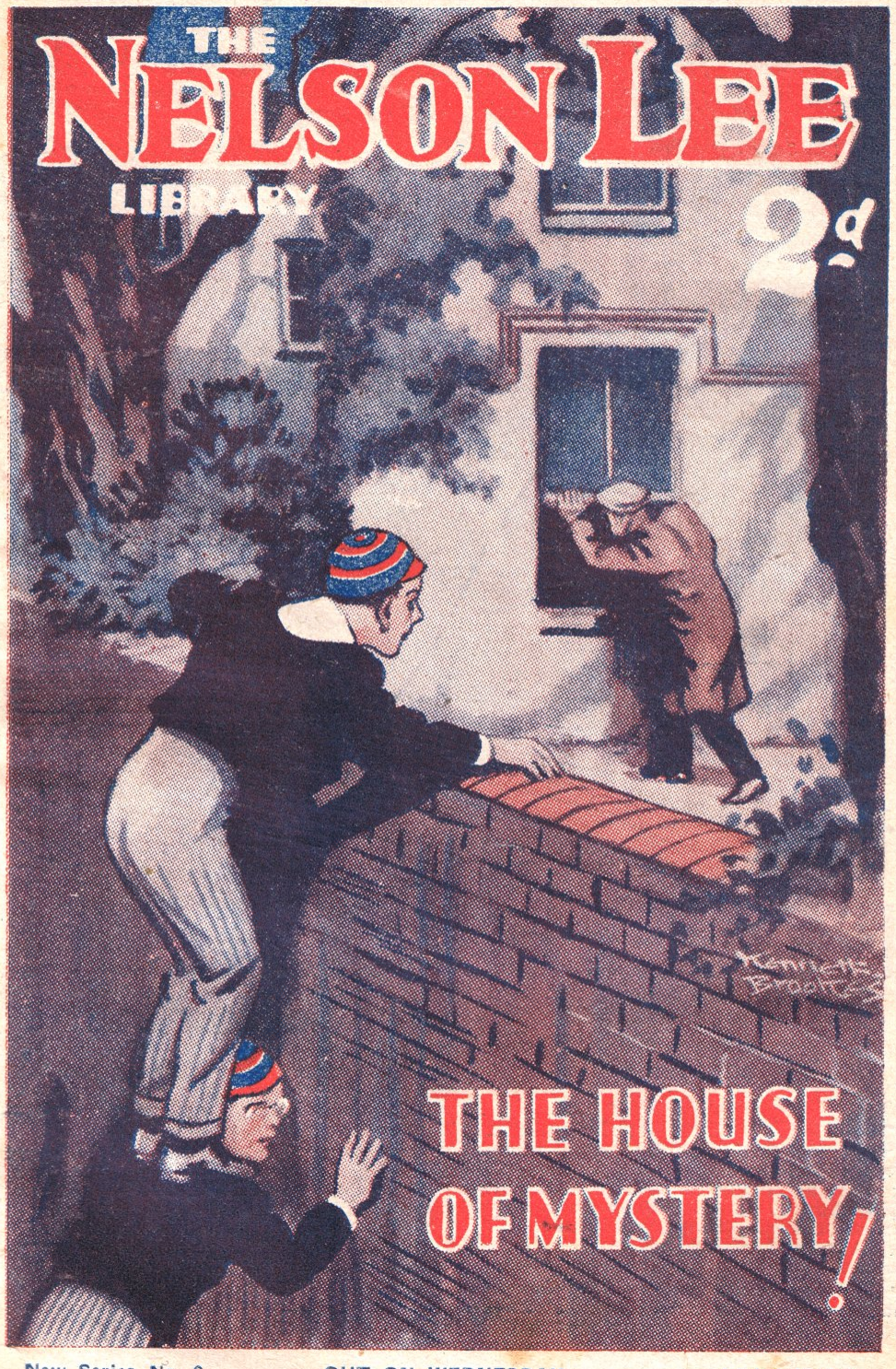
MAGNIFICENT ST. FRANK'S SCHOOL & DETECTIVE STORY!



New Series No. 6. OUT ON WEDNESDAY. April 1st, 1933.

A Thrilling Yarn of School and Detective Adventure—

THE HOUSE of MYSTERY!

By EDWY SEARLES BROOKS

CHAPTER 1.

The Road-hogs.

SIR LANCELOT MONTGOMERY TREGELLIS-WEST and Tommy Watson and I were out cycling—"I" being Nipper, known at St. Frank's as Dick Bennett. It was a lovely evening, with scarcely a breath of wind, and the sky flecked with fleecy 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 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?"

—Starring Nelson Lee, Nipper and the Chums of St. Frank's.

It was just a snapshot that gave the first clue to the sinister secret of the Bridge House. But that small clue led to the solving of a baffling mystery—and a nerve-tingling adventure for Nelson Lee and Nipper & Co. There are thrills, mystery, fun and adventure in this grand yarn, related by Nipper.

"Dear Benny, I said cyclin'—not flyin'," replied Tregellis-West languidly. "Cyclin's all very well, begad, but it's such a botherin' fag, 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', speakin' of cars, I'm brought back to my original theme——"

"Your which?" asked Watson.

"Theme, old boy."

"Theme to me you're——"

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

"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, but I'd feel ever 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—— Look out, ye 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 shooting 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 occupants 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 Noys. In fact, the whole gang of knuts were evidently out joy-riding. Under the guidance of Ralph Leslie Fullwood, the knuts of St. Frank's were shining brilliantly as expert road-hogs.

Fullwood & Co. had recognised 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," Montie 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 a wreck. Hallo! Look down there, my sons!"

I was staring down the hill at the speeding motor-car, and I could see it 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, could see 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.

"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.

Fullwood & 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 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 shockin'ly. I didn't stick my foot through your back wheel on purpose, 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 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!

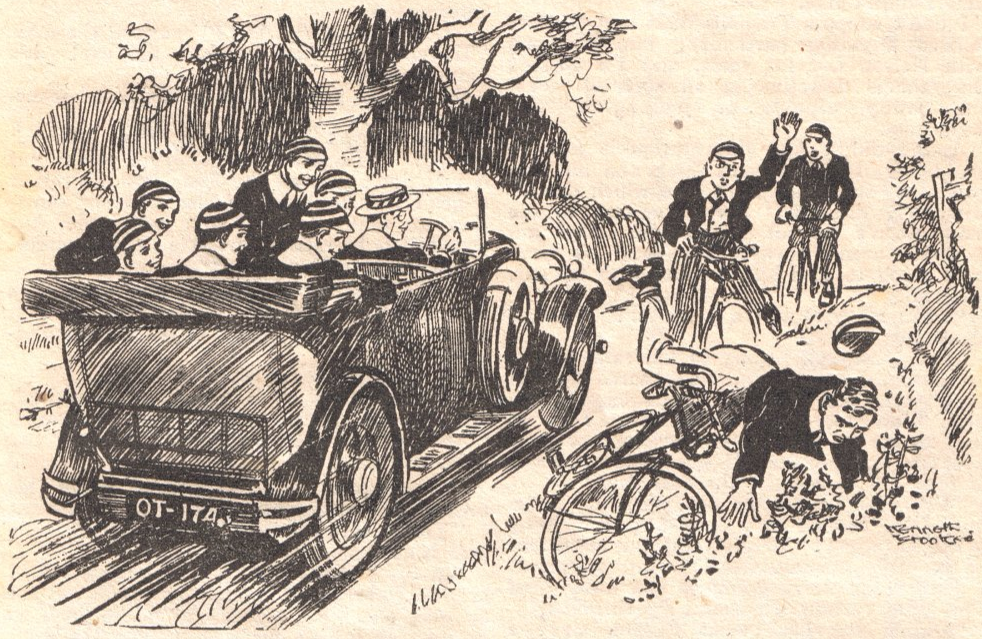
We extricated his foot, and found that, barring a few scratches and bruises, he was unhurt. Watson had come off just as lightly. But his machine was more than slightly bent. The back wheel wouldn't turn, one of the pedal-cranks was badly twisted, and the handle-bars had tried to twist themselves into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

"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 aren'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



A large touring car came shooting round the bend on the off side of the road. I let out a yell and dived clean into the hedge to avoid the car as it swooped past. Its occupants, the knuts of St. Frank's, roared with laughter!

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 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. 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 & 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 2.

Nabbed by the Knuts.

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 Lee 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 blackguards 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 shan'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 man. "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's 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."

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 microscope. Pebbles vary in size, don't they, Benny? I believe this one must weight 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 overbearing 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 damaged much, 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 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.

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 coin drop to? I'm blessed if I can find it," I added, searching the grass carefully. "Hallo! What the thunder——"

I stopped abruptly and gasped.

"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 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 man'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.

"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 knuts have had their joy-ride, and they're hurrying back to the school. The 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 motor-car was one of his chief pastimes. And his knutty pals, of course, made no objection 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 somthing 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 knuts let out a yell of merriment. I guessed that they had spotted us.

"Look out, 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 knuts.

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 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. 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 knuts, 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, 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.

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 knuts.

CHAPTER 3.

Treed!

SIR MONTIE sighed.

"Life is hard!" he exclaimed sadly. "Benny, old boy, we're in the hands of the Philistines. 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 going 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 knuts 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 shan'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 one in 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 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.

Sir Lancelot Montgomery Tregellis-West, a member of Study C and "Dick Bennett & Co." Always serenely cool, and a staunch chum.

"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 going 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——"

"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 cheek 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, isn'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 knuts 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, isn'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 always saw the humorous side.

The whole business—although only a particularly mean trick—reminded me of some of the tight corners the guv'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 & Co. would crow for days. And Montie and I would certainly get into hot water.

That didn't worry me, however. 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 knuts 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 caddish trick.

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 somethin' 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 quarters 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 very dim 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, Benny?" 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 complete darkness had fallen, 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.

Gradually, however, I felt the knots giving. It was necessary, however, 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 conquered, 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 farther 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 sinister-looking 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 4.

Rebuffed!

"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 seven feet high, and I was soon standing on Montie's shoulders. 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 shoulders are 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 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 bed-rooms, 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 Tregellis-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. "Enough of this rubbish! To-morrow 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! 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 much just because we told him that a burglar was in his house?"

"Dear Benny, I am no good at riddles," 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 aren'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

Tommy Watson. He shares Study C with Tregellis-West and Dick Bennett, or Nipper. One of the best, and a reliable member of the Co.

bit alarmed. But Fullwood & Co. were cackling like old hens, and I guessed that something was on. The awful rotters! 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 floggin'! Isn'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 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. "Nice goin's hon, hain't they? All the boys are abed, an' I shall 'ave to report ye 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 cheek——"

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 Housemaster, 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 guv'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. Alvington'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 guv'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 guv'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 the guv'nor 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, guv'nor!" I replied, squatting down on a corner of the desk. "Terrible, isn'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 schoolboy——"

"Oh, come off it, guv'nor!" I grinned. "You do it well, 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 side-whiskers need trimming a bit!"

The guv'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 & Co., but didn't mention their names. Nelson Lee wouldn't make any inquiries about the car, because he hated sneaking as much as I did. The guv'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 guv'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 Freemans, 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."

"Well, get 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, guv'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 5.

Trouble Over a Snapshot.

FULLWOOD & 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 Watson 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 hoboes 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 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 hobo around St. Frank's. I figger that sort of guy ought to be cleared out—he ain't no doggone use anyways!"

"You cheeky cad!" roared Fullwood. "If you aren'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 take a back seat."

Fullwood had asked for this quite plainly, and everybody roared. Farman's expressions were 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 echoes of Edward Oswald Handforth. They nearly always agreed with him for the sake of peace.

It was really not wise 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 loud-speaker, 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 knuts 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 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 guv'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 tuckshop for refreshments. Our next point was the old bridge, and we were discussing this—and certain eatables—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. A 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, ye know—took it furnished for two months, I hear say. Old Mr. an' Mrs. Freeman has gone up to Lunnon. Ay, he's a queer fish!"

"Look out!" roared Tommy. "The rotter!" Tracey, his face purple with rage, rushed at me like a mad bull, lashing out with his stick with savage force as he aimed at the camera in my hand. "No, you don't!" I exclaimed hotly, and whirled the camera out of reach.

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

"Why, he lives 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 use to 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 piece 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 mad 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 exclaimed 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 6.

Revenge is Sweet!

MONTIE 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 knuts 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 cads! Pilin' on a fellow——"

"Just like you and your pals," 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 force, 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'm not 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 those were treated in a similar fashion. But he was allowed to get into them again immediately.

"Are—are you going to make me go back to St. Frank's like this?" he mumbled, terrified. "Oh, you awful rotters! The chaps will cackle 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.

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."

All Fullwood's 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're not goin' 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 goin' 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 knut!" 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 knuts 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 7.

What the Photo Revealed!

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!"

Tregellis-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 guv'nor

(*Continued on page* 24.)

Halt Here For Your Editor's Pow-wow!

HALLO, CHUMS,—We are almost on the eve once again of that great annual sporting event, the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race, which will be rowed on old Father Thames next Saturday. No purely sporting event captures the imagination of the nation to the same extent as does the Boat Race. To young and old alike it is an event that has always been followed with the keenest interest. Every year increasing thousands flock to various vantage-points along the course, from Putney, the starting-point, to Mortlake, the finishing-post, to see sixteen picked oarsmen pulling away for all they are worth in a gruelling race over a 4¼ miles stretch of water. Always the "Battle of the Blues" is a thrilling attraction.

Every man of the two crews is trained to the minute, but so fierce is the pace, it is hardly to be wondered at that members of the crews sometimes collapse over their oars at the finish—mute testimony of the do-or-die courage of every man. Theirs is a fine tribute to the spirit of sporting endeavour.

The preparation for the race and the training of the crews is a long and tedious task, but the race itself is well worth every penny of the £2,000 that is roughly the expenditure of a Boat Race. It takes just over twenty minutes to complete the course, therefore the cost works out at about £100 a minute. Boats and oars alone take about £300 of the total, and the remainder goes in various other expenses, such as training, paying to keep the course clear, and compensating the Port of London Authority.

Well, here's wishing good luck to both crews on Saturday; and may those of my readers who will be there see a race that will be the most thrilling since the series started.

ALL FOOLS' DAY.

By the way, mind your step next Saturday, too—the First of April japers will be on the warpath.

The practice of practical joking on this day, however, is not so prevalent nowadays as it used to be. But the younger generation, at any rate, still get plenty of fun japing on the First.

A magistrate discovered this last year when, seated in court, he pulled out his pencil to make a few notes. The pencil had a good point, but no amount of pressing would produce even a dot. On inspecting it closely, the magistrate discovered that the pencil, instead of having a lead core, had a rubber one! He smiled as he made the remark that it was a japo of his own children.

THE NET-BREAKER!

How's this for a remarkable goal that "A. B.," of Sunderland, tells me about in his letter? It happened in the League game between Sunderland and Sheffield Wednesday. Mark Hooper, the Wednesday winger, sent in a shot with such force behind it that the ball broke the net and crashed into the crowd behind the goal! As the nets are always inspected by the linesmen before the game starts, there couldn't have been a hole for the ball to pass through. Undoubtedly it was a sizzling shot, and I, for one, wouldn't have liked to stop it!

READERS' OPINIONS.

Letters of congratulation on the definite return to the St. Frank's stories are still pouring in to me, and I am kept very busy answering them. It is a task, however, that gives me much pleasure, for I have a very happy band of readers. One and all, they are delighted that the popular chums of St. Frank's have returned to stay in the pages of the NELSON LEE.

Listen to what John Clift, of Hayes, Middlesex, a new reader of two weeks' standing, has to say: "I think the stories are tip-top. I have only had two copies of the NELSON LEE up to now, but I shall be a regular reader if it continues with the same programme."

John's a discriminating reader, you see. He soon made up his mind about the Old Paper, though. He can rest assured that the present programme will continue.

Here's what another reader thinks. Geoffrey Phillips, of Cricklewood, N.W.2, after thanking me profusely for the pocket wallet which he was awarded for a "Smiler," says: "The NELSON LEE is perfectly spiffing . . . every story suits me fine."

Geoffrey was in bed with tonsilitis when he wrote. I hope he has made a speedy and complete recovery by now.

Here's just one more extract from a letter. It comes from a reader of the fair sex—Miss Florence Howard, of Wood Green, N.22—who writes: "Although I have been reading the NELSON LEE for seven years, this is the first time that I have written to you. The N.L. is one of my favourite books, and I always get up earlier on Wednesday mornings to read it before going to school."

That shows how enthusiastic Florence is. I hope she does not let another seven years elapse before she writes to me again.

Cheerio until next Wednesday!

"Smilers"

Jokes from readers wanted for this feature. If you know a good rib-tickler, send it along to "Smilers," Nelson Lee Library, 5, Carmelite Street, London, E.C.4. Splendid pocket wallets, penknives, and grand prizes are awarded for all efforts published.

THE TRAMP'S A B C.

Tramp: "I've asked, begged, and cried for money, mum!"

Lady: "Have you ever tried working for it, my good man?"

Tramp: "I'm going through the alphabet, and I 'aven't got to 'W' yet!"

A pocket wallet has been awarded to F. Moore, 75, Springfield Avenue, Banbury, Oxon.

DEMONSTRATION.

Teacher: "Give me a sentence with the word 'demonstrate' in it."

Sambo: "De books were falling off de shelf so I puts dem on straight!"

A penknife has been awarded to D. Jones, "Rushmere," Orchard Avenue, Finchley, N.3.

TOUGH.

Sailor: "Did you get that parrot I sent you from Australia?"

Grandmother: "Aye, lad; but, by goom, it were tough!"

A pocket wallet has been awarded to R. Hortin, 54, Denbigh Road, Willesden, N.W.10.

THE "OPTICIAN."

The sailor was recounting his experiences to a dear old lady.

"What rank did you hold?" she asked.

"Ship's optician, lady," was the reply.

"I never knew there was such a rank in the Navy. What did your duty consist of?"

"Scraping the eyes out of potatoes, lady!"

A penknife has been awarded to S. Cross, 126, Grosvenor Road, Forest Gate, E.7.

IMPOSSIBLE.

Singing Teacher: "You must sing louder than that."

Pupil: "But I'm singing as loud as I can."

Teacher: "Let yourself go—open your mouth and throw yourself into it!"

A pocket wallet has been awarded to G. Hutchinson, 64, South View Road, E. Bierley, Yorks.

TAKING NO RISKS.

First Navvy: "Why don't old Bill come down off his steam-roller and have dinner with us?"

Second Navvy: "Oh, 'e says with all these car thieves about 'e ain't taking no risks!"

A penknife has been awarded to S. Chamberlain, 1, Lock House, Newport, Shrops.

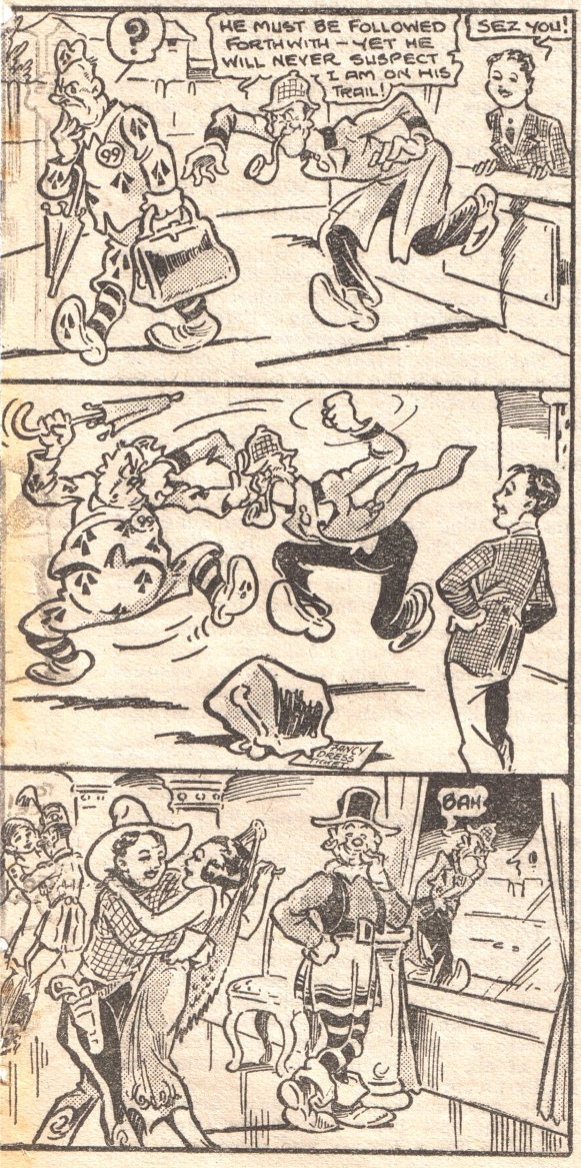
The Remarkable Adventures of TRACKETT GRIM

The Dud Detective

ures of

IM & SPLINTER

– and – His Assistant



"Smilers"

SQUASHED.

There was a fierce argument in the midst of traffic between a taxi-driver and an old man wheeling a barrow.

"You ought to be pushing a pram!" cried the taxi-driver scornfully.

"And you," replied the old man, "ought to be in it!"

A pocket wallet has been awarded to J. Hancock, 29, Hawksmoor Road, Fazakerley Liverpool.

A MUSICAL TEST.

Jeweller (to customer tapping a ring on the counter and putting it to his ear): "You cannot get music out of a gold ring, sir."

Customer: "Perhaps not; but you can out of a brass band!"

A penknife has been awarded to K. Richards, 13, Grove Street, Oxford.

QUIETLY DOES IT.

Doctor (to burglar patient): "Your heart is weak, my man. You should always take things quietly."

Patient: "I always do!"

A pocket wallet has been awarded to R. Hollingworth, 66, Ashfield Road, Nottingham.

PUTTING THINGS AWAY.

Mother: "Tommy, what are you doing at the larder?"

Tommy: "Oh, just putting a few things away!"

A penknife has been awarded to J. Joseph, The Glebe House School, Hunstanton, Norfolk.

MISUNDERSTOOD.

Teacher: "When was Rome built?"

Boy: "At night, sir."

Teacher: "Who told you that?"

Boy: "You did, sir. You said Rome wasn't built in a day!"

A pocket wallet has been awarded to L. McClellan, 98, Whitefield Road, Everton.

SHORT OF BAIT.

Inspector (to class of boys): "Now, boys, how did Noah spend his time during the Flood?"

First Boy: "Fishing, sir."

Inspector: "Yes, I fancy he did some angling."

Second Boy: "He wouldna catch many fish."

Inspector: "Why not?"

Second Boy: "He'd only ha'e twa wurrms!"

A penknife has been awarded to K. Head, Bainton, E. Yorks.

THE HOUSE OF MYSTERY!

(*Continued from page* 20.)

developed the films he would see 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 knuts—liked him. It would be a sad day for St. Frank's when the guv'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 guv'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.

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 guv'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.

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 bath-rooms—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 guv'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 guv'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 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 guv'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 which 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 guv'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 guv'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 guv'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 guv'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. He thinks the photos are spoilt."

Sir Montie beamed and chuckled.

"That's rippin'!" 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, an' 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 Lee 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 deal, 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 8.

The Missing Crook.

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 thickset. 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 Tong seeking Nelson Lee's life and the reason for our being at St. Frank's under assumed identities.

"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 Just near that town 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 for a few 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——"

The noble Ralph Leslie Fullwood looked like a scarecrow by the time we had finished with him. All his clothing was inside out, his waistcoat was tied with string, and his gold watch-chain was hanging from one ear. His face was savage under the grease-paint—and at that second I snapped him!

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 Horsham.

"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 deadlock, 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 guv'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 guv'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 properly 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 guv'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 Lee busily writing.

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

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

"I want your advice, guv'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 Lee. "What's he doing down here?"

I told the guv'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 guv'nor "I can read your thoughts quite easily. You are connecting this jewel thief with Mr. Tracey, of the Bridge House?"

"Of course, guv'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 guv'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 shan't tell you my plans now—indeed, they are only half-formed," went on the guv'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 9.

Brought to Book!

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 once. 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.

So, just after Mr. Morley had arrived, we strolled along masters' passage, and went to Nelson Lee'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 Lee'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. 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 coming 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 guv'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 not a light showed.

"It's a good thing this house is isolated," I murmured, as we paused 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."

"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 light the bombs."

The bombs 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.

"Now then—yell!" I gasped.

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

"Fire! Fire!" they yelled at the top of their voices. "The house is on fire!"

I chimed in, too, and we kept it up for about a minute. If anybody had been listening they would certainly have said that there had been an explosion in the front of the house, and that it had caused a fire.

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! We wanted to startle the occupants into rushing out—that was the idea of the wheeze. But had we succeeded?

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

We pelted 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, Morley."

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. Stevens 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.

Incidentally, there was much excitement at St. Frank's when the facts came out. Study C was famous, and its occupants 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 joke 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 school books, 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 knuts 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 mystery of the Bridge House had been cleared up.

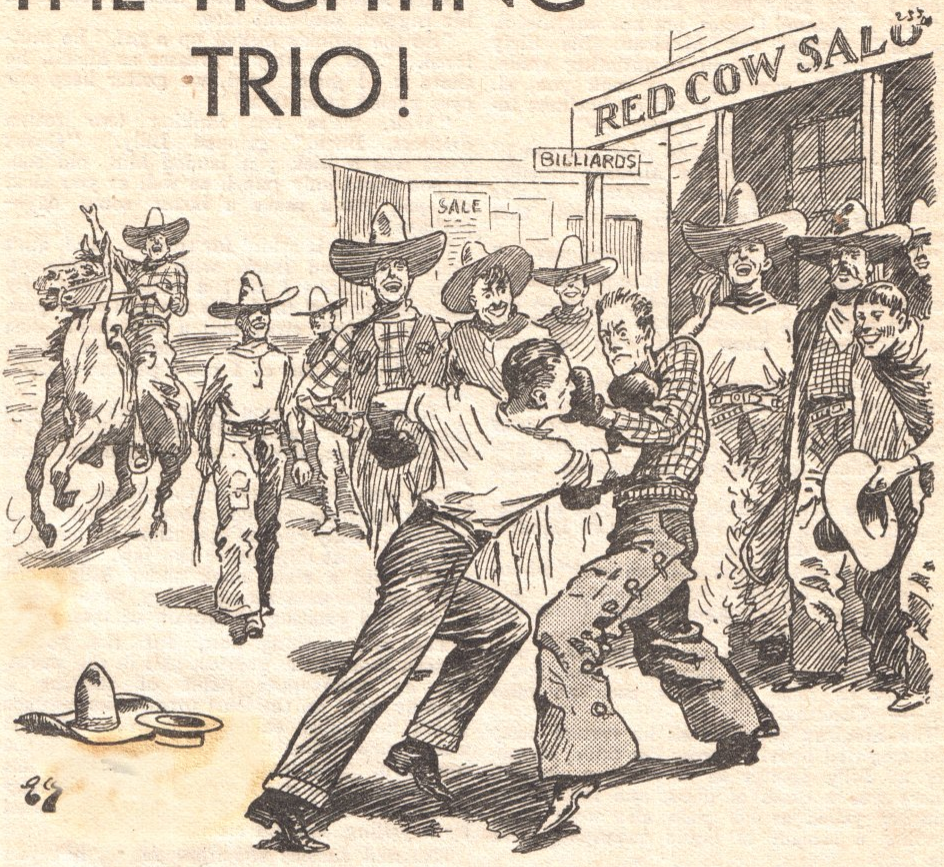
THE END.

(" Rivals of St. Frank's! "—that's the title of next Wednesday's grand long complete St. Frank's yarn, and as it suggests, the Monks and the Fossils are on the warpath again. Japing—football—adventure, you'll find them all featured in this tip-top tale.)

Here's the Most Thrilling Wild West Story of the Week!

THE FIGHTING TRIO!

By STANLEY AUSTIN



The six-gun is the weapon of the lawless prairie—but it's a hard bunch of knuckles that get our boxing pals out of trouble!

The Frame-up!

"SENORS!"

Billy Baxter and Buck Malone started.

They swung round in their chairs on the shady veranda of the Red Cow Saloon at Bakersville and blinked at the swarthy, dirty features of Manuel Gomez, the Mexican.

It was high noon, and the hot sun beat down in a pitiless glare on the dusty plaza of the Texas cow-town.

The Battling Bees had travelled a long trail that morning. But, tired as they were, they had already given a couple of performances with their partner, Bandy, the boxing bear, before repairing to the Red Cow for rest and refreshment. They were sprawling at ease in rockers when the soft, silky voice of the Mexican animal-trainer broke on their ears.

"Gomez!" gasped Billy Baxter. "Well, I'm blowed!"

"Thet durned greaser!" ejaculated Buck Malone. "Waal, this shore beats it! Hyer, you pesky, cross-eyed coyote, get outer this—pronto! Burn the durned trail afore I——"

"Senors——"

"Light out, you dog-goned rattlesnake!" hooted the boxing puncher. "Search me ef you ain't gotter nerve comin' near us guys after tryin' to shoot us up like you done, greaser!"

"But zat—eet is one mistake, Mister Malone," said Gomez, waving a pair of dirty hands. "And I, Manuel Gomez, hav' regrets many. Eet was you, brave amigos, who

saved me from ze hanging by that bad man, Black Carter——"

"And durned fools we was to do it," snapped Buck. "We oughter hev' let you swing, you pesky rattlesnake! Light out afore I boot your pesky hide!"

"But I, Manuel Gomez, am not ungrateful, amigos!" insisted the Mexican, his dirty features twisted into an ingratiating smile. "I—— Eet is my desire to zank you, si. And perhaps, amigos, we zall do business together. Zat leetle bear, Bandy——"

"Oh, you're still after thet bear, are you?" snorted Buck, eyeing the Mexican fixedly. "What's the durned game, greaser? You're trailin' us across Texas jest to get thet bear——"

"Ze bear, he belongs to me, amigos——"

"You thumping liar!" interposed Billy Baxter hotly. "Old Joe Sandley gave us the bear as a parting present when he disbanded the circus—you know that well enough, Gomez!"

"Zere hav' been one leetle mistake," said Gomez suavely. "But I do not ze bear claim as you, amigos, have my life saved. Ze bear I will buy heem from you, si. I will giv' you feefty dollars for Bandy, ze boxing bear, misters."

"Not for five hundred dollars, you double-crossing skunk!" roared Buck. "Old Bandy's our pal now, durn you! Git!"

"You will not ze bear sell, amigos?" hissed the Mexican, his black eyes glinting.

"Nope—not to a doggoned cruel brute like you, Gomez, anyway!"

"Por dios! Veree good, misters," said Gomez, turning away slowly. "But you—you are ze fools to refuse such an offer for—— Carambo!"

The Mexican stumbled as he turned away and sprawled heavily across the table, clutching at Billy Baxter as if to save himself. There was a crash of glass, and the boxing puncher yelled as his glass also went over, sending a stream of liquid swamping over his legs.

"You clumsy bonehead!" Buck roared, jumping up. "Hyer, you've spilled the works, an' now I guess it's shore time you quitted, greaser! Hit it, you pesky scallywag!"

Billy had—only too quickly—freed himself from the dirty Mexican's unexpected embrace, and Buck clutched the swarthy scoundrel's neckcloth and swung him round.

Then his boot connected with the seat of the greaser's tight-fitting velvet trousers with a hearty kick. Gomez howled as he was lifted from the top of the veranda steps to the bottom.

He fell there with a crash, and rolled over and over in the dusty plaza. From the loafers reclining in the shade of the cottonwood trees came husky laughter, and Gomez scrambled to his feet, his swarthy face darker still with rage and hate.

His hand dropped swiftly to his six-gun, and the laughter changed to warning yells. But the Mexican did not draw. He turned and limped away to where another man was lounging against a cottonwood. He was a Mexican, and looked as unsavoury a rascal as Gomez himself. The two greasers disappeared along the plaza.

Buck Malone gazed after them, a frown on his rugged, sunburnt face.

"So the skunk's picked up a pal," he muttered. "An' as ugly a greaser as hisself, he shore is. I guess, pard, we gotter keep our eyes peeled after this."

"Well, we're not funking two rotten greasers, Buck," grinned Billy. "Gosh! That was a kick you landed him, old son. If you could only punch as well as you kick, old pal, you'd make a boxer some day—perhaps!"

"You shore is askin' for trouble, pard, ain't you?" inquired Buck, with polite interest. "So you thinks I ain't a boxer, huh? By the great horned toad, it's me as'll show you, you long-faced, straw-hatted Britisher! Jest you light down on the durned plaza, pard, and I'll show you ef I can't punch—I shore will!"

"Right you are, you lanky streak of tinned chewing-gum!" said Billy cheerfully. "I'll get the gloves, though, in case I might hurt you!"

Billy soon returned with the gloves, and the boxing partners stepped down to the dusty roadway. Billy opened operations by handing his pal a neat clip under the jaw. Buck retorted with a right hook under Billy's left ear, and the next moment they were giving a free and exciting exhibition of their skill.

This was nothing new, for the roving boxers, though the greatest pals in the world, had an unfortunate habit of starting a friendly scrap on the least provocation—scraps which invariably ended in a draw. But it was a new thing to the inhabitants of the cow-town. The loafers and ranch-hands left the shade of the cottonwoods, and in a matter of seconds the Battling Bees were surrounded by a yelling, excited crowd.

Hot and furious the fight raged, but just as Billy and Buck were warming up and thoroughly enjoying themselves, there came an interruption. Through the delighted crowd of punchers a burly man in chaps and stetson, and handling a Colt, pushed his way, and an authoritative voice rang out:

"Let up thet, you galoots! I wants you—pronto, or this gun'll go off!"

Buck and Billy drew apart instantly, quite startled by the steely, grim voice, and peeled off the boxing-gloves. Buck wiped a heated, grinning face and eyed the man.

"An' who might you be, pard?" he demanded. "Say, you kinder talk as ef——"

"I'm Bill Miller, assistant sheriff of this hyer burg, I reckon," said the man significantly, "an' I guess you younkers are comin' along wi' me to the office."

"But what for?" demanded Buck. "Can't two gents enjoy themselves on the plaza without durned sheriffs butting in——"

"Aw! Quit chewin' the rag and c'm' on," snapped Bill Miller. "Ef you wants to know.

I'll durned soon enlighten you. You 'uns is charged with holdin' up two gents on the trail and liftin' thar green-backs off'n 'em, I reckon. Mebbe you ain't th' guys, and mebbe you is, but I guess you're c'ming along to th' office right now."

"Us guys is charged with that?" yelled Buck.

"Yep! An' them greasers charges you," said the assistant sheriff, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "I reckon I ain't fond o' greasers no mor'n any r'spectable guy is, but I guess a greaser's entitled to justice same as any other durned cuss. C'm' on!"

The pals stared blankly, but they understood as the crowd parted to show two figures hovering in the background. One was Manuel Gomez, and the other was his Mexican pal.

"Waal, the pizen polecat!" gasped Buck.

"Eet is ze truth, boss," exclaimed Gomez, coming forward, his hand on his gun. "Zee young bandits, zey did hold us up on ze trail, si. Search them——"

"You liar!" yelled Billy furiously. "Why, you——"

"Aw, can it—you don't want to get mad yet awhile, Britisher!" snapped Miller, ramming his Colt into Billy's chest as he rushed as if to attack Gomez. "Let up, durn you! These hyer greasers claim as you held 'em up, and I reckon they gotter prove it yet awhile, they shore hev'."

"Search theem, boss!" shrieked Gomez. "Of a certainty they hav' ze money with theem! Zey hold us up on ze trail——"

"Aw, don't spill yore mouth so much, greaser," drawled Bill Miller. "Jim, jest you tek' charge of this guy's ironmongery, and then search th' guys right hyer."

Buck Malone clenched his fists, but under the gun of the assistant sheriff they could do nothing. In any case, they did not fear a search—they were only dumbfounded by the Mexican's amazing charge.

One of the sheriff's men jerked Buck's six-gun from the holster and ran his hands over the boxing puncher's clothes. Then he turned to Billy, who never carried a gun. But Billy was carrying something else—though he didn't know it—and Gomez gave a yell as Jim drew a well-filled, dirty wallet from the Britisher's jacket pocket. Inside showed a roll of bills.

"Thet yore roll, greaser?" drawled Bill Miller.

"Eet ees my wallet and my dollars, boss!" shrieked Gomez excitedly. "I, Manuel Gomez, told you of a certainty zey had robbed me, si."

"Waal, carry me home to die!" gasped Buck Malone, while Billy was thunderstruck.

"Thet yore roll, Britisher?" drawled Bill Miller.

"No, it certainly isn't," gasped Billy dazedly. "But—gosh!"

"It's a durned frame-up!" roared Buck Malone. "Jumping snakes! Whar's thet polecat of a greaser? I guess I'll knock thar goldarned stuffin' outer him!"

"I kinder guess you won't, puncher!" snapped Bill Miller, grasping the excited Buck and hauling him back. "Let up, you fool galoot, afore this blamed gun goes off! This pard o' yourn sez as thet roll o' dollars ain't his'n."

"It shore ain't—I guess we ain't a whole dollar atween us," hooted Buck angrily. "But thet goldarned greaser——"

"Aw, cut it out, puncher! You c'n spill yore mouth at th' office, I reckon. Ef the dollars ain't yours, then you gotter explain this rookus to the sheriff immedjutely he returns. C'm' on!"

"But, you durned bonehead——" roared Buck.

"C'm' on!"

It was a bellow, and as the assistant sheriff emphasised his order by jamming a gun into Buck's ribs, the Battling Bees decided to obey. Followed by the staring, curious crowd, the assistant sheriff and his men escorted the astounded pals to the office.

— —

Black Carter!

THE Battling Bees were annoyed, but not at all alarmed. It was only too obviously a frame-up engineered by Manuel Gomez—for what reason they scarcely needed to guess. And they felt certain that it would be an easy matter to clear themselves—despite the fact that Assistant-sheriff Bill Miller appeared to be a rather stupid and over-officious representative of the law.

But they were booked for an unpleasant shock. Instead of giving them seats to await the return of the sheriff of Bakersville in the office, Bill Miller escorted them to a little yard at the back. At the end of the yard was a massively built log building with small, barred windows! It needed less than three seconds' reflection to tell them what the building was.

"Holy smoke!" gasped Buck indignantly. "Hyer, you guys, what's this game?"

"Gosh! They're shoving us in prison, Buck!" snapped Billy Baxter.

"You've said it, Britisher!" said Bill Miller coolly. "Mebbe it's a frame-up like what you sez; but mebbe it ain't! And as the roll o' green-backs was found on you, it's you guys as is goin' to remain in hyer till the sheriff comes back."

"You goldarned bonehead——" bawled Buck.

"Aw, quit chewing the rag, puncher!" drawled Miller. "We got no time to waste on you hoboes. We got wind as thet blamed coyote, Black Carter, is headin' this way on some game, and the sheriff an' me's out to nail thet snake of a bushwhacker. Jest you cool yore heels in thar until we comes for you."

"But it's a doggoned frame-up, you pesky gink! Thet durned greaser hev'——"

Buck got no chance to say more. A violent shove from one of the sheriff's men sent him sprawling inside the building. Next instant Billy was sent in after him, and the massive

door was slammed and locked upon them.

They stared at each other, Billy grinning feebly, Buck red with rage.

"It ain't nothin' to grin about, you pesky gink of a Britisher!" hooted Buck. "Can't you see what it means, Billy? Thet dirty snake of a greaser's after thet bear agen. He's got us fixed up so's he can hit the trail after pinchin' Bandy."

"Gosh!" Billy became suddenly serious and alarmed. "I never thought of that, Buck."

"Course you didn't, bein' a locoed bonehead!" snapped Buck heatedly. "Thet stumble o' th' greaser's on the durned plaza jest now weren't no accident. He did it o' purpose, so's he could shove thet roll in yore pocket, you gink! When he sprawled across the table he must 'ave——"

"I guessed that quickly enough," groaned Billy. "But I didn't spot his game. That's it, of course. He's after the bear. And he can get at Bandy easily enough—he's only locked in the stable back of the Red Cow!"

"An' we mebbe stuck in hyer for a week," went on Buck savagely. "You heard what thet bonehead said—he said as the sheriff was out after Black Carter, what was headin' this way. Jumpin' snakes! Supposin' Black Carter were after Gomez—trailin' him jest as Gomez's trailin' us."

"Looks like it," grinned Billy. "Sort of follow-me-leader game!"

"Mighty funny, Britisher!" grunted Buck. "Specially as Black'll jest fill us full o' lead when he catches us—he shore will! Yeah, I reckon as thet greaser—— Jumpin' snakes! Look thar, Billy!"

Buck, who had been gazing glumly out through the small barred window, gave a sudden bellow.

Billy looked quickly from the window as his pal pointed out, but he did not see anything at first. Then he sighted the three distant figures heading out on the prairie trail. Two were men, and the third was, without a doubt, a grizzly bear led on the chain. And it was pretty certain that there was only one tame bear in that section, at least, and that was Bandy!

"Bandy!" gasped Billy in alarm. "Great Scott! You were right, Buck! Those rotten greasers have collared Bandy!"

They could not doubt it, for the bear had been fastened in a stable at the rear of the Red Cow, easy enough for anyone to get at unseen. Even at that distance they could see the bear was an unwilling companion, and the eyes of the pals glittered as they saw that one man was using a whip to goad the bear on.

"The durned coyote!" hissed Buck Malone.

In a fury the boxing puncher started to hammer and kick at the heavy door and yell at the top of his voice, while his pal did his best. But if the assistant sheriff heard, he did not heed. And after kicking up a terrific row for ten minutes or so, the pals gave it up. The thought of their animal partner being at the mercy of the cruel Mexican filled them both with rage and apprehension.

They had scarcely ceased their vain efforts to attact attention when the sound of galloping hoofs was heard outside the gaol. Nearer the sounds came, and then, with a jingle of harness and bridles, two horsemen came into view and dismounted in the yard outside the gaol. One was a grizzled, elderly man with a star on his breast.

"Th' sheriff!" breathed Buck, glaring out through the little window. "Good enough!"

"We'll soon be out of this now," said Billy thankfully.

"Ef the durned sheriff's as big a bonehead as Bill Miller we shore won't, pard," said Buck thickly. "Say, Billy, we ain't chancing it. Gomez hev' gone with his durned wallet, I guess, and us'll be kept hyer until they find him."

"Then what the dickens are we to do, Buck?"

"Collar them cayuses and light out after Gomez somehow, pard," hissed Buck, his eyes gleaming. "You game to risk flyin' lead? Yeah? Then jest you follow my trail, pardner. I ain't lettin' thet durned greaser get away with old Bandy. I shore ain't."

They heard Bill Miller greet the sheriff, and the three men vanished from their sight. Buck whispered his daring plan to his pal as they waited by the door of the cell. They had not to wait long.

Clumping, spurred feet sounded out in the yard, and then the big door was unlocked and flung open. Bill Miller stood there, and he was alone.

"Sheriff's come back, you guys," he grunted. "I guess you c'n come and spill the works to Sheriff Gunter. An' ef yore wise——"

He got no further.

Buck was ready, tensed for action. One hand whipped Bill Miller's gun from his belt, and the other handed out a lightning, devastating punch that sent the unsuspecting assistant sheriff thudding to earth.

"Now, pard!"

In a flash the two had leaped to the horses. The reins had been thrown over a post, and, whipping them off, the two pals leaped up in the saddles. The horses wheeled round and set off at a gallop, Buck and Billy urging them on with foot and hand.

Bill Miller scrambled up, roaring with rage, but the pals were away before he had even recovered himself. He felt for his gun, missed it and rushed, bawling, into the office.

By this time Buck and Billy had passed the Red Cow Saloon on the way out of Bakersville. Billy was almost as much at home in the saddle as the ex-puncher, and he got the most out of his horse. From behind came a sudden roar of six-guns, and bullets whistled past the heads of the escaping pals. But soon they were out on the dusty trail, and the furious yells and shots died away behind them.

"But they'll soon be after us, Buck," grinned Billy. "Gosh! We've done it now,

Buck and Billy were riding fast out of Bakersville when suddenly from behind came a roar of six-guns, and bullets whistled past the heads of the escaping pals, followed faintly by furious yells from the sheriff.

old scout. Bill Miller will want to string you up after this. That peach of a punch you handed him——"

"Thet durned bonehead ain't caught us yet, pard, an' he ain't goin' to until we've got Bandy back," snapped Buck.

But his face was grim as they rode on. Sooner or later the sheriff's posse would be out after them, and unless the sheriff was a more reasonable man than Bill Miller, they were in for serious trouble.

But the Battling Bees lived for trouble, and they were only worrying about the devoted Bandy as they rode the trail, eyes scanning the prairie keenly. Suddenly Buck grunted and pointed. Far in the distance, well away from the dusty trail, and just climbing towards a chaparral, showed three figures, one much larger than the others.

Buck glanced back. So far, there showed no signs of pursuit, but the sooner they got rid of the borrowed horses the better.

"Light off, pard!" said Buck. "I guess it's time we parted with these hyer cayuses."

As he spoke Buck slipped from his horse, wheeled him round and gave the animal a slap. The horse obeyed instantly, and started to trot back along the trail. Next moment Billy was out of the saddle and his horse was following it. The two pals dived into the straggling mesquite by the trail, and started off across the prairie in pursuit of their quarry.

For half an hour, under the burning sun, they pushed on. Manuel Gomez and Mexican Pete—for that was the name of the other rascal—did not halt in the chaparral, and it was easily clear that they were trying to blanket their trail.

But the pals did not allow them to get out of sight. Buck and Billy came to a halt as they saw the three figures ahead—clear and recognisable now—pull up near a ramshackle stockman's hut. Here the ground was rocky, and the chums pushed through the scrub, taking advantage of every bit of cover. They could hear the greasers talking now, and Buck called a halt.

Both the boxing pals were curious and puzzled. Why did the rascally animal trainer want Bandy, the boxing bear? And why, now he had the animal in his clutches, did he not shoot him as he had tried to do once before—and the pals also? Possibly the greaser was afraid of the shot attracting attention near the cow-town, and yet—it was strange! Motioning his chum not to act yet, Buck drew his six-gun and waited.

That the greasers had halted to deal with Bandy was soon evident. Mexican Pete drew well away from the bear. Gomez unwound his steel-thonged whip from his waist and

approached Bandy, cracking it with cracks like gun-shots.

"Now, leetle bear," he called softly in English, "we shall not be disturbed here, and eef you try tricks zee dose of lead will settle you, si. Carambo!"

He stepped back swiftly as Bandy, growling and snarling deeply, made a sudden swing at him with his paw. Bandy, though still afraid of the cruel trainer, was evidently going to allow no liberties!

"What's his durned game?" breathed Buck.

Gomez advanced again. He grabbed the bear's chain, and then he reached up towards the bear's neck. Again the bear's paw swept round viciously, and with a stream of lurid Mexican oaths, Gomez ducked and leaped away, his eyes glinting with rage.

"Veree well, leetle bear!" he snarled. "You will hav' heem!"

He stepped backwards a few paces, and his gun came out.

Though taken by surprise at the sudden action, Buck proved the quicker on the draw. His hand went up, and the two reports of the six-guns sounded almost as one.

Gomez yelled as the six-gun was whipped from his hand and went spinning yards away. The bullet from the Mexican's gun licked a tuft of hair from Bandy's thick, grey-brown coat.

"You durned rattlesnake!" roared Buck.

He fired again, and as a bullet whistled over his head, Mexican Pete pouched his own gun and, with a startled oath, bolted like a rabbit. He vanished amid the scrub behind the hut. Gomez whirled round—just in time to stop a right-hook from Billy Baxter. Gomez gulped and went down.

And it was just then that the sound of galloping hoofs became heard, faintly at first, and then growing rapidly louder. Buck turned swiftly from the prostrate Mexican and scanned the prairie. In the high grass of the distance appeared four bobbing stetson hats.

Buck grinned. He supposed it was the sheriff's posse from Bakersville, hard on their trail. If Bill Miller was one there looked like being a high time ahead for the Battling Bees.

Buck watched grimly as the four horsemen came up at a gallop, riding hard, evidently attracted by the shots—at least, he supposed so.

"I guess thar's trouble headin' this way, pard," snapped Buck, keeping one eye on the greaser at his feet. "Doggone thet durned gink Bill Mill—— Holy smoke!"

Quite suddenly Buck's keen eyes had recognised the foremost of the oncoming horsemen. He knew that evil, stubbly face, with its heavy black eyebrows and black beard—though the face had worn a mask before. He knew it only too well as the face of Black Carter, bushwhacker, rustler and trail-thief, and the biggest scoundrel in the section.

"Holy smoke!" he went on in a startled yell. "It ain't the sheriff—it's worse'n any sheriff! It's thet durned coyote, Black Carter!"

——

Bandy Brings the House Down!

"BLACK CARTER!"

Billy Baxter, who was striving to keep the enraged Bandy from flying at the prostrate Mexican, gave a gasp of alarm. Black Carter was trailing Gomez, undoubtedly, and not them. But he had a heavy score against the pals, and they knew he would riddle them with lead on sight—if he got a chance.

But the name had a far more alarming effect on Manuel Gomez.

He gave a frightened yelp and scrambled up, heedless of Buck's gun. Buck quickly grasped the situation.

"No good thinkin' of facing the fire-bugs, Billy," he snapped. "We gotter think of old Bandy's chances of stoppin' lead! Get him inside thet thar shanty—pronto! Gomez, you dirty, double-crossing snake, ef you wants to save yore hide, you'd best do thar same, durn you. P'raps we c'n hold thet hut until the sheriff happens along."

"Carambo!" panted Gomez.

He hesitated a moment, and then, giving the pals a glare of hatred, he dashed off for the hut. Billy Baxter sensed instantly what his treacherous intention was, and he flew after him, leaving Buck to deal with Bandy.

It was just as well he did, for Gomez had slammed the door of the hut and was just about to ram the bar across as Billy arrived. Billy charged the door in the nick of time, sending the Mexican sprawling across the hut as the door crashed back.

"You rotten hound!" yelled Billy. "Quick, Buck!"

A glance showed that every second was precious. The horsemen were quite close now, galloping hard. A yell, and then a fusillade of shots sounded. Bandy seemed to want to stop to argue the matter out, but Buck managed somehow to hustle the big bear to the hut.

Billy held the door wide, and then—possibly scenting rest and a feed, Bandy dropped on all fours and ambled quite eagerly inside the stockman's hut. Buck followed him in, and as Billy crashed the door shut and fastened it, another fusillade of lead rattled and thudded into it. Gomez was on his feet again now, his swarthy face white with fear. He shrank back against the wall as Bandy gave a deep-throated growl on sighting him.

"Quiet, Bandy, old hoss!" gasped Billy, grabbing his chain and trying to soothe the bear. "Hallo, here the brutes come, Buck!"

There was a jingle of bridle and stirrup outside, followed by savage oaths. Then came a crashing blow on the door as the haft of a quirt struck it savagely.

"You 'uns in thar!" came Black Carter's deep, menacing voice. "Open this hyer durned door, goldarn you!"

For answer Buck sent a couple of shots crashing through a chink in the door. From

somewhere a few yards away came a wild yell, and another deep oath from Carter.

"You hyer me?" he shouted. "Open this goldarned door! I know you've got thet pizen skunk, Gomez, in thar. I bin trailin' the skunk fer days, and I'm honin' to string him up when I gets him. Let a guy in, you durned quitters!"

"I guess you're safer outside, Black Carter," answered Buck Malone coolly. "And we're safer inside for a bit! Hit the horizon and forget it, hombre!"

"I'm havin' you outer thar, I tell you!" yelled Black Carter furiously. "Thet skunk of a greaser hev' double-crossed us, and we're goin' to string him up after we've chewed the rag with him for a while, we shore is! Open, doggone you!"

"Aw, take yore ugly mug off'n our front step, Carter!" called Buck coolly. "Hit the trail pronto. I'm startin' shooting agen right now!"

He rammed the barrel of his six-gun in the crack again and pulled the trigger. From the gun sounded a click, but that was all. The gun was empty.

"Aw, durn it!" snapped Buck thoughtlessly. "An' I ain't gotter 'nother pill."

Evidently Black Carter had heard both the ominous click and Buck's remark, for he gave a yell.

"Thar lead's given out, boys! Get to thet window and shoot 'em up from thar, Big Jim! Pump lead into the durned galoots, boys!"

"Holy smoke!" groaned Buck. Then he sighted the shivering greaser. "You got any lead, greaser? Ef you ain't, hyer's whar we get ours!" he snapped eagerly. "Quick, you durned coyote!"

"Carai!" hissed Gomez, his face shaking with fright. "My gun, you shot heem from my hand, and ze bullets I hav' none!"

"Then it's us for the buzzards!" said Buck calmly. "I reckon afore the sheriff lights on us—— Jumping snakes! Look out!"

As he spoke Buck suddenly sighted a face high at the little glassless window of the hut, and he flung the useless six-gun with all his force. It struck the stubbly, evil face with a dull thud, and with a wild yell the bushwhacker vanished and a crash followed.

But it was only a respite. There was a mutter of oaths beneath the window, and then a hand and arm showed—the glint of a gun. Billy grabbed desperately at his battered straw hat and threw it, but he was too late. With a deafening roar the gun spoke, and Bandy, the bear, gave a shrill squeal as the bullet rammed into his shoulder.

Buck gave a roar of rage, and Billy Baxter a roar of warning. Next moment Bandy, the bear, took a hand in the fight. Growling with rage and pain, the unwieldy animal tore free from Billy's restraining hand and lumbered across the hut. What had struck him Bandy did not know, but he seemed to know that the searing, stabbing thing had come from the window. Following the shot a face and head appeared there, and just then Bandy charged like a mountain of fur and flesh.

He struck the wall of the hut sideways with a crash that sounded far and wide, and the shanty shook as if an earthquake had struck it, and then——

Buck and Billy yelled as the wall collapsed with a shattering, smashing crash. A beam of heavy timber narrowly missed Billy's head, and Gomez howled as a plank thudded upon him, sending him to earth.

But Bandy had done the trick. Evidently the bushwhacker who had fired was standing on a mate's bent back, and the wall fell on both amid a crashing of splintering timber.

And Bandy, overbalancing, fell on top of the wall, crushing the men to earth beneath it.

Daylight flooded in, and, leaping out, Buck Malone sighted Black Carter standing a few yards away, his dark face registering his astonished alarm. Then the bushwhacker grasped what had happened and his arm went up.

Bang, bang, bang!

But the bullets went wide in the rustler's excitement, and Buck suddenly sighted a gun amid the ruins and snatched it up. Next moment he was answering the bushwhacker in his own language.

And then, faintly to the Battling Bees' ears, again came the sound of galloping hoofs. Black Carter heard it, and gave a savage yell.

"Hit the trail, boys," he roared. "It's thet blamed sheriff! By the great horned toad! Hit it—pronto, you ginks!"

He sent a parting volley of shots whistling and thudding into the wrecked hut, and then he leaped into the saddle and drove home his spurs. Only one of the bushwhackers followed him, however—the other two were under the wrecked wall of the shed and Bandy, and they were not likely to have heard, much less heeded, their leader's warning.

Buck sent shot after shot hurtling after the bandit, but Black Carter was well away, hitting the prairie trail as hard as his horse could make it, urged on with savage whip and spur.

Then the pals sighted the oncoming horsemen, and Buck's face lit up as he recognised the leading horseman. He was a grizzled, bronzed man with iron-grey moustache, and wearing a star on his shirt-front.

"It's Sheriff Tobin!" yelled Buck. "We're in luck, Billy. It's the sheriff from Broken Gulch!"

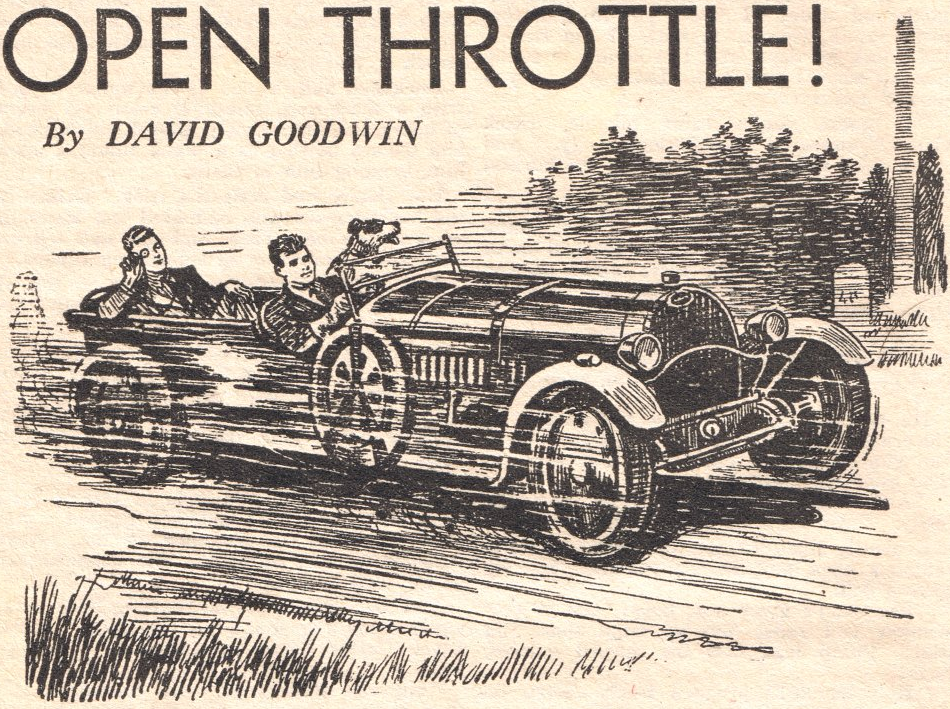
They watched as the oncoming horsemen broke into two parties, one bunch going off full-tilt on the trail of Black Carter and his confederate, the other bearing down on the wrecked hut. Sheriff Tobin, with three of his deputies, rode up at last and dismounted, their faces showing astonished amazement as they took in the scene.

(*Continued on page* 44.)

Bud Gives Himself the "Sack"!

OPEN THROTTLE!

By DAVID GOODWIN



Bluff!

"IT made me so anxious and worried," continued Mr. Finch, "that I hastened off at once to find you. I felt sure there was something wrong with the car, though what it was I hadn't the faintest idea. I knew it oughtn't to start in the race, and——"

"Gee!" said Cyril, gaping. "Why didn't you tell me——"

"How could I shout it out before all the crowd?" replied Hotham impatiently. "I didn't know myself what had happened. I wanted you to postpone the race so that we could find out. Barney had heard the warning about the car, too, and when I found you wouldn't listen to reason and were so terribly obstinate about it, I told Barney to hurry off and try to stop your young chauffeur at any cost. We thought he might have more sense than you. So Barney went and did his best. But it didn't come off!"

"No," said Barney gloomily, fondling his jaw. "It didn't!"

"Barney was terribly upset!"

"I went to this young What's-his-name here," said Barney, "and——"

"Kelly's my name," interrupted Bud.

"I went to young Kelly, and asked him to take the car back to the garage, Cyril," said Barney, ignoring Bud; "but he wouldn't hear a word. He was just as pig-headed as you! I begged him not to start. I even offered him money if he'd wash it out, for I saw how obstinate he was, and dad said the car simply mustn't go! Then this fellow of yours—of course, I'm not blaming him—hit me under the jaw before I knew what he was going to do, and knocked me down. And away he goes, and comes within an inch of breaking his neck!"

Cyril stared at Bud with a flabbergasted expression.

"When a fellow comes up to me and offers me money for not carrying out my orders," said Bud sourly, "I'd knock him down every time! Why didn't he say——"

"We've been hunting everywhere for that

THE OPENING CHAPTERS

Bud Kelly, a clever young motor mechanic, gets a job as chauffeur-valet to Cyril Babbit, a youthful millionaire. He has a suspicion that Hotham Finch and Barney Finch, Babbit's uncle and cousin respectively, and Joe Cleugh, a rascally chauffeur, are in league "to get rid" of Cyril.

Bud has a miraculous escape when the car, which Cyril was to drive, crashes in a race. The youngster suspects foul play, and gets Cleugh arrested for cutting the axle. Hotham Finch and his son start to bluff out of the affair.

(Now read on.)

man who gave us the warning, but he's disappeared!" interrupted Hotham. "After the accident we thought it certain there'd been dirty work somewhere; and it wouldn't be the first time, in a big car race. Have you found out what was wrong with the car, Cyril?"

"Look at it!" said Cyril. "Axle cut halfway through!"

Hotham and his son, with exclamations of amazement, bent over the wrecked car.

"Cut through?" said Hotham. "Surely not!"

"Dinna ye touch it, sir," said McTaggart; "that's goin' up to the police."

"Don't you know that your man Cleugh has been run in, uncle?" said Cyril.

"What do you mean?" gasped Hotham.

Cyril told him how Joe Cleugh had been brought to book. Barney and his father looked perfectly horrified.

"Cleugh? Oh, but this is impossible! It couldn't be Cleugh!"

"Well, it looks like it, anyhow," said Cyril. "There's his fist-marks on the steel, and the saw was found on him. He's going to be tried."

"Cleugh! Why, he came to me with the best of references!" protested Mr. Finch blankly. "He was recommended by Lord Mornington! Why should he do such a shocking thing?"

"Blessed if I know!" said Cyril. "Had a big bet on another car, I suppose, and didn't want this one to win. Or else he's got a taste for seeing people smashed up. What did he do it for? Ask me an easier one! I've never done him any harm that I know of."

"It's terrible!" gasped Hotham. "I can't believe it. If I thought it possible he could be such a scoundrel I wouldn't have engaged him. Why, he might have cut the axle of my car!"

"Wouldn't be likely to do that—doesn't want to crash himself, of course," said Cyril wisely. "After all, there's no great harm done."

"This poor boy might have lost his life!" cried Mr. Finch tremulously. "Oh, it makes me feel cold all over!"

"Don't you worry, uncle," said Cyril soothingly. "No fault of yours, anyhow. You're not responsible for him, any more than I'm responsible for Bud. Lots of wrong 'uns about—Bud is always telling me so. We'd all be feeling pretty sick if young Bud had been done in, and we've had a lucky escape."

"It could never have happened if you had only listened to me, or if your lad had listened to Barney!" groaned Mr. Finch. "We used out utmost endeavours to stop this wretched race. We implored you not to start, but you always will know best!"

"By gad, that's true!" said Cyril penitently. "I know I'm an impatient sort of guy. I'm sorry, uncle. And I must say Bud was very hasty in sloshing poor old Barney like that. Of course, I told him to drive the car, and I'm his boss; but I didn't give him orders to slosh Barney. You'll have to beg Barney's pardon!"

"Me, sir?" said Bud.

"Oh, that's all right!" said Barney generously. "No doubt he's quite a faithful servant, and I forgive him—I forgive the young fellow freely, as I expect to be forgiven when I have done anything hasty."

Bud began to feel sick.

"Shake hands on it, then!" said Cyril commandingly to Bud. "To show there's been no ill-feeling. It's jolly decent of Barney!"

Bud glanced at his employer, then looked Barney in the face, and held out his hand very slowly. Barney took it, without apparently noticing that Bud's fist was tight shut. Barney, flushing, gave it a half-shake and dropped it.

"Now we'll go and see what this dreadful business is about Cleugh," said Hotham. "Come along, Cyril!"

Cyril, with his uncle and nephew, left the shed. Bud, left behind, stood thinking for a few moments. He turned to McTaggart, who still stood silent behind the wrecked car.

"What d'you think of it?" asked Bud dryly.

"Imphm!" said McTaggart.

Trouble Ahead.

AN hour later Cyril Babbit was driving homewards, with Bud sitting beside him and Pincher at the back. Pincher looked as if he had had a thoroughly enjoyable day. Next to a good day's ratting, he thought it could hardly have been improved upon. He wondered why his two friends in front appeared to have the "hump."

Cyril was looking bad-tempered, an unusual thing for him. He had hardly said a word to Bud since he left Brooklands. Perhaps his wrist was hurting him. But it was evidently better, for he was able to drive.

"Well, Uncle Hotham was quite right," he said absently, staring in front of him over the steering-wheel. "Cleared it all up. Made it plain. Ought to have taken his warning. Wonder who that chap was who gave him the tip? Eh?"

"I don't believe a word of it!" said Bud.

"What!" exclaimed Babbit, turning his head and staring.

In doing so he nearly ditched the car.

Bud had supposed Babbit was speaking to him.

"All my eye, sir," said he deliberately. "It was very clever, all of it. I've heard some tales pitched in my time, and that was a good one. But it's not good enough."

"What on earth are you talking about?" said Cyril.

"May I ask you a question, sir?"

"What question?" said Cyril shortly.

"I don't know whether I ought to ask it, but I feel I've got to. Suppose anything were to happen to you, would Mr. Finch get all your money?"

Cyril burst into a fit of laughter.

"Great Scott, no! Not that I know of," he said with obvious astonishment.

Bud was astonished, too, but rather puzzled.

"It wouldn't do Mr. Finch any good, then, if you were to—to peg out, sir?"

"There are a lot of people who would be sorry if I pegged out," said Cyril, "and nobody more so than Uncle Hotham—let alone Barney who's a pretty good pal of mine, for I give him a tidy bit of the stuff from time to time." He checked himself suddenly. "That's enough!" he said, with a haughtiness that surprised Bud. "You're talking rot, my lad!"

"Very good, sir!" said Bud rather sulkily.

"Very good, be hanged! It's not very good," continued Cyril, who seemed to be nursing a grievance. "I make allowances for you, but you had no business to be knocking Mr. Barney Finch about. It was quite enough to refuse to do what he asked, if you didn't understand it—without using your hands on him. Dash it all, he's my cousin, and a guest at my house—and you're a chauffeur—a paid servant."

Bud said no more. He was beginning to see there were two sides to Cyril. Besides, there was the chance that Bud had made a mistake.

Bud, however, felt very sure he had made no mistake at all. He remembered what he had heard the night before at the house, and it stuck in his mind.

He believed that if Cyril himself had started to drive in that death trap of a racing car, then Finch would never have tried to stop him at all. The story that Hotham and his son had told after the accident—that they had done their best because of their anxiety on Cyril's account—was very smart, and nobody could prove it wasn't true. But Bud felt perfectly certain they were both lying.

It seemed strange that Finch had nothing to gain by putting Babbit out of the way. If that was true, then Bud's suspicions were all wrong. But when Bud once got suspicious, it took a good deal to satisfy him. Was Cyril right? He had laughed at the mere idea of such a thing as foul play on Finch's part. And he ought to know. But Bud had not much opinion of Cyril's wisdom.

"I've put my foot in it, anyhow!" thought Bud gloomily.

There was a coolness between Babbit and his chauffeur. It could be felt as the car drove along and entered London. The exuberant Cyril was now haughty and silent. And Bud had a temper of his own.

He did not like being made to lunch at his master's table on one day, and to be reminded on the next that he was a servant. It was not playing the game.

Perhaps he had made a mistake in knocking Barney Finch down. It was a silly thing to do, it had given him away, so to speak. But Bud did not regret it. He felt that he would have knocked Babbit down under similar circumstances—or anybody else. Bud was feeling fed-up

Not a word passed between the two until they reached Eaton Terrace, and Cyril drove straight into the garage.

"Shan't want the car again to-day," said Cyril briefly, "as far as I know. You can come up for orders to-night, though."

"Very well, sir," replied Bud.

Cyril strode out with his chin in the air. He went upstairs to the great oak-panelled dining-room, where a late lunch was just finishing. Cyril had had his lunch at Brooklands before leaving, but the Babbit mansion kept open house all day for all comers, and here was a company of Cyril's friends and hangers-on, making as free with the place as if it were a hotel. There were seven of them at the table, of all ages from eighteen up to thirty, and a loudly-dressed, rakish crowd they looked.

"Hallo, Babbit, my buck!" cried the leader. "Your old butler told us you were out, so we got him to turn on the lunch while we were waiting. How's the fun of the fair at Brooklands? Dull place, Brooklands. Come and have a drink, my boy!"

"Nothing dull about Brooklands to-day, Crocker," said Cyril, joining them at the table. "Don't want a drink, I tell you what——"

"Come on, wet your whistle like a sportsman!" said Crocker, pouring out spirits and soda.

"Don't want it. Not just now."

The company laughed derisively They had been making free with Babbit's cellar, and looked as if they had had as much as was good for them.

"Maybe he'd rather have bread-and-milk," sneered a guest at the end of the table. "Don't push it at him if he's afraid of it"

"Afraid of it be hanged!" retorted Cyril angrily. "I'll show you!"

He took up the glass with an air of bravado and gulped the stuff down. He would nearly as soon have drunk petrol. Cyril did not like spirits, few people do unless they train themselves to it. But the others did, and so did Cyril, after the first dose the poison went down more easily

"That's it!" sniggered Crocker. "You weren't afraid of it last Friday night, old chap! Now what's this about Brooklands?"

Cyril put down his glass and told them. Presently roars of laughter arose in the dining-room. Bud, away down in the garage, could hear it.

Bud had the bonnet open and was tinkering with the car's engine. She had not been pulling well on the home run, and, though he was tired, Bud could not leave it alone till it was right. An engine that was running out of tune annoyed him. He took nearly an hour over it, and, just as he was leaving the garage, Cyril came through.

"Hallo, young trackscooter!" laughed Babbit. "Still messing about? Never saw such a kid in all my life!"

He seemed to have got over his ill-temper, but his voice was rather loud and insolent. Bud looked at him curiously He noticed that Cyril's face was slightly flushed.

"It's lucky for you," said Cyril, "that Barney Finch was not me! I'd have given you such a licking as you've never had in your life. Remember to keep your hands off your betters in future, my lad, or you'll get fired!" he added, and swaggered out of the garage.

Bud stared at him wonderingly.

"The fellow must have been drinking," he thought. "He seems different, somehow. Does he think I'm paid wages to be talked to like that?"

He sniffed a faint odour of spirits in the air.

"Bah!" said Bud, with deep disgust.

Bud had led a rough life and had lived in some queer places; a drunken man—not that Cyril was drunk—was nothing new to him. But he had a contempt for such people that amounted to hatred, and the smell of spirits or any other alcoholics, revolted him.

A chorus of laughter came from the company upstairs; they were getting noisier than ever. There was not much doubt what was the matter with them. Bud listened, and shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm fed-up with this place," he muttered. "I can't stick such a crowd as that. And I doubt if I can stand my new boss, either."

He wandered out of the garage.

"Suppose I've got to, though," he added gloomily. "Two quid a week isn't picked up easily at my age. There's the old lady to think of. And it isn't my business, anyway."

Bud was feeling worn out and unhappy. He looked at the black side of things, which was very rare with him. But a fellow cannot be slung out of a racing-car without being shaken up in body and mind. Cyril seemed to have forgotten about the crash already. Cyril evidently had a short memory. Bud went into his own quarters, a small bed-room next to the garage, where he had slept the night before.

He threw himself on the bed, and in ten seconds was sleeping heavily.

Bud Mutinies.

WHEN Bud woke it was dark. He felt for the electric light switch, and clicked it on. The time was nearly eight o'clock.

He felt rested and refreshed, though rather stiff and sore. He went through into the house, and in the hall he ran into the old butler. He was big built and rather stout, a fine figure of a man, with grey side whiskers.

"Governor upstairs, Mr. Binns?" inquired Bud.

"Out," said the butler briefly. "Might be in any time now, or might not be in till morning. He's out with those friends o' his. What's your name, my lad? I've got to enter you up."

"Enter me up?" exclaimed Bud. "What for?"

Mr. Binns opened a sort of ledger book that he took from a drawer in the hall.

"You're the new garage boy, aren't you? I'm chief o' the staff in this house, and I keep a tally of the servants engaged. That's my job, and I do it. A bright lot they are!" added Mr. Binns scathingly "Two of 'em caught thieving last week. I caught 'em. The governor, he don't care, but I do. We've got wrong 'uns enough in this house, an' they ain't all in the servants' hall, either! What's your address?"

Bud gave his name and his mother's address; Mr. Binns made an entry. Then he took a good look at Bud.

"Where did the governor pick you up?" he asked.

"On the high road, like a stray tyke," replied Bud.

"Oh," said Mr. Binns, and stared at him. "Well, I'll tell you one thing, young 'un. You're about the first honest face I've seen in this house, except when I look into me shaving-glass in the mornings. You seem a tough little beggar, but I like your looks."

"Thankee," said Bud, rather surprised. And as Mr. Binns seemed talkative, he asked a question. "Who are those friends of the governor's, Mr. Binns?"

"Rubbish!" replied the butler. "That's what they are. A set of flashy dead-beats, miscalling themselves sportsmen. Livin' on Mr. Babbit, and draining him dry!"

"That's what I thought," said Bud. "Dead-beats, are they? I know the sort. Why doesn't the governor hoof 'em out, if they're a trouble to him?"

"Him! He can't get rid of them. He hasn't any more backbone than a caterpillar! Now, I don't know that he wants to. It's enough to make anybody cry to see the way this house is run. I've always been used to serving gentlemen, not dustbin stuff like those. And they're makin' the young master as rotten as they are themselves."

"He doesn't take much making," thought Bud. "Birds of a feather!"

Just then there was a confused noise outside the front door and somebody was beating on it with a stick. Binns went to open the door. Cyril and five or six of his friends had arrived.

It occurred to Bud that he himself was looking rather disreputable. He slipped away to the lavatory by the garage, washed, and combed his tangled hair. His coat was torn all up the back, but that could not be helped. It was the fault of the car. There was a rent in the seat of his trousers, too.

He tidied himself as much as possible, and went upstairs to get his orders, as arranged. Most of the company were making a noise on the upper landing, but he found Cyril by himself in the big smoking-room.

PEN PALS

B. F. Edgecombe, 34, Holme Road, East Ham, **London, E.6,** wants to hear from stamp collectors.

Denis Noon, 144, Mansel Road, Small Heath, **Birmingham,** wants correspondents; ages 12-15.

H. Edditts, Prince of Wales' Volunteers, Lundi Kotal, North West Frontier, **India,** wants correspondents interested in photos.

Ernest Dillon, 138, Goderich Street, East Perth, **Western Australia,** wants members for the Wide World Fellowship Correspondence League. Stamps, coins, photos exchanged.

Miss R. Pagett, 137, Devonshire Street, Surry Hills, Sydney, N.S.W., **Australia,** wants to hear from girl readers.

Geoffrey F. Guest, 23, Cartwright Road, Chorlton-cum-Hardy, **Manchester,** wishes to correspond with stamp collectors, especially in his area.

Douglas Nicol, Douglas, Taranaki, **New Zealand,** wishes to hear from stamp collectors in Spain, Canada, Panama and Jamaica.

H Redgrave, 44, Albert Road, **Kilburn, N.W.6,** wants correspondents.

Ronald Harris, 47, Ruskin Avenue, Southend-on-Sea, **Essex,** wants correspondents.

H. Martin, 15, Coniscliffe Road, Darlington, **Co. Durham,** wants members for his hobby and correspondence club.

Max Batty, 25, Kent Road, Keswick, **South Australia,** wants correspondents outside Australia.

E. P. Pereira, 6, Stinger's Street, G. T. Madras, **India,** wants to hear from stamp collectors; Africa and West Indies especially. Advanced collectors preferred.

Keith Garland, c/o R. W. Mayhew, 49, Spofforth Street, Cremorne, Sydney, N.S.W., **Australia,** wants correspondents in the British Empire; stamps and photography.

Fred Byrne, 524, William Street, Broken Hill, N.S.W., **Australia,** wants correspondents interested in tennis, stamp collecting, etc.

Geoffrey F. Guest, 23, Cartwright Road, Chorlton-cum-Hardy, **Manchester,** wants to hear from secretaries of correspondence clubs with view to amalgamation.

Jack Beckow, 1341, Lajoie Avenue, Montreal, **Canada,** wants to hear from stamp collectors.

Miss Valerie Beech, The Hawthorns, 154, Victoria Road, Aston, **Birmingham,** wants girl correspondents overseas.

B. Collins-Kisner, International Pen Pals' Correspondence Club, Canal au Sucre, 34, **Antwerp,** wants members.

H. K. Stocks, 244, Upper Woodlands Road, Bradford, **Yorks,** wants correspondents who are interested in the St. Frank's stories.

Cyril was in full evening-dress, with a diamond in his shirt-front, but the effect was rather spoiled by his white tie being all crumpled and slewed round under one ear.

"What time do you require the car to-morrow, sir?" asked Bud.

"Car?" said Babbit stupidly. "Car?"

He turned round and stared at Bud. Cyril's face was pale, his eyes vacant, and he swayed slightly. Bud saw what was the matter with him.

"Here," cried Cyril fiercely, "what do you mean coming to my room looking like a ragamuffin, eh? Look at your coat! Look at your trousers! Nice sort of object you are to be a gentleman's servant!"

Bud turned white; his temper began to bubble up like hot water in a pipe.

"And how dare you bring that beastly dog in here?"

Pincher was sitting quietly beside his master, with his ears cocked. Bud had forgotten him. It looked to Pincher as if there would be trouble.

"I'll come for orders in the morning, sir," said Bud quietly, and turned to go out.

"Stop!" shouted Cyril. "Stay where you are!" He reached for the spirit decanter. There was only a trickle in it, which he poured into a glass and drank. "Here, go and get me another bottle out of the dining-room. It's on the sideboard!"

Bud turned and faced him.

"I'm a car-driver," he said. "I'm not paid to fetch and carry that muck for you! You can't pay me to do it, either!"

"What!" cried Cyril. "You impudent little cub that I picked up out of the gutter, I've had enough of your cheek! I tell you what, I——"

He broke off suddenly, and, seeing another full decanter on the side-table, he snatched it up and half-filled his glass.

Bud had lost his temper altogether. He walked up to Cyril, blazing with anger.

"You drink that stuff and make a beast of yourself, an' you think you can talk to me like a beast!" he said. "Well, here's my answer to you!"

He knocked the glass off the table, and, seizing the decanter, flung it through the window-pane.

There was a splintering of glass and then a crash, as the decanter burst like a shell on the stone floor of the courtyard below.

Babbit stared at him in dumbstruck amazement. He sat down heavily in a chair, goggling at Bud. Words failed him.

The door opened, and five of Cyril's friends poured in, all of them in evening clothes, led by Crocker.

"What the dickens is this?" exclaimed Crocker.

"Been impudent to me!" gasped Cyril. "And threw decanter through window!"

"By George!" said Crocker. "I told you you were an ass, Cyril, to bring this gutter-snipe into the house! You're well rid of him! Out with him!"

The next moment Bud was fleeing for his life—but not before Pincher had left his teeth-marks in Crocker's calf—through the doorway and down the staircase he went, his pursuers close behind, yelling like a crowd of savages. Reaching the hall door, the youngster hurled it open and dashed into the street. Then Bud pulled up and looked round him.

There was no fear of any further pursuit. The chase had died down, and he began to realise what he was up against. The doors of Eaton Terrace had surely closed against him for ever.

"Good job, too!" said Bud; and, whistling to Pincher, he set out on foot for Piccadilly.

He was glad to be quit of it all. If this was the gilded West End, thought Bud, give him Houndsditch and Whitechapel. He was fed-up with youthful millionaires and their friends. In Mile End people knew how to behave themselves.

"We'll go home to mother," said Bud cheerfully. "There's somebody'll be glad to see us, anyway."

It was ten o'clock when he reached Couper Street. It was paved with cabbage-leaves and rubbish, and at ten o'clock at night it is as noisy as Smithfield Market. Costers' stalls, with flaring naphtha-lamps, line it from end to end.

Bud sniffed the smell of cauliflowers and banana-skins, whelks, and vinegar; he heard the shouting of the stall-keepers and the din of mouth-organs. He liked it. It was nice and homely.

Most of the costers and boys of Couper Street knew Bud. They called out greetings to him, and he waved his hand in reply. He was glad to see them, but he made for the little sweetstuff-shop at No. 119.

Bud's heart gave a bound. The house was lit up, and his mother would be there. He had not had a chance to see the old lady for five months. It warmed his blood to think of her. He was coming home.

Bud went straight through the shop into the tiny parlour behind. It was poorly furnished, very bare and cold. A big, stout, untidy woman, with a good-humoured face, was sitting at the table, with an untouched sausage-roll in front of her, and shedding tears.

"Hallo, Mrs. Guffey!" exclaimed Bud. "Where——"

"Why, Bud!" said the dame, getting up. "Oh, dear! I ain't half glad you've come. I meant to write when your letter come, but I sent you that tellygram just before closin' time."

"Telegram? I didn't get any telegram!" exclaimed Bud. "What d'you mean? Where's mother?"

Mrs. Guffey wiped her eyes with her shawl.

"She's very ill, pore dear! Upstairs in her bed."

(This is a sad blow for poor old Bud. Nothing is going right for him now. Next week's dramatic instalment will grip you from first line to last!)

THE FIGHTING TRIO!

(*Continued from page 37.*)

"Waal, carry me home to die!" stuttered the sheriff. "You younkers and thet bear agen! Say, weren't thet thet durned snake, Black Carter?"

"It were," grinned Buck. "Seems he was honin' after our company agen—an' thet coyote of a Mex. Why, whar is thet greaser?"

He glanced round, but there was no sign of Manuel Gomez. The crafty Mexican animal trainer had gone while the going was good.

"I recollect you 'uns," said Sheriff Tobin. "You're the hombres as used to belong to old Sandley's circus over at Pine City afore you took the trail with thet bear. Waal, I guess—— Why, holy smoke! Ain't thet Mosey Pete and Sam Loosen, Black Carter's pards? Waal, this shore is good luck! Hi, rope them bushwhackers up, you 'uns!"

Sheriff Tobin leaped from his horse. Whether Black Carter was caught or not, he was going to make sure of Carter's two men. The two rustlers—one of them unconscious—were secured, and the capture seemed to please the sheriff and his men greatly.

Buck then explained the position, and the sheriff eyed the pals and grinned as he heard how they had broken gaol and borrowed the sheriff of Bakersville's own horse.

"Waal, you 'uns hev' a nerve, you shore hev'," he commented. "But don't you worry none, strangers. I'll hone along back with you, and I'll fix things square with the sheriff. You leave it to me."

And the Battling Bees agreed to leave it to him. Bandy's wound proved to be little more than a scratch, and they bathed it and soothed the enraged bear. Then they hit the trail again, the sheriff and his men riding their horses slowly.

And, as he promised, Sheriff Tobin did make all "square" with the sheriff of Bakersville. And when the Battling Bees and Bandy trailed out of the city early the next morning, the local inhabitants, prominent among them being Bill Miller, saw them off with a cheer.

"Waal, thet's thet, pard!" grinned Buck Malone as they trudged along the sunny trail in search of new adventures. "This hyer travelling showmen game is provin' durned excitin'—it shore is! And, at least," he added with a chuckle, "we c'n say as Bandy brought the house down—he shore did. And, so doin', he nabbed two of the durnedest bushwhackers in Texas, and I only wish thet coyote Black Carter had bin one of 'em. Thet hombre and the greaser are gettin' on my nerves, and I hopes we've seen the last of 'em."

And Billy hoped so, too—but it proved to be a vain hope. They were to see Gomez and Black Carter again yet.

(Buck & Co., the boxing partners of the prairie, meet the most thrilling adventures of their travels in the next nerve-tingling yarn of the Wild West. Don't miss reading "The Rustlers of Hidden Canyon!")

Printed and published every Wednesday by the Proprietors, The Amalgamated Press, Ltd., The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Advertisement Offices: The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, E.C.4. Registered for transmission by Canadian magazine post. Subscription Rates: Inland and Abroad, 11/- per annum; 5/6 for six months. Sole Agents for Australia and New Zealand: Messrs. Gordon & Gotch, Ltd.; and for South Africa: Central News Agency, Ltd.

New Series No. 6. S.G. April 1st, 1933.