

THE MYSTERY MASTER OF ST FRANK'S!

by
EDWY SEARLES BROOKS



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THE MYSTERY MASTER OF ST. FRANK'S!

by EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH has always considered himself a great detective—and when a new master comes to St. Frank's, Hoody gets a chance to employ his peculiar powers—with thrilling and amusing results!

The Narrative Related Throughout by NIPPER.

CHAPTER I.

Not Quite Himself!

MR. CROWELL rapped his desk impatiently. "Attention!" he exclaimed, glaring round the Remove Form Room. "I insist upon quietness and order! The next boy who speaks will receive five hundred lines, and will be detained for six hours!"

The Remove listened with grave attention. Nobody had been talking at all, and the Form-room had been dead-quiet ever since lessons had started. It was therefore astonishing that Mr. Crowell should demand attention.

I looked at the Form-master curiously, and I could not help observing that he

was not himself. There were hollows under his eyes, and his cheeks were far paler than they had been a month earlier. For several weeks, in fact, Mr. Crowell had been looking somewhat out of sorts.

But until quite recently he had carried on with his duties in the same old routine way, with never a change.

He was generally absent-minded and moody now, and his temper, always somewhat razor-like, was becoming sharper.

His school duties could not be responsible for this curious change. Personally, I had an idea that Mr. Crowell was filling in all his spare time by writing. He was compiling some historical

work, perhaps, or a book on ancient mythology. We didn't exactly know, and the matter did not interest us in any case.

But the Remove master was seldom seen out of his study, except at mealtimes and when lessons called him. Wet or fine, he remained bottled up, and when he emerged he generally had a far-away expression in his eyes—an expression which indicated that his thoughts were in other realms.

During lessons, however, he nearly always came out of his shell, and confined himself to the work in hand with all his usual vigour. But within the last day or two Mr. Crowell had remained absent-minded, even at lesson times. Not only this, but he sometimes acted in a very singular way, and would make the most irrelevant observations.

Only the previous evening he had ordered the Remove to write two lines, and to consider itself detained after lessons for twelve hours! Naturally, this punishment was not taken seriously, and Mr. Crowell himself apparently forgot all about it. In other ways, too, he was acting very strangely.

On this particular morning things had been going smoothly so far, and Mr. Crowell had given no sign that he was in one of his "dotty" moods. For the Remove had come to regard their Form-master as being somewhat off his rocker. And, certainly, Mr. Crowell's attitude sometimes gave colour to this suggestion.

"He seems to be getting worse!" whispered Handforth, nudging McClure, and causing that junior to make a huge blot on his paper. "Didn't you notice the way he—"

"You—you ass!" hissed McClure. "Look what you've done! I shall get canded for having a blotched paper like this! Why the dickens can't you shut up? You know jolly well that Crowell is touchy about talking in class."

"It strikes me you're doing all the talking!" snapped Handforth.

Mr. Crowell rapped his desk again.

"Handforth," he exclaimed harshly, "stand up!"

Handforth stood up, gave a glare at McClure, and then faced the Form-master.

"Yes, sir?" he asked innocently.

"A moment ago, Handforth, you were talking," said Mr. Crowell, with dangerous calmness. "You were not only talking, but you were making grimaces at McClure. In order that you may thoroughly understand my instructions, I command you to write me ten thousand lines of Greek, to be translated into English."

Handforth gasped, and the Remove gasped.

"Ten thousand lines, sir!" repeated Handforth faintly.

"That is what I said, boy!"

"Of—of Greek, sir?"

"Yes."

"But—but we aren't advanced in Greek, sir," said Handforth indignantly. "I couldn't translate ten thousand lines in two years!"

"Unless you take your seat at once, Handforth, I will make your punishment even harder," declared Mr. Crowell. "Remember my words. Ten thousand lines of Chinese to be translated into English!"

"Chinese, sir?" stuttered Handforth.

"Yes!" roared the Form-master.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Remove could not contain itself any longer, and they yelled.

"Silence!" thundered Mr. Crowell.

"How—how dare you make all this noise? As for you, Handforth, I have altered my decision. I will cancel the punishment I just meted out to you."

"Thank goodness!" muttered Handforth.

"Instead of that you will be placed in solitary confinement for a period of six hours," said Mr. Crowell. "Go to Mars at once, and remain there until I give you permission to return!"

Handforth stared.

"Go—go where, sir?" he asked.

"You distinctly heard what I said,

Handforth," said Mr. Crowell irritably. "You will go up to Mars at once, and you will remain on the planet until I instruct you to return to earth!"

"Oh, my goodness!" said Handforth blankly. "I—I don't mind going to Mars if you'll tell me how to get there."

Mr. Crowell picked up the duster and mopped his brow. The Remove, meanwhile, looked on with interest and wonder.

"Clean dotty!" murmured Watson into my ear. "If he goes on like this we shan't be able to have lessons at all. I reckon he'll be fit for a lunatic asylum in less than a week."

Mr. Crowell looked up and glared at Watson. He had removed the duster, and his face was decidedly paler—probably because the duster had contained a good deal of chalk.

"Watson," said Mr. Crowell tartly, "you were speaking just now!"

"Was—was I?" asked Watson lamely. "Yes, you were, and you will write me fifty lines!" snapped Mr. Crowell. "I have repeatedly said that I will have quietness in this Form-room, and what I say I mean."

Mr. Crowell glared round, and his gaze became fixed upon the standing Handforth, who was still waiting for instructions before proceeding on his journey to Mars.

"Handforth," rapped out Mr. Crowell, "what are you doing there?"

"Standing up, sir!" said Handforth brilliantly.

"I can see that, boy! Sit down at once!"

"But you told me to go to Mars, sir!"

"I—I told you——" Mr. Crowell paused, then grasped a pointer. "I will have you know, Handforth, that this is no time for making humorous remarks," he went on curtly. "Come out here!"

"But—but you did tell me to go to Mars, sir——"

"Don't be so absurd, Handforth!" shouted Mr. Crowell. "I told you to go to Mars! Preposterous!"

"Ask any of the chaps, they'll say the same, sir!" exclaimed Handforth warmly. "I'm not trying to be funny, but I thought you were!"

Mr. Crowell glipped the pointer more firmly.

"Pitt, tell the class that Handforth is talkingarrant nonsense!" he commanded.

"I—I can't very well do that, sir," said Reginald Pitt, standing up. "The fact is, sir, you did tell Handforth to go up to Mars. Don't you remember, sir?"

"No, I do not!" retorted Mr. Crowell sharply. "Hold out your hand!"

He strode forward, and Pitt received two stinging cuts—for telling the truth. Handforth was treated in a similar manner, and they were both ordered to sit down.

After that the lesson proceeded quietly for another ten minutes. But Handforth and Pitt were by no means pleased. Their hands were smarting, and they failed to see why they should suffer for nothing.

Undoubtedly Mr. Crowell was far from being himself. At times his mind wandered, and the curious part about it was that he didn't seem to be aware of the fact. The juniors scarcely knew when he was serious and when he was talking out of his hat—as Watson put it.

"Of course," said Mr. Crowell, "it is an undoubted fact that this phenomenon occurs quite frequently. At the same time scientists have declared that other phenomena of a similar character only take place in every thousand years."

"My hat!" I murmured. "He's off again!"

"Dear old boy, it's gettin' serious," said Sir Montie Tregellis-West. "Something will have to be done—it will, really!"

"Did you speak, sir?" asked De Valerie politely.

Mr. Crowell started.

"Eh? What is that?" he said.

"Certainly I did not speak. Do not be ridiculous, De Valerie. Upon my soul! What are you doing, Fullwood? Is it possible that you are actually chewing?"

Ralph Leslie Fullwood, who was seated in a corner at the back of the room, swallowed very hard, gasped, and stood up.

"I, sir?" he asked. "No, sir, I'm not chewing!"

"I distinctly saw your jaws moving a moment or two ago," said Mr. Crowell angrily. "If you have any article of food in your desk I order you to bring it to me at once!"

"But I've got nothing, sir!" declared Fullwood. "I think you must be dreamin' again, sir. We aren't on Mars, you know!"

"Dry up, you ass!"

"Shut up, Fully!"

Mr. Crowell smiled.

"No, I quite agree, Fullwood, that we are not on Mars," he said. "It may interest you to know, however, that very shortly we shall be on Jupiter! And unless you are very careful I will send you off in advance—alone! Sit down, and cease talking arrant nonsense. It is most astounding! Every time I look up one of you boys is standing in his seat!"

"But you told me to stand up, sir," said Fullwood.

"Nonsense! And one more word from you, Fullwood, and I will cane you!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell. "I have no wish to be harsh, but at the same time I insist upon being obeyed!"

"I wouldn't dream of disobeying you, sir," said Fullwood. "I'll sit down at once, and—"

"I told you not to speak, Fullwood!" interrupted Mr. Crowell. "You appear to think that you can talk to me just as you like. Come down here!"

"But I don't see—"

"Come down here!" thundered Mr. Crowell.

Fullwood left his place, and descended to the front of the Form-room.

Meanwhile, Mr. Crowell had turned for a moment, and when he looked round he found Fullwood standing in front of him.

"What are you doing here, Fullwood?" he demanded angrily.

Fullwood gasped.

"Why, you just told me to come down, sir," he exclaimed.

"If this is an attempt to insult me, Fullwood, I warn you that it will not pay," said Mr. Crowell warmly. "How dare you leave your place?"

"But—but—"

"I want no excuses! Go back to your seat!"

"Oh, very well, sir!" said Fullwood. "But I don't see how we can know what to do when you contradict your own orders in the same bally breath!"

Mr. Crowell clenched his fists.

"I will not deal with you now, Fullwood!" he said, with ominous quietness. "I will not interrupt lessons to cane you as you deserve. Go at once to my study, and wait there until I arrive. I will cane you severely, and then perhaps you will realise that it is not permissible for boys to insult their masters!"

"I wasn't insulting you—"

"Go!" shouted Mr. Crowell.

Fullwood hesitated a moment, and then went. After all, he would miss nearly half an hour of lessons, so he had no particular objection. And he was booked for a caning, in any case.

He walked out of the Form-room, and slammed the door viciously.

"Now, boys, we will continue," said Mr. Crowell curtly as he gazed about the room. "Dear me! Is it possible that there is an absentee from lessons?"

He pointed to Fullwood's empty seat.

"Who is missing from there?" he demanded angrily.

"Why, Fullwood, sir," I replied, in astonishment.

"Very well," said Mr. Crowell.

"When Fullwood arrives I will punish him severely for being late—"

"But you sent him to your study not two minutes ago, sir," I interrupted.

Mr. Crowell started.

"Good gracious! So I did!" he said. "Of course—of course! How forgetful of me. Well, boys, get on with your geography."

"We're doing arithmetic, sir!" said Pitt.

"Indeed!" exclaimed the Crowell. "Arithmetic. I was under the impression that I was giving you instructions in history! However, get on with your work, and do not delay any further."

The Remove got on, but every junior was feeling somewhat uncomfortable. Mr. Crowell's strange behaviour was by no means pleasant. He seemed quite all right most of the time, but at intervals he would go off into these strange fits of forgetfulness.

Meanwhile, Ralph Leslie Fullwood made his way leisurely to the Form-master's study. He found the apartment empty, of course, and calmly took possession of Mr. Crowell's own chair, and proceeded to examine the numerous papers which lay on the desk.

He discovered that Mr. Crowell was in the midst of writing a heavy scientific work. It was quite dry to Fullwood, but it seemed to offer an explanation of the master's singular behaviour. He was so wrapped up in his writing that it overshadowed his ordinary work.

Fullwood was warned by footsteps in the passage, and he slipped out of Mr. Crowell's chair and stood respectfully in front of the fireplace. The next moment Mr. Crowell strode briskly into the study.

"Ah, good!" he murmured. "Now I can have another hour— Upon my soul! What is the meaning of this?"

He glared at Fullwood with anger and astonishment.

"What are you doing here, boy?" he demanded.

"I've been waiting for you, sir," said Fullwood.

"Oh, indeed!" snapped the Form-master. "You will write me two hundred lines, Fullwood, for having the insufferable impertinence to enter my study."

"But—but you told me——"

"Silence! Go at once!" shouted Mr. Crowell. "And bring me those lines before eight o'clock this evening, or they will be doubled."

"Dash it all, sir, I don't see why I should write any lines!" roared Fullwood. "You told me to come here, and you can't punish me for obeying instructions!"

"If you dare to say another word, Fullwood, I'll cane you on the spot!" shouted Mr. Crowell hotly. "And remember that I shall require those twenty lines before eight o'clock. Go this instant!"

Fullwood lost no time in going. He had received no cane, and the imposition was suddenly reduced from two hundred to twenty lines. Fullwood thought it better to get out before the impost was increased to a thousand lines. There was never any telling with Mr. Crowell in his present mood.

Fullwood went straight to Study A in the Remove passage, and found Gulliver and Bell waiting for him. They adopted expressions of sympathy as their leader appeared.

"Did you get it hot, old man?" asked Gulliver.

"Hot!" grinned Fullwood. "The silly old ass didn't even touch me—wanted to know what I was doin' in his study."

"But he told you to go there!"

"He'd forgotten it, I suppose," said Fullwood. "Blessed if I can understand what's come over him of late—at least, I couldn't understand until a little while ago. But he's writin' a book of some sort, an' I suppose it's turnin' his poor little brain. Blow the silly old ass! Let's see about tea!"

And Fullwood & Co. dislodged Mr. Crowell from their minds.

CHAPTER I.

In the Clouds.

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST shook his head.

"Dear old boys, I can't understand it—I can't, really!" he declared. "Mr. Crowell's never been like this before, an' unless things improve——"

"They'll get worse!" grinned Watson.

"They might not," I said. "Mr. Crowell seems to be half on earth and half in the clouds nowadays, and there's evidently something wrong with him."

"In the head?"

"Of course," I said. "He's all right otherwise. But it seems to me that he's been doing too much brainwork lately. Before long lessons will be an absolute farce. Even now we can do pretty much as we like."

"That's what I'm so concerned about, dear fellow," said Montie. "It seems frightfully unfair, you know."

"Unfair?"

"Well, some of the chaps are takin' advantage of Mr. Crowell's slackness," said Montie. "Long, for example, has done practically nothin' all day, an' a few others have been slackin' just the same."

I nodded.

"Yes, I've noticed the same thing myself," I said. "Of course, it may be only a passing phase—a kind of spring madness, so to speak. We'll give Mr. Crowell until to-morrow before saying anything about it. But if he's no better, I'll tell the guv'nor."

"But what can Mr. Lee do?"

"Well, I don't know," I said. "He might be able to get Dr. Brett up here, to have old Crowell examined. This kind of thing leads to brain fever unless it's stopped in time."

"You don't think he's dotty, then?" asked Watson.

"Of course he's not dotty," I replied. "For fifty minutes out of every hour he is just himself. He only has these periods at intervals, and I suppose it's caused by preoccupation. He's

thinking about something else, and he gets kind of unhinged. But he's not violent, and there's no reason why we should make a lot out of nothing. It's quite possible that he'll be as right as rain to-morrow."

"Begad! Let's hope so," said Sir Montie. "He's a decent old stick, an' I shall be sorry if anything serious happens to him."

It was tea-time, and we were seated in Study C in the Ancient House. The evening sun was shining in at the window warmly, and we were anxious to be out in record time, in order to get on to Little Side for cricket practice.

We saw very little more of Mr. Crowell that evening. He was apparently bottled up in his study, as usual. I passed him in the passage just before supper-time, but he did not seem to notice me at all.

He walked straight on, with his hands clasped behind him, and with his eyes cast down towards the floor.

"Good-night, sir!" I said, as we passed one another.

But Mr. Crowell did not reply. He walked straight on, as though I did not exist. I gazed after him, and then went along to the dining-hall for supper. I could not help wondering what would be the end of the business.

It was a fact that many of the juniors had deliberately skipped their prep, feeling certain that Mr. Crowell would fail to notice anything wrong in the morning. The lazy juniors in the Remove—and there were quite a few—saw no reason why they should not take advantage of the Form-master's unusual slackness.

There was a further discussion in the dormitory, and one or two fellows declared that Mr. Crowell was off his head, and that the best thing would be to have him placed quietly in a lunatic asylum. But these fellows were not given any serious attention by the others.

Morrow, of the Sixth, saw lights out, and the Remove was soon asleep. I dropped off almost at once, for I had

been practising cricket all the evening, and was feeling tired. But although I could drop off to sleep at will, I never slept heavily. Any unusual sound in the night would generally make me wake in a second.

And it was so on this occasion.

I did not know what the time was, but every fellow in the Remove dormitory was sound asleep. The moon was shining in at the windows with quite a summer brilliance. The night was perfectly still and peaceful.

I wondered what had caused me to awaken. I lifted my head a trifle and listened. And I distinctly heard a voice outside in the open.

I was on the point of turning over to go to sleep again, for I imagined that the hour was still comparatively early, and that two of the masters were having a final cigarette before turning in.

But just at that moment the school clock chimed solemnly. And the strokes followed. One, two—I waited for more, but they did not sound, and I sat up in bed curiously.

Two o'clock!

Obviously no masters were taking a stroll at that hour, and now that I was sitting up I could tell that only one voice was sounding. And, moreover, I recognised it at once as the voice of Mr. Crowell!

What on earth could he be doing in the Triangle in the small hours of the morning? It was decidedly unusual, and I slipped out of bed and moved across to the window. It was wide open at the bottom, and I leaned out and gazed down.

The Triangle was quite clear in the moonlight, but although I looked over every corner of it, I could see no sign of anybody, and yet the voice was now much more audible, and seemed nearer.

I looked about me with astonishment, but still I could see no sign of Mr. Crowell. It struck me that he might be at one of the windows.

But this did not seem to be the case. I glanced at all the windows, but

all those in the near vicinity were bare. I glanced above, and then I uttered a startled gasp. And not without reason!

"Great Scott!" I muttered blankly.

There, high above me, right on the very parapet of the roof, stood Mr. Crowell! His head was lifted towards the sky, and he was talking rapidly. But this caused me no dismay.

It was Mr. Crowell's position that horrified me.

One step and he would plunge down to certain death. He stood up there, quite careless of any danger, and he talked to the empty atmosphere. The thing was rather uncanny, and I felt a curious creepy feeling pass down my spine.

I hardly knew how to act, and stood there watching, half fascinated.

Mr. Crowell was a somewhat timid man by nature. He was more inclined to take things easily and quietly, and for him to stand on the very edge of the roof in this dangerous fashion was the last thing I should have expected of him. It made me feel queer.

And then suddenly a thought struck me.

"I've got it!" I muttered. "He's asleep!"

This seemed the only possible explanation. Mr. Crowell had got up from his bed and had walked in his sleep to the roof, and at any moment he might take the false step and plunge down to the hard ground far below.

Mr. Crowell had never shown any tendency to be a somnambulist before, but his recent brainwork had probably affected him.

I realised that something would have to be done—quickly.

To shout up to the sleeper would be fatal, for he would probably awaken and fall over the edge of the parapet before he could find out where he was. The only safe method would be to creep up behind him and pull him back before he could awaken, and there was no time to be lost.

I crossed quickly to Watson's bed and shook his shoulder.

"Get up!" I exclaimed softly.

"I say, don't be an ass!" muttered Watson sleepily. "What's the idea of getting up now? It's still night—"

"But listen!" I broke in. "Mr. Crowell's walking in his sleep."

"What!"

"He's up on the parapet of the roof, talking to the sky," I said. "He must be asleep, and if he wakes up he'll be killed."

"My goodness!"

Watson sat up in bed, fully awake.

"Do—do you mean it?" he asked huskily.

"Yes, of course," I replied. "Get up, and come with me to the roof. We needn't get dressed; it's as mild as August to-night."

"Dear old boys, what's the trouble?" inquired a sleepy voice. "Is anything the matter, Nipper?"

I turned quickly.

"I didn't mean to disturb you, Montie," I said. "Every second is precious. Mr. Crowell's walking in his sleep on the roof."

"Begad!"

I rapidly told Montie what I had seen, and within ten seconds he and Watson were out of bed, anxious to follow me up on the roof. We all liked Mr. Crowell, and if we could do him any service we should be only too delighted.

Without losing a moment we left the dormitory and passed along the passage until we came to the staircase leading to the attic. Mounting this, we soon found a door which opened directly on to the flat leads, for in this part of the building the roof was perfectly level, with parapets at each side.

The door, as I had half expected, was unbelled, proving that Mr. Crowell had come up this way some time earlier. We slipped through, and found ourselves under the night sky.

In spite of my reference to an August night, the air was rather chilly, and this was not to be wondered at, considering we only wore pyjamas. However, it was no time to think of such

details, and we crept along the ledge, past one or two chimney-stacks, until we came within sight of Mr. Crowell.

He was still there, but he was not actually on the parapet, as I had supposed, or perhaps he had got down within the last minute or two. He was standing close to it, and as it was low there was still danger of his toppling over if he should suddenly awaken. We paused for a moment.

Mr. Crowell was not speaking so loudly now. He seemed rather to be talking to himself, and every now and again he would use his arm, waving them up towards the sky in strange gesticulation.

"He's dotty!" murmured Watson.

"Dear old boy, the poor man is asleep," said Sir Montie. "He doesn't know what he's doin', and I'm wonderin' if it will be wise for us to wake him up. I've heard that it's frightfully dangerous to rouse people while they are walkin' in their sleep. What do you say, Nipper, old boy?"

"It can't be helped!" I exclaimed.

"Mr. Crowell's in a position of danger, and it's up to us to get him to safety. If we can lead him off the roof without awakening him, all the better. Come on!"

I led the way across the roof, and my chums followed. We slipped along as silently as shadows, and even if Mr. Crowell had been awake he would not have been aware of our presence. We waited until we were actually within arm's length of him, and then we grasped him gently by the coat-sleeve.

The Form-master gave a violent start.

"Good heavens!" he panted, turning with a gasp.

He stared at us wildly for a second, then recognition came into his eyes, and his expression changed into one of anger.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded harshly. "Good gracious! Do you realise what the time is? What do you mean by coming on to the roof at this hour of the night, and in your pyjamas?"

"We came to save you, sir," said Watson meekly.

"To save me!" repeated Mr. Crowell.

"You were asleep, sir——"

"Nonsense, boy!" snapped the master. "Asleep! What do you mean by talking such arrant rubbish?"

"It was my fault, sir," I said. "I thought you were asleep, and I woke these other fellows, and told them to come up with me. We meant to save you falling over the parapet——"

"That is sufficient," interrupted the Form-master curtly. "It seems to me that you have been deliberately spying on my movements. You will all get to bed at once, and write me five hundred lines in the morning!"

"Yes, sir," I said.

It was a bit of a shock to discover that Mr. Crowell had been fully awake all the time. He had not needed saying, and he was perfectly aware of his own actions! But this only puzzled me all the more.

Why on earth had he come to the roof at two o'clock in the morning? Why had he been talking to the empty air? Instead of getting better the Remove master was becoming worse! His actions were getting more and more bizarre.

"Go on—go away this instant!" ordered Mr. Crowell. "I have been disturbed quite sufficiently, and I will not allow you to remain here another second. Go! And do not dare to return in any circumstances!"

"All right, sir," I said quietly. "We will obey your orders, of course, but if you will pardon my saying so, I don't think we deserve such a heavy punishment."

"You deserve a flogging, you young rascals!"

"But just consider, sir," I said. "I saw you up here, talking to the thin air, and I naturally thought that something was wrong——"

"Fiddlesticks!" interjected Mr. Crowell. "I was talking to friends of mine."

"Friends, sir? Up here?"

"Yes, certainly," said Mr. Crowell irritably. "I have been conversing with the inhabitants of Mars!"

We stared.

"You—you've been talking to people on Mars?" I ejaculated blankly.

"Precisely!"

"But—but that's impossible, sir!" broke out Watson. "You—you aren't well, sir! I—I think you ought to see Dr. Brett——"

"Tush!" snapped the Form-master.

"If you do not get out at once, I will send you all to Venus for a week! You interrupted the most interesting conversation with the Martians, and it may take me a considerable time to get into communication with them again."

"Come on, you chaps," I said briskly. "We'll clear!"

"We're frightfully sorry if we've upset you at all, sir," said Sir Montie gracefully. "Anythin' we have done was quite unintentional, begad. If there's nothin' else we can do we'll retire."

"Quite so—go at once," said Mr. Crowell. "Get straight to your lessons, and I will be with you in the Form-room within ten minutes!"

We walked away, leaving Mr. Crowell standing in the middle of the roof. Somehow we were feeling rather queer about the whole business. Watson nudged me as we were about to enter the doorway.

"Poor old chap!" he announced. "He's gone—clean gone!"

"He certainly seems a bit off his balance," I agreed. "His mind is mixed up with the planets and lessons, and goodness knows what else! He seems to be safe enough up here, so there's no need for us to worry our heads about him. At the same time, I'm a bit concerned."

"Dear fellow, don't you think we ought to tell Mr. Lee?" said Tregellis-West. "Mr. Crowell is gettin' much worse, an' I think it would be safer if we sent Mr. Lee up to him now. There's no tellin' what he may do on the roof."

I nodded.

"You're right, Montie," I agreed. "We'll go straight to the gov'nor's bed-room and rouse him up. Mr. Crowell won't sent him off easily, and it'll be just as well to let the gov'nor see him when he's in one of his queerest fits. Come on."

We hurried down the stairs, along the passage, and came to a halt outside the door of Nelson Lee's bed-room. I tapped upon the door and waited.

"Who is that?" came the gov'nor's voice.

"Nipper, sir," I replied. "Can I come in?"

"Certainly, but unless you have a good explanation to give, I shall be very angry," said Nelson Lee. "What are you doing out of bed at this hour?"

I entered the gov'nor's bed-room, and Sir Montie and Tommy followed me.

CHAPTER 3.

The Legacy of the Storm!

NELSON LEE was out of bed, and just slipping into his dressing-gown. He had switched on the electric light, and he regarded us with an expression that was somewhat ominous.

"The hour is nearly two-thirty," he said. "You boys are out of your dormitory, and you are wearing only your pyjamas. What is the meaning of this strange conduct, Nipper?"

"Well, sir, we thought we'd better come to you," I said. "Mr. Crowell's on the roof talking to some pals of his in Mars!"

Nelson Lee frowned.

"This is no time for joking, young 'un," he said severely.

"But I'm not joking, sir," I went on. "Mr. Crowell told us himself—and he ought to know. I saw him from the dormitory window at first, and thought he was walking in his sleep. So I woke up these other chaps, and went on to the roof, meaning to pull Mr. Crowell back into safety."

"Well?"

"We crept up to him, sir, but as soon as we touched him we found he was awake. He was very angry, and ordered us back to bed."

"And he told us that he was holding a conversation with some friends in Mars, sir," put in Tommy Watson. "He seems to mean it, too, and—and—Well, we thought it was very queer, sir."

"So we decided to let you know," I concluded.

Nelson Lee stroked his chin.

"A most extraordinary story," he said. "Mr. Crowell is on the roof, talking to friends in Mars, eh? Dear me! If there were not three of you to support the story I should imagine that somebody had been suffering from nightmare. Is Mr. Crowell still on the roof?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "That's why we came to you."

"Well, in the circumstances, I will not punish you for being out of the dormitory at this time of the night," said Lee. "You have apparently acted for the benefit of Mr. Crowell—and he does not appear to welcome your attentions. But I am puzzled, boys. Why should Mr. Crowell tell you such a preposterous story? He is not usually given to joking."

"I think he means it, sir," I said. "He thinks he is talking to somebody in Mars. That's what makes it so uncanny. And Mr. Crowell has been queer like this for two or three days."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, sir, Haven't you noticed it?"

"I have certainly noticed that Mr. Crowell has been far from himself of late," said Nelson Lee slowly. "He has appeared to be absent-minded, and has given me one or two vague answers when I have addressed him. But I have noticed nothing really startling in him."

"He's been overworking his brain, I believe, gov'nor," I said. "That's about the size of it. But I wish you'd go up to the roof—"

"Yes, Nipper, I intend going at

once," said Nelson Lee. "Get back to your dormitory, and go to sleep. If there is anything to tell you, I will have a word with you in the morning. Good-night!"

"Good-night, sir!"

We all left the bed-room, and Nelson Lee hurried along the passage towards the upper staircase. But we didn't return to the dormitory. Before we had gone ten yards, I came to a halt.

"Come on, my sons," I whispered. "We'll slip up to the roof after the guv'nor—at any rate, to the door. Perhaps we shall be able to hear what goes on. I don't feel inclined to wait until the morning."

My chums were rather doubtful, but they followed me readily enough. And within a minute or two we had arrived at the top of the upper staircase. The door was open, and I gazed out. Nelson Lee was fairly close, and Mr. Crowell was just strolling round a chimney-stack. He came to a halt as he caught sight of the Housemaster.

"Good gracious! Is that you, Mr. Lee?" he asked.

"Yes," replied the guv'nor, moving forward.

"You gave me quite a shock for the moment," said Mr. Crowell.

"I became aware that you were on the roof, and I wondered why you were acting so strangely," said Nelson Lee. "It is between two and three o'clock."

"Quite so," interrupted the Form-master. "I really couldn't sleep, Mr. Lee, and the night was so brilliant and clear that I fancied a turn on the roof, where everything is quiet and still. I have been greatly interested in studying the stars and planets, and I have found the occupation most entertaining."

I looked at my chums blankly.

"Well, this is about the limit," I said softly. "Old Crowell's absolutely himself now—not a trace of wildness in his talk. The guv'nor will think we've been spinning him a yarn."

"Yes, it's frightfully absurd, dear old

boy," said Sir Montie. "I am beginnin' to wish that we hadn't gone to Mr. Lee at all."

"How the dickens were we to know?" I said. "He's been like this all along—he has spasms, so to speak, and forgets all about them within a minute or two. If we showed ourselves to Crowell now, he'd probably say he hadn't seen us before on the roof. We'd better nip back into bed."

"So, without any further delay, we hurried downstairs and got back between the sheets. And in the morning I went straight to Nelson Lee's study. The guv'nor looked at me with an amused smile.

"Really, Nipper, I fail to see why you should be so concerned in the night!" he exclaimed. "Mr. Crowell is quite rational, and it seemed he was only on the roof for the purpose of taking a stroll."

"I know, sir," I replied. "We slipped up after you, and we heard what Mr. Crowell said. I expect you think we were dreaming, or something."

"I certainly think you allowed your imagination to run somewhat riot," said Nelson Lee, nodding. "It is always possible to get weird ideas into one's head in the dead of night—"

"Oh, come off it, sir!" I protested. "I'm not the kind of chap to have ideas of that sort. Mr. Crowell did exactly what I said, and it's a pity he got back into his ordinary manner before you saw him. He has his like that, and it's a ten-to-one chance that he'll show signs of it in the class-room this morning."

"If Mr. Crowell acts strangely during lessons, make an excuse and leave the room," said Nelson Lee. "Come straight to me, and I will accompany you back."

"Good enough, sir," I replied.

We left it at that, and, of course, Mr. Crowell was almost normal during lessons. The Remove found this out to its sorrow.

The fellows who had skipped their

prep were in hot water, and other juniors who thought they could take things easily made the uncomfortable discovery that Mr. Crowell was as keen as mustard.

Only once during the whole morning did he go off into one of his strange moods. And this was over within a couple of minutes. I found no opportunity of reporting to Nelson Lee, and when lessons were over the Remove had practically come to the conclusion that the Form-master had completely recovered from his temporary fits of delusion.

It was a half-holiday that day, and as soon as dinner was over everybody hurried out into the open to enjoy the afternoon's freedom. A good many members of the Remove were booked for cricket practice.

But Sir Montie and Tommy and I decided to go out for a cycle ride. It was lovely weather—almost too lovely, in fact. The heat of the afternoon was sultry, and reminded one more of August than the latter part of April.

The sun shone from a cloudless sky, and there was hardly a breath of wind. And the sky, although clear, had a look about it which seemed to suggest a thunderstorm was on the way.

"Phew! This is warm work, my sons!" I exclaimed, as we pedalled slowly up a hill. "I don't think we'd better go the round we originally planned. We'll take it easier, and get back to Bannington in time for tea."

"That's the idea, old boy," said Tre-gellis-West. "We'll go into that nice little restaurant, have a ripplin' tea, an' then get back to St. Frank's nicely before locking up!"

"Exactly," I agreed.

We took things so easily that it was rather late when we arrived at Bannington, on the return journey. We were perspiring freely, and we had ice-creams before taking tea. Whether the mixture was good from a health point of view was of no concern to us. By the time we had finished we were feeling quite cool and refreshed, and the

ride back to St. Frank's would be easy and enjoyable.

At least, we thought so at first. But soon after we left the restaurant I changed my opinion. The sky, over in the south, was as black as ink, dense masses of clouds rolling up steadily and ominously. And every few seconds flashes of lightning appeared in the midst of the blackness. Low rumblings were plainly audible. A thunderstorm of considerable violence was coming.

"We'd better put steam on," I remarked. "If we don't, we shall be provided with a free bath before we get to St. Frank's."

"I felt a spot of rain just now," said Tommy Watson, glancing up at the sky. "My hail! Look at those clouds! I don't think I've ever seen the sky looking so threatening."

"Dear old boys, we certainly seem to be in for a spot of wetness," observed Sir Montie.

We pedalled on with all speed, perspiring freely again. The air was very warm, and there was hardly a breath of wind. Something extra violent was evidently brewing.

Before we had covered half the distance from Bannington to Beilton, large drops of rain had commenced to fall. At first the drops were few and far between, and there was no necessity for us to stop in order to seek shelter.

We arrived at the little turning which cut off the village. By taking this lane we should skirt the back of Beilton Wood, and arrive at St. Frank's ten minutes earlier. It was a short cut the fellows generally took when they were in a hurry. When there was plenty of time to spare the main road was always better. The lane was flinty, the road surface having an ample supply of the finest puncture mixture.

Still, we chanced it this time, and at length we arrived within sight of the River Stowe. In six or seven minutes we should be home.

"Good!" I exclaimed. "I reckon we shall do it comfortably. The rain seems to be holding off for our especial

benefit—which is very obliging of it."

But although the rain was holding off, the sky had become much blacker. The clouds had now rolled right overhead. And the darkness increased with every minute that passed.

As we cycled along we could scarcely see fifty yards ahead, except when the blazing flashes of lightning rent the heavens.

Boom—boom—booom!

A crash of thunder roared overhead like the combined reports of a dozen heavy guns, and the echo rolled and reverberated alarmingly.

"Great Scott!" gasped Watson. "That was a crash, and no mistake!"

"Rather, old boy!" said Montie. "I'm gettin' quite nervous. I don't remember a storm like this before. It's somethin' quite exceptional."

The lightning was awful—great jagged forks of livid brilliance. And before we had ridden another two hundred yards the darkness was almost like that of a winter's night. Then, without the slightest warning, came the rain.

It simply fell in one solid mass—a blinding, roaring sheet of water, hissing down with appalling force. And with it came a gale which almost brought us to a standstill, and which bent the trees and hedges nearly flat. Riding was practically impossible, and we fell from our machines rather than dismounted.

"In here—quick!" I yelled above the hiss of the rain and the howl of the wind.

By a piece of very good luck we were just opposite a low shed which stood within a gateway. It was an old farm building, and it didn't matter to us whether it was occupied or not. We dashed into it blindly, nearly half soaked, and we found the place empty. It was a shelter, and that was sufficient.

"By Jove," I panted, "only just in time!"

"Only just in time!" echoed Sir Montie. "Dear fellow, I shall never be able to wear these trojers again, an' my jacket is quite worthless."

"Blow your beastly clothes!" said Watson. "Just have a look outside. Phew! Did you ever see such rain? It's like a flood!"

"It's a cloud burst," I said, gazing out into the meadow. "I pity anybody who happens to be caught without shelter near by. We're jolly lucky to get in here."

We didn't talk much, for we were fascinated by the extraordinary fury of the thunderstorm. The thunder crashed again and again—terrible booming reports which fairly shook the ground. And the rain descended with such fearful violence that the spray formed a kind of fog fully three feet above the ground. It was impossible to see across the meadow, even when the long lightning flashes made the darkness brilliant.

"My word!" said Watson in an awed voice. "What a storm! It makes a chap feel so jolly small, you know. When Nature gets busy like this we human beings are as helpless as pebbles on the beach."

"You're right there, old son," I agreed. "We can do a lot of wonderful things, but when it comes to something on a large scale, Mother Nature shows us a few— Good heavens, look—look at that!"

Boom—boom—crash!

We all stared out at the black sky. Without the slightest warning it had been parted by a blinding flash of light—a flash which did not seem to be the same as the ordinary glares of lightning. And a crash followed on the top of it which seemed to make the whole ground rock and quiver.

But the most astounding thing was still visible. A ball of fire was shooting down from the clouds. It came down in a slanting direction, and we watched it with something akin to consternation.

"What—what is it?" gasped Watson. "Do you think an aeroplane was caught in the storm? That lightning might have exploded the petrol."

"That's not a blazing aeroplane," I

said grimly, "It's something very different, and unless I'm mistaken—By jingo, look at that!"

The ball of fire, now absolutely ablaze with brilliance, whizzed down, and fell in one of the neighbouring meadows—on the other side of the river, by the look of it. A glare lit the sky for a second when the object struck, and rapidly died down to a glow, which, in turn, vanished altogether.

"Great Scott!" panted Watson. "What was it?"

"Dear old boy, it's no good asking me," said Sir Montie, shaking his head in rather a bewildered fashion. "Begad, the rain has stopped!"

"So it has!" I said, looking out into the open. "The tap's been turned off as abruptly as it was turned on. But I expect we shall have a lot more wetness before long. I vote we venture out at once."

"To see what fell over there, old boy?"

"It was an aeroplane on fire," persisted Watson.

"You're wrong, my son," I interrupted. "That wasn't an aeroplane."

"Then what was it?"

"Well, it's my belief we've witnessed the fall of an aerolite," I replied.

"A which?"

"An aerolite!"

"And what the dickens is an aerolite, you ass?"

"A kind of meteorite," I answered.

"They're called fireballs, and the smaller sort are very often the common or garden thunderbolts."

"Begad!"

"It looks to me as if that thing we saw was a meteorite—white-hot owing to the friction caused by the atmosphere," I said. "The best thing we can do is to hurry over and have a look at the spot."

"Jolly good idea," said Watson. "I believe the thing was a burning aeroplane, and I wouldn't mind betting a currant bun I'm right!"

I didn't take on the bet, and we left the shed without further delay, leaving our bicycles within. We could easily

go back for them, and it was impossible to ride them across the half-flooded meadows, in any case.

We were all somewhat excited, and we lost no time in getting to the foot-bridge and crossing to the other side of the river.

The sky was now clearer, but the thunder still rolled out in tremendous peals, and the lightning was incessant. But the rain seemed to be over, except for one or two drops which fell at intervals.

Over in a corner of the meadow which adjoined the St. Frank's playing-fields we saw a column of thin steam rising in the now still atmosphere, for the wind had died down completely.

And we hurried towards that steam, feeling sure that we should discover something of exceptional interest.

What was it that we had seen falling from the clouds?

CHAPTER 4.

Mr. Crowell's Amazing Discovery!

"**G**REAT pip!" Edward Oswald Handforth uttered that exclamation in a tone of great excitement. He was standing just within the lobby of the Ancient House, staring out into the blackness of the storm.

The Triangle looked very much like a lake, for the torrential rain, which had only just ceased, had descended with such force that the water had been unable to run away.

A good many other juniors were collected about the Ancient House doorway, too, and they were all awed by the extraordinary violence of the thunder-storm.

Needless to say, Handforth had been startled by the fall of the flaming object which had so astonished Tregellis-West and Watson and myself. Church and McClure, and a good few others, were also witnesses.

"What was it, you chaps?" panted Church excitedly.

"Blessed if I know," said Pitt. "It

came right down out of the sky, and it must have fallen in the playing-fields."

"Rais!" said Handforth. "It fell miles away."

"It's my belief it came down in the village," said Singleton.

Opinions differed, but the majority of the fellows agreed that the flaming object had descended a mile or two away. It was very difficult to tell precisely—as, in just the same manner, a burning building in a large town often seems near when it is actually a long distance away.

Nobody knew exactly what to think, and hardly any juniors suggested venturing out to investigate—mainly because they were under the impression that the strange object had fallen some miles away.

But the juniors were not the only ones who had been watching.

Mr. Crowell was at his study window. He had been curious in his manner during the earlier part of the storm—nervous, jumpy and excited. He had talked to himself almost continuously, pacing his study with rather wild eyes.

And as he saw the ball of fire shoot down from the heavens he gave a hoarse cry, and flung open his window. He stared out into the gloom, and then, without the slightest warning, he turned from the window and dashed across his study. He flung open the door and tore out into the passage.

Down the passage he fled, reaching the lobby, and pushed his way through the crowds of juniors roughly and made for the exit.

"Let me pass—let me pass!" he shouted feverishly.

The juniors were astounded, and allowed the Form-master to reach the doorway. He was hatless, wore only house slippers, and had no overcoat.

"You—you can't go out, sir!" exclaimed Handforth. "The Triangle's flooded!"

"You haven't got any hat, sir!"

"Egad, and no boots!" said Singleton.

But Mr. Crowell took no notice whatever. He tore out of the lobby, went down the steps two at a time, and crossed the Triangle at the double—the juniors looking after him with astonishment.

"He's mad!"

"Clean off his chump!"

"Oh, rather!"

Mr. Crowell was unconscious of these remarks regarding his mental condition. He continued to run, and he went over the playing fields, across a meadow until he reached the river bank, and then he came to a pause and gazed around.

"It was in this direction—I know it was in this direction!" he panted hoarsely. "I distinctly saw it fall—Ah!"

He suddenly caught sight of three figures in the gloom—the figures of Tregellis-West, Watson and myself. We saw the Form-master at the same moment and came to a halt. We were just on our way to the spot where we had seen the fireball fall.

"Who's that?" asked Watson, peering forward.

"Looks like old Crowell," I said.

"Begad, I believe it is!" said Sir Montie. "But there is something strange about this, dear boys. He's wearin' no hat, an' he appears to be—Begad, I believe he's beckonin' to us!"

Mr. Crowell was, and we hurried across the meadow.

"Boys—boys!" shouted the Form-master. "Did you see it?"

"Yes, sir," I replied.

"Where did it fall?" demanded Mr. Crowell fiercely. "Tell me! Where did it fall, Nipper? Tell me at once!"

He was feverish in his anxiety and impatient to a degree.

"By what we could see, sir, the thing came down just on the other side of that hedge," I said, pointing. "We were wondering what it could be, and I'm of the opinion it was a meteorite—"

"More likely an aeroplane on fire," said Watson.

"Nipper is right—Nipper is undoubtedly right!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell. "A fragment of matter from the outer space. A portion of— But we must waste no time. Not a second! This object has come straight from Mars! I know it—I am absolutely sure of it!"

"From where, sir?" I asked, staring.

"From Mars!"

"Oh, I don't know, sir—" I began doubtfully.

"But I do know, boy—I do know!" shouted Mr. Crowell. "Do you think I am speaking without knowledge? The object we saw has come direct to this earth from the planet Mars! Come, we will investigate!"

"But you haven't got any hat, sir," said Watson. "And you've only got slippers on. You'll catch a terrific cold, sir."

"What do I care about colds?" denounced the Form-master sharply. "Watson, you will write me fifty thousand lines for impertinence!"

Watson gasped.

"Fifty thousand, sir?" he repeated blankly.

"Yes, at least," mumbled Mr. Crowell, as though talking to himself—"at least fifty thousand miles a second. Even at that rate it would have taken many days to travel through the realms of outer space— Eh?" he added suddenly. "Oh, come, boys, come! We are wasting time!"

"But about those lines, sir—" began Watson anxiously.

"What lines?" barked Mr. Crowell.

"You just gave me fifty thousand."

"Nonsense—nonsense!" shouted the Form-master, rushing off.

He made straight for the hedge, and we gazed at one another.

"Dear old fellows, he's got 'em again!" murmured Tregella-West softly.

"He seems a bit wild, anyhow," I said. "I don't mean angry—but

strange. I wonder what he's got in his bonnet this time? He seems to be a bit doity on Mars, by the way he keeps talking about it."

We followed Mr. Crowell to the hedge, broke through a gap, and passed into the other meadow. There, not thirty yards away, the Form-master was standing quite still, staring at the ground.

Just at that spot steam was rising, and we could see that the grass was blackened. We ran up, and then we stared at the spot with great interest. The meadow was quite a smooth one, but just in this particular place a considerable hole had been made.

The grass was scorched and burnt, and a fair-sized hole was visible, being partially filled up with jagged pieces of rock-like substance of a curious texture and colour. It was steaming, and the very centre of the hole was filled with a great chunk of the rock which fairly glowed with heat. We could feel the warm air on our cheeks as we stood there.

The air, too, was charged with a pungent smell. It was not unlike the smell which results when a white-hot piece of iron is suddenly thrust into a tank of water.

"Extraordinary!" said Mr. Crowell softly.

"An aerolite, right enough," I remarked. "I was right, you see, Tommy. Your aeroplane idea was right off the mark."

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Watson. "I thought we were going to see something worth looking at. There's nothing here, only a few ragged chunks of beastly rock."

"Dear fellow, were you anxious to see a wrecked aeroplane?" asked Sir Montie. "I am frightfully glad that nothin' worse has happened."

"Oh, I didn't mean that!" said Watson. "I'm glad there's been nobody killed or hurt. But this is a frost. There's nothing to see at all."

"My dear chap, this is of great interest," I declared. "I'll warrant a

report of this appears in all the newspapers to-morrow."

"Rats!"

"You don't seem to realise that the fall of an aerolite is an event which only occurs once in a blue moon," I went on. "This seems to be an extra big one, too. Think of it—a fragment of matter from outer space, coming down here, near St. Frank's! My dear chap, it's an event of the utmost scientific importance!"

"Well, there's not much to see," said Tommy bluntly.

"You always were a stolid, matter-of-fact bouncer," I grumbled. "You've got no imagination, my son. Think of this piece of metallic rock, weighing tons and tons, shooting through space towards the earth! Supposing it had struck St. Frank's! It would have crashed through to the very cellar, and a fire would have started on the instant. It's amazingly lucky that it fell here, out in the open meadows."

"Well, I must admit that," said Watson, staring at the blackened remains. "But you can't tell me this thing weighs tons and tons—"

"It probably did," I said.

"It did?" asked Watson. "What do you mean—'it did'?"

"Well, I expect it was fifty times this size before it struck our atmosphere," I explained. "It was as cold as ice then—colder. A mere fragment of the countless interplanetary bodies which form a part of the solar system. Then it came into contact with the earth's atmosphere. At that great speed the friction must have been terrific, and within a few seconds the mass of rock was white hot to the core, burning itself away and melting into dust, until only a small piece of it remained to hit the ground. That's how I figure it."

"You put it in a convinclin' way, old boy," said Sir Montie. "I don't know anythin' about these matters, but it is exceedin' interestin'—I beg your pardon, sir!"

Mr. Crowell, having been silent and still for several minutes, was now mov-

ing about and talking. He bent down, picked up a portion of black rock, and then hastily dropped it.

"Most decidedly a meteorite," he said absently. "I was hoping that it would be something different. However, this is of enormous interest. I must admit that I am greatly curious. I cannot understand—"

He mumbled the rest of his words, and we couldn't catch them. Then he went round the hole, bending low, gazing at the curious-looking rock with intense interest and animation.

"He'll catch the 'Fu through this," I murmured. "But it's no good talking to him. Wild horses wouldn't drag him away now. I vote we get off at once, and give the guv'nor a tip. He'll probably come out and make Mr. Crowell go back."

"Good gracious!" gasped Mr. Crowell abruptly. "What is this—what is this? 'Pon my soul! A metal casket! Ah! I was right! This is the one moment I have been waiting for! I was right—I was right!"

He fairly shouted the last words.

"What's the matter, sir?" I asked curiously.

Mr. Crowell took no notice of me. He had suddenly pounced down, and he now held something in his hands—something which he tossed about from palm to palm, proving that it was fairly hot.

He looked at him with sudden interest, and we looked at the article he held. It was a smallish metal box, bound strongly at the corners. Its colour was a drab, slaty-blue, with streams of black in it. I could see at once that the box had been subjected to white-hot heat at one time, for it was warped and twisted out of shape.

"Great Scott!" muttered Watson. "What's that?"

"It couldn't have been in that mass of stone, anyhow," I said. "Such a thing is impossible! Yet it seems mighty queer—"

"It was right in the middle of those broken bits, anyhow," said Tommy,

"It was in that aerolite, as sure as a gun, and when the thing broke it liberated this box."

"Oh, rot!" I said. "You can't tell me that that metal box came from outer space. It's a box fashioned by the hand of man. This meteorite came from some other planet——"

"You are right, Nipper—you are right," declared Mr. Crowell, turning to me. "This mass of rock came from another planet. It came from Mars. And this box came, too. It may be of the very highest importance."

He was fairly shaking with excitement, and he wrenched eagerly at the warped metal casket. At first nothing resulted, but then we heard a creak, and one more fierce pull did the trick.

The lid came off, and fell to the ground.

Mr. Crowell stared eagerly into the box, and we stared, too, moving nearer with a new curiosity. The sky had cleared a good deal by this time, and the evening light was fairly strong. The thunder only rolled distantly, and away in the south the clear sky was beginning to appear.

"Dear me!" muttered Mr. Crowell. "Dear me!"

The box contained something which looked like blackened paper, but which, on investigation, proved to be a roll of thin asbestos. It was tightly done up, and tied with asbestos string.

"Wonderful—wonderful!" gasped Mr. Crowell, his hands shaking with intense excitement. "This proves conclusively that Mars contains the same substances as the earth. Asbestos! To keep something intact and safe from the white heat of the outer casing of rock. It is clear—a masterly expedient!"

He fairly tore away the string, and then unrolled the asbestos sheet. We watched with wondering interest. What on earth this could be we hadn't the faintest idea. But it had been found right in the midst of this meteorite—which, without the slightest doubt, had come from outer space—

and we were naturally curious. But I couldn't bring myself to believe that the metal box had actually broken free from that fragment of another world.

Mr. Crowell succeeded in unwrapping the asbestos, and only a very small object remained—a folded piece of yellow and scorched parchment. The Form-master could hardly hold it from excitement.

"A message!" he muttered feverishly. "A message from Mars!"

"Oh, go easy, sir!" grinned Watson.

"A message from Mars!" repeated Mr. Crowell, unfolding the parchment and taking no notice whatever of us. "There is not the slightest doubt on the subject. Every precaution was taken to ensure the safe arrival of this parchment. Wonderful! This will be the sensation of the— Ah! Here we are! Yes, I was right—I was right!"

He had unfolded the paper by this time, and was gazing at the face of it. The parchment was ancient, to all appearances—a piece of old stuff which had seen many summers. It was discoloured, scorched, and torn at the edges. But the face of it bore some strange characters quite distinctly.

We gazed upon them wonderingly. They were not words, but symbols—hieroglyphics. All were weird and utterly unlike anything I had ever seen. Mr. Crowell fairly yelled with excitement as he saw them.

"Yes, I was correct!" he shouted wildly. "A message—a message from the inhabitants of Mars!"

"But look here, sir——" I began.

"This is a message, I tell you!" interrupted Mr. Crowell fiercely. "I know what I am saying! This parchment came from outer space—from the planet Mars! And this is a message to us—the human race. For many years we have been waiting, and at last it has come! Wonderful—wonderful!"

"Begad!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"But what's the good of it, sir?" I

asked. "Even supposing it is a message, we can't find out what it means—"

"Nonsense!" shouted Mr. Crowell. "I shall make it my task to decipher this arriving message. I shall not rest until I have arrived at the solution!"

He grabbed up the asbestos and the two pieces of metalasket, and then rushed away towards the school, his coat tails flying. We gazed after him, and did not say a word until he had vanished behind the hedge.

Then we looked at one another. "Well, I'm jiggered!" said Tommy Watson.

"A bit staggering, eh?" I remarked. "A message from Mars, my sons—sent to earth within a giddy meteorite!"

"Begad!" said Sir Montie. "You don't believe it, do you, Nipper boy?" I grinned.

"Of course I don't!" I said. "I was repeating Crowell's words. It's no more a message from Mars than this thing is a chunk of Martian rock! Crowell has gone dotty on the subject, that's all. I don't think we'd better tell the other chaps, or our respected Form-master will be the laughing stock of the school."

"But it's jolly queer how that parchment got into the metal box," said Watson thoughtfully. "All that asbestos, too. You can't get away from it, you chaps. It's thundering queer!"

"So it is," I agreed, nodding. "I've been puzzled over that point myself. It's quite clear that the parchment was carefully placed within the asbestos, and then in the metal box so that it could withstand enormous heat. And Crowell found it all among these fragments of meteoric rock. On the face of it, a fellow would be inclined to think that the littleasket had come from the rock itself—but I can't bring myself to believe it. Crowell, being absolutely eaten up with these scientific matters, and being dotty on astronomy, jumped to the obvious conclusion at once. He simply wouldn't hear of the thing being a fake—"

"But how do we know it is a fake?" asked Watson.

"Common sense."

"Eh?"

"Our common sense tells us that such a thing is impossible," I went on. "My dear old son, you're not going to make me believe that the inhabitants of Mars have sent down this chunk of rock with a message in the middle of it. I'll agree that everything points to it; but there'll be a perfectly natural explanation. But, for the moment, I am not interested in it. I am rather anxious to see what Crowell will make of those weird-looking hieroglyphics."

"An' we'd better lose no time in gettin' back into the House, dear old boys," observed Sir Montie. "I'm feelin' wet, an' I shaply must have a change of clobber."

"And don't forget—we musn't say anything to the other fellows about thatasket," I exclaimed. "It's all right about the meteorite—we can tell them of our startling experiences."

A moment later we were crossing the meadow at a trot, and rather surprised that nobody else had come to the spot in order to make investigations. We got our bicycles, and rode them along the soaking lanes until we reached St. Frank's.

By this time the sky was almost clear, and the air calm again. The storm had passed over us, leaving any amount of damage behind it.

When we got back to St. Frank's, our first thought was to change into dry clothing. It was well past tea-time, of course—in fact, supper-time, and we had our prep to do, to say nothing of other duties. For example, I thought it as well to write some lines which Mr. Crowell had imposed upon me earlier in the day. He might forget all about them, but, on the other hand, he would probably remember the impet.

But we found enough time to slip down into the Common-room before going along to Study C. It was fairly crowded, and the juniors were all discussing the recent storm. They were

greatly interested when they heard that we had been caught in the rain.

"I suppose you saw that thing fall from the sky?" asked Pitt.

"Yes."

"I reckon it came down somewhere near Calstowe," said Grey.

"Wrong!" I grinned. "My dear chap, it fell only one meadow away from the playing fields."

"My hat!"

"Well, I'm blessed!"

"What was it, Nipper?"

"Don't all speak at once," I said. "The thing that came down, my sons, was a meteorite—a fragment of matter from outer space, made white hot by its rush through the earth's atmosphere."

"What rot!" said Handforth. "How could the atmosphere make anything hot? Every airman says that the air, thousands of feet up, is freezing cold!"

I grinned.

"My dear chap, that's a different matter," I said. "When a foreign body, travelling through space, strikes the atmosphere of a planet there is an immediate friction, and, although the atmosphere may be freezing, that friction will cause solid rock to become white hot—"

"We don't want to hear any scientific lectures," said Handforth. "And as for this thing being a meteorite, I'm not so sure that I believe it. I expect you imagined half of it."

"Rats!" exclaimed Pitt. "You saw the thing fall, Handy, and you know as well as I do that it was something unusual. It was a meteorite, sure enough, and I've a good mind to pop out and have a look at it. What does it look like?"

"Oh, there's nothing particular to see," said Watson; "only a few chunks of dirty-looking rock splintered about. I'm blessed if I can see anything to make a fuss of."

"There's no telling what that rock may contain," I said. "I remember reading of a case where a meteorite fell, and the rock was full of diamonds."

"Great Scott!" said Handforth. "Let's rush out and look!"

"But hundreds of meteorites have fallen that haven't been worth a ha'penny, except as souvenirs," I added. "You don't seem to realise, my sons, that this is a chance in a lifetime. In the morning you ought to lose no time in collecting little bits to keep. It'll be jolly interesting to have a chunk of matter that came down to earth from outer space."

"Yes, rather," agreed Pitt. "We'd better go out now—"

"Take my advice, and leave it till the morning," I said. "It's dark, and you can't see properly—and what's more, the rock is too jolly hot to get hold of. It'll be hours before it's cooled down sufficiently to handle."

The juniors took my advice, and spent the remainder of the evening discussing the affair with much animation. Handforth & Co., as usual, commenced arguing almost as soon as they opened their mouths.

They were passing along the passage from Study D to the school library.

"You can say what you jolly well like," declared Handforth, "but I know what I'm talking about. Meteorites don't touch the earth at all. And we'll soon see who's right when we look in the encyclopaedia."

"A dotty idea, I call it," said Church. "What's the good of wasting time like this? Shooting stars are meteors."

"Well, what's the difference between a meteorite and a meteor?" demanded Handforth.

"A meteorite is a thing that falls on the earth," said Church. "A meteor is the same thing, but it doesn't hit the earth at all—it flies to fragments, or dust, before it can get through our atmosphere."

"Rot!" said Handforth bluntly.

"Look here, I'm not going to be talked to like that!" snorted Church rebelliously. "I've been stating scientific facts—and you call it rot! If you say another word, I'll refuse to go with you!"

Handforth came to a halt.

"Is that so?" he said with deadly

calmness. "In that case, you cheeky rascal, you'll come along whether you like it or not. You'd better understand, once and for all, that I don't stand any rat from you!"

He grasped Church by the back of the neck, and proceeded to run him along the passage. Church naturally resisted, and the result was that the pair finally went to the floor with a thud, Handforth's head striking the panel of a door with a terrific thud. Unfortunately, it was the door of Mr. Crowell's study.

"Yaroooooh!" howled Handforth wildly.

"You—you silly ass!" gasped Church. "I ricked my ankle——"

"Ow—yow!" moaned Handforth. "I can see twenty stars——"

"Meteorites, you mean," grinned McClure.

"You—yon funny idiot!" snorted Handforth, sitting up with his back to the door. "I'll—I'll—— What the—— Whooooo!"

Handforth suddenly disappeared backwards through the doorway, for he had been leaning against it. It had been flung open by Mr. Crowell himself, and the Form-master strode out into the passage, whisking a cane.

At least, it was his intention to stride out. He had no idea that Handforth was on the floor. The result was disastrous. Mr. Crowell trod on Handforth's chest before he could pull himself up. Then he stumbled, pitched forward, and fell in a heap. Church and McClure fled.

"Good gracious!" gasped Mr. Crowell. "You—you young rascal! How dare you deliberately make this disturbance outside my door——"

"We—we didn't realise it was your door, sir," panted Handforth, jumping up, and lending Mr. Crowell a hand. "I'm awfully sorry, sir! I—I hope you aren't hurt, sir!"

Mr. Crowell leapt to his feet, assisted by Handforth. He was labouring under great excitement—not because of this little incident, but evidently on account of something very different.

Swish! Swish! Swish!

"Yewoooo!" howled Handforth, jumping high in the air. Swish—swish!

Mr. Crowell piled his cane with great energy before Handforth could realise what was happening. And the cane sang round Hand's legs. The Removile had no chance to dodge until he was quite sore.

"Go away—leave me in peace!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell fiercely. "Go away, you young rascal! Just as I am in the middle of deciphering this amazing document from another world! Go, go! Write me two million lines!"

"Oh, my only hat!" groaned Handforth, hobbling down the passage. "He's mad! He's clean off his chump! And after I helped him to his feet, too! I never knew he was so jolly ungrateful! Two million lines! Great corks!"

Handforth did not take the impot seriously. It was impossible to do so. It was apparent—except to Handy—that Mr. Crowell's mind was running on huge distances and calculations of space. Otherwise he would never have presented Handforth with two million lines.

As it happened, I was entering the passage just as Handforth limped out. He was looking rather the worse for wear, and I paused.

"Trouble?" I inquired sympathetically.

"Where are you going?" demanded Handforth abruptly.

"Crowell's study."

"Don't go!"

"Why not?"

"He's mad—absolutely dippy!" declared Handforth. "He just swiped into me for nothing, roared like a bull, and gave me two million lines!"

"Is that all?" I asked. "I suppose you'll get them done by bed-time?"

Handforth snorted, and marched on. In the circumstances, I thought that it would be better, perhaps, to wait a few minutes before taking the lines to Mr. Crowell. I was not anxious to share Edward Oswald's fate.

However, after ten minutes had slipped by I went to Mr. Crowell's study.

tapped at the door, and entered. The Form-master was sitting at his desk, leaning back in his chair in a thoughtful attitude.

He seemed quite oblivious of my presence, and there was an expression in his eyes which was eloquent of triumph and inward excitement. He looked at me as though he didn't see me.

"I've brought those lines, sir," I said.

Mr. Crowell started.

"Good gracious!" he exclaimed. "How did you get into this room, Nipper?" he asked.

"I walked in, sir."

"But I didn't see you— However, I presume I was thinking," said Mr. Crowell. "What are you doing here, Nipper? Why on earth do you choose this time to come disturbing me?"

"I'm only obeying your orders, sir."

I replied. "I've brought these lines."

Mr. Crowell waved them aside.

"Never mind the lines now, Nipper," he said. "I have something of the utmost importance to tell you—something which will amaze you, and which is destined to amaze the whole world."

Mr. Crowell rose from his chair and acted mysteriously. He went to the window, saw that it was fastened, and pulled the curtains closely together. Then he passed across to the door, locked it, and returned to his seat. He beckoned to me to take a chair opposite. I did so, feeling it better to humour him, for he was obviously in a state of great inward excitement.

"Now, Nipper," said Mr. Crowell, in a husky whisper, and looking at me with eyes that shone strangely, "listen to what I have to tell you. It is the most astounding revelation that any boy has ever had the privilege of listening to!"

CHAPTER 5.

Mr. Crowell's Delusion!

MR. CROWELL paused before saying any more.

I waited wonderingly, and came to the conclusion that my re-

spected Form-master was not fully aware of what he was saying. For days past he had been showing signs of weakness in the upper storey, and it seemed that he was now getting worse instead of better.

"Is it really important, sir?" I said, breaking the silence.

"Important!" echoed Mr. Crowell. "Good heavens! I can safely tell that this is the most important discovery that has ever been made by mankind—and I do not exaggerate. I am giving you the honour of being the first outsider to hear the astounding revelation."

"Thank you, sir!" I said.

"Well, Nipper, you must listen carefully," said Mr. Crowell, bending forward in his chair, and speaking in a mere whisper. "I have been examining that parchment which I discovered within the meteorite—or the object which we mistakenly took for a meteorite. It was actually a specially prepared projectile, sent from Mars to this planet."

"Really, sir?" I said, humouring him.

"Yes, really," declared Mr. Crowell. "That object was no chance atom of rock flying aimlessly through space. It was sent to this earth by the highly advanced inhabitants of Mars—and I have proof of it."

"Proof, sir?"

"Yes, Nipper—unqualified proof," said Mr. Crowell keenly. "Listen! I have been examining that parchment, and I have already deciphered the hieroglyphics which seemed so incomprehensible to us."

"But how could you decipher them without a key, sir?" I inquired.

"I discovered the key—I have been intent on these matters for many years, and I am absolutely convinced that my reading of the message is correct," said the Form-master. "Indeed, it is impossible that it can be incorrect. There is only one reading, and I have discovered it. See!"

He spread out the parchment on his desk, and I gazed at it.

He had made one or two pencilings here and there, but nothing that I could understand. The symbols themselves were weird-looking things—some round, some square, and twisted shapes. And at the very end was a circle with a rough drawing of half the world on it. I could see South America quite distinctly.

"How could that have been drawn in Mars, sir?" I asked. "That's supposed to be a picture of the world at the bottom."

"Quite so—quite so!" declared Mr. Crowell. "You must realise that the people on Mars can see everything upon earth—that is to say, they could easily trace our coasts, thus a map is easy to make. That symbol was the easiest of all to understand. The others were difficult, but I have conquered them."

"And can you make any sense of the message, sir?" I asked.

"Sense!" echoed Mr. Crowell, rising to his feet, and striding up and down the study. "Good heavens! Can I make sense of them! I will tell you the truth, Nipper, at once. Within twenty-four hours from now—that is to say, at nightfall to-morrow—a messenger will arrive on earth from Mars!"

I stared.

"A—a messenger, sir?" I echoed blankly.

"Yes."

"But that's impossible, sir," I protested.

"It may seem impossible to you, but it is an absolute fact," declared Mr. Crowell. "A Martian will arrive at nightfall to-morrow, and he will alight on exactly the same spot as the casket. That is the purport of the message. My lad, you must realise that this is an event which will be regarded as the most amazing in the history of mankind. This messenger from Mars will arrive—and I shall be the one chosen to interview him, and to introduce him to the world."

"Yes," I said, rather breathlessly.

To tell the truth, I was flabbergasted. I never dreamed that Mr. Crowell—our

hard-headed, keen Form-master—would suffer from delusions of this character. For, of course, it was a delusion; it could be nothing else. As Timothy Tucker would have said, Mr. Crowell's brain was moving rather too rapidly.

I couldn't resist the opportunity of questioning the revelation.

"A messenger is coming from Mars, sir?" I asked. "How will he arrive? How will he travel? How will he be able to land on exactly the same spot as the meteorite? And how will he prevent himself being dashed to atoms?"

Mr. Crowell waved his hand.

"Tut-tut!" he snapped. "Those matters do not concern me, Nipper. This messenger is coming—I have conclusive evidence of it. He will come—that is sufficient. See! Here are the very words which I have deciphered."

He thrust the writing block under my nose, and I saw what was written.

"To the finder of the casket. Prepare to receive a Martian messenger! He will arrive at the fall of night, twenty-six hours following the delivery of this message. Prepare to receive him, for he will await your coming."

There were a few other words which I could not understand, for Mr. Crowell had scrawled them hastily. How on earth he had made up the message was something of a wonder, for it was impossible to see anything in the hieroglyphics to suggest such a solution.

The truth, of course, was that Mr. Crowell's mind was not in perfect order, and the wish was father to the thought. He wanted the message to be there, and so, in his deluded state, he had manufactured it—firmly believing that he had arrived at the correct solution.

"Yes, sir," I said; "it's wonderful."

"That word is not adequate, Nipper," said Mr. Crowell huskily. "We are on the eve of the greatest event in the history of mankind. To-morrow night I shall meet this Martian messenger, and then it will be my duty to introduce

him to my fellow-beliegs. I shall be famous within a week—the most famous man in all the world!”

“Yes, rather, sir!” I said helplessly. “But remember—not a word!” went on the Form-master, grasping my arm, and speaking mysteriously. “Not a single word! Do not dare to tell a soul of what I have related to you.”

“Can’t I tell anybody, sir?” I asked.

“Nobody,” said Mr. Crowell. “Your lips will only be sealed for twenty-four hours, and then the whole world will know. Go now, Nipper, for I wish to be alone.”

I was rather glad to escape—and I did so without having given Mr. Crowell the slightest assurance that I should keep mum. He had asked me to say nothing, and in one way I should respect his wishes. I had no intention of shouting the story all over the Ancient House.

But there was no reason at all why I should not take Sir Montie and Tommy into my confidence—and perhaps Nelson Lee. I rather fancied that Mr. Crowell should have seen a brain specialist, rather than a Martian.

My chums were frankly incredulous when I told them.

“I say, that’s a bit thick!” said Watson. “If you think we believe a yarn like that, Nipper, you’re jolly well mistaken.”

“Begad! It is frightfully tall, I must remark.”

“Of course it’s tall, Montie!” I agreed. “And, if it comes to that, it’s thick, too. But the fact remains that I’ve told you just what Mr. Crowell told me.”

“Then he must be mad,” said Watson.

“He’s not mad, but suffering from a delusion,” I said. “That’s the size of it. He’s got planets and stars and all those sorts of things on his brain—and the finding of this casket kind of unhinged him a bit. He’s rational enough in ordinary things, but this business will drive him dotty unless it’s stopped.”

“Busy, you chaps?”

Nicodemus Trotwood put his head in at the door.

“Not particularly,” I said. “Come in.”

The elder of the Trotwood Twins entered.

“What’s that you were saying about somebody going dotty?” he asked. “I’ll bet you were talking about Crowell?”

“We were.”

“I just met him in the passage,” said Nicodemus. “He was muttering to himself, and talking about Mars, I believe.”

“Well, don’t get jawing,” I exclaimed. “Look here, Trotty, we can trust you—I know you’ll keep mum. I’ll tell you what the poor old chap’s got in his bonnet—he’s absolutely deluded.”

I explained the position to Trotwood.

“My only hat!” grinned our visitor. “A messenger from Mars, eh? That’s certainly interesting; but I don’t understand about the casket and the hieroglyphics. How did that get into the affair?”

“That’s what I can’t understand,” I replied. “But we shall probably arrive at a solution before long. Anyhow, the finding of it has driven poor old Crowell dotty, and he’ll go out to that meadow to-morrow night, looking for the Martian.”

“Oh, my goodness!” grinned Watson. “We shall have to be there—it’ll be worth seeing, my sons.”

“But what will Crowell do when he finds nothing?” I asked, frowning. “It’s no laughing matter, Tommy. He’s absolutely certain that the Martian will be there, and when he draws a blank he’ll probably go dotty altogether.”

Trotwood’s face broke into a queer smile.

“We’ll be on the spot,” he said. “It’ll be interesting to see what Crowell does when he finds no Martian—but it will be ten times more interesting to see him having a chat with the messenger from Mars!”

“Oh, talk sense!” said Watson.

"You know it's all rot! There's no messenger coming——"

"He'll be there," interrupted Trotwood.

"The messenger from Mars will be on the spot!"

"Begad!"

"You don't believe this tommyrot, do you?" I asked wonderingly.

"Certainly not!" replied Trotwood.

"But just now you were saying that Crowell might go off his rocker if he doesn't find the Martian. We don't want that, do we? Wouldn't it be a lot better for Crowell to make his wonderful discovery? Wouldn't it be better for the Martian to appear?"

"In a way, it would," I agreed. "The shock wouldn't be so great, afterwards; in fact, the shock would probably do him good. But you know as well as I do that there'll be no messenger——"

"There will be a messenger," interrupted Nicodemus calmly.

"How do you know?" demanded Watson.

"Because we shall provide one!"

"Who-as?"

We stared at Trotwood in amazement. "We shall provide one," he repeated.

"We're the only four chaps who know, so we can manage it nicely. Mr. Crowell will go into the meadow, and he'll find the Martian waiting for him. Afterwards he'll discover that it was all spoof—and it's my belief that the sudden revelation will bring him to his senses."

"Great!" I exclaimed enthusiastically. "Trotty, you're a genius." I jumped at him and waltzed him round the room and then plumped him into the easy chair.

"Now we shall have to plan the details," I said breathlessly. "Somebody will have to dress up as a Martian—but it'll have to be done well, or Crowell will spot the wheeze, even in the darkness."

Trotwood shook his head.

"That's not good enough," he said. "According to all the books I've read, Martians are things like machines—

with no semblance whatever to human beings. Of course, these things are only creatures of novelists' imaginations, but they're generally accepted as what Martians may be like. We've got to fake up something with wires and rods, and all that kind of thing."

"But it can't talk!" yelled Watson.

"It'll talk all right," declared Trotwood calmly.

"You—you giddy magician!" I gasped. "You're a ventriloquist, and you mean that you'll throw your voice from the other side of the hedge, and make Crowell think that the fake is talking."

"Exactly," grinned Trotwood.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"By Jingo, what a stunt!" I exclaimed. "It'll be easy enough to fake up something. Now I come to think of it, there's an old gas engine in the boat-house—only a small thing, and we can prop it up with iron legs, and stick wires over it, and fake up a head, and there you are. In the gloom Crowell won't notice anything wrong, and we can make it move by pulling strings."

"Yes, rather," said Trotwood. "It'll talk, too——"

"English!" grinned Watson.

"That won't matter a bit," I said. "Crowell's in such a state that he'll believe any old thing. The best thing we can do is to spend all to-morrow evening at the game. Directly after lessons we'll go and fix up the thing."

We shook hands on the compact, and when we went to bed that night we were quite convinced that the morrow would provide something of unusual interest.

CHAPTER 6.

The Messenger from Mars!

AS I had half anticipated, Mr. Crowell did not appear in the class-room for morning lessons—or for afternoon lessons, either. He had remained in his bed-room indis-

posed and one of the other masters took the Remove for that day.

The fact was, Mr. Crowell was too excited and too nervous to take the Remove, or to do any school duties. He was quite rational enough to realise this, so he remained in his bed-room—waiting—for the great moment.

I had a word with the gov'nor that morning, but I told him nothing about the Martian incident. It was just as well to keep that quiet for a bit. Nelson Lee told me that Mr. Crowell would probably be sent away for a holiday within a few days—if he did not improve. He had been working too hard.

After lessons were over for the day, my chums and Trotwood and I slipped out, and made for the boathouse. We wanted to be there first, for the evening was fine, and the other juniors would soon be on the spot.

We succeeded in getting the tiny gas-engine out, and taking it to a quiet spot among some trees, where we should not be observed. The engine had been originally used to propel a boat, but had been discarded as useless. Yet it served our purpose well.

Within a couple of hours we had faked up a figure which no novelist could possibly imagine, even in his wildest moments.

The thing was extraordinary in appearance, but, at the same time, it bore a kind of resemblance to a human being. The body was the little gas engine, the legs a part of an old farm implement, and two long arms stretched out weirdly. The head was another metal contrivance, with cogs and other things showing.

We had arranged it so that it would be possible to pull invisible strings and move the arms and the head as we liked.

This would greatly add to the deception—and Trotwood had his own ideas to prevent Mr. Crowell making close investigations.

Having concealed our Martian, we retired to the school for tea—very hungry,

but satisfied. It was well past the ten hour by now, but this made no difference. Prep. was the next thing on the programme, and we disposed of this unwelcome task as rapidly as possible.

By the time we had finished it was nearly dark, and we left the Ancient House and returned to the meadow. Our fake was in the far corner, concealed among the trees. Nobody was out now, for it was rapidly growing dark.

"We shall have to buck up," I said. "Crowell might be out here early, and it would properly put the lid on it if he saw us fixing the thing in position."

"Yes, we shall have to hurry," said Trotwood.

"Do you think we could do it alone—you and I?" I asked.

"I suppose so."

"It's a bit weighty—but we'll manage it," I said. "In the meantime, Tommy, the best thing you can do is to go with Montie, and keep a sharp look-out for Crowell—he's bound to come across the playing fields. If he comes yet awhile, delay him—do anything you like to keep him back."

"Anything to oblige, dear old boy," said Montie. "I'm game."

Watson didn't care for the task much, but he consented—and, as it turned out, precaution was absolutely necessary.

Our two chums went off, and Trotwood and I wasted no time in fixing up the Martian. It was a somewhat difficult task, for the thing was heavy. We planted it firmly and securely in the ground a few yards from the spot where the meteorite had fallen. There was very little left of the latter, for it had broken up, and almost every fellow at St. Frank's had obtained a piece, as a souvenir.

Fortunately, the hedge was quite clear, so it would be easy for us to crouch behind it, and hear everything that went on. Trotwood, too, would be able to throw his voice with ease.

In the meantime, Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West waited on the other

side of the playing fields. After about ten minutes had elapsed, Mr. Crowell came striding up. He seemed to be oblivious of his surroundings, and did not even notice the juniors. He was about to walk straight past.

"Speak to him, you ass!" hissed Watson.

"Egad! I thought you were going to do it, old boy."

"I—I don't know what to say," gasped Tommy.

Mr. Crowell had passed by this time, and Montie ran up to him, and pulled on his arm. Mr. Crowell gave a start, and turned.

"What is it—what is it?" he demanded irritably.

"Just a moment, sir," said Tregellis-West. "I was just wondering if you could tell us the names of some of those stars."

He pointed into the sky—a real brain-wave on his part. It was about the only subterfuge which would have succeeded.

"Those stars, Tregellis-West?" said Mr. Crowell. "Why, yes, I can tell you quite a lot about them. Another time will do, my boy. I'm in a hurry just now—"

"But we're frightfully interested, Mr.," said Montie. "It won't take you long."

Mr. Crowell condescended to name the stars, and the juniors piled him with all manner of questions.

The result, of course, was that time sped rapidly, without Mr. Crowell realising it. A good ten minutes had elapsed before Sir Montie and Tommy thought it safe to allow the Foremaster to continue his walk.

As soon as he had parted from them, the juniors raced round to Little Side, skirted the hedge, and arrived at the agreed-upon spot well in advance of Mr. Crowell, Trotwood and I were already there, waiting.

"Good!" I exclaimed. "Everything's fitting."

We watched with amusement and a touch of anxiety. We really liked old Crowell, and it was a shame to see him

in his present state. Our chief hope was that this little trip would do him good—would restore his mental balance.

We saw him striding across the meadow. Suddenly he came to a halt. Then he came on again at a run. For he could see something standing near the hedge—something which was quite still and strange in appearance.

Nearer, Mr. Crowell saw more details.

The thing was an extraordinary looking object. It reminded him somewhat of a human being, except for the fact that it appeared to be made of metal, and all the different members of the creature were grotesque in shape and design. The head was almost square, with peculiar cogs and ratchets.

In the very centre something round gleamed and glowed with a greenish light, and from two holes at either side of the head appeared small volumes of wispy steam. At the same time the thing hissed curiously.

This was really an afterthought on our part. We had placed some chemical liquids in the cavity of the head, and these would give off fumes for quite a long time.

The idea had an additional advantage, for it caused the Martian to give forth a pungent chemical smell. The eye, of course, was merely a dab of phosphorous paint. In the darkness it was impossible to distinguish much—and that was where we were safe.

Mr. Crowell approached, fairly shaking with excitement. It was true! The Martian had arrived, exactly as the message had stated! A messenger had come down to earth from one of the planets—and Mr. Crowell was the first to set eyes upon him!

"Wonderful—wonderful!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell, his voice almost cracking with the intense excitement from which he suffered. "I am here to welcome you—"

"G-r-r-r!"

The Martian made an extraordinary noise—or seemed to. From the region

of the head came a fierce kind of growl, and Mr. Crowell halted some feet away. At the same moment a long, tentacle-like object rose in the air and stretched out towards the master.

"Halt!" came a deep growling voice from the monster.

As Mr. Crowell had already halted, this advice was unnecessary.

"I am the first to set foot upon this wondrous world of yours," went on the Martian, in perfect English. "I welcome you, my friend of the human race. It is with great pleasure that I address you at this moment."

"I—I'm overwhelmed!" said Mr. Crowell. "This is far better than I had ever dared to hope for! I must——"

"Keep back—keep back!" thundered the Martian.

Mr. Crowell had taken a step forward, but he halted again.

"It will be safer for you to remain where you stand," exclaimed the Martian. "I am not of this earth, and my breath would probably render you unconscious, and it would be fatal for you to approach close. Death is not pleasant for the human beings of the earth. We Martians never die. We live always and for ever."

Mr. Crowell remained where he was. "It is just as well that you gave me warning," he said. "I was about to examine you closely, and that would have spoilt everything. But I'm amazed—I am astounded! You, a Martian, to speak the same language as we in England."

The weird-looking object gave forth a chuckle.

"I speak any language of the earth," he said. "Language means nothing to us in Mars. We know everything that occurs on this planet—not the slightest detail escapes our notice. For countless years we have been observing your progress, and wondering at the amazing slowness of it."

Mr. Crowell took a deep breath.

"But I am nevertheless amazed," he said. "That you should speak our language will prove to be of the utmost

value later. But why did you not send your message in English instead of by way of symbolic signs?"

This was a poser for Trotwood, but he was ready for it.

"Ah! Your wits are slower than ours on Mars," he said, with a laugh. "The symbols were sent with a purpose—as a test for the finder of the casket. It was believed that you would be clever enough to decipher the message, and to know exactly what it meant. That is the position."

"But how did you know that I should find the casket?" asked Mr. Crowell. "What if it had fallen into the hands of an ignorant labourer or a child?"

Trotwood was ready again.

"We on Mars know all," he made the figure say. "We can see into the future, and we know exactly what is about to happen. Thus we knew that you would pick up the casket, and we planned everything accordingly."

"You must tell me about Mars," said Mr. Crowell eagerly, moving a step forward in his excitement. "You must tell me what your cities are like—what your——"

"We have wonderful cities!" interrupted the Martian. "We have cities that the human mind cannot possibly picture. Furthermore, we are possessed of the most wonderful telescopes. By their aid we can see everything."

"You can see what is happening on this earth?"

"Yes, naturally," said the messenger, waving his arm eloquently. "Our telescopes extend one thousand miles in the air, and by means of their lenses we are able to see everything on earth. We can read newspapers as they are held in the street. We can see every minute detail of the earthly life. For centuries we have been observing these things. And now, at last, we have discovered a method of visiting you in your native element. We are capable of coming to earth in thousands and millions."

"How amazingly interesting," said Mr. Crowell, taking a deep breath.

"You have impressed me more than I can say. I can now understand why you know our language—since you can see everything so closely."

"Further than that," went on Trotwood, drawing on his imagination, "we are able to hear all things. Thus, two people walking along an earthy road may talk, and we in Mars can hear everything they say. We have progressed millions of years ahead of you. We are not of flesh and blood, but of machinery, and it is impossible for a Martian to receive injuries, or to be killed. The greatest explosive you possessed would do us no harm whatever. We laugh at your puny efforts at warfare. They could not harm us in the slightest degree."

"Amazing," said Mr. Crowell.

"Furthermore, we are capable of dealing death on every hand," went on the Martian. "My very presence among a crowd would kill everybody within range of my vapour. So, you see, how vastly superior we are to you human beings. You are merely the lowest type of animals compared to the high intelligence of Martians."

"I suspected something of the sort," said Mr. Crowell eagerly. "But, at the same time, I do not altogether approve of your attitude. This is a peaceful visit, I believe, and yet you talk about wars and killing."

Behind the hedge I nudged Nicodemus.

"Draw it mild, Trotty," I murmured.

"Rats!" said Trotwood. "I want to see what he'll do. I'm going to continue on the same tack, because I believe it'll do him good."

"It—it seems rather uncanny," murmured Watson. "Somehow I can't help but laugh at it—old Crowell standing there talking to that giddy gas engine!"

Sir Montie and I chuckled.

"It's great!" I murmured. "If the poor chap wasn't a bit doty in the top storey, I should be ready to yell with laughter."

Mr. Crowell came nearer still.

"Remember my warning!" exclaimed

the Martian. "Do you wish to be the first to die at the hands of the wonderful inhabitants of Mars? Remember, my friend, that before long the earth will be a different place. We, in Mars, have come to a momentous decision—a decision that will change everything."

"I fail to understand," said Mr. Crowell.

"I will explain," went on the messenger. "We are overcrowded—Mars is not sufficiently large to accommodate us all in comfort. In consequence of this, it has been decided that the earth shall become a Martian colony."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell.

"We have discovered the method of reaching the earth," went on the Martian. "I am the first to undertake the trip, and I shall return to Mars almost at once with the valuable information I have received—with the route fully mapped out and ready for the coming of the Martian hordes. Without me the conquest of the earth would be impossible, for I am the master of Mars—I am the one who has discovered this method of traversing outer space. When I return I shall give my secret to my fellow Martians. If I do not return, they must remain on their own planet. But I am due to start back within the hour, and in a very short time you will discover the result of my experimental visit."

"What will it be?" asked Mr. Crowell, with set teeth.

The Martian laughed.

"You will soon find out, as I have just said," he declared. "But I may as well tell you, for all the preparations you may make will be futile. I shall return to earth with five hundred million Martians, and these will be merely the first contingent of our full army! We shall descend upon the earth in myriads at every corner, and wherever we walk there will be death!"

"Great heavens!" said Mr. Crowell, utterly startled.

"It will be impossible to hold us back," went on the Martian. "No

weapons of yours will harm us, and we shall come just as we are. Within three of your weeks the earth will be cleared of the human race, and it will become the first of the great Martian colonies."

"Upon my soul!" said Mr. Crowell faintly.

"After the conquest of the earth, we shall lay our plans to make Venus our second colony," went on the Martian. "I am telling you all this so that you will be prepared for your end. For, I can assure you, there will be no escape."

"And if you fail to return?" asked Mr. Crowell strangely.

"Then everything will fail—for I hold the key!"

Mr. Crowell clenched his fists, and then made a dash forward.

"Then, by Heaven, you shall never return!" he shouted, in a queer, high-pitched voice. "I will see to it that you never return!"

Before we could do anything the Form-master rushed at the figure. I had thought that Trotwood had gone rather too far, but this proved it. Nicodemus had been only following up his argument in a spirit of fun, but he had never expected anything of this nature to occur.

Mr. Crowell grasped the figure without dying—and this did not seem to surprise him, although he had been warned. He wrenched at it fiercely, tore it from the ground, and held a portion of it in his arms. The rest had fallen away, although Mr. Crowell did not notice this.

"Great Scott!" I gasped.

"Stop him!" said Watson nervously.

But Mr. Crowell was dashing across the field, staggering, as he went, under the weight of the faked-up figure. He was only able to carry it because of his excessive nervous strain. At any ordinary time he could not have performed the task.

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Trotwood. "I didn't think——"

"He's making for the river!" I exclaimed, bursting through the hedge. "He's going to chuck that giddy engine

in the water, and it belongs to Wilson, of the Sixth!"

"Bugad!"

We rushed across the meadow, hoping to be in time. But while we were still ten yards distant from Mr. Crowell he reached the river bank and flung his burden into the water.

Unfortunately, some projection caught on Mr. Crowell's clothing. And before he could save himself, he, too, plunged in.

Both the figure and Mr. Crowell vanished beneath the surface.

CHAPTER 7.

ON for a Real Cure!

"GOOD heavens!"

"Bugad!"

"Oh, my goodness!"

"Great Scott!"

We stood on the bank, and stared at the disturbed water in horror and amazement. We knew at once what had happened. Mr. Crowell, caught by the projection, had been pulled down, and the weight of the engine—small as it was—was sufficient to keep the Form-master beneath the surface.

Unless help was quickly afforded, he would drown.

"The water's deep here, too!" said Watson, with chattering teeth. "Oh, we were fools to play this trick! Poor old Crowell will be drowned——"

"Not if I know it!" I said grimly.

I ripped off my coat, and noticed that Trotwood was doing the same with his. The next second I plunged into the river, and Trotwood dived in a second later. Sir Montie and Tommy were ready to follow, if they should be necessary.

Four or five times we dived.

And then, more by luck than anything else, I succeeded in grasping Mr. Crowell's coat. Trotwood came to the rescue, and we pulled for all we were worth. A moment later Mr. Crowell was on the surface, gasping and spluttering.

The whole occurrence had only taken about a minute, although it seemed like hours to us. And Mr. Crowell had had sufficient sense to hold his breath as long as possible. The result was he had shipped very little water.

Montie and Tommy hauled him on to the bank.

"Thank you, boys—thank you!" he gasped. "I—I am at a loss! How did I get into the river? I was in my study—I—I—"

His voice died away, and he swooned. "Poor old chap!" I said. "He's come to his senses—and that's one good thing. I don't suppose he remembers anything about that Martian business. He was off his rocker when that happened."

"What—what shall we do with him?" asked Watson.

"He's simply fainted," I said.

Between the four of us we carried the unconscious Form-master across the meadow, over the playing-fields, through the Triangle, and into the Ancient House. By a piece of luck, we met Nelson Lee on the steps, and he halted.

"Good gracious, boys, what is the matter?" he asked.

"Mr. Crowell fell into the river, sir, and we fished him out," I said. "He's fainted. I'd better ring up Dr. Brett at once."

Mr. Crowell was soon taken upstairs into his own bed-room. His wet clothing was ripped off, and he was placed into warm blankets. In the meantime, Dr. Brett had been called up, and he had promised to come post haste.

I explained everything to Nelson Lee, feeling that it was necessary to do so.

"I can quite understand, boys, that you acted in a spirit of fun, and quite innocently," said Nelson Lee gravely. "At the same time, I must condemn your action in the strongest possible terms. It was a dangerous joke to play, knowing that Mr. Crowell was in such a curious mental condition."

"But we thought it would do him good, sir!" I protested.

"It was not your place to try to do Mr. Crowell any good," said Nelson Lee. "I only hope that everything will turn out all right, Nipper. Ah! I fancy I can hear Brett's car in the Triangle."

Nelson Lee was right, and three or four minutes later Dr. Brett himself came into Mr. Crowell's bed-room. I was obliged to go out with my chums, and we waited in the passage anxiously, and in a state of nerves.

Twenty minutes later Dr. Brett came out with Nelson Lee.

"No danger at all, my dear Lee—not the slightest trace," Dr. Brett was saying. "In fact, I can assure you that Crowell is well on the road to recovery, and all he needs is a long rest."

We rushed up to the pair.

"It's all right then, sir?" I asked.

"According to Dr. Brett's statements, everything is quite satisfactory," said Nelson Lee, smiling. "In fact, your little trick worked wonders."

"Begged!"

"It's a fact, boys," said the doctor. "Crowell was well on the road to insanity, by all I can understand. He's been working altogether too hard lately—combining his duties with a very heavy scientific book on astronomy. The result was that he became slightly unbalanced, and was practically on the verge of brain fever, if not positive lunacy!"

"Well, I'm blessed!" I exclaimed. "And is he all right now?"

"He is far from being all right," said Dr. Brett. "At the same time, I am quite convinced that the sudden shock of plunging into the water brought him completely to his senses. That trick of yours was beneficial in every way, and, as it has turned out, it was a good thing you played it."

"Well, that's jolly satisfactory," I said. "I hadn't hoped for anything as good as this. And do you think Mr. Crowell will completely recover?"

"I am certain of it," said Brett. "All he needs now is a long rest—a rest from work of every description. He must go away to the seaside, and recuperate his normal health and

strength. Within five or six weeks he will be his robust self again."

"With no trace of lunacy, sir?"

"Not the slightest," said Dr. Breti. "It was only a passing phase—a kind of delusion. He will be quite all right now, after this shock. You may congratulate yourself upon having performed a really good service. By the by, what was the interview like?"

"The interview, sir?"

"With the Martian."

We grinned.

"It was a scream, sir," I chuckled. "Poor Mr. Crowell thought the thing was genuine—and it certainly looked like it. Trotwood made the thing speak, and, with Mr. Crowell in his unhinged condition, he was completely deceived."

"I rather wish I'd been there," chuckled the doctor. "Anyhow, it was all for the best, and I should certainly have advised a sudden shock if I had examined Mr. Crowell earlier."

When we went downstairs we were certainly feeling pleased. Mr. Crowell had been saved from insanity by our little device, and all he needed was a long rest. But there was still one point which was puzzling us.

How had that message in the casket got to blessed in the meteorite remains?

"I'm blessed if I can understand it," I said, as we strolled towards the Common-room. "That asbestos, too, to protect the thing from heat. It was done purposely for somebody, and it's absolutely a puzzle."

"We shall have to make inquiries," said Watson.

But inquiries, we soon learned, were unnecessary.

We had only just entered the Common-room when we noticed that Fullwood was chatting with a crowd of other fellows, and they were all grinning.

The story had got about that Mr. Crowell had fallen into the river, in consequence of a delusion concerning a messenger from Mars. Nobody knew the exact details, and nobody knew that

we had been connected with it. We meant to keep the thing as dark as possible; but the main features of the story were bound to get round.

"So, you see, you chaps, I provided the starting point of it all," said Fullwood pleasantly. "I thought old Crowell would go a bit dotty on it—that's why I did it. It serves the old roofer right for makin' a fool of me the other day."

"Begad! Do you hear——"

"Hold on, Montie," I whispered. "Let them jaw."

Fullwood chuckled.

"You see, when I went into Crowell's study I saw that he was hard at work on a book of astronomy," he said. "His papers were lying all about, and I had plenty of time to look at them. And, later on, I got an idea to jape him."

"What did you do?" grinned Bell.

"You know as well as I do," replied Fullwood. "I got that piece of parchment, drew some symbols on it, and wrapped it in asbestos and put it in an old box, which I found somewhere round the back. It had been there for ages—a relic of the fire in the College House. I thought it would look better to have something warped by fire, to give the impression of having come through space."

"Jolly cute!" said Merrell.

"Well, my original idea was to drop the thing in the Triangle, and see that Crowell found it," said Fullwood. "Of course, it might have gone wrong, but I was hoping for some fun. Crowell would certainly have suspected that the thing hadn't fallen from the skies—I was going to take up the yarn, anyhow."

"But you altered your plan?"

"Yes, of course," said Fullwood. "That giddy meteorite fell, and I slipped out immediately afterwards, and dropped that little box in among the hot bits of rock. When Crowell found it—as I knew he would—he naturally thought that it had come from Mars!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Fullwood went on to discuss more details.

"Well, that's all we want to hear." murmured to my chums. "So it was one of Fullwood's beastly wheezes!"

"The rotter!" said Watson. "All his trouble——"

"Hold on!" I interrupted. "As it's turned out, it was a good thing that Fullwood did play the trick. Everything is all serene. Crowell has recovered his normal balance, and to-morrow he will go away for a rest cure."

"And we shall have another Form-master," grunted Watson.

As a matter of fact, we did have another Form-master. He arrived a few days later, and his name was Mr. Clement Heath, M.A., and he was to prove a rather mysterious individual.

CHAPTER 2.

Ragging the New Master!

"**I** WONDER how he'll shape?" remarked Tommy Watson thoughtfully.

"Eh?"

"Speakin' to me, old boy?"

Sir Montie Tregellis-West turned to Watson politely, and I did the same. But Watson was apparently unconscious of our presence.

"Personally, I've got an idea that he'll be a bit of a dud," he went on, still in the same absent-minded manner. "There's no telling, of course."

"Dotty?" I inquired, giving Tommy a shake.

"Eh? What the——" Watson broke off, and stared at me. "What's wrong, you ass? What's the idea of shaking me like that?"

"I simply wanted to bring you to your senses," I replied. "You've been talking to yourself, and that's a habit that isn't good for anybody. You were wondering how somebody will shape."

Tommy Watson nodded.

"Yes, that's right," he agreed. "I was referring to Mr. Heath."

"Oh!"

"He takes us at lessons this morning for the first time," said Watson.

"Everybody's rather curious to find out how the new man will get on with the Remove. It's my opinion that he won't be up to much. He looks too jolly meek."

We were standing on the steps of the Ancient House, basking in the bright sunshine of the early May morning. Other juniors were there, too—waiting for the bell to ring which would summon them to the Remove Form-room.

"Hallo! Here comes the new merchant now," remarked Church suddenly.

All eyes were directed out into the sunlit Triangle. A figure had just appeared round the gymnasium, and it was making straight for the Ancient House doorway. The figure was that of Mr. Clement Heath, M.A., the new master of the Remove.

He was by no means an elderly man. In fact, he was decidedly young, and I set his age at about twenty-seven or twenty-eight. He walked with a slight limp of his left foot.

His figure was comparatively slight, and he possessed dark hair and rather ordinary features. In no way was he distinguished. Compared to Mr. Crowell, in fact, Mr. Clement Heath was quite insignificant.

His face wore a very meek expression. He even seemed nervous as he approached the Ancient House dormitory.

Handforth & Co. were at the bottom of the steps. They raised their caps politely as Mr. Heath passed them.

"Good-morning, sir!" said Handforth.

"Beautiful morning, sir!" remarked McClure.

"Just like summer, sir!" said Church.

"Er—yes, boys—yes!" said Mr. Heath mildly. "Quite so. The morning is certainly most pleasant."

There was a kind of shake in his voice, and it was plain for us all to see that the Remove master was distinctly nervous. He refrained from looking at any particular boy, but kept his gaze cast downwards in almost a furtive manner.

He walked past us, his gown rustling,

and found the way barred by Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell, of Study A. I frowned as I watched them, for Fullwood & Co. were obviously intent upon a little joke. And their idea of a joke was generally unpleasant. They could see an opportunity of taking a rise out of the new master.

"Good-morning, sir!" said Ralph Fullwood, raising his cap.

"Good-morning, my boy!" replied Mr. Heath.

"Nice weather for the time of the year, sir!" said Fullwood. "If things don't alter, they'll remain as they are."

"Undoubtedly," said Mr. Heath.

"An' if we have some rain, sir, it'll probably be wet," went on Fullwood, still with the same air of exaggerated politeness.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The other juniors chuckled somewhat loudly.

Mr. Heath seemed at a loss for a moment, and was unable to make any reply. At that moment, however, he was relieved by the sudden appearance of Nelson Lee.

The gun'or's arrival on the scene caused Fullwood & Co. to melt away rather hurriedly, and Nelson Lee walked through the lobby accompanied by the new master. The juniors remained collected about the steps and in the Triangle.

"You cad, Fullwood!" I said sharply. "I don't approve——"

"Nobody asked you to butt in," sneered Fullwood. "You can go an' eat coke. Nipper. It doesn't matter a toss to me whether you approve or not. Heath is absolutely a worm, an' he'll soon find out that we aren't standin' any of his wishy-washy ways. I'm goin' to rag him in the Form-room."

"Take my advice, and don't do it," I said.

"I don't want your advice——"

"Then take a warning," I said grimly. "If you deliberately insult Mr. Heath this morning, Fullwood, you'll have to settle with me afterwards. You'd better understand that quite clearly."

"Hear, hear!" said Handforth. "He'll have to settle with me, too. I believe in having a bit of fun with a new master, but not Fullwood's kind of fun."

"Oh, dry up!" snapped Fullwood sourly.

He strolled away, and Sir Montie shook his head.

"He means it, dear boys," he remarked. "Fullwood is goin' to cause trouble in the Form-room, this mornin'. It's just like his vindictive nature to take advantage of Mr. Heath's meekness. I'm afraid that Mr. Heath is booked for an unpleasant time."

I shook my head.

"I'm not so sure about that," I said. "He hasn't got his bearings yet, remember. He's arrange to us all, and to his surroundings. He expects a bit of a ragging—all new masters are prepared for it. But when he's shaken down he'll probably begin to show a bit more pep."

"Hallo! There goes the bell," exclaimed Watson. "We'd better get in at at once, and show Mr. Heath that we're good little boys for being punctual."

But when we arrived in the Remove Form-room we found that the other fellows were not quite so punctilious. They came in leisurely, in twos and threes, and a minute after the proper time there were still two juniors absent. One of them was Fullwood, and I noticed that Gulliver and Bell were grinning and chuckling.

"There's something on," I remarked grimly. "Fullwood means to show his contempt for the master by arriving late. It's just one of those little tricks he takes a keen pleasure in playing."

"Well, I hope he gets lines," said Watson.

Mr. Heath arrived a moment or two later. He entered, closed the door, and went to his desk. He sat down, fingered his books for a moment or two, and the Remove sat at attention, curious and silent.

Mr. Heath stood up, cleared his throat, and then sat down again. The

form plagiéd, and there were many grins. It was quite clear that the new master was far from comfortable. He rose to his feet once again.

"Well—er—boys, it is to be my pleasure to give you instructions during Mr. Crowell's absence," he said, clearing his throat. "Before commencing the geography lesson, I should like to have a few words with you all. You are aware, of course, that I am only a temporary master. But during my stay at St. Frank's I sincerely hope that we shall get on well together. I am very pleased to be here, and I hope that you will be equally pleased."

"Yes, rather!"

"I also wish to tell you that I shall allow this morning's lessons to be fairly easy," went on Mr. Heath. "I must grow accustomed to your ways, and you must grow accustomed to mine. After two or three days we shall probably understand one another better, and—"

Mr. Heath paused, and gazed at Fullwood.

The cad of the Remove had just entered the Form-room. He had taken particular care to slam the door with some violence, and he was strolling to his place unconcernedly, with his hands in his pockets.

"Er—excuse me," said Mr. Heath mildly. "One moment, my boy."

Fullwood took no notice whatever, but went to his place, sat down, and lounged back in his seat, with an air of profound boredom. The Remove looked on with a certain amount of disdain. Mr. Heath certainly had no spirit.

But the Remove master was not quite a dud.

"My boy, tell me your name," he said, pointing to Fullwood.

Ralph Leslie yawned, and said something to Gulliver. It was a deliberate rag, and Fullwood intended to make Mr. Heath look small before the whole class.

"I think your name is Pitt," said Mr. Heath, looking at Reginald Pitt, who sat in the front row. "I heard

another boy addressing you this morning."

"That's right, sir. I'm Pitt."

"Kindly tell me the name of the boy who just walked in," said Mr. Heath.

"Fullwood, sir," replied Pitt.

"Thank you!" said the new master.

"Fullwood, stand up!"

Fullwood yawned again.

"Speakin' to me, sir?" he inquired lazily.

"Yes, Fullwood, I am speaking to you," said Mr. Heath. "You will come down here, and stand in front of my desk."

"What for, sir?"

"I will tell you what for when you arrive."

Mr. Heath's voice was still meek, but it was firm, and the Remove began to get interested. Perhaps the new master would not be such a duffer, after all. Fullwood could not very well ignore an order of that sort, or he would be liable to be reported to the House-master. He lounged out of his seat, walked down the class-room, and halted in front of the desk.

"Now, Fullwood," said Mr. Heath, "I do not intend to commence my sojourn at St. Frank's by inflicting punishments, but I will have you know that when I address you I expect an answer. Furthermore, it is your duty to be here at nine-thirty, and not a moment later. Why were you late in arriving?"

"I've just come from Yorke, sir," said Fullwood.

"From Yorke?"

"Yes, sir," said Fullwood calmly.

The Remove chuckled again. We knew, of course, that Fullwood was referring to Yorke, of the Remove, a College House fellow, who was suffering at the moment from an injured foot, and who was allowed to remain in his own study for a day or two, as moving about was painful to him. Mr. Heath was probably unaware of the fact that any boy was named Yorke, and he imagined that Fullwood was referring to a place.

"Let me understand this quite clearly, Fullwood," said the Form-master. "You say that you have just come from York?"

"Yes, sir."

"I don't know whether you are deliberately attempting to be humorous, Fullwood, but I don't approve of this attitude," said Mr. Heath. "Less than fifteen minutes ago I passed you in the lobby. Do you mean to imply that you went to York and returned since then?"

"That's right, sir," said Fullwood. "I thought I'd have a look at Yorke before lessons, and I didn't allow myself quite sufficient time to get back."

"I am well aware of the fact, Fullwood, that you are not referring to York in Yorkshire," said Mr. Heath. "I presume there is a York in Sussex?"

"Oh, yes, sir!" said Fullwood calmly. "Just across the Triangle, in fact."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth jumped up in his seat.

"Why don't you punch his nose, sir?" he roared. "The cad's only trying to be funny! He means Yorke, of the Remove—one of the chaps. He's only saying all this to make you look small!"

"Sneak!" hissed Gulliver.

"What's that?" bellowed Handforth. "You—you wait until after lessons, Gulliver—"

"Order—order!" exclaimed Mr. Heath sharply. "I thank you, my boy, for the information you have given. I was not aware of the fact that one of the boys here was named Yorke. Fullwood, you may go to your place, but I must warn you that any further attempts at humour on your part will be punished."

"Thanks awfully, sir," said Fullwood languidly.

He strolled back to his desk, bestowing a fierce glare on Handforth as he passed that junior's place.

"The silly rotter!" he mumbled to Gulliver, after he had sat down. "I was going to keep it up for a long time. Never mind—I've got another idea. I'll catch Heath on the same stunt before long. It always goes down well, an' it's a good way of ragging a master."

"There must be no talking!" said Mr. Heath firmly.

After some little delay the lesson started, and the Remove was already gaining more respect for the new master. He was certainly slow, but perhaps that was an advantage. Personally, I had an idea in the back of my head that Mr. Heath was not such a fool as he looked. I also had an idea that Fullwood was by no means finished, and this surmise turned out to be quite correct.

The geography lesson had been proceeding smoothly and easily for twenty minutes, when Fullwood rose in his place.

"May I ask a question, sir?" he asked politely.

"Certainly, my boy."

"I've just been looking at Greenock, on my map," said Fullwood. "Wasn't some famous man born there? I can't quite remember, sir, but I've got an idea that somebody named Knott was born at Greenock. Wasn't he connected with the invention of the steam engine, sir?"

It was quite an innocent question, and on the face of it it seemed that Fullwood was honestly asking for information, and that he was desirous of improving his knowledge. Mr. Heath could hardly see that Fullwood was laying a trap.

"I think you are wrong, Fullwood," said Mr. Heath. "The man who invented the steam-engine, or who was credited with doing so, was James Watt. He was born in Greenock, as you say, in the year 1736."

"Watt, sir?" asked Fullwood.

"I think you heard what I said, my boy," said the Form-master.

"Of course I did!" went on Fullwood, looking surprised. "But somehow, sir, I had an idea that it was Knott."

"It was not what?"

"But you just said it was Watt, sir—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You distinctly told me that Watt was the man, sir," went on Fullwood.

"An' then you said it was not Watt! I

don't quite know which to believe, sir. If it wasn't Watt, then it must have been Knott. I always thought it was Knott, sir."

Mr. Heath looked rather grim.

"It seems to me, Fullwood, that you are getting yourself in a bit of a knot," he remarked smoothly. "Now, let us have it clear. The inventor of the steam engine was born at Greenock, and his name was Watt——"

"Knott, sir," said Fullwood, pretending that he had been asked a question.

"It was not Knott!" said Mr. Heath sharply. "He was Watt."

"What, sir?"

"Yes!"

"I say, this is a bit too bad," murmured Tommy Watson into my ear. "The joke's as old as the hills, anyhow. We can't help grinning, but I don't like to see Fullwood taking a rise out of the new master like this."

"I fancy Fullwood will have the rise taken out of him," I whispered.

"But I don't think you quite catch my meaning, sir," said Fullwood, with perfect coolness. "The man I'm referring to is Knott, and the man you're referring to is Watt. I don't see how it's possible for Watt to be the man if he is Knott. An' if Knott is not Watt, then what is Knott?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Remove simply howled.

"You see my meanin' sir, don't you?" went on Fullwood calmly. "Knott is the man I mean, an' it's clear that Watt can't have anythin' to do with it. What I want to know is this—did Knott invent the steam engine, or did Watt? If Knott invented it, then it stands to reason Watt did not. Do you follow me, sir?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yes, I follow you perfectly," said Mr. Heath with icy calmness. "I quite understand your motive in asking me these questions. Not only do you wish to waste the time of the class, but you are also trying to make fun of me."

There is just a little advice I should like to give you, and I trust it will be beneficial."

Mr. Heath turned to the blackboard, seized a piece of chalk, and rapidly wrote some words on the black surface. Then he stood away, and the Remove was able to read the words.

We read the sentence with sheer delight, for it ran:

"A head full of nonsense is equivalent to a head of wood. If I, Fullwood, of sense were full would I ask so foolishly?"

The words "full" and "would" were heavily underlined, and the Remove did not fail to grasp the pun. Fullwood had certainly asked for it, and Mr. Heath had been very prompt to reply in the same coin.

Fullwood looked absolutely idiotic.

"By gad!" he muttered, staring at the board.

"You must memorize that sentence, Fullwood," said Mr. Heath smoothly.

"What—what for, sir?"

"Because I require you to write it two hundred times," replied the new master. "You will present the lines to me this evening by seven-thirty. You may go to your place."

"But—but—but——" gasped Fullwood.

"That is enough, my boy. Go and sit down."

"I'm not going to do any lines like that!" roared Fullwood defiantly.

"Indeed!" said Mr. Heath. "You will either go to your place at once, Fullwood, or you will write the sentence five hundred times. And if you are impertinent again I shall be reluctantly obliged to report you to your House-master. You have interrupted the lesson long enough."

Fullwood went back to his place utterly squashed. His little "rag" had recoiled upon himself, and Mr. Heath had proved that he was far from being the duffer he had seemed to be.

The grins of the juniors nearly caused Fullwood to do something

desperate. He had set out to make Mr. Heath a laughing-stock, and Mr. Heath had made Pullwood look exactly what he was—an insolent young idiot.

CHAPTER 2.

Something Wrong with Handy!

CHURCH and McClure strode briskly along the Remove passage, their hands filled with paper bags. They had been paying a visit to the tack-shop, and were just returning to Study D.

It was nearly tea-time, and lessons were over for the day. Mr. Heath had impressed the Remove very favourably. Handforth had certainly made one or two vague remarks about Mr. Heath's pianer. According to Handy, there was something about the new master which was not quite satisfactory. But even Handforth couldn't define what this something was.

"I think it's all rot," said Church, as they walked along the passage.

"What is?" asked McClure.

"What Handy says about Mr. Heath," replied Church. "He seems a jolly decent sort to me, and not half so soft as he looks. But Handy keeps on saying that there's something queer about him."

"I didn't notice it."

"Neither did I," said Church. "It's all rot for Handy to say that Heath kept looking at him on the q.t. out of the corner of his eye. Handy's all right, but he's got a habit of imagining things."

McClure nodded.

"Well, we'd better not say much about it," he said. "If we get arguing with Handy he'll only kick up a fuss, and I don't see why we should have our tea spoilt. We're having an extra good spread this evening, too."

"And we shall have to buck up," added Church. "Nipper wants us out for cricket practice by six o'clock, and it's past five already."

They turned into Study D, expecting

to find it empty. They had left Handforth some little time earlier, arguing in the Common-room. But, rather to their surprise, they found their respectable leader reclining in the arm-chair.

Handforth was not in an elegant attitude. He sprawled over the chair, and his legs overflowed into the fender. He was looking straight at the wall opposite.

"So you're here?" said Church. "Well, I think you might have laid the tablecloth, instead of telling there doing nothing."

Handforth didn't reply.

"Deaf?" asked Church, staring.

"Gone!" said Handforth dramatically. "Great pip!"

"Oh, quite!" agreed Church. "I always knew you were going, but I'm glad to hear you admit that you've gone—clean off your rocker!"

Church, as a precautionary measure, possessed himself of a cricket stump while he was making that remark. But, rather to his surprise, Handforth did not even look round. He simply ignored the insult.

"What's the matter with him?" asked McClure wonderingly.

"Blessed if I know."

"He was all right when we left him in the Common-room—as sane as—well, as sane as he usually is," went on McClure. "Now he seems to be deaf and dumb and everything else. Handy, what's wrong with you?"

"Gone!" muttered Handforth huskily.

"There he goes again—repeating it!" said Church. "This looks rather serious, you know. What ought we to do?"

"Stick a pin into him," suggested McClure.

"Handy!" roared Church, "aren't you going to wake up?"

"Poor little Edith!" said Handforth dreamily.

Church and McClure exchanged startled glances.

"Great Scott!" gasped Church. "I—I didn't think it was so bad as this!"

"I can understand now! Poor old Handy!"

"He—he must be in love!" said McClure in alarm.

"Yes, I—I suppose so!"

"What shall we do? What the dickens—"

"Shush! He's talking again!"

They remained quiet, gazed at Handforth, and listened.

"What a rotten shame!" muttered Handforth. "It isn't fair! Poor little Edith—gone! I might never see her again!"

"My only topper!" gasped Church.

"We—were right! He's dazed about it—I don't believe he knows we're here, looking at him. I've heard of chaps going melancholy because they've been crossed in love, but it isn't often daps go dotty!"

Handforth's chums were greatly alarmed.

"You can easily guess what's happened," said McClure. "He must have been meeting a girl named Edith, and I dare say her parents didn't like it, so they've taken her away so that Handy can't see her any more."

"That's about the size of it," agreed Church. "But I can't understand it. He was all right half an hour ago—and he hasn't had a chance to see a girl during that time. It's a mystery."

"I don't know much about that," said McClure. "Handy may have had a letter—"

"My only hat!" exclaimed Church. "I remember now! One of the chaps came into the Common-room just as we were going out, and told Handy there was a letter for him in the rack."

"Well, there you are, then!"

"But fancy a letter bowling him over in this way!" went on Church. "And it's pretty evident he was on rather jolly terms with the girl, too. Just fancy! Handy in love! It's—it's staggering!"

Handforth suddenly sat up in his chair, and looked at his chums drowsily.

"Why can't you chaps go away?" he demanded in a weary, irritable voice.

"What do you want to come bothering here for? I suppose you're only jawing about your own little affairs. Go away!"

"We—that is—" Church paused. "You see, Handy, we—we thought you weren't quite well, and we were wondering—"

"Then go and wonder somewhere else," interrupted Handforth. "As a matter of fact, I'm not well; I feel rotten."

"Didn't you hear what we were talking about just now?" asked McClure.

"No."

"Didn't you hear me asking you questions?"

"I've got something more important to think about—something that you chaps wouldn't understand," said Handforth, with unusual quietness. "Be good sorts, and buzz off. I want to be alone."

Church and McClure were quite sure that Handy was in love—badly.

"It's all very well to talk like that," said Church, "but this is our study as well as yours, Handy, and we naturally want to be in it. Besides, it's tea-time, and we've brought some extra-special tuck."

"That's all right—eat it."

"Don't you want any?"

"No!"

"You don't want any tea?" asked Church curiously.

"No!" roared Handforth.

"But—but not half an hour ago you told us you were famished," said Church. "You gave us five bob to lay in a special feed—and it's all here, on the table. We're going to make tea now—"

"You're not!" said Handforth, rising to his feet, and glaring at his faithful chums. "I'm not going to have anybody in this study just now! I'm worried—I've had some rotten news—and I want to be alone."

"News?" said Church. "What about?"

"Edith— About something that wouldn't interest you," said Handforth,

with some confusion. "Are you going to clear out, or not?"

"Dash it all, Handy, there's no need to be nasty about it," said McClure. "I can see you've got a letter in your hand——"

He paused as Handforth jammed his fist into his pocket. The two juniors regarded their leader with curious expressions. They had never known him to act in this way before, so it was obvious that something unusual had occurred. Moreover, his own words had told them how the wind lay.

"About Edith?" said Church. "Who's Edith?"

"Clear out!" roared Handforth. "Can't you see I'm worried? I'll give you just ten seconds to shift, and if you don't go I'll pitch you out on your giddy necks! I don't feel like talking now—I don't feel like anything except being alone."

"Yes, but look here——"

Handforth did not wait any longer. He simply hurled himself at his chums, and succeeded in knocking Church flying. McClure fled to the door, with Handforth after him. The next second McClure was hurled forth.

"Yar-oo!" he howled wildly, as he sat down in the passage. "You—you dangerous lunatic!"

The next second Church came hurtling out. He collided with McClure as the latter was rising, and the pair collapsed on the floor in a heap. The door of Study D closed with a slam.

"Oh, my only hat!" said Church breathlessly.

"He's a bit off his rocker this time, and no mistake!" groaned McClure. "And all because he's fallen in love and been carrying on with some girl named Edith! I'm blessed if I can understand——"

"Hallo!" said Watson, coming out of Study C. "Trouble in the family?"

"Dear old boy, it certainly looks like it," smiled Sir Montie, who had followed Watson out.

I was behind the pair, and we smiled as Church and McClure picked them-

selves up somewhat painfully. They were looking rather untidy, and they were now considerably incensed.

Handforth's drastic treatment of them had not improved their tempers, and if they had ever had any thoughts of keeping his secret, those thoughts were now abandoned. Any fellow who could treat his chums as Handforth had done was only deserving of exposure.

"The porter!" panted Church.

"Just a little argument?" I inquired politely.

"No!" snorted McClure. "Handy's got a letter, and it's completely bowled him over. We went into the study to tea, and he turned on us like a tiger!"

"What on earth for?"

"Because he's in love!" growled Church.

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Which?"

"In love!" repeated Church. "Head over heels!"

"Begad!"

"Well, I'm not surprised," I grinned. "Handy's capable of anything. But I didn't know that it was a sign of love to pitch his chums into the passage. But Handy always does differently from everybody else."

"It's because he's been found out—that's why he's wild," explained McClure. "We heard him talking to himself about Edith——"

"Oh, chase me!" grinned Tommy Watson.

"That seems to be the girl's name," said Church grimly. "Edith, mark you!"

"Well, it's a good name, isn't it?" I asked.

"You may think so, but I don't," said Church. "I've got a cousin named Edith, and she's a little bounder. Well, Handy was talking to himself, and it seems that this girl has gone away. I expect her people found out what was in the wind, and stopped it all. But, just fancy! Old Handy being in love!"

"Well, it does need a bit of believing. I'll admit," I remarked. "Still, he's been in love before, so I expect he's got a return of the fever. But even now I can't see why he should pitch you out."

"Neither can I," said Church gruffly. "I want you chaps to come into the study with us, and we'll bring Handy to his senses. The more the merrier. We'll make him sit up for treating us like that!"

"Anything to oblige," I said pleasantly. "Who's game?"

The seven or eight juniors who had collected round us all agreed to lend a hand, and there were many chuckles. It was regarded as a huge joke that Handforth should have fallen in love with some unknown damsel.

"Well, let's get it over," I said briskly.

I opened the door of Study D and marched in. But before I had taken two steps forward I paused and regarded Handforth curiously. He was sitting at the table, his chin resting in his hands, and he was staring unseeingly straight before him. It was a most unusual attitude for the vigorous Handforth.

"Pile in!" grinned Pitt, from behind. "You're blocking the doorway."

I walked into the study, and the other fellows crowded in after me. Handforth looked up with a rather startled expression, and became suddenly aware of the invasion. He jumped to his feet, glaring.

"You—you rotters!" he exclaimed warmly. "What's the idea of this? Can't you leave a chap alone when he's worried?"

"What does she look like, Handy?" grinned Pitt.

"What colour are her eyes?" asked Grey.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"How tall is she?" asked Singleton. "Personally, I don't care for tall girls. Small and dainty ones are best."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"How many times have you kissed her?" asked De Valerie sweetly.

"How much tuck have you treated her to?" came Patty Little's inquiry, from the door. "Girls are frightfully expensive when it comes to tuck and ice-creams."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old Patty!" grinned Hart. "Always thinking of grub!"

Handforth stood quite still. We had expected him to fly into a tearing rage, and to hurl himself at the lot of us, regardless of the odds. But Handforth did nothing of the kind. He stared at us in a dazed, pained kind of way.

"You—you miserable rotters!" he said bitterly.

"Rats!" said Pitt. "If you choose to make an ass of yourself, Handy, you must be prepared to accept the consequences. We know all about it."

"You—you know all about it?"

"Yes."

"All about the letter I received."

"Of course."

"From Edith, you know," grinned Watson. "You were jawing to Church and McClure about it——"

"I didn't tell them a word," retorted Handforth sharply.

"Yes, you did," said Church. "When we first came in you talked all sorts of rot about Edith. Said she'd gone, and you mightn't see her again."

"Stop!" shouted Handforth hoarsely. "I'd better give you chaps warning. If there's any more of this contemptible behaviour I'll fight the whole crowd of you! I'm absolutely surprised—I'm disgusted! I thought you were all decent chaps, and not rotters of this sort."

"Come off it, Handy!" I grinned. "You can't expect to have everybody sympathising with you because your best girl has given you the chuck."

"My—my best girl!" gasped Handforth.

"At your age you oughtn't to be in love at all," I went on. "I'm surprised that you should make such an ass of yourself—and that's the truth. If you

can't be good-tempered about some simple chaff, we'll clear out."

Handforth clenched his fists.

"Hold on!" he said. "Who told you I was in love?"

"Church!"

"What else did he say?"

"He explained that you'd let the cat out of the bag—that a girl named Edith had gone away, and that you wouldn't be able to see her any more." I grinned. "That was good enough, wasn't it?"

"As it happens, it wasn't," said Handforth quietly. "There seems to be a misunderstanding—and perhaps I'm to blame—for jawing to myself and letting those bounders hear me. But they got hold of the wrong end of the stick?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I've had some bad news—rotten news, in fact," replied Handforth, looking straight at us. "There's no joke about it, and it's not news concerning any silly girl. I'm not in love in the way you mean, so the best thing you can do is to apologise and clear out."

"But you admitted everything about this girl, Handy," said Church.

"Perhaps I have," agreed Handforth. "And perhaps you'll have the sense to clear out of this study—the whole crowd of you. This girl, Edith, doesn't happen to be a silly flapper I'm in love with, as you fondly imagine, but a relative."

"Oh!"

"A—a relative!"

"To be more precise," said Handforth quietly—"my sister!"

"Your—your sister?"

"Yes."

"Oh, my only hat!"

"We—we thought—"

"I say, Handy, we didn't know!" exclaimed De Valerie concernedly. "I'm awfully sorry I spoke as I did. I thought it was merely a joke, you know. Your sister! It seems that we've made a mistake."

"I'm glad you acknowledge it," said Handforth.

"Is it anything serious, old man?" I asked, looking at him anxiously. "You mustn't take any notice of what these fellows have been saying—they didn't know the matter was really private and personal. I don't want to interfere with your family affairs, Handy, but would it be rude to ask if anything's happened to your sister?"

"Well, no," said Handforth. "It wouldn't be rude. I can't tell you any details, because the whole affair is private. But Edith has disappeared, and my pater and mater don't know where she is. I only heard the news this afternoon, and it rather bowled me over. And Church and McClure can do nothing better than to spread the silly yarn that I'm in love."

"We—we didn't know, Handy!" gasped Church. "We—we thought—"

"You'd better not think," interrupted Handforth tartly. "People with only small brains are better off without thinking—it's too much of a tax on their mental powers. It's a pity you couldn't mind your own business."

The crowd of fellows retired gracefully from Study D.

"Thank goodness they've gone!" exclaimed McClure, at last. "I say, Handy, I hope you'll forgive us—we didn't realise—"

"That's all right," growled Handforth. "Don't make a song."

Although he was such a fire-eating junior, and although he was ready to punch any fellow's nose on the spot, Handforth was really soft-hearted. A junior had only to ask his forgiveness, and it was granted on the spot. Handforth was disarmed in a moment.

"You see, old son, we heard you talking about Edith, and we naturally thought you were in love," said Church. "We've never heard you saying anything about a sister—at least, we've never heard her name."

"I generally refer to her as Sis," said

Handforth. "She's a lot older than I am, of course—she's twenty-one, in fact. She's a jolly good sort, and we always got on famously together. And now she's gone!"

McClure was about to ask a question, but Church put a finger to his lips to signify that it would be better to keep quiet. They sat about getting tea ready as quietly as possible, leaving Handforth sitting in the easy-chair.

He glared at them rather bitterly as they busied themselves with the table.

"Fine sort of chums, aren't you?" he snapped.

"Eh?"

"A fat lot you care about my troubles," said Handforth, with a sniff. "You haven't got the decency to ask what's happened to my sister! You don't care a jot!"

Church and McClure flushed—not with shame, but with indignation. Handforth's words were rather unjust, considering that they had refrained from putting questions on purpose to spare his feelings. But it was just like Handforth to misunderstand them. He generally misunderstood things.

"I say, go easy, old man," said Church. "We care a lot, you know."

"It seems like it, doesn't it?"

"You told us the matter was private, and we didn't want to butt in," said Church. "As a matter of fact, we're very anxious to hear what's happened to your sister—and I think it would be only decent if you told us. We don't keep secrets from one another in this body."

Handforth nodded.

"That's right enough," he agreed. "And, since you've apologised, and everything's all right, I'll tell you all about it. The letter I've got is from the mater, and it's properly upset me for the time. Still, I'm better now, and perhaps things aren't so bad as they seem to be on the surface. But I think the mater and mater ought to feel pretty keen about it. They deserve to."

"Deserve to?" repeated McClure, staring.

"Yes," said Handforth grindy.

"But why?"

"I'll tell you," went on Handy, sitting forward in his chair. "It's this way. My sister fell in love with a jolly decent chap named Arthur Kirby. He used to call at home sometimes—months ago—but I never happened to see him. The last time I was home Mr. Kirby had been barred."

"What for?" asked McClure.

"Oh, because he didn't suit my people," said Handforth bitterly. "Sis was tremendously in love with him, and she was awfully upset about the whole business. She told me everything. Somehow, she felt she could jaw at me—let off steam, sort of thing. We've always been jolly pally together. She's a sport, and we got on rippingly. I've always loved Sis—that's why this news has come with such a jolt. It's bowled me over."

"What news?" inquired Church.

"Aren't I telling you?" demanded Handforth, glaring. "Don't be so jolly impatient, you prize ass! This chap, Kirby, is a journalist, or something like that, and he's poor. How can you expect a young fellow of about twenty-six to have tons of money? It isn't reasonable! By what I can understand, he works on the papers, and he's making jolly decent headway. Edith reckons that he'll be earning big money before he's thirty."

"Journalists are generally poor, though," said Church, shaking his head.

"Rot!" said Handforth. "Some writers earn tons of tin, and Mr. Kirby has only just found his feet, so to speak. Anyhow, my mater and mater liked Kirby all right, but they reckoned he wasn't suitable for Edith. They admitted he was square and a thundering good sort, and that he was working his way up in the world—but, at the same time, they reckoned that Kirby would never earn enough money to

keep Sis in real comfort. So Kirby was politely given to understand that he wasn't welcome, and that his attentions to Edith were off-side."

"That was a bit rough on your sister," said Church.

"Deadly rotten. I call it," said Handforth. "I believe the mater had got somebody else in mind—a blithering ass named the Hon. Bertie Smythe-Fennant, or some fat-headed name like that. A proper Johnny, you know, with about as much brains as—as you fellows have got!"

"Thanks awfully," said McClure, glaring.

"Oh, well, you never reckon that you're strong in brain power," said Handforth. "This fop chap was a smart-set bounder, I believe, and the mater wanted Sis to go into the exclusive circle. So Arthur Kirby was clucked, and Sis was told to get busy with the Hon. Bertie. I can tell you, I felt pretty bad about it, especially when Edith told me that she hated the beggar, and loathed the very sight of him. In one way, I am glad things have turned out as they have."

"Then what's the idea of being upset?" asked Church.

"Oh, it's no good expecting you fellows to understand!" snapped Handforth, getting up and pacing up and down the study.

"Well, let's hear what else there is first," said McClure.

"It's not much," said Handforth, looking worried. "I knew, of course, that things were going all wrong with Edith, and she had my sympathy. I didn't dream she'd do anything rash, but this letter I've got says that Sis ran off two days ago and got married to Arthur Kirby."

"My hat!" said Church.

"Well, I don't blame her," remarked McClure. "She's married the chap she loves—and that's the main thing. I suppose your people are furious?"

"Now it's happened, I've got an idea that they're a bit sorry," replied Hand-

forth. "They wish they hadn't been quite so hasty. Because, with their consent, the marriage would have been a good one, and everything would have been all serene. As it is, Sis has run off and married the chap in secret, by special licence, or something. And they bunked off together, and haven't left a trace."

"Well, I'm blessed!"

"That's why I'm so jolly worried," went on Handforth. "Sis left a letter behind explaining everything, and said it would be far better to go away completely and live her own life. She's a jolly independent sort of girl, and even if she's half-starving she wouldn't appeal to the mater. She'll stick to her husband. And—and we may never see her again!"

"Oh rot!" said Church. "She'll turn up before long. She'll get to know that your people aren't cross, and she'll write, or call, or something of that sort. I shouldn't take it to heart so much, Handy."

Handforth grunted.

"It's all very well for you to talk!" he said. "You haven't lost your sister like I have. She's gone, and goodness only knows what's become of her. It's rotten to think of her going off, and never being able to see her again. I don't blame Kirby a bit—he did the right thing, in my opinion—but, at the same time, it's pretty rotten for me. He gets the wife he wants, but I lose my sister! I don't suppose I shall ever see her again!" added Handforth despondently.

He sat down in the easy chair, and looked moody. After that he said very little more, and Church and McClure busied themselves with the tea. But when everything was ready Handforth wouldn't touch a thing.

Church and McClure were rather surprised. It was something new for their headstrong leader to betray sentimental emotion. It proved that he was something better than a rough and ready fighter. When it came to the

point, Handforth was as soft-hearted as anybody.

And the loss of his sister, even though it might only be temporary, had completely bowed him off his feet. He wasn't himself at all, and his chums hoped that the effect would soon wear off.

Study D seemed lonely and deserted without Handforth roaring about in it. To have him sitting there quietly and moodily was rather disconcerting. But, try as they would, Church and McClure could do nothing to cheer up their despondent chum.

CHAPTER 13.

A Mysterious Letter.

"COME in, ass!" sang out Church. He and McClure were busy at prep, tea having been disposed of long since. Handforth was still lounging in the easy-chair, and there was a far-away expression in his eyes. The more he pondered over his sister's disappearance, the more he worried. It was evident, in fact, that Handy was very fond of Edith.

The door of Study D opened, and a cheerful youth in buttons appeared. This was Tubbs, the pageboy, and he stood just within the doorway.

"What's the idea of bothering now?" demanded Church, without looking up. "We haven't got any ink to lend, and no spare pen-nibs, and no exercise paper—"

"Beg pardon, Master Church—"

"Oh, it's you!" interrupted Church, looking up from his work. "We're busy at prep, and if you want to say anything you can leave it until later on. I'm right in the middle of some beastly French verbs, and my head's buzzing."

Tubbs grinned.

"That's bad, sir," he remarked. "I won't stop more than a second. I've just brought this 'ere note for Master Handforth—"

"Which note?" demanded Handforth, looking up.

"This letter, sir."

"Letter?" repeated Handforth. "There's been no post in since this afternoon, and—"

"All the same, sir, there's a letter come for you," said Tubbs. "It was brought in by hand, not ten minutes ago. Some little boy brought it up from the village, I believe. Anyhow, he gave it to Warren, and Warren brought it indoors. It's addressed to you right enough, sir, so I thought I'd let you have it at once."

"Good man!" said Handforth. "Let's look at it!"

There was an eager light in his eyes as he grabbed the letter from Tubbs' hand. But it died out when he gazed at the writing. The envelope was of poor quality, and it was obvious that it only contained a mere slip, for it almost felt as though the envelope was empty.

"That's all right, Tubby, you can buzz now," said Handforth. "Here's a tanner for the trouble."

Tubbs pocketed the sixpence and departed. When he had gone, Handforth turned over the envelope several times, looking at it intently. Church and McClure watched their leader with much interest.

"Who's it from?" asked McClure at last.

"How the dickens should I know?"

"Well, you can open it and see, I suppose?"

"Yes, I expect I can," admitted Handforth. "But I can't understand this writing. It's all printed, and I believe it's disguised. There seems to be something fishy about it."

Church and McClure bent over Handforth's shoulder and were quite ready to agree that there was something unusual about the communication. For the writing on the envelope was written in sprawly printed characters—in pencil.

"Some jape or other, I expect," said Church. "One of Fullwood's rotten ideas, perhaps. That rotter's capable

of any mean trick. Open it and see what it's got inside."

Handforth was already performing the operation. He slit open the flap, inserted his fingers, and produced a single slip of notepaper. Upon it were merely a few words, also written in pencil, and in printed characters. Handforth stared at the words wonderingly and his chums stared too.

"To E. O. Handforth.—Be at the little stile in Belton Lane to-night at eleven without fail. The matter is of great importance."

That was all. There was no signature, and nothing whatever to indicate the identity of the sender.

"Well, I'm jugged!" said Handforth. "What's the meaning of this? I've got to meet somebody in the lane, at the old stile, at eleven o'clock. I wonder who on earth can have sent it? There's a mystery here, my sons."

Church shook his head.

"Take my advice, and have nothing to do with the business," he said. "Ignore it completely."

"Ignore it?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"Well, it's obviously a trick," said Church. "Some funny ass wants to get you out in the lane after lights out—Fullwood, very likely, as I said. He and his sporty pals want to rag you, I reckon."

"That's about the size of it," agreed McClure.

But Handforth shook his head.

"I'm not so sure about that," he remarked. "This doesn't strike me as being one of Fullwood's wheezes. I think we'd better go."

"We?" said Church.

"Yes, of course."

"But that's all rot——"

"If you want to desert me, say so!" roared Handforth, in his old manner. "But I thought you were my chums, and not a pair of rotters. There might be something important in this. And I reckon the best thing we can do is to go down to the stile together."

"But if it's private business," argued McClure, "Church and I would only be in the way. We shouldn't like to interfere——"

"There's no question of interfering if I ask you to come," snapped Handforth. "If it's a jape, as you think, the jokers will only expect me to go. But we shall all be there, and it'll be easy enough for us to deal with any trouble that crops up. Yes, we'll certainly go."

"Well, I can't see the sense of it, and that's plain," declared Church obstinately. "It might be a jape in connection with the new master—just to get us into a row. It would be like Fullwood to send Mr. Heath a note, too, telling him to be in the lane at the same time. I'm suspicious, and I think we should be jolly sensible if we chucked that note into the wastepaper basket, and ignored it."

"Hear, hear!" said McClure, nodding.

Handforth sniffed.

"You needn't come at all!" he said icily. "I'll keep the appointment alone, and what you can do is to go and eat coke. Rats to you! Blow you! And if you say anything more, I'll punch your faces! I'm not in a mood to stand any of your silly rot! You'll come with me or get wiped up!"

"But you just said you'd go alone——"

"Never mind what I just said!" roared Handforth. "It's like your kid's intelligence to think of a fatheaded explanation like that! This is a mysterious note—not from Fullwood, or any of those cads. There's something fishy about it—something that needs investigating. And who's better fitted for a detective's job than I am?"

Church and McClure thought it advisable not to answer that question, for they could have named any junior in the school. In their opinion Handforth was the last fellow in the world to entrust with a detective's job. He fancied he was rather keen at that sort of thing, but it was only a fancy.

The chums of Study D went on with their prep, and Handforth was rather more cheerful than he had been. That note had given him something else to think about, and it took his mind off the worrying affair of his sister.

Bed-time came in due course, and the Remove trooped upstairs to its dormitory.

There was the usual chatter among the fellows before they settled down to sleep. But one by one they dropped off, and silence reigned at last in the dormitory.

Handforth had warned his chums to keep awake for their excursion, but Church and McClure cheerfully went to sleep, hoping Handforth would do the same! But in that they were unlucky.

CHAPTER II.

The Mystery of Mr. Heath!

HANDFORTH sat up in bed.

"You chaps awake?" he murmured softly.

Nobody answered.

"Sleepy beggars!" muttered Handforth gruffly. "Nice chums, I must say! We arrange to go out, and all you can do is to drop off to sleep."

The school clock had just chimed out the half-hour, and Handforth knew that it was exactly half-past ten. If he arose at once, he would have nice time to reach the stile before eleven. And Handforth was quite determined to keep the appointment with the mysterious sender of the note.

Handforth slipped out of bed, and went softly over to the beds which were occupied by Pullwood & Co. Those youths were all sound asleep, so it seemed that they had had nothing to do with the strange communication.

Within a couple of minutes Handforth had awakened his chums, and, although they protested strongly, he flung them out of bed and compelled them to dress.

"Couldn't have a better night for

the job," remarked Handforth softly. "There's hardly any wind, the air's mild, and there's a lovely moon in the sky."

"Yes, but that doesn't alter the fact that we're probably on a wild-goose chase," said Church irritably. "I don't see the fun of getting up now, Handy."

"Neither do I," said Handforth. "There's nothing funny in it, as a matter of fact, and it's my belief that we shall make some discovery. Buck up! We shall have to be pretty quick to get there before eleven."

Church and McClure knew how useless it was to argue, so they got dressed with as good a grace as possible. Soon afterwards they followed their leader out of the dormitory, and then downstairs into the deserted corridors. They emerged into the Triangle, via the window in Study D, and found that it was necessary to use extreme caution, for, of course, many of the masters were still up and about. It was quite possible, indeed, that one or more of them might be taking a stroll in the school grounds.

And, as the moonlight was quite strong, Handforth & Co. thought it just as well to be careful. They therefore made a wide detour, in order to reach the outer wall, keeping in black shadow all the time.

They reached the wall without mishap, and without catching sight of anyone. Then, just as they were about to scramble over into the lane, Church uttered a soft exclamation, and grabbed at Handforth's sleeve.

"Sh-sh-sh!" he whispered hurriedly. "Somebody coming!"

Handforth looked round and observed a somewhat slight figure moving across the Triangle almost directly towards the wall. The three juniors crouched behind a bush and waited.

"One of the prefects, I believe," murmured McClure. "Sit tight, for goodness' sake, and don't even breathe! If we're collared, it'll mean a flogging." They waited in absolute silence. The

figure came nearer, but, somehow, it was acting in a remarkable way. It did not walk boldly across the Triangle, but slipped from shady patch to shady patch in a furtive manner. And as the figure grew nearer the juniors recognised it.

It belonged to Mr. Clement Heath! "The new master!" murmured Church. "Oh, my hat!"

The juniors hardly dared to move a finger. For, to their consternation, it seemed that Mr. Heath was making straight for the spot where they crouched. They had been expecting him to approach the gate, the small gate which was used exclusively by the masters. But Mr. Heath was directing his footsteps towards the wall.

"We've been spotted!" breathed McClure. "The best thing we can do is to bunk, and we may not be recognised."

"Stop still, you ass!" hissed Handforth. "We won't move until it's absolutely necessary. I don't think he knows we're here. Look at the way he's moving about—like a giddy burglar!"

There was certainly some cause for Handforth's remark. Mr. Heath was acting in a very strange way. Having reached the deep shadow of the trees which lined the school wall, the new master paused for a few moments, and then crept along until he reached a spot where the big stones, of which the wall was built, were uneven.

And then, to the astonishment of the juniors, Mr. Heath silently climbed up, reached the top of the wall, and then dropped down into the lane. It was quite obvious that Mr. Heath was unaware of the fact that he had been watched.

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Church. "That's rummy behaviour for a master!"

Handforth nodded grimly.

"Jolly suspicious behaviour, if you ask me," he said. "I thought there was something wrong with the man right from the start. No respectable schoolmaster would leave the premises in

this way. He's acting as though he were afraid of being seen—and that's about the truth of it. He's afraid of somebody spotting him."

"Well, we spotted him," said Church. "I'll admit it looks suspicious, but there might be a simple explanation. Perhaps he hasn't got a key of the gate yet, and slipped over the wall—"

"That may be true," interrupted Handforth. "But why did he come across the Triangle in such a secretive manner? If everything's above board, there's no need for him to steal about the place like a criminal. I tell you, my sons, there's something jolly puzzling about this new master. He's not exactly what he seems to be, and I'm going to watch him."

"Now?" asked Church.

"Yes. He can only have covered a few yards," whispered Handforth. "He went down the lane, too, towards the side—"

"Great guns!" exclaimed McClure.

"What's the matter, you ass?"

"I—I suppose it wasn't Mr. Heath who sent you that note—"

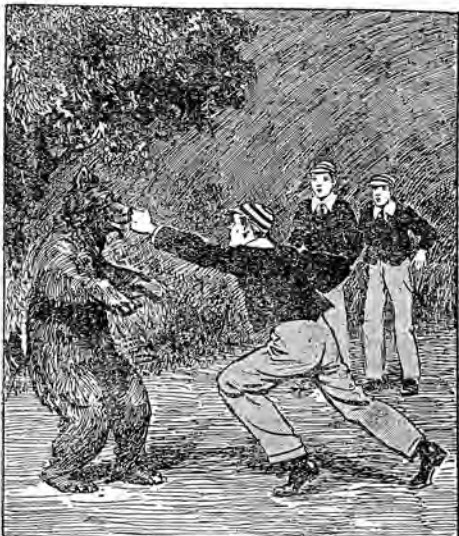
McClure's other words were frozen by the cold glare which Handforth bestowed upon him.

"You—you poor idiot!" said Handforth witheringly. "A Form-master wouldn't send a secret note to a junior, would he? If you can't talk better sense than that, my son, you'd better dry up altogether. This is just a coincidence, and it's a good thing we broke bounds to-night. We might be able to spot the chap's game."

"I expect he's only gone for a stroll and a smoke," said Church.

At the same time, Church was not quite convinced that this was the true explanation. Masters out for a stroll do not generally creep about the grounds in a strange way, and climb over the walls. Handforth was perhaps justified in believing that there was something amiss with Mr. Clement Heath.

"We'll dodge across the lane and get



Handforth went into the attack without hesitation, nothing doubting that the bear was Fullwood dressed up. His fist struck the bear fairly on the nose, and there was a fierce throaty snarl—a realistic snarl which could not be mistaken. It was the escaped bear Hindenburg!

into the meadow," breathed Handforth; "then we can slip along parallel with the road and overtake the bounder. He won't know we're there, and we can watch him."

"He might hear us," said Church.

"Not if we keep quiet, you brainless chump!" snapped Handy.

Church said nothing in response to this insult, but followed his leader across the lane. He had his doubts about silence. He and McClure might be able to maintain quietness, but Handforth was always a noisy individual.

Once in the meadow, the lane was cut off by the thick hedge. The grass underfoot was soft and mossy, and the juniors' shoes made no sounds as they hurried along. Some distance before they reached the stile they heard footsteps.

A handy gap provided a spy-hole, and Church peered through. Mr. Heath was walking along as quietly as possible, and his slight limp was easily apparent. He evidently had no idea that he was being shadowed.

Curiously enough, the new master came to a halt at the stile, and the juniors halted opposite. It seemed rather strange, but Handforth was certain that Mr. Heath was not in the least responsible for that mysterious note.

His presence near the stile at this particular time was merely a coincidence—and, as a matter of fact, Handforth's opinion was quite correct.

After waiting a moment or two, during which he peered up and down the lane, the new Remove master stepped over the stile, and plunged into the wood. Handforth & Co. were rather undecided.

"What shall we do now?" whispered Church.

"Stay where we are," replied McClure. "We can't follow the chap through the wood. He'd know in a minute, and would only wait behind a tree until we came up, and dodge out on us. We'd better give it up."

Handforth bestowed a glare upon his chum which was intended to be withering, but, unfortunately, the darkness deprived it of its effectiveness. At all events, McClure was unmoved.

"You burbling ass!" said Handforth. "Give it up! We're going into the wood—now! And if you don't come, I'll—"

"Oh, all right!" said Church. "Let's go."

It was better than arguing, anyhow. The three juniors broke through the hedge, crossed the lane, and slipped over the stile. They had not proceeded many yards along the footpath before Handforth called a halt.

"He's coming back!" he breathed. "Drop down—anywhere!"

They hastily concealed themselves behind a thick bush, and waited. The limping figure of Mr. Heath came into view a second later. The new master was walking leisurely, and his hands were in his pockets. His gaze was directed upwards, and he seemed to be greatly interested in the trees.

Handforth & Co. waited, hardly daring to breathe. Mr. Heath was quite near them, and he had come to a halt. Then, to the astonishment of the juniors, he proceeded to shin up the nearest tree!

The new master was agile, and he swung himself from branch to branch with perfect ease. The juniors watched him in wonder. What on earth was Mr. Heath doing up a tree in Bellon Wood. It was inexplicable.

Mr. Heath climbed to the very top, and, once there, he remained in his lofty perch for quite a while. He was lost to view now, but the juniors could hear him moving about among the branches. Twigs were broken, and now and again a slim limb would creak protestingly.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" muttered Church. "What's his game?"

"Perhaps he wants some fresh air—or perhaps he's looking for birds' nests," suggested McClure brilliantly.

"Some of the masters have queer habits, you know."

"Shush!" breathed Handforth. "He's coming down."

Shortly afterwards Mr. Heath swung himself to the ground. His first action was to take out his penknife and make a small notch in the trunk of the tree. Then he looked about him, walked to another tree, and commenced to climb this one, too!

He disappeared among the dense foliage and the branches.

"Great Scott!" said Church. "He must be dotty!"

"Clean off his rocker," agreed Handforth. "No human being in his senses would make a hobby of climbing trees in the middle of the giddy night! The chap's certainly up the pole!"

"Up the tree, you mean," said McClure, grinning.

"Ha, ha, ha!" sneered Handforth. "I suppose that's funny!"

"Shurrup, you ass!" muttered Church. "He'll hear you!"

Perhaps Mr. Heath had heard something, for the juniors noticed that he was perfectly still for a few moments. Then he rapidly descended. On the ground, he looked round cautiously, standing quite motionless. Apparently satisfied that everything was all right, he made another notch, and walked off towards the stile. The juniors followed, after allowing a minute to elapse.

Mr. Heath had disappeared, and when the juniors looked up and down the lane they could see no sign of him. This was curious, for the dusty road was bathed in moonlight, and it was impossible for the new master to have vanished out of sight within such a short space of time.

"Where the dickens has he got to?" muttered Church.

"Perhaps he dodged back into the wood," suggested McClure.

Handforth did not think this likely, and he slipped across the road, mounted the bank, and peered over the hedge into the meadow—for Beilton Wood only lined one side of the lane. And there, sure enough, Mr. Heath's limp-

ing figure was clearly visible on the other side of the field.

"There you are!" said Handforth triumphantly. "I thought as much! We'd better follow him——"

"What about your appointment?"

"Oh, that can wait!" said Handforth.

He charged through the hedge, and his chums followed. By this time Mr. Heath had disappeared from view, having passed into the next meadow. The juniors ran across the intervening space at top speed, and when they arrived at the opposite hedge they had no difficulty in picking out the new master's slim figure in the moonlight.

"He seems to be making for the moor," whispered Church. "What's the good of us following——"

"Oh, dry up!" declared Handforth. "The chap's either dotty or crooked—and it's my belief he's not exactly what he seems. I'm on the track, and I'm not going to be shaken off!"

The juniors followed over the next meadow, and after that they came out upon the Heath, where patches of gorse enabled them to seek easy concealment if necessary. The Remove master was striding away briskly towards the moor proper.

Handforth & Co. continued to follow for some little time, but then they lost sight of their quarry. Abruptly, without the slightest warning, Mr. Heath had vanished, as though he had been swallowed up by the very ground itself.

The chums of Study D pressed on cautiously until they reached the spot where they had seen the master; but, although they scouted about in every direction, they could now see no trace whatever of Mr. Clement Heath.

"Fat lot of good coming, wasn't it?" growled Church.

"If you start grumbling, my son, I'll smash you!" exclaimed Handforth warmly. "Why, Nelson Lee himself would have lost the chap on a moor like this! Never mind; we shall meet with better success another time."

"Let's hope so, anyway," said

Church. "I suppose we're going back to bed now?"

"Not likely!" retorted Handforth. "We're going to the stile—to wait for the fellow who sent me that note."

"But it's long past eleven—"

Handforth would hear of no excuses, and he led his chums back to the stile at a brisk trot. When they arrived they found everything quiet and still. There was nobody waiting, and it was pretty obvious that the whole affair was a frost. Who could have sent the note? It was certainly a bit of a puzzle.

"Look here, Handy, we're fed up with this rot!" said Church grimly. "Are you coming back to bed or not?"

"I'm going back to bed when I please," retorted Handforth. "If you chaps like to go off and desert me, you can do so—and rats to you! I mean to stay here until I discover what—"

Handforth came to an abrupt halt, for at that second a dim figure loomed out of the wood, and came to a halt on the opposite side of the stile. He stood there motionless, without saying a word.

"Oh, my hat!" murmured McClure.

Handforth was always fond of the dramatic, and, with something of a flourish, he produced an electric torch, and flashed the brilliant light fully upon the face of the newcomer. The man's head and shoulders were dazzlingly lit up.

"Mr. Heath!" gasped Handforth.

The Remove master was momentarily startled, but he recovered himself.

"Take that light away, Handforth!" he ordered sharply. "You will explain to me at once what you are doing out here in the lane at this hour of the night."

His voice was cold and harsh—very different from his mild tones of the class-room. Handforth did not turn the light away immediately—he was too startled to move—and he and his chums could see that Mr. Heath's face was somehow different. It was drawn and hard, and his eyes were glittering

with fury; yet he strove to remain calm.

"Answer me, boy!" he said grimly.

"We—we— That is to say— I—I—"

Handforth paused helplessly, being unable to say anything further at the moment. He was flabbergasted at being discovered, and, in addition, he was amazed at Mr. Heath's appearance. They had seen the new master disappear on the moor, and they had come back at the double. Yet Mr. Heath was here, in the woods! In some extraordinary way he had reached the stile first.

"Cannot you speak articulately, Handforth?" demanded Mr. Heath angrily. "What are you doing here? Do you realise that it is nearly midnight—"

"We—we came to keep an appointment, sir," ventured Church. "You— you see, Handforth got a note—somebody asked him to be at the stile at eleven—and we came out to meet the chap—"

"That is enough!" snapped Mr. Heath. "In the first place, I do not believe this cock-and-bull story; and, in the second place, you had no right to leave your dormitory. Things have come to a pretty pass when a master cannot have a moonlight stroll without encountering boys of his own Form—long after they are supposed to be asleep! Go back to your beds at once!"

"Yes, sir," said the juniors meekly.

"Handforth, you will write me seven hundred lines, and the other boys will write four hundred."

"Why—why should I be given more sir?"

"Because you appear to be the ring-leader of this reckless escapade," retorted Mr. Heath. "Now go! Do not dare to argue with me, or I will increase your punishment. You may consider yourselves very lucky that I do not report you to the headmaster—for that would mean a flogging."

Church and McClure managed to

drag Handforth away before he could enter into any argument, and they were only too glad to find themselves back in the Remove dormitory. They had seen a side of Mr. Heath's character which had not been apparent hitherto. The new master had been cold and determined, without the slightest sign of weakness. He had been anxious, too—far more anxious than he had wanted the boys to see.

"Well, it's a jolly queer business—that's all I can say!" Handforth declared as he got undressed. "It's fishy—and I mean to keep an eye on Heath. Unless I'm mistaken, he's not the innocent master he pretends to be!"

"Better leave him alone," remarked Church. "You'll only get yourself into more trouble—"

"Bats!" retorted Edward Oswald as he slipped between the sheets. "I know what I'm doing—and I know that Mr. Heath is a crook. This is a fine chance for me to develop my detective ability."

Church and McClure grinned in the darkness, and they felt like saying a few sarcastic remarks; but, as they were anxious to get some sleep that night, they refrained from doing so.

And the Remove dormitory was soon quiet and peaceful.

The other fellows guessed that Handforth was worried about his sister—and this guess was quite correct. As a matter of fact, Handforth had received another letter from his mother that morning, and Church and McClure had been permitted to see it. It contained no good news.

Edith was still missing, and no trace of her could be found. She had not communicated with her parents since her elopement, and Handforth was miserable and worried. He was quite satisfied with his sister's choice as regards a husband, but Handforth was terribly upset because Edith had disappeared.

As he explained to his chums, his sister had sound judgment, and if Mr. Arthur Kirby was good enough for her, he was good enough for Handy. Edward Oswald was quite satisfied with his sister's choice. He had never seen Mr. Kirby, but he had heard a lot about him, and he knew that Edith loved him dearly.

At the same time, Handforth could not excuse this conduct.

"Rotten!" he declared. "I don't blame the chap for taking Sis away and marrying her—he couldn't very well do anything else. But, once married, he ought to have brought Edith back and snapped his fingers in the pater's face. It's offside to vanish in this way and not leave a trace behind. The mater's in a terrible state, and goodness knows what'll happen if Edith doesn't show up soon!"

It was little wonder that Handforth was pre-occupied during lessons, and that he did not give his full attendance to the work. His worry increased as the day passed, and by tea-time Handy was fairly "dippy"—as Church put it.

He was so mentally upset that he seldom replied when he was spoken to; he went about in a condition of dazed misery, and the expression in his eye was far away and somewhat wild.

Tea was a matter of no importance to him. He was always a fellow of brisk action when he was normal, but

CHAPTER 12

Good News!

MR. CLEMENT HEATH looked just the same as usual the next morning when he entered the Form-room. He was mild and perfectly self-possessed, and there was not the slightest trace of uneasiness in his expression.

But it was an undoubted fact that he seemed to be particularly down upon Handforth. Twice during lessons he punished Handforth severely for minor offences—inattention. Handforth, for some reason, was strangely absent-minded, and there was an expression of worry in his eyes which had seldom been there before.

now he had given himself over completely to worry. Handforth always went to one extreme or the other. Generally speaking, he never worried over anything, but now that something had turned up he almost worried himself crazy.

And it was entirely unnecessary, too. There was no reason for him to suppose that Edith was in any trouble. She had disappeared, certainly; but she had a husband with her, and they were probably happy enough. But Handforth loved his "Sis" tremendously, and it was awful to him to realize that she had disappeared out of his life, and that there was a possibility of his never seeing her again.

His chums did their best to console him, but without avail. Things were miserable enough in Study D for the rest of the evening.

When the Remove went to bed Handforth was still silent and subdued. But the next morning there was a sudden and complete change in him.

He had risen early, and when Church and McClure came down they were astonished to see their chum performing queer antics.

Church and McClure had got dressed quickly in order to follow Handforth. And they had arrived at the top of the stairs just in time to discover that their mighty leader had completely gone off his rocker.

There was no doubt about it whatever.

Edward Oswald Handforth was behaving in a most extraordinary fashion. He had the lobby to himself, and he was dancing round it, kicking his legs in every direction, and singing at the top of his voice.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Church. "He's gone mad!"

"Stark, raving dotty!" agreed McClure. "Look at him! And what's he got in his hands? What's that he's waving about?"

"Looks like a letter."

It was a letter, and, by all appear-

ances, the letter was unopened. Handforth was still capering round, and he was still singing. His face was flushed, and his eyes were gleaming. Suddenly he caught sight of his chums on the stairs, and he finished up his song and uttered a terrific yell.

Then, with glittering eyes, he rushed up the stairs towards them.

"Great Scott!" panted Church hoarsely. "He's dangerous!"

They fled.

Along the passage they ran at full speed. They dodged round a corner, and Handforth rushed past in full pursuit. The next second Church and McClure dodged out again and retraced their steps.

Handforth became aware of the trick just as they were disappearing down the stairs. He uttered another yell, and gave chase.

Church and McClure simply fell down into the lobby. They were highly alarmed, and they rushed down the Remove passage at breakneck speed. Handforth came charging after them like an infuriated elephant.

"The study—quick! panted Church. "We can lock ourselves in."

They reached Study D in the nick of time. The very instant they were inside they slammed the door to. But before it was properly shut Handforth had arrived, and he shoved at the door.

"Push!" gasped McClure. "We haven't let him in! He's—he's dangerous!"

"You—you burbling asses!" roared Handforth outside. "Open this door!"

"No fear!" panted Church.

"If you don't I'll wipe you into the middle of next month!" roared Handforth. "I'll roll you in the Triangle and I'll duck you in the fountain!"

Church and McClure held the door with all their strength.

But it was useless. Inch by inch Handforth was forcing the door open, and within another two or three seconds he would be in the study.

"We'd better humour him!" whispered Church huskily. "It's no good—we can't stand this!"

The juniors relaxed their efforts, but Handforth didn't relax his. The result was somewhat disastrous. Edward Oswald suddenly found that the resistance behind the door had vanished, and he came hurtling into Study D. He charged into the table, sent it flying over, and collapsed on the floor.

"Great pip!" he gasped faintly.

"Now's our chance!" said Church breathlessly. "We can slip out now!"

Handforth leapt to his feet, closed the door with a bang, and put his back to it. He gazed at his chums.

"What's the idea of this, you mad idiots?" he demanded. "You might have done some damage, making me pitch into the study like that! I've got some good news, and all you can do is to dodge away from me."

"Good news!" said Church dully.

"Yes, you babbling ass!"

"Take it quietly, old man," said McClure gently. "There's no need to excite yourself, you know. As long as you keep calm it'll be all right."

Handforth started.

"Do you think I'm mad?" he demanded warmly.

"Nunno! Of course not!" parried McClure. "Mad! What an idea! You're—you're just a bit upset about that letter from your mater—"

"Which letter?"

"That one in your hand."

"You—you balmy hunkie!" said Handforth. "This letter isn't from the mater—it's from Edith! It's from my sister!"

"What!"

"That's why I've been dancing with joy," went on Handforth. "A letter from Sis, my sons! Think of it! And when I want to tell you all about it you can't do anything better than to rush about as if you'd suddenly gone dotty!"

"We—we thought you were dotty," explained Church feebly.

Handforth condescended to grin.

"Well, I suppose I did act a bit queerly," he admitted. "But I was so surprised and delighted that I did go a bit off for a minute. A letter from Sis, my sons! Everything will be all right now! All my worries are over!"

"What does she say?" asked McClure.

"How do I know? I haven't read it yet."

His chums stared.

"You haven't read it, and you're dotty with joy?" asked Church.

"Oh, it's bound to be all right," said Handforth. "It's from Sis, so it must be. I'm going to read it now, and I wanted you chaps to hear it."

Church and McClure were greatly relieved to find that Handforth still retained his mental balance, and they watched him with interest as he tore open the envelope and removed a plain sheet of notepaper. It was only a short note. There was no address on the top, and Handforth had already noticed that the postmark was: "London, W."

"Well, what does she say?" asked Church.

Handforth allowed his chums to read the note over his shoulder:

"Dearest Ted,—I expect you have heard all about me from mother and father, and perhaps you are worried because you don't know where I am. Please don't worry any more. I am very comfortable, and very happy. Arthur and I have a dear little home, and I could wish for nothing better. Later on, perhaps, I will write and let you know where I am. But just at present you must be content with this little note. But please don't worry about me at all. Everything is all right.

"Your loving sister,

"EDITH."

"There you are!" said Church. "What was the idea of your worrying your silly head off? She's as right as ninepence."

Handforth nodded slowly.

"Of course, this makes me feel a lot better, I'll admit," he said. "But, at the same time, she might have told me where she's hanging out. Surely she could trust her own brother?"

"I dare say she thought it better to be cautious," said McClure. "Anyhow, everything's all right now, and there's no need for you to go about looking like a boiled owl."

Handforth folded up the letter and placed it in his pocket.

"Well, that's all right," he said in a curious tone. "Now that I'm relieved, there's no need to worry any more. She has written, and she's happy—and she'll write again before long, telling me her address. Good!"

All was merry and bright in Study D again. The Remove soon noted the change in Handforth's spirits, and it was not long before we heard the cause.

Handforth gave me some further information, which he considered to be serious, but which I looked upon with considerable amusement.

"Heath is a rotter," Handforth declared darkly. "There's no getting away from the fact—he's a crook!"

"Begad!"

"Now, look here, Handy," I said. "There's no need for you to get those dotty ideas into your head. There's not much wrong with Heath."

"That's all you know," said Handforth, with a mysterious nod. "But I've seen things, and I know things! You'd be surprised if you only knew what I know! And I can tell you Mr. Clement Heath is a criminal!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"All right—you wait," said Handforth grimly. "You won't cackle so much soon. Heath's a crook, and I'm going to make it my business to watch him and get on his track. Understand?"

"Perfectly!" I smiled. "You're starting on one of your detective stunts."

"Yes, I am!" said Handforth firmly.

"This is my chance, and I've seized it with both hands!"

He strode away with his nose in the air, and I grinned to my chums. But there was certainly something in what Handforth said. Mr. Clement Heath was a mysterious individual, and before long he was to be even more mysterious still.

CHAPTER 14.

Strange Behaviour!

"CYCLING—that's the idea!" said Church.

"Rats!"

"Well, suggest something better!"

"That's easy," replied McClure.

"Cycling's too jolly warm on a day like this—and too dusty. Finest thing we can do is to go rowing on the river, and take some tuck with us for tea."

Church nodded.

"Well, it's not a bad idea," he admitted. "Perhaps it will be better than cycling; but I've just got my bike from the makers, you know—a brand new one. I want to give it a good trial."

"It's a ripping bike, I'll admit," said McClure. "Jolly decent of your pater to send it. But the best time to take a run on it will be after tea—this evening. It'll be cool then. But what we require this afternoon is a lazy pull up the river, and some nice books to read. Think of it, lying under a shady tree, with the river in front of us, and——"

"Yes, by jingo, we'll go on the river!" said Church. "All three of us. Handy's got nothing special on for this afternoon, and he's always fond of the river. We'll go and select a good boat——"

"No, we won't!" exclaimed Handforth from the doorway.

Church and McClure glanced round, and beheld the figure of Edward Oswald Handforth in the doorway of Study D. Handy was looking unusually determined, and there was a grim expression in his eyes.

"We're not going on the river this afternoon, my sons," he said firmly.

"Look here, Handy, don't be an ass!" said Church. "It's a lovely day, and it's too hot for cycling. I wanted to go out on my bike at first, but McClure pointed out that the sun is too hot."

"We're not going cycling, either," said Handforth.

"Then what's the idea?"

"We'll do some rambling."

"Some which?"

"We'll go for a ramble," said Handforth grimly.

"I call that dotty!" exclaimed McClure. "It's too jolly hot to go walking to-day—too hot and dusty. There's a glorious river here, and plenty of boats. There's no reason why we shouldn't enjoy ourselves on the river."

Handforth regarded his chums pityingly.

"It's not a question of enjoying ourselves," he said. "We've got a duty to perform."

"A—a duty!"

"Exactly!"

"Explain, you ass!" said Church. "It's a half-holiday to-day, and we're not supposed to do any duties at all—"

"I don't mean school duties, you babbling idiot!" roared Handforth. "If you want to know the truth straight away, we're going to do some detective work—some tracking—some shadowing!"

"Wha-a-ast!"

Church and McClure stared at their leader speechlessly.

"That's the programme!" said Handforth, with a pleasant nod.

"De-detective work!" stammered Church. "You must be dotty! There's no detective work for us to do—and even if there was we couldn't do it. We aren't detectives!"

Handforth nodded.

"I'll agree that you fellows aren't detectives," he said calmly. "But I'm one—I'm a detective—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Church and McClure howled.

"You sacking fathheads—"

"Ha, ha! Ahem!" gasped Church, suddenly becoming serious. "We—we didn't mean to laugh, Handy, but we couldn't help it, you know. You've often thought you were a bit of a detective, but it's silly to think things like that."

"You—you rotter!" snapped Handforth. "You know as well as I do that I'm jolly smart at detective work. You only run me down because you're jealous. I've never known such jealous bounders as you chaps. Anyhow, we're going to get on the track this afternoon. That's final."

"On the track of what?"

"We're going to shadow Mr. Heath," said Handforth.

Church and McClure gazed at one another, and breathed rather hard. Handforth had always had a bee in his bonnet that he was a keen amateur detective. This fallacy had been exploded many times, and one would have supposed that Handforth would have given up the job in disgust.

But he always came up smiling every time, and was already ready to undertake a fresh investigation at a moment's notice. Experience taught him nothing. And for him to interest himself in the affairs of Clement Heath was not particularly surprising. But Church and McClure did not like it.

"I don't agree with this shadowing business, Handy," said Church, shaking his head. "It—it doesn't seem—well, square to me."

"What do you mean—square?"

"Well, it seems that we're prying into his business," said Church. "It's no concern of ours what he does. It's not right to spy on the chap, and to follow him when he goes out on a half-holiday. Surely you must have some sense of honesty, and all that sort of thing?"

Handforth waved his hand.

"All that sort of talk is empty," he declared—"as empty as your giddy

head! When you're dealing with a crook it's necessary to act in accordance with the task. It's no good being a detective if you've got to wear kid gloves all the time. It's necessary to harden your heart, and put aside all scruples. I'm as much against spying as anybody, but it's not spying when you're a detective—it's shadowing!"

"The same thing with a different name?" asked Church.

"You can call it what you like, but we're going to shadow Mr. Heath this afternoon!" said Handforth grimly.

"Supposing he doesn't go out?" asked McClure.

"Then we can't shadow him, you duffer!"

"I think he's gone out already," said Church carelessly. "As a matter of fact, I'm almost certain I saw him go out about half an hour ago. So the best thing we can do is to give it up for this afternoon and go on the river."

Handforth withered his chum with a look—at least, he tried to.

"If Heath goes on the river, then we might go on it, but that's the only chance of boating you've got this afternoon," he declared. "I've made up my mind, and— My goodness!"

Handforth stared out of the window excitedly.

"What's the matter?"

"Look! He's going out now!"

Mr. Heath was certainly striding across the Triangle. He was dressed in a grey flannel suit, and he carried a walking-stick with him. Upon his head rested a straw hat, and it was quite evident that he meant to go for a stroll.

"This is where we get busy," said Handforth briskly. "Come on!"

"Yes, but look here——"

"No arguments—follow me!"

Church and McClure had half a mind to stay behind and risk the consequences when Handforth returned. But it was perhaps as well to accompany him. They were convinced that his shadowing would come to nothing, and that he would only make an ass

of himself. There would be a certain amount of satisfaction in this, so Church and McClure went.

They left Study D by means of the open window, and walked leisurely across the Triangle in the baking sunlight. Mr. Clement Heath was a short distance down the road, and the juniors hung back, not wishing to be seen.

"Better get into the meadow, the same as we did the other night," suggested Church. "He can't see us then."

They lost no time in dodging through a gap, and it was then impossible for Mr. Heath to be aware of the fact that the three Removites were on his trail. He was striding along leisurely, smoking a cigarette, and it seemed clearly evident that he was merely out for a quiet afternoon walk.

Reaching the stile, he crossed over, and entered Beilton Wood. Handforth's eyes gleamed as he noted this fact. He looked at his chums grimly.

"There you are!" he exclaimed. "Don't you call that suspicious!"

"Blessed if I can see anything suspicious about it," said Church.

"He went into the wood the other night——"

"That's nothing," said Church. "It's only natural that he should go there now. It's quiet and shady, and the air in there is cool. It seems to me that you want to make mysteries out of nothing, Handy!"

"Well, we'll see," said Handforth grimly. "Don't forget what happened the other night—and don't forget that Heath was absolutely furious when he saw us. He was alarmed really, and tried to hide it by being angry. There's something queer about the chap, and I mean to find out what it is."

"Of course, if you choose to butt in——"

"Look here, you rotters!" shouted Handforth. "I know what your game is! You're deliberately jawing here so that Heath will have a chance to get out of sight! If we aren't quick we shall lose him!"

Church and McClure exchanged a glance. As a matter of fact, Handforth had divined their little idea. They had hoped, by arguing, to keep their leader in the meadow until Mr. Heath had vanished into the recesses of the wood.

But Handforth was "wise" to the move, and the next moment he had godged across the lane, and was in the wood. Mr. Heath was not in sight at the moment, but by following the foot-path for some distance, the juniors came within sight of their quarry.

The new master was hurrying along now; he was not taking it leisurely as he had been, and it seemed that he had some definite object—to deceive anybody who happened to see him. Free from the public gaze now, he was putting his best foot foremost.

But where was he off to?

Handforth & Co. certainly performed their self-imposed task creditably. Although Mr. Heath glanced round more than once, he saw no sign of his shadowers. Handforth, Church and McClure were strung out in a line, fifty feet apart. Handforth led the way, of course, and he kept Mr. Heath constantly in view.

The wood was very thick, trees and bushes abounding. It was quite easy to keep the master in view, and to remain hidden. But this did not apply after the wood had been left behind.

Handforth found it necessary to go more carefully.

On the other side of the wood there were two routes to take. One led on to Bannington Moor, and the other went across the fields and led into the little dusty lane which ran to Edgemore, and then joined up to the Bannington Road.

Mr. Heath went across the meadows, so it was fairly evident that he was bound for the tiny, sleepy village. Edgemore was right off the main track of things.

The place consisted mainly of a few old cottages, a big manor house, a post-office, two or three little shops, an old-fashioned inn, and a village green.

It was quite an interesting little place, but why Mr. Heath should be going there was a mystery to Handforth. It was no mystery, however, to Church and McClure. They came to the fairly obvious conclusion that Mr. Heath was bent upon looking over the village, for it was one of the most picturesque spots in the district.

Mr. Heath was a new arrival at St. Frank's. Was it not natural that he should choose a fine afternoon like this to take a walk to Edgemore? Handforth, having got it fixed into his head that Mr. Heath was not what he pretended to be, thought of all sorts of explanations—all of them wildly improbable.

Edgemore was nearly reached; the tiny church spire could be seen between some trees just down in the hollow. Mr. Heath, after turning a bend in the lane, had turned into a little spinney beside the road.

This led nowhere, and Handforth came to a halt rather uncertainly. He waited until his chums drew level with him, and explained what had happened. The three juniors concealed themselves in the hollow of a dry ditch. Ferns surrounded them, and completely hid them from view.

"What are we going to do about Heath?" said Handforth. "He's gone into that thicket, and I'm afraid to walk up, because there's no cover—he'd spot me in a minute. And he might have gone right through the spinney to the other side! Why the dickens couldn't he keep straight on the road, instead of messing us about like this!"

Church and McClure were unable to answer this question.

"Anyhow, I'm not going to stop here for long," went on Handforth. "If there's no sign of him within two minutes we'll—Hallo! What the dickens—"

He paused abruptly, for a stranger had emerged from a gap in the hedge, leading from the spinney—the same gap that Heath had entered by. The juniors, low down in the dry ditch.

could see the man clearly, although he was unable to see them.

"Who's that merchant?" muttered Church.

The man was smallish; he wore a light overcoat, and a bowler was upon his head. The man walked forward for a few paces, looking up and down the lane.

"Great—great pip!" gasped Handforth faintly.

"What's the matter?"

"Didn't you see?" asked Handy, with a gulp.

"See what?"

"That chap—he limped when he walked!"

Church and McClure stared.

"Why, what—what——" Church paused. "Do—do you mean——"

"It's Heath!" exclaimed Handforth breathlessly. "Heath himself! He's been into that thickset to put that overcoat on, and to change his straw-yard for a bowler! He's disguised himself!"

"But—but this chap has got a moustache!" said McClure, startled.

"False!" said Handforth keenly. "Look at him! He's walking away now. He limps! He can't disguise that! Oh, my only hat! This is even better than I expected! Heath in disguise! A St. Frank's master——"

"It's—it's impossible!" said Church. "We must have made a bloomer!" declared McClure.

"Puff! That chap's Heath all right," said Handforth, with conviction. "I've said all along that Heath isn't square—and this proves it. You don't like to believe this because you thought I was wrong."

There was a certain amount of truth in this remark, and Church and McClure were compelled to admit it. They instinctively knew that the man who had just appeared was, indeed, Mr. Clement Heath.

The Remove master paused to light a cigarette, and unbuttoned his overcoat in order to obtain a match.

The juniors then saw something which removed the last shred of doubt.

The man standing in the lane was wearing a light grey flannel suit, and it was one which could not possibly be mistaken, for there were distinctive blue stripes in the material.

Furthermore, when his face was towards the boys, they recognised him as Mr. Heath, in spite of his false moustache.

He turned, and walked slowly down the lane, swinging his stick carelessly.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Church, taking a deep breath. "It's him right enough—no doubt about it at all."

"There you are," said Handforth triumphantly.

"But—but what's the idea of disguising himself?" asked McClure in amazement.

"Goodness knows."

"Well, what are we going to do?"

"Do?" said Handforth, rising out of the ditch as Mr. Heath's form vanished round the bend. "What are we going to do? Why, I'll show you!"

He jumped up, looking grim, and his chums felt rather alarmed.

"I—I say, Handy, don't be rash, you know!" exclaimed Church. "Don't rush up to Heath and ask what his game is——"

"You silly ass!" interrupted Handforth scornfully. "Do you think I'd do a dotty thing like that? This is a race which needs tact."

"Which needs what?"

"Careful handling," explained Handforth. "We've got to be cautious, and we mustn't act hastily or precipitately."

"My hat!" said McClure. "That's good word!"

Handforth glared at his chums, and then walked briskly down the lane. Church and McClure followed the brainy leader.

CHAPTER 16.

The Mysterians Collage!

EDMORE was quite asleep. The straggling little High Street was absolutely deserted as Mr. Heath walked leisurely along. He did not

traverse the whole length of the street, but turned down a tiny lane, which was almost concealed by overhanging trees.

As soon as he had vanished round the corner, three youthful figures bobbed into view from behind the whitewashed wall of an old farm building, which lay flush with the road.

Handforth & Co. were on the trail.

"Yes, my sons, we're on the track of something big," declared Handforth gravely. "No decent man—no honourable Remove master—would come to a place like this, and disguise himself before appearing. It's fishy."

"He might be doing it just for a joke

—"

"I don't want any brainless remarks from you, Arnold McClure," snapped Handforth.

"Yes, but—"

"The facts are beyond dispute," went on Handforth, with a magisterial wave of his hand. "We've tracked Heath to this place, and we've found out that he's up to something crooked. We're fully justified in following up our investigation. We shall probably obtain more data for future use. It's just as well to press our inquiry forward with all speed."

Handforth spoke in an important tone, for it was one of his favourite weaknesses to pose as one of the fiction detectives he so much admired. He rather fancied himself in the role of crime investigator—and he was prone to think people criminals merely for the sake of investigating their movements.

They arrived at the corner some few moments after Mr. Heath had vanished. Peeping round, Handforth had no difficulty in sighting his quarry, two hundred yards ahead.

Mr. Heath was just disappearing round a twist in the narrow lane, so Handforth & Co. were safe in following.

"Come on, my sons," said Handforth briskly. "We're conducting this investigation in the right way. I don't sincerely believe in theories, but I'm tempted to make a guess at things now. In my opinion Mr. Heath is a burglar,

and he means to break into the Head's safe before long. He might have some confederates somewhere in the district, and he's probably going to meet them now."

"Steady—on, Handy," protested Church. "That's a bit thick, you know."

Handforth glared.

"I don't want any rot from my assistants!" he said tartly.

"Your what?"

"My assistants," repeated Handforth. "Don't forget that while I'm engaged on an investigation, you fellows must consider yourselves my employees. If I give orders, you've got to obey them. And if you don't obey them, you'll get it in the neck!"

"You'll be taking a larger size in hats next!" snuffed Church.

Handforth did not realise what this cryptic remark meant until several yards had been covered, and then it was too late to inflict punishment. For just after that he caught sight of Mr. Heath turning in to a gateway.

"Keep back, you ass!" hissed Church abruptly.

The detective-in-chief nearly made a bad bloomer, for he had exposed himself at the most critical time. But for the fact that Church pulled him back, Handforth would have been seen by the disguised Mr. Heath, who had glanced round for a moment.

As it was, the catastrophe was avoided and Mr. Heath entered the gateway still unaware of the fact that his movements were under observation.

The three juniors peered round the bend cautiously.

"My hat!" muttered Church. "He nearly spotted us."

"Nearly spotted Handy, you mean," remarked McClure.

"You shouldn't bother me so much!" snapped Handforth unreasonably. "I'm beginning to regret bringing you now. I think I could have conducted this case better on my own. We're wasting time."

He moved forward cautiously. The lane was very shady, and a thick hedge

enclosed the garden of the house which Mr. Heath had approached. Before reaching the gateway, the boys came upon a slight break in the hedge, which permitted them a view of the building.

Mr. Heath had apparently only just arrived at the door, for he lifted the knocker as the boys watched, and then brought it down.

Rap-rap! Rap-rap-rap! Rap-rap!

The knocks were quite distinctive; a double knock, three sharp ones, and then another double knock. Handforth's eyes gleamed as he looked at his chums.

"A signal!" he announced.

"We can't be certain of that," said Church.

"Oh, yes, we can," declared Handforth. "He rapped in a distinctive way—in order to let the people in the house know his identity. This is getting more and more mysterious, my lads. We must put all our energies forward in an attempt to discover the truth."

"My hat!" whispered McClure. "Look there!"

But his chums were already looking, and they saw something which rather surprised them. For a second the casement curtain of one of the front windows was pulled aside, and a face appeared—a wrinkled, yellowish face which looked somewhat startling in the subdued light, for thick trees grew near the house, and the windows were in deep shade.

"This is getting grim!" declared Handforth. "What do you think of that? A Chinaman!"

"I don't think it was a Chinaman," said Church. "We only caught a glimpse, and we didn't have time to see the face distinctly. I believe it was a woman—an old woman with grey hair."

Handforth regarded Church pityingly. "What's the good of bringing a chap like you with me?" he demanded warmly. "An old woman! You're either blind, or short-sighted! It was the face of a Chinaman, and I'll bet a quid that— By Jupiter!"

The front door had opened a few

inches. Mr. Heath slipped through the aperture, and the door was closed silently. But the boys heard a sound which indicated that a bolt was being shot.

What could it mean?

Mr. Heath had entered the place in a most mysterious way. It was quite evident that he was afraid of being seen and there was something very strange about the whole affair. The juniors were astounded.

It was all so unexpected—so queer. For a St. Frank's master to act in this way was really extraordinary. And the very appearance of the house struck a chill into the hearts of the watchers.

Although the afternoon was so fine with the sun shining brilliantly, the house somehow had a very sombre aspect.

It was a low-built place, of grey stone. Thick trees grew all round, as though to shut out all sunlight. The front garden was a kind of wilderness, full of rank weeds and long grass.

The windows were like those of a prison, and there was no possibility of making the place look homely. The house was old, but far from picturesque and the mysterious behaviour of Mr. Heath only added to the strangeness.

"Well, are you satisfied?" asked Church.

"Satisfied?" repeated Handforth. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you started out to track Mr. Heath, and you've been brought to a full stop here," said Church. "You discovered his destination, and we don't know any more now than we did first."

"But we shall know a lot more before I've finished," said Handforth grimly. "By George! I'm hot on his scent! I mean to discover what it all means, what Heath is doing here—and why goes prowling about the woods at night."

"How are you going to do it?" asked Church.

"I don't know yet; but I'm going."

start at once," said Handy, looking round. "This place is surrounded by trees, so it ought to be easy to do some scouting work. We'll get round to the back, and then creep up to the house."

"We'll be spotted."

"Not while I'm leading you!"

Church and McClure did not feel so confident as Handforth. In fact, they were mildly astonished that the investigation had gone so far without discovery. It was really a record for Handforth.

"Come on!"

They retraced their steps until they came to a meadow. By getting through the hedge they entered the meadow, and passed along the garden of the house—which, according to a board over the door, was called Greyhurst Cottage. The hedge was thick, so there was no fear of the boys being seen from the house itself.

They found many trees at the rear, and bushes and shrubs grew in profusion. By moving cautiously it was quite easy to penetrate into the rear garden itself, and there was not the slightest danger of being seen.

"This is topping!" murmured Handforth. "We might be able to discover all sorts of things if we're careful. I'm not sure about bringing you fellows, and I think it would be just as well if you stayed behind here."

"Rats!" said Church. "We're all in this!"

"Rather!" agreed McClure.

"Come on, then," said Handforth.

They all three crept on through the bushes and trees until they had approached the house to the very nearest point possible.

They could only go near by exposing themselves, and that, of course, was out of the question. There were at least three windows from which they could be seen. So the juniors came to a halt, and peered through the bushes at the back of Greyhurst Cottage. The rear of the little building was even less prepossessing than the front. The garden

here was like a rank patch of forest land. Some creeper grew on the walls, but it was overgrown and untidy, and gave the whole place an appearance of wildness.

"Not much to see here!" muttered Church.

He was certainly right in this assertion. From their vantage point, the boys could only see three windows—two upper ones and one lower. The upper windows were small and were closely curtained. It was impossible to catch the faintest glimpse of what lay within.

The lower window was open, and the casement curtain fluttered about occasionally as the warm breeze caught it. The juniors centred their attention upon this window, and also upon a narrow door which stood near to it.

The door was closed, and it had not been painted, apparently, for many years. Handforth & Co. listened for the sound of voices, but they heard nothing. At least, they heard no voice.

But faintly to their ears came a curious metallic sound, like the faint clanging of some machinery. They could not understand what it was caused by. But it certainly seemed strange.

Handforth wanted to creep farther forward, but his chums were firm.

"Look here, you can't go, Handy," said Church earnestly. "What's the good of ruining everything by exposing yourself?"

"There's no danger, you ass!"

"I don't suppose there is," said Church. "But if you allow yourself to be seen now, Heath will know that we've been on his track, and then all our trouble will have been for nothing."

"The best thing is to come here some other time," suggested McClure. "After dark, for instance. We can creep up to the very window then, without any fear of discovery. I'm blessed if I can see any sense in giving ourselves away."

Handforth was persuaded.

"Perhaps you're right," he admitted.

"We'll leave it for now; but I mean to come back here to-night, and it's a ten to one chance that Heath will be here, too. What a fine thing it will be if we can expose him! My hat! Did—did you see——"

Handforth paused abruptly, his eyes gleaming.

His chums had certainly seen, and they were somewhat puzzled. For a moment the breeze had blown the curtains aside, allowing the juniors to catch a brief glimpse of the interior of the apartment.

Everything was dark inside the window, of course, but during that brief spell the juniors had seen a metal wheel whirling round. And then, before any other details could be impressed upon the vision, the curtain floated back in place.

"My goodness!" said Handforth, almost gulping in his excitement. "Machinery! That's the cause of that clanging noise! This—this place must be a factory of some kind! They've got something a-shady here——"

"A printing machine, perhaps," suggested Church vaguely.

"You dotty ass! What good would a printing machine be?" demanded Handforth. "It couldn't be anything of that nature—— Great guns! I—I've thought of something. You're right, Church! It is a printing machine!"

"How do you know?"

"Why, it's obvious; there can't be any doubt," said Handforth excitedly.

"But what are they printing?"

"Bank notes—dud bank notes!"

"Great pip!"

"Oh, my only aunt!"

"Forgeries!" went on Handforth, with much relish. "That's what it is! Heath is the chief of a gang of forgers, and he's come to St. Frank's as a respectable schoolmaster so that he won't be suspected! He's got his gang here, and he visits the place when he can."

"I—I say!" panted McClure. "Draw it mild, Handy——"

"It's the truth, you ass!"

"We don't know that for certain, old man. After all, it's only guesswork on your part!"

Handforth laughed curiously.

"Guess work!" he echoed. "Why, you poor fathead, there's no guess work about it! It's all as clear as daylight. Any chap with a grain of sense can see the truth about it."

"You saw it all right," remarked Church.

"Of course I did! I can generally see——" Handforth paused, and glared at Church. "Are you trying to be funny?" he snapped. "Are you suggesting that I've only got a grain of sense?"

"Oh, don't be touchy!" grinned Church. "But, seriously, I can't exactly see how you arrive at your conclusions, Handy. We've seen some queer things here, I'll admit, but there's nothing definitely to show us that Mr. Heath is the chief of a gang of forgers."

"It simply shows that you've got no imagination," said Handforth sourly.

"Well, a detective oughtn't to have an imagination," declared Church.

"He's got to stick to facts—not what he imagines. It's easy enough to see one or two things, and to guess the rest; but that's not a safe way."

"Are you trying to teach me how to be a detective?" roared Handforth.

"Shut up, you idiot!" muttered McClure. "If you're not careful you'll give us away! Don't yell like that!"

Handforth snorted.

"Well, this fathead here shouldn't be so jolly clever!" he exclaimed. "He thinks he knows better than I do! I'm the chief, and I'm conducting this case—don't forget that! If you chaps can see the truth, I can. Heath is the head of a gang of counterfeiters, and it's within our power to expose him!"

"We can't tell the police——"

"Not yet," Handforth agreed. "But we can come back to-night, get our evidence complete, and then tell the police. It will be a triumph for us."

And Edward Oswald Handforth

look in the grass, his face glowing with enthusiasm, and thrilled with the thought of his great discovery.

Somewhat, Church and McClure couldn't quite share his feelings. There was a doubt, somewhere in the back of their minds, that their mighty leader was on a false trail.

"This is the place," said Handforth briskly. "We'll wait here."

The three amateur sleuths had returned to the little spinney just outside Edgemore. It was more cheerful here, and the sun was shining warmly.

Handforth was just as enthusiastic as ever, and by this time he was absolutely positive that his theory was correct. Indeed, one might have supposed that he had seen the printing press with his own eyes—that he had even fingered some of the forged notes.

And Church and McClure were beginning to share his enthusiasm now. His constant repetition of the theory was beginning to convince them that his story was true, and that Mr. Heath was, actually, the head of a gang.

But Church and McClure were cautious.

"Look here, Handy, I think we'd better tell Mr. Lee all about it," remarked Church, as he plucked the seeds from a grass head. "It's too big to keep to ourselves. If the gang escapes we shall be blamed."

"You can trust me, I suppose?" demanded Handforth.

"Well, yes, but—"

"You needn't worry at all," went on Handy. "We'll see first what we find out to-night, and then tell Nipper about it."

"Good idea!"

"At the same time, I shall make him thoroughly understand that I'm the leader, and that this is my case," went on Handforth firmly. "I'm not going to be pushed aside by Nipper, or by anybody else. Not likely!"

Church and McClure nodded.

"Well, what about tea?" asked Church casually.

"It's nearly five o'clock," added McClure.

"That's just like you chaps, thinking about your beastly tummies when there's important work to be done!" said Handforth scathingly. "We're on important detective work, and we haven't got time to think about grub!"

"But even detectives must eat!" protested Church.

"Of course they must, but not until they're ready," said Handforth. "When a detective's on the trail, he's got to stick to it. We've come here now to satisfy ourselves finally that the chap we saw is really Heath. He'll come back into this spinney, and we shall be able to see him discarding his disguise."

"But we might have to wait for hours!"

"Never mind; we can wait."

But Handforth's chums did not relish the idea of waiting in that spot indefinitely. They decided to stay there for another hour at least. And then, if nothing occurred, they would leave Handforth in charge while they went in search of tea, and risk his wrath.

However, this move was not necessary.

Hardly twenty minutes had elapsed before footsteps were heard. And then a form appeared through the trees, and the juniors saw that it was the man who had entered Greystones Cottage—a man in moustache and bowler.

"Not a sound!" breathed Handforth.

"Watch!"

The juniors were securely ensconced in a bed of ferns, and they were not even visible at a range of ten feet.

Mr. Heath walked through the trees, and came to a halt against the dead trunk of an old tree. Then, after glancing round him carefully, he placed his overcoat in the trunk, did the same with his bowler, and produced a straw hat. When he turned his face again the juniors saw that he was minus his moustache.

He had become Mr. Clement Heath once more.

The Remove master wasted no time. Having completed the transformation, he walked briskly out of the spinney, and took the road to St. Frank's. Handforth & Co. followed shortly afterwards, and did not trouble to keep the new master in sight.

It was no longer necessary to shadow Mr. Heath, for it was obvious that he was returning to St. Frank's. The juniors took the journey leisurely, discussing the affair as they went.

CHAPTER 15.

Fatty Little Goes Up the Pole!

"HURRY up, Fatty! Put your back into it!"

I delivered that advice free of all charge, and Fatty Little turned a perspiring red face towards me, and grunted.

"I've got more to carry than you have," he protested. "Great pancakes! This hill is a corker! I shall need a terrific feed after this, to get my strength together again! Perhaps we can drop into the tuckshop in the village——"

"And perhaps we can't!" interrupted Nicodemus Trotwood firmly. "We shall only just get back in time for locking-up as it is, and we can't afford to waste three hours while you fill your bunkers!"

"Yes, Fatty—don't be a fuel!" grinned Tommy Watson.

Sir Montie Tregellis-West, straining hard to surmount the brow of the hill, gave a sudden gasp and collapsed on his bicycle.

"Begad!" he panted. "What a frightful joke!"

We all dismounted.

"Joke!" exclaimed Trotwood. "Where? I don't see it!"

"You said something about bunkers, and I said something about fuel," explained Tommy Watson laboriously.

"You generally fill bunkers with fuel."

It certainly was an appalling pun.

There were five of us—all cycling home from Bannington in the cool of the May evening. While Handforth & Co. had been shadowing Mr. Heath that half-holiday, we had been over to the local town to witness a professional cricket match. We were now returning to St. Frank's with the firm impression that the Remove Eleven could knock spots off the professionals any day of the week.

Having reached the top of the hill, we remounted our machines. The evening was delightfully calm and mild, and the setting sun filled the western sky with a glorious mellow light. It was extremely pleasant, pedalling back to the school along the quiet roads.

"Cycling's all right, but there's too much blessed sag about it," declared Fatty Little, as he pedalled away. "I shouldn't mind if I had an engine under me. These push bikes are too much like hard work——"

"Lazy beggar!" interrupted Trotwood. "Push cycling is just what you require to get your weight down. It's a wonder to me how that bike stands the strain! I'm expecting to see it fall to pieces any minute!"

We chuckled.

"There's not much chance of Fatty getting his weight down," I observed. "It's no good taking cycling exercise if he keeps gorging grub the way he does. Judging by what we've seen this afternoon, I should think he'll last until this time next week."

"Oh, go easy!" protested Fatty, grinning. "I'm frightfully hungry! Great sausages! I shan't be able to get back to St. Frank's if we don't stop in the village for a feed—I shall never be able to finish the last lap! This kind of exercise gives a chap a keen appetite."

"Anything makes you hungry," I remarked. "Somehow or other, Fatty, you always find an excuse for eating. If you're exercising yourself, you say that it gives you an appetite. If you're

sitting still, you declare that the inactivity makes you hungry. If you go to sleep, you say that it makes you want to eat. The fact is, you're like a chicken—you always want to be pecking at something."

Patty Little took this chaff in good part. Considering that he was chipped about his appetite fifty times a day, he found it better to keep his temper. But he was an amiable youth always, and he knew his own weakness.

"The fact is, you're all jealous," he remarked cheerfully. "You don't know what it is to have a decent appetite. There's nothing in the world more inspiring than grub! It makes a chap work harder, it makes him more good-tempered, it makes him strong and healthy——"

Bang!

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Watson. "That's done it!"

"That's the worst of having wonky tyres," said Trotwood, as we all dismounted. "I noticed a corn on that front cover of yours——"

"Of course you noticed it!" growled Watson irritably. "I knew the giddy tyre was weak. What are we going to do now, I should like to know?"

"Mend it!" I said briskly.

"But it'll make us late for calling over——"

"Besides, we shall lose every chance of stopping a few minutes in the village," complained Patty. "Old Binns has got a fresh supply of beef pies——"

"Oh, rats to you, and the beef pies as well!" snapped Watson. "My front tyre's busted, and we haven't got time to repair it——"

"Yes, we have," I interrupted. "Repairing a cycle tyre is only a five minutes' job. Unfasten your giddy tool-bag, and let's get busy. It won't repair itself while we look at it."

The bicycle was soon placed in an inverted position on the grass, and it was only a matter of minutes before the cover was off. The damage was not severe. The "corn" had only been a

small one, and the resultant burst in the inner-tube was not very large.

We had a good supply of patches and canvas, and well within the five minutes a patch had been applied, and the cover was roughly strengthened. Then we proceeded to put the tyre on again, and this was soon accomplished.

"Now you chaps can pump her up," I said. "I've done my bit."

"Let Patty do it," grinned Trotwood.

"Eh?" said Little. "Why should I? It's Watson's jigger."

"The exercise will give you an appetite," explained Nicodemus.

"You—you ass! I've got a terrific appetite already," said Patty, holding his ample waistcoat forlornly. "If I make it any sharper, I shall be too faint to complete the journey home. It's surprising how soon I get hungry!"

"Begad! It is!" agreed Tregellis-West, nodding.

Watson pumped his tyre up, and we all prepared to remount our machines. But just at that moment something happened of a rather extraordinary nature.

"I say, you chaps," exclaimed Nicodemus, in a curious, strained voice. "What—what do you make of that thing over there?"

He was gazing over a low part of the hedge, and seemed to have his attention fixed upon the far side of the meadow.

"Which thing?" asked Watson, turning.

"It—it's not a cow; and I'm jolly certain it's not a donkey!" went on Trotwood, staring fixedly. "I must be dreaming; but the thing looks like a—a—— Hang it all! It can't be! We're in England!"

Sir Montie adjusted his pince-nez.

"Dear old boy," he inquired, "what on earth are you talking about?"

"Look!" said Nicodemus. "Look for yourself!"

We all jumped up on the bank, and gazed across the meadow, rather puzzled by Trotwood's obvious excitement.

For a few moments nobody spoke. I

felt my heart beating slightly faster as I fixed my attention upon something which was moving across the meadow. It was an animal—a shaggy brown thing, which crossed the grass with lumbering, clumsy movements. And I knew in a moment what the object was.

"Great Scott!" I exclaimed softly.

"It—it's a bear!" gasped Watson.

"A bear?" said Sir Montie, startled out of his usual sangfroid. "Impossible, dear old boy—absolutely impossible! We don't have bears in this country!"

"It is a bear, Montie!" I put in.

"But—but where the dickens did it come from?" gasped Watson breathlessly.

"Goodness knows!" I said. "It might have escaped from a circus or a menagerie. Anyhow, it oughtn't to be wandering about the open countryside like this. Bears are dangerous beggars very often—"

"Good gracious! This one looks dangerous!" ejaculated Trotwood abruptly.

"My hat! Rather!"

Just for a moment or two we stared at the strange animal in a fascinated way. It had evidently seen us, and was by no means scared. For, without warning, it broke into a run and came lumbering across the meadow right towards us at a rapid speed. It was rather disconcerting.

"Look here—we'd better shift!" I said sharply. "We're no match for a bear—even the five of us. If it happens to be a ferocious beast, we shall be in a tight spot! Get a move on—quick!"

"Ride like the deuce!" panted Trotwood.

The situation seemed likely to be dangerous, and we suddenly awoke into activity. The bear was only a few yards off now, and our only hope of getting away from it was to jump on our bikes and race for it.

We simply flung ourselves upon our machines, and shot down the road. It was far better to put a safe distance between ourselves and the brown bear.

But in the momentary confusion we

failed to notice something of a rather startling character.

Patty Little was the last to jump on his machine. He was active enough, but not quite as agile as ourselves. He employed the same means of getting into the saddle as we had employed.

And then the disaster occurred.

Patty was heavy enough at the best of times, and his bicycle was not a specially built one. When the stout Junior took a flying leap on to the machine it couldn't stand the strain.

Snap!

Patty Little alighted fairly and squarely in the saddle; but the next second he was on the ground, mixed up with the ruins of his machine. The front forks had snapped off clean at the head, owing to the terrific strain to which they had been subjected.

"Oh, great coconuts!" gasped Little, panting hard.

He sat up dazedly, and gazed down the road at the cloud of dust which marked our progress. That dust hid him from our view, and we knew nothing of his predicament at the moment.

Fatty was alone—helpless—and the bear was practically upon him.

His right knee was grazed, his arm was bruised, and he was smothered with dust; but he did not think of these things. He jumped to his feet with remarkable agility, and gazed round nervously.

Plucky enough on all normal occasions, Patty was, nevertheless, scared now. He knew well enough that he was not equal to doing battle with a bear. And there was nobody near at hand to help him.

And there, breaking through the hedge at that very moment, was the bear! Its eyes were fixed upon him, and Patty fairly gave a gasp of fright. The bear lumbered through the gap—which was situated about fifteen yards down the road—and came straight towards Patty, rearing himself on his hind legs as he did so.

This was the final straw. Patty knew well enough that bears frequently assumed an upright position when they were about to attack, and he now saw that this creature was an enormous size—at least, it seemed extra large to his heated imagination.

And there was no escape—even if he ran, the bear would overtake him in less than ten yards. Poor Patty thought that his last minute had come.

And then, in a flash, hope came to him.

His gaze, wandering round wildly, became suddenly fixed on one of the black telegraph poles which lined the road. It was right next to him—practically within arm's reach—and his heart gave a leap as he saw that footrests were fitted to it.

"By chutney!" he panted. "It's a chance!"

Not a fraction of a second did he waste. He simply hurled himself at the telegraph pole. The footrests did not begin within easy reach, but Patty swarmed up the pole with amazing agility until he reached the first footrest. He grasped it, and, after that, it was an easy matter to climb higher.

But he did not pause. He went up and up, and only came to a stop when the wires were just above his head. Then, breathing hard, he gazed down upon the road. The bear was nowhere to be seen!

"Thank goodness!" gasped Patty.

He gave vent to a huge sigh of relief—which suddenly changed to a fresh gasp of dismay, for he caught sight of something which his own bulk had hid until that second. The bear had not vanished, but was, in fact, climbing the pole with slow and deliberate movements.

Patty Little gave one yell of terror, and then he commenced yelling at the top of his voice.

"Help! Help!" he bawled. "Rescue, St. Frank's!"

But no reply came—and the bear continued climbing!

CHAPTER 14.

The Head's Order!

NICODEMUS TROTWOOD ceased pedalling abruptly.

"I say!" he exclaimed in alarm. "Where's Patty?"

"Grinding along in the rear, I suppose," panted Watson. "He's always slow on a bike. But he'll overtake us on the next dip; he generally gathers speed downhill. It's his weight, you know."

"Hold on!" I said. "Patty doesn't seem to be with us at all. He might have had a mishap or something."

"Is the bear coming?" asked Watson anxiously.

"Oh, don't be an ass! It hasn't had time to get anywhere near us," I declared. "I can't understand why Patty isn't here. Didn't he jump on his bike when we did?"

"Blessed if I know," said Trotwood. "I lost my head for a tick—that bear gave me a bit of a scare, and I don't mind admitting it. I saw Patty running along with his jigger, and I naturally thought he was getting on. But he doesn't seem to be here."

We were now standing in the road, gazing back anxiously. By this time the dust had drifted into the hedges with the breeze, and we could see down the lane fairly distinctly.

But there was not a soul in view. The spot which we had just left was hidden by a slight bend, but Patty ought to have been close behind us. Instead of this, he was nowhere to be seen—at least, on the road.

Then, suddenly, I gave a little gasp.

"Great Scott!" I shouted. "Look there!"

I stared down the road in alarm and amazement.

"Look where?" demanded Watson. "I can't see anything!"

"Up that telegraph pole!" I exclaimed, pointing. "Can't you see—?"

"Good heavens!"

"Egad!"

"Oh, my only aunt!"

The juniors simply stood stock still and stared. For, now that I had brought their attention to the spectacle, they saw only too distinctly what had become of the unfortunate Patty Little.

The telegraph-poles which lined the road were in clear view—and, right at the top of one of them, some distance away, was perched a tubby figure, clinging for dear life to the cross-pieces.

And, only a few feet beneath him a large brown object was perched—and we needed no telling that it was the bear!

"What—what shall we do?" gasped Trotwood. "Poor old Patty will be killed! Oh, what on earth can we do? Poor old Patty!"

Trotwood and Patty Little were study chums, and Nicodemus was naturally extremely anxious. But he was no more concerned than we were. Certainly something had to be done.

"Come on!" I said grimly. "We've got to move ourselves!"

"What are we going to do?" asked Watson quickly.

"Scare that bear away," I declared. "I don't suppose we shall stand much risk, and it might have some effect if we chuck stones at the beastly thing."

"He'll come down and attack us, if we do that."

I nodded.

"That's just my idea," I said.

"Begad!"

"You—you want the bear to attack us?" demanded Tommy.

"Exactly," I said. "Anything, in fact, to get him down from the pole, and to make Patty safe. We shan't be in any danger, even if the bear does attack us—we've got our bikes, and it'll be quite easy to buzz away— But we can't waste time like this," I added briskly. "Get a move on!"

I set the example by leaping on to my machine, and pedalling back as quickly as possible towards the scene of Patty's peril. The other juniors quickly fol-

lowed me, and within a few minutes we reached the spot.

Patty saw us coming, and yelled lustily.

"Help—help!" he roared. "Rescue, St. Frank's!"

"Keep your hair on, old son!" I shouted. "We'll save you!"

"Rescue, Remove!" shouted Patty desperately.

The bear had got well over half-way up the telegraph-pole, but had come to a halt there, and was staring at Patty with hungry eyes. His jaws looked awful, and the stout junior was in a terrible way.

The bear, a big, shaggy brute, hardly knew which way to turn. It seemed afraid to mount higher, and it did not like to descend. However, we soon caused it to make up its mind.

A pile of stones stood by the roadside, and within a few seconds we were hurling good-sized pebbles at the bear.

Nearly all our shots were true, and the stones thudded upon his back and legs in quick succession. This treatment did not seem to please him at all, for he turned his head round and gazed down at us in a reproachful kind of manner.

"Keep it up!" I said briskly.

We did keep it up, and the bear soon had enough. He suddenly commenced slithering down the pole, and as he landed on the ground, we took the precaution to jump on to our machines.

But this move, we found, was quite unnecessary.

The bear evidently did not like the stones we had been pelting him with, and he thought it advisable to make off. He lumbered over the ground, broke clean through the hedge, and won across the field with rapid, clumsy movements. He burst through the farther hedge, and then vanished from view altogether.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Watson. "He's gone!"

"Yes, but he may come back," said Trotwood. "There's no telling, you know."

I vote we get to the school as quickly as we can."

"Hear, hear!"

I mixed up at the telegraph pole.

"It's all right, Fatty," I shouted.

"You can come down now."

"I—I'm looking at the bear!" said Fatty. "I can see him from up here. He's going across the second field, and now he's disappeared into the trees. Great dumplings! I—I thought I was going to be done for that time! All this giddy excitement has made me hungrier than ever!"

"I'm blessed if he can leave food alone even in a time like this!" grunted Trotwood. "Come down, you fat boulder! What on earth made you get up there?"

"Look at my bike!" said Fatty crossly.

We noticed his machine for the first time, and it was certainly a wreck.

"This is what comes of being so jolly weighty," remarked Trotwood. "I'll bet you jumped on the bike and smashed it up."

"That's right," said Little, as he landed in the grass with a thud. "I found the bear right upon me, and all I could do was to climb the telegraph post."

"In fact," I said, "you went up the pole!"

"By chutney! I should think I did!" agreed Fatty. "I nearly went up the pole mentally, too! I thought that rotten bear was going to have a chunk out of my leg. There's no telling what a bear will do when he is hungry. I often get hungry, and I know how desperate it makes anybody feel."

"Well, thank goodness, you're all right," I said. "We'd better not hang about here too long, my sons. Let's get to St. Prank's as soon as we can, and when we pass through the village we'll tell the police—"

"But how can I go with you?" demanded Fatty, in alarm. "My bike's busted."

"Never mind," I said. "We can manage somehow—"

"Fatty can't ride on somebody's step!" protested Trotwood. "We don't want two bikes busted!"

I grinned.

"He can have my jigger," I said. "I'll ride on your step, Tommy. We can get home all right like that. As for your bike, Fatty, we'll leave it behind the hedge for the time being."

This plan was decided upon, but just as we were preparing to mount we saw a motor-car speeding along the road towards us. And we pleased to find that it contained three men in uniform.

One was a policeman, another a railway official, and a third a man I couldn't quite place. The latter was driving.

I stepped into the middle of the road, and waved my hand.

"Looking for a bear?" I asked calmly.

"Yes, we are, my lad!" replied the man at the wheel. "Have you seen anything of him?"

"Yes."

"Splendid—splendid!" said the railway official, whom I recognised as the stationmaster at Caistowe. "Our search will probably be successful after all, Roberts."

"I shouldn't waste much time, if I were you," I advised. "The bear was here only five minutes ago, and he's disappeared over among those trees. If you hustle you might be able to recapture him."

"The brute nearly got me!" growled Fatty. "It climbed up this telegraph pole, and I was at the top!"

The car-driver—evidently a keeper—grinned.

"So he's been up to his tricks, eh?" he said. "We'll soon have him under lock and key again, my lad. I never thought he'd have enough sense to wander about like this, and give us all this trouble, too."

"How did he escape?" asked Watson.

"Accident at the station," said the constable. "One or two coaches were derailed, and this bear's cage broke open. The brute slipped out before anybody knew anything about it. I never

did hold with taking managerics on a railway!"

We gave the men precise directions, and they lost no time in hurrying across the fields in pursuit of the escaped bear. We waited for some little time, but there was no sign of the trio returning.

"Well, what shall we do?" I asked. "Wait here until they come back—with or without the bear—or shall we buzz off to St. Frank's?"

"I'd like to see the result of the chase," said Trotwood. "But if we stay here we shall be late for locking up—"

"You needn't worry about that," I interrupted. "We're late already—and, in any case, we're got a first-class excuse. We shan't get lines. Perhaps we'd better stop here for another five minutes."

We decided upon this course, and I was rather sorry I hadn't accompanied the bear trackers. They had vanished across the fields, and were evidently searching a little wood which was visible over the rise.

After ten minutes had elapsed—during which time we kept a sharp look-out for any sign of the runaway—the three men re-appeared. They came from another direction, so it was clear they had been making a wide search.

They were empty-handed. The bear was still at large.

"Infernal nuisance!" snapped the keeper, who was red in the face with his exertions. "Not a sign of the animal!"

They came down into the road.

"We shall have to do something, Mr. Hammond," said the constable. "It'll be gettin' dark pretty soon, an' there won't be much chance o' finding that bear after sunset! The folk'll be scared stiff if that monster is allowed to roam about all night!"

"A good many people seem to be scared stiff already," grunted the keeper. "The village is in a panic. Pity these country boobies can't keep their

heads! Hindenburg wouldn't do 'em no harm!"

"Hindenburg!" echoed Tommy Watson, staring.

"Yes, sonny—the bear," explained Hammond. "That's his pet name!"

"Begad!" murmured Sir Montie.

The constable turned to us.

"I suppose you really saw the bear, young gents?" he inquired suspiciously. "You ain't trying to pull our legs?"

"The beastly thing tried to pull my leg!" said Paddy, with indignation. "It chased me up the telegraph pole, and was practically making a meal off my left foot when these other chaps came up, and chucked stones at it! But for them I should have been eaten! Great macaroons! It was a near shave!"

The keeper grinned.

"Hindenburg wouldn't have eaten you, Tubby," he said.

"Don't you call me 'Tubby'!" exclaimed Little warily. "It's like your cheek—"

"Now, gentlemen, I should advise you to get home as quickly as possible," put in the station-master, evidently anxious to avoid a delay. "There's nothing that you can do, and you'll be safer indoors."

"We wanted to see the end of the chase," said Watson.

"I'm afraid you can't do that, young man," put in the keeper. "There's no telling when we shall lay fingers on Hindenburg. He's out now, and he'll probably remain out all night. He's an elusive old beggar!"

So, without wasting further time, we mounted our bicycles, and continued the journey to St. Frank's. Paddy Little had my machine, and I rode on the step of Tommy Watson's—until Tommy grew tired. Then we changed places.

We arrived long after locking-up, and Warren, the porter, regretfully announced that it would be his duty to report us. We didn't care, for we had an excellent excuse. We put our jiggers in the shed, and strolled over to the Ancient House.

In the lobby an excited crowd of juniors had gathered.

We knew that the news about the bear would be at the school—for the village was seething with the story. As we passed through Bellon we had noticed many signs of activity.

Cottage windows were shuttered—in spite of the warm weather, children were conspicuous by their absence, and only a few groups of men were about the old High Street.

And every man held a heavy stick, or some weapon, in his hands. The village, it seemed, was prepared.

"Here they are!" shouted somebody, as we came in. "I say, you chaps, heard the latest?"

"About the bear?" I inquired.

"Yes, of course," said Reginald Pitt. "There's a regular panic in Bellon. It may be a yarn, but the people are saying that a grizzly bear has escaped from a menagerie at Calstowe, and it's over in this district, running wild."

"A huge bear, capable of eating a dozen chaps at one meal," added Hubbard excitedly. "Some of the Sixth Formers are talking about going out on the hunt, but I don't suppose the Head will allow it. Too jolly dangerous!"

"It's been exaggerated," I said. "The bear isn't as dangerous as the villagers make out. They naturally got scared out of their wits. The bear is a big brute, but I don't think he'd make a meal off anybody."

"Oh, wouldn't he?" said Fatty. "He tried to eat me, anyhow!"

"What!"

The juniors stared at the fat junior.

"Have—have you seen the bear?" said Owen major excitedly.

"Yes."

"Where?" asked everybody, in one voice.

The crowd settled round us, yelling for information.

"Steady on, you asses!" I grinned. "Give us breathing space! We'll tell you all about it—"

"Just a minute, kids," interrupted the voice of Morrow, the prefect. "I want a word with some of you. Warren reports that four of you have only just come in—Nipper, Watson, Tregellis-West, and Little."

"I'm included," said Trotwood. "Did Warren forget me?"

"You'd have been more sensible if you'd kept quiet, kid," said Morrow. "I shall have to punish you with the rest now—"

"Not likely," I interrupted. "We've got a good excuse, Morrow. You can't give us lines. In ordinary circumstances, we should have been back in nice time for calling-over, but we happened to meet the bear."

"En?" said Morrow sharply. "You did what?"

"The bear tried to eat me!" declared Fatty Little.

"You young idiot—"

"It's true!" roared Fatty. "Watson's front tyre punctured, and we had just repaired it when Trotty spotted the bear coming across a meadow! All the chaps hopped on their bikes and I hopped on mine. We thought it would be better to slide off the giddy landscape!"

"Well?" asked Morrow. "What then?"

"The other chaps got off all right," explained Fatty. "But when I jumped on to my bike the front forks collapsed, and I came a cropper—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors yelled.

"It's no laughing matter, you unfeeling asses!" said Fatty, indignantly.

"I've been expecting your bike to fall to pieces for weeks," grinned Pitt. "I suppose the catastrophe happened because you jumped on with extra force. It's asking too much of any bike, you know."

"Rats!" said Fatty. "The rotten thing must have been weak. Anyhow, it let me down, and when I got up there was the bear, staring at me! Great bloaters! I was tremendously

scared! I shinned up a telegraph pole, and the bear came after me!"

"My only hat!"

"What did you do?"

"Let's have the yarn, Fatty!"

The juniors were soon satisfied. I told the remainder of the story, and Morrow listened with serious attention. He nodded when I had done, and unrolled a stiff piece of paper he had been holding in his hand.

"You're excused, of course," he said. "In the circumstances, you can't be punished. It's a good thing Little wasn't hurt—and this notice of the Head's is fully justified—and necessary."

"Which notice?" asked De Valerie.

"You'll see in a minute."

He pushed his way through the crowd until he reached the notice-board. Then he fixed the sheet of paper with four drawing-pins, and everybody crowded round to read the announcement.

I was one of the first to get there, and this is what I saw:

"NOTICE!

"It has come to my knowledge that a large bear has escaped from a menagerie, and is at present roaming loose about the neighbourhood. In the circumstances, every boy in the school is forbidden to leave the premises. Until the bear is recaptured every boy—senior and junior—is confined to gates. Should this order be disregarded, the punishment will be severe.

"(Signed) MALCOLM STAFFORD.

"Headmaster."

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Pitt.

"We're all gated!"

"Oh, my only aunt!"

"Until the bear's captured we're prisoners!" ejaculated Watson. "That's a nice thing, I must say! I call it rotten—"

"It's—it's beastly unfair!" roared Hubbard. "Why should we be made to

suffer because this confounded bear escaped from a menagerie? It isn't our fault, and I don't see why we should stand it!"

"It's unjust!"

"Yes, rather!"

"The Head ought to have more sense—"

"Hold on, you thoughtless asses!" I interrupted. "This notice is just what I expected. In fact, it's the only thing the Head could do. He's responsible for all of us, and it's only natural that he should forbid us to go out of gates. He doesn't want anybody to get injured."

"Yes, I suppose he's quite right," agreed De Valerie. "It doesn't matter much, of course—"

"Doesn't matter!" echoed Armstrong warmly. "Why, we might be kept in for days on end. We shan't even be able to go out on Little Side—"

"Rats!" I said. "It's pretty nearly certain that the bear will be captured to-night, and it's only natural that we should be gated while there's any danger—"

"Hallo! What's that?" demanded the voice of Edward Oswald Handforth. "Who's gated? Who's been getting into trouble?"

"We're all gated, Handy," said Pitt.

"All of us?" echoed the leader of Study D. "What utter rot! I've done nothing to get myself gated—"

"The whole school is forbidden to move outdoors, practically speaking," I put in. "It's only a temporary measure—until the bear is recaptured. But while there's any danger, we've got to stick indoors."

Handforth snorted.

"Well, I call it piffle," he declared warmly. "What's more, I'm not going to stand it. I'm not afraid of a beastly bear, and I shouldn't be at all surprised if the whole thing's an advertising stunt. Who's seen the bear? Nobody! It might be a myth—a yarn spread about to advertise—"

"Great pancakes!" exclaimed Fatty. "You don't know what you're talking.

about, you ass! The bear tried to bite chunks out of my feet—when I was up the pole!"

Handforth nodded grimly.

"I think you're up the pole now!" he remarked.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you funny ass!" howled Fatty.

"I meant the telegraph pole!"

"What telegraph pole?"

"The one I climbed up, of course."

It was necessary to explain everything to Handforth. He had only just come down from Study C with his inseparable chums, Church and McClure. And, as usual, he wanted to know all about things.

"Personally, I don't see where the sense of it comes in," he declared. "We aren't a lot of infant-school kids! If a crowd of us happen to meet the bear we could easily deal with him!"

But Handforth's voice was almost alone. When the juniors fully realised that danger did exist, they were only too willing to remain within gates. There was no telling where the bear would get to—especially after dark.

But Handforth, as usual, was obstinate. When he got back to Study D he paced up and down with a frown on his brow. Church and McClure knew well enough that their leader was in an irritable mood.

"It's all piffle!" snapped Handforth. "What's more, I'm not going to take any notice of it! I've made my plans for to-night, and I'm going to carry them out—just the same! I'm going to get on Heath's track!"

His chums looked startled.

"Look here, Handy, don't be an ass," urged McClure. "You know jolly well you can't break bounds at a time like this. You'll get into a terrific row if you're collared—"

"If we're collared, you mean!" said Handforth. "You chaps are coming with me, don't forget! I'm not going to let you shirk your duties! I'm engaged on important detective work, and

I can't be expected to carry on without the help of my assistants. We're all in this affair!"

"I'm not going to break bounds to-night!" declared Church.

Handforth glared.

"You're not!" he demanded.

"No!"

"Afraid of the bear?" sneered Handforth bitterly.

"No, I'm not afraid!" roared Church. "But there's a risk, and I don't see the fun of running risks for nothing! This potty detective idea of yours—Look out! Mind what you're doing, you prize ass—Yarrah!"

"Potty detective idea—eh?" thundered Handforth, preparing to deliver another punch. "I'll show you something you won't forget in a hurry—"

"We'll come with you!" groaned Church.

Handforth paused, and rolled down his sleeves.

"Both of you?" he asked.

"Oh, I suppose there's no getting out of it," grumbled McClure. "We shall have to come—to look after you!"

They considered it perfectly mad to venture out after lights-out on any night; but to do so on this particular occasion was simply asking for trouble in the loudest possible voice.

And Handforth & Co. were certainly destined to find trouble!

CHAPTER 17.

The Mysterious Canister

MR. CLEMENT HEATH, M.A., master of the Remove, quietly slipped out of the small doorway to the Ancient House. He walked out into the Triangle, and paused in the deep shadow cast by the silent building.

The moon was shining clearly, and the May night was quite mild. The school clock chimed out the time, and Mr. Heath nodded.

"Quarter-to-eleven," he murmured. "Just gives me nice time."

Instead of crossing the Triangle boldly, and going to the private gate, Mr. Heath edged his way along in the shadow of the building.

For some reason Mr. Heath appeared anxious to maintain secrecy. He apparently wanted to leave the school at night without anybody else being aware of the fact. It would have been far better, perhaps, if he had gone to work boldly—for there is nothing which attracts attention more than mysterious movements.

Mr. Heath reached the corner of the Triangle, and then turned, and made for the school wall. It was quite unnecessary for him to go by the round-about route, and the only explanation of his action was that he wanted to get into the road without being seen.

But this was not to be.

Mr. Heath had only moved a few steps when he suddenly became aware of the fact that another form had emerged from beneath the great chestnut-trees on his left. The glowing end of a cigar gleamed for a second, and the fragrant smoke was carried to Mr. Heath's nostrils on the light breeze.

He came to a halt, and compressed his lips.

"A delightful night, Mr. Heath," came a pleasant voice.

"Er—yes, beautiful!" said Mr. Heath awkwardly. "I didn't see you, Mr. Lee."

"Apparently not," smiled Nelson Lee, in evenly modulated tones, as he strolled up to the Form-master. "Taking a stroll before turning in?"

"I—thought about doing so—yes," admitted Mr. Heath, pulling himself together quickly. "I didn't know that you were also in the habit of having a final smoke in the open, Mr. Lee."

"I occasionally indulge in the pastime," smiled Nelson Lee, taking out his cigar-case. "Try one of these, Heath—I think you'll like it."

"Thank you," said the Remove master.

He took the cigar and snipped off the end, and, as Lee held out a light, the detective took full notice of Mr. Heath's face as it was revealed for a brief period in the glare of the match.

And Nelson Lee had no difficulty in seeing that Heath was somewhat confused.

"I don't blame you for coming out on a night like this, Heath," went on Nelson Lee pleasantly. "It appears to be quite a nightly business with you. I have frequently noticed you leave the school at about this hour."

The Remove master took in a deep breath.

"I—I didn't know that you were so interested in my movements, Mr. Lee," he said. "I have made it a practice to take late walks in different directions, and—and the exercise does me a world of good. Yes, this cigar is delightful. I always appreciate a good cigar."

Nelson Lee was quite aware of the fact that Mr. Heath was anxious to change the subject, and a few moments later the Remove master slipped quietly away—making his exit from the Triangle by passing through the small gateway.

Nelson Lee looked after him thoughtfully. His brow was puckered, and he was deep in thought.

"Curious!" he murmured. "Yes, decidedly curious."

He made no attempt to follow Mr. Heath, but the latter apparently considered such a movement was not impossible.

For, after Mr. Heath had walked a distance of two hundred yards down the lane, he looked quickly behind him and dodged into the hedge. He crouched there for at least ten minutes, silent and perfectly still. But there was no movement on the road, and the night continued to be still and calm.

"Thank goodness!" murmured Mr. Heath.

He was quite satisfied that he was not followed, and he cautiously emerged from his hiding-place and continued his journey down the lane.

with quick, noiseless footsteps, taking care to walk on the grass border.

When he arrived at the stile which led into Bellon Wood he halted, and remained a few moments, sitting on the cross-bar.

"I'm not sure whether I've done right," he muttered anxiously. "Perhaps I ought to have taken a stroll with Lee, and gone back into the Ancient House. Confound him for being there!"

He did not pause for long, but made up his mind almost at once. It was clear that he decided to continue his journey. Throwing the half-smoked cigar down, he plunged into the wood and walked swiftly along the narrow footpath which led almost directly to Edgemore.

Under the thick trees the silence was quite heavy. Hardly a leaf moved, and no ray of moonlight penetrated to the footpath. The place was intensely dark, and Mr. Heath was rather glad of this.

But, a little farther on, the nature of the wood changed, and it became more open. Here and there along the path open patches were encountered, where the moonlight shone down in clear, cold brilliance.

Now and again a slight sound would come from amongst the thick trees on either side—but Mr. Heath took no notice of these. A squirrel, perhaps, or a rabbit—there were all manner of small animals bounding in the woods.

Mr. Heath always took the path because it was a short cut, and because it was the only way of reaching Edgemore from St. Frank's unless he choose to go two or three miles round by road.

The Remove master strode on without slackening his pace. But, quite abruptly, he came to a stop. Then instinctively he moved slightly sideways, and he was off the path and concealed in the undergrowth. But he could still see along the path fairly distinctly.

What had caused him to pause in this way?

A sound had come to his ears—a sound different from the ordinary

slight noises of the wood. A cough, and then the sharp crackling of a rotten twig. There was no mistaking the sounds.

Another man was close at hand.

But Mr. Heath could see nothing of him, although he stared down the path intently, waiting for him to appear. The moonlight was shining fairly clearly into this space.

"A poacher, possibly," thought Mr. Heath. "Hang the fellow!"

He continued to watch the path, but still there was no sign of anyone. This was rather curious, for the man was somewhere close at hand. Further cracklings sounded, and now and then a swishing noise.

Mr. Heath jumped to the truth.

The other man was obviously in a tree, and not on the ground at all. The difficulty was now to determine which tree, and Mr. Heath ventured to step slightly out into the path.

He soon satisfied himself. For the branches of a big oak were shaking. By looking at the branches intently Mr. Heath was able to see that the climber was descending.

The Remove master ventured to approach closer. There was cover near at hand, and it would be possible for him to get within ten yards of the tree without being seen, and to remain there.

Edging his way silently and slowly, Mr. Heath managed to get into this position. And just then something happened which completely upset his plan. He had no intention of revealing his presence.

There was a sudden slithering noise, however, a gasp, and then Mr. Heath saw a form falling out of the tree. Instinctively Mr. Heath dashed forward in a vain attempt to break the other's fall.

But he was a shade too late.

The man hit the ground with a thud, and stumbled over backwards, his head striking a stone-hard root.

He lay there, perfectly still.

"Good heavens!" murmured Mr. Heath.

The stranger had almost fallen upon him, and now he went down upon his knees quickly, and looked at the other with great concern.

He lay so still that the Remove master had a dreadful fear that the man had killed himself. But a second later Mr. Heath found that this was not the case. He placed his hand over the man's chest, and felt distinct heart-beats.

"Whew!" murmured Mr. Heath. "Thank goodness!"

But now that he knew the stranger was alive, and not seriously hurt, he wondered what his best move would be. All his original thoughts had vanished; he was no longer anxious to get to Edgemore.

He considered it his duty to help this unfortunate man who had injured himself. And Mr. Heath was curious—not without cause.

For he could see at a glance that the stranger was no poacher. Neither was he an ordinary villager. There was a riddle here which required a solution, and Mr. Heath was naturally curious.

He looked down upon the still form rather wonderingly. The light overcoat was open, revealing a perfectly cut grey suit. The stranger was expensively dressed.

A further item for wonder was the fact that the man was by no means young. His hair was grey, and a neatly pointed beard adorned his chin, and there was a moustache on his upper lip.

"A foreigner, by the look of him," murmured Mr. Heath; "and a pretty wealthy gentleman, too. Now, what in the world possessed him to wander about the wood at this time of night? Not only that, but why the deuce was he climbing trees?"

The riddle of the wood was certainly a poser, but this was hardly the time to attempt getting at an explanation. Mr. Heath confined himself to the task of assisting the injured man.

Cold water was what he wanted to revive the unconscious stranger, and the Remove master suddenly remembered that a brook, which joined up with the River Stowe, ran through the wood near this spot. He had nothing to carry the water in, so he decided to shift the man to the brook.

Mr. Heath gripped him under the armpits, and commenced dragging him through the trees into the dark recesses of the wood. It was a somewhat difficult task, for the man was by no means light.

However, after the first few yards had been traversed the job was easier. For the ground sloped down, and Mr. Heath had no difficulty whatever in pulling his burden down a gully.

At last, hot and perspiring, Mr. Heath dragged his charge into a clearing, and a few moments later he had him on the bank of the brook, with a willow-tree just near by. Mr. Heath took out his handkerchief, washed it and then dabbed the wet material over the stranger's forehead.

He now had the man's head propped upon his knee, and it was not long before there were signs of returning consciousness. Mr. Heath discovered that an ugly bruise lay beneath the hair at the back of the man's head.

He dabbed the bruise carefully and gently, and fairly swamped the stranger's face with water, allowing a good quantity to enter his mouth. Ten minutes of this treatment was quite sufficient.

The man opened his eyes, after stirring restlessly, and gazed about him with a perfectly blank expression.

"It's all right; you needn't worry," said Mr. Heath. "You'll be quite all right presently. That bruise at the back of your head is pretty bad, but not particularly serious."

"So?" murmured the stranger. "I must remark that I am feeling decidedly uncomfortable. I beg of you to let me know what has been happening."

"I'll tell you all about it when you feel a lot better," said Mr. Heath. "What you've got to do now is to keep quiet until you get some of your strength back. This water will do you a world of good."

The stranger stirred again, attempting to sit up.

"Steady, sir—steady!" exclaimed Mr. Heath. "You mustn't be impatient!"

"My dear sir, please allow me to know best," said the other in perfectly modulated tones, and with a smoothness of manner which was peculiarly charming. "You must allow me to thank you for your excellent services. Furthermore, I feel the necessity to take something slightly stronger than water. My head is throbbing abominably."

Mr. Heath smiled.

"You feel dizzy, I dare say?" he inquired. "I'm awfully sorry, but I don't happen to carry any spirit—"

"Ah! But you will probably find a small flask which I carry in my hip-pocket," interrupted the stranger. "If you will be good enough—"

"Certainly," said Mr. Heath quickly.

He turned his charge over, and soon obtained a small brandy-flask, a solid silver article with a screw stopper. The stranger brightened up considerably after he had taken one or two mouthfuls of the spirit.

In fact, the effect of the brandy was remarkable. The injured man insisted upon getting to his feet, but Mr. Heath was just as insistent upon his remaining in a sitting posture.

At last the stranger smilingly agreed to remain on the grass for a few minutes, while Mr. Heath explained what had occurred.

"There's very little to tell you," said the Form-master. "I happened to be coming along the path, and I arrived at that spot just in time to see you fall out of the tree. I did my best to break your fall, but was a second too late. You tumbled backwards, and caught your head against a root."

The other nodded.

"So I imagined—precisely," he said. "It was most careless of me, to be sure. I made an absurd mistake when descending. I was foolish enough to trust my weight upon the remains of a rotten branch. Before I could recover my hold, I fell. I remember nothing more until I found myself lying here. It seems to me that I fell out of the tree hours ago—"

"Barely twenty minutes," said Mr. Heath smilingly. "I am very glad that I have been of some service to you. It was fortunate that I came along at that moment. If there is any further task that you would like me to perform, I am only too willing to comply."

"I can see that you are a true friend," said the other smoothly. "My gratitude cannot be expressed in mere words. And, doubtless, you are curious to know why I should be climbing trees at such an unearthly hour?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I was certainly wondering—"

"Quite so, quite so," said the stranger. "Perfectly natural, too. I feel that it is incumbent upon me to give you some explanation of my unusual behaviour. My name is Plessigny, and at present I am residing at Bannington—"

"The Count de Plessigny?" inquired Mr. Heath abruptly.

"I fear I must plead guilty to the title," smiled the other. "I am the Comte de Plessigny, and it is obvious that my name is familiar to you. I can observe that you are more surprised than ever."

"I really cannot understand the affair at all," admitted Mr. Heath.

"Of course not—of course not!" said the count, taking a monocle from his waistcoat-pocket and placing it carefully in his eye. "But a few words will be ample to make the whole position clear. I am guilty of a hobby, and that hobby is to collect strange specimens of insect life. It is generally my habit

to prow through the countryside when honest folk are in bed."

"Oh, I see!" said Mr. Heath. "You are a naturalist?"

"In a way," admitted the count. "It is my particular delight to collect all manner of quaint insect specimens, and to preserve them. I went up that tree in search of a particularly interesting moth. But the little beggar eluded me, and you know what happened to me afterwards."

"Moths are frequently very difficult to catch," smiled Mr. Heath.

The Comte de Plessigny nodded.

"I have reason to agree with you, my dear friend. By the way, I have not the pleasure of being acquainted with your name."

"Oh, I must apologise!" Mr. Heath hastened to exclaim. "My name is Heath; I am a Form-master at St. Frank's College. I was just taking a late stroll through the wood, as the night was so glorious."

"I quite understand," said the count. "You, too, have fallen under the magic influence of the charms of nature. There is one incident I deplore, concerning this ridiculous accident of mine. I was unfortunate enough to drop a most valuable specimen when I fell out of the tree."

"It was in your hand at the time?"

"Precisely."

"I saw nothing when you fell," said Mr. Heath. "What was the specimen?"

The count looked at the other man closely.

"A little object which I really cannot afford to lose," he replied. "I need it urgently for my collection, and if it is not recovered I shall be extremely disappointed."

"Perhaps it has run away by this time," said Mr. Heath—"unless it was dead."

"Oh, yes, it was quite dead," said the count dryly. "There is not the slightest fear of the little specimen running away. Come! We will leave this spot, my dear friend. I am deeply

grateful to you for what you have done—"

"Please don't mention it," interrupted Mr. Heath. "I will come with you now, and help you in your search for that specimen."

The count shook his head.

"No, no! I cannot allow that, Mr. Heath!" he declared. "I have taken up too much of your time already. You must not allow an old fellow like myself to trouble you unduly. I have been anxious to make the acquaintance of a St. Frank's master. I could not have met with a more charming gentleman than yourself."

Mr. Heath smiled.

"I am afraid you are too flattering," he said. "I have done nothing at all. It was merely the act of a decent man to render you the slight assistance which has been my privilege. I should consider it a favour if you allowed me to help you further, sir."

"I cannot order you to leave me, of course," said the count pleasantly. "If you insist upon helping me to search for the specimen, I must accept your generous aid. At the same time, I can assure you that I am quite myself again—Dear me! I must not speak too soon, my dear friend! So! I am steadier now."

For a moment he had staggered, as he stood upon his feet. Mr. Heath allowed him to lean upon his arm, and the Form-master was determined to continue his good services until the count was quite steady.

After the latter had walked a few paces he found his feet, so to speak, and very shortly after that he was practically himself again. He admitted that his head was throbbing very painfully, and that the bruise was very sore. But he dismissed them as mere trifles.

When the pair reached the footpath again they came out at a different spot, and found it necessary to walk a hundred yards along the path before they arrived at the great old oak tree.

The moon had shifted, of course, and the light was different. Under the trees everything was extremely dark, except for one of two bright patches here and there. The count turned to Mr. Heath and took his hand.

"Allow me to thank you once again for your very generous services, Mr. Heath," he said courteously. "I really could not think of detaining you for one moment longer. You have wasted quite sufficient valuable time. I am perfectly all right now."

Mr. Heath laughed.

"It's no trouble at all—not the slightest," he said.

The count shrugged his shoulders, and flashed the light of an electric torch upon the ground. It almost seemed as though he were particularly anxious for Mr. Heath to go away; but he didn't like to say so in blunt words. And the Remove master—quite an innocent, gentlemanly fellow—was not the kind of man to suspect any ulterior motive on the count's part.

While De Plessigny was searching on one side of the tree, Mr. Heath walked round the other, his gaze fixed on the ground.

"What kind of a specimen is it?" he inquired.

"Oh, something of quite an unusual nature. I don't suppose you will understand even if I fully explain," replied the count.

This was quite vague, and it somehow gave Mr. Heath the impression that his companion would be more comfortable if he were left alone. However, he did not wish to leave on the instant, but pretended to continue his search.

While he was doing this his eye caught a glimpse of something in the grass, almost concealed beneath a leaf. It seemed to glitter in a dull kind of way.

Mr. Heath had forgotten the specimen search for a moment, and he lifted the leaf, revealing the object underneath. The leaf was fixed to a

little twig which had fallen during the count's mishap.

The Remove master picked up a hard, round object. It seemed to be round at first, but as he moved it in his fingers he found that it was of irregular shape, and it appeared to be a curious little piece of stone.

He slipped it into his waistcoat pocket quite naturally, intending to examine it during a more leisure moment. Never for an instant did it strike him that the thing was in any way connected with the count's search, for the quaint old fellow was, to the best of Mr. Heath's belief, looking for some forest insect.

Realising how hopeless the task was without some more definite description, Mr. Heath decided that it would be better for him to go, so he straightened up, and strolled round the other side of the tree. The count was still searching.

"Any luck?" inquired Mr. Heath.

"I'm afraid not, my dear sir—I am afraid not," said the Comte de Plessigny, shaking his head. "But I must have patience. I presume you have found nothing?"

"No; nothing at all," said Mr. Heath, shaking his head. "That is—well, that is—No, I have found nothing in connection with your search."

The count looked at Mr. Heath curiously.

"I am afraid I can't be of much assistance to you in this, sir," the Remove master went on. "I don't exactly know what you're looking for. And it's getting very late. Perhaps I had better bid you good-night!"

"So! Don't let me detain you any longer," said the count quietly. "I wish you good-night, and I once more thank you for your very generous assistance. I shall not quickly forget. Good-night, my dear friend!"

"Good-night, sir!"

Mr. Heath turned and walked rapidly away down the path.

And the Comte de Plessigny stood there in the moonlight, gazing after the

Form-master, and slowly stroking his soft, neatly cut beard. And there was a curious expression in his eyes—an expression very difficult to define. But it was quite clear that the count was not quite satisfied.

He turned back for a moment, looked about under the tree, and then snapped out his electric torch and put it in his pocket. He had given up the search for his specimen—a rather significant fact.

What had the old fellow been really looking for?

CHAPTER 12.

Prowlers of the Night!

EDGEMORE lay just ahead, bathed in the soft, silvery moonlight. It seemed to be a place of the dead, for everything was quiet and still, and not even the bark of a dog, or the crowing of a cock, disturbed the peaceful night.

Mr. Heath was walking down the dusty lane a few hundred yards from the little hamlet. He was almost an hour later than he had reckoned upon being, but this did not seem to worry him exceedingly.

He had been thinking over the incidents in the wood as he walked along, and now, for the first time, he remembered the little object he had picked up under the oak tree. Never for a moment did he believe that it was anything of importance.

He had forgotten it until now, and he had only been reminded of it because his thoughts had reached the point where he recalled the count's question as to whether he had found anything.

Mr. Heath halted in the centre of the lane, and pulled the piece of stone out of his pocket. Now, in the bright moonlight, he would be able to see what it actually was.

"A piece of flint, I expect," he murmured softly.

The stone was rather bigger than he

had thought, and of quite considerable weight. He regarded it curiously in the moonlight, and then his heart began beating faster.

"Good heavens!" he muttered huskily.

He turned the object over again and again, examining it intently and closely. He took his pocket-knife out, and attempted to scratch the stone, but found that it only blunted the keen blade.

"It's impossible—absolutely impossible!" he muttered. "At the same time, I seem to remember having seen an uncut stone— Oh, but this thing is too big—it must weigh an enormous amount!"

He glanced up and down the road, as though expecting people to be within view; but the whole countryside was deserted. Mr. Heath took out a box of matches, and struck one. In the flickering glare of light he gazed at the stone more closely.

"By Jove, I believe I'm right! I believe the thing is a diamond, after all!" he murmured feverishly. "A diamond! Why, heaven above, it must be bigger than the Koh-i-Noor itself!"

His hand was unsteady as he held that big, curiously transparent stone. Some years before he had been shown a few small uncut diamonds by a friend; but they were mere fragments compared with this.

He continued to stare in a fascinated way at the object in his fingers. It was undoubtedly a most remarkable-looking stone, and anybody connected with diamond mining would have declared that it was a magnificent specimen; but, of course, it was rough and uncut.

"I'm making a fool of myself," went on Mr. Heath. "My own common-sense tells me that this isn't a real diamond. And yet—and yet— Good gracious! What if it should turn out to be a real—"

He did not allow his thoughts to continue in that strain.

"I expect it's only a piece of curious

miseral," he told himself. "But why it should have been under that tree is more than I can imagine. It's a pity I didn't show the count—he might have told me."

Mr Heath did not seem to consider the possibility that the Comte de Ples-signy himself might have been searching for that rough stone! The Remove master was under the firm impression that the count had been searching for a dead insect.

Stowing the thing away again, he strode down the lane, and entered the silent little hamlet. He went straight to Greyhurst Cottage, and tapped in a peculiar manner upon the door.

It was opened within a minute, and closed securely again. What was the meaning of these secret, mysterious visits of Mr. Heath's to the Edgemore cottage? Who was the old man Hand-forth had seen?

The thing was something of a puzzle, and, as it happened, Edward Oswald Handforth was hot on the scent that very night—at least, he considered that he was on the scent.

Actually, he was too late for anything.

He had had some difficulty in getting Church and McClure to accompany him; they could not see the sense of this expedition. But Handforth was determined to find out what Mr. Heath's game was.

"There's no telling where our investigations will lead us to," said Handforth, shaking his head wisely. "I'm pretty certain that Heath is a collier—or, to be more exact, a chap who makes counterfeit notes. That cottage is his giddy factory."

"There's nothing to prove—"

"Rats!" said Handforth. "What about the machinery we saw?"

"We only caught a glimpse of something turning," said Church. "It might have been a coffee-mill, or—or a chaff-cutter, or a mangle—"

"You burbling idiot!" snapped Handforth witheringly.

"Well, anyhow, I don't see the sense of coming out to-night," said McClure, looking round him anxiously. "What about that bear? It's still roaming about the neighbourhood—"

"Somebody said it had been captured," declared Handforth.

"That was a yarn," said Church. "Several chaps believed that it had been collared, but it turned out to be a rumour. The bear is roaming about."

"It might be in this very wood," declared McClure.

"Within twenty yards of us!" added Church nervously.

Handforth regarded his chums pityingly.

"And you call yourselves Removites!" he exclaimed. "You call yourselves plucky chaps! Ye gods and little kippers! You haven't got half an ounce of pluck between the pair of you!"

"Oh, go easy, Handy!" protested Church. "We don't mind anything ordinary—but a bear, you know! Especially at night! We—we might get caught by the brute."

"Or you might get a couple of black eyes!" said Handforth grimly. "You will get 'em if you don't stop this beastly snivelling! We're going to lie concealed in the wood."

"You—you mean conceal ourselves just here—against this stile?" asked Church.

"Yes!"

"Well, that isn't so bad," said McClure. "But aren't you going to Edgemore?"

"We'll wait here first and see if Heath comes along—"

"But supposing he's gone?"

"Eh?"

"What if Mr. Heath has already passed through the wood, on his way to Edgemore?" asked Church. "It's pretty late, you know; and if he's gone, there's no sense in us stopping here with that bear knocking about."

"Oh, my hat!" groaned Handforth. "You've got on the bear subject again! Don't I keep telling you that there's

"not one chance in a million of us meeting the thing? It may have been lurking about in the district during the evening, but it's probably miles away by this time."

Church and McClure were not feeling exactly comfortable, in spite of Handforth's reassurances. They felt that there was a considerable amount of danger in the wood.

Within two or three minutes they were settled comfortably in their place of concealment. From the stile they were invisible.

"Why, even if the bear passed right along this path, it wouldn't spot us!" said Handforth complacently.

"Perhaps not," said Church; "but it would smell us!"

"Smell us?"

"Yes!"

"If you're saying that I smell——"

"You silly ass!" snapped Church. "Bears have an acute sense of smell, and if that bear's anywhere near us, we shall receive a visit. It's a pity we didn't bring some heavy sticks."

Handforth grunted, and the three settled down to watch and wait. Not that there was much hope of their encountering Mr. Clement Heath, for by this time the Remove master was in Greyhurst Cottage, Edgemoor.

However, the night was not to pass without excitement. Handforth & Co. had not left their dormitory for nothing.

Church was the first to notice anything strange.

A slight rustling in the trees first attracted his attention, and this was followed by the distinct sound of a snapping twig.

"What's that?" he whispered abruptly.

"Oh, nothing! A rabbit, perhaps——"

"Rabbits don't break twigs!" said Church keenly. "It was something bigger. Handy——something which seemed to come over from the stile——"

"Heath!"

"Oh, rats!" said McClure. "Heath

wouldn't crawl about in that way. There's no reason for him to fear anybody here. I—I believe—— Well, I can't help thinking about that bear——"

"What utter rot!" said Handforth curtly. "Put the bear out of your head, and don't be such a silly ass! A fine thing, when we come out on important detective work, for you chaps to be scared out of your wits by a bear that might be twenty miles away. It's absolutely——"

"Gr-r-r-rrrh!"

Handforth was interrupted by a very peculiar sound, which came from the other side of the bushes.

"What——what's that?" he asked abruptly.

"Goodness knows!" muttered Church.

"It sounded like——"

But McClure did not trust himself to speak further.

"Oh, rot!" said Handy. "There's nothing——"

Sniff—sniff—sniff!

Handforth & Co. stood rooted to the spot. There was something ominous about that sniffing noise. Even Handforth was impressed.

"It—it can't be the bear!" he muttered shakily.

"We—we'd better bunk!" gasped Church.

"Rather not! It's the worst thing we can do if it happens to be about," said Handforth. "He'd collar us at once. No; we'd better wait until he moves off. Then we might be able to slip away——"

"Oh, my goodness!" gasped McClure suddenly.

Swish—crackle—swish!

The trees and bushes were parted and trampled down just behind the spot where the juniors were crouching. Something dim loomed up in the gloom, and for a moment Church and McClure were on the point of bolting. Handforth, if the truth must be told, was in a similar state.

But he just managed to keep his nerve.

With one swift movement he took out his electric torch, and pressed the button sharply and rather unsteadily. The light flickered in and out twice—and then finally it became extinguished altogether—for the simple reason that Handforth's fingers had suddenly become almost nerveless.

For there, staring through the parted bushes at them, was the head of a huge bear! The light had gleamed for a brief space on its glassy, baleful eyes. It was the bear that Patty Little had encountered during the afternoon!

"Good heavens!" panted Church.

Handforth was the first to act.

He made a sudden leap upwards, just where he stood, and caught hold of the bough of a big tree. The next second he had hauled himself up on to the stout limb, and he stood there, filled with anxiety.

"Jump, you asses—jump!" he gasped. "It's easy enough! I'll give you a hand—and it's the only chance!"

Church and McClure did not need telling twice. Somehow or other they scrambled up into the tree, and Handforth lent them a hand. For a moment they were safe. But what of the bear?

The juniors did not wait to see whether Mr. Bruin was following. They climbed higher and higher into the tree.

Reaching a high bough they waited there, their hearts filled with anxiety. Would the bear follow them into the tree, or would it meech away into the wood?

The question was soon answered.

For, looking down, the three juniors saw a dim, uncertain figure standing at the bottom of the tree. And then, with slow and deliberate movements it commenced to climb.

The bear was coming after them!

The position was really serious. There was no avenue of escape, for the bear was climbing the trunk, and there was no means of getting out of harm's way. The juniors, by mounting the tree, had placed themselves in a trap.

The dark bulk of the bear, unshapely and clumsy, mounted higher and higher. Handforth & Co. had no weapons, and they could do nothing but sit astride the branch and wait.

The bear mounted higher and higher, and at length drew level with the three fugitives. It was grunting and gasping a bit, as though the effort had been a serious labour. But it was there, and it seemed to be a terribly dangerous customer.

To make matters worse, the bear had halted against the tree trunk, and was now actually moving along the bough they were on.

"Oh, goodness!" muttered Church. "We're done!"

And this certainly seemed to be the case. Foot by foot, the three juniors edged their way back along the branch. The bear was there, and they had nothing better to do. It was impossible for them to remain where they were, and to allow the bear to attack them, as it was evidently intent upon doing. Inch by inch it moved on the bough, and inch by inch Handforth & Co. edged away.

Creak—creak!

The bough began to sag and creak under the weight. It was a fairly stout one, and was quite capable of bearing the weight of Handforth & Co., if they had kept near the parent trunk. But as they edged farther and farther out, the bough commenced to droop. The position was rather appalling.

"We—we can't go any farther! This beastly bough will break!" panted McClure, who was on the outside position. "If you chaps press back any more, I shall tumble off."

"Can't—can't we do anything at all?" asked Church anxiously.

Handforth didn't answer. He was far too engaged for the moment. Being nearest the trunk, he was naturally nearer to the bear; and the latter was creeping along to the branch. There was something strangely human about its actions.

Then, with a sudden growling sound,

the bear clawed at Handforth. The leader of Study D pushed his way back by sheer force, and just got out of reach of the deadly claws.

Then creak—creak—crack!

The bough cracked, being unable to stand the extra strain which had been put upon it. It smashed off at the junction with the tree—or, to be more exact, it half-smashed and sagged down, through the other branches, at a sharp angle.

Handforth & Co. were pitched down with considerable force. They didn't know what was happening for the moment. Church and McClure yelled with alarm, and Handforth gave vent to a terrific bellow.

Crash! Crash!

The juniors smashed through the tangle of branches and found themselves on the ground. Fortunately enough they were unhurt—practically unscratched. But they were in a tangle of broken branches, and it was almost impossible for them to extricate themselves at the moment.

The bear, meanwhile, was descending the tree hurriedly by the more usual route. It dropped to the ground, and came crashing through the branches towards the three unfortunate juniors.

"Run!" panted Church.

But it was advice which could not be carried out. The juniors were so tangled that it was impossible to run—unless they chose to walk right into the arms of the bear. There was only one clear space, and that clear space was occupied by Mr. Bruin.

But the bear acted in a curious manner. It rushed up, possibly believing that its victims were stunned or injured. But it soon discovered that the three Removites were hardly touched.

Then it commenced to retreat.

But it was too late!

The bear had given himself away by venturing so close, and by acting so strangely. Handforth gave vent to a terrific bellow of fury, crashed through

the branches, and grasped the bear firmly from behind.

Church and McClure watched, horror-struck.

"He'll—he'll get killed!" gasped Church. "Oh, the reckless ass!"

But Handforth seemed quite safe.

"You swindling rotter!" he roared, shaking the bear fiercely. "You confounded spoofers! By George! I'll punch you until you don't know—Well, I'm hanged! Fullwood!"

Church and McClure could hardly believe their ears. Was it possible that the bear was a fake?

It was possible—for it was the truth. The bear was none other than Ralph Leslie Fullwood!

CHAPTER 15.

Not Nice for the Nuts!

FULLWOOD gave vent to a somewhat nervous little laugh.

"Oh, come off it, Handforth!" he exclaimed, attempting to shake Edward Oswald's hands from his shoulders. "I spoofed you properly, and there's no need for you to get ratty about it! It was only a jape——"

"A—a jape!" roared Handforth fiercely. "You—you beastly cad! You might have half killed us! It was only by a piece of pure luck that we weren't hurt when that branch broke!"

Church and McClure broke their way through, both of them amazed.

"Fullwood!" they echoed. "It's—it's impossible!"

"Look at him!" said Handforth grimly.

He flashed on his electric torch, and revealed the "bear." The head had now been pushed back, revealing the face of Ralph Leslie underneath. He was wearing the huge skin over his ordinary clothing, and his legs and arms were padded out.

In dense gloom it was quite easy to imagine that he was really a bear, but

in the full light of the electric torch no such mistake could be made.

When Handforth had first flashed on the light, only the head had been visible through the trees—and that part of the make-up was lifelike.

"It was a jolly good joke, anyhow," said Fullwood, in a satisfied tone. "You'll be shipped to death over this, my sons! I'll make the school ring with the bally yarn! You'll be the laughing-stock of St. Frank's!"

Handforth snorted.

"You miserable rotter!" he said. "Before I start getting busy with you, I want to know how you managed it—and I want to know how you knew that we should be in the wood to-night?"

Fullwood grinned.

"Your voice doesn't happen to be very faint, Handy," he said. "You were jawing to these other chaps in the dormitory, and I heard you."

"Oh!"

"I knew you were goin' to hide yourselves in the wood, against the stile," proceeded Fullwood. "As soon as you'd slipped out, I did the same, and Gulliver an' Bell lent me a hand with the disguise. Pretty smart, wasn't it?"

"You—you beastly spoofer!"

"You cad!"

"You rotter!"

"I thought you were sportsmen!" sneered Fullwood. "We got this bear-skin out of the library, an' I reckon it was a pretty good jape; but all you can do is to make a dashed fuss!"

"I'm going to do more than that in a minute!" said Handforth grimly. "You needn't think that you've triumphed! This affair isn't over!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you might have injured us with a rotten practical joke of this sort," said Handforth angrily. "We naturally thought you were the real bear, and our first move was to climb a tree. That branch broke, and it was only by sheer luck that we weren't smashed up!"

Fullwood snorted.

"That's rot!" he declared. "You knew as well as I do that the bear was recaptured before we went to bed. If you'd had any sense at all you'd have known that it was a joke——"

"You silly ass! Who told you the bear was captured?"

Fullwood started.

"Isn't—Isn't it captured?" he asked sharply.

"No!"

"But—but——"

"Some of the chaps spread a yarn that it was, but that was only a rumour," said Handforth. "That bear's still at large, and we naturally thought——"

"Still at large!" gasped Fullwood. "Why—why it might be near us! It might attack us at any moment. You—you fool! Why didn't you tell me before? Let me go!"

Fullwood struggled fiercely, and yelled for help.

The knowledge that the bear was still at liberty—after he had thought it had been recaptured—came as a considerable shock to him.

"You're not getting away just yet, my son!" said Handforth grimly. "Jokes of this kind aren't the thing. It was a contemptible trick—but just what I should expect from a chap like you!"

"Look here, I'm not going to stop——"

He paused, as some twigs crackled in the rear.

"What's that?" he panted nervously. "It's—it's the bear——"

"Rot! It's Gulliver and Bell!" said Handforth witheringly.

Fullwood's chums had been lurking near by all the time, but now they came into view, attracted by the argument. Somehow, the jape wasn't panning out quite so funnily as the nuts had anticipated.

"Is—is the bear anywhere about?" asked Fullwood nervously. "There——"

these idiots say that the bear hasn't been recaptured!"

"What!" exclaimed Bell. "Not— not recaptured?"

"Rot!" said Gulliver.

"You can call it what you like," said Handforth, "but the bear hadn't been recaptured when the Remove went to bed—so the chances are that it's still roaming about."

"Then—then why did you come out?"

"Do you think I was going to be kept indoors by the fact that a blessed bear was loose?" asked Handforth witheringly. "Not likely! But that's enough. I'm going to give you chaps a jolly good hiding on the spot!"

"Don't be a fool, Handy!" urged Fullwood. "We—we didn't know the bear was still at large, or we wouldn't have ventured out ourselves!"

"I quite believe that!"

"We ought to get back into the school while we're safe," went on Fullwood. "There's no sense in asking for trouble! It's simply acting the goat, and you can rely upon us to keep this mum!"

Handforth grinned.

"That won't work!" he said pleasantly. "Even if I could take your word, it wouldn't make any difference. I'll bet you'll keep mum, in any case! You won't feel like saying anything to anybody to-morrow!"

"Look here, don't act the giddy ox —"

"It's better to act the giddy ox than the bear!" said Handforth. "Keep hold of those other rotters, you asses—don't let them escape. You can give them a hiding each while I'm dealing with Filly!"

"Good idea!" said Church.

Gulliver and Bell were seized. They struggled fiercely, and a tremendous battle commenced, then and there. The chums of Study D were angry at the trick which had been played upon them.

It had been a contemptible and dangerous jape to play.

But it was just like the cad of the

Remove to plan a dangerous practical joke of this sort.

But he paid for it.

Handforth dealt with him unmercifully and Church and McClure got busy with Gulliver and Bell. By the time the scrap was over, the Study A trio was feeling decidedly worn out.

They crawled away painfully, and made a bee-line for the school.

"I'll bet they won't jaw much to-morrow!" said Handforth grimly. "They'll be too busy explaining where they got those black eyes from! They won't dare to spread this yarn about the bear."

"There's no telling what they'll do; but I don't care," said Church. "The best thing we can do is to get to the school at once, and get into bed. I'm not feeling particularly bright myself!"

"Same here!" said McClure.

Handforth hesitated.

"Well, I don't know," he said slowly. "It's quite likely that Heath has gone by this time; we've missed him. I dare say you chaps are right. After that scrap I feel a bit grubby. Perhaps we'd better get back."

"Good!"

Church and McClure shook hands in the darkness, and a moment later they and Handforth emerged into the lane, and set off towards the school. It was still moonlight, but Belton Wood put the lane in deep shadow.

"I'm blessed if I can understand how we escaped being hurt when that branch broke," remarked Church. "I've got a couple of little scratches, but they're only trifles. It's a wonder we weren't smashed up."

Handforth nodded.

"Well, for one thing, that branch was lower than we really thought," he said. "The distance to the ground wasn't particularly great, and the branch didn't break off clean, either. It simply snapped, and then sagged down, carrying us with it. So, instead of being sent to the ground at express speed, we sort of floated down."

"Well, I don't want to do any more floating of that sort," said Church. "Once is enough for me, thanks!"

They continued their way to the school, discussing the affair, and saying choice things about Fullwood & Co. However, no harm had come to anybody, only the nuts, so it was decided that nothing would be said to any of the other fellows. There was no need to spread the yarn about the school.

Naturally enough, Handforth & Co. had a motive for this decision. If they related how they wiped up Fullwood & Co., the story would get about. Prefects would hear about it. Inquiries would be made—awkward inquiries.

And, as a natural result, Handforth & Co. would be hauled up before the Head for breaking out of bounds after lights-out. Fullwood & Co. would be hauled up, too; but that would be little satisfaction to the chums of Study D.

It was therefore decided to keep mum.

"Talking's never any good, anyhow," said Handforth. "Some chaps believe in jawing about everything, but I'm not that sort. If I've got anything important to keep—anything private—I never say a word."

Church and McClure gravely agreed, merely for the sake of peace. Of course, they knew well enough that the actual truth was just the opposite. It was a terribly difficult task for Handforth to keep a secret, and he generally succeeded in letting it out to somebody before many hours had passed.

The three juniors were not far from the school when a slight sound came from the ditch on the left. At the same moment the juniors caught sight of a dim form moving out into the road.

"What's that?" asked Church. "Those fathcaded nuts, perhaps," said Handforth grimly. "If they're trying any more of their tricks—"

"Better get your torch ready," whispered McClure.

Handforth was already prepared, and when he and the other two juniors had

walked a few more paces, Handforth came to a halt and flashed on his torch. "Great guns!" muttered Church faintly.

There, standing just on the grass near the ditch, was the strange figure of a bear—raised on its hind legs, and standing ready to attack.

Handforth sent out a terrific bellow. "Well, of all the giddy nerve!" he roared. "They're trying it a second time."

"Oh!" breathed Church. "It's Fully!"

"Of course, it's Fully!" snapped Handforth. "By George! I'll teach him not to play the fool like this!"

He rushed forward like a whirlwind, and the dim figure stood quite still. Handforth went into the attack with his fists clenched.

Crash!

His fist struck the bear fairly and squarely upon the nose, and there was a violent, sneezing noise, and then a fierce, throaty snarl—a snarl which could not be mistaken.

Handforth staggered back, almost petrified.

For, in that second, he knew the truth. He had made a bloomer! This object was not Fullwood dressed up, but the real escaped bear, Hindenburg!

CHAPTER 23.

The Capture—and the Reward!

HANDFORTH wanted to fly for his life.

But, somehow, he found it impossible to move, and he just remained there, helpless and scared. Yes, he was certainly scared, and he was not ashamed to admit it.

Church and McClure were equally scared, and they stood there, petrified. The bear was reared upon his hind legs, snuffing fiercely—the effects of the terrific punch which Handforth had delivered.

It was the knowledge of his attack which caused Handforth to be so nervous. After treating Bruin in that way, it was hardly likely that the bear would remain inactive.

But he dimly realised that the bear was remaining quiet probably because the juniors made no attempt to run away. They couldn't. They were frozen with fright and horror.

And then the bear acted.

He lumbered forward two or three paces, until he towered above Handforth. Not until it was too late did the junior recover the use of his limbs. He attempted to slip away—to dodge—to get free.

But that awful embrace was upon him!

The bear's great forelegs enclosed him, and Handforth was pressed tightly against Bruin's chest. He was, in fact, being hugged!

"Help, help!" gasped Handforth faintly.

Church and McClure did not even reply.

Their tongues refused to act—their brains were in a mad whirl. They expected to see Handforth crushed to death before their eyes.

And then Mr. Bruin acted in a rather strange way.

Still keeping Handforth tightly clasped, he sniffed the air, and shoved his nose down towards Handforth's side-pocket, where he sniffed again. The junior, meanwhile, was becoming dimly conscious of the fact that his captor was not hurting him in the least. The bear was hugging him, but not viciously.

Then—r-r-r-rip!

Handforth's side-pocket was torn out badly. A small package lay revealed, and the bear seized this in his mouth, and a moment later he was contentedly munching a ham sandwich! Handforth had placed it there before setting out, in case he got peckish.

The impudence of the bear was quite amusing—if the affair had not been so full of peril. The bear had scented the

sandwich, and had deliberately set about obtaining it for his own benefit.

Having demolished the morsel, he sniffed about for more—but in vain. He kept Handforth imprisoned all the time. But, when he found that there was nothing doing in the grub line he relaxed his hold, and allowed Handforth to slip away. But, just before doing so, a wet tongue licked itself over the back of the junior's hand.

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Handforth faintly.

"Run—run for your life!" panted Church.

But Handforth was recovering his composure.

"Wait a tick," he said, calming himself with an effort. "A minute ago Hindenburg could have crushed me to death, but he didn't. Then he licked my hand, just like a giddy dog. It's my belief he's as tame as a kitten!"

"Tame!" gasped McClure.

"Well, doesn't it look like it," said Handforth. "He hasn't done me the slightest harm—and there he stands now, quite interested in our talk."

"We—we'd better bunk!"

"No, I don't see it," said Handforth, shaking his head. "The keeper said the bear wasn't fierce, and he was easy to handle."

There was certainly every indication that the bear was perfectly tame. He stood there, while the juniors had been speaking, still on his hind legs. But now, without any warning, he dropped down, lumbered round the juniors, and sniffed about, as though in search of food.

Then he sat up again, and looked alert.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Handforth. "He's asking for grub. I'm blessed if I know what we ought to do. I'm not a bit scared now, anyhow. He's a nice old chap. Sorry, Hindy, old son, there's nothing doing!"

"I've got a sandwich!" put in McClure.

"Good! Let him have it."

McClure took out the sandwich gingerly, unwrapped it, and threw it on the ground. Hindenburg lost no time demolishing the morsel. Then he sat down again, and waited for more.

By this time Handforth & Co. were feeling quite easy. The terror which had gone over the neighbourhood was quite unnecessary, it seemed. The bear, even when hungry, was quite harmless, and as tame as a puppy.

All Handforth's confidence returned. "I—I say!" he exclaimed eagerly. "We can capture this bear and hand him over to the keepers. Just think of the name we shall make for ourselves!" "And there's ten quid, too!" said Church.

"Eh?"
"There's ten quid reward——"
"Great guns!" said Handforth. "I'd forgotten all about that! Ten quid reward for the capture of the bear! Why, it's ours—— It'll be as easy as winking to lock old Hindy up."

"I'm not so sure about that," said Church. "He may seem peaceful enough now, but there's no telling with bears. I think the best thing we can do is to scoot away while we're safe, and never mind about the ten quid."

"Rot! He's harmless enough."
A moment or two later Church and McClure were quite ready to share Handforth's opinion, for Mr. Brain proved to be singularly docile. There was a short length of rope attached to his collar, and Handforth boldly seized this and pulled upon it.

The bear was ready.
He walked up the lane meekly and obediently, following Handforth as though he had known the junior all his trained life.

The affair certainly had a ludicrous side. After all the excitement which had disturbed the neighbourhood, it was really humorous to see a junior of St. Frank's leading the bear by a thin piece of cord.

And Brain did not get up to any tricks. He followed the juniors right

to the school, and readily entered the Triangle by the masters' side gate, the big main gates being locked.

The juniors, now filled with wild excitement and exuberation, were not the slightest bit nervous. Hindenburg had proved himself to be a perfectly willing prisoner. Probably he had had enough roaming, and was tired and hungry.

At all events, he allowed himself to be placed in the woodshed, and the stout door was closed upon him and bolted. Then Handforth & Co. gazed at one another, their faces flushed, and their hearts beating rapidly.

"We've done it!" said Handforth exultantly. "We've captured him! You two chaps stop here on guard. There's just a chance that he'll try to get out. If he does, yell at the top of your voices."

"What are you going to do?"

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THURSDAY, JUNE 3rd.

But Don't Forget to Order Early.

"I'm going indoors."

"What for?"

"To tell Mr. Lee, of course," said Handforth. He's our Housemaster, and, besides, he's a sport, and won't punish us severely for being out of bounds. He oughtn't to punish us at all, considering that we captured the bear."

Handforth lost no time in hurrying into the Ancient House. He got in by means of the study window, and then rushed up through the dark passages and staircases until he arrived outside the door of Nelson Lee's bed-room.

He rapped loudly upon the panels.

"Well?" came a prompt inquiry. "Who's that?"

"I, sir!"

The door opened, and Nelson Lee stood there, fully dressed. Handforth was too excited to wonder why Nelson Lee should be fully attired at that hour of the night.

"Handforth!" exclaimed Lee. "What is the meaning of this, my boy? Why are you not in bed?"

"We—that is, Church and McClure and I—we've captured the bear, sir!" blurted out Handforth excitedly.

Nelson Lee looked hard at the junior. "You have done what, Handforth?" he asked sharply.

"We've captured the bear, sir!"

"Dear me! Surely you are joking with me, Handforth," said Nelson Lee severely. "Let me tell you that I do not approve—"

"But it's true, sir—absolutely true!" shouted Handforth. "We captured the bear in the lane, and brought him along to the woodshed. He's locked in there now, and I thought perhaps you'd ring up the police, or somebody."

"I shall certainly do so after I have satisfied myself that you have made no mistake, and that there has been no hoax."

"But—but it's true, sir!" declared Handforth earnestly. "Can't you take my word? The bear's in the woodshed now!"

Nelson Lee nodded. He judged by the junior's tone.

"Very well, Handforth, I will take your word. There is a telephone in my room here, so I will get into communication with Calstowe at once. The search has been abandoned until daylight."

Handforth was extremely pleased, and he was even more pleased when he heard from Lee, a few minutes later, that a motor-car was speeding from Calstowe, and the school would be reached in a very short time.

"That's fine, sir!" said Handforth. "I'll buzz downstairs, sir, and help the other chaps keep guard. I reckon you're going to report us to the headmaster, sir?"

"I shall find it necessary to do that, Handforth," replied Nelson Lee. "You see, the headmaster must know about it, and it is just as well that the story should come from my lips. I will do the best I can."

"Thank you, sir!"

Nelson Lee went off, and Handforth hurried down into the Triangle. There was no need for secrecy now, for before long there would be quite a sensation at the school. And Handforth's part in the affair would come out, in any case.

"It's all serene, you chaps!" he shouted. "Car's on the way from Calstowe."

"Don't yell like that, you idiot!" said Church, in alarm.

Handforth laughed.

"It doesn't matter—everybody will know soon!" he shouted louder than ever.

His voice was by no means quiet, and it easily penetrated through the open windows of the Remove dormitory. I sat up in bed fully awake, dimly conscious of the fact that something unusual had disturbed my slumbers.

And then I heard Handforth's voice outside.

"That's queer!" I muttered. "What on earth is the fathead doing out in the

Triangle—and making all that shindy, too?"

I got up from my bed, hopped across the floor, and was soon leaning out of the dormitory window, staring down into the quiet moonlight of the Triangle.

Handforth & Co. were distinctly visible over by the woodshed.

"Hist!" I exclaimed softly. "What's the matter down there?"

Handforth looked up.

"Nothing's the matter," he replied calmly. "We've captured the bear—that's all."

"You've—done—what?" I yelled.

"We've captured the bear——"

"I suppose you're trying to pull my leg?" I exclaimed.

"You can believe it, or you can do the other thing. It doesn't matter to me," said Handforth carelessly. "A car's coming over from Calistowe now, and it'll soon be here. We've had quite a bit of excitement down the lane."

"Rather!" said Church.

Several other juniors had heard my voice, and they, too, came to the window and looked out. After five minutes had elapsed, practically the whole Remove was awake, and shouts went on continuously.

Handforth & Co. found themselves bombarded with questions, and they also had to deal with sundry prefects and one or two masters, who sallied out to know what on earth was the matter.

"Of course, I've got a way with animals!" shouted Handforth, addressing the fellows at the dormitory window. "Any of you chaps wouldn't have been able to capture the bear at all. But he was quietened when he saw me——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You mean he fainted at the sight of your face!" grinned Pitt.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It was my eagle eye!" roared Handforth warmly. "You know as well as I do that it's possible to tame a savage tiger if you can only fix it with a steady

eye. As soon as this bear came up I punched it on the nose, and showed it quite plainly that I was master."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Rats!" yelled Hubbard. "We don't believe that yarn!"

"It's true enough!" roared Church. "Handy gave the bear a terrific swipe."

Neither of the juniors thought it necessary to add that Handforth had been under a mistaken impression when he landed out so forcibly at the bear. That part of the story might just as well be left out.

"He got that punch on the nose, and it kind of staggered him a bit," said Handforth, glad of the opportunity of reaping the glory. "He seemed quite dazed, and when I spoke to him sharply he was as obedient as a dog. We gave the old chap a couple of sandwiches, and then he followed us home. But it was only because of my powerful eyes that the bear didn't maul us to pieces."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Somehow, the juniors didn't take Handforth seriously.

"You needn't believe me unless you like. I don't care!" roared the leader of Study D. "But I can tell you the bear fairly took our breath away for a minute, and if we hadn't had nerves of steel it would have been all up. He might have killed all three of us. It was a terrible ordeal!"

"Don't you believe it, young gents!" said a pleasant voice.

Handforth turned round, and found Hammond, the keeper, had come up, and he was leading his charge on a stout cord. In the excitement of telling the yarn, Handforth had not been aware of the arrival of the motor-car.

"Oh, so you've got the bear, then?" said Handy.

"Yes, young gent; and I understand it's because of your sharpness he's here," said the keeper. "It needed a bit of nerve, too, to bring old Hindy up to the school in the middle of the night."

"It was a terribly risky business!" said Handforth.

Hammond grinned.

"Not on your life!" he said. "Hindy never hurt a fly, and I don't suppose he ever will. He's the most harmless old chap that ever lived. You could put your hand in his mouth and he wouldn't bite you. Meek ain't the word!"

Everybody roared with laughter.

After all Handforth's remarks about the terrible danger and the frightful risks, it was certainly humorous to hear that the bear was quite harmless. True enough, the keepers had circulated the news broadcast that the bear was not dangerous. But the country people did not believe this story. A bear was a bear, and therefore a peril.

"There's a little matter about a reward, young gent," went on the keeper. "I haven't got it with me now, of course, but it'll be sent on as soon as the boss bears particulars. If you'll just give me your name and address, I'll see that the gov'nor deals with the matter the first thing to-morrow."

Handforth gave the necessary details, and shortly afterwards Mr. Hammond and the bear took their departure with one or two other people. Hindenburg had not been at liberty for long, but he had caused a great scare in the neighbourhood.

As Handforth & Co. went in they found Dr. Stafford in the lobby, and the Head was looking rather severe.

"Why were you boys in the lane at such an hour?" he demanded.

"We—we—well, the fact is, sir, we—we were there!" said Handforth weakly. "We went out—to—to—why, to capture the bear!"

"Of course, sir!" echoed Church and McClure.

The Head frowned.

"It was not your business to capture the bear, Handforth. And, in any case, you were distinctly forbidden to leave the school premises. Seeing that you have been so successful I will not punish you as I would have done. But you will write me five hundred lines

each for insubordination and disobedience."

"Yes, sir," said Handforth & Co. meekly.

They went to bed feeling that they had got off pretty lightly, considering. Five hundred lines was a pretty stiff impost, but they were to receive ten pounds to act as a kind of balm. It was decidedly worth all the trouble they had taken.

"Ten quid!" said Handforth, as he went upstairs. "That would just come in handy if I knew where my sister was. I expect she's on the rocks somewhere in London. Ten quid would act as a nice present. But I don't know her address."

"It's a good thing you don't!" said Church.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we don't want you to send all that ten quid to your sister—we're entitled to our share of it," declared Church firmly. "I reckon it ought to be split up evenly, if you ask me."

"I've got a better idea than that," put in McClure. "We can reckon that we've gained the honour for the Remove, and I think it would be pretty decent if we used the tenner to stand the Form a terrific feed. Do you agree?"

"I'm game," said Church.

"Oh, well, of course, it's up to me to fall into line," said Handforth. "I suppose it's the best way to spend the money—there can't be any jealousy, anyhow. At the same time, I wish I knew where my sister was. Since she ran away and got married against the pater's wish I haven't seen a sign of her."

"Oh, you'll see her one day!" said Church. "Come on in!"

They had reached the Remove dormitory, and the juniors gave them a terrific reception—particularly when they heard that the whole Form was to be treated to a feed. Handforth was not chipped any longer, but praised in the most generous terms.

"Where do you reckon you'll hold the feed to-morrow—in the Common-room or in the lecture hall?" asked Hubbard.

"Oh, anywhere," said Handforth. "I think it would be a pretty good idea to have a picnic on the river—at tea-time. It'll be a bit of a novelty, and we shall all enjoy ourselves just the same."

"Yes, rather! Good wheeze!"

The juniors quite agreed upon the suggestion. But discussion was soon put to an end by the arrival of the prefects. And once more the Remove went to its slumbers.

Meanwhile, Mr. Clement Heath had returned to St. Frank's from his mysterious mission at Edgemore, and he still had the diamond in his possession. He had not yet made up his mind

what to do with it. But had the Remove master only known, that precious stone was to cause him no little trouble in the near future—trouble in which the Comte de Plessigny played a big part.

The next day the ten pounds reward arrived for Handforth. Needless to say, the Remove turned up to a man to the big picnic held by the river, and a "gorgeous" time was had by everyone—particularly Patty Little.

But during the day Handforth was in a thoughtful mood. It was not his sister that engaged his thoughts. He was thinking about Mr. Heath. But little did Handy guess the true explanation of the strange behaviour of the mystery master of St. Frank's.

THE END



Next month: *"THE SCHOOLMASTER SPY!"*—a thrill-packed long yarn of the further adventures of the mysterious Mr. Heath, the Comte de Plessigny and, of course, Handforth & Co. Look out for this great number.—Editor.

HUMAN FROGS

A FEW years ago fifteen-year-old Adolf Kiefer, a youngster who lived on the shores of Lake Michigan, went for a swim. He waded in, turned on his back, and proceeded to lever his way through the water with a stroke he'd made up himself. It was, in fact, the only one he could do.

When he came out he found a man waiting to speak to him. "Where did you get that stroke, son?" asked the stranger. And then, when he had been told that young Kiefer had invented it himself: "How would you like to train for competition swimming?"

The stranger turned out to be a famous coach. He took Kiefer in hand, but he didn't teach him any new strokes. Instead, he worked at the one the youngster already knew, showing him how to get more and more out of it.

Back-stroke Swimmer No. 1.

The results were sensational. Within a year Kiefer had won the State Back-stroke Championship, the All-America Back-stroke Championship, and been nominated to represent the United States at the Olympic Games. There he beat the world, and filled the result sheets with world's records.

Kiefer's stroke is a new one. Somehow he levers himself half out of the water and kicks his way along in a smother of spray.

But it isn't the only new one. Within a season John Higgins, a New York schoolboy, had set the swimming world by the ears with a new stroke which he called "Butterfly." This was a form of breast-stroke, but instead of pushing his arms forward through the water, Higgins continued his stroke till his hands were against his hips, and then brought both arms up out of the

water, and over. It is terrifically tiring—not even the best-trained swimmer can do more than a hundred yards—but it is also terrifically fast. The first time Higgins produced his stroke, he did a hundred yards in 65 seconds. Try to find a crawl swimmer of your acquaintance who can touch 70!

The Under-water Speedman.

And now meet Johnny Schmeller, the human frog! Schmeller entered for a breast-stroke race at Michigan against three of the crack swimmers of this stroke. The gun went, and all four tense bodies catapulted into the water.

A moment later three heads broke water and went surging up the bath. But where was Schmeller? The other competitors believed he was plugging along behind them, and they must have got the shock of their lives when he suddenly popped up right at the other end of the bath. He had been swimming under water.

A quick turn, a snatched breath, and Schmeller had vanished again, to complete his second length the same way as the first, and win easily.

But perhaps the queerest of all the new strokes is the "Dolphin," an entirely new way of getting along in the water invented by yet another Yank fish named Jack Sieg.

Sieg's stroke has a double over-arm, both arms coming forward out of the water simultaneously, followed by an ordinary breast-stroke movement. But the legs do not kick. They remain close together, while the swimmer wriggles his body from side to side like an eel.

Sieg has covered a hundred yards in a minute dead using his stroke, and thinks he can go faster still. The old-fashioned crawl exponents will have to look to their laurels.

TWO MORE GREAT SCHOOL YARNS TO READ, CHUMS!

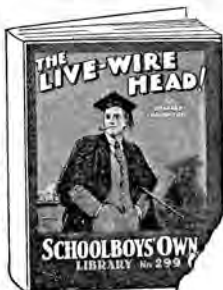


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