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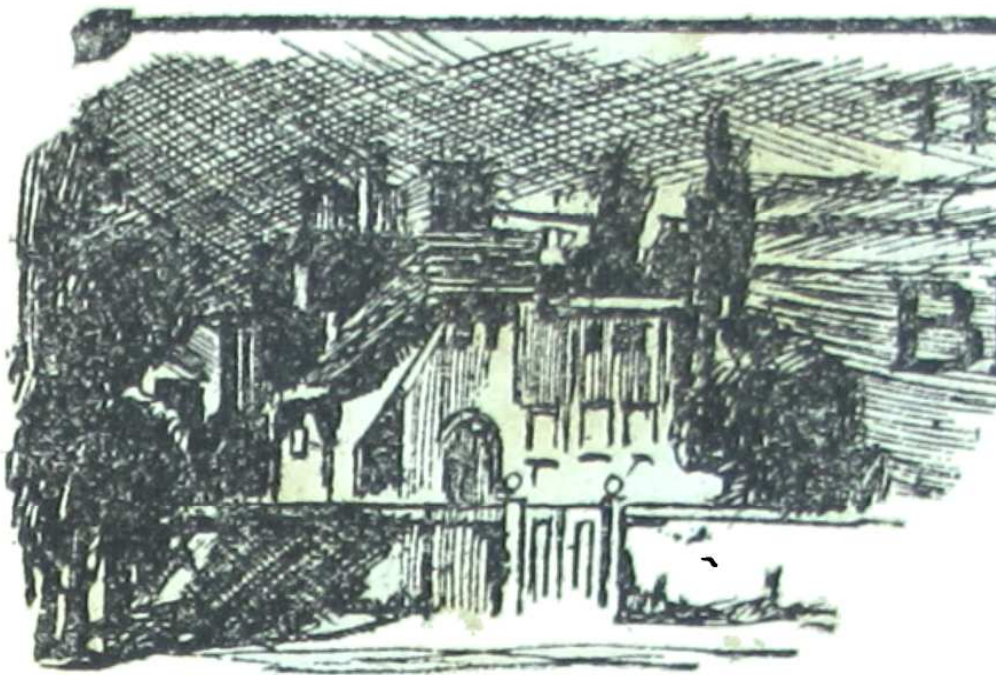
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THE MYSTERY OF THE BRIDGE HOUSE

Another Tale of **NELSON LEE & NIPPER AT ST. FRANK'S COLLEGE.**
Set down by **NIPPER**, and Prepared for
Publication by the Author of "The

Yellow Shadow," "Nipper at St. Frank's," "The Verdict of the School,"
"The Messages of Mystery," and Other Stories.

AUTHOR'S NOTE.

Nelson Lee and Nipper are at St. Frank's College for a period of several months. Having incurred the hatred of the Fu Chang Tong, a murderous Chinese Secret Society, Nelson Lee and Nipper have been forced to adopt new identities until the time of peril has passed. Nelson Lee is a Housemaster, and Nipper a junior schoolboy. Nipper himself writes of the events which took place during his life as a member of the Remove Form in the Ancient House at St. Frank's.

CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH FULLWOOD AND CO. SHINE AS
ROAD-HOGS.

WHEN I sat down to write I wasn't quite certain whether I should start on one of our adventures at St. Frank's or whether I should make it a detective yarn, pure and simple.

You see, I've got such a terrific pile of notes of all descriptions, that there's grave danger of my hair going white. But I suppose I ought to be glad, really. I've got all my plots at my finger-tips—and they have the advantage of being true records of Nelson Lee's detective cases.

With regard to the St. Frank's episode, however, I took most of the notes myself. So, to prevent any further waste of time—and ink—I'll get busy on a St. Frank's yarn. The mystery of the Bridge House is, in a way, as much a detective story as any in my "Note-Book."

The affair happened in the neighbourhood of St. Frank's, not long after that

queer business with Frederick Charlson, the ex-convict—who mistook the gov'nor for somebody else, and tried to drop him into the river, with a huge chunk of stone tied to his feet as a kind of make-weight.

Sir Lancelot Montgomery Tregellis-West (in one word, Montie) and Tommy Watson and I were out cycling. It was a lovely evening, with scarcely a breath of wind, and the sky flecked with fleecy, wispy clouds, golden and red in the sunset.

We'd been round by way of Caistowe Bay and Shingle Head, and then home through the town of Bannington. We were now on the hilly, winding stretch between Bannington and St. Frank's. There was plenty of time before locking-up, and so we weren't hurrying particularly.

"I've been thinkin', dear fellows," remarked Sir Montie, as we jogged along a straight stretch. "I've been thinkin' quite hard—I have, really. It's not often, I think, I'll admit, but when I do——"

"What have you been thinking of, ass?" asked Watson.

"Cyclin'," said Sir Montie.

"That's a fat lot to think about!" I chuckled. "Isn't your powerful brain capable of rising to greater heights?"

"Dear Benny, I said cyclin'—not flyin'," replied Tregellis-West languidly. "Cyclin's all very well, begad, but it's such a botherin' sag, you know. These hills fairly take it out of a fellow—"

"You lazy slacker!" interrupted Tommy indignantly. "Do you call these pimples hills? I could ride up 'em backwards!"

"So could I, dear fellow—if I was sittin' in a motor-car," smiled Sir Montie. "An', speaking of cars, I'm brought back to my original theme—"

"Your which?" asked Watson.

"Theme, old boy."

"Theme to me that you're—"

I couldn't get any further, for Sir Montie wobbled giddily, and nearly bashed into me. He looked very unwell.

"Bennett, dear man, pray refrain from such awful puns; I felt quite faint for a second—I did, really," he exclaimed reproachfully. "I'd better finish what I was goin' to say before you think of some more. Cyclin's a rippin' sport, I'd feel over so much more comfortable if there was an engine somewhere underneath. I think I shall have to go in for a motor-bike, you know!"

"Well, you're not far off the mark there," I admitted, with thoughts of my own ten-horse sidecar combination in my mind. How often had Nelson Lee and I whizzed up Gray's Inn Road on that? I almost sighed.

"Motors are rotten!" declared Tommy Watson decidedly. "You're an ass, Montie. Motors spoil your clobber, and they cause other people choking fits, and—Look out, yo cripples, there's one of the beasts coming along now!"

We had just mounted a rise, and there was a nice little slope to coast down on the other side. But we couldn't see far, because of a corner. We heard the sound of the approaching car, plainly, however. It was evidently buzzing some.

"This lane's narrow," I said. "Let's get into single file."

I was leading, and I drew to the near side of the road. But at that very moment a large touring car came shoot-

ing round the bend on the off side, which, of course, was our near side.

There was no time for warnings. I managed to let out a yell, and dived clean into the hedge. From behind me came a crash and a series of gasps. The big car swooped past, its occupant roaring with laughter.

I just caught one glimpse of them before the dust swallowed the car up. I saw the grinning face of Fullwood, of the Remove. I saw Gulliver, too, and Bell and Merrell and Noye. In fact, the whole gang of Nuts were evidently out joy-riding. Under the guidance of Ralph Leslie Fullwood, the Nuts of St. Frank's were shining brilliantly as expert road-hogs.

Fullwood and Co. had recognized us, and they were vastly amused at our smash. For, on looking round, I saw a curious mixture close against the hedge. It seemed to consist of human legs, bicycle wheels, feet, and stinging-nettles.

"Great Scott! I thought I heard a crash," I gasped, running back. "Did you chaps have a spill?"

A dusty face came out of the nettles. "Dear boy," it murmured weakly, "this isn't a spill, you know. Tommy an' I are tryin' to find out how much sting these nettles have got in them. Just a little diversion, you know. Begad, am I in one piece, or in fifteen?"

Tommy Watson came to the surface, so to speak.

"The rotters!" he gasped. "Did you take the number of the car—"

"They were Fullwood's blackguardly crowd," I said hotly.

"My only hat! We'll make 'em sit up for this!" said Tommy, scrambling to his feet painfully. "Just look at my jigger—just look at it!"

"That's what I am doing," I said. "It looks like the wreck of a Zeppelin on a small scale. Hallo! Look down there, my sons!"

I was staring down the hill at the speeding motor-car. The road wasn't dusty down there, and I could see the automobile clearly. Tommy saw it, too. Poor old Sir Montie was trying to get his foot out of Watson's back wheel.

"There's another car coming along that side lane," I said quickly. "We can see it all right—but Fullwood can't. And the other driver can't see Fullwood."

The reckless idiot! There's going to be a bad smash down there!"

We forgot our own troubles for the moment.

As I had said, we were at the top of a rise. Looking down, it was possible to see the white ribbon of a small by-road which branched into this one about a quarter of a mile away. The roads had high hedges, however, and neither driver could see the other. But Tommy and I, on the hill, noticed that the two cars would reach the cross-roads at about the same second.

The unknown car was travelling sedately, but Fullwood was "blinding." If any accident happened it would be Fullwood's fault entirely.

The whole thing happened in a few seconds, of course. I had seen that Sir Montie wasn't really hurt, and so I gazed rather anxiously down the road. I didn't want St. Frank's to be brought into disrepute by the "road-hogging" of the Nuts.

"Great pip!" gasped Tommy. "It's a smash all right!"

How the disaster was averted I never knew, but it wasn't through any skill of Fullwood's. The two cars seemed to meet, and I expected to hear a dull crash, followed by shouts of agony.

But this didn't happen.

Instead, the second car—which was a small two-seater—ran deliberately into the ditch, its driver half smothered in the overhanging branches of the trees. The car listed heavily to port, like a torpedoed steamer.

Fullwood and Co., in their own car, careered along in triumph. It had been a very narrow squeak, and an accident had only been averted, so far as I could see, by the skill of the other driver. I can't think how he stopped his car so quickly. The atmosphere was very clear, and we could see distinctly.

"The dangerous rotters!" said Tommy Watson savagely. "Just look at my jigger! You ass, Montie, you won't do that wheel any good by sticking your foot through it!"

Sir Montie was still struggling to get free.

"I'm deserted," he said painfully. "I've been left to struggle alone. Dear boys, you're not really—you've abandoned me shockingly. I didn't stick my foot through your back wheel on pur-

pose, Tommy boy. Accidents will happen, you know."

"They're sure to, when hogs like Fullwood go rushing along these narrow roads," said Watson warmly. "Lend a hand with this fathead, Bennett."

It seemed rather unkind to call poor Montie names; he'd suffered the most, anyhow. But Tommy was upset, far more so than Tregellis-West, in fact, Sir Montie was quite serene, as usual. Nothing short of an earthquake could upset his urbanity—and I don't believe that would, even!

We extricated his foot, and found that, barring a few scratches and bruises, he was unhurt. Watson had come off just as lightly. But his machine was more than slightly bent. The back wheel wouldn't turn, one of the pedal-cranks was badly twisted, and the handle-bars had tried to twist themselves into knots.

Montie's elegant bike, by a curious chance, was hardly damaged at all. He surveyed it with satisfaction.

"Quality tells, dear fellows," he smiled. "Hardly a scratch, begad! An' Tommy's bike's nearly smashed up. These cheap articles—"

"Cheap!" roared Watson. "That bike cost the pater ten quid!"

"Mine was ten guineas," said Sir Montie serenely. "Just see what a difference ten bob makes. It'll cost you a term's pocket-money in repairs—"

"I'm not going to pay it!" declared Tommy Watson firmly. "I'll have the bike put right, and have the bill sent to Fullwood. If he refuses to pay I'll jolly well tell old Alvy all about it! That won't be sneaking!"

I had been looking down the hill, and I turned.

"Never mind Fullwood now," I said. "That poor chap down there seems to be in trouble. He can't shift that car alone. I vote we go along and lend him a hand. It's up to us to show that St. Frank's chaps ain't all rotters."

"I can't ride that bike!" howled Watson.

"Wheel it, then!" I said. "We'll help you, old scout. I'm afraid you'll have to carry the back part, though!"

We proceeded down the hill slowly. We were in no particular hurry to get back to the school, for there was plenty of time before locking-up. And we naturally felt that it was only playing the game to help the stranded motorist.

We could see him, standing in the middle of the road, shaking his fist in the direction taken by Fullwood and Co. He was probably making a few loud and nasty remarks concerning road-hogs, but we couldn't hear them.

And when we finally turned the corner into the side lane, we saw the stranger vainly shoving away at the back of his car. He couldn't shift it an inch, and Sir Montie grinned rather unfeelingly.

"We're comrades in misfortune, dear fellows," he murmured. "We're— Oh, begad!"

I knew why Montie had stopped speaking. The motorist had turned his head, and he was glaring at us furiously. The expression on his face wasn't in the least reassuring, and I half regretted coming along.

We little realised, then, that this was to be but the first of several meetings; and that some of the others were to be far more dramatic than this.

CHAPTER II

WE ACT THE PART OF GOOD SAMARITANS—
AND THEN FALL INTO THE HANDS OF THE
PHILISTINES!

THE motorist was a man of about fifty, I judged—rather short but more than usually broad. His hair was tinged with grey, and he was clean shaven. But it was the expression and set of his face that I didn't like.

I don't suppose Tregellis-West and Watson noticed anything particular; but I'd been with Nelson Leo for years, and I'd assisted the famous detective in all sorts of cases. I'm pretty capable of judging a face accurately.

And I didn't like this stranger's face in the least. His lips were thick, and his eyes pale blue—that unpleasant blue which one instinctively distrusts. My impression of the man wasn't at all favourable. But impressions aren't always right, and we were only going to give him a hand with his car, after all.

"Shall we give you a push, sir?" I asked cheerfully.

"I suppose you belong to the same school as those infernal young black-

guards in that car?" said the motorist, with savage harshness. "No doubt you have come here to jeer at me—to gloat over the work of your wretched companions. If you don't run away at once I'll thrash the three of you!"

"Dear fellows, we're not wanted!" murmured Sir Montie in a pained voice. "Why is life so unjust? Why should our intentions be so sadly misunderstood? But, somehow, I don't think we're going to run away—and I'm quite certain we sha'n't be thrashed."

"Didn't you hear what I said, sir?" I asked, keeping my temper. "We offered to give a hand with the car—"

The stranger snorted. "With the intention, probably, of pushing the car further into the ditch!" he snapped. "You young hounds—"

"Hold on!" interjected Tommy Watson warmly. "I don't think you've got any right to speak in that way, sir. And you shouldn't judge us by the actions of those cads who were in that car. They nearly ran us down—smashed my bike up, anyway—and it's not likely we're pals of theirs!"

The motorist looked at Tommy's bike and nodded.

"Perhaps I was hasty," he said grudgingly. "I'm sorry, boys, but I'm in a most heated rage. It is a scandalous state of things that such boys should be allowed to race over the countryside in this manner, to the danger of all and sundry. Thank you for your offer—although I don't suppose you can do much!"

The old chap had climbed down somewhat, and our angry feelings subsided. He had reason to be in a paddy, and I don't suppose we could altogether blame him for venting it on us.

"Come on, you chaps," I said briskly.

We laid our machines down, and went to the rear of the car. Here we set to work with a will, and heaved away in vain for about a minute. The two-seater, although small, was one of those solid, heavy cars, and it would not budge.

"Confound it!" rasped the stranger. "It's no good, boys. You can't do anything. If you are going to Bellton, perhaps you will deliver a note for me at the blacksmith's. That man has a horse, I believe—"

"We don't want a horse, sir," I interrupted.

"Don't be absurd, boy!" snapped the other. "Haven't we tried to shift the car? It's quite useless."

Sir Montie adjusted his gold-rimmed pince-nez carefully.

"We mustn't lose patience, dear fellows," he said. "There some sayin' or other that if you don't succeed the first time it's rather a good idea to have another shot—or somethin' to that effect. I may be stupid, but wouldn't it be rather advisable to gaze underneath the beastly old car?"

"Underneath?" exclaimed our companion in misfortune, glaring. "Don't be a fool, boy! What's the good of looking underneath?"

Sir Montie beamed good-naturedly.

"There might be a brick, or somethin', against one of the wheels," he suggested. "An' I'm not really a fool, sir. Some of my ideas are quite brilliant. In fact, I shine occasionally."

The motorist said something under his breath, and waved his hand.

"You'd better be off to the village," he said brusquely.

But Sir Montie was keen on having a look at the ditch—and I thought it would be just as well, too. We weren't at all inclined to go an inch out of our way to help the man. There was no excuse for his coarseness now. But we didn't like giving up the job so easily.

Sir Montie and I dived into the ditch—which was perfectly dry—and bent down close to the wheels. It was gloomy there, but I saw Tregellis-West grinning. He pointed downwards.

"All that energy wasted, Benny boy," he murmured. "I wonder how many pounds of 'push' we put into the bally car? We couldn't expect to heave it over this lot, could we? It's always wise to investigate matters, you know."

Montie was pointing to a huge rounded stone, about a foot high, which was wedged right against the back wheel, and actually jammed against the footboard. We both lugged at it with all our strength, and managed to pull it free. Then we emerged.

"Well?" demanded the car-owner tartly. "Have you found a pebble in front of one of the wheels—or was it a blade of grass?"

"A pebble, dear sir!" replied Tregellis-West, with perfect serenity. "If you care to crouch under these trees, you'll see it—without the aid of a micro-

scope. Pebbles vary in size, don't they, Benny? I believe this one must weigh about a hundredweight!"

"The boy's a fool!" snarled the motorist.

"I wonder why people will call me that?" asked Sir Montie wonderingly. "Perhaps it's because they know a good deal about fools. An' it certainly isn't polite. It makes a fellow feel that he isn't appreciated, begad!"

"You're a bit too free with your remarks, sir," I said sharply. "We're doing our best for you, and you do nothing but slang us the whole time. Montie's not such a fool as you seem to think, because he was absolutely right. We found a huge boulder against the back wheel, blocking it."

"Oh, indeed!" snapped the other. "Then, perhaps, we shall be able to shift the car now!"

Sir Montie and Tommy and I gave a huge heave just as the motorist was getting ready to push. The car shot forward with surprising ease, and our doubtful friend missed his hold and went sprawling. It was rather good. He'd asked for it—and he'd got it!

"You young ruffians!" he bellowed, scrambling to his feet, dusty and angry.

"It moved that time, didn't it, sir?" grinned Sir Montie.

The man had no answer at all. Considering his overhearing attitude previously, the least he could do now was to admit that his own judgment had been entirely wrong. But he didn't do anything of the sort. He just helped us to push the car out of the ditch—quite an easy task now.

The two-seater wasn't hurt in the least, and, without a word, the stranger turned the crank and started the engine. Then he jumped into his seat, and I thought that he was going off without even thanking us.

Just as he was about to slip the clutch in he fumbled in one of his pockets, and then withdrew his hand, holding something between his fingers.

"Thank you, boys—you may divide this between you!" he said sourly.

He tossed a small coin over to us, and it fell among the grass. The next second the car started, and turned the corner. The tone in which he had thanked us had left an unpleasant impression upon our minds. He certainly begrudged the expression of gratitude.

and he had thrown the coin at us as though we had been a trio of ragged street urchins.

"Begad!" said Sir Montie, in distress. "We didn't want this sort of thing, dear boys. It's appalling; that's what it is. Fancy bein' given a half-sov. to divide between the three of us. Anyway, Tommy boy, it'll go towards repairin' your long-sufferin' jigger."

We could hear the car buzzing along right in the distance now, and I bent down and fumbled in the grass.

"The old rotter!" I grumbled. "We didn't want his beastly tin, anyhow. And fancy chucking it at us in that contemptuous way—after we'd got him out of the hole, too! Where did that half-sovereign drop to? I'm blessed if I can find it," I added, searching the grass carefully. "Rather queer, too, chucking gold about in war-time. I should have thought—Hallo! What the thunder—"

I stopped abruptly, and gasped.

For the coin I picked up wasn't a half-sovereign—it wasn't gold at all.

"What is it?" grinned Sir Montie.

"By gad—a mere tanner!"

"Sixpence!" roared Tommy. "Oh, hold me up, Montie—"

"Half a minute!" I chuckled, in spite of myself. "It's not even a sixpence, my sons—it's a giddy threepenny-bit!"

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Watson weakly.

"We can't grumble, dear fellows," smiled Sir Montie. "That's a penny each, anyhow—he told us to divide it, didn't he? It's amazin' to me how some people can be so shockin'ly extravagant!"

Tommy had collapsed into Montie's arms, and I couldn't altogether blame him. We didn't want the old rotter's money, anyhow; and, in fact, we were all rather relieved to find that the gift was what it was. I mentally decided to give it to one of the village children as we passed through. Somehow, I didn't like to keep money which had been given in a grudging spirit—no matter how small the amount. Besides, we hadn't pushed the car out of the ditch for the sake of a tip. There's such a thing as doing a good turn for the mere satisfaction of it.

"It's just about the limit," I said, smiling.

"A giddy insult!" declared Tommy,

recovering rapidly. "Threepence! I wonder who the old idiot is? I'm jolly sorry we came down to help him now. Do you think I want his rotten penny?"

"I don't wish to be a pessimist, dear fellow, but my watch tells me that we've only got about twenty minutes to get to the school," said Tregellis-West. "We don't want to be late for callin' over, do we? And the gates will be locked by the time we arrive, if we're not careful. Old Warren's a good porter, but he lacks consideration sadly. He doesn't seem to realise—"

"Never mind what Warren doesn't realise," I interrupted briskly. "We shall have to put our best foot foremost if we're going to arrive in time. In fact, I don't think we'll be able to do it."

"You two chaps ride on," said Watson. "No need for us all to be late—"

"Begad! We're not going to desert you, Tommy boy."

"I'll tell you what," I put in. "The village isn't far, and you'd better take your jigger straight to the cycle shop, Tommy. Montie and I will buzz to St. Frank's, and then I'll come back, trailing Montie's. I shall meet you in the village, I expect, and then we can both ride to the school."

"Can't be did!" said Tommy, shaking his head. "Not enough time."

"Plenty," I declared. "We'll get to St. Frank's in seven minutes, riding hard, and the rest's easy. You walk straight to the village, Tommy. We'll cut down the lane. Look out for me in the High Street."

There wasn't any time to be lost, so Sir Montie and I hastened off. We didn't want to get lines, and we couldn't very well explain to Mr. Alvington, the Housemaster of the Ancient House (in other words, my worthy guv'nor, Nelson Lee) without giving Fullwood & Co. away. And we couldn't sneak like that.

Tregellis-West and I pedalled up the hill quickly, intending to turn off by the short cut at the foot of the next slope. But, just before we got to the turning, we heard a hum behind us.

"That's Fullwood's car again, for a cert.," I exclaimed, glancing back.

"The Nuts have had their joy-ride, and they're hurrying back to the school. The garage driver is waiting for them there, I suppose."

Fullwood & Co. often swanked in this way on a fine evening. Fullwood had more money than he knew what to do with, and he loved display of all kinds. Gadding about the countryside in a whacking great motor-car was one of his chief pastimes. And his nutty pals, of course, made no objections to accompanying him.

This time Sir Montie and I drew close against the hedge. Fullwood, who was driving, was quite capable of shooting past us with hardly an inch to spare, in the hope that we should have another spill. That was Fullwood's little way. Behind me I heard Fullwood shouting something to his companions—for the car was, indeed, the one that had caused us so much trouble. I didn't hear the words, but the other Nuts let out a yell of merriment. I guessed that they had spotted us.

"Look out, Sir Montie!" I yelled quickly.

Fullwood's car, however, kept well to the centre of the road, and I thought that it was going to pass right by. But the brakes were suddenly applied, and it came to a stop about twenty yards ahead of us.

The occupants tumbled out one after the other—seven of them, altogether. Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell, of Study A; Merrell and Marriott and Noys, of Study G; and Fullerton, of the Third. Fullerton belonged to the College House, and he was a regular scamp. He was old enough to be in the Fifth, and big enough, but his laziness was only equalled by his blackguardism.

"Collar 'em!" shouted Fullwood viciously.

"Begad!" gasped Sir Montie. "We're done, Benny!"

We were taken completely at a disadvantage, for we had drawn on to the grass beside the road, and it was impossible to put any speed on at such short notice. The only thing was to dismount and face the Nuts.

But, while we were in the act of dismounting, we were captured.

It was quite hopeless from the start. Four fellows piled on to me, and three on to Montie. We weren't superhuman, and we couldn't withstand that onslaught. Besides, we were attacked from behind.

The bicycles went sprawling, and Fullwood and his companions were not at

all particular as to where they put their feet. It looked as though our jiggers were to share the fate of Tommy's.

Ralph Leslie Fullwood hated me like poison. Ever since I had arrived at St. Frank's he had been up against me. Once or twice he had nearly caused serious trouble because of his savage antipathy. The majority of the fellows in the Remove had nothing but contempt for the Nuts, but Fullwood was pleased to be contemptuous of them. But he paid special attention to Dick Bennett & Co., of Study C—that is, Tregellis-West, Watson and myself. I'm Nipper, really, but at St. Frank's I'd adopted the name of Dick-Bennett. In the same way, Nelson Leo was now Mr. Alvington. There wasn't any sense in concealing ourselves in the school unless we altered our names.

Fullwood, as I said, paid special attention to me, and whenever he saw a chance of playing a particularly mean trick, he seized upon it with gusto. He saw such a chance now, for Sir Montie and I were at a disadvantage.

And in less than a minute we were flat on our backs in the grass, held down by many hands—and feet—and Fullwood & Co. were chuckling hugely over their triumph. At least, they called it a triumph.

Ralph Leslie Fullwood gazed down upon us with great satisfaction.

"This, my cheerful kids," he said pleasantly, "is where you get it in the neck!"

"Hard!" grinned Gulliver.

And there was a fresh yell of laughter from the noble Nuts.

CHAPTER III.

IN WHICH WE SPEND SEVERAL HOURS IN VERY RESTRICTED QUARTERS, WITH SPIDERS, EARWIGS, AND OTHER CHOICE INSECTS FOR COMPANY—THEN A QUEER THING HAPPENS.

SIR MONTIE sighed. "Life is hard!" he exclaimed sadly. "Benny, old boy, we're in the hands of the Philistines—or perhaps it would be better to say the Huns. There's no tellin' what will happen to us now."

Fullwood grinned. "You'll find out soon enough," he said with a vicious note in his voice.

"I've been waitin' to get my own back on you cads for weeks. Now I've got you fairly on the hop. There'll be strange rumours about the disappearance of two Removites to-night!"

"Begad! He's goin' to kill us!" said Sir Montie, looking pained. "That's rather hard lines, isn't it—"

"Tie 'em up," interrupted Fullwood, addressing his companions. "Yank off their belts—they'll do for their ankles."

Our belts were duly yanked off, and improvised as straps to bind our ankles together. Scarves were then used to tie our wrists behind our backs. After that we were bundled ignominiously into the car. The Nuts were all grinning with delight. They had no intention of making us disappear for good and all—as Montie had humorously suggested—but there was certainly some caddish wheeze afoot.

I had been hoping that Tommy would come along in time to witness our discomfiture, but the car was off at once, Sir Montie and I being nearly smothered beneath the pile of juniors. Our bikes, I had noticed, had been roughly slung behind the hedge. Watson would know nothing about the affair.

The car went on towards the village, but turned up a little lane which skirted Bellton Wood. And it came to a stop when we were in a secluded spot, away from all observation.

"We shall have to buck up," remarked Merrell anxiously. "Only about twelve minutes before locking up, fully."

"Oh, we'll do it," said Fullwood. "We sha'n't be more than five minutes here, and that'll leave us plenty of time to do the half mile to the school comfortably. Sling those rotters out!"

Sir Montie and I were grasped by many hands. We couldn't offer the slightest resistance, for we were bound hand and foot. And yelling wasn't a bit of good, because there was no house or cottage within sight. And the dense mass of the wood hid the village and the school near by.

"Bring 'em along," said Ralph Leslie, with a chuckle. "No need to be very gentle—we're in a hurry."

I noticed that Fullwood wasn't doing any work himself. He stalked along in front, leading the way between the trees. Montie and I were half-carried, half-dragged, in the rear.

When we had proceeded about two hundred yards into the wood we came to a small clearing. On the edge of this stood a huge old oak tree. I'd noticed it before; it must have been hundreds of years old, and the trunk was as big round as three ordinary trees put together.

"We'll never get 'em in!" grumbled Gulliver.

"Rats!" said Fullwood. "You an' Merrell an' Noys buzz up into the tree, and then we'll hoist the cads up, one at a time."

Sir Montie began to look languidly alarmed.

"Are you goin' to drop us into the hollow oak, Fullwood?" he asked.

"Begad! What a fate! It's all up, Benny. We're doomed!"

"Is this tree hollow, then?" I asked grimly.

"Didn't you know?" grinned Marriott.

"You haven't been at St. Frank's long enough to know all the little landmarks, you cad. This oak tree is as hollow as a reed inside. I know all about it, because Christine and his rotten lot dropped me into the trunk once, and I had to stop there for hours."

"Now, then—buck up," said Fullwood.

The three juniors had climbed into the tree by this time. A rope was passed over my shoulders and under my arms. Then I was swung off my feet and hauled up into the tree. With three fellows above pulling, and three below hoisting, this was quickly accomplished. I couldn't do a thing to help myself, for struggling would only have earned me some vicious jabs and cuffs.

About ten feet from the ground there were some heavy branches, which formed a kind of platform. And here, in the great trunk, I saw a wide, gaping hole. Without ceremony my feet were thrust through, and my body followed.

Then, without the least attempt to be gentle, I was lowered right down into utter darkness. The trunk was huge, and was quite hollow inside, without a crack anywhere. When my feet touched the soft, spongy mass of rotten wood at the bottom, I seemed to be in a deep pit, with a little circle of dull light gleaming in one of the walls high above me.

The rope was pulled clear of my body—it had been double—and a minute later I saw the little circle of light obscured. Then Sir Montie came down with a rush.

The rotters had done it purposely, so that Montie would crash on me. But I pushed against the side, and Montie slid down close against me, gasping.

We were fairly wedged, with scarcely enough room to breathe. The rope was again pulled up, and we heard a dull, far-away cackle of laughter. The confined tree-trunk shut off nearly all the sound.

"This is the limit, Benny, old man," said Tregellis-West pantingly. "By gad, we'll make Fullwood sit up for this! My trousers are ruined, and my eye-glasses have vanished—"

"All serene down there?" came a sneering voice from above.

"You rotter!" I gasped.

"This is just a reminder that I'm still leader of the Fossils," sneered Fullwood, with great enjoyment. "I don't stand check from outsiders of your brand. You can't get out of this without assistance—and you won't get that for a long while. I'm not going to say a word until bed-time."

"You cad!" I said hotly. "You can't leave us here until then—"

"Can't I? You'll jolly well see!" sneered Fullwood. "At bed-time, when all the prefects and masters are gettin' waxy about you, I'll give the tip to Watson, or another of your pals. See? Watson will break bounds, an' come to your rescue. Dramatic, ain't it? When you turn up, long after bed-time, you'll all get a floggin', and lines. Oh, it's a rippin' wheeze!"

We heard a muffled chuckle, and then Fullwood vanished. Only the dim circle of light showed above us. The Nuts had gone back to the car—to speed to St. Frank's in time for locking up. They'd only just about do it.

"The awful rotters!" I said thickly. "We're diddled, Montie. There's no getting out of this tree. We're wedged—we're absolutely helpless."

Sir Montie shifted slightly.

"The fortunes of war, dear fellow," he murmured. "I suppose this is what you'd call a complete defeat, ain't it? Never mind, Benny. Think of the pastin' we'll give those gentle youths later on."

I couldn't help smiling.

"You're a queer card, old son," I said. "Here we are, bound like a couple of prize chickens, utterly helpless, with the

cheery prospect of staying here for hours, and you're as calm as ever."

"No good gettin' wild, Benny," replied Montie languidly. "It's rather cheerin' to hear that we're like a couple of prize chickens. I shouldn't care to resemble one of the shop articles, you know."

I grinned this time. Montie was a wonder.

The whole business—although only a particularly mean trick—reminded me of some of the tight corners the gov'nor and I had been in sometimes. In this case Fullwood was the villain; but he hadn't left us to die. We were simply going to be left in the hollow oak until bed-time. Then Watson would come for us.

There was nothing particularly startling in the affair. But I naturally felt wild. Fullwood and Co. would crow for days. And Montie and I would certainly get into hot water.

That didn't worry me, however. Hot water doesn't hurt me. But I was simply furious over the whole rotten adventure. First of all, Fullwood had smashed up poor old Tommy's bike; now he had bested Montie and I because he had taken an unfair advantage of us. The whole crew of Nuts would crow, of course. But the fellows would know that Fullwood hadn't gained any real victory.

The Fossils and the Monks had House rows occasionally, but it wasn't considered the thing at St. Frank's for fellows belonging to the same House to jape one another. And this wasn't a jape; it was a dirty piece of trickery.

Sir Montie and I belonged to the Ancient House, of course. The Removites, and all juniors generally, of the Ancient House were known as Fossils. Over the other side of the Triangle—in the College House—the Monks held sway.

"Benny, dear fellow," said Montie, out of the darkness.

"Hallo!" I replied.

"I don't like to complain, old boy, but isn't something of yours pressin' against my waistcoat?" he asked gently. "Somethin' that feels like a screw-driver. It's tryin' to bore holes in me, begad!"

I grinned.

"My elbow," I said, shifting with difficulty. "Sorry, old scout. These quar-

ters are so confined that we can hardly move. Ah, that's better. We'll get as comfortable as possible, anyhow."

We had both moved, and now we were almost facing one another. I could hardly see anything of Tregellis-West, for only a very dim, subdued amount of light entered by the hole above. That hole was nearly five feet above our heads.

"Phew! What a squeeze!" I exclaimed, breathing hard. "The air's warm and stuffy, too. Montie, we can't possibly live in this place for more than an hour."

"That's a sad piece of news," said Montie dolefully. "I've often wondered what it would be like to die young—"

"You ass!" I grunted. "I didn't mean literally!"

"Benny — Benny!" he breathed huskily.

"What's the matter?"

"Do you mind blowin' on the left side of my neck?—hard?" asked Sir Montie.

"Blowing on your neck?" I gasped.

"Exactly, dear fellow. There's somethin' crawlin' there—an ant, or an earwig, or somethin' just as horrible. Be a pal, Benny, an' blow it off!" he pleaded.

"It's going on an explorin' tour down my giddy back!"

I blew for all I was worth, but I don't know what the insect was or whether it went down Montie's back. Anyhow, he said that everything was all right, and I was satisfied.

The old tree-trunk was simply full of crawling insects, and this wasn't to be wondered at. Perhaps the darkness was a boon, really.

So far as I could see, there was nothing to do except await deliverance. We couldn't deliver ourselves, anyhow. The scarves were tied very tightly round our wrists, and the lack of space made it almost impossible to wriggle an inch.

All the same, I was doing my best. After twenty minutes of fruitless effort, I gave it up for a bit. The dusk was thickening now, and hardly a glimmer was entering the hole in the trunk.

"Couldn't we yell, Bennett boy?" asked Sir Montie.

"No good," I replied. "We shouldn't be heard fifty yards off—and the road's over two hundred. And then there's nobody along that lane at this hour. It's only a farm track, I believe."

"That's not very cheerin'," said Tregellis-West. "I don't suppose there'll be a thunderstorm, will there?"

"A thunderstorm?"

"Yes, dear boy. This tree might be struck by lightnin', you know, an' it would split up, an' we should be saved."

"You ass!" I grinned. "What about us?"

"Oh, begad! I'd forgotten that," said Sir Montie. "I suppose we should get struck, too. Well, let's settle down, Dicky. We shall soon hear old Tommy callin' out for us."

"I'm going to get free myself—if I can!" I declared grimly.

But, by the time darkness had fallen in dead earnest, I was still as securely bound as ever. My hands were behind my back, remember, and I was jammed against the hollow trunk. I could hardly shift an inch.

And then I had a brain wave.

"By Jingo!" I yelled.

Sir Montie gave a gasp.

"Great goodness! What's the matter?" he asked, startled, for once, out of his usual serenity. "You startled me, old man."

We had been quiet for several minutes, and I suppose my sudden yell must have been rather unexpected. My mouth was about an inch away from Montie's ear, by the way.

"Sorry!" I said quickly. "Look here, Montie, supposing we turn round? Back to back, I mean? I can't untie my own bonds, but I might be able to yank yours free. What an ass I was not to think of it before."

"It's imposs., dear fellow."

We managed to turn round, however, and I found that I could just fumble with Montie's wrists. I had been so busy trying to get myself free, that I hadn't thought of this plan. I must have been asleep.

But I wasn't successful at first. The minutes sped by, and I still wrestled with the scarf which was knotted round Montie's wrists. Don't forget that we were pressed close together, with our hands behind us.

Gradually, however, I felt the knots giving. It was absolutely necessary to have frequent rests, for the strain was painful. In this way a good hour dragged away. But then, just as I was getting fed up, the last knot was con-

quered, and Sir Montie pulled his hands free.

"Rippin'!" he exclaimed. "Oh, rippin', dear boy! You're a marvel, Benny. I'll have your hands free in no time, begad!"

"No time" proved to be ten minutes, for the knots were extremely stubborn. It was a strenuous task, unstrapping our ankles, but it was done at last. I was feeling elated now. If we could only get to St. Frank's before supper, we shouldn't get anything worse than lines.

Without much trouble, I scrambled on to Montie's shoulders, and grabbed the edge of the hole. Then I hauled myself up, sprawled outside, and breathed the fresh autumn night air. It was very dark and gloomy.

Montie was soon beside me, for I reached down and hauled him up. Then we dropped to the ground, and breathed freely.

"Now, old son, we've got to scoot," I said briskly.

"Let's cut through this corner of the wood," Tregellis-West suggested. "We shall come out at the back of the Bridge House, Benny—you know, that old place just by the river. Old Mr. and Mrs. Freeman live there—a rippin' old couple. We shall strike the road easier by doin' that."

"Right-ho," I said. "Come on."

We set off through the trees, greatly pleased by our escape. At least, we should have the satisfaction of telling the fellows that Fullwood's little plan didn't pan out so well as he had intended.

The wood ended abruptly a little way further along, and a meadow stretched away before us. Right ahead lay the road, and on our left a high brick wall was to be dimly seen. This was the bottom wall of the Bridge House garden. High shadowy trees loomed beyond the wall, and the dull bulk of the house itself.

We started trotting across the grass, our feet making no noise as we ran. Then, suddenly, I grabbed Montie's arm, and brought him to a standstill.

"Shsss!" I whispered. "What's that, over there?"

I pointed, and Tregellis-West looked wonderingly. Then he seemed to stiffen, and grow rigid.

"There's somebody getting over the wall!" he murmured softly.

I nodded in the darkness. Dimly visible against the skyline, we could see a shadowy figure hoisting itself to the top of the wall. It remained there for a second or two, and then abruptly vanished.

Somebody had stealthily dropped into the garden of the Bridge House!

CHAPTER IV.

SIR MONTIE AND I MEET WITH ANOTHER REBUFF FROM THE ILL-TEMPERED MOTORIST—AND THEN I HAVE A WORD WITH THE GUV'NOR—THE REMOVITES ARE INTERESTED.

"THAT'S queer!" I whispered. "What's that fellow doing, Montie?"

"Burglin', I should say," said Sir Montie. "Burglars usually climb over walls an' things, don't they? That's what I've read, anyhow. Begad! And Mr. and Mrs. Freeman are a pretty aged old couple, you know. They live all alone, too, except for two servants; but they're only village girls, and I've heard they go home at night."

"Look here," I said keenly, all my old instincts aroused. "There's no hurry for a few minutes—and it would be rather rich if we collared a giddy burglar. That would make Fullwood look a bit small, eh? I'm going to have a squint over that wall, Montie!"

"Any old thing, dear boy."

We ran lightly across the grass, and arrived at the foot of the wall. The Bridge House was fairly large, and, from a burglar's point of view, was probably a decent "crib." At the same time, I didn't let my imagination run riot. The guv'nor had often warned me against that. In all probability the fellow we had seen was merely some village lout on a pilfering expedition—after vegetables, or something like that.

"Give me a hoist up, old chap," I whispered.

The wall was six feet high, and I was soon standing on Montie's back. I grabbed the bricks, taking care to do so gingerly, in case there was broken glass on it. I'd cut my hand badly like that, once, but I'd never been caught napping again.

The garden was not extra large, as I was able to see almost at once. At least, the house was comparatively near

to the wall; perhaps there were more grounds at the side.

I strained my eyes, and tried to search every yard of the garden. The night was not intensely black, but extremely gloomy. The windows of the Bridge House were all in darkness, and I could just see them, standing out like black squares against the dull expanse of the wall.

And, as I watched, I saw a figure move against one of the lower windows. It paused there, and I realised that my first thought was right off the mark. The man was evidently trying to break into the house. Even as I watched I saw the window sash go slowly upwards, and then the stranger disappeared.

I dropped to the ground.

"See anythin', dear boy?" asked Sir Montie. "I hope so—I do really. My back's achin' quite a lot, and I'm sure your boots have not improved the look of my jacket."

"Never mind your giddy jacket," I cut in. "That chap has sneaked into one of the windows, Montie. Men don't sneak into windows at night unless they're out for mischief. I'm going round to the front door, to knock old Mr. Freeman up—the old couple are sure to be in bed. They retire early, I'll bet."

"Not so early as this, I don't suppose," objected Montie. "We shall find a light in one of the front rooms, old fellow. But we're wastin' time. What a night, Benny! Shall we ever get back to St. Frank's? And what about our poor old jiggers?"

"My hat! I'd forgotten, all about 'em," I said. "But we'll let them rip now. Come on!"

We hurried round with all speed, and were soon at the front of the house. It was a low-built, rambling old place, very picturesque and ancient. On the other side of the road flowed the river, with the bridge near by.

The house stood a little back from the road, with high hedges, and two old-fashioned gates leading on to the drive, which was half circular. There was not a light to be seen, but we were not discouraged by this.

Striding up the gravel drive, we reached the rustic porch, and felt our way to the door—for it was very black here. Finding a creaking old knocker, I gently thumped it down twice. As I

did so I wondered if the burglar would hear it. I had only knocked lightly, and the rear window was right away in the far back region of the house. If the burglar was still there, he couldn't have heard those two knocks; while the old couple were probably in one of the front bedrooms, just overhead. As I whispered to Montie, we should have been fine asses if we'd given the burglar warning.

Rather to our surprise, we heard a footstep in the hall almost at once. It came to a stop as we listened; but then, as Sir Montie made a remark, we heard a chain being removed, and the bolts were shot.

We couldn't see the door open, but we felt that it had done so, and somebody stood before us.

"Is that Mr. Freeman?" I asked quickly.

"What is this?" demanded a harsh voice. "Who are you, boy? What are you bothering here for at this time of night?"

"By gad!" breathed Sir Montie. "I know that voice!"

And so did I.

It was the grating voice of the man we had helped out of the ditch, with his car—the generous gentleman who had tipped us a penny each! I was extremely surprised, and couldn't restrain an exclamation.

"Great Scott!" I ejaculated. "I thought——"

"Confound you, boy! What is the matter with you?" demanded the unseen stranger. "Aren't you the young rascals who helped me with my car this evening? Why have you come here, to my house——"

"Your house!" said Sir Montie, in mild surprise.

"I do not intend to stand here bandying words with a couple of impudent schoolboys!" rapped out the other. "Neither do I intend to explain why I am in possession of this house. But I shall certainly make it my business to call upon your Headmaster in the morning, in order to lay a complaint——"

"Hold on, sir!" I interrupted angrily. "You can lay all the complaints you like, for all we care! You seem to be making yourself as unpleasant as you possibly can—and Tre-gellis-West and I have gone out of our way to lend you a hand. I tell you

plainly, sir, if we had known that you were here, we should have let this thing slide!"

"What do you mean, you young hound—"

"I reckon you've called us enough names!" I said curtly. "We came here to give Mr. and Mrs. Freeman a warning. We'll give it to you, and then clear off."

"Hear, hear, old boy!" came a murmur from Sir Montie. "I rather like this battle of words, you know. It's quite amusin'. I wonder what'll happen when this cheery and polite gentleman meets the burglar—"

"The burglar!" rasped out the other harshly.

He had bent forward, and I detected an acute note of alarm in his voice. I felt rather pleased. I should have been more pleased still if he went to the back and found that all the grub had been pinched out of the larder!

"Yes, a burglar," I replied tartly. "Montie and I were skirting the meadow at the back of your garden—or, rather, Mr. Freeman's garden—when we saw somebody climbing over the wall. I hopped up and then I saw the fellow getting through a window—"

"You infernal young—" The man had shouted out the words in a sudden access of fury. But he checked himself abruptly. "A—man climbing over the wall?" he asked hoarsely. "Nonsense—nonsense!"

"It's true enough, sir," drawled Sir Montie. "I didn't see the window business, but he was getting over the wall all right."

"You were mistaken!" said the occupant of the house, in a low, cold voice. "However, I thank you for telling me this. I will have a look at the back premises. You may wait to hear the result!"

He stepped back and closed the door with a slight bang. Then we heard rapid footsteps for a few seconds. This was followed by a double gasp from Sir Montie and I.

"Well, this is about the limit," I exclaimed. "He's actually condescended to allow us to wait here—on the step, mind you—while he goes and investigates! The man's a queer fish altogether, Montie."

"He's amazin'," said the swell of the

Ancient House. "Do a lot of people live in houses in total darkness, Benny? It seems rather topsy-turvy to me, you know. How can he read, or get his supper—"

"Don't be an ass, Montie!" I chimed in. "If you want to know my opinion, I believe there's something jolly wrong here. It's mysterious. Didn't you notice the way he gasped when we mentioned the burglar?"

Before Sir Montie could answer we heard the footsteps again. Then the door opened with a swish.

"Go!" rasped a voice from the darkness. "You are young idiots—both of you! There is nobody in the house, and every back window is securely closed! This is some schoolboy trick, I presume, some annoying scheme for—"

"You can say what you like!" I interjected hotly. "There was a man getting into one of the back windows, and if they're all closed now, the fellow shut it after him. That means that he's in the house at this moment—"

"Go!" thundered the other. "I am sick to death of this persecution! Tomorrow I shall call upon your Headmaster, and instruct him to flog you severely—"

I laughed.

"The Head doesn't take instructions from everybody who calls on him," I said sarcastically. "If you try this sort of nonsense on him you'll find yourself chucked out—jolly quick! Here we've taken a lot of trouble to do Mr. Freeman a good turn, and you can do nothing but rave at us. Rats to you!"

"A dozen times, dear fellow!" said Sir Montie, heartily.

And we marched off feeling hot and angry. We heard the door slam behind us, and the bolts being shot. When you go to do somebody a good turn, and only get insults for your pains, you naturally feel incensed.

This man's attitude was ungrateful, to say the least. He had treated us in a most astonishing fashion, and I was sorry I had taken the trouble to warn him. But what was he doing in the Bridge House, anyhow?

"Some relative of Mr. Freeman's perhaps?" I suggested, as we hurried to the school. "Why did he flare up so terrifically just because we told him that a burglar was in his house?"

"Dear Benny, I am no good at rid-

alleg," said Sir Montie, yawning. "I dismiss the whole matter from my mind. In plain words, old man, I'm fed-up. And what about our jiggers?"

"We shall have to give old Warren a fat tip, and tell him to go and fetch 'em," I said. "We can't possibly go for them ourselves—Hallo, who's this?"

A well-known voice hailed us.

"What the dickens—How on earth did you fellows manage to get out of that old oak?" exclaimed the well-known voice.

Tommy Watson faced us excitedly.

"That cad Fullwood explained to me, five minutes ago," he panted. "I've been running like a cinder-path racer! But how the merry deuce did you manage to escape?"

"We do these things, you know, Thomas, old son," said Sir Montie cheerfully. "It's just a matter of brains—nothin' else. But in this case it was Benny's brains that did the trick. I'm afraid mine ain't much use."

"Rats!" said Tommy. "Let's hear what happened."

"Why, we were collared by Fullwood & Co., bound, and shoved into the old oak tree," I explained. "We were jammed there for hours, and then got free—that's the lot in a nutshell."

"I wondered what had happened to you!" said Watson, falling into pace with us. "When I got to St. Frank's I was late, of course, and got a hundred lines. Nobody knew where you were, and I began to get a bit alarmed. But Fullwood & Co. were cackling like old hens, and I guessed that something was on. The awful rotter! Just when we were going to bed, Fullwood told me where you were—and I rushed off. Old Warren saw me, so there's trouble brewing, my bucks. This'll mean a flogging all round!"

"A delightful prospect, Tommy boy," murmured Sir Montie. "It's hard—very hard. Misfortunes never cease. We've had bike accidents; we've been shoved into hollow trees; we've had arguments with an outsider of the first water—and now, to finish up, we're in for a flogging! Ain't it sad?"

"I'm not so sure about the flogging," I replied. "Dash it all, we've only got to tell the truth—say that some rotters—names unmentioned—had a lark with us, and prevented us getting in. I'll tell

you what; I'll go to old Alvy myself, and spin him the yarn. I'll bet I'll get the three of us off with a couple of hundred lines each."

Sir Montie sighed.

"Things like that don't happen in real life, Benny," he said sagely. "In stories, if you like, but not really. It's a floggin', as sure as that motorist fellow is a rank bounder!"

I held different views, however; but I couldn't explain to my chums that "Mr. Alvington" and I were really the greatest of pals.

When we reached the gates we shook them and rapped noisily. In a few minutes, Warren, the porter, came out with a lantern. He was looking very serious, and eyed us somewhat suspiciously.

"I dunno about this, young gents," he said, shaking his head. "Nico goin's hon, haint they? All the boys are abed, an' I shall 'ave to report yo straight away."

"No need to report us, Rabbit," I said cheerfully. "I expect Mr. Crowell's waiting for us with a coal hammer, as it is. Do you feel like going for a nice stroll down the Bannington Road?"

"Now, Master Bennett, I don't want no check—"

I grinned, and explained to Warren about the bikes. He didn't like the idea of fetching them, but agreed to go for the consideration of five shillings. Having settled this point, we marched across the Triangle to the Ancient House. As we had half expected, we met Morrow, the head prefect, in the lobby. Everything was strangely quiet.

"Oh, so you've come in at last, have you?" he said grimly. "You'll have to give a pretty good account of yourselves, you young rascals. Do you know the Remove's been up to bed for nearly twenty minutes?"

"My dear old Morrow, of course we know it." I replied calmly. "We've missed our supper, and we've been in solitary confinement—at least, Tregellis-West and I have. We've been the victims of a little jape."

"That sort of thing won't do," said the prefect sternly. "Mr. Crowell has instructed me to send you to the House-master, Bennett. You've got to give him an explanation—"

"Only me?" I asked quickly.

"That's all," said Morrow. "You

other juniors cut-off to bed. Bennett's the captain of the Remove on this side, and so he's got to face the music for the three of you. I expect it will be a flogging to-morrow. That'll be something nice to sleep on," added the prefect, cheerfully.

Morrow was a decent sort, and he didn't attempt to browbeat us in the least. The arrangement was just as I would have wished. In fact, I strongly suspected that the gov'nor had given these instructions. He wanted to have a word with me on the quiet—and this was a good way of arranging it.

Sir Montie and Tommy went off upstairs, and I slipped along to Mr. Alyington's study. I tapped at the door and walked in. Nelson Lee, in his character of the Housemaster, was taking it easily. He was sprawling in an easy chair, reading a magazine, and smoking a cigar. He didn't look a bit like the gov'nor, of course, because he was disguised. This disguise was a bit of a bother to live up to continually. But Nelson Lee was quite capable of it.

I closed the door, and stepped forward. The gov'nor twisted in his chair, laid his magazine down, and gazed sternly at me over the tops of his glasses—which he was getting used to. He had to wear them in the class-rooms, and Lee is always thorough in everything.

"Well, Bennett?" he asked severely.

"May I ask the meaning of this?"

"Nothing to prevent you that I know of, gov'nor!" I replied, squatting down on a corner of the desk. "Terrible, ain't it? There's some talk of flogging, but that's all tommy-rot, of course!"

"Oh, it's tommy-rot, is it?" said Nelson Lee evenly. "Let me tell you, Nipper, that you can't presume upon our true relationship. We are no longer detective and assistant. I am a Housemaster, and you are a junior school-boy—"

"Oh, come off it, gov'nor!" I grinned. "You do it lovely, but that stuff won't go down with me, you know! How are you? I haven't had a private word with you for two or three days. Your whiskers need trimming a bit!"

The gov'nor's eyes twinkled.

"I observe, Nipper, that you are trying to get me into a good humour," he remarked. "You can't play that game with me, young 'un. Now, I suppose

you've got a good explanation for this extreme lateness?"

"Well, you don't think I've been on the razzle, do you?" I asked. "The fact is, sir, Tregellis-West and I have had a night of adventures, and I've made them a wager that you won't give us more than two hundred lines each. So you must let me win!"

"I had an idea, Nipper, that the discipline in this school would knock some of the cheek out of you," said Nelson Lee sternly. "But, upon my soul, you're worse than ever. Now, let's hear the yarn."

I briefly explained about Fullwood and Co., but didn't mention their names. He, I knew, wouldn't make any inquiries about the car, because he hated sneaking as much as I did. The gov'nor knew, of course, that it was Fullwood all the time.

"So you were bottled up in an oak-tree all the evening?" smiled Nelson Lee. "Hard lines, Nipper—and I don't propose to punish you severely for that. In fact, I almost think that your explanation is quite satisfactory. But I shall give the pair of you a hundred lines apiece—just for the sake of appearances. Watson doesn't seem to have been in the affair."

"Good old gov'nor!" I grinned. "Don't be surprised if you don't see my lines at all—I might be too busy to do 'em! There are great advantages in having you for a Housemaster. But I just want to have a word about something else that happened."

So I told Nelson Lee of the Bridge House affair. He listened interestedly, but wasn't in the least impressed.

"You mustn't make too much of it, Nipper," he said at last. "From what you have told me of the motor-car incident, and the subsequent episode at the Bridge House, I judge that the gentleman is cursed with a decidedly bad temper and a harsh disposition. He acted the part of a brute, but that doesn't say there's anything fishy, as you express it. He's either a relative of the Freeman's, or a friend. The other points—the absence of lights, and his refusal to believe your burglar story—are merely further evidences of his overbearing nature and eccentricity. As I have told you before, my lad, go by the facts—not by what the facts point to."

I shook my head.

"Well, it's my belief that there'll be more trouble with that chap," I said. "I may have been mistaken about that man entering a window, but I don't believe so. It might have been a reflection in the glass—but I could swear I saw the window go up. Perhaps he's a German spy, and he's going to turn the Bridge House into a wireless station!" I added humorously.

"Well, got off to bed," said Nelson Lee, picking up his magazine again. "You'll be fit for nothing to-morrow."

"Rats!" I replied, grinning. "How many times have we snatched three hours' sleep, gov'nor, and been as fresh as paint afterwards? Don't forget that I'm still Nipper—your assistant. And if there's any chance of detective work, I'm on the job."

We bade one another good-night, and I hopped off. Morrow was hovering about in the lobby, and he looked at me inquiringly.

"You're looking cheerful," he remarked. "What's the verdict?"

"A hundred lines each," I replied. "Floggings are off, Morrow. You see, old Alvy understood that the fault wasn't ours. Haven't got time to explain it all to you now. Good-night, old son!"

I left Morrow looking after me wrathfully, and was in the Remove dormitory a couple of minutes later. The lights hadn't been put out yet, and everybody was awake. And it was quite clear that everybody was interested, too. They were waiting to hear the verdict.

CHAPTER V.

IN WHICH I TAKE A FEW SNAPSHOTS—WITH VERY SURPRISING RESULTS.

FULLWOOD AND CO. were all in bed, in a row. They were grinning with expectancy, but their expressions changed somewhat as they noted my smiling countenance.

"A flogging?" asked Tommy Wetson anxiously.

"A floggin'—yes!" sneered Fullwood. "And lines, too—and a gatin', I expect. Serve you jolly well right, you—"

"Do the chaps know all about it?" I asked smilingly.

"Of course, we do," said Griffith. "You were stuffed into that hollow tree, weren't you?"

"Say, I guess it's up to us to make

these guys feel good an' sore!" remarked Justin B. Farman, the boy from California. "I'll allow a joke's a joke. Guess there ain't a jay likes a joke better than I do. But Fullwood's sure one of the most all-fired hoboos around this ranch!"

I grinned.

"That's all right, Farman," I replied. "You can leave Fullwood to me. He's going to pay for this affair sooner or later. I don't say when. It may not be for days—but it'll come. I don't blame his dear pals so much—it was Fullwood's idea from the start."

"Say, that's surely good talk," agreed Farman, nodding. "Fullwood's the meanest hobooc around St. Frank's. I fidget that sort of scum ought to be scooped right off—scum ain't no doggone use anyways!"

"You cheeky swab!" roared Fullwood. "If you ain't careful I'll come over and punch your rotten American nose!"

Farman jumped up.

"Come right along," he invited promptly. "I guess I'd like my nose punched—if you can get around that quarter. Say, Fullwood, you're sure a dandy feller when it's a question of handin' out piles o' hot air. Talk? Waal, I guess you ken talk high soundin' nonsense till you're fair blue in the face, an' your tongue's jest scorchin'. But, say, when it comes to actions, you're like the feller who's in charge of that blazin' land o' heathens they call Germany—the Kaiser!"

Fullwood had asked for this quite plainly, and everybody roared. The comparison was very apt, too, for the great Ralph Leslie was famous for his bombastic and bragging ways.

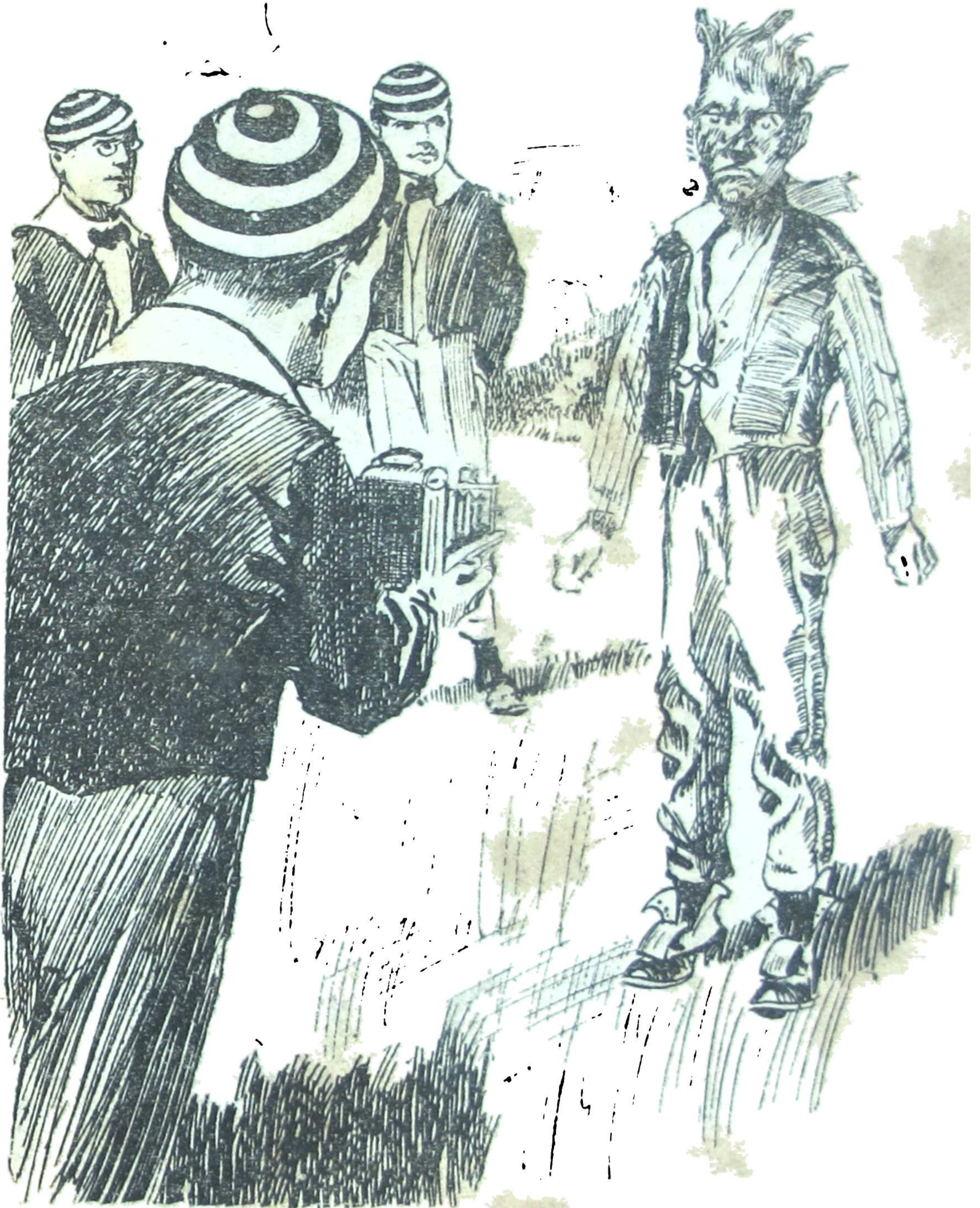
He didn't accept Farman's proposal, but scowled instead. The American boy lay back on his pillow, and chuckled.

"Well, you haven't told us the verdict yet," said Handforth, of Study D. "If you're going to be flogged, Bennett, I'm going to put my foot down. You're one of the best chaps in the Remove—barring myself, of course—and we've put the stopper on Fullwood's rot long ago. I vote we yank him out of bed, and duck him in a cold bath!"

"Hear, hear!"

"That's the idea!"

These two remarks came from Church and McClure, who were the faithful



Fullwood was looking absolutely savage, and at that second I focussed my camera and snapped him beautifully in the sunlight.—(See p. 22.)

echoes of Edward Oswald Handforth in all things. They were his shadows, and, no matter what he said, they agreed with it.

It was really impossible to do anything else, for Edward Oswald possessed a fist with a fifty horse-power drive, and he was just as ready to punch the noses of his own pals as anybody else's. So Church and McClure steered clear of that fist by agreeing with him always. This was difficult occasionally, for Handforth had the most weird ideas.

He fully believed that he was a power in the Remove—but nobody else did. He couldn't speak without bawling, and he generally interjected frequent snorts. His voice was like a megaphone, and was well known, far and wide.

But Handforth, for all his faults, was one of the best chaps in the Ancient House. He'd lend his last sixpence to anybody, and would generally forget all about it.

"You're too drastic, Handforth, old man," I grinned, as I undressed. "You're like a bull—you want to dash about with a fearful noise. Fullwood deserves ducking, but we don't want all the prefects of the House on top of us. This is my little affair—and I'll deal with Fullwood in my own way."

"You'll do a lot of dealing, won't you?" sneered Fullwood.

But he looked decidedly uncomfortable, while the rest of the Nuts were grinning. And then a plaintive murmur came from a bed up the other end of the dormitory, somewhere near where I slept.

"It's cruel—it is, really!" exclaimed Sir Montie pathetically. "I'm lyin' here waitin' and waitin'. I don't know what my fate's to be, an' there's Benny arguin' the point with everybody. I shall go to sleep in a minute. All this is too exhaustin'!"

"Well, you've got a hundred lines to do, Montie," I replied cheerfully. "Alvy's a brick. I explained everything to him, and he said we weren't much to blame. We've just got a few lines."

Ralph Leslie Fullwood sat up in alarm.

"You rotter!" he hissed. "You've been sneaking—"

"Keep your hair on!" I said contemptuously. "I didn't give Alvy any names, and he was sport enough not to ask for any. Your little trick's fizzled out, Fullwood. You thought you'd get us a flogging—"

"Fully's little tricks always do fizzle out," mumbled Sir Montie from his pillow. "It's rippin' news, Benny, an' I can sleep peacefully now. I've been thinkin' of floggin's an' gatin's until I'm dazed. Good-night, everybody!"

It was a case of "good-night" all round the next minute, for Morrow came in and switched the lights off. We went to sleep feeling contented, on the whole. Of course, I meant to make Fullwood sit up—and I had already had a wheeze in my head. I was going to let the whole thing drop for a day or two, leading Fullwood to believe that I had forgotten all about it.

The next day he was very uneasy, and kept his eyes well open. But I took no notice of him at all. The days following were just the same, and nothing happened, in fact, until the next half-holiday came round.

It was a very sunny day, and I was anxious to get my team on Little Side, hard at practice. The football season was just commencing. The great game had been shamefully neglected in the Ancient House—and I was altering all that. The junior school team were nearly all College House fellows, with Bob Christine as skipper.

I had already bucked the cricket up tremendously, but football was the thing now. And it was my positive intention to make the Ancient House eleven a hotter team than Bob Christine's.

But this afternoon, when I particularly wanted to have my men slogging at practice, some new goal-posts were being erected, turfing done, and general improvements all round. The junior ground, in fact, couldn't be used, and so we had to postpone practice.

This being so, Sir Montie and Tommy and I decided to take advantage of the glorious autumn afternoon by snapping some photographs of interesting spots round about. Incidentally, I meant to deal with Fullwood.

The gov'nor had presented me with a ripping new camera—it had been sent straight from the stores in London, of course. Nelson Lee had also fitted up a dark-room, and had promised to develop any films I exposed.

We started by taking a view of the old High Street in Bellton village. Then, on the strength of that, we adjourned to the tuck-shop for refreshments. Our next point was the old bridge, and we were

discussing this—and certain catables—when a man entered the little shop.

"Old grumpy, from the Bridge House!" murmured Tommy. "I say, when he's gone, we'll ask Mr. Gibbs who the dickens he is."

The stranger didn't even look at us, and, having made his purchase he went out again. We strolled up to the counter, and old Gibbs, the owner of the tuckshop, beamed upon us good-naturedly.

"Anything else, young gentlemen?" he asked, rubbing his lean hands.

"Not in the grub line," I replied.

"Can you tell us who that chap was, Mr. Gibbs?"

"Him who just came in, Master Bennett? Why, that were Mr. Tracey—a stranger round these parts," replied Gibbs. "Leastways, he ain't one of us, as I might say. Ay, an' he is strange, too, I'll tell ye. I queerer fish I never did hear on."

"Why, what's wrong with him?" I asked interestedly.

The old fellow leaned across the counter.

"There's something rum about that man, young gents," he whispered wheezily. "He's took the Bridge House, yo know—took it furnished for two months, I hear say. Old Mr. an' Mrs. Freeman has gone up to Lunnon—so's to be near their wounded son, what's back from the fightin'. Ay, he's a queer fish!"

"You said that before, dear Gibby," said Sir Montie. "But what's wrong with the excellent Mr. Tracey?"

"Why, he live all alone, for one thing," replied the old man. "That don't kinder seem right to me, nohow," he added, with a shake of his head. "All alone, young gents, in that great house."

"Without any servants?" asked Tommy doubtfully.

"That's the truth, young sir," was Mr. Gibbs reply. "When he fust come, he had the same two gels that uster serve the Freemans. But then, all of a suddin, one mornin' he sent 'em off packin'—on the second week of 'is bein' here. Never a word did 'e give 'em, except that 'e's payin' their wages jest the same. Said 'e wanted to be alone, or somethin' like that. That's wrong, I'll swear. Why do 'e want to be all alone?"

And the old shopkeeper shook his head again.

We passed out after a few minutes, and

I was rather thoughtful. This little picco of information had interested me, and it struck me as being very strange. After our own adventures with Mr. Tracey, there was ample reason for being suspicious of him.

As we emerged into the sunlit street, I saw Mr. Tracey walking up towards the station. We turned in the opposite direction, making for the old bridge over the Stowe. For the moment, I dismissed the new tenant of the Bridge House from my mind, and managed to get a fine snap of the bridge and the river.

"I say!" remarked Tommy Watson. "Why shouldn't we take a photograph of the Bridge House? It's a fine old place, and would look ripping in a photograph. There's nobody at home now, as we know. Mr. Tracey's out, and he lives all alone. So this is a good chance."

"Not a bad idea!" I replied, rolling up the next film into position.

Tommy's suggestion was rather a good one, in fact. I mentally resolved to keep the photograph in my collection, as a kind of curiosity.

I found that it was quite impossible to focus the house from the roadway. There were high hedges in the way and trees beyond. So we entered the drive, and stood just at an angle. From this spot, the whole house could be focussed, with the front showing prominently, with its quaint old gables and old-fashioned windows.

Everything was very quiet, and I made a good exposure; but just as I clicked the camera-shutter, I heard an angry snort from the gateway. There stood Mr. Tracey, gripping his stick firmly, well below the handle. He pushed the gate open, and came striding towards us with an unmistakable glare of fury in his eyes.

"Squalls, dear fellow—squalls!" murmured Sir Montie.

The signs were very evident. But why? Surely we'd done no great harm in taking a common or garden snapshot? The man seemed to fly into furies for the mere enjoyment of it. We were getting used to them by this time.

"What have you been doing here?" rasped out Mr. Tracey.

"Just taking a snapshot of the old house, sir," I replied. "I'll send you down a print—"

"How dare you!" snarled the man. "How dare you! Give me that camera at once! At once, boy! I intend to smash the plate!"

"That will be rather difficult, sir," smiled Tregellis-West. "It happens to be a film. But you can't mean what you say? Begad! There's no harm in—"

"No harm! No harm!" bellowed Mr. Tracey, losing control of himself. "I won't have that photograph taken away from here! Do you understand me? You infernal young scoundrels! How dare you trespass on my property while I am absent and take a photograph of my house? I won't have it! I won't have it!"

"That's all right, sir," I replied. "I don't want you to have it. And I don't think I'll offer it to you after this—"

"Look out!" roared Tommy suddenly. "The—the rotter!"

Watson's warning was unnecessary, for I had my eyes well open. Mr. Tracey had rushed at me like a bull, lashing out with his stick with the most savage force. I should have been brained if that stick had come down on my head. But Tracey was aiming at the camera in my hand.

"No, you don't!" I said hotly. "My hat, the man's mad!"

I only just dodged in time, whirling the camera round out-of-reach. Again and again Tracey slashed at me, his face literally purple with fury. His eyes blazed, and his teeth were showing in a snarl.

"I say, we'd better scoot!" muttered Watson, half nervously.

"I really think that a strategic retreat is advisable, Bennett, old man," murmured Tregellis-West, with concern. "Begad, you'll be hit in a minute!"

I didn't intend to be hit, however. It was quite obvious that Tracey had lost the last shred of control. He was amazingly violent, and retreat was the only wise course. I was dodging about like a cat on hot bricks, and the man was becoming more savage every second.

"Gate's open!" called Watson quickly. "Bunk for it, Bennett!"

I side-stepped rapidly as Tracey made a mad rush at me. Then, twirling round before he could turn, I scooted for the gate at full speed.

Sir Montie and Tommy were there, and as I dodged through they slammed the gate to with a crash. Tracey was pounding after me, and he met the gate with his chest, being unable to pull up.

We heard a grunt as we raced down the road. Then something struck the stones just behind my heels, and I felt a sharp pain in my leg. Glancing round,

I saw Tracey's heavy stick lying in the dust; and the man himself was standing at the gate, shaking his fist and almost foaming.

We ran for three or four hundred yards and then eased up. To tell the truth, I didn't feel at all safe. Tracey looked quite capable of loosing off a revolver at us. I'd never seen a man so blindly furious before.

What on earth could be the meaning of it?

CHAPTER VI.

RALPH LESLIE FULLWOOD OBLIGES ME BY POSING FOR THE CAMERA.

SIR LANCELOT MONTGOMERY TREGELLIS-WEST slowed down to a walk.

"I'm in a whirl, dear boy!" he exclaimed pantingly. "What can be the meanin' of it? Tracey seemed to be as mad as a hatter—just because we took a snapshot! It's astoundin'!"

"Astounding isn't the word!" gasped Tommy Watson.

"It's my belief," I remarked, "that the fellow ought to be shut up in a lunatic asylum. Every time we've met him, he's shown us some kind of violence or other. This time he's really taken the biscuit! I've a good mind to tell old Alvy about it! A man like that is a danger to other people!"

"We might have been half-killed!" said Tommy seriously. "How the dickens did you manage to dodge those terrific swipes, Dicky? It's a wonder he didn't smash you all up!"

We should probably have discussed the extraordinary affair for quite a while; but just at that moment I observed a cyclist coming up the rise from the village. One glance told me that it was Fullwood, and my eyes gleamed.

I had already planned to lure Fullwood behind the gym when we got back to St. Frank's. But there was a chance that he might refuse to be lured, and so I determined to seize this opportunity on the spur of the moment. It was a splendid chance.

"It's Fullwood!" I said rapidly. "Don't look round, you chaps! Wait until he's nearly passing us, and then grab him! You know what to do afterwards!"

"More excitement!" said Sir Montie serenely. "We'll dismiss Tracey for a

while, an' amuse ourselves. By Jove, Fully's here!"

The leader of the Nuts had seen us. Perhaps he suspected that we should try some little game, for he was pedalling hard. The sharp rise, however, prevented him from gaining much speed, and he was easy prey.

Just as he was forging past, I darted along and grabbed the back stays of the bicycle. One heave, and Fullwood came to an abrupt stop. He fell sprawling, and my two chums were on him in a second.

"Leggo!" roared Fullwood. "You beasts! What do you think you're doin'?"

"We're going to take your photo, my son," I replied genially. "I don't know whether you'll like it, but it's going to be taken all the same!"

"You cadst! Pilin' on a fellow——"

"Just like the Germans," smiled Tregellis-West. "It's a shockin' thing for us to pile on him; but he and his pals can pile on us, an' it's quite a joke! It's a warped perspective—that's what it is! Fullwood, dear rotter, your focus wants adjustin'. We're goin' to adjust it for you."

Ralph Leslie was kicking viciously; but we were prepared for this, and his ankles were soon fastened with his own tie. Then, without ceremony, we hauled him through a gap in the hedge, and laid him out on the grass. We were quite secluded here, for no houses were within sight, and everything was quiet.

"You'd better take it quietly, Fullwood," I said. "You've got your choice—either do exactly as we tell you, or have it done by force! If you choose the force part, you'll probably get hurt! But you've got to go through it, one way or the other!"

"What are you goin' to do, you bounder?" gasped Fullwood fearfully.

"Well, to start with, you've got to undress——"

"Undress!" panted Fullwood, staring. "You ass! I ain't goin' to undress in an open meadow!"

"There's not a soul to see except us," I replied. "What's it to be? Will you undress quietly, or shall we yank your clobber off? Don't look so scared, you fathead! You can get dressed again in two ticks!"

Fullwood rose to his feet, looked round desperately, and bestowed a glare upon me which ought to have shrivelled me up.

But this didn't happen. I merely grinned and nodded to him.

"Get busy!" I said briskly.

The necktie had been taken from his ankles, of course. Fullwood had sense enough to realise that there was no escape. He probably regretted having carried out that rotten trick two or three days earlier. With a scowling face, he ripped off his coat and vest. I took them and calmly proceeded to turn them inside-out. His trousers followed, and these were treated in a similar fashion. But he was allowed to get into them again immediately.

"Are—aro you going to make me go back to St. Frank's like this?" he mumbled, terrified. "Oh, you awful rotters! The chaps will cacklo their beastly heads off!"

"That's just what we intend them to do!" grinned Tommy. "No; don't shove your braces on! We want them."

Tommy collared the braces, and Fullwood struggled into his reversed waistcoat with a face that was red with helpless rage. The waistcoat was drawn together by a piece of ragged cord, and then his coat—inside out, of course—was forced on to him.

Fullwood presented a most remarkable spectacle now. But we hadn't done with him yet. One side of his collar was unfastened, and his watch-chain was hung over one of his ears in festoons.

Then I took a stick of grease-paint from my pocket and chuckled.

"Hold him tight!" I said briskly.

"You—you——"

"That's all right! You can explode later on," I remarked. "If you cause any trouble now, Fullwood, you'll only make things worse for yourself. We're just getting you ready for the pose. That's all!"

I used the grease-paint liberally, and converted Fullwood's face into a most weird object. But I didn't overdo it. It was perfectly easy to recognise him at the first glance.

The noble Ralph Leslie Fullwood looked like a fifth of November guy, only worse. Fullwood, of course, regarded himself as the glass of fashion and mould of form in the Ancient House. To be treated in this way was gall and wormwood to him.

"I think that'll do," I said, eyeing him critically. "Scarecrows are cheap to-day! Just unlace his boots, Montie,

and pull the tongues out! That'll add to the effect."

It's a bit difficult to describe Fullwood's appearance, but you can imagine it all right. All his clothing was inside out, his waistcoat was tied with string; his gold watch-chain was hanging round one ear, his collar was loose, and his face was a study in itself.

We yelled with laughter as we gazed upon him. There was no fear of Fullwood bolting now! He would have given ten pounds rather than be seen by any of the other fellows. He only wanted to crawl away to some quiet spot, where he could make himself presentable again.

But we hadn't gone to all this trouble just for the sake of ourselves. We meant the whole of St. Frank's to see Fullwood in his novel costume. That was where my camera came in. It was a good way of getting my own back. To make Fullwood the laughing-stock of the whole school would be the bitterest blow of all to him.

"Now, Fullwood, you've got to pose!" I said cheerfully.

"You—you ain't going to take my photo?" gasped Fullwood huskily.

"Dear boy, that's the very idea," smiled Sir Montie. "Views of the great Ralph Leslie, you know—one in each common-room and a few dozen in the studies! Begad! The whole school will be cacklin' to-night!"

Fullwood nearly fainted.

"It's a rotten trick! It's an outrage!" he snarled. "Do you think I'm going to pose for your fat-headed camera?"

"If you don't pose, you'll be snapped just the same," I replied. "And then, perhaps, you'll look even more ridiculous!"

"I—I say!" panted Fullwood. "I—I'm sorry about that tree business, you chaps. Don't be cads! If—if you let me go, I'll give you a tenner!"

"Bribery and corruption!" exclaimed Sir Montie, horrified. "Begad! The fellow's worse than I thought! An' I don't believe he's sorry at all, dear boys! Does he look sorry? I never knew sorrow was expressed like that!"

Fullwood, in fact, was looking absolutely savage, and at that second I focussed my camera and snapped him beautifully in the full sunlight. He realised, as he heard the click, that we meant business, and he did his best to look dignified and scornful.

This was better than ever! The chaps would simply yell when they saw that

expression, and this time I took a very careful exposure.

"That's all, my spotless Nut!" I grinned. "As many copies as you like free, gratis, and for nothing! Call at Study C this evening, and we'll—"

"You—you sneakin' outsiders!" roared Fullwood furiously.

We had no further use for Fullwood, and so we strolled off and left him there. The elegant leader of the noble order of the Nuts was nearly boiling with rage, and that wasn't to be wondered at, considering all things!

Sir Montie and I felt that revenge was sweet—but it would be much sweeter when we had circulated the prints of that photograph all over St. Frank's. To touch Fullwood's vanity was to hit upon his raw spot.

And our touch had been a pretty severe one!

CHAPTER VII.

THE AMAZING PHENOMENON OF THE BRIDGE HOUSE PHOTOGRAPH.

MR. ALVINGTON, smiled genially.

"You wish to use my dark-room, boys?" he said. "Certainly—certainly!"

"Thank you, sir," I said, winking at him unnoticed by the others. "I've made some ripping exposures."

Sir Montie and Tommy and I were standing in the doorway of the school library, where we had found Nelson Lee. He put his book away, and crossed over to us.

"If you like, my boys, I will develop the films for you," he said benevolently.

"Thanks awfully, sir," I said.

"It's—it's very kind of you, Mr. Alvington," murmured Sir Montie. "But—er—I was thinkin'— Begad!"

Tregollis-West paused, rather pink in the face. It was most unusual for him to show any emotion of any kind. I guessed the reason for his disturbance. If the gov'nor developed the films he would see those two delightful snapshots of Fullwood. And Montie feared that they would be confiscated before any prints could be taken.

But I knew better, and I was quite cheerful.

We all trooped off to the dark-room, Nelson Lee leading the way. He was very popular among all the boys, and

Tregellis-West and Watson liked him particularly. Outside of school hours Mr. Alvington made himself a breezy, good-natured companion for every decent fellow in the school.

In the presence of most masters my chums always felt a kind of restraint, but with "old Alvy" it was different. We slanged one another just as much as we liked, and he only smiled. And he lost no respect owing to his good nature and geniality. Nearly every fellow in the Ancient House—barring the Nuts—almost worshipped him. It would be a sad day for St. Frank's when the gov'nor left.

The dark-room was situated on one of the upper landings. It had originally been a spare box-room, and it wasn't at all pretentious. It contained just an amateur's outfit, and I couldn't help smiling when I remembered Nelson Lee's splendidly appointed dark-room at Gray's Inn Road, containing every modern invention in connection with photographic development.

But this little place was quite suitable for our purposes here. I took out the roll film from my pocket and handed it to the gov'nor. I'd left my camera down in Study C, having changed the films down there. My last roll was now in the camera—unexposed, of course.

Nelson Lee poured some developer into a clean dish, while Tommy and I unrolled the film from the spool. It was a six-exposure roll, and we intended developing the six at once—quite a usual procedure.

The dark-room lamp was a good one, having an electric lamp inside it—so there was no nasty smoky smell in the room. Having got the film out, I fixed a clip on each end—which was really necessary, for these films are as slippery as eels once they get a bit wet. And when they're dry they curl round and round in the most uncomfortable manner.

Tommy and I held it out straight, however, and the gov'nor took it from us. Then he ran it through the developer quickly, and then continued with a slow up and down movement, so that each exposure would receive an equal dose of developer. The dish was only full-plate size, and we couldn't immerse the whole film at once.

On the whole, Nelson Lee always preferred the dark-room method of developing to that of the tank. Tank develop-

ment is only for people who are too jolly lazy to take a little trouble.

Sir Montie and Tommy and I stood round the bench interestedly. The images appeared quickly, and, by what I could see, all the exposures were a success. In a few minutes the film—now comprising six negatives—was transferred into a bowl of water, and from there to the fixer.

The same process was continued in this dish until every trace of opaqueness had vanished. Nelson Lee kept it in a few minutes longer, however, and then removed it, and we adjourned to one of the bathrooms—for it was safe to use ordinary daylight now.

"Let's have a look at 'em, sir," I asked interestedly.

"Not until they are dry, Bennett," replied the gov'nor smoothly. "Of course, we may hold the film up to the window—Dear me! Whatever can this be? And there is another one very similar, I observe!"

I grinned.

"Oh, that's—that's just a little snapshot of one of the fellows," I said, while Tommy and Montie looked anxious.

"Nothing, much, sir—"

"Nothing much, Bennett," interjected Lee. "It appears to me that the boy is wearing his clothes the wrong side out! What can be the meaning of that? And his face—Good gracious, it is Fullwood!"

"Oh, stars!" murmured Montie, in dismay.

I nudged the gov'nor, and he gave a little cough.

"I don't suppose it is my business to inquire too closely into this," he said drily. "How Fullwood came to be in this unfortunate position is somewhat astonishing. Perhaps he is anxious to create an impression?"

"Not exactly anxious, sir," I chuckled. "But we thought the fellows might like to see that photograph; it'll cause no end of amusement."

"I am sure of that, Bennett!" replied Nelson Lee.

But he didn't say any more, and the film negatives were treated with hypo-destroyer—thus obviating washing. We then hung the film out to dry in the breeze. Just about an hour later it was quite dry. This time we found Nelson Lee in his study, and he was quite ready to take some prints for us.

So we adjourned to the dark-room once more, cut the film up, making six negatives, and then took a print of each on gaslight postcards. This method was quicker—and certainly better—than the ordinary daylight printing.

We grinned tremendously as we looked at Fullwood's photo floating in the fixing dish. It had come out splendidly, clear in detail and lifelike. All the photographs, in fact, were highly successful.

Nelson Lee looked at Fullwood's weird portrait with a stern expression, but his eyes were twinkling at the same time. Then, suddenly, he burst out laughing.

"You know, boys, this is very wrong," he said severely. "You needn't tell me how this photograph came to be taken. As you brought the film to me voluntarily, I don't see how I can punish you. Possibly Fullwood deserves a little correction. If I know the boy at all, I imagine this snapshot will hardly please him."

The gov'nor didn't say any more, but fished the last print out of the developer, washed it for a second, and dropped it into the fixing solution. He looked at it with much interest.

"I don't seem to recognise this building," he said, frowning.

"That's the Bridge House, sir," I replied. "Mr. Tracey—the tenant—happened to be out, and so we popped in and took a snapshot. Makes a good picture, doesn't it, sir?"

"Did you say Mr. Tracey was out, Bennett?"

"Yes, sir—everybody—the house was quite empty."

"I think not, my boy," replied Nelson Lee, with a note in his voice aroused my curiosity. "There is a face at one of the windows. It is very small, of course, and somewhat indistinct. But it is undoubtedly the face of someone who was looking out at the very second of your snapshot."

"Begad!" ejaculated Sir Montie. "That's queer, sir!"

We all bent over the photograph interestedly. And then I got a bit of a shock. One of the upper windows of the Bridge House was fitted with curtains, which were slightly parted in the middle. And in the blank space a face could be seen—hazily, because of the intervening glass.

But it wasn't this fact which startled me so much. It was the appearance of

the face itself. There was something about it which looked ghastly. It was repulsive, expressionless, and altogether horrible.

"Great Scott!" I muttered, rather huskily.

"That—that wasn't there when we took the photo," said Tommy, looking half scared. "It—it must be a flaw in the negative—"

"That's no flaw, Watson," interjected Lee. "It is quite feasible that you saw nothing, while the camera took this positive impression. Somebody was in that room, and he approached the window for a fraction of a second. To the human eye the movement was invisible—unless you had been actually looking for it—but the camera made no mistake. You were mistaken, boys, in supposing that the house was empty."

"But—but that face doesn't belong to a man—or a woman either!" I said quickly. "It's—it's horrid, sir! I don't like it at all!"

"Yet, Bennett, it is really none of our business," the gov'nor reminded me.

I made up my mind quickly.

"Look here, sir," I said. "There was something strange happened immediately after we took that photo. Mr. Tracey found us in his front garden, and he flew into a most appalling rage. I believe that he's got somebody in that house—a prisoner, perhaps—and he was furious because we took the photo. The face here explains a lot of things."

And, without hesitation, I explained exactly what had occurred. Nelson Lee listened intently. When I had done he nodded, and stroked his hair gently.

"Mr. Tracey was astoundingly violent," he remarked. "I am thankful that no harm came to you, my boys. Now, on the face of it, there was no adequate reason for the man's terrible access of fury. But this photograph alters matters a great deal. Mr. Tracey suspected that the occupant of the house would appear in the picture—indeed, I am inclined to believe that Mr. Tracey saw the face at the window. He was startled when he found that you had just photographed the house."

"Why should he want to keep somebody in that house—secretly?" I asked.

"It's rummy, sir," added Watson.

"To us it appears very remarkable," agreed the gov'nor. "But you mustn't make too much of it, boys. In any case,

"I advise you to say nothing to your schoolfellows. I do not want a lot of mystery making going on in the school. There may be a very natural explanation for the appearance of this face—and for Mr. Tracey's anger, too. And, in any case, we cannot interfere."

"Why can't we, sir?" I asked, looking right into Lee's eyes. "I believe there's something shady going on at the Bridge House. Tracey's an absolute scoundrel. That—that face is awful—"

"It is repulsive, Bennett, but not awful," interposed the gov'nor quietly. "The explanation may be very simple. Probably, Mr. Tracey has a deformed son—some hideous creature who deserves nothing but pity. Naturally, Mr. Tracey does not want this talked about, and so he keeps the poor boy concealed within the house. He was angry when he found that you had taken the photograph, and, being naturally a harsh man, he allowed his temper to get the better of him. That, I say, is a possible explanation. As we can do nothing, I advise you to destroy this photograph—to which you have really no right—and keep your tongues still."

"I suppose that'll be best, sir," said Montie slowly. "All the same, it's remarkable, sir. I can't understand it. But we'll do as you say."

"Of course, sir," I agreed.

We went down to tea a few minutes later, leaving the prints to wash. The gov'nor's explanation, I knew, had only been offered to settle our minds. He didn't really believe that idea of a deformed son. And I was resolved to have a few words on the quiet before the evening was out.

When we entered Study C we set about preparing tea. But we had hardly started when Teddy Long, the sneak of the Ancient House, poked his nose into the study. Long was fat and stumpy, and he smirked as he came in.

"Try next door," said Watson curtly. "No teas going in this study—"

"Oh, don't be an ass, Watson!" said Long. "I don't want your beastly grub. Fullwood asked me to bring this to you fellows."

"Oh, so Fullwood's managed to get back!" I grinned. "What's this, lanky?"

Long handed me a roughly tied parcel, and slipped out into the passage again. I pulled the string off, and jerked back

the paper. A mass of shining yellow film met my gaze.

"What the dickens—!" I gasped. "Hallo, there's a note!"

I looked at the scrap of paper, which was lying there. It contained a few words in pencil: "Don't be so careless," the words ran. "I'm afraid you won't get any negatives from this film. You're diddled, my beauties.—R. L. F."

Then, in a flash, I understood. Sir Montie and Tommy were staring wonderingly. My camera was standing on the mantelpiece, and I took it down, and opened the back. The new roll of film had vanished!

"Don't you understand, you chaps?" I grinned.

"Begad! I'm not brainy enough to—"

"Oh, yes, you are, Montie," I said.

"I'm wild about this film being ruined, of course, but I'm thinking of Fullwood's face when he sees that photograph! Don't you remember I took the exposed roll out, and shoved this new one in the camera?"

"Yes, but—"

"Well, while we were with old Alvy, Fullwood sneaked into this study, and spotted the camera," I explained. "He opened it, and took the film out. He doesn't know a giddy thing about photography—he's more interested in gambling—and he thought that the new roll was the one I had exposed."

Tommy Watson gave a yell.

"Then Fullwood fondly believes that he's mucked up the photographs?" he gasped. "Oh, my hat! What a lark! He's simply exposed this new film to the light."

"That's it," I grinned. "He knew that a roll mustn't be opened in daylight, and he knew that there's no image on the film until it's developed—any ass knows that much. He thinks the photos are spoilt."

Sir Montie beamed and chuckled.

"That's ripping," he exclaimed. "The shock will be all the greater. Dear fellows, it's worth a film to give Fullwood a shock. We'll pin the beautiful portrait up in the common-room, and await events."

Fullwood thought that he had had his revenge; that the "freak" portrait could never be made. And it was upstairs, washing, all the time!

"I'll run over to Bannington on my

jigger immediately after tea," I said. "It'll only take me half-an-hour. I must have another roll of film—this spoilt one was my last—because I want to take your dials in the morning. You chaps can be drying those prints."

We had tea comfortably, with many grins and chuckles. Our joke on Fullwood would set the whole school cackling before long—and that was a cheery prospect. Fullwood could not have been touched on a more tender spot.

As Nelson Leo had suggested, we tried to dismiss the affair of the Bridge House from our minds—and also the curious phenomenon of the photograph. At the same time, I was thinking of it a good lot, and simply couldn't believe that everything was square and above board.

After tea I set out for Bannington—and I little realised what this chance visit of mine was to lead to before the night was out!

CHAPTER VIII.

IN WHICH I MEET DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR MORLEY—AND THEN CHAT WITH THE GUV'NOR.

MY ERRAND in Bannington was only a short one. I just went to the chemist's for my photographic materials, and emerged with the intention of riding straight back to St. Frank's.

The evening was as fine as the afternoon had been, and the main street of the old country town was looking as dull as ever. The old-fashioned shops, the narrow, stony pavements, all seemed to be part of a bygone period. Here and there some newly erected store stood out conspicuously, ablaze with gold paint and plate glass. But, somehow, they spoilt the picture completely.

I was just throwing my leg over my bike when I jerked my head; I had seen somebody walking along towards me—somebody who seemed familiar. I looked keenly, and then gave a little gasp.

"Well, I'm blowed!" I muttered in astonishment.

The man I had seen was square and thick-set. He was dressed in quiet tweeds and a bowler-hat, and he nearly brushed past me, smoking a blackened

briar. I jerked out my hand, and grabbed his arm.

"How goes it, inspector?" I asked cheerily.

The man turned round and stared at me. Then a smile came into his eyes, and he grabbed my fist.

"Hallo, young 'un!" he said genially. "What are you doing in Bannington?"

"That's just what I was going to ask you, Mr. Morley," I replied. "You know what I'm doing all right. You're in the 'know,' and—"

"To tell you the truth, Nipper, I'm having a deuce of a time," said my companion. "Bring your bike over to this quiet corner. We'll have a chat."

We passed over to the little nook, in which a seat was set. We squatted down, and Detective-Inspector Morley, of Scotland Yard, sighed. I had recognised him on the instant, for the guv'nor and I had often worked with him in London.

Morley had been taken into the guv'nor's confidence, and he knew all about the Fu Chang rotters, and our reasons for being at St. Frank's. In fact, Morley had taken part in that curious affair of Justin B. Farman.

"You're having a deuce of a time?" I asked. "Taking a holiday?"

The inspector grunted.

"Oh, yes, a splendid holiday!" he said grimly. "That's what the Chief'll tell me when I get back to the Yard. The truth is, Nipper, I'm at a dead end. I've drawn blank."

"Nothing new in that—"

"You cheeky young rascal!" snorted the inspector. "Are you suggesting that I usually draw blank?"

"Of course not," I grinned. "But you come to a full stop sometimes, don't you? The guv'nor and I have been just the same many a time. What's the trouble, Mr. Morley? Perhaps I can help you."

The inspector looked at me with a glare. His gaze passed down from my face to my feet. And then he gave a chuckle and his face broadened into a smile.

"Perhaps you can help me, eh?" he exclaimed. "I'm liable to forget who you are, in that get up. I thought a cheeky schoolboy was talking to me. Well, there's no telling, perhaps you can do something, Nipper. Miracles have happened."

I chuckled.

"Is it anything specially big, Mr. Morley?" I asked.

"Towards the end of last week," replied the inspector, "a big jewel-robbery was committed at the Grand Regent Hotel. The theft took place in the evening, and was a particularly daring piece of work. I was on the scene early, and got on the track within an hour."

"The right track?" I asked.

"Do you think I should go off on a fool's errand?" demanded Detective-Inspector Morley tartly. "I discovered that the thief had left London on a fast motor-cycle, and I was hot on his heels as far as Canterbury. Just near that city he abandoned his machine, and took the train."

"To Bannington?"

"Exactly," nodded Morley. "He took the train to Bannington, Nipper. I learned all that, for certain. And I've been here three or four days, trying to trace him. I've ransacked the town from corner to corner. The only definite piece of information I can get is that the fellow walked out of the station. From that second he vanished. That's the position."

"But, surely, somebody must have seen him—"

"My dear kid, that's what I told myself," interjected Morley. "But somebody didn't! All my inquiries have been futile. The jewel-thief has completely vanished—and in this tin-pot little hole! It's disgusting, Nipper."

"It's a bit off, certainly," I agreed. "You're at a dead-lock, Mr. Morley. But you're not going to give it up, are you?"

"I shall, unless something happens this evening," replied the inspector grimly. "I can't waste my time down here. I'm staying at the Station Hotel, and I've been intending to run over to St. Frank's, to see your gov'nor. But I thought, under the circumstances, that I'd better not. Can't be too careful, you know—and it's not exactly wise for us to be talking here."

"Well, I'm off now, anyhow," I said, getting up. "I wish you luck, Mr. Morley. I'll tell the gov'nor that I saw you."

We parted a minute later, and I rode off along the Bellton road. St. Frank's was only two-and-a-half miles away, and the run was short. As I pedalled along

I smiled occasionally. Morley had been regularly cut up. Where could his precious jewel-thief have vanished to?

"Somebody concealing him, perhaps," I thought.

My mind automatically reverted to the Bridge House, and to the mysterious Mr. Tracey. The photograph! The house was supposedly empty, and yet a face had come out in the photograph! There was somebody concealed in the Bridge House—we knew that!

"Great Cæsar!" I gasped.

It was a startling thought, and I nearly fell off my bike. Morley had traced the burglar to Bannington, and had then lost him. Supposing the fellow had slipped on to Bannington Moor—which was lonely and deserted? He could have arrived in Bellton without a soul knowing. And Sir Montie and I had seen a man getting over the wall of the Bridge House garden! And yet Tracey had been furious when we warned him!

"Phew!" I muttered. "This is getting warm! Is it possible that Tracey is harbouring the thief? Is Tracey connected with the affair that Morley's investigating? I'll bet my whiskers I've hit on the truth!"

As I didn't possess whiskers, this wasn't much of a bet.

What about the man who had entered the Bridge House—and whom Tracey had denied all knowledge of? All this couldn't be a coincidence, I told myself. And I made up my mind to go straight to the gov'nor as soon as I arrived at the school.

Fortunately, Sir Montie and Tommy were nowhere to be seen, and the lobby was deserted. I went straight to the Housemaster's study, and knocked.

"Come in!" came the invitation.

I went in, and found Nelson Leo busily writing.

"Can I have a word with you, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"Fifty if you like, my boy," replied the gov'nor, laying down his pen. "You are looking excited. Anything wrong?"

"I want your advice, gov'nor," I said in a low voice. "I've just come back from Bannington, and I ran into old Morley while I was there."

"Morley, eh?" remarked Leo.

"What's he doing down here?"

I told the gov'nor the story of the

jewel-thief, just as the inspector had told it to me. Nelson Lee looked at me keenly as I finished.

"Well, sir?" I asked, bending forward.

"On the face of it, Nipper, the thing is significant," said the gov'nor. "I can read your thoughts quite easily. You are connecting this jewel-thief with Mr. Tracey, of the Bridge House?"

"Of course, gov'nor. It's as clear as daylight!" I exclaimed. "That chap Tregellis-West and I saw was the thief. He's hiding in the Bridge House."

Lee rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

"As clear as daylight, Nipper?" he mused. "I hardly think so. Nevertheless, the facts are interesting. I think we ought to act in some way. Did you mention your suspicions to Morley?"

"Not a word, sir. I didn't think of Tracey until I was on the way home," I replied. "And, in any case, I should have spoken to you first. Don't you think we ought to do something this evening?"

Nelson Lee nodded.

"Certainly, young 'un—and I'll tell you why," he answered. "If this man is, actually, the jewel-thief, he will undoubtedly make a bolt to-night. Don't forget the photograph. Tracey believes that the 'face'—as we will call it—appears in the negative. Therefore, if there is anything shady going on, the owner of the 'face' will escape after darkness has fallen."

The gov'nor rose to his feet, and paced the room for a moment or two. Then he glanced at his watch.

"Nipper," he said crisply, "I'm going to act."

"Good!" I exclaimed.

"But I sha'n't tell you my plans now—indeed, they are only half-formed," went on the gov'nor. "I shall want, however, the assistance of you and two other juniors—your own friends, of course. I don't think it would be wise for you to be in this affair alone. As soon as you see Detective-Inspector Morley arrive, bring Tregellis-West and Watson to my study. I shall have instructions to give you."

I stared.

"But Mr. Morley's not coming here!" I protested.

"You are mistaken, Nipper," replied Nelson Lee smoothly. "I am about to

ring him up this minute, requesting him to attend as soon as possible. The Station Hotel, I think you said?"

CHAPTER IX.

THERE IS MUCH EXCITEMENT, AND SIR MONTIE AND TOMMY AND I CONTRIVE TO MAKE A VERY GOOD IMITATION OF AN AIR RAID—AFTER THAT MORLEY MAKES A CAPTURE—THERE ARE SOME EXPLANATIONS—AND EVERYTHING IS ALL SERENE.

TOMMY WATSON and Sir Montie could hardly believe their ears when I told them what was afoot.

Of course, they'd met old Morley before, when the inspector had come to St. Frank's in connection with the Farman affair. But they didn't expect to join in any work with him. Nelson Lee, however, had got some idea of employing the three of us in the capture—if there was to be a capture.

"Not a word to anybody else, you know," I said to my two chums, as we lounged on the Ancient House steps, waiting for the inspector. "I reckon it's jolly good of Mr. Alvington to make use of us like this."

I hadn't explained everything to Tommy and Sir Montie—it wasn't possible. But they knew quite enough. We'd forgotten all about Fullwood's prize photograph in this new excitement.

"Alvy's a brick," declared Sir Montie. "I shall have to shake hands with him one of these days—I shall really. But, dear fellows, this detective-Johnny may not be aware of our value. He'll probably sniff at us, begad."

"Mr. Morley won't sniff," I replied. "Didn't I help him to capture those rotters who were after Farman? The inspector's a good sort—Hallo, here he is!"

Morley had arrived in a trap, and while he was walking towards the Ancient House, Nelson Lee appeared behind us.

"Come to my study in five minutes, boys," he said smilingly. "Ah, here is the worthy inspector. If I can help him, I shall only be too pleased. He is a clever man, I believe. I am pleased to meet you again, Mr. Morley!"

Lee walked forward with extended

hand, and I know the old inspector was doing his best not to laugh. The governor was acting the part of "Mr. Alvington" to the life. He and Morley passed inside.

Five minutes later my two chums and I strolled leisurely into the lobby, and went to Leo's study. We were admitted at once, and found Morley displaying some curious objects on the desk. I guessed that he had brought them from Bannington at Leo's request.

"Ah, boys, you have come as I requested?" said "old Alvy" gently. "Very good—very good! I have been having a chat with Mr. Morley, and he considers that he is quite justified in taking drastic action. He would be glad of your help."

"We're willin' to do anythin', sir," said Sir Montie. "Only too delighted, in fact."

"That's all right, then," remarked the inspector. "Now, boys, the position is this. I am after a jewel thief, and, from what Bennett and Mr. Alvington have told me, I suspect that the Bridge House is connected with the affair."

"It's pretty certain, sir," said Watson.

"No, not certain—but highly probable," went on Morley. "I can, of course, have the Bridge House searched, for I am armed with full authority, and hold a warrant for the thief's arrest. But there is a difficulty. If I approached the house in the usual way, my quarry would be warned, and I should probably lose him. That wouldn't do. Again, I have no positive proof that the fellow is hiding in the Bridge House. I must be sure before I can act—even the police cannot do as they like, you know. And this is where you boys come in."

"What's the idea, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"Well, as I said, I must have proof—and the best proof is the sight of the burglar himself," replied the inspector.

"The idea, Bennett, is to trick my man into fleeing from the house. If we can do that, we shall probably be successful in capturing him. My plan is quite a simple one, and it has an added advantage in the fact that, if these suspicions are unfounded, we shall not have shown our hand. It will be merely regarded as a schoolboy trick—and you three, of course, will fall into hot water," added the inspector, with a twinkle.

He had called the idea his, but, as I

knew well enough, it was the gov'nor's. But this was necessary in front of Sir Montie and Tommy. We received our instructions eagerly, and we were all enthusiastic.

So far as I could see, the adventure would be a big success.

Just about one hour later, Sir Montie and Tommy and I crept silently into the front drive of the Bridge House. Everything was dark and gloomy, and a breeze was rustling the leaves above us.

Not a light was showing from the house itself, but this didn't mean to say that the old building was deserted. Judging by what we had seen, Mr. Tracey rather liked the darkness. The most probable explanation, however, was that the lower windows were closely shuttered or curtained.

"It's a good thing this house is isolated," I murmured, as we paced against the porch. "There's no cottage for quite a distance, and the wood stretches away behind for a couple of miles. If there were a lot of other houses about we couldn't work this wheeze at all. We couldn't very well cause an alarm of this sort unless the house stood quite to itself."

"It's a rippin' idea," declared Sir Montie. "Begad! I'm anxious to see how it'll work, dear boys. I just feel ready to shout for all I'm worth. My voice is in good trim."

"You'll have to shout lustily in a minute or two," I declared. "Mr. Morley and old Alvy are all ready by this time, so we'll act. Get ready, my sons. I'm just going to drop the bombs!"

The bombs were the objects I had seen on the gov'nor's table; and they were, actually, two big cannon crackers—those kind of fireworks that make a terrific explosion, but don't do much damage, unless you happen to be quite near them.

These two fireworks I placed on the doorstep, right beneath the porch, and then lit the fuses. They spluttered and crackled impatiently.

"Get ready!" I whispered. "It's going to be a deafener!"

I had stepped back, and stood with the other two about ten yards off. As we held our breath there was a loud double report, and a flash of red flame. The explosion was even louder than I

had expected, for both the fireworks had gone off at the same time.

With it came the sound of splintering glass.

"That's the door burst in!" I gasped. "Phoo! What a niff of gunpowder! Now, then—yell!"

Sir Montie and Tommy started rushing about the drive, as though in a panic.

"Is it an air raid?" roared Watson at the top of his voice.

"It can't be the Germans, surely?" bellowed Sir Montie.

"Can you see 'em?" I chimed in. "What's up there?"

We kept up this sort of thing for a minute; if anybody had been listening they would certainly have said that an air raid was proceeding. And that imitation bomb explosion positively seemed to clinch matters.

The occupants of the Bridge House must have heard our shouts clearly—and there wasn't the least doubt that they had heard the explosion! Just picture to yourself what you'd feel like if you were calmly reading, or eating, and a shattering bang occurred—followed by shouts concerning an air raid. You would naturally conclude that there actually was an air raid.

And that was the idea of this wheeze.

In brief, we wanted to startle the occupants of the house into rushing outside. Although there's most danger outside during an air raid, the first impulse is to dash out. I don't know why this is so, but it's a well-known fact. And people dash out with greater speed if their own house is being bombed.

There was a sudden commotion from the rear of the house.

"It's worked!" I gasped breathlessly. "But they haven't come out this way—they've gone the other side. Perhaps it's just as well!"

We jolted round at full speed, and became aware of a dull mass of struggling figures on the gravel, near the back door. We bounded forward and lent a hand. In less than a minute Mr. Tracey and another man were helpless.

"It's all right, Davey," panted the inspector. "I recognised you the first instant I flashed my torch on your face. The game's up, my son. You'd better take your gruel quietly!"

"Just my luck!" groaned the captive. "I thought I'd slipped past you this time, Mr. Morley. This'll mean another five-year stretch, as sure as I'm a born idiot! Oh, lor! What a life!"

Detective-Inspector Morley chuckled.

"Let me introduce Creeping Davey," he said pleasantly. "He's quite a decent chap in many ways, but he has a propensity for taking other people's jewellery. In private life, he's Mr. David Stevens."

"You infernal busybody!" snarled Mr. Tracey. "Who are you?"

"Your nephew just mentioned my name, my dear Mr. Morton," replied the inspector. "Oh, yes, I recognise you, too! Didn't you serve a ten-year stretch for burglary? Of course you did, Silas! This'll mean a feather in my cap!"

The two prisoners were making no attempt to get away. Considering that they were handcuffed, any such attempt would have been futile. Stevens, at least, made himself quite agreeable.

"You did your part well, boys," said Morley, who was bubbling over with glee. "I really don't deserve any credit for this capture, but I suppose I shall get it. We generally get more than we deserve in this life!"

The trick had been a complete success, as I have described. And our suspicions were proved to be correct.

The whole truth was quite simple. Creeping Davey, the jewel thief, had escaped with his plunder, but had found the police so hot on his track—owing to a slip of his own—that he had fled into the country.

Silas Morton, his uncle—who had lived under the name of Tracey since his release from prison—had rented the Bridge House, furnished, for two months. Stephens knew this, and he had made straight for Bannington. He had crept over the rear wall by night, and, by chance, Sir Montie and I had seen him.

Stevens begged his uncle to allow him to remain. Morton agreed, on condition that he got half the spoils. The next morning, when the two servant maids arrived, they were summarily dismissed. Since then Stevens had lived in the house unknown to a soul. And he had made himself a rough kind of mask to wear if

at any time he had occasion to look out of a window. As he admitted himself, he was foolish to show himself at all. For I had snapped the photograph of the old house just as Stevens was looking out.

This, of course, explained his uncle's fury. Morton had another reason for wishing to remain quiet. For he was engaged in some intricate engravings for the purpose of manufacturing false currency notes. They were a bright couple altogether, and old Morley was hugely pleased at the double capture. He freely acknowledged that I had been the main cause of it.

But it was owing to Nelson Lee's ruse that the capture had been a success. If it hadn't been for that surprise, Stevens would probably have escaped—for everything had been prepared for instant flight.

Incidentally, there was much excitement at St. Frank's when the facts came out. Study C was famous, and its occu-

pants were the lions of the junior school for quite a time.

Fullwood spent a week of utter misery. For I printed a dozen copies of each of those two photographs, and they were circulated throughout the school from the fags to the lordly Sixth. It was the jcke of the term.

Fullwood raved and stormed, but it wasn't any good. He found photographs in the common-room, pinned up in the gymnasium, tucked between the leaves of his schoolbooks, and in all sorts of odd corners. It was like a nightmare to him—and it was one of the best lessons he had ever received.

It would certainly be a long time before the classy Nuts played such a mean trick again. Yet, on the whole, I was rather glad they had played it. For it was owing to our lateness on that particular night that the Bridge House affair had been cleared up.

So, taking everything into consideration, I had nothing to grumble at.

THE END

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The Boxing Sailor

A STORY OF THE RING AND LIFE IN THE NAVY.

By **ARTHUR S. HARDY.**

Read this first!

TOM CRAWLEY, light-weight boxer and stoker on board *H.M.S. Flyer*, is ordered out to sea, and helps to rescue the wounded on board a torpedoed hospital ship. He also rescues a German sailor. His great friend,

BOB RANDLE, has been sent out to France with his regiment after an affecting scene with

MARY THWAITES, daughter of Fisherman Thwaites, of whom Tom is very fond; and her brother Fred is one of those rescued by the *Flyer*. Tom's father has been captured by the commander of a German submarine, and the sailor whom Tom rescued tells him that ~~he is~~ *he is* alive and has been taken to a German port. Tom has a few day's leave ashore and visits Fred, who is gradually recovering. Then he is ordered to sea again in the *Flyer*, and they are told a fight is coming off.

(Now read on).

THE FIGHT AT SEA.

AFTER they had been at sea some time, and moving at three-quarter speed on a given course, the clouds shut down, and the moon vanished completely.

It might have been fifty minutes later that the sudden sound of heavy firing fell upon their ears.

Again the wireless crackled, and the course of the *Flyer* was changed.

Boom! Boom! Boom-boom! The sea carried the detonations to the ears of the eager crew, and they knew that out there over the heaving waters a battle was in progress between several warships.

"They're destroyers, mates," said Tom Crawley eagerly. "Nothing bigger; and if we have a bit of luck we'll cut off one of 'em."

The sound of the firing seemed to be

receding, but the *Flyer* sped onward, keeping to her course.

And at last, it might have been an hour and a half later, and they had been tearing through the sea all the time, they could see sparks flying through the air in myriads, dancing and prancing, swirled high by the rush of the flame from the red-hot smoke-stacks of a couple of destroyers which was passing them far to port.

Suddenly there was a flash, a roar, and the hull of the *Flyer* trembled. Answering booms, the burst of shells, and the flash of gun-flame revealed the position of the enemy warcraft.

"There are two of 'em!" yelled Tom Crawley. "Two of 'em, and we'll have 'em both with a bit of luck."

The fight was of the fiercest. For a brief moment the aim of the German gunners aboard the fleeing destroyers was poor, and the shells flew wide.

It was then corrected, and a shell seemed to bounce aboard for'ard and ricochet away.

A part of the deck was torn up. Some of the crew were hurt.

Next a shell appeared to strike the bridge, but when the smoke cleared Captain Walsh could be seen carefully directing operations.

Tom kept his eyes trained on the enemy. Ah! well done, *Flyer*. One of the enemy's destroyers was hit—badly hit.

Flames burst out aboard her, and letting number two rip for a while the *Flyer* swerved and bore down on the crippled vessel.

Luck attended the manœuvre. The Hun gunners, flurried perhaps, or maybe bad marksmen, sent their fire far over the greyhound of the Weathersea patrol.

And as she still showed fight the skipper in command of the *Flyer* made sure. As she closed with the enemy her guns

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raked the Hun fore and aft, and at last with a point-blank shot blew her side clean out.

Amid the flames and the smoke and the flash of a violent explosion Tom Crawley could see human forms leaping wildly into the sea, and sinking far, far below the surface of the heaving water.

The Hun vessel, with her back broken, and reeling like a drunken man, heeled slowly over, until the dark silhouette of her keel showed plainly for a moment.

It was the end, and Captain Walsh, abandoning her to her fate, turned his attention to number two.

Round swung the Flyer's bows. The sea beat her high, and down she plunged into the trough. Up and down, now held, then gaining increased momentum, she fought her way in pursuit of the second of her enemies.

But the German was plucky. All aboard the British boat expected her to abandon her sister ship to her fate, and race for home under the protection of her mine fields.

She did not. She stood by and made a fight for it.

Had she fled Captain Walsh would have settled her too, for his ship was many knots the faster.

Now shells rained upon her, directed with sure aim. The Flyer's guns flashed in answer, boom echoing on boom.

Shells burst about, around, and on board the Flyer.

Tom saw Tomkins hurled to the deck by the spreading death. He felt the gallant ship tremble as if mortally struck. He saw the enemy ship hit amid the billowing smoke. And then—then suddenly with the hiss of steam, which burst from the iron sides of the hull in stinging jets, the Flyer came to a stand.

A man raced up, begrimed and gashed, but as brave as a lion.

"They've driven a shell clean through our boiler, mates," said he. "We're done."

THE END OF THE FLYER!

IT was only too true. The Flyer lay helpless and crippled upon the heaving sea, fighting, still fighting so well that the Hun crept away from her, crippled and wounded and abashed, leaving her there.

Off in the darkness she went, glad to be out of it, but she had done enough.

Orders were issued, and the Flyer was like a hive full of bees, every man springing to his place, and the work of trying to save the ship went on.

Still moving slowly, ever so slowly, she was struck broadside on by an immense wave, which swept her decks and drove her downward, and as Tom was hastening forward the sea caught him up and carried him away with it, filling eyes and mouth and nostrils with stinging spray.

He was carried under, borne down by an immense weight which he could not struggle against.

When at last he rose to the surface, almost exhausted, and looked about him, he could see a dark hull of a warship near.

Was it the Flyer? He could not say.

He caught a piece of floating debris in his hands, and held on, floating there. Then the dark outline of the hull vanished.

The sea rocked him up and down, buffeted him about, now breaking over him, then lifting him high.

There were times when he felt stunned and dead and almost inclined to let go and end it all.

But he stuck it with clenched teeth, murmuring his mother's name or Mary's.

He lost all count of time. Voices called him through the night in helpless, piteous appeal. Then they died away and were silent.

A half an hour passed, an hour, how long he hardly knew.

Then he suddenly became aware of a vessel near.

He could hear the throbbing of her engines, and he knew from the sound that she was moving slowly. Voices once more, some hysterical in their joy.

And at last she showed up, black and menacing, almost cutting him down. He shouted, shouted, bawled until he was hoarse.

"Ship ahoy! Ship ahoy!" What was the use, since it was impossible for them to hear him?

At last the vessel drifted nearer. She was a destroyer.

"One of ours," thought Tom. But an instant later he knew by her peculiar

(Continued overleaf.)

outline, all raised up forward, that she was a Hun.

He was silent then, for he thought they would murder him if they found him, drew him aboard, and discovered that he was a British sailor.

The sea bore him up, then tore him down. It almost beat him against the iron sides of the slowly moving water, then swept him away again.

Finally, he was taken up on the crest of a wave, and fairly lurched on to the deck of the Hun ship, and instinctively clutched at the first thing near him.

Half stunned he lay upon the deck when the wave passed on and the surplus water guttered over the sides of the ship back into the sea.

He lay cold and helpless, caring little what happened to him then, and a faint dream heard commands given, and answered, and whistles blown.

From somewhere in the darkness came a tremendous roar and a flash of light, followed by a hoarse, Hunnish cheer.

Had he known, it was the last of what remained of the *Flyer*, a German torpedo, and the gallant ship he loved was thus sent to the bottom of the ocean, to her last resting place, where the German destroyer, leaping forward like a thing of life, headed for her, fearful lest some others of British watchful sea patrols might catch her, and sink her too.

Tom lay prostrate, with his arms round the base of a ventilator. And so, presently some men coming his way found him, picked him up, and bore him into the light of the hold.

"A British seaman," he heard someone say, and he opened his eyes to see white and hideous faces glaring at him.

"Take him on deck and throw him into the sea," a petty officer cried, and the seamen were about to obey the order when an officer, who looked little more than a boy, intervened.

"He is a prisoner of war," he said. "Give him hot broth, and let him dry out down here. He can do no harm."

Tom looked at the officer in amazement, wondering.

He was young; he did not look cruel like the others.

He nodded, smiled grimly, and turned away.

"Ach, you will be useful when we get you ashore," he said. "For you can tell us what you know."

THE RETURN OF THE SAVED.

It was a sad day for Weathersea, when the survivors of the *Flyer* were brought back to port by a sister ship of the Weathersea patrol.

The story of heroism and devotion of commander, officers and crew of the unfortunate destroyer was the only consolation the relatives of the lost men had to help them bear their losses.

Nor were the survivors many. Among them was Captain Walsh, who had gone down in his ship, and had been saved in spite of himself.

The last exploit of the last vessel was duly set down in the records of our famous Navy as one of the brilliant little affairs of the war.

Captain Walsh had taken risks, but it had been his duty to take risks. He had sunk one enemy destroyer, had sadly crippled a second, and but for being struck by a chance shell in a vital part, and afterwards torpedoed, whether by submarine or destroyer, was still unknown, might well have accounted for a third.

The speed of the lost *Flyer*, coupled with the instinctive knowledge and splendid judgment of her commander, had enabled the sunken vessel to come to grips with the enemy when such a result seemed well nigh impossible.

He tackled the fleeing enemy without giving them a chance of gaining the safe area of their mine fields, and for this feat alone had added hugely to his reputation.

And so the sailors who came back, their commander, and a few officers who had survived the wreck were received with overwhelming congratulations, and a demonstration of enthusiasm such as Weathersea had seldom known.

(To be continued.)