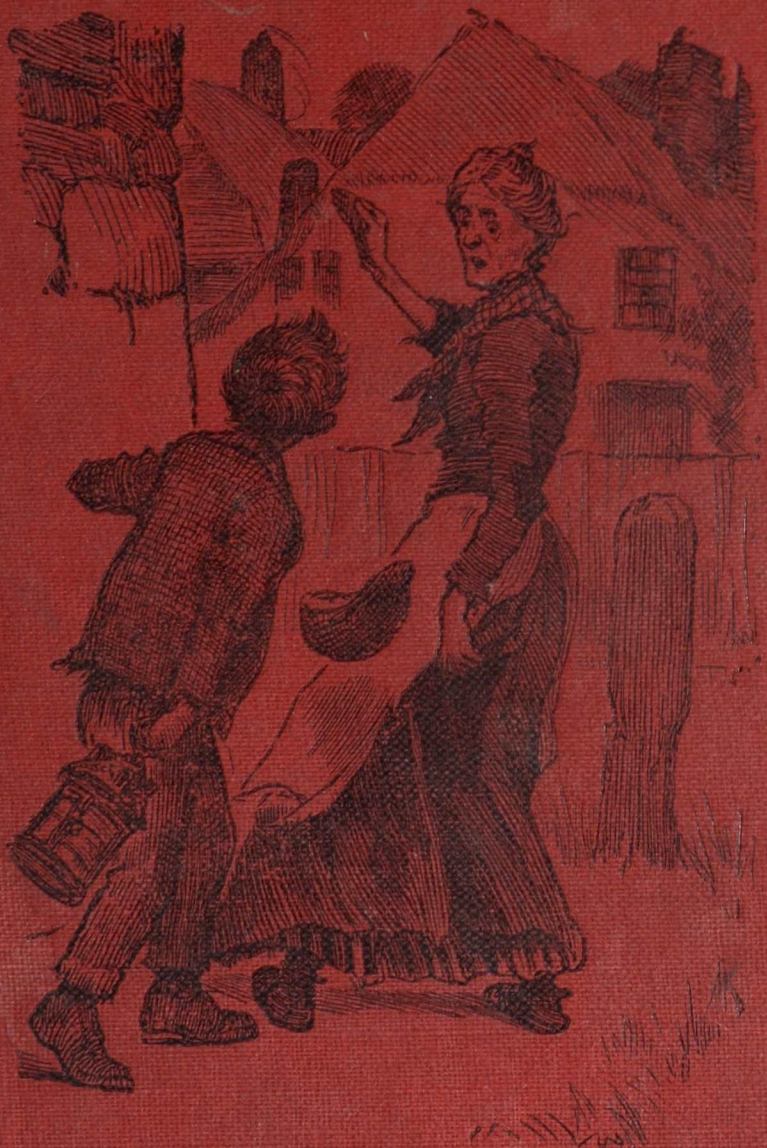
THE OWL-HUNT

by R.L.S.



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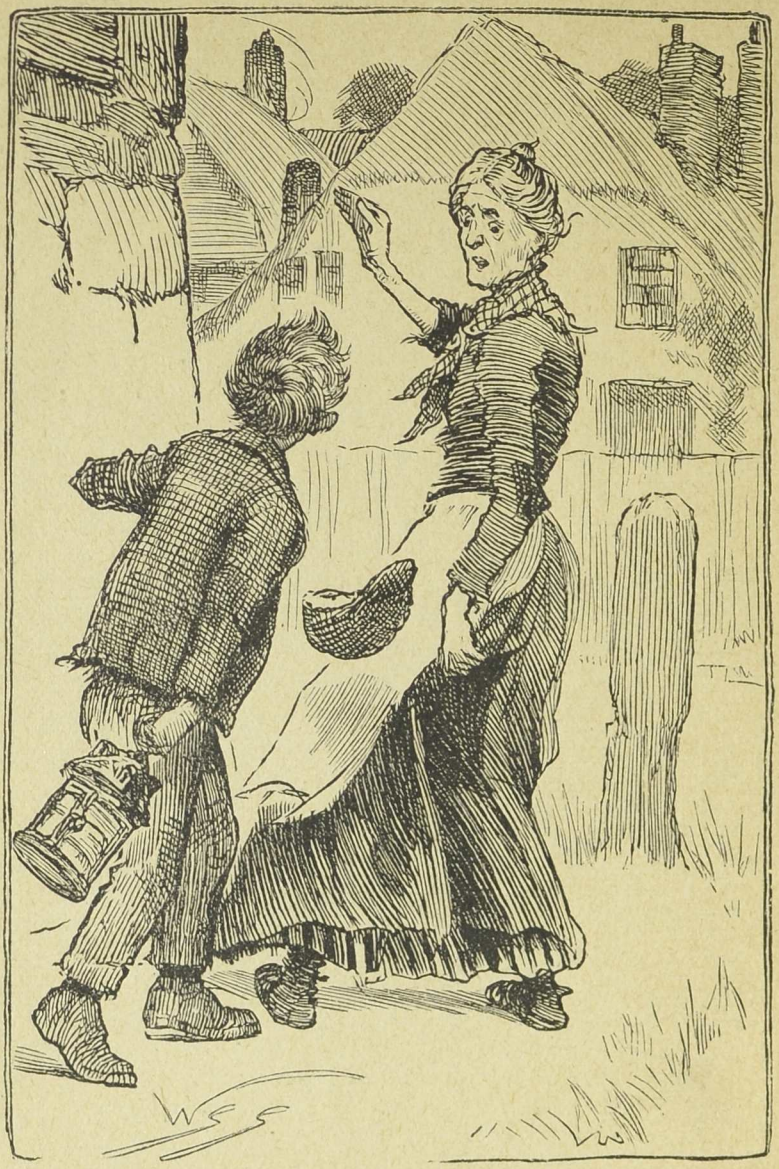

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, RUNNING ROUND THE CORNER LIKE A STEAM-ENGINE?" *Page* 14.

THE OWL-HUNT.

BY

R. L. S.

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THE OWL-HUNT.

BOB TESTER and Fred Grant sat next each other at day school. Since the time they first came as infants they had always been more or less together. The most backward boys for their age in the village, neither of them had ever been known to win a prize. When they were caned (which happened pretty frequently), they were generally caned together, for having got into the same scrape; and now they had reached the ages of eleven and twelve years, they really were the dread of all the old women, girls, cats, and dogs in the place.

They spent their spare time in what they called "having a lark," and their "larks" generally ended in misery, either to themselves or to somebody else.

It was Bob Tester who made the monster catapult, which he carried about with him under his waistcoat for days, and at last fired at a starling sitting on the chimney of the school-house. The stone missed the starling, and went through the church window.

It was Fred Grant and Bob Tester who lost the bucket in the village well, and it took three men a whole day to get it up again, and then the water was so muddy nobody could use it for a week after.

It was Bob Tester who set fire to Farmer Brown's wheat stack on Sunday evening, when he played truant from church, trying to learn to smoke behind the shelter of the rick.

It was Fred Grant who climbed the big elm on the green after a rook's nest, and slipped on his way down, and broke his ankle, and was laid up for seven weeks.

Altogether, the mischief the two boys got into would take too long to tell, and the worst of it was, they never remembered they were doing wrong until it was all over, and no amount of caning helped them to keep straight when the next opportunity for getting into a scrape came.

One summer morning they were sitting next each other in school; and, as usual, while the

master was engaged with one of the other classes, they managed a good deal of private conversation, without being found out.

Bob Tester began in a whisper directly prayers were over—

"Why were you so late this morning? I wanted to see you. I had *such* a lark last night; I only thought of it after I was in bed."

"In bed?"

"Rather. I got up, after everybody else was asleep, and ran all the way to the ruins in the squire's woods. You know them."

"What for?"

"Owls! There's a nest up in the tower, I saw the old owl fly in the day we were at the park for the school treat."

"Did you get it?"

"No. My, it was dark! The trees seemed all walking about, and there *were* black shadows, and just as I got to the ruins I ran slap up against a keeper. I thought I was done for; but he fell over a root or something, and I went like the wind; it was precious near though, I can tell you."

The master turned round suddenly here, and found Bob and Fred exceedingly busy over their slates; but a moment later, when he was looking away again, Bob started off once more.

"We'll go to-night, you and me; see?"

Fred nodded eagerly. "What time?"

"What time does your father go to bed?"

"Ten o'clock."

"Then we'll start at a quarter-past, sharp!"

After this they had no more opportunity to talk, for the master took the class himself. Just as lessons were ending, the door opened, and the rector came in. The curate, Mr. Bowman, had taken prayers and the Scripture lesson that morning, so the school had not seen the rector before; and they stood up with a certain amount of curiosity, wondering what he had come about. They were not left in doubt very long. He spoke to the master for a moment, and then turned to the classes.

"Boys," he said, "I have just seen the squire, and he told me one of his keepers came upon a boy in his grounds, near the ruins, last night, after ten o'clock. It was too dark to see who the boy was, and the man slipped and fell, and lost sight of him. Now, I should be very sorry to think one of my school had been trespassing. There isn't one of you that doesn't know, perfectly well, that the squire's grounds are private. All the same, I told the squire I would mention it in school, and he asked me to say, that if a boy *is* caught,

he will receive a sound thrashing. You all know, country boys as you are, that the young game is about, and the keepers are always in the woods; and I can only repeat that I sincerely hope the boy who was seen last night does not belong to the school."

He paused, his glance lingering for a moment on Bob and Fred, and then he dismissed the school.

Outside, they strolled off together. "What a fuss!" Bob began, sticking his hands deep into his pockets.

Fred sniffed. "Good job for you that keeper fell last night. You *would* have caught it!"

"Pooh, I'm not caught yet, and don't mean to be. To this day they don't know which of us broke the church window."

Fred shook his head doubtfully. "It's all very well, that; but, anyhow, we get more canings than pretty near the rest of the school put together."

"Well, who cares, when once it's over? And, oh, I say, I have such a rare idea! We must have a lantern for our owl-hunt. You know the big one old Kemp has for going up the belfry at night with? Well, I mean to prig that. There's no ringing, or choir practice, or anything to-night, and he won't miss it; and it'll do fine for us. He

keeps it behind the big door, and I can slip in easy before the church is locked up; and I'll hide it in our rhubarb till to-night. We'll light up when we get to the ruins; it's terrible dark up those old stairs, I can tell you, and I'm not just sure to a foot or so where the owl's nest is."

"Then you still mean to go?"

Bob stared at Fred. "Rather; why not?"

"I only meant after what the rector said."

"You're not afraid, are you?"

"No, of course not. What shall we feed the owls on when we get them?"

"Why, rats and mice and raw meat, and things of that sort, of course. But, I say, Fred, are you really in a funk?"

"I'm not afraid of keepers; it's not that."

"What is it then?"

"People say some one walks there at night—somebody all in white, without a head."

Fred dropped his voice as he spoke, and looked cautiously over his shoulder to make sure nobody could overhear him.

Bob laughed scornfully. "Ghosts! I'm not afraid of them, there aren't any, and if there were there's two of us. I like those jolly old ruins."

Then Fred laughed too. "Why, of course, so do I!"

It was easy to make light of ghosts, and dark stairs and shadows, in the broad summer sunshine; besides, he had given his word to go, and he was afraid to draw back.

"We shall want something else besides the lantern," Bob said presently—"a hamper to bring the owls home in; and I tell you where to get one. Higgs, the greengrocer, has heaps in that shed at the back of the shop. He won't miss one, any more than Kemp will miss the lantern. You go for it, and I can get the lantern."

The ruins of which the boys spoke were the remains of an old Norman castle, standing in a lonely part of the squire's park, with a dense wood all round. There were certainly not many boys in the village who would willingly be left alone after dark near these old ruins. There were strange tales about them, and even when the squire had spoken about the boy his keeper had seen the night before, the rector, for this reason, could hardly believe it to have been one of the boys of the place.

That afternoon, when school was over, Bob stole up to the church. There were two or three people about, the village carpenter, mending the churchyard gate, and the watchmaker, coming down from his weekly winding of the great clock. Bob had

once broken his shop window with a misdirected catapult shot. He looked at him sourly and suspiciously as he passed, and Bob stared back carelessly, sauntering through the churchyard with his hands in his pockets ; but when the watchmaker had disappeared round the corner of the almshouses, and the carpenter shouldered his bag and set off after him, he doubled back and slipped into the porch. But his difficulties were not yet over, for as he turned up the step he came face to face with the curate, Mr. Bowman.

Bob had a liking for Mr. Bowman—certainly not due to any weak-minded overlooking on his part of catapults or underhand smoking. He understood boys. Moreover, though a first-rate cricketer himself, he did not despise the boys village cricket club, and often came down to the green in the long summer evenings and showed them how to keep wicket and field in style.

The boys who went to his Bible-class confessed to their pals that it really wasn't half bad, even though Mr. Bowman would never stand one word of disrespect or bad language, and had ideas about manliness, and honour, and cleanliness that had never entered their heads before.

Mr. Bowman stopped when Bob ran against him, and asked him a direct question.

"What do you want?"

Now, as a rule, Bob was not always exactly particular as to telling the truth, if he happened to be in a tight place, and any small deception would serve to get him out of it. But it was not easy to look Mr. Bowman in the face and tell anything short of the truth, so he answered stupidly enough—

"Nothing!"

"We will walk down the green together," the curate said with a smile. "I want to talk to you about that football club for next winter."

Another time Bob would have been keenly excited over the prospect of a football club. No game came amiss to him, and he played most well; but just now, with his head running on owls' nests, he was anything but pleased to be stopped in the middle of his errand. However, there was no help for it. Mr. Bowman didn't leave him till they reached the bottom of the village street; and then it came home to Bob's mind that unless he used his legs and ran all the way back, Kemp would already have locked up for the night, and there would be no getting the lantern for that evening.

Five minutes found him back at the church again, just in time to see the old clerk slowly fitting the ponderous key into the lock of the

great west door. Bob stood still in dismay. But just as the door was drawn to, Kemp remembered something he had left in the vestry, and hobbled into the church, leaving the door ajar behind him.

Once more Bob was in the porch. He heard returning steps ; but his fingers were already groping for the lantern. A moment more, and he had hooked it down, and was out again and speeding along the flagged pathway, while the wheezing cough of the old clerk sounded faintly behind him.

Even now his troubles were not at an end. As he quickly rounded a corner on his way homeward he cannoned against a woman, named Mrs. Fuller, who lived in the cottage next his mother's.

Bob was no favourite with her, and now she gave him a good box on the ear before he managed to duck his head.

"What do you mean, running round a corner like a steam-engine?" she cried angrily, catching his shoulder with one bony hand. "You and that Grant boy are the plague of the place. I saw your mother just now ; she was looking for you. The rector had been in to see if you could take a note for him. Of course you were out of the way—you always are, except when you're not wanted. But do you know what he said? A bad

boy got into the squire's grounds last night, and he said the squire told him if he caught a boy there he'd have him thrashed. Perhaps he'll catch you there one day. I wish he would! I don't believe there's another boy in the place, besides you and that Fred Grant, as would dare such impudence. I promise you one thing, if I find out anything about it I'll go to the squire myself. You've got your hand behind your back now ; you're trying to hide some piece of mischief, I'll be bound." But Bob had pulled himself free and bolted.

When he had hidden the lantern in the rhubarb-bed at the end of the garden, he turned to go to tea in anything but a comfortable frame of mind. It was not the first time Mrs. Fuller had threatened to get him into a scrape—not the first time, either, that she had managed to carry out her threat.

He rather dreaded facing his mother ; but she was laying the tea-things, and hardly noticed when he came in. She looked up at last, however, and stopped with the teapot in her hand.

"Bob," she said, "I wish you would get home quicker from school, afternoons. The girls have been up to the grocer for me since they came back. The rector came in, and wanted you to take a note up to old Thomas at Shellfield, and you nowhere

to be found; and I went out and looked right on to the green. What have you been after?"

This not being a convenient question to answer, Bob mumbled something under his breath that might have been anything or nothing; and Mrs. Tester did not ask more particularly. She went on talking.

"Mrs. Fuller came in, too, and hindered me ever so; she was grumbling about you and Fred Grant."

Bob started guiltily. "What about, mother?"

Mrs. Tester was filling the teapot, and didn't turn her head.

"I don't know that it was more than usual," she said; "but the rector told me some one had got into the squire's grounds last night, and I said to her I wondered who it could be, and she said there wasn't many boys in the village up to such tricks; and I don't know what she meant, but I suppose it was something nasty; and I got so tired of her talking I told her she had better go and waste somebody's else's time, as I'd too much on my hands to listen to her grumbling all day. And then she said it wasn't any wonder I was worn out, with such a boy as you, always up to mischief. And after that I told her she might keep her remarks to herself. But I do wish you wouldn't put her back up

—we've got to live next her, and you might keep the peace."

Bob drew a long breath of relief. Evidently as yet Mrs. Fuller had not done more than give a hint at what she thought, and his mother had not taken the hint. All the same, he found it hard work to get through tea, for the story of the trespassing had been told in the girls' school, and naturally lost nothing in the telling. His two sisters would talk of nothing else. He half wished that he could put off the owl-hunt till things had quieted down a little, but he suddenly remembered what he himself had said to Fred Grant only a few hours before. "Of course, he would think I was afraid of ghosts, because he is himself, so I *must* go through with it now."

Soon after tea he heard a whistle outside, and found Fred waiting for him by the front palings.

"I've got the hamper," he said in a low voice, keeping an eye on Mrs. Fuller's door, which was half open. "I had such a spree getting it. Old Higgs was in the shop safe enough, but the greengrocer's man was in the shed behind, counting the very hampers over. I could see him out of the tail of my eye. I thought it was all up; but he went back for a bit of rope to tie them together for market; and then, quick as thought, in I slipped

grabbed the top one, and out again before you could say 'Jack Robinson!' Then I hid round the corner of the post-office, and watched him come back. He must have thought they didn't look right—I know I shoved them a bit on one side; anyhow, he began to count them again, and I thought I should have died of laughing. You should have seen his face."

"Has it got a lid?"

"The hamper? Oh yes, rather. It'll hold a dozen owls. And the lantern?"

Bob nodded. He had caught sight of Mrs. Fuller's face watching them over the blind in her little front parlour.

"Fred," he said suddenly, "Mother Fuller has heard about last night somehow. She thinks it is either you or me that did it. She must be a witch."

Fred only laughed. "I'm not afraid of an old woman," he said scornfully, "though I don't pretend to like ghosts."

And Bob felt how impossible it would be to suggest giving up the owl-hunt now.

"I'm not afraid of her, either," he said; "but I've thought of something. She doesn't go to bed till —oh, ever so late; some folks say she never goes to bed at all. I wonder if she saw me get out of

the house last night; and, if so, she may watch for me again?"

Fred shook his head. "Not likely," he said.

And Bob suddenly laughed out loud. "Well, she may look her eyes out to-night, if she pleases, but she won't see me. I shall get over the back fence."

The squire's park, which has been mentioned so often, lay outside the village, about a mile from the church. It had a high wall running all round, and was rather dismal and gloomy altogether.

Bob felt this when he had come there alone the night before; but this evening, when he and Fred stood together outside the little gate over which they intended to scramble, the comfort of companionship and the excitement of the thing for the time kept all "creepy" feelings in the background.

It was a dark night for the time of year—the moon had not yet risen. The little gate at which they stood was not very high, but it had a most inconvenient row of sharp nails along the top. Bob, profiting by experience gained the night before, threw his coat over the top, and then jumped.

"Here, hand us up the lantern," he said in an

undertone; and when it had been carefully lowered on the other side the hamper was passed over in the same way.

Fred, not being much of a climber, slipped, in spite of the loan of a helping hand, and the night stillness was broken by the ominous sound of a tear. But when they dropped to their feet on the inside they forgot everything in the excitement of the moment.

As they stood listening, the distant chimes of the church clock striking half-past ten came faintly from the village.

Bob nudged Fred. "Do you hear that? Time we were getting on."

"Yes, I hear; don't speak so loud! How still everything is, and how dark! I can't see the pathway or anything, and I don't know which way to go for the ruins."

Bob, having come all by himself the night before, felt astonishingly brave.

"I know. Here, you take the hamper, and follow me. We shall get out into the open in a moment, and then we shall see better. There's an old saw-pit somewhere about here; it's ever so deep—ten feet, I should think; we mustn't fall into it—we should break our legs."

As he spoke he pushed his way through a tangled

undergrowth, but after a few minutes' plodding he came to a sudden stop.

"It *is* dark," he admitted—"ever so much darker than last night. It's all clouds overhead. I wish the sky would clear. I say, Fred, I didn't mean to strike a light till we get to the ruins; but we *must* light up for a moment. I can't see my hand before my face. Give me the matches."

He knelt on the ground and struck a light, holding it to the candle in the lantern, and as he did so Fred gave a little cry.

Bob started up. "What is it?"

For reply, Fred pointed before them, and Bob looked, and stepped back suddenly. Not two yards from where they stood the disused saw-pit yawned in front of their very path; a few feet more, and they would have fallen into it. Silently they crept up to its edge, and side by side looked down silently into its black depth.

Then Fred turned away with a slight shudder. "Come," he said, "let's get away from here. I can't stand this sort of thing; I'm shaking all over."

Bob went first, carefully holding the lantern so as to throw a light upon the ground. They had not wandered far from the pathway, and they soon struck into it again. The fright had sobered them,

and for a while they said very little. Presently Bob blew out the lantern.

Fred turned. "What's that for?" he asked sharply.

"It isn't safe to have it alight here. We're getting near the ruins, and very near the place where the man ran after me last night."

Fred caught hold of Bob's arm. "I can't see a step," he said; "so, if you will go in the dark, I must have hold of you. And suppose we come on another saw-pit?"

"Pooh, there aren't any more, and we're just in the open now; look, it's ever so much lighter."

As he spoke there broke upon their ears a terrible wail, long and weird. It came so suddenly and seemed so near that Fred gripped Bob's arm like a vice, and both boys stood for a moment as if turned to stone.

Then Bob pulled his arm away. "Let go, you stupid," he said, though his voice shook in spite of himself. "It's only an owl. Have you never heard it before?"

It was, indeed, only an owl, but it was some time before Fred would move on again in the darkness. He was beginning to find out that rambling in a wood in the dark was not so pleasant

as he had imagined. If it had not been for Bob, he would very much have liked to turn tail and run home then and there.

In a few minutes now they came out of the trees, and before them they could distinguish a dark mass towering up.

"That's the ruins!" Bob exclaimed in an excited whisper. "Come on!" And at that moment they forgot their fears, forgot everything but owls, and pelted along in a neck and neck race over the open ground, eager to reach the tower where the nest was said to be.

The ruins were still some size, though time had tumbled down three of the once lofty towers, and only one remained standing up gaunt and solitary; but there were still the remnants of what had once been a large banqueting hall.

Bob found the archway that led into the tower, and stopped at the bottom to relight the lantern. Then he sprang nimbly up the old ruined stairs, Fred, in no mind to be left behind, following as quickly as possible. It was a rugged stairway, and here and there, as they mounted, the steps had been worn away by the weather, and they had to scramble some distance from one to another. Halfway up, as they rounded a sharp turn, something came by with a whirr and a bang, and hit

Fred on the head, knocking his cap off. Bob jumped on faster.

"It's the mother owl," he shouted. "Come on, Fred, we'll have the nest in another moment!"

Fred was searching about in the darkness. "Come down a moment, Bob; it's my cap that has gone. I can't see where it is, bring the light!" But Bob's voice only sounded faintly from above in reply, and after a moment's further groping in the dark Fred gave up the search and stumbled up after him.

He found Bob almost at the top of the tower, holding the lantern first on one side and then on the other.

"It ought to be just here," he was beginning, when Fred suddenly interrupted him in a terrified whisper.

"Shut up! there's something moving out there among the trees. Put out the light, Bob; stoop down. Don't you hear?"

In a moment out went the lantern, and the boys huddled down side by side. There was a loophole in the thick wall of the tower close by, and it was through this Fred had been looking. Now they both held their breath to listen.

"Did you hear that?"

There was a gentle rustle, gentle, but quite

unmistakable, just below, a sound like some one creeping through bushes near at hand, and trying to make as little noise as possible. Bob heard it plainly enough, and his heart went thump, thump, thump against his side.

"Yes, somebody's there."

"What shall we do?"

"Wait a bit. Don't talk. The moon must be getting up, it's ever so much lighter."

Then there was silence, while they crouched together and waited. After a few seconds the sound came again, nearer this time, and Bob could bear the suspense no longer. He rose gradually to his feet, and then on tiptoe, looked cautiously out of the loophole. In the dim, dull light at first he could distinguish nothing; but his eyes were fixed on the spot where the curious rustling came from, a small underwood to the right of the tower. Fred rose too, and peered over his shoulder.

"It's coming now!" he gasped. "Look! Oh, Bob, that is it! It's something white!"

He caught Bob's arm and struggled to pull him away.

"It must be the thing in white that people talk about. What shall we do?"

Bob said nothing; his tongue refused to frame any words; he could not even turn away from the

loophole, could not withdraw his terrified gaze. Meanwhile the awful white object came gradually out of the thicket, and stood still a moment, an indistinct mass; then—oh horror! it began to move slowly towards the tower where the boys were hiding, the same gentle rustling sound following its movements.

Once more it stopped, and then, in the silent night arose the most appalling donkey's bray ever heard.

Bob fell back from the window in a fit of hysterical laughter, and Fred followed his example. Shout after shout came, and they could not stop them. Lying up against the stone wall, they laughed till the tears ran down their faces.

"Oh my!" Fred sobbed out at last. "Only an old white moke wandering about, and we—we ——" He sank down in a heap on one of the stone steps, and went off into a fresh outburst.

Bob was the first to recover himself. "My sides do ache. I only hope there weren't any keepers within a mile of us just now; we made enough row to wake the family up at the house."

Fred's fears began to return. "So we did; and it must be ever so late."

"Yes, we must be getting on." As he spoke Bob stooped and lighted the lantern once more.

"Come; the owl's nest must be higher than I thought. If you'll hold the light, I'll climb up by these projecting stones. I expect it's in one of those holes; there is something sticking out that looks very like a nest."

So Fred held the lantern high above his head, and Bob climbed from one block of stone to another, sticking his toes into the crevices between.

"There is something here," he said at last, feeling with his hand and reaching up. "It's soft and warm; it's a whole nestful of——"

But just at this most critical moment Fred suddenly blew out the light, and they were left in darkness, Bob clinging to the walls of the tower.

"What are you doing? Light up at once!"

Fred stopped him with a terrified "Hush!"

"What's the matter? Light up at once. I can't see where to put my foot."

"Be quiet, there's another noise."

"Pooh, the donkey again! What a funk you are in! I tell you I shall break my legs if you don't light up. I can't see my way down, you stupid."

But Fred was stubborn as a mule. He stood by the loophole listening, and refused point-blank to relight the lantern. Well for them that he did, for just at that moment, clear borne upon the

stillness, came a most undeniable shout. There was no mistaking it this time; this was no ghost or donkey or owl, it was the shout of a man, and not so far off either; and at the sound, Bob, much to his own astonishment, came down suddenly and quietly to the floor, without giving a thought as to how his descent in the dark was to be managed. Down he came, and he caught up the hamper and thrust it into Fred's hands, and seized the lantern in his own.

"Down—down and out! We are lost if they catch us up here," he panted.

As he spoke they rushed helter skelter down the turret stairs, tumbling over one another in their haste to reach the bottom. Out of the tower they scrambled; and as they stood a moment, uncertain which way to fly, the figures of two men broke from the thicket on their right, and came straight for the tower.

They had not yet seen the boys, who stood close in the deep shadow, and one was saying to the other—

"I tell you I saw a light from the tower plainly. I am certain the noise came from there too. I shall go up and see."

Fred was clinging to Bob's arm. He put his lips close to his ear.

"Wait till I make a dash for it, and then follow," he whispered. "Leave the hamper and lantern here."

A moment later he sprang suddenly out of his hiding place, followed closely by Fred, and dashed across the open space of ground into the underwood growing upon their left hand. At the same instant, with a loud halloo, both men were in hot pursuit. It was a wild chase. The boys crashed through the hazel bushes, which, luckily for them, grew so thickly as to form a barrier between them and their pursuers. But Bob had sense to know that this could not long save them. Every moment the men must be gaining on them. Three times he doubled nimbly as a hare, Fred following in his steps; then suddenly springing aside, he dragged him down on his knees underneath a thick low-growing hollybush.

Close together the boys lay, with beating hearts and trembling limbs, hardly daring to breathe, while the sound of cracking sticks and hasty steps came nearer and nearer; and then, with a crashing and a rush, the two men dashed by, so near the boys' hiding-place that they brushed the holly boughs aside as they passed; and even in the dim light Bob could make out the two figures fairly plainly, one—the same who had chased him the

night before—a tall, powerful man in gaiters, the other, short and thick-set, in a white jacket.

Directly the sound of their heavy steps had died away Bob jumped up. "No time to lose," he panted. "Back to the ruins for the hamper and lantern, and then we must get out the other side of the park; we are cut off now from the way we came in."

They scurried along as silently as possible, pausing every now and again to listen. They found it much easier to retrace their steps now the moon was up, and in a very short time the ruins once more loomed before them.

Bob, bounding out into the open space of grass before the old tower, suddenly fell with a crash over something white lying in a little hollow, which got up with an impatient snort. Fred saw it, and jumped aside with a cry, which Bob stifled with a sharp "Be quiet!" as he picked himself up.

"It's only the moke again," he said, rubbing his shins. "I hope there aren't any more about. What a night we are having! Now for the lantern!"

But just then a faint shout sounded behind them, and Bob drew up in mid career and turned his face to the underwood.

"They're coming back. Fly!" And without another word they dashed once more into cover.

Bob certainly made the most of his knowledge of the squire's grounds that evening. He used it so well that before very long they struck into a cart road, and after following this for some time it led them at last to a five-barred gate in the high park fence. With a rush they scrambled up the gate, and dropped one after the other into the high-road. Fred caught his breath in a kind of sob.

"Safe at last," he said in a shaking voice; but Bob gripped his arm roughly.

"Are we though? Look at that!" pointing along the road.

Coming steadily towards them there was a speck of light, moving regularly up and down.

"The peeler!" Once more Bob dragged Fred along with him. There was a deep ditch running by the side of the road; into this they rolled, regardless of a bed of stinging-nettles over a foot high, and there they lay trembling, while the moon suddenly burst out from the clouds, turning the night almost into day.

And ever nearer, nearer, sounded a steady tramp, tramp. And then they heard something else that made their very blood run cold—noises behind

them from the park; and then, oh, horror! some one climbing the five-barred gate and the sound of a man's heavy boots dropping on the hard high-road. Raising their heads ever so little, they saw, in the bright moonlight, the shorter of the two men who had so nearly caught them, standing not twelve yards from their hiding-place, looking up and down the road.

The tramp of the policeman sounded close by now, and the short man hailed him. The policeman pulled up, and the two men talked together; and the boys could hear, by the way he spoke, that the short man was still very much out of breath. He was panting heavily, and, in spite of their terror, and the stinging-nettles that were pressing into them every moment, they could not help feeling a certain satisfaction at having given him such a run.

They could hear every word from their hiding-place. The short man was decidedly out of temper.

"Too late, as usual!" he said savagely. "What's the good of asking you to look round? You always turn up when everything's over."

"What, has he been again?"

"Course he has, and another with him, and bolted—thanks to you. If you had been here half

an hour since, as I asked, you'd have caught 'em coming out."

The policeman scratched his head thoughtfully. "They can't have got back to the village, else I'd have met them," he said slowly.

"A likely thing they'd go by the high-road, when there's the path over the fields straight in front of them," the short man replied scornfully.

"I didn't see them cross the road."

"Of course not; they've been gone over five minutes—safe home by this. If I could only lay my hands on them!"

After a few more words they parted. The short man clambered once more over the fence, and the policeman turned back to the village. When they were both quite gone, the boys crawled out of the nettles, and set off home by the field path. They didn't say much to each other; they had gone through so many frights there was no spirit left in them, and they parted silently at Fred's home as the church clock struck twelve.

When Bob awoke next morning, his mother was standing at the door of the little attic where he slept.

"Do you know what the time is?" she said. "It's pretty near half-past eight, and you still abed. How can you lie so late? I've been out

washing for Widow Holman since I got father's breakfast, and when I come home I find you still asleep. The girls have finished their breakfast an hour ago. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, that you ought. I shall speak to your father about it."

Bob bundled out of bed, heavy-eyed and miserable. He *was* ashamed of himself, for once in his life, and as he scrambled through his breakfast and set off to school in dirty boots, he felt as if he had not been to bed for a week at least.

Round the first corner he met Fred, who seemed to be in very little better plight. They talked over the night's adventure, and were rather inclined to be quarrelsome and blame one another.

After a long pause Fred said, "Well, anyhow, we got off all right; nobody will know who it was; and if the squire sends to the rector again, and he comes down to school, they can't *prove* we did it, whatever they may think, and, of course, we shall never split on each other."

"Of course not; but the bother is that old lantern. There *will* be a row when Kemp wants to light up the belfry for ringing practice to-night. The hamper don't count; Higgs won't miss that."

Fred said nothing for a moment; then he suddenly went red all over, and stopped short.

"Bob!"

"Well, what?"

"My cap!"

"What about it? There's dozens like it in the school."

"It isn't that. It's got my name in it."

"Whew!"

There was a deadly pause. Bob was the first to break it.

"Are you sure?"

"Certain. I inked it in big and black last week after Bill Evans got hold of mine by mistake."

A gloomy silence settled on them after this until they reached the school, for which they were both late, as usual. All through the long morning they unconsciously watched the door, and when at last it opened they knew instinctively who was coming in. It was almost a relief when the rector appeared before them, and they all stood up; but they were not prepared for the two who followed him, a tall man in gaiters, carrying the church lantern, and a short man in a white jacket, with a hamper tucked under one arm.

Fred turned suddenly white, and the figures on Bob's slate ran all together in a jigging dance, and though he was conscious the rector was speaking, he couldn't have repeated a single word that he

said. He found himself intently watching a small green caterpillar crawling up the collar of the boy in front of him. It was rearing its body in the air and waving about, and Bob kept wondering if it would bridge across the gap between collar and neck, and climb up the boy's hair. He repeated to himself over and over again, "It'll get squashed if it does."

And then all at once something seemed to give way in his head, and his mind came back to what was going on in the room before him.

Fred had been called out before the school, and was standing in front of the rector, who beckoned to the tall man in gaiters, and took something from his hand; and when Fred saw what it was he lost his presence of mind altogether.

"It was the owl in the tower that knocked it off," he stammered, and a suppressed titter ran through the room.

In the rector's hand was a boy's cap. He looked round, and there was silence.

"This cap was found last night on the stairs of the old ruined tower in the squire's park. These two men heard noises and saw a light, about eleven o'clock, and came upon two boys at the foot of the tower, and lost them in the woods. Afterwards they went and searched the tower;

at the bottom they found that hamper and my church lantern, and on the stairs, as I said, this cap. The name inside, plain enough, is 'Fred Grant,' and you all heard just now that he confessed to being in the tower; but that is not all, of course; there was another boy, and I think that boy is in this room. I ask him to come forward now and confess, and not allow his companion to bear all the blame he ought to share with him."

There was a dead silence—no one spoke, nobody stirred. Bob sat with his lips tightly pressed together, staring straight before him. After some minutes the rector turned to the two gamekeepers.

"Can either of you see the other boy who was in the park last night?" he asked.

The men looked carefully from face to face, and the glance of the tall man lingered upon Bob, hesitating for a moment, and then passed on.

"It is impossible to say, sir; it was too dark to see plain enough," he said. And the rector nodded, and then turned to the room once more.

"I can't ask one boy to tell tales of another," he said, "so I can only hope the coward who is sheltering himself at present will be sufficiently ashamed of his conduct to tell the truth before

long. As for you, Fred Grant, I saw your father as I came down the village. He told me he hoped you would be very severely punished. You will be caned at the close of school, and I trust it will be a lesson to you for life. The squire wished me to say to all of you, that the next time any trespassing takes place he will put it into the hands of the police."

When school was over Bob waited about till Fred Grant came out. Half the school waited too. They were wildly excited over the trespassing business, and keen to discover who the second boy was. Luckily for Bob, who might have found their curiosity difficult to baffle, somebody suddenly spied the squire striding down upon them, and in two seconds the space before the school was clear. The boys had a wholesome dread of the squire, who was a magistrate, and just now there were other sufficiently powerful reasons for them not wishing to come particularly under his notice.

Bob hid behind a buttress of the school-house, and soon after the squire had disappeared Fred came out, with very red eyes and a drooping mouth. They trudged off together into a field path at the back of the church ; they had no wish to encounter the whole boys' school, who were no doubt waiting for them round the next corner.

Bob spoke first.

"Did it hurt?"

"Rather!"

"I was a beast not to let out."

"Pooh! What's the use of having two whackings, when one will do? It's not the first time we've stood by each other, and you're safe now, they won't bother you any more."

"I'm not so sure of that, either. I guess Mr. Bowman will know it was me."

"Why?"

"Well, I ran against him in the church yesterday, when I went for the lantern. When he hears about all this turnout with the keepers, he'll remember, and put two and two together."

"If he does he mayn't split; and, after all, there's no proof."

"Proof! It's not that, it's Mr. Bowman himself I'm afraid of. He justs looks at you and you let out everything, before you know where you are."

"Then keep out of his way."

"I can do that. But he'll see at once I daren't meet him, so he'll find out either way."

Fred went home whistling. His punishment, at any rate, was over. But Bob slunk in the back way, like the sneak he knew himself to be. There was beef-pudding that day for dinner, but he could

hardly bring himself to touch it, and his mother decided that he must be sickening for the measles, which was very much about in the next village. The girls had brought home wonderful tales from school about Fred Grant and the unknown boy who had trespassed with him, and his mother finished up the subject by saying—

"Well, I hope this will be a warning to you, Bob, not to go with that bad Grant boy again."

After this Bob got up and left the room; he could stand it no longer. He went out to idle on the green, and came upon the very person of all others he most wished to avoid. Mr. Bowman was hurrying along, but he stopped and spoke to Bob as if nothing had happened. He made some arrangements about cricket practice that evening, and then went on, and Bob stood looking after him, not at all certain whether he was more relieved or sorry that the trespassing business had not been touched upon.

For the next two or three days the boys of the place lived in a fever of excitement, but, do what they would, they found out nothing further. Suspicion, of course, pointed strongly at Bob, but as he said nothing, and Fred said nothing, things were at a deadlock. They looked upon Fred as something of a hero; but after they had tried in vain to

extort a confession from Bob, they took to snubbing him on all possible occasions. He wouldn't have minded that very much—he could look after himself pretty well as a rule—but something else was troubling him, and things came to a crisis on the Sunday afternoon following the unhappy owl-hunt.

Mr. Bowman preached at the children's service. He never kept them very long, recollecting, perhaps, summer Sunday afternoons long ago, when he was a boy, when the hot sun beat in through the curtainless windows, when the Sunday "button-holes" and posies drooped on their stalks, and when the infants fell asleep one by one, and had to be shaken upright in time for the last hymn.

On this particular Sunday afternoon he only spoke for five minutes, and to one, at least, of his hearers his words went home.

Bob and Fred were sitting rather low down, with the third class boys. They were not so openly misbehaving as to attract the attention of the teacher who sat near, but they found a small feather, and they were blowing at it silently, each trying to send it different ways along the book-rest.

Mr. Bowman was speaking of the sin of lying, and Bob listened a moment before deciding that

the subject didn't concern him. "I don't tell lies," he thought carelessly, and then gave another silent puff at the feather. A moment later he forgot all about it; some words caught his attention, he was listening in spite of himself, and he moved uneasily on his bench.

Fred was trying to attract the notice of the boy at the far end of the seat. The feather had travelled down the bookshelf, he was making signs to him to blow it back again; but Bob saw nothing, his head had dropped. He stood up for the last hymn with a dazed feeling, and then trooped out with the rest into the glare of the afternoon sun. He walked quickly up the white, dusty High Street, past the shuttered shops, past the groups of lads standing under the shade of the chestnut by the butcher's shop. He turned at last into the fields that led to the river, and threw himself down in the thick grass, among the meadowsweet and sorrel and dog daisies, and lay with his hands behind his head, looking up into the blue above.

The words he had just heard were still ringing in his ears; he could not put them away from him. "I didn't tell a lie though," he said to himself, half angrily, as if answering some accusing voice within. "I never said I didn't go with Fred; I only held my tongue!" And then he sat up suddenly. Mr.

Bowman had said a "white lie" was really as bad as any other lie. To make people think what was not true was just the same as saying the words yourself. He had said, "It doesn't matter if people think badly of you as long as you are true to God, and it doesn't matter one bit how well people think of you if you are false to God. Remember these words when next you are tempted to do anything underhand, 'Thou, God, seest me.' Remember, nothing you can do will hide anything from God's eyes; all truth, all falsehood are open to Him always night and day, and He never forgets."

Bob got up at last and strolled slowly back to the village. He went past Fred's home, past his own gate, and on to a small cottage opposite the almshouses. He walked up the flagged pathway to the green door, and took the knocker in his hand. As he held it, hesitating, it slipped from his fingers and fell with a loud knock. Half frightened, he took a step back, and then turned and stood firm. There was a sound inside, the door opened, and Mr. Bowman's housekeeper stood waiting. A few moments later, when he found himself in Mr. Bowman's study, he spoke quickly, twisting his cap nervously in his fingers.

"Please, sir, I was the other chap with Fred Grant."

Mr. Bowman was standing by his bookshelves an open book in his hand. He closed it with a smile when he saw who his visitor was, as if he had been expecting him, as perhaps he had.

Afterwards Bob couldn't in the least remember what he had said, or how he had told his story. He knew he had blundered a great deal, and that Mr. Bowman was patient and did not hurry him; at any rate, the confession was made at last.

"I didn't mean to tell a lie, sir, I didn't mean to be a sneak."

Mr. Bowman waited till he had quite finished. "I knew you were the other boy all the time," he said.

"Why didn't you tell, sir?"

"Because I wanted *you* to tell, as you have done; and now, what do you suppose is the right thing to be done?"

There was a long pause, while Bob shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. At last—

"I suppose I ought to tell, sir?"

"I think so."

"When, sir?"

"What do you think?"

Another pause, and then, hesitating, "Not before the whole school, sir?"

"Well, I'm not quite so sure about that; you

were not afraid to deceive the whole school, were you?"

There was no answer to this, and after a moment Mr. Bowman went on, "I should tell the rector to-night, if I were you, and on Monday"—he paused, and Bob winced—"on Monday I should stand up in school and tell the truth. I'll come in at twelve o'clock and help you. After that the caning will be nothing."

"No sir, I don't mind the caning."

"I don't think you will; and Bob, now we are talking of this matter, I want to say a word about you and Fred Grant. I know that most of the scrapes you and he get into are planned by you. You have a much stronger will than he has. Do you think it fair to drag him into trouble that he certainly wouldn't get into of his own accord? Next time you want some fun, do without it unless you can carry it out openly, before the face of the village, and, above all, remember you cannot hide anything from God." He looked at his watch, and then took up his hat. "I'll go with you to the rector now," he said.

The housekeeper was standing in the passage barring the way.

"Your tea is waiting, sir," she said, looking sourly at Bob.

"Never mind, it will wait."

They went to the Rectory together, and afterwards Bob told his father and mother all about the owl-hunt. It was not pleasant work—it never is pleasant to have to confess you have been a sneak and a liar; but that was nothing to what he had to go through on Monday morning.

The school looked upon it as the biggest joke they had had for many a day. The caning itself was soon over; but the boys didn't forget that he had baffled their curiosity for nearly a week, and they took it out of him accordingly.

Afterwards, when they were alone together, Fred danced about with irritation.

"You idiot, why did you tell—why did you tell? No one would have found it out. Whatever made you do it?"

"It was partly Mr. Bowman, on Sunday afternoon."

"But you didn't tell a lie."

"Didn't I? It was precious like one, anyhow."

"Pooh, only a white one!"

"Well, he said there wasn't any real difference between them and the other kind of lies, and I don't believe there is."

Then Fred's face fell. After a time he said, hesitating—

"You're not going to turn mighty good all of a sudden, are you? I mean too good to go in for larks?"

Bob burst out laughing. He felt wonderfully light-hearted.

"Rather not! But I'm going to stop short of being a sneak and a liar, if I can."

"And Mrs. Fuller?"

"I know it isn't pleasant, but I've got to go through with it; and, perhaps, after all, as Mr. Bowman said, it doesn't so very much matter what people think, particularly when you deserve it every bit."

THE END.

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