled it at Nelson Lee with all his strength. Lee dodged, and the book flew harmlessly past. The next moment the Greek junior was firmly in Lee's grasp.

"Now, Alexis, I will teach you a lesson!" panted the Housemaster.

Slash! Slash! Slash!

The cane rose and fell, and his yells and shrieks could be heard half-way down the passage. At length Nelson Lee flung the boy aside in disgust. Alexis ran to the door, pale with fury and pain.

"You shall pay!" he snarled. "You shall pay!"

"Go!" ordered Nelson Lee curtly. "And if I have any more of your impertinence, Alexis, I will take you straight to the headmaster."

Alexis opened his mouth to speak.

"Go!" thundered Nelson Lee.

The Greek junior was awed at last, and he was afraid to say another word. He opened the door, and passed out into the passage. He slammed the door violently, and strode down towards the lobby.

"I shall remember!" he shouted. "It was Nipper who caused all this—and Nipper shall suffer!"

"Don't talk out of your silly hat!" said Handforth, who was in the passage. "You yelling cad! You ought to be kicked!"

Alexis made no reply, but walked straight on. And all the fellows he passed stared at him with looks of contempt. Sir Montie Tregellis-West was in the lobby, and he turned to me with a grave expression.

"You must be careful, Nipper, old boy," he said quietly.

"En? Careful?" I said. "What for?"

"You have made a dangerous enemy."

"I'm not afraid of that Greek cad, if that's what you mean," I said lightly. "The chap is absolutely beneath the notice of any decent fellow. If he isn't kicked out of St. Frank's soon I shall be surprised!"

Sir Montie looked troubled.

"A lot can happen before that does, dear old boy," he said. "Alexis is dangerous, begad! He is, really! An'

you'll have to be frightfully careful, an' keep your eyes open all the time."

I grinned.

"I can look after myself, thanks," I said. "Don't you worry."

CHAPTER 3.

Plotting in Cabinet

"CAN I speak to you?"

Titus Alexis asked that question, and it was addressed to Ralph Leslie Fullwood, who was just emerging from Study A, in the Remove passage.

It was after tea the following day. Titus Alexis had kept to himself since his caning. He couldn't very well do anything else, because most of the fellows barred him. He had never been popular, and when the news got round of his vicious action in the Triangle, he was avoided more than ever.

Fullwood paused and stared at Alexis curiously.

"It seems that you are speakin' to me," he said. "Well, what do you want? Spit it out!"

Alexis bit his lip, but he made no hot retort, as Fullwood had half expected. To tell the truth, Fullwood was not at all anxious to hold any lengthy conversation with the Greek junior.

Fullwood, Gulliver, and Bell were unprincipled young rascals, and they did not possess many scruples when it came to perpetuating a mean trick. But they had all agreed Alexis was a bit too wild for them. They were not at all anxious to get friendly with him.

"What I have to say must be said in private," said Alexis. "You agree? The matter is of importance—to you."

"Oh, is it?" said Fullwood. "Well, you can come into the study for a minute, if you like. But I'd better tell you plainly that I don't feel inclined to give you more than three minutes."

"It will be sufficient."

Fullwood turned back into Study A, and Gulliver and Bell, who were just

getting ready to clear the tea-things away, looked up with some surprise.

"What's the idea?" asked Gulliver.

"We don't want that chap in this study," said Bell bluntly.

"He wants to explain a matter of importance," said Fullwood. "So I'm giving him three minutes to do it. If it's all rot we're goin' to kick him round the study."

"Well, that's somethin'," said Gulliver pleasantly.

"I'd better put my heavy boots on," added Bell.

Alexis scowled.

"This is foolish!" he snapped. "You are silly!"

"Are you lookin' for a thick ear?" demanded Gulliver warmly.

"Bah! You make me sick!" said Alexis sourly. "You English boys are all the same—you always speak of thick ears and black eyes, and noses that bleed! You are all for violence!"

"Well, you seem to be an expert in that respect," said Fullwood pointedly.

"I am not so clumsy," said Alexis. "We all dislike Nipper—eh?"

"That's agreed upon, certainly."

"We would all like to see him punished?"

"Yes."

"Then I have the idea."

"Oh, that's all right," said Fullwood. "If we want to have a go at Nipper, we can do without your help, thanks all the same. Shut the door after you."

Alexis had an expression of surprise in his piercing eyes.

"I do not understand you," he said.

"I wish to explain my idea. It is good. It is of the best."

"There's nothin' like modesty," murmured Bell.

"Oh, let him spout," said Gulliver.

"What's the wheeze, anyhow?"

"I will tell you," said Alexis, sinking his voice. "My wish is to get Nipper where we shall have him alone. We dislike him—we hate him. It is time that he received punishment. If we can get him alone—and I have a simple

idea for that—we can do with him exactly as we please."

"Throw cricket-balls at his head?" suggested Bell.

"You are always talking of nonsense!" snapped Alexis. "We need not do that; we need not harm the wretched dog. It will be sufficient if we perform what is called here a 'rag.' Eh? It will be easy."

Fullwood looked thoughtful.

"Will it?" he said. "Not so easy as you seem to imagine. Nipper isn't the kind of chap to be caught in a trap. He'll smell a rat in a tick if we try any of our dodges—an' I don't suppose you can think of anythin' good enough to diddle him."

"My idea is simple——"

"Then it's hopeless," said Fullwood.

"I think not—I am sure it is not," declared Alexis. "It is so simple that it cannot fail to act. You will see. Listen!"

Fullwood & Co. did listen, and after Alexis had been talking for some little time they were inclined to alter their tone. Fullwood regarded the visitor with a little show of respect.

"Well, it's not so bad," he admitted.

"It is good!" snapped Alexis.

"Perhaps it is," acknowledged Fullwood. "An' it ought to work, too. As you say, it's so simple that it can't fail. An' we shall have Nipper in our hands, an' we can do as we like with him."

"I suggest glue," said Gulliver. "We've got a big tube of glue in the cupboard, an' there's plenty of paint out in the wood-shed. I think we'd better freeze on to this idea, my sons."

"We will!" declared Fullwood.

And the nuts of the Remove entered into the plot with enthusiasm. And they talked over the scheme until it was all cut and dried.

About two hours later, just as it was getting dusk, I happened to be crossing the Triangle. There was nobody about at the time. I was making for the College House, to have a chat with Bob

Christine about the football. Tommy Watson and Sir Montie were doing their prep. in Study C.

It was rather gloomy out in the open, and there was a promise of rain in the air. The situation could not have been better for the little plot which was afoot.

I was half-way across the Triangle when I was brought to a standstill by a sudden roar of pain.

The sound was coming from the little belt of trees which hid the ruins of the monastery from the Triangle. And as I stood quite still I distinctly heard the shrill voice of a fag.

"Oh, you beast, you cad!" shouted the fag frantically. "I'll scream if you don't let me alone! Lemme go, you beast!"

"I will not let you go!" came another voice. "How do you like that?"

"Ow!" screamed the fag. "Ow-yow! You're hurting me, you Greek rotter!"

"I will hurt you more yet, you English brat!" came the voice of Alexis.

I clenched my fists. It seemed quite clear that Alexis was playing some more of his tricks. The Third Former's voice was known to me. I recognised it as Fullerton's. This junior belonged to the College House, and he was the worst little rascal in the Third.

He would have been pally with Fullwood & Co. if they had allowed it; but their dignity was too great for them to allow a mere Third Former into the circle of nuts.

"Lemme alone, I tell you!" screamed Fullerton. "Oh, you cad — you — Yow!"

"My hat!" I muttered. "I must see about this!"

I hurried to the trees, and as I broke through them I heard a loud gasp, a snarl, and then a sound of running footsteps. Fullerton had broken away, and was rushing towards the ruins.

I caught sight of him as he entered them, and Alexis was only just in his rear, rushing after him at full speed.

I rushed into the ruins, but by that time they had both vanished, and I realised that Fullerton had fled down the circular staircase which led into the vault, far below the surface.

And Alexis, close in his rear, was descending, too!

Down in that vault, he would have the fag at his mercy, and I was filled with alarm. I did not waste a second, but pelted to the stairway, and commenced the descent.

As I did so I pulled out my electric torch, and flashed it on. This enabled me to make the descent more swiftly. But I was filled with alarm all the time. I knew how dangerous Alexis could be when he was really angry.

I negotiated the old steps in safety, and at last arrived at the bottom. I charged into the vault breathlessly.

"Good!" exclaimed a voice. "He's taken the bait!"

"On him!"

"Hold him tight!"

The next second, to my amazement, four forms emerged out of the darkness. The electric torch was snatched from me, and I was hurled to the ground. And then I realised the truth.

It was a trap—and I had fallen into it!

To say that I was furious would be putting it mildly. And I was more enraged with myself for having been caught napping so easily. But the harm was done.

I struggled in vain.

The odds were too many, and almost before a minute had passed my hands were bound and my ankles were secured. When this had been done several candles were lit, and I saw the grinning faces of Fullwood & Co. The Third Former was grinning, too; but Alexis looked fierce and sullen.

"What price that for a neat dodge?" chuckled Fullwood.

"You—you spoofing rotters!" I gasped.

"I did it well, didn't I?" grinned Fullerton. "I put those howls on

especially for your benefit, Nipper. It was awfully obliging of you to come into the Triangle on your own."

"I'll pay you for this, my son!" I said grimly.

"We've been waitin' for a chance like this for a long time," said Fullwood, "and now that it's come we're going to make the most of it. You won't know yourself when we've done with you!"

CHAPTER 4.

Alexis' Revenge!

THE nuts were looking very pleased with themselves, and I had no doubt that they had planned a particularly unpleasant ordeal for my benefit. Fullwood & Co. were not the fellows to take a large amount of trouble for nothing.

I had an idea that they meant to give me a tremendous loking: that was the type of punishment which appealed to them.

"What's the game?" I asked.

"Have patience, fair youth, and you will soon be satisfied," said Fullwood, with a grin. "We have to mix the stuff yet."

"Stuff?" I repeated.

"The mixture!" said Fullwood.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

I didn't know what the game was, but I soon found out. A large tube of glue was produced, and Fullwood drew on an ancient glove.

"I don't want to soil my hands, you know," he remarked. "This liquid glue is sticky stuff!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's right—grin!" I said sourly. "I'm blessed if I can see anything funny!"

"You wouldn't!" grinned Fullwood. "This glue is goin' to be spread over your hair; it's the finest lotion you could imagine."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It'll make your hair grow like one

o'clock," went on Fullwood. "This'll fix your hair better than hair-cream!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It'll be so strongly fixed that you won't be able to do anythin' with it—until you've about twenty baths," went on Ralph Leslie. "But that's your look-out. An' after the glue we shall start with the second course. Oh, you're goin' through it properly this time!"

"You—you bounders!" I exclaimed. "If you put glue on my hair I'll half skin you when I get free!"

"Rats!" said Gulliver. "Didn't Handforth and a crowd of other fellows shove glue on Christine's hair the other week? You didn't say anythin' about that. An' we're just as entitled to work off a jape as anybody else is."

I could say nothing in response to that. Glueing a fellow's hair was not considered to be a vicious action; it was a joke—a joke, at all events, to everybody except the unfortunate victim.

And I was rather surprised to find Fullwood & Co. were content to adopt such measures. I had expected them to be far more drastic—and I was almost sure that they would be before they were finished.

"Come on, Bell," said Fullwood. "You can squeeze the giddy tube."

Bell was only too willing to oblige. He squeezed the big tube of liquid glue on to Fullwood's gloved hand. The sticky stuff was smeared all over my head, and rubbed into my hair.

I said nothing, for it wouldn't make matters better if I objected. But it would take me hours to get that glue out, and the scent of it would remain hovering about me for days.

"That's all right," said Fullwood at last. "What do you think of him now, Alexis? How does that suit you?"

"It is good," said the Greek Junior. "But it is not enough. Oh, no! We must do much more yet."

Next, a large paint-pot was produced, and a big brush. Fullwood stirred the paint round with great relish.

"You'd better shut your eyes an' your mouth," he advised. "We're going to convert you into a nigger. By the time we've finished, you'll look a sight for sore eyes!"

They proceeded to paint my face, and they did it thoroughly. I couldn't see myself, of course, but by the howls of laughter which arose I judged that I was looking extremely grotesque.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Bell. "Isn't he a sight?"

"Paint some white rings round his eyes," chuckled Gulliver. "The paint will mix a bit, but that doesn't matter. Oh, my goodness! Won't the chaps roar when they see him?"

"An' they can't touch us, either!" grinned Fullwood. "This is just a usual rag. The whole Remove will be yelling!"

I could quite believe him. It was, as he said, a usual "rag." The fellows thought nothing of ruining clothes and that sort of thing. I was rather at a loss to understand Fullwood's attitude. I had expected something far more violent than an ordinary ragging.

"There you are," said Fullwood at last. "How's that?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Bell. "Fine!"

"Ripplin'!" grinned Gulliver.

"Gorgeous!" said Fullerton.

"It is good, but the wretch has not suffered!" said Alexis. "We must do more! We must punish this British beast—"

"Steady!" interjected Fullerton sharply. "We're British, don't forget. You'd better not get cheeky, you foreign bounder! It wouldn't take us two ticks to paint you up like this!"

"Bah!" muttered Alexis. "It is not enough, I say!"

"Well, I don't feel inclined to do anythin' more," said Fullwood. "The chaps can't touch us for this, but if we do anythin' else they can touch us. The rotters would half skin us if they could, an' I'm not takin' any risks!"

"Rather not!" said Gulliver and Bell.

That, of course, was the secret of their moderation—they feared the conse-

quences. Before they considered that I was quite finished, they propped me up on an old box and tied my feet round it. I couldn't move an inch—I was helpless.

Then my collar and tie were placed round my left leg, and several other small details were attended to.

"I reckon we can go now," said Fullwood. "Most of the crowd will be in the Common-room, an' we shall just catch 'em. This idea of yours, Alexis, has worked out a treat."

"I am flattered," sneered Alexis.

"An' so you ought to be," agreed Fullwood. "Ready, you chaps?"

"Yes."

"Then get a move on!"

"What about the candles?" asked Bell.

"We'll leave them burnin'," said Fullwood. "They're practically new, an' they'll last for an hour yet. The other chaps will be down within twenty minutes, an' they'll need plenty of light to see the colour effect!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The nuts took their departure, and I heard them ascending the stone steps. Soon their footfalls died away, and all was quiet in the grim old vault. It was not a pleasant situation for me.

I was horribly uncomfortable. My head felt awful, smothered with liquid glue as it was. The glue was drying into my hair, and the sensation was not at all nice. I was sickened by the smell of paint, and I constantly got the wretched stuff into my mouth.

And I couldn't move. I had been bound so tightly that any attempt at escape was hopeless, unless I had had hours in front of me. But Fullwood & Co. meant to send a crowd of fellows down almost at once. So it would have been a sheer waste of energy for me to struggle with my bonds.

Meanwhile, the japers had reached the surface.

It was dark now, and the school was twinkling with scores of lights from the numerous windows. Fullwood & Co.

made their way through the trees, and crossed the Triangle.

As they were entering the Ancient House, Fullwood looked round.

"Where's that Greek blighter?" he asked.

"Blessed if I know!" said Gulliver. "He slipped off somewhere."

"Oh, let him go," said Bell. "I don't like him."

So the nuts entered the Ancient House, and made their way down to the junior Common-room. But Titus Alexis had remained behind with a purpose—a purpose he had had in mind even when he mooted the whole idea to Study A.

He descended into the vault again, and he carried something with him. I knew nothing of his presence until I heard a slight sound near the foot of the staircase. The Greek junior had crept down like a shadow.

He stood regarding me with a glowing light in his queer eyes.

"So!" he exclaimed softly. "You are helpless—and I am alone with you!"

"Both your remarks seem to be right," I said. "What's the idea of this, Alexis? You'd better be careful——"

"Silence, you dog!" snapped Alexis. I stared at him.

"What's the matter with you?" I asked. "You seem to have got your knife into me, my son. If you want to get on well at St. Frank's you'll find it necessary to alter your tone a good bit——"

"You cur!" snarled Alexis—"you English cur!"

I made a resolve that the cad would suffer for that insult. I longed to be free to get my fist at his nose. But I was unable to lift a finger. He had me at his mercy.

"I will tell you what I mean to do," went on Alexis, his voice quivering with rage. "You were the cause of my getting caned——"

"I was," I echoed.

"You hit me when I threw that cricket ball at the small boy——"

"You deserved to be hit!" I snapped.

"Mr. Lee came, and he heard all—because of you!" snarled Alexis. "I was thrashed because of you—and you shall be thrashed!"

"By you?"

"Yes, you pig-dog, by me!" snapped the Greek. "You smile! Ah, I will make you smile differently soon! I will thrash you until you beg for mercy—until you cry to me to cease!"

"Really?" I said. "I shall cry for mercy? My dear idiot, you can whop me until I am blue in the face—but you won't find me yelling for mercy. That sort of thing seems to be more in your line!"

"We shall see," said Alexis—"we shall see!"

"I was expecting something of this sort," I went on. "So you're going to take your revenge in this way, eh? Well, get on with it. The only time you can hit me is when I am helpless. That ought to make you feel very pleased with yourself. There must be a lot of pleasure in striking a fellow when he isn't in a position to hit back—you cad!"

He had struck me heavily in the face, and I could do nothing. I would have given any amount to be free at that moment.

"You will cease talking!" shouted Alexis. "Your tongue is too loose! I will soon make you howl—and you will have no time for talk!"

He produced a thick, heavy length of cane. It slashed through the air, and he looked at me glowingly. Probably he expected to see some signs of fear. If so, he was greatly disappointed.

"You do not wince!" he said. "Very well! We shall soon see!"

I looked at him squarely.

"Just listen to me for a moment," I said, in a grim voice. "If you touch me with that cane—if you give me just one slash—I'll give you the biggest hiding of your life!"

Slash!

The cane descended upon my shoulders with stinging force.

"Now!" panted Alexis. "How is that?"

"Well it's booked you for a first-class licking," I said grimly. "Well, the more you give me, the more I'll give you when I get free— Oh!"

I uttered the cry involuntarily; for Alexis had brought the cane down again. And this time he used all his strength. The pain was considerable, and I had great difficulty in keeping my face straight.

Slash! Slash!

The blows were awful, and my back was already feeling numb. For the brute to attack me like this was altogether unexpected.

"Stop, you madman!" I gasped.

"Ah, you are calling for mercy already—"

"Don't be an idiot!" I snapped. "I'm not asking for mercy. But you must be mad! You don't realise what you are doing, Alexis! Put that cane down and listen to reason—"

Slash!

I broke off as he swiped at me again. In spite of his slim build, he possessed great strength; and he yielded the cane with vicious force. The weapon struck me repeatedly.

I felt like gasping with pain, and once or twice I nearly let out a cry. But by clenching my teeth and compressing my lips I managed to keep all sounds within me.

"You feelingless log!" he panted. "Will you ever cry?"

Swipe! Swipe! Swipe!

I was feeling almost sick with the pain; my back was tingling as though it had been burnt with red-hot irons. My head was dizzy, and the flickering candles, and the walls of the vault commenced to dance before my eyes.

"Scream, you fool—scream!" shouted Alexis.

Without a pause he used the cane, and I felt that if I did not shout aloud I should explode. How I stood the ordeal I hardly know. At last, Alexis lowered the cane.

"So!" he said huskily. "You refuse

to appeal for mercy? Very well! You will receive none!"

"Alexis," I said, "you'd better stop this fooling before it's too late. I'm not a fellow to sneak, but if you go on much longer it won't be a question of sneaking at all. If I'm carried up out of this and into the school, there'll be an inquiry—and then the truth will come out. You'd better go easy!"

The Greek boy laughed.

"You think I have finished?" he asked fiercely. "Poo! I have barely commenced! I will show you!"

Slash! Slash!

After the short rest his strength was renewed—and the pain on my back was greatly intensified. I could not shift my position, owing to the fact that my feet were secured to the box on which I was seated.

I honestly believe that I nearly fainted.

I hardly remember what happened towards the end. Everything was dim and uncertain. Even the pain was a dull, numb sensation. The candles were just a blur of light.

And then, at last, the ordeal was over.

I heard Alexis speaking, but I don't know what he said. His voice was just a gloating sound droning in my ears. After that came complete silence, and I sat upon the box, my head sunk upon my chest, indifferent to everything.

Thus Alexis had had his revenge!

But there was a reckoning to come!

CHAPTER 5.

The Discovery!

RALPH LESLIE FULLWOOD entered the junior Common-room with a smile on his face. Bell and Gulliver followed him—and they, too, were looking unusually happy. The fellows noticed the difference at once.

"My hat!" said Handforth. "What's wrong with you, Fullwood?"

"Nothing," said Fullwood. "What do you mean?"

"But you're looking amiable!" ejaculated Handforth amazedly.

"Oh, don't be a fool!" snapped Ralph Leslie, scowling.

"Ah! That's more like it!" said Handforth. "That's your usual expression. Well, I'm jiggered! You're smiling again! And Gulliver and Bell are smiling, too!"

"Amazing!" said Reginald Pitt, grinning.

"What's happened?" asked De Valerie. "Have you suddenly come into a fortune, Fullwood, or have you just performed some particularly caddish trick on somebody? That's the kind of thing that would make you smile."

"Oh, rats!" said Fullwood. "You can go and eat coke—all the lot of you! Mind your own business!"

Fullwood and his chums walked over to one of the tables. Fullwood sat upon the edge of it, and grinned again.

"Seen anythin' of Nipper?" he asked casually.

"No," said Watson. "Have you?"

"I saw him about ten minutes ago—"

"No, you didn't!" chuckled Gulliver. "He wasn't visible under that coating—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Bell.

Tommy Watson stared.

"They're dotty!" he exclaimed blankly.

"Didn't you know that before?" asked Handforth. "They've been dotty ever since they came to St. Frank's!"

"But what the dickens are they cackling about Nipper for?" demanded Watson. "Montie and I left him out on Little Side nearly an hour ago, and he promised to be in within ten minutes. And we haven't seen a sign of him."

"Not a sign, begad!" said Sir Montie. "I expect he's gone down to the village for something."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Fullwood & Co.

"There they go again!" exclaimed Watson. "I believe the rotters know something about Nipper."

"I shouldn't be at all surprised if we do," said Fullwood. "There's no telling."

you know. As I said before, we saw Nipper—or a part of him—ten minutes ago. An' if you don't like to believe it, you needn't."

"You saw a part of him?" asked Church.

"Exactly."

"Has he been chopped up, then?" yelled Watson. "Don't be an ass!"

"Of course, if you fellows like to look for him. Instead of wastin' your time here, it's quite likely that you'll find him," said Fullwood calmly. "There's all sorts of places where you could look—but there's one place in particular which it would pay you to visit."

"It's not far from here," remarked Bell thoughtfully. "Only just across the Triangle, and down a lot of steps."

"Stone steps," said Gulliver. "Some of 'em are broken."

"By jingo!" said Watson, with a start. "Do you mean that Nipper has gone down into the old monastery vault?"

"I'm not explainin' anythin'," said Fullwood. "But if you like to draw your own conclusions, you are at liberty to do so. You might be right—an' you might be wrong."

"Oh, they're dotty this evening," said Watson. "And I'll bet they've been up to some monkey business, too—that's why they're looking so jolly pleased with themselves."

"You won't see Nipper for a long time—if you don't go and look for him," remarked Bell. "It's jolly awkward when a chap's unable to move—"

"Oh, rather!" said the others.

They strolled out of the Common-room before they could be questioned further, and the remainder of the juniors looked at one another rather uncertainly. Watson was the first to speak.

"I'm going down into the vault," he said firmly.

"An' I'm with you, dear old boy," said Sir Montie.

"So am I," declared Handforth. "There's been some foul play, unless I'm mistaken. Those Study A bouncers

have been up to some of their rotten tricks. My hat! I'll smash 'em if they have hurt old Nipper!"

"No, you won't," said Watson grimly. "Study C will attend to 'em—it's our concern, don't forget."

"Well, let's get a move on," said Pitt. "I'll come, too, if I'm not in the way."

"You can all come, if you like," said Watson.

About a dozen fellows decided to go—for it was quite obvious, from the veiled remarks that Fullwood & Co. had let pass, that something of an unusual nature had occurred—and a visit to the old vault would probably enlighten them.

They lost no time in setting out across the Triangle. They had brought no lights with them, but they all knew the way into the vault. Watson led the way down the broken stairs, and the whole procession of juniors followed him—Montie and Handforth & Co. and Pitt and several others.

"Better go easy, down there," called out Pitt. "These stairs are treacherous, and if you once start falling you'll find it difficult to stop—the angle is so jolly steep."

Nobody tripped, however, and at last the vault was reached.

"By jingo!" exclaimed Watson, just before he got to the bottom. "It's true enough! There's a light down here!"

They all hurried on, and half of them crowded into the vault at the same moment. They stared before them.

Candles were burning in two or three places, and almost in the middle of the vault a figure sat huddled up on a box. The figure belonged to me, but nobody recognised it. My face was bent down on my chest, and the new-comers could see very little of me.

"Look at that!" roared Watson. "He's bound up—hands and feet! And what the dickens is the matter with his hair— Oh, my goodness!"

"Great Scott!"

"Help!"

I had just raised my face, and the juniors gazed at me with blank amaze-

ment. There was not the slightest doubt that I looked several kinds of a freak, with my face all daubed with paint.

"Is—is that you, Nipper?" gasped Watson.

"Yes," I said huskily.

"Oh, my hat!" exclaimed Pitt. "I—I can't help it—ha, ha, ha! But you look so jolly funny that I must laugh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Everybody else yelled.

"It's shockin'!" declared Sir Montie. "His face doesn't matter so much—but just look at his clobber! Dear boys, it's in a frightful state!"

"So this is why Fullwood & Co. were grinning!" said De Valerie. "They've been playing a trick. You don't seem to be very lively, Nipper. I should have thought you would be roaring!"

"I don't feel like roaring," I said with a sickly grin. "I'm too raw!"

"My hat! Is that a pun?" asked Handforth.

"If you like!" I said weakly.

"What's the matter with you, you ass?" demanded Watson, slapping me on the back.

"Ow!" I shouted, gasping. "Oh! You ass! Oh—oh!"

"But I hardly touched you!" said Watson, staring.

"I—I'm sorry," I said. "I wasn't quite expecting it, old man. My back's a bit tender—"

"Have those cads been whopping you?" demanded Handforth suddenly.

"Great pip! If they've laid a finger on you, Nipper, we'll slaughter 'em!"

"Rather!" said the others.

"His back seems to be pretty tender," said Tommy—"and he's sort of dazed. Who's got a knife?"

About four were produced, and my bonds were quickly slashed through. Then Watson helped me to my feet. I staggered a bit, then sank down on the box again.

"Have a look at my back," I muttered painfully. "I believe it's been bleeding. It—it feels awful. I wish

somebody would fetch some cold water and a sponge. I feel awfully groggy just now."

"See if his back is bleeding!" ejaculated Handforth. "My only hat! You don't mean to say that you've been hit as hard as all that?"

"Lend me a hand!" said Watson sharply.

My jacket was removed, and then my waistcoat.

Two or three of the fellows pushed my shirt back, while some of the others held candles. And then I heard a chorus of horrified gasps.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Pitt hoarsely.

"Oh, my hat!" muttered Watson, looking pale.

"Is it bad, then?" I asked.

"Bad!" gasped Tommy. "Your back is all raw—it's a mass of livid weals!"

"Poor old chap!" exclaimed Somerton feelingly. "Oh, by Jove! You must have received a terrible slashing."

"I did!" I said faintly. "But I shall be all right before long. I can stand a little pain, I hope. But it only finished a few minutes ago, you know, and I haven't quite got over it—"

"And those cads were grinning!" said Handforth wrathfully. "Who's coming with me to slaughter 'em?"

Handforth dashed for the stairway, and eight or nine fellows followed him. They rushed up to the outer air, pelted across the Triangle, and dashed into the Ancient House.

All they thought about was getting hold of Fullwood & Co. First and foremost in Handforth's mind was the necessity to take immediate measures with the cads of Study A.

Fullwood & Co., surprisingly enough, had made no attempt to hide themselves. They were lounging in the lobby when the crowd rushed in.

"Well?" chuckled Fullwood. "Any luck?"

"Did you find him?" grinned Bell.

"You cads—you brutal cads!" shouted Handforth furiously.

"Oh, come off it!" snapped Gulliver. "There's nothing brutal in what we did. We can indulge in a jape if we like, I suppose?"

"Do you call it a jape to beat a chap on the back until he is nearly stunned with pain?" asked Pitt harshly. "Do you call it a jape to make his back raw like you did?"

Fullwood and Co. stared.

"I don't know what you mean!" snapped Fullwood.

"Don't know what we mean?" roared Handforth. "You raddish cur—"

"Steady on!" said Gulliver. "There must be some mistake. All we did was to paint Nipper's face, an' put some glue in his hair."

"Didn't you touch his back?" demanded Church.

"No."

"Not with anything?"

"Not even with our little fingers!"

"You liars!" shouted Handforth. "Nipper's there, with his back looking as though it had been whipped with a cat-o'-nine tails. If you try to deny the truth you won't be believed—"

"But look here!" interrupted Fullwood. "Is this true? Is Nipper's back really slashed about?"

"Yes; in the most awful manner," said Pitt.

Fullwood and Co. exchanged startled glances.

"Well, I give you my word that we're not responsible," said Fullwood. "All we did was to play a jape. We didn't hurt Nipper—"

"I don't believe you," said Handforth flatly.

Many of the other juniors didn't believe Fullwood's denial, either. His propensity for lying was too well known in the Remove. He would probably have been captured then and there, but for the arrival of Tommy Watson.

"Where's Alexis?" gasped Watson breathlessly.

"Blow Alexis—"

"But I want to find him—I want to smash him into little bits!" shouted

Watson. "It was he who slashed Nipper like that—Nipper has just told us."

"Alexis!"

"Yes, the brutal cur!"

"What about Fullwood?" asked Pitt.

"Nipper said that Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell didn't touch him," said Watson. "They went out after they had painted him up; but Alexis came back, armed with a thick cane."

"Now do you believe me?" asked Fullwood hastily.

"I'll bet you put Alexis up to it," snapped Handforth.

"We didn't! We didn't know a thing about it until you told us just now," said the leader of Study A. "I had an idea that Alexis wasn't satisfied with what we did, but I never dreamed that he'd go back."

"Has he hurt Nipper much?" asked Gulliver.

"The poor chap is nearly fainting with pain," said Church.

"Look here! I want you chaps to believe me," said Fullwood earnestly. "You're not always ready to take my word, but this time I give you my solemn promise that we didn't do a thing to Nipper that anybody would be ashamed of—an' we hadn't the faintest idea that Alexis would go back. I'm fully sorry about the whole thing."

"Well, we needn't say any more," said Watson bluntly. "Yes, I believe you, Fullwood. But where's Alexis? I mean to smash him!"

By this time I had been brought up from the vault, and the fresh air of the Triangle did a lot to revive me. I felt so much better that I didn't want any assistance.

Sir Montie and two or three other fellows were with me.

"Look here, you chaps," I said. "There's no need to make a song about this. I'll settle with Alexis within a day or two. We don't want any of the masters to know that I've been hit—"

"But they must know, you ass!" exclaimed Somerton.

"Why must they?"

"Because you'll have to have your back dressed!"

"Some of you fellows can do that for me in the dormitory to-night," I said. "Anyhow, I don't want the Head to know."

"Well, I think you're an ass!" declared Owen major. "Alexis ought to be sacked—"

"If he was sacked I shouldn't get a chance to lick him," I interrupted. "I want him here. I want to lick him until he can't stand. And I shan't be able to if the masters get to know what has happened."

Meanwhile, Watson and many other juniors were searching for Alexis. As luck would have it, they caught sight of the Greek junior just as I was crossing the Triangle with Sir Montie and the others. Alexis had been skulking amongst the trees, it seemed, and now he was attempting to dodge into the house.

"There he is!" shouted Watson. "Hold the cad!"

Many fellows obliged, and a few seconds later Alexis was cut off, and he found himself in the grasp of many determined Removites. He struggled fiercely to get free.

"Let me go—let me go!" he shouted.

"You brutal hound!" exclaimed Watson, rushing up. "You've made Nipper's back almost raw—"

"That is splendid!" gloated Alexis. "I am glad. Yes, it was I who punished him—as he deserved. If you do not allow me to go I shall scream until help arrives."

"Scream, then!" shouted Watson fiercely. "Do you think we care? We're going to make you suffer for what you've done—"

"Let me go, you curs!" shrieked Alexis wildly. "You pigs—you dogs! Let me go! I will not be held!"

He continued to scream at the top of his voice, and he fought like a wild-cat. It was necessary for three or four fellows to hold him down. And when he at length showed signs of becoming

quiet, quite a commotion had been caused.

Seniors and juniors were pouring out of both Houses to find out who was being murdered. Windows were being pushed up, and two prefects appeared upon the scene with canes in their hands.

"What's the trouble out here?" demanded Fenton of the Sixth.

The captain of St. Frank's strode over to the group of juniors. But before he could reach them Mr. Crowell, the Fourth Form-master, put in an appearance. Alexis had given himself away by his outcry.

"What is the meaning of this disgraceful noise?" asked Mr. Crowell sternly. "Boys! Who was it screaming just now?"

Nobody answered, and Mr. Crowell strode forward to the spot where a number of fellows were collected. He had just reached the spot when a sudden commotion commenced in the middle of it.

"Sir!" panted a wild voice. "I want your protection! These boys intend to harm me, and you must prevent them."

"Alexis!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell. "Oh! So it was you who made those most unearthly screams just now?"

"I was calling for help——"

"When you call for help another time, Alexis, you will kindly do so in a different manner," said the Form-master curily. "Allow Alexis to go, boys."

"But we're going to slaughter him, sir!" roared Handforth.

"Do not be so ridiculous, Handforth!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell. "If you cannot use a less absurd term, I shall punish you. Let Alexis go at once. Do you hear me?"

"But he's done something terrible, sir!" said Watson breathlessly. "Yes, I'm going to tell! I don't care what Nipper says! It's only right that such a young criminal should be exposed!"

"Hear, hear!"

"It's not sneaking, in a case like

that!" said Handforth. "I'm dead against sneaking, but there's a limit."

"Rather!"

Mr. Crowell listened with mild astonishment.

"Do you know what this means, Fenton?" he asked.

"No, sir," said the captain of St. Frank's. "I haven't the faintest idea. But it seems that Alexis has done something to incur the anger of the juniors."

I came forward, but concealed myself behind some of the other juniors. I remembered that I was unrecognisable.

"Hold on, sir," I said huskily. "It's all right. Don't take any notice of Watson. There's nothing that we can tell you, Alexis has a little difference with me—but I'll settle that privately, later on."

Mr. Crowell turned.

"I need an explanation," he said grimly. "Come here, Nipper."

I had been expecting that.

"Sorry, sir!" I stammered. "I—I can't come just now!"

"You cannot!" shouted Mr. Crowell. "How dare you, Nipper? Come here at once, and explain what this means."

I realised that the only safe course was for me to escape. So I dodged away—and ran right into the arms of Morrow of the Sixth.

"No, you don't!" grinned Morrow, grabbing me. "Come back——"

"Oh!" I yelled. "Oh!"

I simply couldn't help it. Morrow had grasped me by the shoulder, and the yell of agony left my lips involuntarily.

"What's the matter, you young idiot?" snapped Morrow. "I didn't hurt you."

"His back's sore!" hissed Handforth.

"Sore!" said Morrow, slapping my back. "Don't talk nonsense—— Great Scott!"

That second blow made me absolutely giddy, and I reeled against Morrow and nearly fell. At last the

prefect realised that something was really amiss. He caught me, and held me firm.

"What's the matter, young 'un?" he asked kindly. "Why, what— You're as black as a nigger! You smell of paint— Well, I'm hanged!"

Mr. Crowell came striding up.

"I really fail to understand all this mysterious behaviour!" he exclaimed. "Nipper, why did you refuse to obey me just now?"

"I think he's been the victim of a rag, sir," said Morrow. "His face is all painted black, and his back seems to be sore. I expect some of the fellows have been hitting him. Their fun is sometimes rather severe."

"Is your back sore, Nipper?" asked Mr. Crowell.

"Er—yes, sir!" I admitted.

"Morrow, bring Nipper into the lobby," ordered the Form-master. "I will examine his back myself. I do not agree with these 'rags'; they are frequently too brutal. If Nipper has been harmed I shall punish the culprits severely."

The fat was in the fire then. I couldn't resist, and I was taken into the lobby, followed by a crowd of fellows. Most of them were glad that Mr. Crowell had decided this way—for they wanted to see Alexis punished.

Mr. Crowell was staggered when he saw me—in the electric light.

"Good gracious," he ejaculated, "his face is painted black! Is—*is* this Nipper?"

"Yes, sir," smiled Morrow. "His back seems to be— Great Scott!" gasped the prefect. "Look here, sir—look here! His back is raw!"

Mr. Crowell gazed at my back, horrified.

"This—this is ghastly!" he exclaimed. "Great goodness! Is it possible—is it conceivable—that the junior boys have committed this vicious assault? I cannot believe it, Morrow!"

The prefect looked grim.

"I think I know the truth, sir," he said. "Alexis did this!"

CHAPTER 4

Floored!

MR. CROWELL started, "Alexis!" he exclaimed. "But that boy could not have committed the assault single-handed! Nipper, you must tell me the truth. I insist!"

"I'd rather not say, sir—"

"This matter must be sifted to the bottom," declared Mr. Crowell sternly. "I cannot possibly allow such a grave affair to be passed by. Your back is in a shocking condition."

Fullwood stepped forward.

"May I speak, sir?" he asked.

"What do you want, Fullwood?" said the Form-master.

"Gulliver and Bell and I painted Nipper up-like that, sir," said Fullwood. "The truth is bound to come out now, so we may as well own up. But we didn't touch Nipper's back. Alexis did that, the young ruffian!"

I was rather surprised to find Fullwood owning up! But, as he had said, the truth was certain to come out; so it was his idea to make things easier for himself by owning up.

"This matter must be taken before Dr. Stafford," said Mr. Crowell. "You will come with me to the headmaster's study, boys—yes, all of you, Nipper, Fullwood, Bell, Gulliver, and Alexis."

"But I can't go like this, sir!" I protested.

"That is exactly how you must come, Nipper," said Mr. Crowell. "Dr. Stafford shall see how you have been treated. No, objections are useless. You must come with me at once."

Alexis' eyes flashed.

"I will not go!" he said angrily. "I refuse—"

"Oh, you refuse, do you?" exclaimed Morrow. "We'll see about that!"

He seized the Greek junior firmly, and rushed him along the passage. Alexis yelled and screamed, but it made no difference. He was compelled to go. And the rest of us followed at a more sedate pace.

There were crowds of fellows waiting

about the passages—waiting to hear the result of the visit to the Head. The whole truth was bound to come out now. There was no help for it.

Dr. Stafford nearly had a fit when he saw me, and it was some few moments before he realised that I was actually Nipper.

"This is appalling," he said. "The lad's hair is smothered with glue—he is painted like a savage—his clothing is in a disgusting state! I am shocked in the extreme!"

"There has been a 'rag,' sir," explained Fenton.

"There has been something disgraceful!" said the Head curtly.

He listened to Fullwood intently. Fullwood explained everything; he had no particular scruples about sneaking. He told how Alexis had first mooted the idea, and he told how the scheme had been carried out.

"We left Nipper in the vault, sir," concluded Fullwood. "It was only a jape, sir, after all. We didn't harm Nipper—as he'll say himself."

"No, sir, they didn't harm me in the least," I agreed. "I have no complaints to make against Fullwood."

"Alexis must have gone back into the vault after we left, sir," said Gulliver. "He had Nipper at his mercy—bound and helpless. And he laid it on heavily with a stick of some sort."

Bit by bit the truth was revealed; and the Head was utterly horrified when he had learned everything. My back was in a nasty state, and the Head was aghast after he had looked at it.

"Terrible—terrible!" he exclaimed. "And Alexis is responsible for this unprecedented act of brutality! Alexis, what have you to say?"

The Greek junior's eyes glittered. "I have to say nothing," he said. "I struck Nipper—yes. I am glad. He deserved more, the dog!"

"Silence!" thundered the Head. "You wretched boy! You admit your sin as though it were a virtue! If you were not new to this school—and, indeed, new to the ways of England—I

would expel you this very night. But you are strange here, and I will be as lenient as possible. To-morrow morning, before lessons, you will be flogged before the whole school. To-night you will sleep in the punishment-room. Fenton, kindly conduct Alexis to the punishment-room."

"Certainly, sir," said Fenton readily. "Come on, Alexis!"

At first the new boy refused, but he soon found out that refusing was worse than useless. And he was taken away, struggling and kicking. The Head breathed a sigh of relief as the door closed.

"The wretched boy!" he exclaimed. "You may rest assured, Nipper, that Alexis will be fully punished for his brutal treatment of you. I also consider that these other boys deserve severe punishment for their part in the disgraceful affair."

"It—it was only a joke, sir," muttered Fullwood.

The Head looked grim.

"Jokes of that sort, Fullwood, cannot be tolerated," he said. "You three boys will receive a caning, and I shall administer it now."

"Ye-es, sir!" said Fullwood.

And while the nits were going through it—let off comparatively lightly—I was taken by Morrow to a bath-room, and great efforts were made to remove the glue and the paint.

We succeeded, in a measure—but it would require several more washes before I was quite rid of the stuff. My back was terribly sore, and it was dressed and bandaged.

I went straight to bed. It was nearly time, in any case, and I didn't feel like putting my clothes on again just then. But I refused to go into the "sanny," and I received much sympathy from the fellows when they came up to bed.

"Never mind, old son," said Pitt. "We've got rid of Alexis for one night, and we shall have the extreme pleasure of seeing him flogged in the morning. How does your back feel?"

"Sore," I replied shortly.

"It's my opinion," remarked Handforth, "that we ought to give Pullwood and Gulliver and Bell a first-class ragging. They're mainly responsible—"

"Oh, don't be funny!" snapped Pullwood.

"Yes, dry up, Handy," I said. "It wasn't Pullwood's fault that Alexis crept back and took advantage of the situation."

"Just as you like," said Handforth. "But I thought it would be rather decent to have some fun in the dorm to-night. What about Alexis? I suppose you'll wipe him up as soon as you're well?"

I shook my head.

"He's going to be punished by the powers that are," I said. "I can't fight the cad after he's had a licking from the Head. That's why I didn't want the truth to be known. I was anxious to have the pleasure of flogging him myself. But it's imposs., so we'll say no more. Dry up! I want to get to sleep."

The buzz of conversation gradually died down. And very soon afterwards I dropped off to sleep—and slept like a top until the rising-bell went.

I sat up in bed, and gave a gasp.

"Phew!" I muttered. "It's worse than I thought it would be!"

But after moving about a bit the pain eased a little, and I commenced dressing.

"Well, I'm dashed!" exclaimed Handforth, blinking at me. "Here's Nipper getting up before anybody else—with his back like that, too!"

"Don't keep jawing about my back," I said tartly. "I'm not made of jelly. I'm worrying about my hair—it feels awful."

Several fellows grinned, and, in the end, I was glad to escape from the dormitory. I didn't want to be bothered with inquiries regarding the state of my health every minute.

There was a good deal of discussion that morning, on the subject of Alexis' flogging. For it was something unusual to have a fellow flogged in front

of the whole school. The juniors seemed to look forward to it as a kind of entertainment got up for their benefit, and I must admit that I looked forward to that "entertainment," too. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to see Titus Alexis squirming under the lash of the Head's cane.

When the time came, he did squirm—and scream, too.

The Head only addressed a few words to the school—for everybody knew about the flogging, and everybody knew why it was to be administered. Alexis was brought in by Penton, and he stood upon the platform defiantly.

His dark face was rather paler than usual, and his eyes were gleaming with a fire of hatred. As soon as he got on to the platform he faced the Head.

"Am I to be hit?" he asked fiercely.

"You will be silent, Alexis!"

"No! I shall not be silent," interrupted Alexis. "You have brought me here to hit me—to flog me. I will not be flogged! I came to this school to learn—to be educated. I did not come here to be knocked about by brutal schoolmasters!"

"Oh!"

There was a general murmur from the crowd.

"That'll mean ten extra slashes!" murmured Handforth, with satisfaction.

"You will be silent, Alexis!" exclaimed Dr. Stafford sternly. "Upon my soul! Do you imagine that you can dictate to me as you please? I see that it is necessary to teach you much before—"

"If you strike me, I will not be answerable for what occurs!" shouted Alexis. "I'll not stand it! I have done nothing—nothing at all! I hit Nipper because he deserved to be hit!"

A storm of booing and hissing broke out, but it was instantly quelled.

And then the flogging commenced. It was one of the most extraordinary scenes which had ever been witnessed in the old hall at St. Frank's. Titus Alexis refused to be flogged, and he struggled like a demon.

Before the Head could get busy with the cane, it was necessary for Warren, the school porter, to be called in. He, with the assistance of several prefects, held Alexis down.

Slash!

The cane descended with a will.

"Ow!" howled Alexis wildly. "I will kill you for this! I will have my revenge if you do not cease at once!"

Swish! Swish! Swish!

The cane rose and fell with monotonous regularity. The Head took absolutely no notice of the Greek junior's howls and screams and threats. The fellow created one of the most disgraceful scenes the school had ever witnessed.

One might have supposed that he was being done to death. He was certainly the biggest coward that the Remove had had in its ranks for many a day. Even Long, the sneak of the Form, was courageous in comparison.

It was over at last, and by that time Alexis was so exhausted by his struggles and by his outbursts, that he had very little to say. But what he did say was uttered in a tone of bitter hatred which almost made me feel uneasy.

"I will remember!" he exclaimed. "I will make you pay for this—and soon!"

It was a distinct threat, but the Head could afford to ignore it. Alexis was allowed to go, and it was universally decided in the Remove that he was to be completely barred in future. He was sent to Coventry, in fact, by practically the entire school. No decent fellow would have anything to do with him. He was too much of a cad for even Pullwood & Co. to associate with.

De Valerie and the Duke of Somerton held an important discussion before lessons that morning, and they arrived at a decision. Without wasting time, they went to Nelson Lee's study, and requested that Alexis should be removed from Study M.

Nelson Lee, realising the reasonable nature of the request, agreed to it. And Titus Alexis was placed in a tiny room at the end of the Remove passage. It was a study which was seldom used, for

it was hardly ever required. Alexis had it now—and he was welcome to it.

"Thank goodness!" said De Valerie, when the last of the new boy's things had been removed from Study M. "The air seems sweeter in here now. I wonder how long it'll be before we see the last of that squirming cad?"

The duke rubbed his chin.

"I don't think it'll be so very long, old chap," he replied. "He can't last, you know. It'll be the sack next time. You've only got to look at his eyes to see that he means mischief."

Somerton was undoubtedly correct.

Titus Alexis did mean mischief. And now his venomous hatred was directed against Dr. Stafford himself—against the whole school, to be more exact. Alexis was an outcast, owing to his own actions, and it seemed highly probable that he would waste no time in giving some evidence of his hatred.

CHAPTER 7.

At Dead of Night!

BOOM!

One o'clock tolled out solemnly from the great tower above the Ancient House. St. Frank's was asleep.

The Remove dormitory was still and dark and silent—silent, at all events, except for sundry snores.

Handforth was generally the chief offender in this respect; but to-night Handforth was not snoring. He did not appear to be sleeping peacefully at all, for he kept rolling about in bed.

"Oh!" he mumbled. "I feel awful!"

He was only half awake, but at last he sat up in bed and gazed round him into the gloom.

Handforth doubled himself up, and moaned.

Edward Oswald, to tell the truth, had a most uncomfortable feeling in his interior, and he had an awful fear that he was about to be sick.

He had eaten not wisely but too well at supper that evening, and rich pastries and kippers had not mixed at all well.

Hence he was feeling the effects of it now. In short, Handforth was bilious, and the unpleasant experience was new to him.

After a while he lay down again; but he couldn't rest.

It was impossible for him to obtain any sleep. He felt that he was suffocating—that he must have fresh air. And at length he tumbled out of bed and swayed over towards one of the windows.

He pushed open the sash weakly and leaned out.

The cool night air beat upon his face, and he breathed in deeply with a sense of great relief. And undoubtedly the fresh air did him a lot of good. He remained at the window for some little time, until the dark Triangle below had become more distinct.

His eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, and where all had been black before he now saw definite objects. He could recognise the woodshed, and Warren's barrow standing near by.

He could see the fountain, with its wide pool. Everything was still and quiet, and nothing disturbed the peace of the night except the distant rumble of a goods train travelling on its journey.

The stars were shining overhead, and the air was rather cool. Handforth decided that he had better get back to bed. He had no wish to catch a cold on the top of his other indisposition.

But, just as he was about to leave the window, his attention became fixed.

"My hat!" he muttered.

He stood gazing down at something which was visible to him near the College House. A figure was moving—a human form! It lurked about for some little time, and then disappeared.

Handforth waited, his heart beating fast. Then, once again, the figure was visible. It was acting in a most suspicious fashion, for it crouched over one of the gratings which led into the College House cellars.

"By George!" murmured Handforth. "A burglar!"

There seemed no doubt upon that point. Who else, indeed, would be prowling about the school at one o'clock in the morning?

Handforth didn't exactly know what to do. He wasn't feeling up to an investigation himself—although, under ordinary circumstances, he would have delighted in such a thing.

But all he wanted to do was to get back into bed and to lay quiet and still. He felt dizzy even as he walked across the dormitory and approached a bed. The next moment I awoke, feeling a hand on my shoulder.

"Hallo!" I said. "Who's that?"

"Don't yell, you ass!" whispered Handforth. "It's me!"

"Oh! What's wrong, Handy?"

Handforth took a deep breath.

"I woke up, feeling bilious," he said. "I shall be all right to-morrow. I woke you up because I want you to give the giddy alarm."

"What the dickens for?" I asked.

"Just now I was at the window, and there's somebody down there near the College House—a burglar!" said Handforth. "I thought I'd better wake you up, Nipper, because you're rather keen on burglars."

I grinned.

"Try pulling somebody else's leg, old son," I said pleasantly. "You're not going to catch me like that—"

"You—you fathead!" hissed Handforth. "I'm not trying to pull your silly leg! It's the truth—I saw the chap with my own eyes!"

"I suppose it's the effect of your bilious attack—"

"I tell you I saw him!" roared Handforth.

"Don't wake the whole school!" I said, with a shruckle. "Where did you see this prowling, sinister figure?"

"Come to the window!"

I slipped out of bed, and I must confess that I felt very doubtful. Handforth was a famous fellow for getting wrong ideas into his head. One had to be very careful when dealing with his "discoveries."

We both looked out of the window, and Handforth pointed.

"You know those gratings which lead into the cellars of the College House?" he said. "Well, the burglar was prowling about one of them."

I fixed my gaze upon the wall of the College House. The gratings which Handforth referred to were well known to me. There were none connected with the Ancient House, however.

"Nobody could get into the school that way," I whispered. "Those gratings are padlocked. Besides, the cellar windows are barred——"

"I'm not saying anything about that," interrupted Handforth. "All I know is that the chap was lurking about—— My hat! There he is again! Can't you see him?"

I stared hard.

"Yes, I can see him," I murmured. "Dry up!"

The figure was dim and indistinct. It had just appeared from the clump of trees which stood near the ruins of the old monastery. The figure crossed the open space, and came to a halt near one of the iron gratings.

Then it vanished.

"What did I tell you?" breathed Handforth. "He's got in."

"It certainly looks like it," I agreed grimly. "My son, this matter needs to be investigated. It's a jolly good thing you were feeling ill——"

"Eh?"

"I mean, it's a good thing you came to the window," I explained. "We'd better make haste and slip some clothes on."

"I don't think I'll come," said Handforth. "I—I'm not feeling quite up to the mark, you know. I shall be better in bed. Take some of the other chaps with you, and collar the burglar."

"That's just what I am going to do," I said briskly.

I rapidly shook the shoulders of Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West. They stared at me sleepily in the gloom.

"Begad! Is that you, Nipper, old boy?" asked Montie.

"Yes," I replied. "Slip out of bed and dress yourself——"

"But it's dark, you know—it isn't time to get up yet!" protested Tregellis-West. "What's the idea of——"

"Burglars!" I whispered keenly. "Hurry up!"

"Begad!"

Sir Montie asked no further questions. And Tommy Watson quickly jumped out of bed and was soon slipping into his shirt and trousers. Within three minutes we were ready, and Handforth was back in bed.

He sat up as we were about to depart. "I've a good mind to come, after all," he said doubtfully.

"You stay where you are, old son," I replied. "You wouldn't be any good to us, even if you did come. You're not feeling fit, Handy, and we couldn't accept the responsibility of allowing you out in the chill night air."

"You silly ass!" growled Handforth.

We passed out of the dormitory, and very soon afterwards we were stealing down the stairs into the hall. We made our exit by the most convenient way——via the window of Study C.

Once out in the Triangle I cautioned my chums to refrain from talking, and to follow behind me in single file. We proceeded along the wall of the Ancient House in deep shadow.

The College House loomed up in front of us. I called a halt, and for some few moments we remained quite still, watching and waiting. But nothing happened. The school grounds were still and quiet.

"You fellows stay here for a tick," I breathed.

"But what——"

Without giving them a chance to question me I slipped away into the gloom, and made a detour. Finally I arrived against the wall of the College House, and edged my way along until I came to the first of the cellar gratings.

It was quite firmly fixed.

But when I arrived at the next grating I found a different state of affairs. The thing was open, and a yawning

black hole lay before me. So Handforth had not been wrong.

Somebody was attempting to burgle the College House!

I was almost certain that the fellow, whoever he was, was lurking inside the cellars at that moment. So, without loss of time, I crept back to my chums and informed them of what I had seen.

"The time to act is now!" I concluded. "What we've got to do is to nip into that cellar and capture the rotter—"

"Hold on!" breathed Watson suddenly. "Look there!"

He pointed.

Sir Montie and I saw a dim figure moving towards the College House—towards the open grating. My surmise, then, had been wrong. The burglar was not within the cellar—unless there were two of them.

We watched the fellow with interest. He was not very big, and he was attired in an overcoat. He seemed to be carrying something heavy—something which resembled a square tin.

"I wonder what his game can be?" I breathed.

"Let's pounce upon him," suggested Watson.

"Good!"

I was in full agreement with the suggestion, and we all started forward at the same time. But the figure disappeared into the cellar, and when we arrived all was quiet and dark.

"We'll wait," I whispered. "We'll collar him as he comes out with his giddy booty!"

"Beard! That's the idea," said Sir Montie. "Although, if it comes to that, dear fellows, I don't think the fishy rascal will find much booty to carry away."

We waited, grim and silent.

We were inclined to be somewhat impatient after five minutes had elapsed. Watson suggested that we should enter the cellar, and Montie seconded the proposal. But I was against it.

"He'd probably slip away if we did

that," I said. "He's bound to come out by this exit, sooner or later, and so we shall nab him."

"Oh, all right!"

"We're certainly in your hands, dear fellow."

And so we waited for a further period. And then we heard a sound just below us. Two seconds later somebody appeared in the opening, and scrambled up to the ground level.

"On him!" I said sharply.

We all sprang at the same moment, and the stranger was overwhelmed.

He collapsed to the ground, and we simply piled over him. He scarcely made any attempt to struggle.

"Now, you rotter," I exclaimed, "let's see who you are!"

At the same moment I flashed out my electric torch—fully upon our prisoner's features.

"Great Scott!" gasped Watson.

"This—this is simply amazing!" declared Sir Montie.

For our prisoner was Titus Alexis of the Remove.

CHAPTER 8.

Strange Behaviour!

THE Greek junior's face was very pale.

"Let me go!" he muttered savagely. "You have no right to keep me in this way! Let me go! Do you hear me?"

"We can hear you all right," I replied. "But you've got to tell us what particular game you're playing, my son. What's the idea of prowling about in the middle of the night?"

Alexis breathed hard.

"I was restless—I could not sleep," he exclaimed. "It is nothing; you need not be frightened."

"We're not frightened, you Greek idiot!" growled Watson.

"What were you doing in the College House cellar?" I demanded. "Out with it, Alexis! Speak up before we give you a licking!"

The Greek junior glared at me balefully.

"It is not your business!" he snarled.

"I think it is," I replied. "You have no right here in the middle of the night. We thought you were a burglar."

Alexis laughed harshly.

"Bah! You are making the fuss over nothing!" he snapped. I was walking for exercise—nothing more. This grating was open, and I was curious. That is all."

"You were carrying something not long ago," put in Watson.

"I was carrying a canful of water," said Alexis. "But why should I explain to you? Let me go! It is no concern of yours; and if you inform the masters about this I shall have my revenge—"

"Oh, dry up!" I said contemptuously. "You're always talking about revenge. We shan't tell any of the masters—you needn't be afraid. But if you're spotted out here you'll be dropped on pretty heavily—that's all. I'm quite certain I'm not interested in your silly movements!"

I rose to my feet.

"Let's get back to bed, my sons," I added.

Watson and Tregellis-West followed me: I was not at all keen to investigate the matter any further. Titus Alexis did not interest me in the slightest degree. He was an eccentric youth, and there was no explaining his conduct.

But Tommy and Sir Montie were not quite satisfied.

"I wonder what the cad was up to?" said Watson, as we re-entered the Remove dormitory. "It strikes me as being queer—jolly queer!"

"Dear fellow, you are quite right," said Montie, shaking his head. "I cannot possibly think of anything which will form an explanation. Alexis was up to something very shady—"

"Oh, never mind him," I interrupted. "He can't do much harm, anyhow. Perhaps some of the College House

fellows have incurred his enmity. I'll give Christine the tip to-morrow—to look out for trouble."

"But he said he was carrying a can of water," argued Watson. "What the dickens could he be doing with a can of water in the cellar?"

"I don't know, and I don't care," I said. "As soon as I found that Alexis was the night-bird I lost all interest in the matter. Rats to the chap! I shall be glad when he's sacked."

We all got back to bed, and Sir Montie and Tommy were soon fast asleep. I was asleep, too, but I awoke shortly afterwards, and found that Alexis was getting back into bed.

In the morning he was up before everyone else—as usual. The Greek junior was certainly not lazy in that respect; he was always an early riser. But we all had an idea that his object in getting dressed before the rising-bell was to avoid contact with us as much as possible.

Handforth was much better.

In fact, the sturdy leader of Study D was practically himself again. He had slept off his bilious attack.

"By the way, what about that burglar?" said Handforth, looking at me.

"Burglar?" said several juniors.

"Oh, nothing, I replied carelessly. "There wasn't a burglar, Handy. We made a bloomer. I'll tell you about it later."

"But I don't see—"

Handforth was interrupted, however, and the subject was not brought up again until I came across him in the Triangle, just before breakfast.

"There was no need to let everybody know," I said. "That chap we saw last night, Handy, was Alexis. We sprang upon him and collared him. But, of course, we let him go again."

"What was he doing?" asked Handforth.

"I don't know—and I'm quite certain I don't care."

Handforth looked doubtful.

"I'll bet the rotter was up to some mischief," he declared. He's not con-

needed with the College House, in any case, and I don't see what game he was playing. Didn't you find out?"

"No," I replied. "Alexis might have been doing all sorts of things—but the most likely explanation is that he was just prowling about for the mere curiosity of it. He's just that kind of mysterious beggar. Anyhow, it's not our business to keep our eyes on Alexis. Confound the chap!"

If he had not been so cordially detested by everybody, Alexis' movements would have proved of some interest to us. But he was so universally disliked we didn't care a jot for him.

By dinner-time I had forgotten practically all about it. For one thing, Alexis was behaving very strangely. He had always been eccentric in his manner, but on that day he was particularly so.

In the Form-room Mr. Crowell had been able to do nothing with him. He had given vague answers to the Form-master's questions—proving that he was not even attempting to attend to the lesson.

And Mr. Crowell, who was thoroughly tired of Alexis, did not pay much attention to him. The Greek junior was allowed to go his own sweet way. He would soon be removed from St. Frank's.

"There's something runny about Alexis to-day," remarked Pitt, as he met me in the passage before dinner. "Haven't you noticed it?"

"Yes," I replied. "He looks a bit queer than usual."

Pitt nodded.

"The expression in his eyes makes me think that he'd be better off in a jolly lunatic asylum," he remarked.

I believe the chap is half-dotty, Nipper.

"He's a queer merchant," I commented.

"Some of the fags are absolutely afraid of him," put in Grey, who had joined up. "They bunk when Alexis gets near them."

"Well, we shall soon be rid of him—

that's one thing," I said. "We don't want any of his kind at St. Frank's."

The others heartily agreed with me. At dinner-time Alexis sat in his place like a mummy. He spoke to nobody, and looked straight before him. His face was set and expressionless, and he only played about with his food, eating less than a quarter of what was served.

He was the first out after grace had been said, and when I emerged into the Triangle with my chums we found Alexis marching about beneath the Elms. His actions were so quaint that we could not avoid watching him.

"He's off his rocker," said Watson.

"Well, he certainly seems to be," I agreed.

Titus Alexis was gesticulating with his arms, and every now and again he would break into a gleeful chuckle. It struck me as being the laugh of a demented being.

Just before afternoon lessons commenced, I happened to run into Nelson Lee. And I mentioned the subject to him.

"What about Alexis?" I asked. "Haven't you noticed him, sir?"

"Alexis seems to be attracting great notice, young 'un," said the guv'nor.

"I believe he's mad, sir——"

"No, not that, Nipper," interrupted Lee. "The lad is quite out of his element at St. Frank's. He loathes everybody here, and his misery is playing upon his mind to such an extent that he hardly knows what he is doing."

"But he's an awful young scamp, sir," I remarked.

"He is, Nipper," agreed Nelson Lee.

"I really think that Master Alexis is the worst junior we have ever had at the school. He is a coward, and his revengeful nature is something which we cannot fathom."

"I hope he'll soon be going, guv'nor," I remarked.

"You need not be concerned on that point, my lad," said Nelson Lee.

"Alexis will be taken from St. Frank's not later than to-morrow, or the next day."

"Good!"

"His parents have been communicated with, and they have been informed that it is not possible to keep the boy at the school," said Nelson Lee. "So you will not be worried with your queer Form-fellow much longer."

"Good!" I exclaimed. "The sooner he goes the better."

When afternoon lessons were over I told the fellows that Alexis would shortly be leaving the school, and the news was received without one word of regret. All the Remove were glad he was going.

During the remainder of that day Alexis was tolerated quite contentedly. And he certainly needed a good deal of toleration. For he was more wild than ever in his conduct.

Realising that Alexis was an outcast in the Remove, the Head had caused him to be placed in a bed-room by himself. That night, therefore, the Greek junior did not go to sleep in the Remove dormitory.

"By George!" said Handforth, "The air seems a lot fresher in here without that dotty ass! Thank goodness, he's going!"

And Handforth's view was shared by everybody.

All the juniors went to sleep peacefully. I was one of the first to drop off, and for some reason I awoke just as the clock was striking two. Why I should awaken at that unearthly hour was rather mysterious.

I lay in bed fully awake, and with my eyes open. Everything was quiet and still, and I struggled over in order to go to sleep again. But, somehow, my attention was attracted by something on the ceiling of the dormitory.

It seemed to me that there was a light playing somewhere. There was a kind of flicker visible on the ceiling—very faint, but quite apparent. I lay in bed, wondering for a few minutes.

There was no moon, and I could not

imagine what the source of that mysterious flicker could be. It died down for a second or two, and then increased until it was a distinct glow.

I sat up in bed, quite puzzled.

"There must be some explanation," I told myself. "Perhaps there's a hay stack on fire somewhere, or——"

My thoughts came to a standstill as the whole dormitory was illuminated by a sudden burst of fire. And, at the same moment, the faint sound of a crackling roar came to my ears.

My heart beat fast as I jumped out of bed.

For the conviction was upon me that the fire was not far distant!

CHAPTER 2.

Fire!

FLICKER-FLICKER!

The light in the dormitory increased, and it was a ruddy lurid glow. I crossed quickly to the window—and then I knew the actual truth. There was no longer any doubt in my mind.

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed huskily.

I stared across the Triangle with wide open, fixed eyes.

Huge tongues of flame were shooting up from the cellars of the College House. From every grating they were licking their way up round the brick walls, leaping higher and higher.

The flames were actually reaching the lower windows, and even as I watched I saw the glass shatter and crack. Curtains caught fire, and there was a fresh uproar of flame.

And yet everything was still!

No lights were showing in the upper windows, and it was quite obvious to me that the inmates of the College House were unaware of the truth. The school slept, unconscious of the disaster.

Fire!

The very knowledge of it staggered me. It was no isolated blaze, either. To judge by the size of the flames, the

whole basement of the College House was already a roaring, flaming mass.

I thought rapidly. My first instinct was to shout an alarm at the top of my voice. But I checked this impulse. To awaken the juniors in that fashion would probably cause a panic—although, of course, there was not the slightest danger in the Ancient House. The fire could not spread across the Triangle.

I came to a decision within ten seconds.

Without troubling to dress myself I rushed to the door, passed out into the corridor, and ran along at full pelt until I arrived at Nelson Lee's bed-room. I charged right in, switching on the electric light as I did so.

The guv'nor sat up in bed instantly. "Nipper!" he exclaimed. "What is the meaning—"

"The College House is on fire, sir!" I panted hoarsely.

Nelson Lee leapt out of bed, ran to the window, and pushed up the sash. He gazed out for only a second, and then turned, his face pale and set.

"Good gracious!" he exclaimed tensely. "The lower part of the College House is a raging furnace! Go back to the dormitory, and wait until Mr. Crowell arrives. Don't wake anybody."

"What are you going to do, sir?" I gasped.

"I'm going over to the College House at once—"

"But I want to come with you!" I said. "The fellows are all asleep here, and there's no danger. And I might be of use over there."

"All right—come!" snapped Lee.

He threw a dressing-gown over himself, and I grabbed one of his ordinary jackets. Then we dashed out. The guv'nor paused for a few seconds at Mr. Crowell's bed-room, to awaken him.

Then we hastened downstairs, and went out into the Triangle.

The whole expanse of the school grounds was brilliantly illuminated by the glare which came from the College House. There was no doubt about the sequences of the outbreak. As I looked

at the leaping flames, I told myself that the whole of the College House was doomed.

We rushed to the side door—the main entrance was already burning, for the flames had spread with appalling rapidity. And even now they were roaring with a ferocity which I failed to understand. It was as though the cellars were filled with goods of a highly inflammable nature.

The side door was locked, and the guv'nor could not move it, so, without compunction, he smashed a window with one blow of his elbow. A minute later we were in the house, fighting our way through masses of choking smoke.

We reached one of the rear passages, found the stairs somehow, and rushed up to the first landing. The smoke here was not quite so thick, but it was increasing with every moment that passed.

As we moved forward the electric light blazed out, and a figure, clad in pyjamas, came looming out of the smoke. It was Mr. Stockdale, the Housemaster of the College House.

"Mr. Lee!" he panted, as he recognised us. "Do—do you know what this means? I only awakened a few moments ago—"

"You must get the boys out as quickly as possible, Stockdale," said Nelson Lee rapidly. "The lower part of the building is on fire. Our first care must be to see that everybody is saved."

"Good heavens!" panted Mr. Stockdale, horrified.

After that there was tremendous excitement and commotion. Each dormitory was informed of its peril. Prefects were aroused, and they took charge of the juniors. The seniors were left to look after themselves.

The fire was spreading so rapidly that the main staircase was already cut right off. And every passage and corridor was filled with choking, blinding smoke. I was forgotten in the general excitement.

I found myself in the Remote dormitory, where the fellows were being

marshalled into orderly columns by two prefects.

"There's no danger if you keep your heads," shouted Reynolds, of the Sixth. "All right," yelled Christine. "We're cool enough!"

"Let's get outside!"

"Don't jaw!"

The Juniors knew their fire-drill perfectly, and there was not even a sign of panic. In the most orderly fashion the long lines of boys filed out through the smoke-choked passages.

The Third had been rescued first; then came the Remove, and the Fifth. And when they arrived outside in the Triangle, each Form was collected together by its particular master, and the roll was taken.

By the time the College House had been cleared the whole school knew of the fire, and there was not a single person sleeping. The Ancient House fellows were not allowed out of the House, for they were quite safe. And if they ran out, there would be confusion.

But every window in the Ancient House was packed with excited, flushed faces.

Every College fellow answered to his name. There was not one absentee, and Mr. Stockdale was greatly relieved. His whole household had been rescued from the burning building.

But, had there been any confusion, terrible consequences might have resulted. For, in that choking atmosphere, it would have been easy to lose count of many fellows. The junior studies were well alight, and flames were roaring from the windows. The hall was a furnace.

There were no class-rooms in the College House; the lower floor consisted of studies and recreation-rooms, while the upper floors were dormitories and bed-rooms. And the whole lot seemed to be doomed.

The school fire-brigade—made up mostly of seniors—was already hard at work. Hoses were playing, and the streams of water hissed upon the blaz-

ing mass. But the fire had obtained big hold.

"Oh, my goodness!" said B. Christine, as he watched the scene. "Isn't it awful! Look at our studies you chaps! The whole building's doomed!"

"It's horrible!" panted Yorke.

"How did it happen?" asked son body.

"Goodness knows!" said Christine. "I was asleep when the alarm came. It seems that the cellars caught fire first. Thank goodness, everybody was rescued in time. Just look at the flames!"

The juniors were awed and scared.

"What shall we do after this?" asked Talmadge buskily. "They can't save the dormitories—it's impossible! I shan't have any place to sleep, or—anything!"

"Don't bother about that now," said Christine. "They might get the fire under control yet, if the Banding people hurry up. The fire-brigade ought to be here already!"

Meanwhile, excited comments were being passed by the Ancient House crowd.

"It's doomed," said Handforth, who occupied a prominent position in one of the Remove dormitory windows. "I doubt about that, my sons. The College House will be a heap of ruins in the morning."

"Oh, rot!"

"They'll get the better of the fire. They watched, fascinated.

The flames were leaping higher and higher. The figures of the fellows with the hoses looked like demons in a panorama, with the lurid glare as a background. And the crackle and roar of the flames filled the air with sound. The heat came over the Triangle in choking waves, and the sparks flew into the sky in myriads.

Crowds of people were collecting on the side in the road. Practically every inhabitant of the village had been aroused. Farm people for miles around were hurrying to the scene, anxious to help.

It was a case of all hands to the pumps; but everybody had the conviction that the College House was doomed.

As to how the fire originated, this was not considered at the moment. But later, when the fellows had got over their first excitement, the question arose. Christine and Co. were particularly puzzled.

"It's astounding," said Bob Christine. "I can't imagine how the old place got alight. It seemed to start in the cellars—but what was there in the cellars to catch fire?"

"Nobody seems to know," remarked Clapson. "It's a mystery."

I was near the spot, and I heard what was being said. Fortunately the night was very mild, and nobody was likely to come to any harm, for the majority of the fellows were in their night attire.

"The fire certainly started in the cellars," I said. "I was the first to spot it, and the flames were leaping out of the cellar-gratings. Was there a lot of paraffin oil there—or petrol?"

"Not that I know of," replied Christine.

"Well, the truth will come out, I suppose," I said. "Anyhow, it seems that you fellows are going to lose your happy home."

"And our belongings, too," growled Yorke.

"Yes, it's rough luck," I said sympathetically. "But these things can't be helped; fires are terrible, and you ought to consider yourselves lucky to have escaped without injury."

"We do," said Christine. "Thank goodness—My hat! Look at that!"

A tremendous burst of fire had suddenly roared out of an upper window. The fire had eaten its way through the flooring, and was well on its way to the roof.

"That finishes it!" said Christine. "What a rotten shame!"

I strolled away towards a group of Ancient House prefects, who were discussing something with considerable animation. As I came up they turned to me.

"Half a minute, Nipper," said Morrow. "Have you seen anything of Alexis?"

"No, nothing," I replied. "I never thought of the bounder."

"He's gone!" exclaimed Fenton.

"Gone!"

"Well, he's not in his bed-room," declared Morrow. "We've searched high and low, but there's not a sign of the fellow to be seen. Mr. Lee knows about it, and he's leading another search now."

"Yes, but why should Alexis be missing?" I asked. "He belongs to our house, and there was no reason why he should be out—"

I paused, as a startling thought came to my head.

Titus Alexis was not in his bed-room. He was nowhere to be found, and nobody knew what had become of him. The obvious explanation was that the Greek junior had been aroused by the fire, and was watching it somewhere—temporarily lost in the confusion.

But it is not always advisable to regard the obvious as the actual truth. I suddenly remembered the adventure of the previous night. Alexis had been out of the dormitory at dead of night, and he had been engaged upon something of a secret nature.

He had been active in the vicinity of the College House! Yes, and in the cellars! We had surprised Alexis in the act of carrying a square tin down into the cellar—a tin which he declared to be filled with water—

"My hat!" I muttered.

For the truth had suddenly dawned upon me, and I was disgusted with myself for not having thought of it earlier, before the disaster occurred. Alexis had deliberately committed this crime.

It was forced upon me that the tin he had carried was a two-gallon petrol can, and, almost certainly, it had been filled with the inflammable spirit!

For all I knew he had been working on the same mission for many nights. We had only made the discovery because Handforth had happened to require fresh air in the middle of the night.

The College House had been fired deliberately!

It had been no accident, but a malicious act of revenge!

Alexis must have placed cans of petrol in various parts of the cellars, in readiness for the moment. And he had, at a given time, poured the spirit over everything, and had then set a match to it.

What else was there to think?

He had sworn that he would be avenged upon the Head—upon everybody in the school. And it was easy to understand, accepting this explanation as granted, how the flames had spread so rapidly.

While I was still thinking, I caught sight of Nelson Lee. He had just appeared from the lobby of the Ancient House, and he was looking worried. He saw me at the same moment, and beckoned me.

"Have you seen Alexis?" he asked sharply.

"I was just going to ask you the same thing, sir," I said. "I don't know anything about him—at least, not for certain. But I suspect a lot."

"What do you mean, Nipper?" demanded the gov'nor. "Alexis is not to be found anywhere. If you can throw any light upon the mystery——"

"Well, for one thing, I believe that Alexis started this fire," I said.

Nelson Lee stared at me.

"What nonsense, Nipper!" he exclaimed curtly. "The very idea is out of the question!"

"I'm not so sure about that, sir," I went on. "You know as well as I do that Alexis has sworn to have a terrible revenge. He hates everybody here, and he's capable of any violence or madness. You know that, gov'nor."

"But, my boy——"

"Listen, sir," I said anxiously.

In a few words I told him of what had occurred on the previous night. He listened with a grim expression in his eyes. When I had finished he grasped my shoulder.

"Nipper, I believe you are right," he

said tensely. "It seems only too obvious that Alexis did this. But where is he? Is it possible that the wretched youth perished in the fire of his own making?"

I startled.

"Great Scott!" I gasped. "I hadn't thought of that, sir. But if he really started the fire—with petrol, too—it's quite possible that he was overcome by the original outburst of flame."

"That is what I am afraid of, my boy," said Lee gravely. "Even if the lad committed this crime, it will be shocking if he has perished. I must institute another search at once."

And the gov'nor hurried away.

I should have followed him, perhaps, but at that moment the Bannington Fire Brigade arrived, and there was a tremendous outburst of cheering.

"Hurrah! Hurrah!"

A perfect roar came from the Ancient House, and there was fresh excitement. Very smartly the Bannington men connected up their hoses, and before long further volumes of water were being hurled at the burning building.

But it seemed to have little effect.

The flames had obtained such a firm hold that nothing would smother them. The water seemed to make little or no difference. For a moment or two the flames would die down, and immense columns of steam and smoke would arise. And then, with a terrific roar, the flames would leap upwards once again.

Already they were licking the roof. The upper windows were a mass of livid fire, and the flames were spreading with tremendous rapidity. Realising that the task was a hopeless one, the firemen at once concentrated all their efforts upon pouring water on the far corner of the building, where only a few feet separated it from the Head's house.

The chief anxiety now was to prevent the fire from spreading. The College House itself was doomed.

The College House fellows watched the destruction of their beloved pile

with feelings too deep for words. The disaster was so great that they were unable to realise its full significance at the time.

And then came a fresh excitement.

Bob Christine was the first to give the alarm. He was gazing up at the College House, his expression slightly sad.

"There goes another top window!" he exclaimed. "They'll all be alight soon. My hat! I don't believe the walls will be left standing! Look at the smoke rolling up from the roof!"

It was an impressive sight and the fellows watched in silence.

And then Bob Christine gave a husky shout.

"Look!" he ejaculated. "There's somebody on the roof!"

I rushed to Christine's side having heard his words.

"Where?" I shouted. "Where do you mean?"

"There—look!" panted Bob.

He pointed with a quivering finger, and a feeling of horror came over me as I saw a figure on the very roof of the burning building—a figure which clung to the main chimney stack.

"Good heavens!" I panted. "He'll be killed!"

For I knew the truth in a flash.

The figure in such a position of deadly peril was that of Titus Alexis!

CHAPTER 16.

Rescuing a Rascal!

"Hi!"

"Who is it?"

"Where's the fire escape?"

"Save him!"

A perfect roar of shouts went up. Fellows over in the Ancient House were yelling too, for all eyes were fixed upon that figure on the burning roof.

"It's Alexis!" yelled Handforth.

"Alexis!"

"The idiot will be burnt to death!"

Nelson Lee came running forward as the Bannington fire-escape was being

rapidly hoisted into position. Up till now it had only been used as a hose carrier, but it seemed that it was to be used for the purpose of saving life.

"You must be careful!" exclaimed Lee sharply. "I am afraid the boy is demented, and it will be just as well to take every precaution!"

The firemen were fully warned, and they knew that their task was likely to be a difficult one. There was danger in it, too, for the heat near the face of the building was almost overpowering. But the escape was erected at a spot where the flames had not yet reached.

The foremost fireman reached the gutter and was about to step upon the slightly sloping roof when he halted. Titus Alexis was standing a short distance away—a wild figure, only half clothed. He was blackened and scorched, and his hair was singed.

He truly looked insane as he stood there.

"Go back—go back!" he screamed.

"Steady, young man!" shouted the fireman. "There's no need to get excited. Come along this way——"

"I will not be saved!" shrieked the Greek junior. "I will die—here! If you move a step farther I will fling myself into the flames!"

The fireman did not move.

"Try to calm yourself, my lad," he said grimly. "If you stay here you'll be killed. Be sensible and come with me!"

"Go!" roared Alexis. "Go, or I will fling myself down!"

The fireman retreated, knowing well enough that the demented boy was capable of carrying out his threat.

Both the men descended to the ground, and there was a great hush when it was observed that they were alone.

"What's the matter?" I muttered.

"Why aren't they bringing Alexis down?"

The firemen reached the ground, and Nelson Lee hurried up.

"The lad is mad, sir, I think!" said

the fireman. "He threatened to throw himself into the flames if we went near him—and it was more than I dare do to step forward."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I was afraid of something of the kind," he said grimly.

He thought for a moment or two, and then again spoke.

"You must go up the ladder once more," he said swiftly. "Make no attempt to get on to the roof, but keep the boy's attention engaged. Do you understand? If he shows any sign of jumping down, retreat."

"Very good, sir."

The fireman again commenced the ascent, and Nelson Lee hastened away. What was he going to do? Nobody seemed to notice him except me—for all eyes were fixed upon that silhouetted figure on the roof.

Nelson Lee ran with all his speed into the headmaster's house. He hastened upstairs, mounted slight after flight until he arrived in the attic. At last he came upon a skylight, and in a moment he had pushed it open, and was on the roof. A great wave of heat surged round him.

The College House lay to the left, burning fiercely. Volumes of water were pouring on the wall next to the Head's house—and the fire, at that spot, was subdued. The two buildings were separated near the roof by a space of about eight feet.

Nelson Lee did not hesitate.

The College House roof was flat just there, with a wide stone parapet running round the edge. Watching for a second, the schoolmaster-detective could see Titus Alexis. His back was towards Lee, and he was facing the spot where the firemen were just visible on the ladder.

Nelson Lee, unseen by a soul, took a short run along the roof. Then he sprang into space. The slightest miscalculation would have meant instant death.

But the detective landed squarely on

the roof, stumbled forward, and then regained his balance.

He ran forward on the instant—for Alexis became aware of his purpose the lad would probably fling himself to destruction. A tremendous roar went up as Nelson Lee was seen.

As swiftly as a tiger, Nelson Lee sprang upon Alexis from behind. His arms grasped the lad, and held him firm.

"Oh! Thank goodness!" I gasped.

"He's got him!"

"Hurrah!"

"Three cheers for Mr. Lee!"

"Hurrah!"

But Nelson Lee was not out of danger yet. Titus Alexis twisted like an eel, his face working with mad fury. The firemen were rushing up the ladder, in order to render assistance.

"Let me—let me go!" screamed Alexis.

"Steady, my boy!" exclaimed Nelson Lee.

The Greek junior was almost foaming at the mouth, and he struggled insanely in Nelson Lee's grasp. For a moment the detective had all his wits cut out to hold his captive secure.

And then the firemen arrived. They were about to render assistance when Alexis became as limp as a rag in Lee's arms.

The boy had fainted.

For a moment Lee suspected that he was shamming. But this was not the case. Alexis was quite unconscious. And, in that condition, he was brought safely to the ground.

The cheering which arose as Nelson Lee landed was deafening. He had undoubtedly saved Alexis from certain death—and the school showed him that it fully appreciated the brave nature of his task.

Alexis had been saved, and there was now no danger of any human life being sacrificed. The unconscious boy was taken straight into the Ancient House, and he at once received medical attention. Dr. Brett had been one of the first to arrive from the village.

"He has only swooned," he declared, after examining him. "Before the morning he will be conscious again. It is my opinion that he was mad with fear and hatred. It would not be correct to say that he is mentally deranged."

The headmaster, haggard and agitated, turned to Nelson Lee.

"And do you really think, Mr. Lee, that Alexis caused the fire?" he asked.

"There can be little doubt with regard to that point," replied Lee. "When all the evidence is gathered, I think we shall have overwhelming proof that Alexis deliberately set fire to the College House. It was a mad act of revenge."

The Head sighed deeply.

"Why did I not send him away yesterday?" he exclaimed. "But I never guessed—I never dreamed that he would commit such an act as this! It is terrible—appalling!"

"I think we should be very grateful for the fact that all lives have been saved," said Mr. Stockdale.

The Head nodded.

"That is true enough, Mr. Stockdale," he said. "But it is shocking to see the place being burnt down before our eyes. The damage will be extensive, for the whole of your house will be destroyed."

Mr. Stockdale nodded gloomily.

Meanwhile, the crowd was watching the final stages of the fire. The worst was over, and that end of the building which almost joined the Head's house was smouldering. The fire had been quenched there. But every other portion of it was a red-hot mass.

Crash!

A portion of the roof fell with a terrific noise. Great showers of sparks flew up, followed by a burst of flame which leapt a hundred feet into the sky. The glare of the fire could have been seen for many miles around.

The roof did not completely collapse. The firemen gradually became masters of the situation, and when the first faint streaks of dawn were appearing

in the sky, the blaze had subsided, and the worst was over.

By that time the College House fellows had been marshalled into the Ancient House. Everything in the nature of a bed was pressed into service. Mattresses were placed in the Form rooms, all over the floors, and juniors and seniors were sleeping mixed up in confusion.

Quite an amount of stuff had been moved from the College House before the fire had become really bad. Most of the mattresses and bedclothes had been flung out of the upper windows by prefects and masters, and the majority of these had been removed. The fellows' clothing, too, had been saved.

But all the furniture, and the boys' other belongings were destroyed by the flames. Not that the boys cared much at that time. They were too weary and sleepy.

The College House had been burnt down, and all the boys who belonged to it were left homeless. What was to happen in the near future was something of a puzzle, and I did not worry my head about it.

I went to sleep with the rest, and dreamed about raging fires and hosts of madmen dancing in the flames.

CHAPTER II.

The Homeless Monks!

BOB CHRISTINE gazed out of the Remove dormitory window, and shook his head sadly.

"They may build it all up again, but it won't be the same place," he said.

"The place is absolutely burnt out!" said Yorke.

They were gazing at the ruins of the College House.

The rising bell had not rung that morning, but all the juniors were up at the usual time. The sun was shining in through the windows from a sky of brilliant blue.

But just over on the other side of the Triangle stood the smouldering ruins of

what had once been a noble pile—for the College House had been a piece of wonderful architecture, picturesque and beautiful.

Now it was merely a matter of four stark walls, with great gaping, blackened holes, where the windows had been. The interior had been completely burnt out. Within those four walls lay a great pile of smouldering wreckage.

Half the roof had collapsed, and the other half was in a precarious condition, but the old walls, built by men who knew their business, were still standing firmly.

Studies, passages, staircases, dormitories, all were no longer in existence. And outside, in the Triangle, lay a litter of debris. The fire engines were still there, and hoses were lying all over the ground. The fired firemen were still playing streams of water upon the smouldering ruins.

"This is a fine state of affairs!" remarked Handforth, as he gazed out of a window. "What the dickens are you fellows going to do now? There isn't room for all of you in the Ancient House."

"I'm blessed if I know," said Christine gloomily.

"I expect they'll all be sent to their homes," remarked Pitt. "That's the only way out of the difficulty."

Many of the College House fellows brightened up.

"By jingo!" said Clapson. "That's not bad, you know. If we are sent home, I shan't be sorry about the fire."

"You ass!" said Christine warmly.

"Well, the place is insured, and we shall be given an extra holiday," said Clapson. "I don't see why we should cry, anyhow."

"We shan't be sent home," remarked Christine. "Why, it would mean being away from school for a whole term—or longer. I can't picture the Head arranging anything like that. We shall be found accommodation in the village somewhere, and that'll be simply awful."

"I expect you're right," I agreed. "If

the Ancient House had been burnt down it would have been different. All the class-rooms are here, and the library, and the lecture hall and the dining-rooms. But the College House was only a boarding place after all."

The idea was general that the Monks would be accommodated in the Ancient House and in other places during the rebuilding of the College House. However, nobody knew anything for certain, and there was a good deal of speculation as to what would happen.

There were no lessons that morning; in fact, a whole holiday had been announced by the Head. Everything was upside down. Lessons, in the circumstances, were out of the question.

The Head was conferring with Nelson Lee and Mr. Stockdale. There was a big problem to be solved.

What was to be done? There was no room for the Monks in the Ancient House, and the whole matter was a puzzle.

After breakfast, crowds of juniors went out into the Triangle, and the only interest of the day was the ruin of the once noble building. The fellows approached as near as they could—but ropes had been erected, dividing the Triangle in half. Nobody was allowed past the ropes.

"Well, the fire has made a proper mess of the place," said Handforth, who was always matter-of-fact. "I expect the builders will get busy soon, and they'll soon shove up a place."

"It'll be a long time before we can go back," said Christine, "and then the place won't be the same."

"Of course it won't," said Handforth. "Instead of those grey stone walls, I expect you'll see red brick——"

"Rats!"

"Well, they generally use red bricks nowadays," said Handforth.

While the little discussion was in progress, two huge motor-cars rolled up. They came to a halt in the Triangle, and two or three grave, elderly gentlemen climbed out and surveyed the ruins with mild horror.

These gentlemen were some of the school governors, who had been informed of the fire by telegram. After looking at the smoking debris for some little time, they all adjourned to the Head's study.

We didn't know what took place there, but when I caught a glimpse of Dr. Stafford some time later, I saw that he was looking even more haggard than ever. And then I came across Nelson Lee. The gov'nor was frowning almost angrily.

"What's wrong, sir?" I asked.

"A great deal is wrong, Nipper," said Lee. "Don't bother me now!"

"Yes, but I'd like to know——"

"The governors, apparently, have decided that it is their duty to hold Dr. Stafford responsible for the College House fire," said Nelson Lee curtly. "There will be an inquiry, if you please."

"But Alexis caused the fire, sir!"

"Exactly, Nipper. And Alexis has already been removed from the school."

"He's gone?" I ejaculated.

"He was taken away early this morning—the Headmaster thought that it would be better for him to be removed," said Lee. "The proof against him, by the way, was overwhelming. Nevertheless, the school governors have decided to hold an inquiry."

"But what on earth for?" I asked.

"Because they consider that Dr. Stafford was in complete charge of St. Frank's," replied the gov'nor bitterly. "The governors place the blame on the headmaster's shoulders."

"But that's awfully unfair, sir," I protested.

"It is unfair and unjust," declared Nelson Lee. "I intend to have quite a long conversation with two of those old gentlemen before long. But don't talk about this, Nipper. There is no need for the boys to discuss the subject yet."

"All right, sir," I said.

I was not exactly surprised to hear that the gov'nor had told me. Several of the members of the Governing Board

were old fossils, who ought to have resigned years before. And just because Dr. Stafford was the headmaster, he was held responsible for the fire, and practically accused of negligence.

It was small wonder that the Head was looking haggard.

The day passed slowly for the juniors, although they quite enjoyed their freedom. Football was in full swing on Little Side, and the fact that the College House was burned down did not seem to worry many fellows after the novelty had worn off.

The only worry existed in the problem as to how the Monks were to be accommodated. As it happened, Nelson Lee had a scheme of his own, and he was laying it before the governors.

I don't think any other man but Nelson Lee would have succeeded in convincing the old gentlemen that his scheme was sound and workable. However, after a long discussion, the gov'nor won the day.

This scheme was one which was destined to give satisfaction to the whole school. We knew nothing of it that day. All was confusion. At night time temporary arrangements were made, and the Monks were once more accommodated in the lecture hall and in the Form-room.

In the morning, however, the announcement was made by Dr. Stafford himself.

The whole school was collected together in Big Hall, and everybody knew that an announcement of some kind was to be made, and it would almost certainly be in connection with the problem of housing the Monks.

The Head was looking pale and wan as he appeared on the raised platform. There was an instant hush.

"Boys, I have something to tell you which is of great importance to you all," he said, in a quiet, penetrating voice. "What I am about to say affects not only the College House, but the Ancient House as well."

He paused, and the school hung upon his words.

"The governors of this school have conferred, and certain decisions have been arrived at. The College House, badly burnt out as it is, will be rebuilt as quickly as a host of workmen can conclude the task—"

"Hurrah!"

"At the same time it has been decided that there shall be a clean sweep throughout the school," continued the Head. "Recently it has been considered necessary to remodel certain portions of the Ancient House, and the whole school undoubtedly requires to be repainted and redecorated. The governors consider that it is an excellent opportunity to have the work performed in a thorough manner. St. Frank's will be closed for this term, at least."

"Oh!"

"The whole school, sir?" shouted somebody.

"Yes, the whole school!" said the Head.

"And shall we all be sent home, sir?" asked Handforth joyfully.

A smile flickered across the Head's face.

"No, Handforth, you will not be sent home," he said. "If that is what the majority of you think, I'm afraid you will be disappointed. The school buildings will be closed, as I have stated, but the school itself will carry on elsewhere."

"Oh!"

"While the College House is being rebuilt and the Ancient House repainted and redecorated, you will receive your education in London."

"In London!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Hurrah!"

"Where shall we be, sir?"

"If you will remain silent, I will explain," continued the Head. "The exact locality of your new quarters is almost in the heart of London—in short, just off Holborn itself, and in the thick of the City's traffic."

"Oh!"

"Right in the giddy City!"

"We'll have some ripping times!"

"Rather!"

"And off Holborn, too," I murmured with sparkling eyes. "Why, dash it all, we shall only be a few minutes' walk from the gov'nor's place in Grays-In Road. Perhaps the gov'nor and I will be living at home!"

"Begrab! That'll be rippin'!" said Tregellis-West.

"Silence!" shouted Morrow of the Sixth.

The burst of excitement died down somewhat, and the Head proceeded,

"There will be no question of overcrowding when you arrive in London," he said. "The premises which have been secured, are roomy and of ample proportions; they are capable of accommodating every boy, with plenty of room to spare. Years ago it was a very famous school known as the Turner College. Owing to bad management, it fell upon evil days, and at length was closed down, a dead failure. For a good many years the place remained utterly neglected and forlorn.

"But an enterprising gentleman purchased the property outright, and it was his intention to re-open the school on modern lines. The whole building was redecorated from roof to cellar, and every modern improvement made.

"But sadly enough, the gentleman have referred to lost his life in a motor accident. His trustees were not in favour of continuing the project, and at the present moment, the great building tucked away behind Holborn is still vacant.

"It is useful only as a school, and the idea of removing St. Frank's to London was the original suggestion of Mr. Lee."

"Three cheers for Mr. Lee!"

"Hurrah!"

"You really must allow me to finish boys," smiled the Head. "You see, Mr. Lee has his own property almost within a stone's throw of this school, and he knew the whole history of the place. When, therefore, the College House was burnt down, Mr. Lee naturally thought

of the Turret College as a likely spot for the temporary housing of you all."

"Hurrah!"

"Originally it was suggested that the College House boys alone should be removed to London," continued the Head. "But it is far better that you should all go—that the school should be maintained intact."

"Rather, sir."

"It is hoped that St. Frank's will be ready for occupation by the commencement of the new term," continued Dr. Stafford. "You will all be conveyed to London on Monday next—that is to say in four days' time. Under the headmastership of Mr. Howard Martin, I wish you every success while you are in London."

The whole school stood spellbound, and stared.

"Aren't you coming, sir?" asked Fenton, amid a deadly silence.

"No, my boy—I'm afraid not," said the Head gravely.

"Oh, sir!"

It was a general exclamation of dismay. There was no mistaking the tone of that "Oh, sir!" The boys were genuinely disappointed.

"But I don't understand, sir," said the captain of St. Frank's. "Mr. Lee is coming, isn't he?"

"Yes—and all the other masters, also."

"Then why won't you be with us, sir?"

Dr. Stafford coughed.

"I should like to be with you, Fenton—I should like to be with all of you," he said in a low voice. "Perhaps I'd better make a brief statement on the subject at once, because I really feel that you will be interested. The governors have decided that an inquiry must be held regarding the origin of the disastrous fire which destroyed the College House."

"But it was Alexis who did that, sir!"

"Of course it was, sir!"

"We are all aware of that, my lads," continued the Head. "But I am the headmaster of this school, and, in that position, I am responsible for the safety

of you all, and for the safety of the property itself. So, in the circumstances, the governors have come to the conclusion that it will be advisable for you to have another headmaster while you are in London—pending the inquiry."

"Oh, sir!"

"So I will take this opportunity to say good-bye—"

"Not good-bye, sir!"

"Well, we will say au revoir," went on the headmaster, with a faint smile.

"I may not address you all again in this manner before you leave. So, my dear boys, I hope that you will enjoy your sojourn in London; and I hope, also, that I shall continue to rule over you when the new St. Frank's is ready. Dismiss!"

That word was the signal for a tremendous uproar.

Not only the juniors, but the seniors let themselves go with a vengeance. The cheers which went up seemed likely to shake the rafters loose. The Head's popularity had never before been so apparent.

"Three cheers for Dr. Stafford!"

"Hip, hip—"

"Hurrah!"

"We want him in London!"

"We won't go to London without him!"

"Hurrah!"

"Down with the governors!"

"Booh!"

"Three groans for the governors!"

The groans were delivered with extraordinary vehemence, and as somebody called for cheers for the Head at the same time, the effect was somewhat startling. The crowds surged out into the Triangle, and meetings were held on the spot.

The Head, quite unconsciously, had set a spark to a fuse which was likely to lead to a very big explosion in the near future. Dr. Stafford had no idea that his few words of farewell would have such a tremendous effect.

I was in the midst of the crowd of Removites, listening to Handforth, Edward Oswald, an ass on most occasions, generally came to the top in a matter of this kind.

"We won't stand it!" he roared indignantly. "Are we going to submit to the decision of a lot of mummified old jossers like the governors?"

"No!" howled the crowd.

"Are we going to submit to the dotty ideas of an antediluvian set of fossils?" shouted Handforth. "The Head's got to come with us, or we don't go at all! Now is the time to take up a firm stand!"

"Hear, hear!"

"It's an absolute disgrace——"

"Rather!"

"It's a shame——"

"Good!"

"Am I going to speak or not?" bawled Handforth, glaring.

"Go it, old son!"

"On the ball!"

"It's a disgrace and a shame that the Head should be suspended from his duties because of the fire," went on Handforth, his voice filled with wrath. "The governors hold him responsible for the fire——"

"The rotters!"

"And they've practically given the dear old Head the sack!" shouted Handforth. "There's an inquiry going to be held—an inquiry, mark you. Why, we're as bad as a giddy Government office!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There's nothing to laugh at!" thundered Handforth. "I suggest that we all rise in a body, and refuse to leave St. Frank's until the governors agree to let the Head go with us!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Good!"

"In a case like this we must act promptly and decisively," shouted Handforth, warming to his work. "There's no sense in talking only!"

"I agree with Handy!" I shouted,

joining in. "This is a serious matter, and——"

"Speech! Speech!"

"Go it, Nipper!"

"Look here——" thundered Handforth, glaring round. "I was saying——"

"Shut up!"

"Let Nipper speak!"

"Good!"

"There's not much to say," I shouted.

"We all know the facts. The Head has been suspended from duty—it practically amounts to that—until an inquiry has been made into the cause of the fire!"

"Shame!"

"It is a shame," I agreed. "The governors have acted foolishly, and public opinion will compel them to withdraw their orders, and to make new ones. We're the public, and it's up to us to get to work."

"Hurrah!"

"That's exactly what I said!" roared Handforth. "Personally, I shall refuse to budge from St. Frank's until the governors decide to withdraw their rotten orders!"

"They'll have to give in, of course," said Pitt solemnly. "They couldn't stick out after you made that terrible threat——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We've all got to refuse!" yelled Handforth. "Don't you understand? It's no good a few of us doing it. We must amalgamate—we must become one solid block!"

"Like your head?" asked Pitt politely.

"Exactly!" roared Handforth. "Like my head—— I—I mean—— You silly idiot——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth glared round, his face rather red.

"If you can't help being funny, Reginald Pitt, you'd better clear off!" he roared wrathfully. "This is a serious matter. The idea is to get up a round robin——"

"A which?"

"Don't you know what a round robin is?" demanded Handforth testily. "It's a protest, signed by everybody—all the names are put in a circle, so that prominence won't be drawn to any particular name. Our round robin will be a petition, and everybody's got to sign."

"Hear, hear!"

"We're game!"

"Who's the petition to?"

"The chairman of the governing board. Sir Rupert Manderley," said Handforth. "I used to think that Sir Rupert was a decent old bird, but——"

"Hold on," I interrupted.

"Oh, don't chip in now, Nipper——"

"Wait a minute," I said. "You've made a mistake, Handy."

"Rot!"

"Sir Rupert Manderley isn't the chairman," I declared. "Sir Rupert resigned before the beginning of this term."

"Oh!"

"How do you know?" asked Handforth suspiciously.

"Mr. Lee told me," I replied. "Sir Rupert hasn't been very well of late, and the responsibility was too much for him. He's a fine old chap—genial, kind-hearted, and generous. He was chairman for ten years, and everything went smoothly during his time——"

"Who's chairman now?" asked Handforth.

"General Ord-Clayton."

"General which?"

"Ord-Clayton," I repeated. "I don't know much about him. It's ten to one that he's responsible for the Head's treatment. I've heard that he dominates all the other governors."

"My hat!"

"The old rotter!"

"Good!" roared Handforth. "We'll show the old idiot what we think of him! To treat the dear old Head like this! Why, I'll tell him what I think of him when he comes."

"And get the sack!" I put in. "You'd better be careful, Handy——"

"Rats!" shouted Handforth. "I'm not afraid. The governors—and particularly the chairman—ought to be abolished. I vote that we draw up a petition to that effect. Governors are only a nuisance!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The uproar continued. And in other parts of the Triangle other meetings were in full swing. The Third was tremendously excited. Owen minor, the leader of the fags, seemed to be doing his utmost to break his voice. And his supporters yelled continuously.

There was a Fifth Form indignation meeting, too, and this, needless to say, was of a far less noisy character, for the Fifth, as seniors, considered themselves to be above shouting and noisy demonstration.

At the same time, they forgot their dignity somewhat on this occasion, and there were a good many shouts and cheers. Even the Sixth looked serious and grave, and it was a well-known fact that the Sixth were determined to support any sensible line which the other fellows decided to take up.

The whole of St. Frank's, to tell the truth, was highly indignant with the school governors, and there was not the slightest doubt that some kind of trouble was in the wind.

CHAPTER 12.

By Demand of the School!

TEA-TIME arrived, and the school was still in a ferment.

In fact, the excitement was increasing. The masters did not fail to observe the signs; and they knew well enough why the fellows were so indignant. The masters made no attempt to interfere. They were probably in agreement with the boys—and, in any case, interference would have made matters worse.

In Study D, Handforth was talking as usual.

"About this round robin," he said.

"First of all, it's got to be drawn up—a really impressive petition. That's the idea. It needs a fellow like me to do it properly!"

"Your tea's getting cold, Handy," observed McClure.

Handforth glared.

"Do you think I care about tea?" he roared.

"It looks as if you don't," said Church shortly. "Why don't you have something to eat—instead of being so excited?"

Handforth looked dangerous.

"Who's excited?" he bellowed.

"You are!"

"Why, you—you——"

"Heard the latest?" inquired De Valerie, looking into the study.

"Go away!" howled Handforth. "I'm just going to slaughter these idiots, and I don't want to be interrupted."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"By George!" snorted Handforth. "If you don't clear out, Cecil de Valerie, I'll chuck one of these cakes at your face!"

"Good!" said De Valerie. "We only had bread-and-butter in Study M, and these cakes look rather appetising."

"You—you funny idiot!" snorted Handforth.

"It's queer how you always call people things that are far better suited to yourself," said De Valerie calmly. "You're funny enough, Handy—and it's a matter of history that you're an idiot."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But about that news," went on De Valerie, before Handforth could speak—or act. "I heard five minutes ago from Fenton that General Ord-Clayton is due to arrive here this evening, with two other governors."

Handforth lowered his flaps.

"By George!" he exclaimed, taking a deep breath.

"Just our chance," continued De Valerie. "By the time the general ar-

rives the petition will all be drawn up and signed. We shall be able to hand it to him, and the result will be known before we go to bed."

"Fine!" said McClure.

"Rather!" agreed Handforth. "That reminds me! We shall have to buck up with that petition——"

"You needn't worry," put in De Valerie. "Everything's going on all right. The Sixth have signed to a man, and the Fifth are signing now. It'll be our turn soon."

"What the dickens are you talking about?"

"The round robin, of course!"

"I know that——"

"Then what did you ask for?" asked De Valerie mildly.

"You barbling ass!" howled Handforth. "How can the Sixth and Fifth have signed the round robin when it isn't even drawn up yet? I was just talking about it when you came in. I'm going to start on the job at once."

De Valerie grinned.

"I shouldn't trouble, if I were you," he said.

"Shouldn't trouble!" shouted Handforth. "Why, you fatheaded cuckoo, our chance has come——"

"My dear old Handforth, your great point is talking," interrupted De Valerie. "And while you've been jabbering, other fellows have been acting. The petition was drawn up an hour ago!"

Handforth stared.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he exclaimed breathlessly. "Of all the nerve! Who had the cheek to do it? By George, I'll punch his nose!"

"I wish you luck!" grinned De Valerie. "Fenton drew up the petition."

"Fenton!"

"Exactly—our respected school captain," said De Valerie. "If you care to punch the nose of the head prefect, I don't know what will happen to you—but it will probably be something lingering, with boiling oil in it. Old

Fenton has been jolly busy, I can tell you."

Handforth calmed down somewhat.

"It makes a difference, of course," he admitted. "Fenton, eh? Good man! Perhaps it's better that he should do the thing—I don't mind confessing that he's a better hand at that kind of game than I am. It's taken a load off my mind. But I reckon I ought to be the first fellow in the Remove to sign."

"You're welcome to that honour, as far as I am concerned," chuckled De Valerie, as he took his departure.

He went down the Remove passage, and there were considerable signs of animation.

I was chatting with Morrow, of the Sixth, outside the door of Study C.

"You're skipper of the Remove," Morrow was saying to me, "and it's up to you, Nipper, to get all the fellows together."

"Rely on me," I said.

"Good!" declared Morrow. "This petition isn't merely a protest by one section of fellows—it concerns the whole school. Every boy—senior and junior—has got to sign. In fact, it's a demand from the whole school that the Head shall continue to rule over us while we're in London."

"That's the stuff!" remarked Watson, with a nod.

"Begad!" said Tregellis-West. "Rather, dear old boys. Even a fiery old fellow like General Ord-Clayton will take notice of a petition signed by the whole school. He can't do anything else, begad!"

"Hardly," agreed Morrow. "Well, I'll leave it to you, Nipper. Fenton will be round soon—he's nearly finished with the Fifth—and he'll expect you to be all ready for him in the Common-room."

There was a considerable bustle shortly afterwards. Fenton of the Sixth arrived with the petition. It was a bit wad of foolscap, and there were

already a very large number of names down.

The Remove signed to a man. Fullwood & Co. were not keen upon it, and they wouldn't have cared if the Head had gone away for good. But the cads of the Remove were compelled to sign—because they knew well enough that if they refused, trouble would follow.

The petition was somewhat mauled about after it left the hands of the Remove—for the fags took possession, and the latter pages of the document chiefly consisted of blots and smudges.

At last it was finished, and Fenton took charge of it. He went away to his own study, and it was generally understood that he would present the petition in person, backed by several other prefects.

The juniors, meanwhile, gathered to the Triangle waiting for the arrival of the three governors.

"Can't be long now," remarked Christine, glancing up at the old clock. "They were due five minutes ago. I understand. Has anybody seen this general, by the way? What's he like?"

"Goodness knows," said Pitt. "I expect he's been to St. Frank's, but we don't notice everybody who comes and goes."

"Morrow's seen him," remarked Watson. "He says that General Ord-Clayton is a shrivelled-up old chap, with a face like a monkey—all lines and wrinkles. I believe he's lived abroad nearly all his life."

Handforth snorted.

"And that's the kind of chap we've got as chairman of the governors!" he exclaimed, with disgust. "Talk about madness—"

"Here they come!"

The shout came from the gateway, and there was an immediate rush. A great many juniors fled out into the road, others stood round the gates, but the great majority remained in the Triangle, waiting.

A big, open motor-car was coming up the lane, and seated in the rear were

three elderly gentlemen. Two looked amiable enough, but the gentleman in the centre was rather formidable in appearance.

His size was not particularly imposing, for he was slim and somewhat skinny. His face, however, wore a constant expression of ferocity. It was not red, but tanned brown, and wrinkled excessively. His white eyebrows—to quote Handforth—looked like toothbrushes.

"That's the general!" shouted somebody. "Give him a groan!"

There was a tremendous response, and it occurred just as the car was entering the Triangle. General Ord-Clayton sat up in his seat with a start, and he looked round in amazement.

"Boo-o-o-oooh!"

There was no mistaking that sound, and it was repeated continuously—by hundreds of youthful voices. There was a tremendous commotion in the Triangle, and the fellows crowded round the motor-car with angry faces.

"His-a-ess!"

The booing was followed by storms of hisses, some of the fellows were groaning, some hissing, and some booing. It was a demonstration which meant only one thing. The governors were not popular!

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed one of the old gentlemen. "This—this is surely amazing! Can it be possible that we have been mistaken for somebody else? It is scarcely conceivable that the boys would dare to greet us in this fashion deliberately!"

General Ord-Clayton compressed his lips.

"By gad!" he exclaimed. "There must be some mistake."

He stood up in the car.

"Silence!" he shouted, in a voice which was literally a bark. "Silence at once! How dare you——"

"Sit down, you old rotter!"

"Booh!"

"You're not wanted, General Ord-Clayton!"

"Yah! Go away!"

"Good gracious!" gasped the general. "This—this is outrageous! It seems to me that we were fully justified in suspending Dr. Stafford. It is apparent that he is incapable of maintaining discipline among the boys——"

The rest of his words were drowned in another storm of shouting. Prefects were now appearing on the scene, and the juniors were not quite so noisy. The motor-car drew up in front of the Head's house, and General Ord-Clayton leaped out.

His face was red with anger, and his eyes were blazing.

As he entered the Head's private doorway there was another outburst of hissing, in spite of the prefects' presence. The general, without waiting for his colleagues, charged down the corridor, and burst into the Head's study.

"Outrageous!" he thundered.

Dr. Stafford, who had been standing by the window, turned with a troubled face.

"I deeply regret that this should have occurred, General Ord-Clayton," he said quietly. "If I had had any suspicion that such a demonstration was intended I should have cleared the Triangle——"

"That is no excuse, sir!" roared the general. "It is disgraceful—scandalous that I, the chairman of the board of governors, should be treated with such gross insolence and impertinence!"

"I am sorry——"

"Sorry be hanged, sir—sorry be hanged!" bellowed the general. "It is quite apparent that you are utterly incapable of conducting this school as it should be conducted! Sir Rupert Manderley was altogether too negligent——"

"Really, general——"

"Don't dare to argue with me, sir!" shouted the enraged chairman. "I'm

extremely glad that I have had this opportunity of witnessing how you conduct the school. I have no longer any doubt with regard to the disastrous fire which destroyed the College House. It was your negligence——"

"Really, general, you must compose yourself!" exclaimed one of the other governors, who had just entered the study. "You are speaking to Dr. Stafford in language which can only be characterised as impolite."

The general swallowed hard.

"You will be good enough to mind your own business!" he thundered. "It may interest you to know, Mr. Somerset, that I am the chairman——"

"We are not likely to forget that," interrupted Mr. Bertram Somerset—who was a mild, kindly old gentleman. "So far as I can see, Dr. Stafford is not to blame for the demonstration which has just occurred outside. The boys, I understand, are indignant with us."

"And why?" demanded the general.

He received his answer from an unexpected quarter.

There was a tap at the door, and Fenton of the Sixth appeared. Fenton had decided to waste no time. He was looking grim and determined, and behind him there were three other prefects.

General Ord-Clayton glared at the prefects ferociously.

"Well, what do you want?" he demanded harshly.

"We are a deputation, sir," said Fenton. "We represent the whole school—from the Sixth downwards——"

"Go away—go away!" snapped the general. "Confounded impertinence! How dare you come interrupting me now? It is amazing to me, Dr. Stafford, that you should allow these boys to behave like this! Infernal impudence!"

Fenton bit his lip.

"We have come without Dr. Stafford's knowledge, sir," he said. "Our object is to present a petition to you."

"A what?" barked the general.

"A petition, sir——"

"Let me see it!"

General Ord-Clayton snatched it away from Fenton as the latter held it out, and he fished from his pocket a pair of glasses. Jamming them upon his nose, he glared at the petition with a gaze which was calculated to bore holes through it.

"Huh!" he snorted. "What's this—what's this? Drivelling nonsense, I'll be bound! Huh! Upon my soul! We, the undersigned, respectfully beg to submit that it will be to the interest of all if Dr. Stafford is retained in his capacity as headmaster during the school's enforced stay in London, and we——" Good gracious me! This—this is outrageous!"

General Ord-Clayton glared at Fenton.

"You require an answer to this?" he thundered.

"Yes, sir, I do!" said Fenton grimly. "I represent everybody in the school in this matter——"

"Here is my answer to this insolent demand!" barked the general.

He took the petition in his two hands, tore it in half, and screwed the remains up into a ball. He flung it into the fireplace with a snort of anger, and then pointed to the door.

"Get outside!" he ordered harshly.

Fenton's eyes blazed.

"Am I to understand, sir, that the Board of Governors has finally rejected the request made by the whole of St. Frank's?" He asked, with deadly calmness. "Am I to understand that your word is final?"

"Yes, it is final!" roared the general. "Go!"

"Very well, sir," said Fenton. "But I should like you to understand at once that I shall accept no responsibility for the behaviour of the boys—and particularly the junior boys. I am the head prefect, but in this particular matter I shall make no attempt to preserve order."

"How—how dare you?" bellowed the chairman.

"Let me warn you, sir, that this nasty and ill-considered action on your part will mean trouble—" went on Penton.

"Confound you, boy, do you want me to pitch you out of this room?" snapped the general. "If your headmaster is incapable of dealing with you, I will show you that I am not to be trifled with!"

"Very well," said Penton ominously. "I have done my best, and I have failed. You will be sorry for this before long, General Ord-Clayton."

Fenton turned and left the study, and he was followed by the other seniors. Out in the passage they gazed at one another with blazing eyes. And they all knew that there would be a great deal of trouble for General Ord-Clayton before the evening had advanced very far!

The Chairman of the Board of Governors had elected to ignore the demand which had been made by the whole school.

Very well—there would be ructions!

CHAPTER 15.

Direct Action!

"THE rotter!"

"The cad!"

"We'll half skin him!"

There was many shouts of a similar nature ringing through the old Triangle. The juniors had just learned that General Ord-Clayton had torn up the petition. And the indignation, which had been high before, rose to fever heat.

The Junior School was ablaze with anger.

Fenton had told us all about it in a few words.

Handforth was nearly off his head with righteous fury.

"It's—it's an outrage!" he roared.

"What I want to know is this—are we

going to stand any nonsense from such a rotter?"

"No!" roared the crowd.

"Something must be done!" went on Handforth. "The governors have slapped us in the face—that's what it amounts to—and we've got to show them that we're capable of hitting back!"

"Hurrah!"

I stepped forward.

"Look here," I said grimly. "It's no good wasting a lot of time in having a row out here. The situation is serious. Unless something is done—and done quickly—we shan't have the Head with us while we're in London—"

"Shame!"

"It seems to me that General Ord-Clayton has got the idea in his head that he can dictate to the whole school just as he likes. The time has come for direct action."

"But what can we do?" asked Pitt.

"The general will be leaving before long," I said grimly. "Talking to him is as much good as talking to a gatepost. But if we show him that we're in no mood for nonsense, he'll probably think in a different strain."

"We'll scalp him!"

"We'll duck him in the fountain!"

"Hear, hear!"

"It's all very well to talk like that," I went on. "You mustn't forget that he's the Chairman of the Governors, and it might mean the sack for the ringleaders—"

"I'm game to risk it!" roared Handforth.

"Same here!" said Pitt.

"We're all in it together!"

"And don't get too wild," I warned.

"We've simply got to show the general that we're determined, that's all. There's no need to scalp him, or duck him. All he needs is a good scare—and he'll get that sure enough."

If the feelings of the Removites were high, they were no different from those of the other Forms. The Third was seething with anger; the Fifth was



With the "band" playing and the juniors creating pandemonium, there was no doubt in the minds of the public that St. Frank's had arrived in London! The painted notice on the leading bus was hardly required.

furious; and the Sixth Form fellows looked very indignant.

This was no ordinary matter. It was not merely a question of one section of boys; the whole school had signed that petition, and it had been rejected—contemptuously, and without consideration.

The school was in no mood for that kind of treatment.

Fenton did not interfere in the slightest; he had no intention of taking a hand in any disturbance, but he gave no orders to the juniors. He would have been false to himself if he had told the fellows to let the thing drop.

Personally, I'm always against disturbances and "direct action." An uproar amongst schoolboys frequently leads to something worse. Boys are rather prone to let themselves go rather too thoroughly, and they bring disaster, not only upon themselves, but upon others as well.

In this particular instance, however, I was as keenly determined to create a disturbance as I was usually determined to prevent one. General Ord-Clayton thoroughly deserved to be taught a lesson.

The whole of St. Frank's regarded him as an outsider. He was a newcomer, in any case, and he had started badly. Sir Rupert Manderley had always been genial and kindly and considerate. More than once he had granted requests which the boys had made. He had never set himself upon a pedestal; he had never acted the tyrant.

At my suggestion, a number of fellows were stationed outside every door of the Head's house. It was possible that the general, seeing the signs, would attempt to speak out quietly by a rear doorway. And we weren't going to be cheated in that manner.

Handforth's idea was to wait in a crowd in the Triangle—and to seize the general as soon as he appeared. But I was against this.

"It's no good!" I declared firmly.

"Look here——" began Handforth.

"And you look here," I broke in. "Supposing we collar the bouncer, as you suggest? Within a minute the Head will be out—and he'll order us to release the general on the instant——"

"We can refuse!" snapped Handforth.

"I suppose we can," I agreed—"and the Head won't be able to do anything. But it would be rotten to get into trouble with the dear old Head—particularly at a time like this. It would be off-side to disobey his orders."

"That's right enough," said Pitt. "But what else can we do?"

"There's the lane," I replied significantly.

"Eh?"

"The lane," I repeated. "The general's motor-car will go down the lane, you know, and it'll be easy for us to stop it. Then we can have a little—argument. The Head won't be there; not a single master will be there. We can do just as we like. And the village duck-pond isn't far off," I added casually.

Handforth's eyes glowed with joy.

"Nipper, you're right!" he declared enthusiastically. "I always said that you were the only sensible chap in the Remove—barring myself!"

"That bit about the duck-pond is interesting," said Grey. "It's full of thick mud at present——"

"But it is only to be used as a last resort," I put in. "If the general will listen to reason, all well and good. But if he is obstinate—well, it may be necessary to use a certain amount of persuasion."

"Good!"

The general's car was still waiting outside the Head's house, so it was obvious that the visit was only to be a short one. A crowd of about twenty fellows, with me at their head, marched down the lane.

We concealed ourselves behind the hedges and waited.

As the minutes passed, we began to fear that our preparations had been for

nothing. Then a soft purr sounded on the still evening atmosphere.

I pushed my head through the hedge. "The car's coming!" I said briskly. "Be ready!"

Everybody waited tensely until the car was within a hundred yards of the spot. Then I gave the signal.

"Now then!" I shouted.

We all sprang out into the road—the whole crowd of us. The big motor-car was unable to pass, for the road was blocked. The only course was to pull up—unless the chauffeur ran us down.

He pulled up, and the car halted within a yard of us.

"What's the idea?" shouted the driver angrily.

Before we could reply General Ord-Clayton jumped to his feet in the rear of the car. His two companions looked rather alarmed.

"How dare you?" roared the general. "Infernal impertinence! Clear out of the way, you young rascals!"

"Not just yet, sir!" I said calmly.

"Eh?"

"We want a word with you, general—"

"What!" he thundered.

"We want to talk——"

"Get out of the way of this car, and don't dare to utter another word!" roared General Ord-Clayton. "Never, in the whole course of my career, have I met with such insolence, and——"

"Pardon me, sir," I interrupted. "there's no question of insolence about this. We represent the Remove, and we understand that you have refused to give any consideration to the petition which was presented to you——"

"Silence!"

"Just one moment, sir," I went on. "Speaking on behalf of the Remove, I want to tell you that everybody in St. Frank's desires Dr. Stafford to retain his position as headmaster—and we all consider it most unfair and unjust that he should be suspended until an inquiry is conducted with regard to the fire. Dr. Stafford is no more responsible

than you are, and it's shameful that he should be treated——"

"Don't dare to utter another word!" bellowed the general, red with fury. "Hoskin, drive on!"

The chauffeur looked helpless.

"I can't drive through these young gent's, sir!" he protested.

The general fairly danced.

"If you don't move out of the way, you young hounds, I will get out of the car and deal with you drastically!" he shouted. "Do you hear me?"

"Yah, rotter!"

"We want the Head back!"

"Hurrah!"

The juniors let themselves go. Handforth's voice was louder than anybody else's, and he didn't care what he said. The general's attitude was calculated to enrage the fellows to fever pitch.

"Hold on!" I shouted. "We'll give the general a chance. If he promises to reconsider his decision with regard to the Head, we'll not touch him——"

"Boy!" thundered the Chairman of the Governors. "Do you realise what you are saying? I will have you soundly flogged for this insubordination! Your new headmaster will stand no nonsense!"

Those words were quite sufficient. It was clear that the general had made up his mind to ignore us—to ignore the expressed wishes of the whole school. And most of the Removites lost their heads then and there.

"Collar him!"

"Grab the rotter!"

"Go it, you chaps!"

The crowd surged round the motor-car. Both doors were wrenched open, and nearly a dozen juniors piled in, regardless of the startled exclamations from the chairman's agitated companions.

"Bless my soul!" said Mr. Somerset. "Boys! You must control yourselves——"

"Sorry, sir!" panted Handforth. "We want the general!"

Before the latter gentleman could protest or act, he was seized by dozens

of hands and pulled forcibly out of the car. He fell into the road on his back, with seven or eight juniors piling on the top of him.

I took no actual hand in the "rag," for Handforth and his excited supporters were taking everything into their own hands. General Ord-Clayton was carried to the side of the road, and deposited in the grass.

"This is scandalous—outrageous!" gasped Mr. Somerset. "Boys, be reasonable——"

But he realised that he was talking to the air, and he touched the chauffeur on the shoulder.

"Drive back to the school at once, Hoskin," he ordered.

"Yes, sir!"

The car was allowed to go; nobody interfered with it. There was no hostility towards the other governors. They were known to be mild and harmless. It was this new chairman—this abusive fire-eater—who was responsible for the trouble.

In the thick of the juniors, General Ord-Clayton had absolutely no chance of escaping. And at last he showed signs of being scared. His face was no longer red with fury. It had turned rather pale, and there was an anxious light in his eyes.

"Boys—boys!" he gasped. "Cease this outrageous——"

"There's nothing outrageous in what we're doing, sir," I interrupted, pushing forward. "You've only got yourself to blame for this state of affairs. St. Frank's won't stand any nonsense—not even from the Chairman of the Board of Governors!"

"Hear, hear!"

"You—you insolent puppy——"

"Booh!"

"Gag him!"

"Down to the duck-pond!" roared Handforth.

"It's the only way with a rotter like this! Talking to him is about as much good as talking to a sheep's head! Action is the only course. Now then, altogether!"

There were plenty of willing hands.

General Ord-Clayton, now thoroughly frightened, was yanked off his feet again, and carried head downwards along the lane. For a moment or two he kicked and struggled convulsively; but he soon realised the futility of resisting.

Other fellows came up by this time, for the commotion had attracted attention. Crowds of fags were dancing round, and quite a good number of Fifth Formers had appeared on the scene.

Chambers and Bryant of the Fifth were enthusiastic.

"Good for you, kids!" shouted Chambers approvingly. "That's the stuff to give him! We don't want brutes of his type in command!"

There were representatives of the whole school in the lane—and every voice was hostile. The crowd swelled with every minute that passed. And General Ord-Clayton suddenly realised that he had stirred up a hornets' nest—and unless he was very sharp, he would be badly stung.

The general was no fool—even if he was a rotter.

"Boys—boys!" he gasped. "Listen to me——"

"Shut up!"

"Gag him!"

"Down to the duck-pond!"

"But, boys, listen——"

The general found it impossible to obtain a hearing, and he began to fear that he had left it until too late. He felt almost faint as he realised that he was about to be pitched into an awful duck-pond.

He, a general—the Chairman of the Governors—was to be thrown into a duck-pond! It was too appalling to be thought of, and the general went into a cold, clammy perspiration.

At any cost, he must escape from this terrible position.

"Boys!" he screamed. "I will listen to your request——"

"Dry up!"

"I am prepared to reconsider——"

"Smother him, somebody!" roared Handforth.

But I was not so excited as the others.

"Hold on!" I exclaimed. "I think the general is coming round. We'll hear what he has to say before we chuck him into the duck-pond. It may not be necessary to carry out that part of the programme, after all."

Handforth glared.

"Do you think we're going to let him off?" he bellowed.

"Yes, if he agrees to our terms," I replied shortly.

There was a halt, and the general was allowed to get upon his feet. He did not waste a second.

"I—I am prepared to—to overlook this gross conduct if you will release me at once!" he panted. "I have never been treated so shamefully in all my life—but I will say no more. With regard to Dr. Stafford, I am prepared to reconsider my decision, and to place the matter before my colleagues——"

"You've got to promise us that the Head shall be free of all suspicion, and that he will come to London with the school!" said Handforth grimly.

The general swallowed hard.

"I—I will grant your request!" he exclaimed between his teeth. "But you must let me go now, or I will withdraw——"

His words, however, were drowned in the uproar which followed. The fellows had won! General Ord-Clayton had caved in weakly, and in the most humiliating fashion. Nobody respected him, and he was regarded by all as a contemptible funk and a rotter of the first order.

But St. Frank's had won the day.

CHAPTER 34.

Arriving in Style!

"HURRAH!"
"Three cheers for the Head!"

"Hurrah!"

"For he's a jolly good fellow!"

The refrain was sung with terrific

enthusiasm, and St. Frank's shook with the din. It was nearly supper-time, and the fellows were streaming out of Big Hall. Only a few minutes earlier General Ord-Clayton had addressed the school.

He had briefly announced that the governors had held a meeting, and had discussed the situation. Realising that the school was anxious with regard to Dr. Stafford's welfare, the governors had arrived at a definite conclusion.

An inquiry would be held into the cause of the fire, as originally intended. It would be unfair to blame Dr. Stafford for anything which had occurred. Therefore, until the inquiry was concluded, the Head would continue his duties as hitherto. The general concluded by adding that he and his fellow governors were highly anxious to retain Dr. Stafford's services for many years to come. He would go to London with the school, and would continue his headmastership.

The cheers which followed were uproarious—but they were all for Dr. Stafford. There was no ovation for General Ord-Clayton. The boys, seniors and juniors alike, regarded him as an outsider.

He had agreed to their wishes, but he would not have done so in the ordinary course of events. The threat of a ducking had worked the oracle. It was not surprising, therefore, that almost everybody regarded the general with contempt.

"Personally, I think it's rotten!" declared Handforth, with a touch of indignation in his tone. "It was just like the old rotter to agree to our demands!"

"What did you want, then?" I asked.

"Well, I didn't want him to agree until he'd crawled out of that mucky duck-pond," said Handforth warmly. "We were nicely dished out of the bit of sport! Blessed if I can see anything to shout about!"

And Handforth marched off to his own study, rather fed-up. At the same

time, he was very glad to know that the point had been settled, and that the school had beaten the governors.

Exactly what Dr. Stafford thought, I can't say. But the position had not been a very comfortable one for him, and it was rather a surprise to me that he did not resign. He could afford to do so, if he wished, and he had certainly been treated with gross unfairness and humiliation.

I fancy that he was rather affected by the tremendous proof of his popularity, and he was willing to remain at the head of the school because the boys wanted him to do so.

The Head was greatly endeared to St. Frank's, and to its occupants. And there was much joy when the fellows knew that Dr. Stafford had consented to continue his headmastership.

This point being settled, there was plenty to occupy the thoughts of all. On the Monday the school would be transferred from St. Frank's to London. And the whole situation was so novel, that nine-tenths of the boys were eager and anxious to make a start.

Those who were discontented—who would rather remain in the old school—were mostly seniors of a studious disposition, fellows of the Fifth and Sixth who were anxious to continue their studies without interruption.

Everybody else was enthusiastic, and on the Saturday afternoon football was allowed to peter out somewhat. The juniors were packing, and making all arrangements for the move on Monday.

It was necessary, of course, to cancel several football fixtures, for the fellows of other schools would not be able to travel up to London in order to meet us on the field.

This reminded me of the fact that we had heard nothing with regard to any recreation-ground in London, so I questioned Nelson Lee on the point at the first opportunity.

"Playing-fields, Nipper," repeated the gaffer. "Well, there is a fairly big field behind the school—completely enclosed by a high wall—but it does

not compare with our recreation grounds here."

"Well, that's only natural, sir," I agreed. "But there's something?"

"Oh, yes," said Nelson Lee. "The First Eleven will be considered before the juniors, of course, and you will have to take your turn. Junior sports must wait until their turn arrives. You ought to be thankful that you'll have a playing field at all."

"Well, it's certainly a relief to know there's something, sir," I remarked. "Perhaps we shall be able to fix up some matches with some local crowds. One never knows, you know."

I was rather relieved to hear that piece of news from the gaffer. And I continued my packing, and all the rest of it, with a lighter heart. It would have been hard lines if we had been compelled to drop sports during our stay in London.

On the Sunday there were further demonstrations of excitement among the juniors. We were due to leave St. Frank's by the midday train on the Monday, when, of course, there would be no lessons. The seniors, with the exception of one or two prefects, were going by the early train, and they would be in possession of the London premises when we arrived.

It was generally considered to be a good idea to let all the juniors go together. But, at the last moment, this was altered. The Third went by the same train as the seniors, and the Remove was left to journey to London on its own.

The reason for this, no doubt, was that the Head thought there would be too much noise and commotion if the fags travelled with us. Nobody in the Remove was sorry at the change.

And when the time came for us to depart, we left St. Frank's without any feelings of disappointment. We liked the old school well enough; but there was something novel in this change. It would be rather exciting to spend a month or two in the heart of London.

I took possession of an empty com-

partment as soon as the train entered the station. Watson, Tregellis-West, Pitt, De Valerle, and a crowd of others, piled in after me. And then we slammed the door.

"Good!" I exclaimed.

"Any room in here?" demanded Handforth, poking his head in.

"No!" shouted the whole crowd.

"Rot!" said Handforth. "The train's full, and I can't find any room—"

"Go in the guard's van, then," suggested Pitt.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You rotters——"

The guard's whistle blew shrilly.

"My only hat!" gasped Handforth.

He raced down the train, and piled in somewhere. It was necessary to change at Bannington, and when Handforth emerged on to the platform it was quite clear that he had been arguing.

His collar was crumpled, and one end of it was torn. His jacket looked as though it had been rubbed in the dust; his cap was missing, and his tie was under his ear. And his nose was looking even larger than usual.

"Had some trouble?" I inquired politely.

Handforth snorted.

"Somebody has!" he snapped.

"Those rotters jumped on me when I got into their compartment. By George! I gave them something, though!"

I grinned as I looked across at a crowd of fellows who were standing on the platform. I could see Doyle and Armstrong and Merrell and Hubbard and several others. One or two of them were somewhat difficult to recognise, however.

Hubbard had both his eyes "bunged up," as somebody elegantly put it. Merrell looked as though he had just emerged from a coal-cellar, and Doyle's face was smeared with blood, which had obviously been drawn from his nose,

"Yes," I remarked, "you do seem to have given those chaps a bit of trouble, Handy. How did it happen?"

"When a crowd of rotters jump on me, I don't stand any rot!" said Handforth grimly. "I had as much right in that carriage as they had. I jumped in hurriedly, I'll admit, but it wasn't my fault that I trod on Hubbard's toes, and put my fist into Armstrong's mouth?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There's nothing to laugh at, you asses!" snorted Handforth. "They jumped on me, and we had a terrific tussle all the way along. Merrell hid under the seat all the time, the cad, and it's a wonder that Noys is alive. Some ass opened the door, and Noys was over half out when we yanked him back!"

"You'd better travel with Church and McClure in the express," I suggested.

"Not likely!" said McClure promptly.

"But he needs somebody to look after him," I explained. "Why not label him, and shove him in the luggage compartment?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

I noticed that Noys was certainly looking a bit shaky, and when the express arrived he and Handforth's late companions selected a compartment at the bottom of the train—because Handforth was at the top.

Fortunately there was no trouble in the express. Of course, there were two prefects with us to keep order, but they kept about as much order as Handforth did. They knew the task was hopeless, so they never attempted it.

London Bridge was reached at last, and here the prefects actually did succeed in asserting their authority. The Remove was lined up, and marched out of the station in triumph.

In the big yard there were three private buses waiting, all ready to receive us. Arrangements had been made in advance, and there had been no hitch. The buses would take us straight to our new school.

But things did not go quite smoothly at the start. Half the fellows marched off, heedless of orders, and besieged two confectioners' shops which were handy. There was no hurry, and the juniors didn't see why they shouldn't purchase a few good things while they had the chance.

Pitt and De Valerie and the Duke and Augustus Hart were in a clump with two or three other fellows. They were waiting for the main crowd to emerge. And they found themselves attracted by the contents of a shop window.

There was a display of carnival robes and dresses—all of them obviously second-hand—possibly the remains of some celebration or other. Pitt and Hart put their heads together, and a hurried consultation was held.

Purses were fished out, and the Duke of Somerton produced a well-filled note-case. Then the party charged into the establishment, which, it appeared, also sold other second-hand articles. Musical instruments of several kinds were on view.

"What's happened to Pitt, and those fellows who were with him?" demanded Conroy major of the Sixth, bustling up. "I'm hanged if you kids aren't more trouble than you're worth. We've got to get off."

"I don't know where they are," I said. "I saw the whole bunch over by a shop window five minutes ago, but they've disappeared somewhere."

The prefect glanced at his watch.

"If they don't turn up within three minutes we'll go without them," he said grimly. "I'm not going to be humbugged about!"

"But they won't know their way!" said Watson.

"That'll be their look-out!" snapped Conroy major.

I heard laughter, and saw that Handforth was busy with something. He had climbed on to the leading bus, and had removed the board which usually indicated the vehicle's various stopping-places.

The blank space at the back was exposed to view—the bus being engaged on private work. Handforth was busily daubing the blank space with white paint.

A crowd was standing below, watching. In fact, we were creating considerable attention, and the public was much interested.

"What's Handy up to?" I asked.

"Dear fellow, don't ask me," said Sir Montie. "There is no tellin' what Handforth will get up to, begad! He's a frightful bounder—he is, really! He just took that pot of paint, an' the brush; they belong to the fellow who is decoratin' that shop-front."

"The ass will get himself into trouble," I said severely.

A yell went up as Handforth completed his work with a paintbrush. I strolled round, and gazed. Daubed in great white letters were the words:

"ST. FRANK'S HAS ARRIVED!"

"We might as well let people know who we are," said Handforth.

I nodded.

"It's just as well," I remarked. "After seeing you, Handy, they might think we'd all escaped from a lunatic asylum——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The public laughed as well as the juniors, and Handforth glared.

"Funny, isn't it?" he roared.

"Yus, mate—not 'arf it ain't!" yelled a newsboy. "It's as funny as a door-knocker. You're talkin' about your face, ain't you?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Fortunately, Pitt & Co. appeared at that moment, or we should have been edified by the sight of Handforth and a newsboy scrapping in the courtyard of London Bridge Station.

"Great Scott!" I gasped. "What—what's this?"

Pitt and Hart and De Valerie led the

way, followed by their companions. At first I didn't recognise them, for a vast change had been wrought. All the jokers were attired in gorgeous, highly coloured costumes. Their faces were as black as coal, with great painted red lips.

And each junior carried a musical instrument. Hart was bugging a concertina, De Valerie had a banjo, Pitt flourished a side-drum. The others were similarly equipped.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Everybody roared as the party mounted to the roof of the leading bus. There was a bit of trouble then, because a number of fellows had taken possession of the front seats. But Pitt & Co. soon turned them out.

"What the deuce——" began Conroy major.

But he couldn't help grinning as the painted ones struck up on the "band." Not one of them could play properly, and the noise was truly terrific. This, coupled with their appearance, caused tremendous amusement.

Then the buses started.

With the "band" playing, and with all the other fellows yelling, there was not much doubt in the minds of the public regarding our arrival! The painted notice was hardly required!

Under the railway-bridge we went, and crowds stopped to watch us pass, and grins were general. Over London Bridge we went in a kind of triumphal procession, the noise being tremendous. St. Frank's had undoubtedly arrived!

Our buses went on their way through the traffic, up King William Street, then along Poultry, Cheapside, Newgate Street, and Holborn Viaduct, with the juniors creating pandemonium.

By the time we reached Holborn Circus we were famous, and crowds watched our progress. Up Holborn we went, and at length turned into a tiny side-street, and pulled up before a pair of massive wrought-iron gates.

We had arrived at St. Frank's the Second.

CHAPTER 16.

St. Frank's the Second!

"FINE!"
"Tophole!"
"A!"

Everybody was delighted with the new quarters, and there were many exclamations of approval. The Turret School was, indeed, a finely-equipped place, and it was very roomy.

There was no lack of accommodation within the old walls—for the building was extremely aged. One could see this easily enough from the outside. The grey walls were ivy-covered and picturesque. The interior, however, was quite modern in every possible way.

The man who had acquired the place in order to turn it into a school had had the work thoroughly performed. Electric lights blazed everywhere; the most modern heating system was installed; the decorations of the place were on a lavish scale.

There were two main buildings, although they were not exactly separate. Originally, they had been divided by a stretch of grass—to judge from the old print which was found hanging on the wall.

But the two buildings were now joined together by the apartments which formed the class-rooms. These rooms were light and airy, for, as there was only one storey, they had excellent skylights.

The Ancient House fellows were accommodated in one building, and the College House fellows took possession of the other—with the class-rooms dividing the two sections. The Monks at once termed their side the College House; and the Possils were not long in following their rivals' example. Our side of the building was soon dubbed the Ancient House.

It was easier for us all, and avoided all confusion. And the school, as a whole, was already known among the fellows as St. Frank's the Second.

The Head and Nelson Lee had their quarters in the Ancient side—Mr.

Crowell also. The other masters were accommodated with the Monks. Of studies there were plenty. The Remove had feared that all the studies would be seized by the Fifth and the Sixth, but there was still a sufficient number left over for the Remove.

These studies were not numbered, so it was only natural that we should seize upon rooms approximating in position to our studies at St. Frank's. Thus, Sir Montie and Tommy and I immediately took possession of the third room in the passage—and we called it Study C.

Doyle and Armstrong and Griffith piled into the one next door; but Handforth arrived, and there was a little argument. Doyle and Co. retired, beaten, and Handforth, Church and McClure took possession of the room—Study D. The other fellows, after a little sorting out, found everything quite to their liking.

The dormitories were large and comfortable, and everything, in point of fact, was well arranged. The only drawback consisted of outdoor space. There was no wide Triangle for the boys to wander in—no spacious playing-fields.

In the front of the school there was nothing at all. The building was only a few yards from the narrow roadway, and was divided by high iron railings. In the back a square enclosure, with high walls around it, did duty as the Triangle. A big, wooden gateway led into the playing-fields.

This, considering the position of the school, was necessarily small. But it was rather good to have a stretch of grass of any sort. When the First Eleven was playing the other eleven would find it necessary to look on—and vice versa.

"Yes, it's not such a dusty hole," remarked Pitt, as he strolled into the Common-room after tea. "It was rather decent of the Head to ignore that little bust-up of ours. He must have known about it, though."

I grinned.

"Well, we've let the whole of London

know that we've come up to town," I said.

"No doubt about that," said Pitt. "This Common-room, by the way, is jolly comfortable. I hope they'll decorate St. Frank's as well, now they've got the chance. It's about time it was done."

I pictured the Ancient House Common-room to myself. I remembered the pink-distempered walls, splashed with ink and scribbled all over with pencilling. This Common-room was very different. The walls were papered in dark green, the paint-work was fresh and bright, and the furniture was new.

Many of the fellows wanted to go out during the evening; they wanted to stroll down Holborn to the City, and others were anxious to have a look at the West End. But nobody was allowed to go.

After dark every place was out of bounds. Locking-up was at seven-thirty, and call-over at eight. The Head had not posted up the rules as yet, but they were generally known.

At nine-thirty the Remove went to bed. The dormitory was comfortable, and the beds were comfortable, too. It had been a somewhat tiring day, but I expected the juniors to sit talking for fully an hour.

I was mistaken, however.

Before twenty minutes had passed every fellow in the dormitory—with the exception of myself—was asleep. I remained awake, with a reason. For I had no intention of turning in for the night—yet.

During the evening I had had a chat with Nelson Lee. And that chat had made a great difference in my plans.

"Yes, Nipper," the gov'nor had said, "it will seem like old times again. It is rather fortunate that we are so close to Gray's Inn Road. I shall run over there after you have gone to bed."

"I say, sir," I exclaimed. "I should like to go with you, just for the first time—"

"I'm afraid it is impossible, Nipper," interrupted Nelson Lee. "You mustn't

forget that you are a member of the Remove, and all junior boys have orders to remain indoors. You may run over to-morrow, but not this evening."

"Yes, but——"

"It is really useless, young 'un," said the gov'nor.

And that was the end of it. It was impossible to argue with Nelson Lee; besides, he had walked off, and I hadn't another opportunity of talking to him. That's why I had no intention of turning in.

"It's likely I'm going to stand that sort of thing!" I told myself, as I slipped out of bed and commenced dressing. "If there's any way out of this blessed place I'm going to slip away—and the gov'nor can't very well say much when I get there."

Having dressed, I went to the door, and passed out into the corridor. The hour was not later than ten-thirty. At St. Frank's it would have seemed rather late; but here, in London, it struck me as being absurdly early. It makes a great deal of difference to one's idea of lateness—living in London.

I could hear the rumble of the traffic in Holborn, and I wanted to be out there. The great difficulty was in finding an exit. Before going up to the dormitory I had discovered that a narrow public passage ran flush with the wall at the bottom of the playground.

This little alley ended in a narrow street which led into Holborn itself. It was one of those by-ways of London which are only known to those people residing in the immediate neighbourhood.

"If I could only get out of the school I should be O.K.," I told myself, as I softly crossed the corridor. "Now, I want the back of the house—and it's not a bit of good going downstairs."

I had made sure of that fact. All the lower windows were barred—protection against burglars, I suppose—and the outer doors were fitted with strong locks

—not latch locks either. So it would be impossible for me to get out.

My only hope, therefore, was from a first-floor window.

There was a window at the end of the corridor, and I softly pulled the curtain aside and raised the lower sash. The night was by no means dark, for a moon was sailing above—although it was rather hazy.

But there was sufficient light for me to distinguish easily the various objects. I had believed that I should find it necessary to get to the ground by means of a rope. But, fortunately, it was not such a hard task as I had anticipated.

Almost immediately beneath the window was the roof of a building which had been recently added—and which I recognised as the school gymnasium. The roof was of slate, and the slope was not acute.

When this had been built the designer had forgotten that it provided very easy access to the house by means of the upper corridor window. But, of course, no burglar in his right senses would break into a school full of boys.

I slipped down, chuckling, and pulled the window-sash into its place. Then I softly crept down the sloping roof until I reached the gutter. It was quite a jump to the ground, but I was not afraid of it.

However, it was not necessary for me to take the leap, for, leaning over, I saw that there was something which would help my descent considerably. At one time a large tree had grown flush with the wall, but it had probably caused trouble to the roof, owing to the constant dripping during wet weather. Anyhow, the tree had been cut down, and a stump, five feet in height, remained. This was turned into an ornamental arrangement, with a flower-plant growing in a hollowed-out portion at the top.

It was the easiest thing in the world to lower myself until my foot rested upon the stump. Then I slipped to the ground.

"It might have been planned out for me!" I murmured. "This'll come in handy, I never know when I might want to slip away after lights out."

I was standing in the courtyard, and when I got to the gates which led into the paddock, or playing-fields, I found that they were locked. However, it only took me a few seconds to scramble over.

The final obstacle was the wall at the bottom of the field. It was only six feet in height.

I got over easily, dropped into the alley, and then set off towards the street, feeling cheerful.

Five minutes later I was in Holborn.

I felt at home once more, and instinctively turned towards Gray's Inn Road—where the guv'nor's house is situated. It is not a particularly select road, but times are different now to what they used to be.

When Nelson Lee first went there, there were no electric trams shooting up and down the thoroughfare. And his house is one of the best in that quarter of London—although, from the outside, it doesn't look much.

I grinned as I walked along Holborn, and I wondered if Nelson Lee would be very wild when I calmly marched in.

"Well, he can't eat me!" I told myself.

I marched on, whistling, and I had only gone a few yards farther before a hand was clapped upon my shoulder. I hadn't expected the guv'nor to be out, and I was rather taken aback.

"Hallo, guv'nor—" I began.

"No, it's not the guv'nor this time," said a well-known voice. "What's the meaning of this, young man? I thought you were in school, doing lessons?"

"Well, I'm blessed!" I exclaimed. "How are you, Inspector?"

"I found myself looking into the smiling face of Chief Detective-Inspector Lennard, of the C.I.D., New Scotland Yard. He was a very old friend, and I hadn't seen him for some months.

"Well, this is rather good, Mr. Len-

nard," I exclaimed, grabbing his hand. "I didn't expect to find you here. It's ages since I saw you! You're looking just as well fed and ugly as ever, though!"

"And you're as cheeky as ever, I notice," grinned the inspector. "I should have thought that stern school discipline would have knocked some of the sauce out of you, you young bouncer!"

"I'm breaking bounds," I said. "That looks like stern discipline, doesn't it? And let me put you right on a certain point. We're not in the habit of doing lessons at this time of night, as you seem to imagine. The Remove is all asleep—and I'm supposed to be with 'em."

Lennard sighed.

"You're a hopeless case," he remarked. "It's a wonder to me how Lee's hair keeps colour. It ought to have been grey years ago. What have you been up to since I saw you last? Mischief, I'll be bound."

"We're in London," I said, "because the College House at St. Frank's was burnt out—"

"Yes, I know all about it," interrupted the chief inspector. "Lee told me the whole affair, and I'm on my way to have a chat with him now."

"By jingo!" I exclaimed. "That's ripping. I'm going to give the guv'nor a surprise, so we might as well go together. He forbade me to come, but I'm taking the chance. You can act as my moral support."

Detective-Inspector Lennard shook his head.

"You needn't rely on me for that," he said firmly. "The chances are that I shall help Lee to kick you out, neck and crop. That's just a warning in advance, so you needn't be surprised at what happens."

"I've heard your tales before!" I grinned. "Well, come along, Mr. Lennard. It seems quite like the old days, doesn't it?"

"Yes, by Jove," said the chief inspector. "It does!"

CHAPTER 14.

The Beginning of the Mystery!

"HOW does it happen that you're paying a visit to the gov'nor now?" I asked, as we walked along. "Just a coincidence?"

"Not at all," replied Lennard. "Lee phoned me up about an hour ago, and asked me to go over for a little talk. I'm rather glad that you're in London again. You and Lee must be getting rather stale."

"Don't you make any mistake," I replied. "You may think it's dull being at a public school, but it's surprising what a number of mysteries we find knocking about. And some of the problems have been jolly interesting, too."

"Well, Lee knows his business best. I suppose," said the inspector. "But I'm not at all sorry that you had that fire at St. Frank's."

Within a few minutes we arrived at our destination. The inspector rang the bell, and then we waited. After only a short wait the door was opened, and Nelson Lee appeared, attired in his old dressing-gown, and with his favourite pipe between his teeth.

"Good man!" he exclaimed heartily. "I didn't expect you here so soon, Lennard. How are you? But I see——"

"Nipper, sir," I said promptly.

Nelson Lee removed the pipe from his mouth.

"You young rascal!" he exclaimed.

"Thanks, gov'nor!"

"How did you get out of the school?"

"Ah, that would be telling!" I said, with a grin. "Don't ask any questions, gov'nor, and everything will be all serene. You needn't pretend to be cross, because I know you're not."

Nelson Lee frowned.

"You seem to take it for granted, young 'un," he said grimly. "Well, you'd better come inside now—but I may find it necessary to report you to Dr. Stafford for a gross breach of the school rules."

"And then you'll get it in the neck!"

remarked Lennard calmly. "You'll get it somewhere else, too, I expect—and I dare say you deserve a good few thrashings. I know you of old, my son!"

We all went upstairs into Nelson Lee's consulting-room. The soft electric lights were glowing, and everything looked exactly the same as it had always looked. Not an article had been moved.

Mrs. Jones, the gov'nor's respected housekeeper, had always kept everything in spick and span order, ready for our immediate reception, if necessary. And it sometimes happened that the gov'nor and I made a flying visit to London.

I closed the door, removed my overcoat and cap, and sprawled in an easy-chair.

"Take a seat, gov'nor," I said languidly. "You're welcome."

"I think he needs a thrashing on the spot, old man," remarked the chief inspector. "It's no good leaving it over until to-morrow. This cane of mine is nice and pliable. I'll hold the culprit while you deliver the goods."

Nelson Lee chuckled.

"I suppose I must let him remain now," he said. "He has broken bounds, and it makes little difference whether he returns at once or whether he returns when I do. The young rascal generally gets round me."

Lennard shook his head.

"I thought it was a farce all along," he observed. "And you're supposed to be a Housemaster——"

"Not here!" I put in. "I say, chuck it, and let's talk about something more interesting."

They took the hint, and within a few minutes their cigars were glowing, and they were sitting opposite to one another, chatting amicably. Meanwhile, I was wandering about the room, looking at well-remembered articles.

"So you reckon to be in London for quite a decent time?" asked Lennard.

The gov'nor nodded.

"For two months, at least," he

replied: "It's possible that we shall remain here until the end of this present term—in fact, almost certain."

"I'm as wise now as I was before," said Lennard. "What do I know about terms, and that sort of thing? I am better acquainted with terms of imprisonment for criminals, you know."

"That's where we taught!" I grinned. "Ha, ha!"

The chief inspector ignored my remark.

"So we shall be seeing a good deal of one another, I hope," he went on. "By the way, Lee, it happens that one of our men has been engaged in this vicinity for several days past. There's a little mystery concerning this quarter which is occupying the attention of Scotland Yard."

"It'll mean employment for some well-deserving detective for months to come," I said, with a nod. "Now, if you place the matter in the gov'nor's hands, it would be all finished within a brace of shakes."

Lennard frowned.

"Any more of your sarcasm, my lad, and I'll use this cane myself," he threatened.

"Pax!" I grinned. "No fighting allowed."

"Well, what is this mystery, Lennard?" asked the gov'nor.

The inspector leaned back in his chair.

"Well, it concerns drugs," he replied—"opium and cocaine, chiefly. As you know, there's been a deal of fuss in the newspapers lately concerning the drug traffic—and not without reason, either. It's an undoubted fact that a considerable amount of opium and cocaine is being distributed secretly. And we have traced large quantities of the stuff to this district, but our people cannot discover the actual source."

"I expect they will succeed before long," remarked Nelson Lee. "Although it is frequently a very difficult task to get to the root of such evils. Will you be placed on the job, Lennard?"

"Not that I know of," replied the chief inspector. "It's hardly important enough, for one thing, and I shouldn't care for it, anyway. And Gregson is quite a good man. You've met him, I believe."

The subject veered round to Gregson of the Yard. Lennard proceeded to tell us of a rather exciting encounter with drug traffickers which Gregson had experienced a few weeks earlier.

And from that the conversation turned about in different directions and it seemed to me that Lennard and the gov'nor were fixtures for hours to come. When the clock pointed to twelve-thirty I yawned somewhat noisily.

"When will you be coming, sir?" I asked.

"Not for an hour yet, my lad," replied Lee. "Perhaps you had better get back into the school—by the same method as you made your exit. And I'll know nothing about it."

"Oh, all right," I said. "I've been here, so I don't mind. It's ripping to see the old place again."

I bade the gov'nor and Lennard good-night, and then took my departure. It was getting on towards one o'clock by now, and the streets were very quiet. I strolled down Gray's Inn Road, passed into Holborn, and quickened my pace.

Five minutes after that I halted in the little alley, and leapt at the wall. I scrambled over, and dropped into the "St. Frank's" property. The moon was still shining through a haze, and I could see near objects fairly distinctly.

The courtyard of the school building was divided from the playing-field by a four-foot wall, with large gates in the centre, and as I walked softly through the grass I realised how easy it was for anybody to get into the building.

I also realised how private everything was in those grounds—although the place was surrounded by busy streets and hundreds of houses and offices. It was one of those backwaters which are

practically unknown to the general public.

The outer walls were all high, and it happened that there were no windows which overlooked the grounds. In the distance there were some high buildings which could be seen in broad daylight, but at night the school enclosures were absolutely private and secret.

Then, as I walked, I suddenly checked myself.

Was it fancy, or had I seen a movement against the wall on my left? I remained perfectly still, watching and listening. I had made no sounds myself, and if anybody happened to be there, he must have been unaware of my presence.

I soon discovered that my eyes had not deceived me.

There was another movement, and then, like a shadow, a figure moved stealthily along the wall in the direction of the courtyard. I followed, wondering greatly. It struck me that the mysterious figure might be Fullwood, out on the prowl—for Fullwood was rather fond of breaking bounds after lights-out.

I lessened the distance between myself and the other; and then I found that my surmise was incorrect. For the figure was slim, and was attired in some kind of loose robe.

Then he moved his head, and I gave a start.

For I had distinctly seen a pigtail!

The man was a Chinaman! What could it mean? What on earth was a Chinaman doing in the grounds of this school at the hour of 1 a.m.? I didn't feel quite sure of myself, and I determined to know the truth for certain.

So I ran lightly forward.

The strange figure turned completely round—and now I was near enough to see an evil, yellow face. The man was undoubtedly a Chinaman, and he acted on the instant. He twirled round with amazing swiftness, and ran like a deer across the grass.

He vanished behind some trees which

grew in a corner of the paddock—but there were high walls beyond, and the fellow was cornered.

I raced after him, pulling out my electric torch.

"Now then!" I exclaimed. "What's your game?"

I plunged into the trees, flashing my light about—and being prepared for any sudden attack. But I reached the corner where the two walls met, and I did not see a soul.

The Chinaman had vanished.

For five minutes I searched, but it was useless. And, at length, deeply puzzled, I got back into the school, and resolved to tell Nelson Lee of the incident in the morning.

The Remove dormitory was quiet when I stole in. I undressed and slipped into bed without awakening anybody, for I was pondering over what had occurred.

And, quite abruptly, a rather startling thought came to me, and sleep was even farther off than before.

"A Chinaman!" I murmured. "I expect it's mere fancy of mine, but I can't help thinking that there's something significant about the fellow's presence in that paddock."

For I remembered what Detective-Inspector Lennard had said. There were drug smugglers at work in this very neighbourhood—men who dealt in opium and cocaine. Opium! Was it surprising that I connected the mysterious Chinaman with the inspector's story? Was it possible that that man I had seen had any connection with the drug traffic which Lennard had referred to?

I was still pondering over the matter when I went to sleep. But my last waking thoughts were that I should keep my eyes open, and remain on the alert—in the future. If there was any mystery to be unravelled, I meant to be in it. And it certainly did seem to me that the mystery was closely concerned with St. Frank's the Second.

CHAPTER 17.

Trouble in Holborn.

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST beamed.

"Dear fellows, this is what I call ripplin'," he declared. "Nothin' could be more to my likin'. It gives a chap a chance to spend his money well, begud! Just look at these neckties! They're frightfully decent—they are, really!"

Tommy Watson and I grinned. "Drag him away," I chuckled. "He'll want to buy the whole stock!"

"Really, old boy——"

"It's unsafe to let you go about London by yourself, Montie," I went on. "You'd spend all your money on articles of personal attire. What the dickens do you want with these neckties?"

"They're simply gorgeous, dear old fellow," explained Montie.

"And a gorgeous price, too!" granted Watson.

"But you've plenty of neckties," I said. "There must be about three dozen in your box, Montie!"

Tregellis-West shook his head.

"But they aren't like these," he said, gazing through his pince-nez into the shop window. "I must really go in an' purchase at least a dozen—— Begud! Pray leave my arm alone, Tommy boy——"

"Come on!" said Watson grimly. "Neckties are off!"

We hauled him away from the shop, and strolled down High Holborn. The hour was a few minutes before six o'clock. The streets were filled with noisy traffic, and the whole experience was somewhat novel to us.

It was a few days after our arrival in London, and we were beginning to get used to our new school and the new surroundings.

For a change Sir Montie and Tommy and I had partaken of tea in a restaurant, and we had thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. And now we were leisurely strolling back towards the little side

turning just off Holborn, where the "St. Frank's the Second" was situated.

Having successfully withdrawn Tregellis-West from the neighbourhood of the tie-shop, we continued our way from High Holborn into Holborn. It was just like old times to me, for I knew every single inch of the ground in that district.

"There seems to be a bit of a bother on the other side of the road there," remarked Tommy Watson, nodding his head. "I can see two or three of our chaps moving across in that direction, too. That chap just crossing the road, he's Pitt, I believe. And there's De Valerie just behind, and Jack Grey—— I say, shall we see what the trouble is?"

"Only somebody in a faint, I expect," I remarked, "or a minor street accident. You often come across that sort of thing up here, you know."

"Then we won't go, dear boy," said Sir Montie. "There's nothin' which distresses me more than to see an accident."

"I'm going, anyhow," said Watson. He marched off across the road, and I turned to Montie.

"We'd better go," I remarked.

Tregellis-West did not object, and he followed Tommy Watson across to the other side of Holborn. The road is considerably wide just there, and the small crowd of people collected near the edge of the pavement did not interfere much with the continuous flow of traffic.

We dodged one or two buses, and arrived on the outskirts of the crowd. Reginald Pitt, of the Remove, saw us at once. He was grinning, but I noticed that his eyes were looking rather concerned.

"The silly ass!" he exclaimed.

"Somebody ill?" I asked.

"No, it's Handforth," put in Grey.

"Handforth!" I ejaculated, aghast. "Do you mean to tell me that Handforth is causing all this commotion?"

"He's having a scrap with an errand boy," chuckled De Valerie.

"Great Scott!"

I was really concerned, and I pushed my way through the crowd without waiting for any more information.

It didn't actually amaze me to learn that Edward Oswald Handforth was scrapping. The famous leader of Study U was never really happy unless he was punching somebody's nose, or giving somebody a black eye.

It was not an easy task to push through the crowd, but I succeeded after a little amount of trouble.

And then, to my absolute astonishment, I beheld Handforth of the Remove. His coat sleeves were turned up, and it was quite evident that he meant business.

"I'll show you, my son!" he shouted. "Why, you cad! I'll teach you to call me a clumsy bargee!"

"If you're lookin' for a bloomin' thing, I'll give you one—an' quick!" shouted a youth who was facing Handforth. "It was your fault, anyhow. Didn't you come blunderin' across the road just as if you was drunk?"

"Drunk?" roared Handforth. "By George!"

He rushed forward, and the next moment he and the other boy were fighting furiously.

Crash! Bang! Crash!

Handforth was a champion fighter, and his fists landed squarely every time. His opponent was bigger than he was, but Handy was making the fellow back away in circles.

I looked round, alarmed.

"Lend a hand, you chaps!" I exclaimed. "We can't allow this to go on, you know! There'll be a policeman here soon, and that'll mean a terrific row. We'd better drag the idiot away while he's safe."

"Begad! Rather!" declared Sir Montie.

He and Pitt and Tommy Watson came pushing through the crowd to my side. I didn't know what caused the scrap; but Handforth was a prize

idiot to engage in a tussle in Holborn. But it was just like him. He was capable of any madness.

"Go it, long 'un!"

"Don't let the kid beat you!"

"That's the way—slash him!"

The spectators were all keenly interested, and many of them gave advice which was quite unwanted. Both Handforth and his opponent were too busy to take any notice of what was going on outside.

I saw Church and McClure, Handforth's bosom chums, were standing near by. McClure's left eye was closing, and Church possessed a thick ear. Apparently, they had attempted to stop the fight, with disastrous consequences. When Handforth really got going he was a terror.

"Now then—altogether!" I shouted. "Let's get through, please!"

Montie and Tommy and Pitt and one or two others came pushing through after me. A policeman was just visible in the distance, and I could see that he was coming along to make inquiries. So there was not a moment to be lost.

"Chuck it, Handy!" I shouted. "You can't fight—"

Handforth glared at me.

"You clear off!" he roared. "I'm giving this chap a licking, and—Yarrah! Why, you—you rotter—"

The errand boy had seized his momentary advantage, and had got in a blow which sent Handforth staggering.

It was just as well, for Handforth was easier to deal with. In spite of his struggles, he was securely grasped by five or six of us. We tore him away from his opponent, and the crowd grinned as we forced an exit through them.

"Lemme go!" bellowed Handforth violently. "You—you silly asses! I was just giving that chap the licking of his life. Lemme go! I mean to squash the cad until he's as flat as—"

"Dry up, Handy!" I broke in sternly.

"What the dickens are you thinking about? You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Eh?"

"Don't you realise that you are blackening the fair name of St. Frank's?"

"Oh, rot!"

"It isn't rot," I said calmly. "We're not in London on a visit, Handy; we're living here. And it wouldn't look nice in the papers if they reported wild scenes in Holborn, caused by St. Frank's fellows. You ought to be more careful, you thoughtless ass!"

Handforth did not look at all repentant.

"When I get the chance I'm going to biff that rotter again!" he declared. "You don't understand what happened, you prize duffers! I was just crossing the street when that juggins hit me in the back with his tricycle. I wouldn't have minded that so much, but he started swearing at me, and you don't suppose I was going to stand that! I dragged him off his rotten tricycle and biffed him on the nose. I haven't half finished yet! Lemme go!"

"Impossible, Handy!" I interrupted, as we hurried him off. "There's a policeman coming, and it wouldn't take him half a minute to arrest you!"

"Arrest me?" gasped Handforth.

"Of course!" said Pitt solemnly. "If you create a disturbance in a public thoroughfare like this the police don't take two minutes to run you in. You'd better make yourself scarce, old son."

"We're not in Belton now," I went on. "We're in the heart of London, Handy, and if you start any of your rot here you'll find yourself pounced upon in next to no time."

"Besides, said McClure, "if the Head hears anything about fighting in the streets he'll gate the lot of us. I told you before—"

"Oh, dry up!" snapped Handforth.

He probably realised that we were speaking words of wisdom, for he made no further attempt to break away. The

little knots of people drifted away, and Holborn took on its usual aspect once more.

There were three juniors standing near who had been rather interested in the scene, although they had made no attempt to interfere. These juniors were Fullwood, Gulliver and Bell, of the Remove.

The nuts of the Ancient House were far too elegant to take part in a rough horseplay; moreover, they would have been quite delighted if Handforth had been left to his fate.

"Just like the bounders to interfere!" exclaimed Fullwood, with a sniff. "I would have served Handforth right if he had been taken away to the police station in charge of a policeman."

Gulliver chuckled.

"It won't be long before the lads gets into trouble again," he said. "There won't always be so many nobbies ready to interfere. I say, these cigarettes look jolly decent, don't they?"

The nuts came to a halt outside a showy window of a big tobacconist's shop. Fullwood and Bell looked at the cigarettes which Gulliver indicated, and they announced that the smokes looked decent.

"You chaps wait here, an' I'll go in an' buy some," said Fullwood, taking out his notecase. "As it happens, I want some loose change; I've got nothin' except four pound notes and a couple of fivers."

Ralph Leslie Fullwood was flush—his notecase was well filled. And Fullwood did not attempt to conceal the fact as he opened it. He always liked to make his chums feel envious.

But it was rather an unwise thing to display such a large amount of cash in public. A man who was passing at the moment seemed to be suddenly interested in the shop window, and he gazed through the plate-glass searchingly.

As a matter of fact, the man was really looking into a mirror—the

the stranger's window was filled with mirrors.

The stranger's eye gleamed somewhat as he observed Fullwood's "flush" complexion. And the man seemed more interested in the window than ever.

He was faultlessly attired in a light-coloured suit. He wore spats and a bowler hat.

The man certainly looked a gentleman.

Fullwood emerged from the shop and joined his chums.

"All serene!" said Bell. "We haven't been spotted by any St. Frank's fellows, and nobody else takes any notice of us here."

But Bell was mistaken.

"Excuse me, boys, but do you happen to know if a gentleman with a red rose in his coat has been waiting about here?" asked a smooth, refined voice at Fullwood's elbow. "I'm afraid I've lost my friend, and we arranged to meet at six."

The nuts turned, and found themselves looking at the well-dressed stranger.

"We haven't seen anybody—not to notice," remarked Fullwood. "I'm sorry, sir—I'm afraid we can't help you. I suppose you're a stranger in these parts of London?"

The man smiled.

"Well, hardly," he replied. "I think I know every hole and corner for quite a long way around. It is my friend who is the stranger, and I am becoming convinced that he has missed me in some manner. Well, never mind, the appointment was of no real importance. I gather that you belong to some big school, although I don't seem to remember your colours particularly."

Fullwood & Co. grinned.

"We belong to St. Frank's, sir," said Bell.

"Why, yes, of course!" exclaimed the other. "I'm dull this evening. I saw a few words in the newspaper about your arrival in London. Well, boys, how do you like it? Getting on all right?"

"Oh, we're gettin' on fairly decently," said Fullwood. "We're rather strange to the district, that's all. We've been lookin' out for a bit of sport, but there seems to be nothin' doin' in that line."

"Sport?" repeated the stranger.

"Yes; somethin' out of the ordinary," said Fullwood. "We three fellows don't pretend to be goody-goody, an' we like a bit of a flutter now and again. We're always ready for a little gamble, you know."

The stranger smiled and winked.

"I think I understand," he said. "As it happens, you couldn't have spoken to a better man than me. My name's Joseph Palmer; and if you care for a flutter, I can help you."

"I don't understand," said Fullwood, staring.

"I suppose you like billiards—with a little interest on the game?"

"Yes, rather," said the nuts.

"And poker?"

"You bet," said Fullwood.

"That's just a hint of the sport I can give you," said Mr. Joseph Palmer, lighting a cigar. "If you'd care to come with me now I'll give an evening of entertainment that'll make you feel happy."

Fullwood & Co. exchanged glances.

"By gad! We're on!" declared

Guiliver heartily.

"Not just yet," said Fullwood, shaking his head. "We'd like to come, Mr. Palmer, but we must be in by seven-thirty—an' there's not much good in goin' with you for an hour."

"Couldn't you be late for once?" asked the stranger.

"We could, but it wouldn't be advisable just now," replied Fullwood.

"When things have got more settled down we can take more chances. An' it's quite possible that we shall be able to slip away after lights out, too."

"We could do that to-night!" said Bell eagerly.

"Now you're talkin'!" exclaimed Mr. Palmer. "If you could meet me, say at half-past ten to-night, I could give you two or three hours of amusement—and

you'd get back to bed without a soul knowing. But, of course, it doesn't matter to me. Come if you like, or stay away if you like—I don't care. But I was a boy myself once, and there's nothing better than a little flutter now and again."

Fullwood & Co. were impressed.

"It's jolly decent of you, Mr. Palmer," said Fullwood. "Yes, I don't see any reason why we shouldn't meet you after lights out. It's a bargain."

And when, ten minutes later, the rascals of the Remove wended their way back to the school, they were in high good-humour; and fondly imagined that they were to have an opportunity of making a pile of money.

Curiously enough, Mr. Joseph Palmer had the same conviction—with a difference. Fullwood & Co. had about one chance in a thousand of reaping any profit. Mr. Palmer was on a certainty.

CHAPTER 12.

After Lights Out!

STUDY C, in the Remove passage, was cosy and comfortable. Prep was over, and I was sitting with my elbows in the glow of the electric light, enjoying the lazy hour of freedom before supper.

"Well, we're jolly comfortable here—that's one thing," remarked Tommy Watson languidly. "But I shouldn't be surprised if we find life duller in London than it was at St. Frank's."

Sir Montie shook his head.

"Not if Handforth goes on as he was going on this evenin'," he said. "Begad, if we hadn't interfered, the frightful duffer would have been arrested for causing an obstruction."

"I don't think he would have been nabbed, Montie," I grinned. "But it's almost sure, same time, the Head would have been told and that might cause him to place Holborn out of bounds. Just fancy the ass—Handforth, I mean—scrapping with a giddy errand boy!"

"Handforth, my dear fellow, is capable of anythin'—absolutely anything," declared Sir Montie firmly. "There's no tellin' what he will be up to next. What amazes me more than anythin' how Church and McClure continue to live. If I were in Study D, I should perish of exhaustion within a week—should, really!"

"Well, we needn't discuss Handforth," I remarked. "Just now you said something about being dull, Tommy. Don't you believe it. It's my opinion we shall have some pretty exciting times."

"I don't see how," said Watson.

"You remember what I told you about that Chinaman—"

"Rata!" interrupted Tommy. "That was your fancy!"

I glared.

"I'm not in the habit of fancying things," I said. "On the first night of our arrival here I broke bounds after lights out—as I have already told you. I slipped along to Gray's Inn Road, to the gov'nor's place. When I was on my way back—after I had got inside the grounds, in fact—I spotted a dim figure near the high wall. It vanished before I could get near, but I'm willing to bet all I possess that the fellow was a Chinaman!"

Tommy Watson was openly sceptical.

"You'd been thinking about Inspector Lennard's story of opium smugglers," he said. "You've got Chinamen on the brain, and when you saw a harmless tramp prowling about, you mistook him for a giddy Chink! That's the long and short of it."

"I don't usually let my imagination get the better of me in that way, my son," I said patiently. "That man was a Chinaman, and he may have had no connection whatever with the drug case of Lennard's. I only say that it struck me as being significant. That's all. And if that rotten gang is operating somewhere close by, we stand a chance of getting some excitement. Because, for the quiet, I can tell you that the gov'nor is as keen as mustard to go on the track."

"Talking about mustard," said Watson, "reminds me that we've got some cold beef in the cupboard—and cold beef isn't worth eating without mustard. Who can we borrow some from?"

Watson had effectually changed the subject, and shortly afterwards we were discussing cold beef sandwiches—regardless of the fact that supper would soon be ready.

When we went up to the Remove dormitory I could not fail to notice a decided change in the attitude of Fullwood & Co.

They were all looking rather excited, and they all did their utmost to conceal it. Either something had happened, or something was about to happen. At all events, the nuts were different.

I noticed a rather significant fact. They placed their clothing in neat piles, and all in readiness to don, even in the darkness. Their boots were handy, too. There was some reason for this unusual neatness.

"Surely the bounders aren't beginning their old games?" I murmured. "They can't be thinking of breaking bounds after lights-out?"

But I was pretty sure that they were—and I realised that here, in London, the nuts would have many more opportunities of satisfying their desire for gambling than they received in Belton.

It wasn't my habit to interfere with Fullwood and his set; and it wasn't my business to interfere, either. If they liked to get themselves into trouble, it was their own look-out.

At the same time, I resolved to butt in just once—in order to give the reckless asses a word of warning.

Long before ten o'clock the dormitory was silent, and in darkness. The subdued roar of London was strange to most of the fellows, but it didn't keep them awake. It takes more than the distant rumble of traffic to disturb healthy boys.

I went to sleep myself, knowing I should awaken if Fullwood & Co. at-

tempted to break bounds. And, sure enough, just as the clock was chiming half-past ten, I was aroused by whispering voices.

"We shall have to buck up," I heard Fullwood mutter. "It's half-past already! We ought to be out by now! Aren't you ready, Gully?"

A grunt from Gulliver.

"Lemme get my boots on!" he growled.

I slipped out of bed, and approached the nuts.

"Who—who's that?" hissed Fullwood.

"Only me," I said quietly. "What's the game, you duffers?"

"Mind your own business!" replied Fullwood.

"Go to sleep, you interferin' cad!" muttered Bell.

"I don't want to interfere," I said. "But I can see that you chaps are thinking of breaking bounds. Don't do it, Fully. You'll only get yourselves into trouble. The game isn't worth the candle."

Fullwood scowled.

"We don't want your advice," he said sourly.

"I know you don't," I said, "and I'm rather surprised to find myself wasting breath on you. But you'd better go easy. Breaking bounds in London isn't quite such an easy game as it was at St. Frank's."

"You ass!" said Gulliver. "We can nip out, and it doesn't matter who sees us in the streets. Nobody will ask questions, an' it'll be as safe as houses. In Belton we had to hide from everybody who passed—because everybody knows everybody else in a poky hole like that. In London we're all serene."

I smiled grimly.

"Well, you can go your own way—it's not my concern. But I thought I'd warn you beforehand—"

"Oh, go to sleep!" growled Fullwood. "We can look after ourselves!"

"That's what you think—that's what all the greenhorns think—"

"Are you calling us greenhorns?" asked Gulliver warmly.

"Yes—I am—and it's true," I said. "You're strange to London. I'm not. I was born and bred here. I know how easy it is to get on the wrong track. A man will get into conversation with you—a well-dressed, polished gentleman. He says nice things and all the rest of it. He invites you to go somewhere with him—quite innocent and harmless, of course. But when you get there you find the place is a rotten gambling-den, or something of that sort. And you come away with your pockets empty—and the polished gentleman is grinning. He's got your money, and he has reason to grin. You can't do anything at all. You can't complain to the Head, or to the police, or to your people—because you'd expose yourselves. My son, I advise you to go easy. That's all."

"Really?" sneered Fullwood. "Haven't you got something else to say? You were just gettin' into your stride. Go ahead! Don't mind us!"

"Oh, he means well!" grinned Gulliver. "Let him go back to bed, an' we'll have our little flutter. We don't happen to be such asses as he seems to think we are. We can take care of ourselves."

I didn't feel inclined to waste any more breath. I went back to bed, and Fullwood & Co. crept from the dormitory. My advice had left them unmoved, but they would probably remember my words later on. In any case, I hadn't done any harm.

The nuts escaped from the school by the same method that I had employed on my first night in the place—via the gym roof. They were standing in the courtyard within four minutes.

"Good!" murmured Gulliver. "Now where do we go?"

"Follow me," said Fullwood softly.

He led the way to the gates which led into the playing-field, or paddock, as it was called. The grounds were not extensive, but large, considering the position of the school.

Fullwood scrambled over the gates and his chums followed. Over the grass they went, until they arrived at the bottom. The high wall which ran here was an easy one to scale—and it led into a little public footway—an alley. This, in turn, led into a side-street.

"It's easy!" murmured Fullwood, grinning.

They dropped over, and stood for a moment or two, regaining their breath. Fullwood glanced at his watch.

"Quarter to eleven!" he muttered. "Mr. Palmer will be waitin'."

"I say," said Bell slowly, "Nipper wasn't far wrong, you know—"

"Wasn't far wrong?" snapped Fullwood. "What do you mean?"

"Well, about a well-dressed stranger," said Bell. "This chap Palmer is a stranger to us, an' we don't know where he's goin' to take us, do we? I've got thirty bob, an' I don't want to lose it—"

"I've got fourteen quid," said Fullwood. "I'm not going to lose mine, you ass! Before I come back I'm going to double my cash!"

"Same here," said Gulliver.

"Yes, but it's queer how Nipper should guess—"

"Oh, come on!" snapped Fully.

They walked down the passage, and nothing further was said. But it seemed that Bell was rather uneasy; the advice had not been entirely ignored, Fullwood and Gulliver were too conceited, and too "doggish" to heed a word of warning.

"Ah! So here you are!"

Fullwood & Co. arrived at the end of the alley. And there, lounging against the wall, was Mr. Joseph Palmer. He regarded the juniors with a frown upon his clean-shaven, smooth face.

"This won't do, boys," he said. "You're late."

"Sorry, Mr. Palmer," yawned Fullwood. "We couldn't get away just when we liked, you know. These things have to be wangled."

Mr. Palmer chuckled.

"Ah, yes, of course," he said. "Well, come along."

"There's no particular hurry," exclaimed Fullwood, taking out a box of cigarettes. "Where are we goin' to?"

Mr. Palmer smiled.

"I do not intend to tell you—and then you will be unable to chatter," he said frankly. "Not that there is much fear of that. For your own sakes, you will keep quiet about this little jaunt. But it is better to be on the safe side. Trust yourselves to me, and you will come home with full pockets. I presume that you have some money—for speculation purposes?"

"I've got thirty shillings," said Bell.

Mr. Palmer frowned.

"Only thirty shillings!" he said. "But I understood—"

"Full's got fourteen quid!" put in Bell. "An' Gulliver is flush, too—he's got four-pounds-ten, at least."

"Well, we shall get on all right," said Mr. Palmer, smiling. "With such an amount to play with—why, you can easily double your capital. If the luck is at all kind, you will return with your pockets well lined."

"Good!" said Fullwood & Co.

They went down the little street, and in Holborn a taxi was secured. Then they sped away into the gleaming lights of the West End. Mr. Joseph Palmer was reckoning that the game was well worth the candle. Between the three of them the boys had close upon twenty pounds. And they would probably prove very easy pigeons to pluck!

CHAPTER 15.

A Gay Time!

"HERE we are!"

Mr. Palmer alighted from the taxi, and Fullwood, Gulliver, and Bell stepped to the pavement in the rear.

The journey had been short, and the three St. Frank's juniors found them-

selves in a narrow, almost deserted street, in the neighbourhood of Soho. But Fullwood & Co. were not aware of their location.

Without a pause, they were hurried into a dark lobby between two closed shops. They went up two flights of stairs, and finally came to a halt on a landing, where a single electric light jutted out from the wall.

"This is a queer sort of show," said Fullwood, looking round. "I thought you were goin' to take us to a pub, Mr. Palmer—where we could play billiards, an' all that sort of thing."

"This is better than a public-house, my boy," smiled Mr. Palmer. "Wait until you get inside. We cannot afford to take chances—and you must not judge the flavour of a cake by its exterior appearance."

Bell hung back.

"I think we'd better give it up, you fellows," he muttered. "We've got to get back, you know—"

"Rot!" said Fullwood. "We've come here for a gay time—an' we're goin' to have it! Lead the way, Mr. Palmer!"

"That's the kind of talk I like to hear," said Palmer genially. "You don't think I'm dangerous, do you?" he laughed. "You are as safe in this place as you would be in your own school!"

"Well, I can't understand why you're takin' so much trouble over us," remarked Bell bluntly. "We're strangers to you—"

"Ah, but you are boys—and I was a boy once," interrupted the man. "It gives me great pleasure to see you enjoying yourselves. Come along!"

He opened the door with a latch-key and entered a dark passage. From within the flat came the sound of laughing, chattering voices. Mr. Palmer switched on an electric light.

"Hang your coats up here," he said smoothly.

He removed his own overcoat, and the boys saw that he was attired in evening-dress.

"Now, boys, we'll have some fun," said Mr. Palmer genially. "Follow me!"

They went along the passage, and passed through a doorway into a neatly furnished room which resembled a library. Books were lying on little tables, and there was no sign of anything shady or "crooked."

Through this room Mr. Palmer led the way, and across to another door—a door which was hidden by a plush curtain. He pulled the curtain aside and opened the door. Fullwood & Co. entered the mysterious apartment which lay revealed.

"By gad!" muttered Fullwood, staring.

The place was a blaze of electric lights, and filled with laughing, excited people. They were mostly men—young men—but there were several women. The latter were well dressed, and obviously belonging to the upper class. The men for the most part were in evening-dress, but some were attired in ordinary lounge suits.

Fullwood & Co. gazed through the haze of blue smoke upon the "gay" scene. The occupants of the large room were gambling—all of them. At one table poker was being played; large piles of money lay on the green cloth. At another table chemin de fer was in full swing.

"Better than billiards—eh?" smiled Mr. Palmer.

Fullwood turned a flushed face.

"Rather!" he said, taking a deep breath. "By gad! Rather!"

"Look over there!" muttered Gulliver. "They're playin' roulette! That's a roulette-wheel!"

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Bell, staring.

They moved forward, and Mr. Palmer joined another man who had approached, and was speaking to him in a low voice. Nobody took much notice of the three schoolboys; just a glance or two, and nothing more. They did not interest this flushed, fevered throng of gamblers. The fever was

upon them, and they cared little for anything or anybody.

"This is a ripplin' place, my sons!" murmured Fullwood.

"Roulette, an' poker, an' goodness knows what else!" said Bell. "I say, is this sort of thing allowed in London?"

"Of course not, you ass!" said Fullwood. "If the police knew about this place they'd jump on it—an' arrest the whole crowd here—"

"Then we might be arrested, if we're copped?" asked Gulliver, startled. Fullwood laughed.

"You ass!" he said. "There's no danger here! There must be dozens an' dozens of places like this in the West End. The owners are too jolly cute to be copped, you duffers! We're as safe as houses—an' we're goin' to have a good time!"

"Rather!" said Gulliver. "Most of these people are greenhorns—an' we're rather experienced at the game. We shall be able to skin them like one o'clock. We'll go home with our capital doubled, just as Palmer said."

Bell was not looking so dubious.

"It seems all right, anyhow," he remarked.

"Aren't you glad you came?" asked Fullwood.

"Yes, now that I know what the show is," said Bell. "Let's have a look at the punters round the roulette-wheel. It's jolly interestin'. We'll splash a bit after we've got the hang of things."

They edged their way nearer to the roulette-table. There were rows of chairs round the table, and all were occupied. Other punters stood behind, playing over the shoulders of those who were seated.

"Make your game, gentlemen!" said the croupier droningly.

Roulette is a fascinating game—if you are silly enough to let it get hold of you. A fellow loses his head very soon, and he plunges recklessly and insanely. The game is a sheer gamble, and a player stands to win huge sums

of money—with luck. But it is far easier to lose than to win—although, strangely enough, the punters seldom realise this.

The chances are all in favour of the bank. Even when the game is played fairly, the punters stand to lose all along the line. But a fair game of roulette is almost unknown; and those who are being cheated never realise that they are being cheated. The game is so fascinating that one always reckons to beat the croupier at his own game.

Fullwood & Co. were not entirely unacquainted with roulette. There had been a famous occasion when they had visited a gambling-den in Bannington, three miles from St. Frank's. Roulette had been played there; and Fullwood and his chums had lost all their cash. But they had not gained any wisdom.

They were as eager now to try their luck as they had been then. It looked so easy—and the chances of "going down" seemed remote. There were so many chances of victory.

"Watch!" muttered Bell.

The croupier had just picked up the ivory ball. At the same time he gently turned the roulette-wheel. This wheel was divided into thirty-seven compartments; one compartment for "zero," and one for each of thirty-six numbers.

The game was not at all difficult to understand—quite simple, in point of fact. Fullwood & Co. knew all about it. The wheel was turned in one direction, and the ivory ball spun within the wheel in the opposite direction. Then the wheel gradually slowed down—until the little ball clicked into one of the compartments. The number of that division was the winner.

If any punter had backed that particular number to win he would receive thirty-five times the amount of his stake. If, for example, he had placed a pound on sixteen, and sixteen turned up, he would rake in the large sum of thirty-five pounds—over and above his original stake.

But there were thirty-seven spaces on the roulette-wheel, including "zero," which meant that the punter had only one chance in thirty-five. In the case of the banker it was different; for he had thirty-six chances of winning—that is, one more than the punters. Which made a deal of difference.

Fullwood & Co. were greatly interested.

As the croupier requested the players to "make their game," money was placed on the table.

"Of course, we needn't splash much, to begin with," murmured Fullwood. "We can go a bit cautiously—until we get into the hang of it. Not that I need any teachin'. I know all about it."

"Well, that's more than I do," said Gulliver. "I remember playin' in that Bannington place, but I've forgotten most of the details."

Fullwood decided to air his knowledge.

"It's easy," he declared. "A winnin' number, if it comes up, brings in thirty-five times the amount of the stake—but that's risky play; it's takin' a chance. You can shove your money on the line between two numbers—coverin' both. Then if either number turns up you receive seventeen times the amount of the stake. That's called a 'cheval.' See?"

"But that's a bit risky, isn't it?" asked Bell.

"Well, you can shove some cash on a row of three numbers, an' that's called a 'transversal.' If it wins you get eleven times as much as you bet—or, rather, if one of the numbers comes up. Or you can back columns of numbers—or dozens. In that case the winnin' number brings you in double your stake money. I think we'd better play cautiously, though, to begin with, an' simply back red or black. That's merely an even chance. Then there's 'pair an' impair,' an' all sorts of things."

"Blessed if I can remember it like that," said Gulliver.

They noticed that the minimum stake was a shilling—but most of the punters backed more heavily than this.

"There she goes again!" muttered Bell.

The wheel spun, and the croupier tossed the ball in. Fullwood and his chums watched intently. The ball went clicking round the shallow basin of the wheel, in the sides of which were fitted little metal studs. At length the wheel came to a stop, and the croupier droned out the result.

"Eighteen, black, impair and marque."

There was a hush for a moment, then a buzz of voices.

"See that fat chap?" whispered Fullwood. "He had a bob on number eighteen—that means to say that he's got thirty-five bob to come. Silly ass! Why the deuce didn't he put a quid on?"

"He didn't know the number was comin' up!" grinned Gulliver.

"I don't see the fun of standin' here an' watchin'," remarked Bell. "We haven't got much time, and we want to make a bit. I'm goin' to shove some money on the table next time."

His chums decided to follow suit. They were feeling unusually free and easy. They were unknown—strangers among strangers. There was no possibility of their "flutter" reaching the ears of the Head.

And they were inclined to let themselves go for once. Fullwood intended showing off, and he pulled out a bundle of notes ostentatiously. Some of the punters stared when Fullwood commenced operations by laying a pound-note on the table. He only took an even chance, but it was a big risk.

Gulliver and Bell were content with a modest half-crown each. By extraordinary luck, they all won. But was it luck? The croupier knew that they were newcomers, and perhaps he wished to encourage them. There was little doubt that he was able to con-

trol the wheel almost exactly as he desired.

"Great!" muttered Fullwood, his eyes glittering. "Watch me!"

He proceeded to lay further sums upon the table. After ten minutes of play he had lost his winnings, but was by no means discouraged. Gulliver and Bell were both "in" to the extent of several shillings, and they were of the opinion that roulette was a great game.

Fullwood plunged in order to make his total higher, and his chums plunged in a minor degree to keep him company. The result was not exactly as they anticipated. They lost heavily.

"I say, this won't do," muttered Bell. "I've only got eighteen bob left! I'm twelve bob down!"

"What about me!" snapped Fullwood. "I've lost three quid!"

"Oh, we shall make it up," said Gulliver. "Some of these people here have won twenty or thirty pounds to-night!"

Mr. Palmer strolled across to the table, and smiled at the juniors.

"Enjoying yourselves?" he asked genially.

"Oh, rather!" said Fullwood, with a sneer. "I enjoy losin'!"

"Losing?" said Palmer, elevating his eyebrows. "Dear me! That's bad, young man! You mustn't lose your money so soon! Perhaps you have been playing recklessly. Let me advise you what to do."

For five minutes Mr. Palmer remained near at hand, and he whispered advice to the excited nits. Fullwood won thirty shillings back, and Gulliver and Bell were actually in pocket over and above their capital.

"This is fine!" said Gulliver enthusiastically.

"Keep on this way, and you will win all along," said Mr. Palmer. "I've shown you what to do, boys. Keep it up."

He strolled off again, leaving Fullwood & Co. to their own devices. He had encouraged them a great deal, and they

entered into the play with greater vim and determination.

But the nuts had bad luck.

The minutes passed, and their money went all in one direction. Now and then a break would occur—they would win. But for every shilling they won, they lost ten.

The result was inevitable.

Bell was the first to go "broke." His money had gone, and he borrowed a pound from Fullwood to help him to win back his losses. As a result he lost Fullwood's pound as well.

Fullwood himself was in a bad way. His notes had been disappearing with startling swiftness. The more he lost the more desperate he became. Gulliver lost his money, and watched—miserable and sullen. He hoped that Fullwood would win hand over fist. There would be a fund to borrow from then.

"Dash it all, I'm goin' to plunge this time!" muttered Fullwood. "It's the only way of gettin' back what I've lost. Roulette is a ripplin' game, but the luck's all against us to-night!"

The "luck" continued to be against them—or, rather, against Fullwood. His plunge resulted in failure, and he was left with three pounds. And he had started with something like fourteen!

He decided to place his money on a number. A pound staked in that way would bring him in thirty-five pounds, if he was successful—and that would more than make up for his losses.

The first note went, and the second was in the balance. The wheel came to a stop, Fullwood & Co. watching it feverishly.

"Lost!" said Gulliver huskily.

"Hang it!" grated Fullwood. "It's rotten—absolutely rotten! I'm fed-up with the game, an' everythin' else. Let's clear!"

"You've got a quid left, haven't you?"

"Yes an' I'm goin' to stick to it!" snapped Fullwood.

"You ass! You might win back everythin'—"

"Oh, all right!" said Folly. "I'd better try, I suppose."

He tried—and lost! He and his chums had entered the flat with over twenty pounds between them. They had been there a bare hour. And now they were penniless! Roulette was certainly a ripping game—for the banker!

CHAPTER 26.

A Startling Adventure!

"BROKE!" said Fullwood savagely. "Broke to the wide!"

"All three of us!" groaned Bell and Gulliver.

They had drifted away from the roulette-table, and were standing together in a miserable group. It was impossible for them to take part in any other game, for they had no money.

"We were fools to come at all!" said Gulliver, with real wisdom.

"How the thunder did we know the luck would be against us?" asked Fullwood. "Any other night we might have won."

"Oh, rot!" said Bell.

"It's always the case," went on Fullwood. "Everybody can't win, and everybody can't lose. It's just a matter of luck, an' the luck was against us. An' now we're stony!"

"It was your idea," growled Gulliver. "If it hadn't been for you, Folly, we should have stayed in bed—"

"That's right—round on me!" snarled Fullwood. "I didn't drag you here, did I? You needn't shout, either. I've lost three times as much as you have. I shall be hard up for weeks because of this!"

The nuts were short-tempered. There are few gamblers who can lose without displaying irritability and impatience. It was only natural that Fullwood & Co. should be snappy with one another.

"We shall all be hard-up for weeks," said Bell.

"Yes, an' you owe me a quid," remarked Fullwood. "I'll trouble you to pay that when you get your next remittance—"

"You silly ass!" snorted Bell. "I lost that quid at roulette!"

"You'll have to pay me——"

"Rot!" said Bell.

"Look here——"

"If I hadn't lost it, you'd only have shoved it on the table yourself," went on Bell warmly. "I'm not payin' that quid back. Fully! I think it's a bit rotten of you to mention it!"

Fullwood glared.

"You rotten swindler!" he said fiercely. "If I'd only had that quid I might have made tons of money——"

"Oh, shut up!" snarled Bell.

"Dear me! Not quarrelling, surely?"

Mr. Palmer strolled up, a big cigar in his mouth. He regarded the nuts with interest.

"No, we're not quarrellin'," said Fullwood. "But we're not in the best of tempers, Mr. Palmer. You wouldn't be in a good temper if you'd lost over fourteen quid! The luck has been dead against us."

"We're all broke!" said Gulliver miserably.

Mr. Palmer moved the cigar from his mouth.

"But you were getting on well when I left you," he said in surprise.

"We did our best!" growled Bell.

"I'm sorry, boys—very sorry!" exclaimed Palmer concernedly. "So you've lost all your money? Dear, dear! That's too bad, especially on your first night here."

"I reckon it'll be the last night, too!" said Fullwood.

"Nonsense!" laughed Mr. Palmer. "You mustn't get discouraged, boys. Why, another time you will make up for this. Have another try now, and perhaps you will be able to mend your fortunes to a slight extent."

Fullwood shrugged his shoulders.

"We can't bet on nothin'," he said, "an' I don't suppose the croupier will accept our IOU's."

"Perhaps not—but I may," said Mr. Palmer smoothly.

Fullwood & Co. stared.

"You'll accept our IOU's?" asked Gulliver.

"I have no objection to lending you a

pound each," said Palmer. "Then I will help you to double it at the roulette-table. Pay me back when you like; you needn't worry in the least. Your IOU's will be sufficient for me."

The nuts brightened up; they were willing to snatch at any chance.

"It's jolly decent of you, sir," said Gulliver eagerly.

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Palmer. "Now, let me see. These cards will do——"

He produced three plain slips of paste-board from his pocket. Apparently, he kept them there for this particular purpose. Fullwood & Co. soon signed their names to the miniature documents, and three pound-notes were handed over.

They considered that Mr. Palmer was true-blue, and did not even trouble to ponder over the actual facts. Their "generous" friend had merely returned a portion of their own money—and he had them in his power. With those IOU's in his possession Mr. Palmer could dictate to them as he chose.

The nuts did not realise that Palmer was probably the man who ran the gambling-flat. The croupier was a partner, perhaps, or an employee.

"That's all right, boys," said Palmer cheerfully, as he pocketed the IOU's. "Now, we'll see if we can't increase that little capital of yours. It ought to be quite easy."

"Haden't we better try poker?" suggested Fullwood. "We're rather good at poker, or nap, you know."

Mr. Palmer shook his head.

"You lost at roulette, so you must win at roulette," he said. "And you will be able to get your money quickly, too."

The roulette-table was still being heavily patronised, and it was some little time before the nuts could get a look in. Then, upon the whispered advice of Mr. Palmer, they staked their money—in shillings.

Sometimes they won, sometimes they lost, but, in the main, they continued to win. Mr. Palmer was responsible for this. He wanted them to win; he wanted to give them encouragement.

At last Fullwood & Co. had doubled their opening money; they possessed two pounds each. And they were feeling cheerful and light-hearted. Even Fullwood, who was still thirteen pounds "out," was smiling.

"It proves that we can win, anyhow," he remarked. "It only needs system—an' a little more knowledge of the table."

"That's right," smiled Mr. Palmer. "Why, before long you will be able to break the bank! It would be rather interesting to see the croupier done out of his job, for want of cash!"

He glanced at his watch.

"Nearly one o'clock," he said. "Time you were going, boys."

"One o'clock!" ejaculated Gulliver. "Great Scott! We shan't have any sleep at all if we don't nip back!"

"I'm stayin'," said Fullwood calmly. "I want to win some tin—"

"Let me advise you to go now," put in Palmer. "You will only lose your money if you stay. You are excited. Moreover, I can take you back by taxi if you come now. Otherwise you will have to walk, and that will be a nuisance."

The nuts looked at one another.

"We'd better go," said Bell.

"Yes, I suppose we had," admitted Fullwood. "But we can come again another night, an' have some sport."

"Of course you can," smiled Mr. Palmer.

He piloted them to the door, and a few minutes later they were out in the open street. The taxi was waiting, and Fullwood & Co. bundled in. This time the vehicle did not travel very far.

It came to a halt at the top of Kingsway, with High Holborn just in front.

Mr. Palmer jumped out.

"You can walk from here, boys," he said smoothly. "It isn't far."

He had succeeded in getting Fullwood & Co. away from the fiat without their learning its exact locality—and that was all he wanted. They were only boys, but he had profited to the extent of about twenty pounds, and had lent his victims three of it. So he was

seventeen pounds clear in pocket. The game was certainly worth the candle. Furthermore, he had a hold on the young rascals now—he held their IO U's. And they might be useful—later.

"Good night, boys!" said Mr. Palmer. "Hold on, sir," exclaimed Bell. "What about that money we owe you—a quid each? I think we'd better pay that off, and get those cards back. We've got the money now, and—"

"My dear lads, say no more," laughed Palmer. "I trust you."

"That's decent of you," remarked Fullwood. "Still, we'd like to pay our debts."

"Yes, of course," said Gulliver. Palmer shook his head.

"No, no!" he said emphatically. "I will not accept the money to night. You have had rather bad luck, and you are short. Don't think of paying me back. I can wait until you are in funds again. That will be soon, I suppose?"

"I'm expectin' a fiver at the end of the week," said Fullwood.

"I shall be in funds on Saturday, too," put in Gulliver.

"Then leave it until Saturday, by all means," said Palmer, who had been pumping for that information. "I can meet you again on Saturday night, if you wish. Then we can have some more sport."

Fullwood nodded eagerly.

"That's a fine idea, sir," he exclaimed. "We shall be able to get our money back, and we can pay you, too. Eleven o'clock on Saturday night, at the back of the school. Is that all serene?"

"Splendid," said Mr. Palmer. "Don't be late, that's all. Good-night, boys!"

"Good-night, sir!"

Mr. Palmer jumped into the taxi, and it moved off. He still held those IO U's, and there was no question about the nuts turning up at the appointed place on the Saturday night. They would have fresh supplies of money then, and Mr. Palmer chuckled as he anticipated the fate of their cash.

Meanwhile, Fullwood & Co. were

walking briskly along High Holborn. It was late, and the street was nearly deserted.

"Of course, we've gone down frightfully—at least, I have," said Fullwood. "I'm quids out. But the luck doesn't always go in a chap's favour. I'm not a rotten loser, anyway. On Saturday I'll make up for to-night, by gad! I'll rake in a cool twenty quid!"

"Jolly decent of Palmer to lend us that money," remarked Gulliver. "We should have been stony without it. It was decent of him, too, to refuse to take it back to-night. He's a real sport."

"Rather!" agreed Bell.

The nuts, in spite of their "smartness," were thoroughly duped. They were unable to see through Mr. Palmer's very obvious game. One lesson was not sufficient for them. They were determined to visit the gambling-den on the Saturday night. No doubt they would learn then the folly of placing faith in plausible strangers.

They reached the little alley at the back of the school without any untoward incident. A policeman had eyed them rather searchingly, but he had not spoken. And the cads of the Remove were rather glad to get into the alley.

"We'd better go cautiously," murmured Fullwood. "If we're spotted it'll mean a floggin' an' a gatin'. Follow me."

They scrambled over the wall, and dropped into the paddock. All was still and dark. Not a light showed in any window from the school buildings. The place looked grim and gloomy to the returning revellers.

"Makes me feel creepy, by gad!" muttered Bell. "Even St. Frank's, in the heart of the country, doesn't look so beastly sinister as this place does. I shall be glad to get indoors!"

"You blessed funk!" grinned Fullwood. "There's nothin' to be afraid of!"

They crossed the playing field, and reached the gate which led into the paved courtyard. Climbing over the gate, they entered the yard, and were

about to move forward towards the gymnasium, when Fullwood paused.

"Hold on!" he breathed. "I thought I saw— Yes, by gad!"

The others halted abruptly.

"En?" said Bell, in a nervous whisper. "What—what did you see?"

"Somethin' moved—"

Fullwood paused, and caught his breath.

Something certainly had moved. The courtyard was dark, save in one small strip. Here a ray of light penetrated from a neighbouring arc standard. The light was a good distance away, but the beam in the yard seemed quite brilliant.

And an object had moved in the gloom; it moved, but it made no sound. The three startled juniors could not see whether it was man or animal; it crouched as it walked, and there was something queer about it.

Then, abruptly, the object passed into the beam of light. It was only a momentary glimpse that the nuts received, but that glimpse unnerved them. For the thing they saw was horrible.

The figure seemed to be that of a man, attired in a long, flowing robe. The face was visible, and it was this which gave Fullwood & Co. such a shock.

It was yellow, and it was like nothing human. Gaunt and ghastly, it resembled a death's head, and in the hollows of the eyes two shining orbs appeared. Just that one flash, and then the thing vanished into the darkness. Not a sound had been made, and the nuts shook as they stood.

"What—what was it?" gasped Gulliver faintly.

"I—I—o-o-oooh!"

Bell whispered something huskily, his knees knocked together, and the next moment he fell in a heap on the ground. He lay perfectly still, and Gulliver and Fullwood stared at him in horror.

"He's fainted!" panted Fullwood.

"Oh, my goodness!" said Gulliver. "What—what shall we do? That thing wasn't human. Fully! It—it looked like a skull—"

Gulliver's nerve forsook him, and he made a dash for the gymnasium. Fullwood, after one second, followed. They forgot all about Bell; their only thought was to get into the house—into the Remove dormitory.

Panic had seized them, and they scrambled up to the roof of the gymnasium like monkeys climbing a tree. Up the roof they clambered, and into the window. They made a considerable noise as they sped down the passage, but they didn't care. It is doubtful if they knew what they were doing.

Reaching the dormitory, they burst in and closed the door.

"Is—is it comin'?" gasped Gulliver.

Fullwood's nerve began to return.

"Shut up, you ass!" he snapped. "You'll wake everybody! We were asses to rush in like that! Where's Bell— That—that thing we saw—"

"It was a ghost!" gasped Gulliver shakily.

"Hallo! Who's talking about ghosts at this time of night?"

I sat up in bed, the voices of the frightened pair having awakened me. I could dimly see them sitting on their beds on the other side of the dormitory. They were breathing heavily, and were plainly scared.

"What's wrong over there?" I asked softly.

"We—we'd better tell him!" muttered Gulliver.

He came over to my bed, and I could then see that he was fully dressed. Fullwood followed.

"Tell me what?" I inquired. "What's the matter with you two? I suppose you've just come back from your little outing? You prize asses! I'll bet anything that you've lost all your money!"

Gulliver clutched at my arm.

"Bell isn't here!" he said huskily. "He's down in the courtyard—unconscious!"

"What the dickens—"

"It's true!" panted Gulliver. "We—we saw somethin'—somethin' horrible! An' Bell fainted away, an' fell down,

He's there now, Nipper, lyin' in the yard."

I slipped out of bed.

"Pull yourself together, Gulliver," I said sharply. "You don't know what you're talking about—"

"He's scared out of his wits," said Fullwood. "We were crossin' the courtyard—Bell an' Gully an' I—when we saw somethin' move. There was an awful yellow face—"

"Like a death's head!" shivered Gulliver.

"Well, it did look pretty ghastly," said Fullwood. "Bell was so frightened that he fainted, or somethin'. We left him down there, the ass. I expect he'll get all right soon, an' then he'll come up."

I looked hard at the quivering pair.

"A fine pair of beauties, aren't you?" I said contemptuously. "You'd better buck up and fetch Bell in, before a master awakens. This is what comes of breaking bounds at night—"

"Oh, don't preach!" snarled Fullwood. "I'm not goin' to fetch Bell in! If he likes to stay outside it's his lookout. Rats to him!"

"I'm not goin', either," muttered Gulliver. "After seein' that—that ghost—"

"You fellows had better get into bed," I interrupted curtly. "You've got about as much pluck as a pair of rabbits! Where did you leave Bell? I'm going to fetch him in."

"He's down in the courtyard you'll see him," said Fullwood. "But I advise you to stay here, Nipper. Bell will be comin' in soon; he was a fool to faint away like that."

"Where did this ghost vanish to?" I asked, as I dressed.

"It—it simply faded into the darkness!"

"Yes, but whereabouts?"

"Over to the left side of the courtyard, against the wall of the College House," said Gulliver. "There's no window there, and not even a door. The—the thing couldn't have passed through the solid wall. It—it just

vanished, you know! I tell you straight, it was a ghost!"

"We'll see about that," I said grimly. And I hastily dressed.

CHAPTER II. Investigations!

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST yawned.

"Begad!" he murmured, blinking round him into the gloom of the dormitory. "Who is that? What are you dain' out of your bed in the middle of the night? Dear me! You're dressin', dear fellow!"

I turned, rather impatient.

"Who told you to wake up, Montie?" I demanded.

"Dear boy, I'm frightfully sorry if I've offended you," he said calmly. "But, really, I have no control over myself when I'm asleep. I thought I heard voices."

"If you don't talk more softly you'll hear other voices—you'll have the whole dormitory awake," I said. "Listen to me for a minute, and if you want to take a hand in the little game you'd better shove some clobber on—quick! I can't stop for any fancy dressing, mind."

"Really, old fellow——"

"Listen!" I interrupted.

And I briefly told Sir Montie the facts. He listened with growing surprise and concern, and by the time I had finished he was out of bed, dressing himself. Fullwood and Gulliver were between the sheets by this time, awake, but nervous still.

"This is shockin', dear fellow," observed Montie at length. "Those frightful bounders ought to be punished. Fancy leavin' Bell in the courtyard in a faint! Bell's an awful cad, but even a cad deserves attention when he's bowled over——"

"We didn't bowl him over," growled Fullwood. "He fainted!"

"You misunderstand me, dear boy—

I mean, you rotter," said Tregellis-West stiffly.

"Don't argue," I said. "We'll go and see for ourselves. Ready?"

"One moment, dear old boy—just one moment!"

"I've been waiting three minutes——"

"But I must find my collar an' tie," said Montie. "Just give me a second!"

"Rats!" I exclaimed. "You don't want a collar, and you don't need a tie. You'll do as you are. Come on!"

"Really, Nipper, I——"

"If you don't come now I shall go without you!" I declared grimly.

I walked down the dormitory, and Montie, with a sigh, followed on my heels. We didn't think it advisable to awaken Tommy Watson. There was no reason for three of us to be prowling about in the dead of night.

Outside, in the corridor, I faced my noble chum.

"This affair seems to be a bit mysterious, Montie," I whispered.

"Dear fellow, it does," he agreed.

"Fullwood & Co. saw something—that's certain," I went on. "And it was something which scared them out of their wits. They're not particularly plucky, and I suppose it was easy enough for them to be scared. It was dark and gloomy, too, and that added to the effect."

"Do you really think that Bell fainted?"

"Bother Bell," I said—"although, to answer that question at once, I do believe he fainted. He's the biggest funk in the Remove, except for Long. But I'm thinking of something else. You remember what I told you last week?"

Sir Montie scratched his head.

"You told me a frightful amount of things, old boy," he said slowly. "I can't——"

"About seeing a Chinaman on the premises, I mean—a Chinaman in the courtyard," I broke in. "Tommy wouldn't believe it at first, and you were a bit sceptical. But I know I saw him."

"Yes, I remember that."

"Well, doesn't it strike you that Full-

wood & Co. might have seen the Chinaman, too?" I asked keenly. "The face was yellow and deathly—that's how it would look to a set of scared finks. I can't help thinking of those drug merchants, Montie. In this district there is a gang of Chinese ruffians who are trafficking in cocaine and opium, for unlawful purposes. They're smugglers, and it seems to me that we might be able to find things out. It would be rather rich if that gang has its headquarters right near the school."

"But, dear old boy, it's rather far-fetched——"

"Rot!" I interrupted. "You don't know London as I do."

"Perhaps not, old man."

"Well, then," I went on, "it seems to me that we're on the track of something—and I mean to investigate thoroughly. We'll go down now, see where Bell is, and then nose about for a bit."

"Begad! That'll be frightfully interesting!" said Montie languidly.

We wasted no further time, but hurried to the corridor window. It was open, just as the nuts had left it. The night was dark, and at first we could scarcely see the roof of the gymnasium, immediately below us.

I lowered myself first, and reached the ground without any difficulty. Then Montie came down—nearly head first—and I only just managed to save him.

"You ass!" I grinned. "Don't make all that noise!"

"I slipped, dear boy!" gasped Montie.

A sound, like a long sigh, came from the darkness.

I looked round, and then saw a dim form lying on the ground. It raised itself up as I stepped across the yard—and I needed no telling that the form belonged to George Bell, of the Remove.

"Who—who's that?" he asked faintly.

"All right, my son," I said. "You needn't be startled——"

"Nipper!" muttered Bell. "Thank goodness! I—I thought——"

"Never mind what you thought." I went on, bending over him. "What's

the trouble? What the dickens made you swoon?"

"It's gone now!" murmured Bell huskily. "I saw it plainly, Nipper! An awful yellow face—— Fullwood an' Gulliver saw it, too! Where are they? I—I don't seem to remember——"

"You fainted," I said. "Gulliver and Fullwood are in the dormitory—and you'd better follow as quickly as possible. What you need is sleep. And you'd better look lively in the morning, too—unless you want the Head to know of your rotten gambling faunt!"

Bell seemed to recover rapidly.

"I—I'll go in," he said, staggering to his feet. "But that terrible face——"

"Where was it?" I asked. "There was a figure, I understand, and it vanished into thin air?"

Bell pointed a quivering finger.

"It disappeared over there," he said unsteadily. "There's nothing but a blank wall, Nipper! Yet it vanished! Oh, it was a ghost—I know it was! I want to get away from this horrible place!"

He was quite unnerved, and Montie and I found it necessary to assist him up the gymnasium roof and into the building. When we reached the Remove dormitory we left him to himself. He was quite capable of undressing and getting into bed.

"I don't want to make objections, dear fellow," said Sir Montie, as we crept down the corridor again; "but wouldn't it be better if we went to bed, too? We can examine the yard much better in the mornin'——"

"Can we?" I broke in. "With dozens of curious chaps dodging about? Don't you believe it, Montie! The best time for us to get busy is—now. I want to have a look at the spot where the apparition disappeared."

"Just as you like, Nipper," said Montie. "I'm agreeable, begad!"

"If you don't want to come——"

"Pray be sensible," said Tregellis-West severely. "I wouldn't dream of backin' out. Your decision is final, dear

fellow—as they say in the competition rules!”

We slipped out of the window, and descended to the ground once more. Everything was dark and quiet, and it seemed rather strange that any Chinaman should intrude in that quiet spot.

But I had seen one with my own eyes several days earlier, and now Pullwood & Co. had been scared by some apparition which they could not understand. It was only natural that I should draw the most obvious inference.

Furthermore, it provided me with an opening for an investigation, and I was quite eager to get to work.

“I thought about waking up the gov’nor,” I whispered, “but I don’t think that would be advisable, Montie.”

“Why not? Mr. Lee could do a lot —”

“He could do better than us,” I said. “But we should have to explain about Pullwood and the others—and I don’t want to sneak. For to-night we’d better look into this affair ourselves. If we are successful—well, I can tell the gov’nor then. But it’s quite possible that we shall find nothing.”

“Most probable, in fact,” murmured Sir Montie.

“Eh?”

“Oh, nothin’, dear boy.”

I grinned, but said no more. Tregellis-West was plainly sceptical; he was under the impression that my efforts would be useless. But, somehow, I felt that I should be able to discover something—even if it didn’t amount to a lot.

I had an electric torch on me, and as I walked over to the wall of the College House I switched on the light. I took care to keep the light very low on the ground, and we had no difficulty in seeing that there was no outlet in the corner which Bell had indicated. The wall of the building rose straight from the ground, and there was no window just there. There was not even a grating.

“I can’t quite understand it,” I remarked. “If the yellow chap disappeared in this corner, he must have

vanished into thin air or dropped into the solid ground. He couldn’t have got out of this dark corner without going back. I expect that’s what he did do, but the nuts were too scared to notice it.”

“Yes, I suppose so, old boy.”

I altered the direction of the light a trifle, and then moved forward, with a little exclamation.

“My hat!” I murmured. “What’s this?”

“It looks like a drain cover, dear boy,” said Montie.

“That’s what it is, too.”

The ground was quite clear and solid, and set into it near the wall was one of those square iron coverings which one often sees. Beneath it, no doubt, were some drain-pipes—and this place was merely provided for the purpose of clearing the pipes if they got blocked.

“Well, I wouldn’t trouble to examine this in ordinary circumstances, because it’s a bit tall to suppose that the mysterious figure vanished into a drain-pipe,” I said. “But, in the absence of any other outlet, we must pay attention to this one—even though it seems out of the question.”

I went down upon my knees, and examined the edge of the grating with minute care. And as I did so Montie watched languidly. My heart began to beat faster, for I had made a discovery.

“Montie!” I breathed, “This cover has been moved recently. The dust has been disturbed, and there is every indication that the cover was lifted less than an hour ago. It can’t be a drain cover, after all! That Chinaman must have gone down this way.”

Sir Montie began to get interested. “Do you really think so, old son?” he asked.

“I do,” I replied. “Lend a hand!”

We tugged at the cover, but it was some little time before we could shift it. There was no handle, and we found it necessary to lever the thing off. But at last we were successful in our efforts.

“Good!” I breathed. “Now we’ll see!”

"Pray listen to me for one moment," said Montie. "If the Chinaman disappeared this way, Pullwood & Co. would have heard him opening the cover—they would have seen him doin' it, begad!"

"There's no certainty about it," I replied. "If this is an entrance to an underground den, the Chinks have probably got a special way of opening the cover which we don't know anything about. That's not an important point, anyhow."

We raised the cover and propped it against the wall. Then I switched my torch on once more, expecting to see a deep, dark cavity. But I received something of a shock. For the cavity was only a foot deep, and was simply a break in two small drain-pipes. A fox-terrier couldn't have squeezed in.

"Hard lines, dear fellow!" murmured Montie.

"Yes, I'm afraid I was rather too hasty," I admitted. "Nothing human could have got into this place. But it's queer, all the same. I can swear the cover has been moved recently."

"Exactly," said Montie calmly. "By a plumber probably."

I nodded.

"Afraid you're right," I murmured. "But, all the same, this drain doesn't strike me as being in proper repair. We had some rain yesterday—a good deal, in fact. And yet these two drains are as dry as a bone. They must have been dry for weeks."

"Perhaps they're different kind of drains, old boy. There's no tellin', you know. They might lead from a part of the house where——"

"Great Scott!" I gasped.

Montie paused abruptly, for I had spoken in a startled tone.

"I knew there was something fishy about it," I exclaimed tensely. "I was just feeling the pipe, Montie, when it moved—the whole base of the cavity moved, in fact. Yet it looks solid."

"Begad! You're not suggestin'——"

"I'm not suggesting anything," I interrupted. "We'll wait and see."

I commenced pressing on the drain-pipes in different places. For a minute nothing occurred; then, abruptly, the whole basin swung back, dropping at the same time into a cavity at the side.

A deep shaft was revealed—a shaft leading straight down into the solid ground. At short intervals iron foot-steps were fixed in the wall. Montie and I stared down with growing excitement.

"What have you got to say now?" I asked tensely. "I was right! I had a feeling that there was something out of the ordinary about this place. Look, Montie! This is a shaft."

"I am quite bewildered, dear boy," confessed Montie. "What about the drains? How does the water flow——"

"You duffer! It's only a fake," I explained. "Don't you see? This exit is made to look like an ordinary drain cover. Any casual examination would reveal nothing."

"And what shall we do now?" asked Tregellis-West.

"Go down!"

"But what about tellin' Mr. Lee?"

"Before I tell the gov'nor anything I want to have a look round myself," I said. "Perhaps you'd better stop up here, Montie—on guard."

Sir Montie smiled.

"That's a ripplin' idea—I don't think!" he said calmly. "I'm comin' with you. We can leave the cover slightly opened, so that our exit will be all serene. I'm comin' with you, Nipper."

"All right," I said. "We won't go far, anyhow. I just wanted to see where this shaft leads to—that's all. Follow your uncle!"

I descended into the shaft, and Montie followed. He made no attempt to close the hidden door, but merely pulled the iron cover down—leaving it slightly out of position.

"We don't want to be trapped, you know," he murmured.

I cast my light downwards, and saw that the descent was clear. So I

switched it off again, and we descended in darkness.

The shaft was not quite so long as I had anticipated, for, just as I was thinking of getting some light on the subject again, my feet touched solid ground—instead of another footrest.

"Hold on, Montie," I whispered. "Go easy!"

The beam of light shot out, and revealed the fact that I was standing in a fairly narrow circular brick tunnel. It was quite dry, and I had no difficulty in recognising it as one of the old type sewers.

In all probability it had been in a state of disuse for a good many years, and its presence was forgotten. In any case, the place was neglected by the authorities, and was now in the possession of a band of drug traffickers. That, at all events, was my firm impression.

"Come on down, Montie!" I whispered, looking up.

Tregellis-West descended the last few footrests and stood by my side.

"Begad, we've got into a queer place now, dear fellow," he observed, peering round through his pince-nez. "I was under the impression that you had come to the end of the shaft, and that we couldn't go any farther."

"We've come to the end of the shaft, all right," I agreed. "But there's a tunnel here, my son—an old sewer, by the look of it. This is where we've got to go cautiously. We might have to bunk in a hurry."

In order that no mistake should be made, I made a mark just near the shaft. It was possible that we should pass other shafts along the tunnel, and we didn't want to get mixed up.

By this time both Montie and I were excited; the thought of turning back never occurred to us. Our chief aim was to press on—and discover everything. Who was the man who had descended into the place?

I was determined to get at the truth.

CHAPTER 22.

The Yellow Band!

THE sewer led straight in one direction, but we could see the end of it in the other. Switching my torch on again, I closely examined the dry floor, and had no difficulty in seeing how the land lay.

For, in one direction, the ground was undisturbed; whilst in the other the dusty brickwork was covered with marks.

"That must be a cul-de-sac up that way," I whispered, pointing down the short portion of the tunnel. "It's no good going in that direction. We'll creep along this way, and see where we get to."

"I'm with you, Nipper, old boy."

"Good!"

We walked on, and I took the precaution to place my handkerchief over the bulb of the torch. It threw only a subdued light—less visible at a distance, but quite sufficient for our needs.

We had not proceeded far in this way before I became aware of a turn in the sewer. It was not an abrupt turn, but a curve. And I was just about to remove the handkerchief from my torch when I changed my mind.

I switched the torch off altogether.

"Begad," breathed Montie, "what's the meanin' of—"

"Hush!" I whispered. "Not a sound!"

For, now that the curve had been rounded, I became aware of a dim glow in the distance ahead. It seemed to fill the whole tunnel about two hundred yards away from us.

And, as we crept forward again, I felt a decided change in the atmosphere. It was warmer and more stuffy—and there was a horrible, sickly odour in the air. I recognised the scent in a moment.

"Opium!" I hissed triumphantly.

"Really, dear boy?"

"We'd better be thinking of going back," I said, coming to a halt. "We

don't want to run any unnecessary risks, Montie. There might be a dozen Chinks farther along this tunnel. There might be a whole band of them."

"A yellow band, begad!"

"That's it, I agreed. I'll tell you what, old son. We'll just go along for another hundred yards and listen. If we can't hear anything we'll venture farther. Then we'll buzz back."

"Ah! what then?"

"The gov'nor!" I said briefly.

There was no need for our light now. We could see quite distinctly, owing to the reflected light in the distance. The source of the illumination was not exactly in view; it was probably in a side tunnel, or cavity.

We crept on very carefully now, and after a while we came to a halt and listened. But everything was absolutely silent. And I suppose the adventure seemed all the more mysterious because of that.

At last I decided to turn back while we were still safe. If I had been alone I might have ventured on farther, but I didn't want to drag Sir Montie into any unnecessary peril.

But just as I had come to the decision I saw a dim doorway just in front. A very weak light was emanating from it; we had not seen it earlier because of the brighter light ahead.

"We'll just take a peep through that doorway," I whispered.

We reached the opening, and peered cautiously round. At first we could see very little. There was no actual light in the place; but it opened into another cavity, as we could see by an outlined doorway. The place was not very large, and at first I thought that it was merely filled with a few bundles of something. Then one of the bundles moved.

The truth came to me in a flash. The bundles were men—lying upon mattresses! Probably they were opium-soaked Chinamen who had come to sleep off the effects of the drug.

In any case, I concluded that our

investigation had proceeded far enough. We could do very little by remaining, for it was quite impossible to venture farther without the certainty of being captured. And, once in the hands of those yellow scoundrels, our fate would probably be swift and unpleasant.

"We'll go back now, Montie," I whispered. "Let me lead—"

"Good gracious!" gasped Sir Montie.

He had taken no care to lower his voice, and I turned abruptly. His startled tone assured me that something was decidedly wrong. And something was! Standing in the tunnel, and barring our retreat, were two Chinamen!

"Great Scott!" I exclaimed huskily.

The yellow men had come up unseen and unheard. Stealthily, they had cut us off, and I realised—too late—that I had been foolish to venture so far.

The Chinamen stared at us, and we stared at the Chinamen. For a few seconds there was a tense silence. Then my wits returned.

"Charge!" I whispered quickly.

Montie took his cue at once, and we both prepared to dash forward. A swift attack might possibly bowl the yellow brutes over, and leave the way clear for us to escape. But there was a sudden flash of steel—and we found ourselves facing two wicked-looking knives!

"Old boy," gasped Montie, "it can't be done!"

We held ourselves in check, our hearts beating rapidly. And at that moment I caught a glimpse of another figure behind—a third Chinaman. He, unlike the two in front of us, who were dressed in European clothes, was attired in flowing robes. And his face was positively hideous—disfigured, deathlike, and horrible to gaze upon.

"So!" exclaimed one of the Chinamen. "You velly brave British boys—eh? What you doee here? Allee santee prisoners. You savee?"

"Prisoners!" I said warmly. "You've got no right to make us prisoners, you rotter! This sewer isn't your private property, I suppose!"

The Chinaman didn't move.

"Allee samee plisoers," repeated the man who had spoken. "You comee here to spy. Is it? You speakee the thuth? You tellee me how you comee in this place?"

"Oh, we just dropped in," I said carelessly. "Having a look round, you know. No harm in that, is there? If we're not wanted here we'll clear out. We're always ready to oblige!"

A hand grasped my shoulder.

"Where you comee from?" demanded the Chinaman.

"It looks like being fine, I think," I replied.

"No playee thicks!" exclaimed the yellow man sharply. "You. I speakee to you! Who sentee you here? Where you comee from?"

Sir Montie, whose shoulder had been shaken, just rescued his pince-nez in time.

"Speakin' to me?" he asked. "We're goin' now, dear boy. Good-night!"

"So! You velly clever white boys!" said the Chinaman softly. "You do speakee? Allee samee plisoers. No escape. Savee?"

He turned as he finished speaking, and uttered a long string of words in his own language. A second afterwards, Montie and I were seized, and the point of a knife was placed against our backs. Any refusal to move forward would have had disastrous consequences.

"You walkee!" ordered the Chinaman.

We walked. There was nothing else to be done, in fact. After being taken along the tunnel for a short distance we passed the opening from which the light was streaming.

I glanced in as we went by, and saw that several paraffin lamps were burning in the heavy atmosphere. Several repulsive-looking Chinamen were moving about, and the place was littered with cases and stools.

After a short walk Sir Montie and I were pushed through a narrow doorway, and then something alarmed. We heard a key grating in a lock, and then a dead silence followed.

I fished out my electric torch and switched it on. The light revealed the fact that Montie and I were in a tiny stone chamber. It was empty, save for ourselves, and the only exit was by means of the door. This was solid, and there was a tiny slit at the top for purposes of ventilation.

Tregellis-West and I gazed at one another rather blankly.

"Dear old boy," said Sir Montie. "We seem to be in a frightful hole—we do, really. What are we goin' to do?"

"Well, that's a question I can't answer," I said. "I suppose it's my fault really for being such a reckless ass."

"Pray refrain from being so utterly absurd," interrupted my chum. "We didn't expect to be collared, did we? It's just our misfortune, begad! I don't suppose these yellow gentlemen can keep us here for long."

"No, I suppose not," I said slowly.

But at the same time, I was decidedly uncertain. Tregellis-West didn't understand the position as I did. I had had some experience of Chinamen before; and I realised that we should be exceedingly lucky if we succeeded in getting out of our perilous predicament.

We could do nothing to help ourselves. We were trapped hopelessly.

I judged that the time was already later than two a.m. The school, of course, was fast asleep, and we could not hope for any help from that quarter. But in this supposition I was wrong.

Certain events were occurring at the school which were destined to make a great deal of difference to our position.

Ralph Leslie Fullwood, for once in his life, acted sensibly. But he only did so because he began to get somewhat scared.

He knew that Sir Montie and I had ventured out of the dormitory to fetch Bell; and he knew that we had gone off again—to investigate the apparition, and Fullwood could not get to sleep. Perhaps he was kept awake by the knowledge of his losses at roulette; perhaps

he was wondering what had happened to Sir Montie and I.

At all events, after an hour had passed, Fullwood was still awake. Everybody else in the dormitory, including Bell, was sound asleep. But Fullwood was rather worried—for once in a while.

"Two o'clock!" he muttered, as he heard a clock striking. "Why don't the fools come back? Perhaps they've been injured by somethin'—an' if they're found in the mornin', there'll be a frightful bust-up."

Fullwood was certainly thinking about the safety of his own skin. He didn't want to get into any trouble. And after a while, he decided to slip out of the dormitory, and make investigations on his own account.

But he merely went to the corridor window, and gazed out into the courtyard. Naturally, he saw no sign whatever, of Montie or myself.

"They've gone!" muttered Fullwood. "What the dickens shall I do? The idiots! What did they want to go out again for? I don't see why I should interfere! Hang them!"

He walked back towards the dormitory, but paused half-way up the corridor. He was still gravely uneasy, for he really thought that something serious had happened.

So, after a moment's hesitation, he hurried away to Nelson Lee's bed-room. He wanted to shift the responsibility on to somebody else—and it was better for him to go to the Housemaster.

Arriving outside Nelson Lee's bed-room, he tapped upon the door and then waited—very nervously. He had half-expected that he would be compelled to knock two or three times, but almost at once the door opened.

A blaze of light flooded out past Nelson Lee into the passage. The schoolmaster-detective was standing in the doorway in his dressing-gown, and he regarded Fullwood with uplifted eyebrows.

"Is anything wrong, Fullwood?" he asked.

"No, sir—that is to say, yes, sir!" exclaimed Fullwood nervously. "Nipper and Tregellis-West are missing, sir."

"Missing? What do you mean?"

"Bell an' I felt rather stuffy after we got to bed, sir, and we went out into the courtyard for a little while—"

"Indeed!" exclaimed Lee. "And how did you get there with all the doors locked?"

"We got out of the window, sir," said Fullwood hurriedly. "While we were standin' in the courtyard a horrible figure appeared, an' Bell fainted. I went back to the dormitory, an' Nipper an' Tregellis-West fetched Bell in. Then they went out again to have a look round. But they've been away a frightful time, sir, an' I'm beginnin' to think that somethin' must have happened."

Nelson Lee regarded Fullwood rather grimly.

"I will not press you to give me your full story to-night, my boy," he said. "But you must tell me what this figure was you saw, and where it disappeared. If Nipper an' Tregellis-West are still out, they must be fetched in."

Fullwood was not at all anxious to give the full story. He wanted to get out of any punishment, and was relieved when Nelson Lee allowed him to go—after the detective had gained all the knowledge he required.

For ten minutes after Fullwood's departure Lee remained sitting in his chair deep in thought. Then, with a rather curious glint in his eyes, he rose to his feet and got to work.

CHAPTER 23.

The Escape!

"DEAR fellow, I am beginnin' to despair—I am, really."

Sir Montie Tregellis-West's tone was not at all in keeping with the words expressed. For he spoke quite

cheerfully, and even lightly. But he seldom spoke in any other way. Montie was always urbane and calm.

"There's no need to despair, old chap," I said, "although we've been here for two hours."

"Two hours!" echoed Montie. "I was thinkin' it was twelve!"

"It has seemed a long two hours, I'll admit," I said. "But it's only just about twenty past three. A nice time for two respectable schoolboys to be up, isn't it, Montie?"

"Up!" said Tregellis-West. "It seems to me that we're down! We've hit upon the secret of this yellow band of smugglers—an' yet we can't do anythin'."

"That's just the trouble," I said. "If only the Chinks would make a move it would be better. But we're stuck in here, and we don't know what's going to happen. That's the aggravating part of it. What a born idiot I was to venture so near."

"Yes, rather," said Montie absently. "Eh?"

"Oh! I was thinkin'!" said Montie, with a start. "Sorry, old boy. I really didn't mean to agree that you're a born idiot. We were both in it together, an' I dare say the fault was mine. I might have made a noise, or somethin'. I'm a shockingly careless chap, you know."

We continued talking together—mainly for the sake of keeping one another company. We were both feeling very anxious, but we pretended to be cheerful. We made ourselves believe that an opportunity of escape would soon come. But I, for my part, had many doubts.

I knew that we had stumbled upon the secret retreat of the Chinese gang, and it was scarcely probable that they would allow us to go free—to tell our story to the police. It was far more likely that we should be kept prisoners for an indefinite period.

I didn't hope to see anybody again that night; although I said nothing to

Montie about it. I was afraid that we should receive no food, even in the morning. Chinese criminals are not very particular with regard to any prisoners they happen to have on their hands.

But, as it generally happens when one comes to a conclusion, I was wrong. Scarcely five minutes had elapsed before the key turned in the lock of the door. We had heard no sound of any approach, and we both turned expectantly and curiously. The door opened, and the figure of a tall Chinaman was revealed.

He had a lantern in one hand, and a long knife in the other.

"You follow me—savee?" he said, in a low voice. "You vellee clever boys—but you been allee samee too clever this time. So! No keepie you here, my young friends. No safe. You go."

"You're goin' to set us free?" asked Montie, in mild surprise.

"Oh, yes—you flee allee light—vellee flee soon," said the Chinaman. "Plenty much killee—the liver."

"Begad!" said Montie. "How frightful! They're goin' to kill us, old boy! What was that he was sayin' about our livers?"

"He wasn't referring to our livers," I replied. "He meant the liver, Montie. We're going to be killed, and then thrown into the Thames. I expect we shall be shoved into a sewer, and the water will carry us down to the river."

"That's frightfully interestin'," said Montie steadily.

"You blave boys—vellee blave," said the Chinaman. "Allee samee, solly to killee you. But you know too muchee. You die. It's quicker, and more certain. You tellee nothing when you downed."

"I don't suppose we shall tell much," I said calmly.

"You comee—savee?"

The Chinaman waved his hand, and we walked out of the stone chamber into the tunnel. There was nobody in sight save our captor. But there was

the prospect of getting the better of him, for he kept his knife constantly ready.

I expected that we should be taken into another place, where others of the yellow gang were congregated. But this did not happen. We went straight past the openings along the tunnel, until we were seemingly lost.

But, in spite of my meek obedience, I was feeling desperate and reckless. It seemed that we were to be killed in cold blood. Well, I meant to make a fight for it. It would be far better to make a struggle for life now. One of us, perhaps, would succeed in getting away. And that would be a distinct advantage.

So, without the slightest warning, I acted.

Montie and I were being forced along ahead of our captor. His open knife was held point outwards; at the least sign of treachery on our part, that wicked blade would play its deadly part.

There was only one possible chance—and that was a slim one. It is no easy task to trick a Chinaman—and I would never have attempted the feat if the position had been less desperate.

While walking, I abruptly fell headlong to the ground, as though my foot had caught upon a projection. The next second I wriggled over like an eel, grabbed at one of the Chinaman's legs, pulled with every ounce of my strength—a tremendous, violent jerk.

Crash!

The man fell headlong on to his face. The lantern went one way, and the knife clattered down. My trick had been successful. I had never really hoped that the ruse would work.

"Great Scott!" I gasped.

The lantern had not gone out. I watched it up, and the flickering glare revealed the Chinaman on the floor. He had caught his head upon the hard stone floor—and he was stunned.

"Dear boy, how did it happen?" panted Montie.

"I don't know—I didn't expect it to happen at all," I replied swiftly. "We've got to bunk—and bunk like mad, too. Come on!"

Montie needed no second bidding. Leaving the lantern behind—after extinguishing it—we dashed away down the tunnel, our way illuminated by my electric torch. We didn't know if we were in the right sewer, and we didn't much care. Our main point was to get away!

And then, it seemed, our luck deserted us. For, as we turned a bend in the tunnel we almost ran headlong into a yellow-faced figure in a flowing robe. Before we could dodge, or even show fight, the Chinaman seized us.

His grip was like iron, and we were helpless. Breathless as we were, we simply hadn't the strength to struggle.

"You try to escape—so?" exclaimed the Chinaman softly. "Veller foolish, my young friends. You comee with me."

We were forced along the tunnel, prisoners once again. A short minute before our hopes had been raised. Now they were cast down again. I hardly remember what happened after that.

Everything seemed like a nightmare, and the first really certain thing I knew was that we had arrived at the shaft—the shaft which led up into the courtyard of the school!

I blinked up, amazed; realisation dawning upon me.

"You are taking us up here?" I asked blankly.

"You gave first, English boy," said the Chinaman. "Holler—no time to waste. And no ticks. Me friend. Me no harmee you."

"A friend!" I exclaimed huskily. "But—but—"

"No wastee time," said the Chinaman curtly. "Climbee up!"

More bewildered than ever, Montie and I scrambled up the shaft, and at last we stood in the open air, under the stars. I took in a great breath, and wondered if I were still awake.

The Chinaman closed the metal cover of the false drain, and Montie and I looked on in a dull kind of way. Montie was still unable to realise what had occurred. We had been expecting such dreadful things—and we had got our liberty!

"You vellee foolish boys," said the Chinaman severely. "Allee samee, no sense to go along the sewer. In fact, you young rascals, you thoroughly deserve a sound thrashing. You might have been killed!"

Montie and I staggered.

"Begad!" panted my chum.

"The guv'nor!" I gasped.

"Exactly," said Nelson Lee, in his natural voice. "I was just coming along to see what I could do—but it seems that you were well on the way to freedom when I found you. You must tell me what happened."

It was some few moments before we could get over our amazement. The "Chinaman" we had run up against was none other than Nelson Lee himself! He had just been coming along to give us a hand—and he had thought that we were doomed!

The guv'nor, we found out, had easily discovered the false drain-cover—for we had left it partially open. Guessing that we had met with misfortune he had taken the precaution to adopt a disguise before commencing our rescue.

"Yes, Nipper, it was foolish of you

to venture so far," he exclaimed, after we had told him all. "But I cannot very well punish you for this escape—for you have discovered a great deal of valuable information."

"Do you think this yellow band is the gang responsible for the drug smuggling, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"There can be little doubt about that point," replied the guv'nor. "But the case is still far from complete, and you must be very careful in future. See nothing about this to a soul—I intend to let it drop."

"And you're not going to investigate further?" I asked, staring.

"I was referring to your escape," said Nelson Lee smoothly. "I shall certainly make very close investigations—but I shall do so alone. Now, boys, you must get off to bed at once. And let me advise you to leave this matter quite alone in the future."

A minute later we were hurrying towards the Remove dormitory.

"Leave it alone, eh?" I whispered. "That's likely, isn't it, Montie? I can see a good deal of excitement coming along."

"It certainly looks like it, dear fellow," said Tregellis-West, yawning. "But at present, I want to get to bed."

Ten minutes later we were in bed. But before going to sleep I came to the conclusion that our adventures with the drug smugglers were by no means at an end!

(In surmising this NIPPER is not far wrong, as is proved in "THE MYSTERY OF ST. FRANK'S!"—which will appear in No. 282 of The Schoolboys' Own Library, published Thursday, November 5th.—Ed.)

TOWSER'S NARROW ESCAPE!

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

A sparkling story of the Chums of St. Jim's, featuring GEORGE HERRIES' Bulldog TOWSER.

CHAPTER I.

Skimpole's Latest!

"WHAT on earth is that box-of-tricks?" gasped Tom Merry, in astonishment.

The Terrible Three were crossing the quad on their way indoors from football practice when Tom Merry stopped short and pointed towards the woodshed, where a grinning crowd of fellows were congregated round a—well, it would be hard to classify what the weird and wonderful contraption really was. It stood about six feet high, and appeared to consist mainly of a long bamboo framework enclosing a series of box-like compartments. And from the sides of this protruded three pairs of queer-shaped wings, covered with a vivid-patterned wallpaper, patched here and there with bits of newspaper.

"I give it up," remarked Monty Lowther, in answer to Tom Merry's question. "It's either a new device for scaring crows or an aeroplane designed and built by an inmate of Colney Hatch. We'd better investigate this, chaps."

And Monty Lowther led the way towards the little crowd surrounding the queer contrivance.

"Hallo! Just what I guessed!" chuckled Lowther, as the three pushed their way through the group. "It's another of Skimpole's giddy inventions. Cheerio, Skimmy! What is it this time? A giant mouse-trap, or a patent bird-catcher?"

Herbert Skimpole, the genius of the Shell, who was busy winding thick cord on a small winch-like arrangement, turned an earnest and enthusiastic face to Tom Merry & Co.

"It is neither, my dear Lowther," he

replied, with a glow of conscious pride at his invention. "It is a new type of flying-machine."

"Oh, crumbs!"

"In its present state of construction, of course," pursued Skimpole, seeming oblivious of the chorus of chuckles, "it merely embraces the simple properties of an ultra-powerful man-lifting kite. Before adding the motive power, however, it is necessary to test the lifting capacity of the—er—planes. That, my dear fellows, I am about to do. I am exceedingly gratified, my dear Merry, that you have arrived so opportunely. You will be willing to help, I am sure—"

"Like a shot, Skimmy!" smiled Tom Merry good-naturedly. "What do you want me to do? Wind the shingummy-ix up?"

"No; I will attend to that. I merely desire you to seat yourself in this," beamed Skimmy, indicating a flimsy trapeze suspended from the body of his invention. "Unless the cord breaks, it will be quite safe, I assure you. When you have ascended to a thousand feet—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Eh, what? Halt a mo', Skimmy!" said Tom Merry hastily. "If it means going up in that blessed thing, then my help's off—decidedly off!"

"But reflect upon the high honour of being the first—"

"A broken neck is too dear a price to pay, Skimmy, my dear ass. Why not test the thing yourself—"

"Ahem! Allow me to offer you the opportunity, Lowther—"

"Nothing doing, Skimmy," said Lowther gravely. "But I'll remember your kind offer when I contemplate suicide, old fellow."

"Ho, ha, ha!"

"Manners, my dear fellow——"

"Rats!"

"Dear me!"

Skimpole sighed deeply, and blinked round appealingly through his big glasses. But there were no takers—only grins. There was really very little chance of Skimpole's flying-machine flying—his inventions never did work. And none of the grinning juniors seemed willing to take the risk of this one being a success. It was really most disheartening to the St. Jim's inventor.

"Really, my dear Merry," he began again, earnestly. "Pray reconsider——"

But Tom Merry & Co. did not stay to reconsider the matter. They walked away chortling. In the School House doorway they ran into Blake, Herries, Digby and D'Arcy of the Fourth, who were gathered round a large hamper standing in the hall.

"My hat!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "That's a whacking great hamper, Blake!"

"If it contains tuck, then we're your friends for life," said Lowther. "Who——"

"Shurrup, you silly asses!" breathed Herries. "He's asleep."

"Eh! Who's asleep?" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"Towser, of course! He's had a jolly good feed, and I want him to sleep all through the journey, if possible—he doesn't like hampers," explained Herries. "I'm sending him to the show at Wayland. He's going to bag the first prize for pure-bred bulldogs, let me tell you. But we're wasting time. I suppose you haven't a label you can spare me, Merry?"

"Dare say we can find you one, if you'll come up to No. 10," grinned Tom Merry.

"Oh, good! I'll leave you chaps to look after Towser, Blake, old man. And mind," added Herries warningly, "don't wake the poor old chan."

And Herries hurried after the Terrible Three to get the promised label.

Blake, Digby, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy groaned wearily when he had departed. They had spent the best part of a half-day helping to prepare Towser for the dog show, and all three were feeling "fed" with Herries and his beloved pet.

"I'll be thumped if I'm going to waste any more time over that blessed animal!" snorted Blake. "Let's go and get tea, and blow Towser and all his works!"

"Yaas, wathah!" agreed Arthur Augustus. "That hampah will be safe enough here. Come along, deah boys!"

And the three Fourth Formers departed, leaving the hamper containing the sleeping Towser to take charge of itself.

Barely had Blake & Co. gone when three juniors entered the School House. They were Levison, Crooke, and Melish—three shady juniors who were always ready to harm anyone or any thing.

"My hat!" exclaimed Levison, spotting the hamper. "That's a stunning hamper! Whom does it belong to, I wonder?"

Crooke stooped and peered between the interstices of the basketwork.

"It's that dashed bulldog of Herries'," he grunted. "He's fast asleep, too, the lazy beast. I say there's nobody about. Let's roll the beast down the steps, Levison."

"Toppin' wheeze, Crooke," grinned Levison. "Yank hold!"

He gripped one handle of the hamper, and Crooke was about to grasp the other when Herbert Skimpole came stumbling up the School House steps. There was a decidedly dispirited expression on the inventor's brainy features, and Levison & Co., who had been amongst the crowd in the quad, chuckled as they saw it.

"Ah, my dear fellows," he began, eyeing Levison & Co. somewhat doubtfully. "I wonder if I can prevail upon one of——"

"Oh, buzz off, you tame lunatic!" said Crooke, with a sneer. "If you jolly well think we're fools enough to play with your potty toys——"

"Half a mo'!" said Levison quickly. "I suppose you haven't persuaded anyone yet to test your invention, Skimpy?"

"Unfortunately, no," replied Skimpole sadly. "But I——"

"And you won't, I'm afraid," observed Levison gravely. "But if I might make a suggestion, why rely upon anybody when your object can be attained by tying a heavy weight—say that hamper of rubbish there—on to the trapeze?"

Skimpole looked from Levison to the hamper, then he placed a finger to his bulging forehead reflectively.

"Ah, h'm, yes! Your argument is certainly logical, Levison, my dear fellow," he observed somewhat doubtfully. "An inanimate object would undoubtedly serve my purpose equally well. It would also be much—ahem!—safer. But are you sure that hamper only contains rubbish?"

"Certainly, we were just carrying it out to chuck away," said Levison glibly.

"Catch hold, Skimpy!"

"But—er—ahem! Very well!"

As Levison gripped a handle of the hamper, Skimpole, still a little doubtful, grabbed the other, and a moment later all four were ambling across the quad towards the woodshed. And with them went poor old Towser, a burnt offering, as it were, on the altar of Skimpole's genius.

CHAPTER 2.

Towser's Peril

MEANWHILE, Towser's master, George Herries, had arrived at No. 10 Study with Tom Merry & Co. But, unfortunately, Tom Merry's assurance to find a label did not materialise. For about ten minutes

Herries waited impatiently whilst the three Shell fellows searched drawers and gunboards, and at last Tom Merry gave it up.

"Sorry, old chap," he murmured apologetically. "I'm jolly certain, though, we had some somewhere, but they've gone."

"Well, you silly asses!" growled Herries ungratefully. "Making me wait all this time for nothing. B-r-r-rr!"

And George Herries was about to retire wrathfully when through the open window sounded loud and decidedly ironical cheers.

"Hallo, what's up?" said Tom Merry, stepping to the window. "Well, my hat! Ha, ha, ha! It's Skimpy's flying machine!"

"And actually flying," chortled Manners. "The only giddy invention of Skimpy's that ever worked. Look at it wobbling! Oh, crumbs!"

Manners broke off with a gasp of alarm, echoed a second later by

THREE MORE GREAT SCHOOL STORIES FOR NOVEMBER!

THE SCHOOLBOYS' OWN LIBRARY

Nos. 280, 281 and 282.

"CAPTAIN AND TYRANT!"

By FRANK RICHARDS.

"ST. JIM'S IN REVOLT!"

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

"THE MYSTERY OF ST. FRANK'S!"

By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS.

Out on

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 5th.

Don't Forget to Order Early.

Herries. Out above the quad was Skimpole's wonderful flying machine, and, more wonderful still, it was, without a doubt, steadily rising in the air. But they were not alarmed at that. It was the sight of a large hamper swaying gently like the basket of a balloon beneath the body of the queer-looking machine.

"Towser!" exclaimed Herries. "It's poor old Towser! Oh, that fool Skimmy! I'll—I'll——"

And Herries dashed from the study and clattered down the stairs like a madman.

"After him! There'll be trouble!" snapped Tom Merry sharply. "What on earth is that idiot Skimmy thinking about?"

Followed by his equally alarmed chums, Tom Merry dashed hot-foot after Herries. Out in the quad the ironical cheers and howls of laughter ceased abruptly as George Herries dashed amongst them, horror in his heart and fury in his eyes.

"Skimpole, you mad fool, bring him down again!" he shouted frantically. "Oh, you—you——"

Herbert Skimpole backed hastily, and blinked in astonishment at the wild-looking Herries.

"My dear Herries," he gasped, "what—what, pray, is the——"

He was interrupted by a shout from the fellows watching the progress of the weird-looking "flying machine" as a sudden gust of wind caught the thing and it ducked and "stunted" in an alarming manner. Then came a crash as it nose-dived and jammed itself in a confused mass of splintered bamboo and torn wallpaper on an ancient chimney of the School House tower.

And a second later came a muffled yelping as the hamper containing the unfortunate Towser swung against the ivy-clad wall of the old tower. Evidently that repulsion had awakened Herries' fat and lazy pet, not only from his

slumbers, but to the fact that something was seriously amiss.

As yet he stood in little danger—so long as the cord held, for Skimpole's unlucky invention was jammed too securely on the chimney-pot to be shifted by anything short of a hurricane. But Towser's terrified yelps were enough for Herries.

Before anyone could raise a hand to stop him, Towser's master had dashed to the foot of the old tower and was climbing swiftly and recklessly up the thick and twisted ivy.

"Come back, Herries, you idiot!" shouted Tom Merry, in alarm.

Herries went on climbing doggedly, hand over hand. Then came a shout, and Kildare and Darrell of the Sixth rushed up.

"Herries, you young fool, come down!" shouted Kildare angrily. "Stop!"

But Herries would not have obeyed even the Head just then. He would cheerfully have given his life for his beloved pet, and Kildare knew it.

Foot by foot the junior climbed steadily until he reached the hamper swinging sixty feet above the ground. Clinging with one hand to the ivy, he reached out and grasped the hamper. Then, as if he realised the hopelessness of doing anything that way, he drew back and began to climb higher to the parapet a few feet above his head.

Then came the tense moment to the watchers below. The parapet jutted outwards dangerously, and it seemed impossible for the reckless junior to accomplish the task.

But George Herries was not troubled with nerves. And in dead silence, save for the yelping of the imprisoned Towser, he hauled himself up and vanished over the parapet. He reappeared a moment later, and, leaning over, grasped the cord and prepared to haul up the hamper.

"Wait!" shouted Kildare from below.

"Wait, we'll be up there in a moment, Herries!"

Followed by his chum Darrell, the captain of St. Jim's disappeared through the doorway of the tower. Several breathless seconds passed; then the figures of the two seniors appeared on the roof alongside Herries.

Inch by inch the hamper was raised, and when it topped the parapet, Kildare and Darrell grasped a handle each and dragged it to safety.

And then the tension of the last few minutes broke, and a wild cheer rose from the watchers in the quad below. And a still greater cheer rang out as Herries, with his beloved bulldog in his arms, emerged from the doorway of the old tower a minute or two later.

"You—you old ass!" said Blake in a husky whisper. "You—you might have been killed, Herries!"

Herries did not reply. He strode over to where the unhappy Skimpole was standing, white-faced and shivering.

"Now, Skimpole," he ground out harshly, "what do you mean by that—that dirty trick? If you weren't a born idiot, I'd—I'd——"

"Steady on, Herries," said Tom Merry quietly. "I don't believe Skimpole had any idea Towser was in the hamper."

"Really, I—I most emphatically assure you that I did not!" gasped the unhappy inventor feebly. "Levison assured me that the hamper merely contained rubbish, and I——"

"Oh!" Herries turned and looked at Levison & Co., who were now wishing they had made themselves scarce.

"Is that true, Levison?" asked Herries furiously.

The cad of the Fourth glanced uneasily at the angry faces hemming him in.

"I—I never—that is, I never thought that thing would really fly!" he stammered, licking his dry lips. "It—it was only a joke."

Herries' eyes blazed, and he seemed about to hurl himself—Towser and all—at Levison. But Jack Blake was before him.

"Then perhaps this," snapped Blake, shooting out his fist, "will make you see the point of the joke, you rotter!"

The blow was straight from the shoulder, and it sent the rascally schemer with a crash to earth.

"Here, stop that!" snapped Kildare, striding up. Then, without a second glance at the prostrate and howling Levison, he turned to Herries. "Herries, you young ass, you may think yourself jolly lucky you're safe and sound. It was a mad thing to do. But, all the same, it was jolly plucky, and—I'm glad old Towser's safe. Now clear away, the lot of you!"

Glad enough to get away, Levison & Co. scuttled across the quad.

"Never mind, it can wait," said Herries through his teeth. "I'll settle with those cads later."

"And we'll help you," said Tom Merry grintly.

"Yaas, wathah, bai Jove!" agreed Arthur Augustus.

And they did. After tea that evening Tom Merry & Co. and Blake & Co. visited Levison's study in a body, and Messrs. Levison, Crooke and Mellish had good cause to regret, from the bottom of their hearts, being the cause of Towser's Narrow Escape!

THE END



WHO WANTS A GOLD MINE?

SOMEWHERE—not more than a day's car ride from Los Angeles—is one of the richest deposits of gold in the world. And nobody knows where it is!

From early days there has been a legend about it. Indians, who once lived in that part of the world, were supposed to know where it was, and once some of their chiefs turned up at a trading-post and bought supplies, paying for them with nuggets of almost pure metal. But they refused to say where they had got them from.

Desert Gold.

And then an old prospector found the place—actually stubbed his toe against a fortune which would have made him about the richest man in the world. It happened this way.

The prospector strayed from the track he was following through a sun-scorched, waterless desert, and when he tried to get back realised that he was lost. For a night and another day he struggled on, and it was during this time that he stubbed his toe on a lump of rock. Near by was a low hill, and all around, lying on the ground, similar small rocks.

The rock he had kicked rolled over—and his eyes nearly popped out of his head. It was a gold nugget! In a moment he was scrambling about on the ground, turning over the other rocks. All of them contained gold, some of them a great deal.

The prospector chose a couple of small nuggets, and set off at full speed to stake his claim. But the desert had him in its grip. The blazing sun beat down on him, making him gliddy, and only the strength of his will drove him on. Two days later he was found, more dead than alive, and taken to a lonely farm, where he gradually recovered.

He didn't tell anyone his secret; he was convinced that when he was well again he would be able to go back. But, though he tried again and again, he couldn't find the place. In his delirious wanderings he had lost all idea of where it was.

Eventually, when all his efforts to locate the place failed, he showed his nuggets to other people, and they were proved to contain an extraordinary high percentage of gold; so much so, that before long hundreds of treasure-seekers were scouring the countryside for a low hill covered with gold nuggets. But nobody found it.

So to this day there is, in California, just about the richest gold mine in the world. Perhaps some day someone will find it again.

The Golden Goose!

It is not the only gold mine that has been lost. King Solomon's Mines are famous, and there is no doubt that they once existed, and, moreover, produced a fabulous amount of gold; but no one knows exactly where they were.

There is another rich deposit of gold somewhere in America, besides the Californian one, which has yet to be discovered. It is known to exist, for a very curious reason—someone once killed a wild goose!

It was not exactly a goose which laid golden eggs, but it was the next best thing, for in its gizzard was gold dust worth over three pounds. Somewhere that goose had been drinking at a stream richer by far in gold dust than any which are known. That stream must have flowed through a district immensely rich in gold ore. The only question which remained to be answered was: where was it?

And that question remains to be answered to this day. The people who shot the bird cut around a bit, searching for other geese that might lead them to the spot, but either the original bird had flown from a long way off, or their luck was out, for they never found the spot.

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