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A Grand Story of School Life and Adventure at St. Frank's College.

BY EDWY SEARLES BROOKS.



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BY EDWY SEARLES BROOKS.

(Author of "The Schoolboy Treasure Seekers,"
"The Black Sheep of the Broom," "The Tyrant
of St. Frank's," etc., etc.)

CHAPTER I.

TEDDY LONG KNOWS SOMETHING.

TOMMY WATSON shook his head doubtfully. "It's too much to expect that it'll last. The chap's a rotter, and he'll always be a rotter. That's my opinion, anyhow."

"I'm frightfully sorrow, dear fellow, but I must be allowed to remark that your opinion ain't spartin'," said Sir Montie Tregellis-West, regarding Watson severely through his pince-nez. "It ain't playin' the game, Tommy boy—it ain't, really. It's been agreed by everybody that Pitt was a hero—"

"Oh, I'm saying nothing about that!" interrupted Watson. "Pitt acted jolly decently—in fact, he can't be praised too much. It'll be a long while before you'll hear me say a word against him. He saved my life, and I shall always regard him as a chap with mountains of pluck."

Sir Montie and Tommy and I were chatting in the Common-room of the Ancient House, at St. Frank's, standing in front of a glowing, cheerful fire. We had the room to ourselves at the moment, and the subject of our discussion was Reginald Pitt of the Retrow.

Pitt had returned to the ranks of the Retrow two days previously, after spending almost three



socks in the school sanatorium. He wasn't quite well even now, but he had begged to be allowed to get about again.

Reginald Pitt was a newcomer this term, and he had earned the nicknames of the Serpent and the Black Sheep of the Remove. This was owing to the fact that he had seemed to have no sense of decency. He even broke bounds to gamble in a gaming-house at Bannington. This place had caught on fire, and it was then that Pitt had saved Tommy Watson's life.

Now he was back again in the Ancient House, and he had repented of his former ways. But Tommy Watson and many other chaps believed that it would not last.

"Well, look here, we needn't talk about Pitt," I said. "I want to have a chat about the football—"

"Football!" exclaimed Handforth of Study D, charging into the Common-room at that moment. "That's queer. I was just looking for you, Nipper, to jaw about the football—"

"Don't!" I interrupted. "Talking about football with you, Handy, is too much of a fog."

Handforth strode across the room, followed by his two chums, Church and McClure. Several other juniors came in, too.

"A fog, is it?" roared Handforth. "If you think you're going to choke me off, Nipper, you're jolly well mistaken! I want to know about the football arrangements for this season."

"But why should you want to know?" I asked innocently. "You don't take an interest in football, do you?"

"You—your silly nos!" roared Handforth. "Just because you're junior skipper you seem to think you know everything. But I'm not going to stand any nonsense, my son. I want to learn—"

"Oh, you want to learn football, eh?" I interrupted.

"Learn!" bellowed Handforth. "Why, you—"

"First of all, Handy, you've got to bear in mind that football is a game," I said blandly. "Twenty-two fellows play it—eleven aside—and the idea is to kick the ball about—"

"You dotty idiot!" roared Handforth.

"And there are two goals, one at either end of the field," I went on. "The chap who stands between the goalposts is called the goalkeeper—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And his job is to keep the ball out of the net," I proceeded, with the air of a lecturer. "Sometimes, of course, he lets the ball slip by him, and that's called a goal. Got that? All that's necessary is to bear these points in mind, Handy."

"You blithering fatted!" shouted Handforth wrathfully. "I suppose you think this is funny?"

"Not at all," I replied. "Football is a serious game. After you've had a few lessons, Handy, you may be able to pick up the rudiments of the game. I don't suppose you will, but you may!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Everybody in the Common-room was cackling, and Handforth's own chums were no exception to the rule. He turned on them wrathfully, pinched McClure's nose with great precision, and treated Church to a beautiful thick ear. They didn't laugh so much after that.

"And if you ain't careful, I'll punch your nose, too!" said Handforth, glaring at me. "It all comes out of sheer jealousy. I happen to be the best junior forward in the school, and you don't like it. That's why you've given me a rotten place in the team as half-back. I don't see why I should stand it!"

I sighed.

"Nobody wants you to stand it that I know of,"

I said patiently. "There are plenty of fellows who would be only too glad of your place, my son. In fact, it's quite likely that I shall be compelled, by public opinion, to chuck you out of the eleven."

"You'd have your hands full!" shouted Handforth warmly. "We've had these arguments again and again, and I'm fed-up with them. If you can't give me a place in the forward line, I shall probably refuse to play for the side at all."

"Begad! What a relief that would be!" said Sir Montie languidly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It wouldn't be a relief to the side!" declared Handforth. "What would you do without me? Just answer me that question, if you can! Without me to back you up, you'd lose every game on the fixture-list. I don't like boasting, but I must say that I'm the chief mainstay of the eleven—"

"Heard the latest?" shouted Teddy Long excitedly, hurrying into the Common-room at that moment.

Handforth turned round, glaring.

"I was talking!" he roared aggressively.

"That's nothing new," said Teddy Long. "When ain't you talking, Handy? Unless somebody interrupted you, you'd go on for ever! Here, I say— Hold him back, you chaps! Ow! Oh, you beastly bully! Leggo my ear—"

"Don't you dare to interrupt me again, then!" said Handforth magisterially. "I was talking about football—"

"Oh, dry up, Handy!" said Long, dodging behind two other fellows. "I've got some news—some jolly interesting news, too. There's a new Remove kid coming this week."

"Let him come!" snorted Handforth.

"But this chap's a novelty," yelled Long, still keeping in cover. "He lives in Bermondsey—"

"Where?" inquired half a dozen fellows in one voice.

"Bermondsey!" repeated Long, gaining confidence. "That's given you a surprise, eh? I call it jolly rotten, and I think we ought to get up a protest."

I strode across the room and grabbed Long by the coat-collar. He was a fat, grubby little beggar, and had the reputation of being the sneak of the Remove.

"What's this yarn?" I demanded grimly. "I expect you've been listening at some keyhole, and you've mistaken the wood. It's more likely to be Birmingham—"

"It ain't!" shouted Long, wriggling away. "Do you think I haven't got ears? The kid's coming from Bermondsey, I tell you. I reckon the Remove ought to get up a petition—"

"But what for?" asked McClure. "What's wrong with Bermondsey? It's a suburb of London, ain't it?"

"Of course it is," said Long. "A beastly rotten slum place, where everybody goes about in rags, and—"

"You young fatted!" I grinned. "Some parts of Bermondsey are more squalid than a good many streets in the West End. And if there's a new kid coming from Bermondsey, it doesn't prove anything. You shouldn't jump at conclusions—"

"But I tell you he's a slum beast!" declared Long defiantly. "I heard the Head telling Mr. Crowell — I—I mean, Mr. Crowell told me about it just now," he added hastily. "Old Crowell was quite pally, and gave me all the information I wanted. Of course, I always get on well with the masters, they like me."

I grinned.

"You little fatted!" I said. "Do you think we believe that yarn? Mr. Crowell knows better than

to confide in a sneaking young brawler like you. Clear out while you're safe—"

"I don't see why I should clear out!" said Long indignantly. "While I was listening I heard—I mean, Mr. Crowell told me that this new kid has been going to a beastly London County Council school. What do you think of that? A low-down brawler from a Council school coming to St. Frank's?"

"I don't believe it!" said Handforth bluntly. "All right, you needn't; but you'll see on Wednesday," retorted Long. "I'm only telling you what I know. This beastly chap is a regular slum cad, and he's only been to a Council school—"

"I don't believe him, either!" I interrupted. "But, supposing a kid does come from a Council school, what of it? Council schools nin't contaminated, are they?"

Teddy Long stared at me. "Why, they're awful places!" he said. "Ragged kids go to 'em, and dustmen's sons, and all sorts of low-down beasts—"

"You'd better buzz off," I interrupted sharply. "And don't air your views about Council schools again. St. Frank's may be a select place, but some of the best chaps breathing were educated at Council schools. And you've got nothing to buzz about, Long."

The fat junior sniffed. "Perhaps you've been to a Council school yourself?" he sneered.

"No, I haven't, but I shouldn't be ashamed of it if I had," I replied. "Every fellow can't afford St. Frank's fees, and a chap learns just as much in a L.C.C. school as he learns here. It all depends upon whether the fellow wants to learn. You'll never learn anything, Long, if you stay at St. Frank's for ten years!"

"Oh, rats!" snapped Long, who felt that he had missed fire with his startling information. "I know my pater won't keep me at St. Frank's if he finds out that a common cad is coming here. This new kid talks like a larder, and he's a perfect horror."

Sir Montie beamed. "That's a piece of zippin' news, old boy," he said languidly.

"What is?" demanded Long. "About this new fellow comin'," explained Trevelyan-West. "If he comes, you're going away, I understand? There couldn't be anything more zippin' than that, legend!"

"Ho, ho, ho!" "Oh, you're sure to be funny!" said Long sheepishly. "Of course, I—I don't suppose I shall go really—"

"I do!" said Handforth grimly. "You'll go out of this Common-room really—assisted by the toe of my boot! Clear off, you beastly little spy! And you'd better get another yarn next time. We don't believe this one."

"Rather not!" exclaimed Galliver. "St. Frank's must have come to a pretty pass if they're admitting Council school rascals. But I don't believe it. The governors wouldn't allow it. As you seem to know so much, what's this new kid's name?"

"Mason!" replied Long promptly. "And he's coming into the Remove?"

"Yes."

"Ancient Héuse?" I asked.

"That's what the Head said."

"Oh, the Head said it, did he?" exclaimed Handforth, frowning. "I thought you told us that Mr. Crowell—"

"I—I meant Mr. Crowell!" stammered Long. "They were talking—I mean, I—"

"You mean that you were listening outside the door of Mr. Crowell's study," I broke in. "Own

up, you little rotter! Did you listen at the keyhole, or not?"

"No, I didn't," said Long indignantly. "I wouldn't do such a thing! I should think I'm above listening at keyholes! I happened to be passing, and I dropped a— a piece of toffee just outside Crowell's door. And while I was looking for it I couldn't help hearing—"

"You awful young fibber!" roared Handforth. "Look here, you chaps, help me to give the young spy a good bumping! I'm down on eavesdropping, and we'll teach him a lesson."

Long backed away hastily.

"Don't you teach me!" he yelled in alarm. "I've given you some news, and you ought to be jolly pleased. Keep your beastly paws off me, Handforth— Yaroooh!"

Handforth and I, ably assisted by Watson, Church, and two or three other fellows, grasped Teddy Long firmly and grimly. He was raised from the floor, wriggling and yelling.

Bump! Long descended with a crash, howling as though he was being subjected to terrible torture. But we persisted with the punishment until he had been bumped six times. Then, sore and angry, he scuttled to the door and passed out.

"I'll never tell you anything again, you beast!" he bellowed, as he closed the door with a slam.

"Bogal! I wish we could believe it, old boys," remarked Sir Montie. "But I wonder how much of that tale is true? Personally, I don't think it matters a rap where a fellow comes from, providin' he is true blue. An' Council schools ain't such awful places, are they?"

"Yes, they are!" said Fallwood, who had come in during the last few minutes. "And I can tell you jolly plainly that if a Council school chap comes here, he'll meet with a hot reception. We'll make his life a misery, an' show him that he ain't wanted."

I didn't think it necessary to make any comment. After all, Long's story was probably all wrong, and I had no intention of saying a word about the matter.

The other fellows, however, said quite a good many words. And I'm afraid that the majority of them were rather snobbish in their views. Even some of the decent fellows considered that it would be a bit too thick for a Bermondsey kid to come to St. Frank's.

But a Bermondsey kid was coming, nevertheless.

CHAPTER II.

THE BOY FROM BERMONDSEY.

WEDNESDAY was a cold, clear day—and a half-holiday. It was ideal weather for football, and a Junior House match was the programme for the afternoon.

Christine & Co. of the College House were in good form, and I was anxious to give them a whacking, for my team was in good form, too. Christine had been saying that his eleven couldn't be touched this season, and it was necessary to point out his little mistake.

Nelson Lee, who was the Housemaster of the Ancient House, had already told me that Jack Mason, of Bermondsey, was due to arrive that afternoon. I had attempted to get further information out of the gov'ner, but he hadn't satisfied me. He just told me to wait until the new fellow arrived, and then draw my own conclusions.

I did know, however, that Teddy Long's yarn, in the main, was true.

As to the why and wherefore of the thing, I couldn't get the hang of it. It was really extraordinary that such a boy should be allowed to enter

an ultra-select college like St. Frank's. Pressure of some kind had evidently been brought to bear upon the governors. For, as a rule, there was no opening for a new fellow unless his name had been on the books for years. And even then the sons of old boys always had preference.

So it was really hard to believe that a fellow of Mason's type should gain admittance. I hadn't seen him, and I passed no comment. It wouldn't have been fair. I believed in judging a fellow on his merits, and that's the only proper way.

But the majority of the other Removites were inclined to judge the prospective new boy by other things. It really didn't matter what he was himself; but it did matter that he had previously been educated at a common or garden Council school.

Taking them all round, the Ancient House fellows were by no means snobbish, but there was a certain limit to their tolerance. And it was universally decided that a Berrmondsey kid couldn't be stuck at any price. It was simply a matter of quality, and St. Frank's had always prided itself upon the quality of its pupils. I could name a few who were worse than the roughest urchins in any free school, in spite of their swell families.

Mason was due to arrive by the afternoon train, and so there was no prospect of seeing him until after he had been at St. Frank's for an hour or two, unless he elected to come over to Little Side in order to watch the game.

And so I dismissed him from my thoughts as soon as the coin was tossed at the commencement of the match. But Fullwood & Co. had not forgotten the new boy, and they stood in a group round the Ancient House steps, deep in consultation.

"The new kid's coming this afternoon—there's no doubt about that," Fullwood was saying. "We've only got Long's word for it that he's a low beast. I think we ought to make sure of it as soon as he arrives."

"How?" asked Gulliver.
"By cornering the cad an' putting questions to him," replied Fullwood. "If he refuses to answer we shall know what to think, an' if he turns out to be a shew rotter we'll rag him until he can't stand. That's my idea. I want you chaps to back me up."

"We're with you," said Marriott, nodding. "And if we find out that the new chap is all reverse, we'll give Long a ragging. So we shall have a bit of excitement in any case."

Fullwood grinned.
"That's settled, then," he said. "Let's go down to the gates."

Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell were accompanied by two of the fellows from Study G—Morrell and Marriott. These precious youths were all members of the noble order of Nuts, and they considered themselves to be the elite of the Remove. This was just as well, for nobody else shared that opinion.

It was not necessary for them to wait long. For presently a figure was observed striding up the road from the village. It was a boy in Etons, with a coat over one arm, and he was carrying two glaringly new bags in his hands, both of them being fully bulged and evidently heavy.

The newcomer came along through the slight mud of the road, and was conscious of the group of very elegant juniors gathered round the gateway. He knew that they were eyeing him in the most critical manner possible.

He was a well-set-up youngster of about fifteen, with fair hair and frank blue eyes. His Eton suit sat ill upon him, probably because it was of rather bad fit and obviously brand new.

"This is St. Frank's, isn't it?" he asked, in a quiet, hesitating voice. "I was told—"

"St. Frank's?" echoed Fullwood, winking at his chums. "Never heard of such a place. This is a convalescent home for young gentlemen, so you can't have any business here, can you?"

The new boy smiled.
"I don't mind a joke," he said, in an even voice. "I know this is St. Frank's, and I only asked you because I just wanted to say something pleasant. You'll let me pass, won't you?"

The request was quite necessary, for Fullwood & Co. blocked the entrance completely, and did so deliberately. Fullwood grinned and shook his head.

"There's no hurry, kid," he remarked. "You're Mason, I suppose?"

"Yes, that's my name—Jack Mason."

"And you're booked for the Ancient House—Remove Form?"

"I think so."
"Well, that's satisfactory so far," said Fullwood, in a fatherly way. "No, don't put those bags down; I like to see you holdin' 'em. By the way, you might give me the address of your tailor."

"But what for?" asked Mason in surprise.

"Oh, I shall have to get him to make a suit for me!" replied Fullwood gravely. "You don't often see a fit like that. It isn't a fit at all really—it's a giddy convulsion!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Nuts laughed uproariously at this cheap, second-hand humour, and Jack Mason flushed scarlet. He knew very well that his clothes were being made fun of, and he was rather sensitive about them himself, knowing full well that they didn't fit him properly.

"I think you are very rude," he said, with simple directness. "I was told that St. Frank's was a very select place, and that I should have to be very careful of my manners. But it doesn't seem that the standard of manners is very high here."

The smiles of Fullwood & Co. vanished.

"Why, you cheeky beast—!" began Gulliver.

"Leave him to me!" snapped Fullwood. "Look here, Bricklayer, or Mason, or whatever your name is, we don't allow new kids to talk like that. And unless you want a choice selection of thick ears, you'd better apologise."

Mason smiled again. It was a very calm, easy smile, and it somehow irritated the Nuts enormously.

"But I'm not going to apologise," he said calmly. "I said that your manners are poor, and I meant it. And I shall be very sorry if all the other boys here are just like you. Will you please get out of my way?"

Fullwood & Co. had an idea that they were getting the worst of it. Mason was nervous—they could see it clearly—but he managed to remain perfectly calm all the same.

"Look here," said Fullwood roughly. "We want to ask you a few questions, you ill-dressed bouncer, an' you're not going through this gateway till you've answered 'em. Do you understand?"

"I heard quite distinctly," said Mason.

"Well, first of all, where do you live?"

"At St. Frank's," replied the new boy sweetly.

"Why, you—you beastly rotter!" roared Fullwood, irritated by the insolent smiles of his chums. "I'll punch your head if you ain't careful! Where did you live before you came here?"

"In London."

"What part of London, you blockhead?"

"Berrmondsey," replied the new boy, sensibly realising that direct answers would be the best.

"By gad!" said Fullwood, taking a deep breath.

"So it was true, then! Berrmondsey! Well, by gad!"

"Is there anything the matter with Bermondsey?" asked Mason.

"You silly young fatted!" snorted Gulliver. "Ain't Bermondsey a beastly, low-down suburb in the East End?"

"No, it's south-east," replied Mason. "And it's not beastly, and I don't think it's low-down. Some parts of it are populated by poor people, but that doesn't mean to say it's low-down, that I'm aware of. And I don't think it's very polite of you to insult me—"

"Beah!" roared Fullwood. "How the deuce can we insult a sham urchin? What is your father, for goodness' sake?"

The new boy flushed.

"My father was a carpenter," he replied quietly.

Fullwood & Co. staggered.

"A—a what?" gasped Fullwood faintly.

"I think you heard me quite plainly."

"A carpenter!" muttered Gulliver dazedly. "Oh, my only Sunday tile! What's St. Frank's coming to? It's too terrible to be believed! The kid's beastly father is a beastly carpenter! We shall be having sweeps and rag-merchants next!"

Jack Mason's eyes flashed.

"I think you are cads—absolute cads!" he exclaimed hotly. "You have no right to talk about my father in that way—"

"Why isn't he talking like a barge?" demanded Bell. "There must be something wrong. A carpenter's son couldn't talk decent English like this chap's talking. He's kiddin' us."

"It you don't let me get past I shall force my way through," said Mason, with deadly calmness. "I'm a new boy, and I don't want to quarrel. I was particularly warned against quarrelling on my first day."

"Collar him!" snapped Fullwood harshly. "We're not going to stand this—from a rotten carpenter's urchin—"

"Perhaps I ought to have told you something else," interrupted the new boy. "My father is dead, and when you know that you won't be so cowardly as to insult him."

"I don't care if your father's in prison!" roared Fullwood. "He's a confounded—"

"I say, hold on!" muttered Gulliver. "You can't talk like that about a chap who's dead, Fully. Go easy, for goodness' sake. We've touched the kid on the raw!"

Gulliver was not quite such a cad as the others, and he was possessed of humane feelings.

"Well, we'll let that pass," growled Fullwood. "But we're not going to let Mason pass!" he added, trying to be funny. "I want to know what school you came from."

"I left school nearly a year ago," said the new boy. "Fellows don't keep at school after they're fourteen in London—at least, not the kind of school I attended."

"And where was that?" asked Marriott.

"The Linden Road School—one of the London County Council schools," replied Mason quietly. "Have you finished asking me questions yet? I want to take my bags indoors and report myself to the Housemaster."

Fullwood & Co. stared wonderingly.

"It's amazing!" said Fullwood. "He talks so though there wasn't any shame in it. By god! What a nerve! A chap comes here from a low, rotten school, and refers to it as though it was a place like this! Grab him!"

This time Mason was grabbed by the Nuts. For some reason best known to themselves Fullwood and his pals considered it necessary to give this outsider a lesson. Why he should have a lesson was a mystery; but he had come from Bermondsey, and that was enough.

His bags were wrenched away from him and thrown into the mud. Gulliver and Marriott playfully kicked them across the road, and Mason's eyes flashed dangerously. Fullwood, meanwhile, amused himself by jumping on the new boy's overcoat, which lay on the ground.

"Oh, you beastly cads!" he exclaimed tensely. "I didn't think that I should find such boogians at a gentlemen's school like St. Frank's. The toughest fellows at Milton Road wouldn't have treated me in this fashion."

"Roll him in the mud!" suggested Bell cheerfully.

"If you do I shall make you suffer for it!" said the new boy, breathing hard. "I can't do anything now. I can't fight five or six of you. But let me warn you—"

Snack!

Fullwood's fist was aimed straight at Mason's nose, but somehow the blow didn't go home. Mason's head was jerked up, and he received the punch on the side of his neck, when nearly all its force was exhausted. To retaliate was impossible, for his arms were tightly held.

"Over with him!" snarled Fullwood savagely.

Willing hands jerked Mason nearly over, but just before he actually fell a fresh voice sounded.

"What's the excitement out here?" it exclaimed.

"Oh, it's a new kid, I suppose?"

"You clear off, Pitt!" snapped Fullwood, glaring.

Reginald Pitt, somewhat pale but otherwise his old self, stood regarding the group with his usual sardonic smile. His eyes, dark and intense, were now somewhat amused.

"Don't be such a confounded set of cads," he said. "Let that new kid alone, Fullwood. It's just like you to play a dirty trick of this sort."

"Mind your own business!" roared Fullwood.

"I think that's what you want to do," retorted Pitt. "Don't take any notice of those fellows, old man," he added, smiling at Mason. "You reason't think they represent the Reserve. They're the Nuts—the elite of the Form. By George, ain't they elite?"

"I'm glad to learn that all the fellows are not such absolute cads," said Mason calmly.

Pitt grinned.

"You're found out, Fully!" he exclaimed. "Beared over, by Jove! This new kid knows that you're an absolute cad—"

"Why can't you shut up?" snarled Fullwood, scowling.

"Clear off, you snaky beast!" said Gulliver savagely.

"I shan't clear off until you've let this new fellow alone!" retorted Pitt. "He's no pal of mine—I've never been introduced to him—but I am not going to stand by and see him chucked over in the mud!"

Fullwood laughed unpleasantly.

"The champion of the oppressed!" he sneered. "How many new leaves have you turned over, Pitt? If you ain't careful, we'll roll you in the mud, too!"

"You'd better not try—!" Pitt panted, and glanced round into the Triangle. "Oh, good!" he went on, grinning. "Fenton and Morrow of the Sixth are coming along. They'll soon make you sit—"

"Hang them!" snapped Fullwood. "Let the new cad go, you chaps. We'll deal with him later. Buck up!"

Fullwood & Co., having no wish to fall foul of the two prefects, released Jack Mason, and strolled

CHAPTER III.

NOT WHAT FULLWOOD WANTED.

down the lane with more haste than dignity. Mason looked after them contemptuously.

"I hope there aren't many more like them at St. Frank's," he said, turning to Pitt.

"Oh, there may be a few!" replied the Serpent calmly. "I used to be worse than Fullwood. I expect you'll hear about it soon enough, so I might as well warn you in advance. I was nearly smothered, you know, but the Head had mercy on me—because I rushed into a burning house when I was too excited to know what I was doing."

Pitt spoke in an easy, sardonic kind of way, and Mason did not know whether to take him seriously. But the very fact that he seemed to be on bad terms with Fullwood & Co. stamped him as a decent fellow in Mason's eyes.

"It's very good of you to help me," said the new boy. "Could you tell me which is the Ancient House, and where I can find the Housemaster? Oh, but I dare say one of those Sixth-Formers will tell me—"

"There's nobody coming," grinned Pitt. "That was only a little dodge of mine to give Fullwood a fright. You see, he couldn't look into the Triangle, and I could from where I was standing. Worked nicely, didn't it?"

Mason regarded Pitt somewhat unfavourably.

"But it was a lie!" he protested.

"Was it?" said Pitt. "How shocking!"

He turned and walked into the Triangle, followed by Jack Mason, who had recovered his saddy bags from the other side of the road. The Triangle was practically deserted, but Mason caught glimpses of footballers on Little Side, and his eyes gleamed with interest.

But he followed Pitt right into the Ancient House, and along to Study E. For the time being Pitt was the sole occupant of that study. Marriot shared it with him until he went into the sanatorium; but, not wishing to be alone, Marriot had transferred to his old study—G. And he had remained there.

"Here we are," said Pitt. "Comfortable quarters, ain't they? Furniture's a bit shabby, but you mustn't take any notice of that. Juniors ain't supposed to have luxuries."

Mason looked round the study with interest. A cheerful fire was blazing in the grate, and the carpet wasn't such a bad one, after all. Two easy-chairs and a table and two ordinary chairs completed the furniture, except for a bookcase on a small side table.

"Is this going to be my study?" asked Mason.

Pitt was rather taken aback.

"Not that I know of," he replied. "This is my study, and I just brought you here—"

"Oh, I'm sorry!" interrupted Mason.

"That's all right," said Pitt carelessly. "Junior studies are generally shared by two or three fellows, and I've no objection to you being my study-mate. But, of course, it all depends upon whether you're agreeable to sharing my quarters."

"I shall be glad to—very glad to," said the new boy quickly.

"Good!" said Pitt. "We'll consider that settled."

And, in this unceremonious fashion, Reginald Pitt and Jack Mason became study-mates—truly a curiously assorted pair. It would be most interesting to see how they got on together.

It had been confidently expected that the boy from Bermondsey would have some difficulty in finding a study, and the whole Rectorate was considerably amazed when it discovered that Pitt, of all fellows, had taken the stronger in to

What was this intimacy to lead to?

WHEN I heard the news I wasn't exactly pleased. Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson and I discussed the matter in Study C at tea-time. We had already seen Jack Mason, and our impression was good.

"He seems to be a thundering decent chap," remarked Watson. "Nobody can take any objection to him, anyhow. He talks with perfect grammar, and looks a good 'un, too."

"An' yet quite a number of fellows are makin' a fuss, dear boys," said Sir Montie. "Personally, I think Mason is a top-hole, an' I'm usually rather particular."

"I don't think!" grinned Watson. "You're about the least particular chap in the Remove, you are?"

"Well, we won't discuss the question," said Tregellis-West languidly. "Nipper, old boy, you might pass the blower-paste. Thanks! Cissy, ain't it, havin' blower-paste for tea? I should think they lived just as well at Bermondsey."

"I shouldn't be surprised!" I grinned. "But look here, my sons, I don't quite care for the idea of Mason being in Pitt's study. You can't get over the fact that Pitt has a bad record, and I've already noticed one or two signs which seem to indicate that his reformation won't last. He's been ill, and hasn't had a chance to get up to any tricks."

"You think he'll make Mason into a rotter?" asked Watson.

"Well, I don't say that," I replied. "But I shouldn't think that the influence of a chap like Pitt will do Mason any good— Great Scott! What's all that noise?"

"Sounds like Handforth," remarked Watson, pouring out some tea.

"And it is Handforth," I said. "There's nobody else at St. Frank's with a voice like that. Just oblige me, Tommy, by stepping outside and telling the us to shut up!"

"Oh, rats!" growled Watson.

But he got up and passed out into the passage. Handforth was within view, and he was having a heated argument with Church and McClure. Jack Mason was standing near by, looking very nervous, but calm.

"What's the trouble out there?" I bawled.

"You mind your own business!" roared Handforth. "Can't I talk to this new kid without being interrupted? If you don't dry up, McClure, I'll punch your silly nose!"

"Well, don't be such an ass!" snapped McClure. "What's it got to do with you who's paying the new kid's fees? If he'd got any pluck he'd jolly well bowl you over!"

"Oh, would he?" snorted Handforth. "Goodness knows I ain't a curious chap, and I only asked a civil question. Why can't he tell us about his giddy people?"

"I don't mind you knowing," put in Mason quietly. "But I can't tell you who's paying my fees here, because I don't exactly know myself. My uncle left me a legacy, I think—"

"But!" interrupted Handforth. "I've got no grudge against you personally, but I'm Mest if I'm going to be checked! You're a new kid, and you've got to understand that new kids can't never back. See? If you say another word to me you'll feel my fist!"

"I'm sure I don't want to—"

Snack!

Handforth, who was always excitable, delivered a light punch—just to prove that he hadn't been gassing. It would perhaps be correct to say that

Handforth considered that punch a light one; but Handforth's judgment was questionable. By the manner in which Mason staggered back I reckoned that there was plenty of force behind that punch. "Leave the new chap alone, Handy!" I shouted sharply.

"Well, he shouldn't make me wild!" roared Handforth. "I didn't want to punch him—in fact, I rather like the look of him, and he can rely on me to back him up if any cads chip him. I'll punch anybody's nose who bothers him!"

"You'd better start with your own, then," I suggested.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth loftily ignored the proposal.

"It's all right, Mason," he said kindly. "No need to back away. I shan't hurt you. But you've got to understand that a new kid at St. Frank's has got to do just what he's told."

"I'll remember!" said Mason quietly.

He was looking very flushed, and his nose was somewhat red. Quite a crowd of juniors collected, and they did not regard him very favourably. Being juniors, however, they were thoughtless, and did not even consider the true reason for the new fellow's meekness. It was only natural that he should do his utmost to avoid anything in the nature of a fight on his very first afternoon at St. Frank's. It would have been a rotten start if he had entered into a fight.

"Funk!" jeered Fullwood, who had sauntered up in time to see the punch. "What else can we expect? Ain't he a rotten shun kid? I suppose he sold papers at street corners before he came here!"

"You dry up, you rotter!" shouted Handforth aggressively.

"It's very kind of you to take my part," said Mason, his eyes blazing; "but there's no need for you to go to the trouble, thank you. And I don't think there's any need for me to answer this coward's beastly suggestion—"

"Are you calling me a coward?" roared Fullwood.

"You heard what I said," replied Mason, clenching his fists.

"Why, you—you impudent little beast!" bellowed Fullwood, striding forward. "Take that for your snuff!"

He lunged out heavily before Mason could realise his intention. The new boy received the blow on the chest, and he went over with a thump. There was a buzz of excitement as Mason jumped to his feet, quivering with anger and looking dangerous.

But the new boy suddenly turned sharply on his heel and walked away. He was followed by a series of deep groans.

"Yah! Funk!"

"Bester?"

"An' the little blighter dared to call me a coward!" exclaimed Fullwood contemptuously. "My hat! If I have any more cheek from him I'll knock him into the middle of next week!"

"That's just what you would do!" snapped Handforth. "Any chap who can stand up to you would be left severely alone. I've a jolly good mind to wipe you up myself, Fullwood! That was a rotten suggestion of yours, anyhow!"

Fullwood stared at Handforth, and then walked away, whistling. When Tommy Watson came back into Study C he closed the door, and the commotion died away.

"The chap's a funk," said Watson disgustedly.

"Think so?" I remarked.

"Don't you?"

"No."

"But he took those punches as meekly as you like—"

"That's nothing," I interrupted. "Didn't you

notice his fists? Didn't you notice his eyes? There's plenty of fight in Mason, if he only lets himself go."

"Then why didn't he stand up to Fullwood—"

"Because he's feeling all anyhow, I suppose," I replied. "How did you get on when you first came to St. Frank's, Tommy? A new kid is the butt of everybody, and if Mason had hit back there would have been a proper row in the passage. Wait until he gets settled down. He won't take punches so meekly then, I'll bet!"

"Bogod! There's somethin' in what you say, dear old boy—there is, really," remarked Sir Montie, with a wisp shake of his head.

But although Montie and Tommy were inclined to agree with me, the rest of the Form had set Mason down as an avrant funk. They didn't take the trouble to reason things out as I did.

And Fullwood, seizing his opportunity, decided to get up a movement against the new fellow. He called a great many fellows together in the Common-rooms, and suggested that Mason should be sent to Coventry.

"He ain't our class!" declared Fullwood warmly. "He's a confounded gutter bent—a low-down boulder!"

"He doesn't look like one," objected Owen major.

"An' I guess he don't talk like one," remarked Farnan.

"That's nothing!" snorted Fullwood. "He's admitted that he came from Bermondsey, an' that's a beastly place—"

"Have you ever been there?" asked De Valerie.

"No, an' I don't want to go, either."

"Then why not talk about things you are capable of understandin'—what?" asked De Valerie calmly. "There's nothin' wrong with the new kid, an' this meetin's declared null and void!"

"Rot!" roared Fullwood hotly. "Mason's an outsider, an' I don't see why we should stand him. Why, he admitted to us that his beastly pater was a carpenter! A carpenter! An' this kid dares to come to St. Frank's! What's the world comin' to?"

"It's a bit too thick, I must say!" admitted Hubbard.

"An' if sendin' him to Coventry's no good, we'll all sign a round robin to the Head!" went on Fullwood grimly. "We'll kick the beast out of St. Frank's. In fact, I don't see why we shouldn't march to the Head's window an' create a demonstration!"

"Nobody's stoppin' you," said De Valerie. "Get on with it, an' there'll be a different demonstration afterwards. The Head's best case will play quite a big part in it!"

"You can keep your rotten sarcasm to yourself!" said Fullwood, glaring. "I maintain that Mason is a chap who oughtn't to have been admitted to St. Frank's. He's a rotten working-class kid, and this school is only for young gentlemen!"

"By gad!" said De Valerie. "That's news, anyhow!"

"What do you mean?"

"If it's only for young gentlemen, Fullwood, what the dickens are you doin' here?" asked De Valerie smoothly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Kick that rotter out!" roared Fullwood, turning red.

The laugh had only been uttered by one or two fellows, for Fullwood's audience mainly consisted of his own chums, who were in strong force. But De Valerie was quite calm.

"If anybody touches me—" he began.

And just then the door opened and I marched in, followed by Watson, Tregellis-West, Handforth & Co., and quite a number of other fellows.

"What's the meaning of this, Fullwood?" I demanded sharply. "I've heard that you're getting up an agitation against Mason—"

"Go away an' hear somethin' else!" snapped Fullwood. "This meetin' is giv' to pass a resolution that Mason shall be shunned by the whole Remore an' kicked out of the school!"

"I shall be surprised if this meeting does anything of the sort," I retorted. "I propose that the meeting be squashed straight away, and the Common-room cleared!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Carried unanimously!" roared Handfoeth.

He didn't wait for anything further, but rushed forward. I followed, backed up by other fellows, and in less than a minute the Nuts were receiving something they certainly hadn't bargained for.

The meeting, in short, was smashed up, and Fullwood & Co. had a very strong idea that they were smashed up, too. They certainly suffered severely at the hands of the Remoresites.

Sore and furious, they fled, leaving us in undisputed possession of the Common-room.

"Rotter!" panted Handfoeth. "I didn't even get a decent punch in!"

"Begad! Don't tell such frightful whoppers. Handy, old boy," protested Sir Montie, nursing his nose. "You punched me in the most shakin' manner, although I've done nothin' to deserve it—"

"That was your fault!" declared Handfoeth. "You shouldn't get your silly face in the way of my fist. Well, the meeting's cleared, ain't it?"

It was, and there were no more meetings of a similar nature.

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE DOWNWARD GRADE.

JACK MASON was not the kind of fellow to abridge himself where he wasn't wanted, and his very quietness made it almost impossible for the caddish element of the Remore to rag him.

The Ancient House was surprised. The juniors, at least, had expected to find Mason an absolute boulder, totally unfit for taking his place amongst the sons of gentlemen at St. Frank's.

But the unexpected had happened. Mason, although a poor boy—although he had never been to anything better than a Council school—was just so decent and refined as any junior in the Remore. In fact, he was far more refined than many.

Most of the fellows decided that no action should be taken. At the same time there was a rather widespread feeling that Mason ought to be treated distastefully. This was most unjust; but justice is not to be expected from junior schoolboys. The advent of Mason had brought out a touch of snobishness in many fellows who had hitherto shown no signs of such a complaint.

The real surprise was that Reginald Pitt had allowed the new boy to share Study E. It only proved that Pitt was an unknown quantity, so to speak, capable of doing things which nobody would have dreamed of.

Pitt went along to Study A soon after the dinner in the Common-room. It was not his intention to be pulled—after what had happened in the gateway that afternoon. It wasn't likely that Fullwood would greet him cordially.

"What the dickens do you want?" demanded Fullwood, scowling at Pitt as he entered the study. "Clear off—"

"Don't get excited!" interrupted Pitt, as he closed the door and looked at Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell in turn. "I must say that you're looking rather the worse for wear—"

"Clear out!" roared Fullwood & Co., who were sore.

"I will when it pleases me," replied Pitt. "I just want to point out that it's a potty idea to persecute Mason. He's my study-mate, and I'm not going to allow him to be sat upon—"

"He can't look after himself, can he?" sneered Fullwood. "The chap's a funk. I knocked him down, an' he didn't even punch me back. I'm surprised at you, Pitt, for bein' associated with such an outsider."

"You mustn't be surprised at anything I do," said Pitt calmly. "If it comes to that, it's rather surprising that I came to this study. I don't want to be offensive, but—"

"We shall be offensive in a minute!" growled Gulliver. "What's the matter with you, Pitt? You need not be like this. Why can't you come in an' have a smoke now and again?"

"Smoking's a silly game. I've chucked it up," replied Pitt. "You needn't stare, I mean what I say. Only silly fools smoke—that is, until they get old enough."

"What a transformation!" jeered Fullwood. "Just listen to our good little George! He makes me sick—"

"He's only rotter!" put in Bell. "Ain't you, Pitt?"

"No."

"You're really serious?"

"Of course I am," said Pitt. "I'm not in the habit of saying things I don't mean. If you take my advice, you'll—"

"I don't want any of your potty advice!" snapped Fullwood. "I never thought you'd turn out to be such a rotten scowling, Pitt. Why can't you have a fog, like the rest of us? It's all piffle to say what you said just now. I'll bet you're dying for a smoke."

"I might be," replied Pitt coolly. "But I can keep myself in check."

"Look here, Serpent, don't be such a fathead!" said Gulliver. "There's no reason why we shouldn't be pals again. Here you are, smoke this. You'll enjoy it hugely."

Pitt pushed the cigarette back across the table.

"I'd rather not," he said shortly.

"Afraid to?" sneered Fullwood.

"No, you rotter, I'm not afraid to."

"Rot!" grinned Fullwood savagely. "I'll dare you to light that fog and smoke it! You beastly funk! The sooner you get out of this study the better. I'm sick of the sight of you!"

Pitt's eyes blazed. To be spoken to in this contemptuous manner by such cads as Fullwood & Co. was past all bearing. He snatched up the cigarette, stuck it between his lips, and then hesitated.

"Never spoil a good mind!" jeered Gulliver.

"Hang you!" muttered Pitt. "I won't smoke the thing!"

"Yuk! You're afraid!" said Bell disgustedly.

"Am I?" roared Pitt.

He savagely struck a match and lit the cigarette. But for the taunts of the three young rascals he would probably have kept to his resolve. But he was not strong enough to withstand these sneers. Had he been manly, he would have laughed them to scorn.

"That's better," said Fullwood. "Why can't you be sensible, Pitt, and squat down comfortably? Great Scott! There's no harm in havin' a cigarette. I suppose?"

Pitt made no reply, but sat down. And just at that very moment, by all that was unfortunate, I looked into the study. I merely intended asking Fullwood a question about a book he had borrowed from Watson. And I was rather startled to find Pitt lounging in the study, smoking.

"What's the idea of this?" I asked coldly. "I thought you promised not to act the fool——"

"Oh, rats!" muttered the Serpent.

He was very red in the face, and he flung the cigarette into the fireplace and pushed past me out of the study. I needed no telling that Fullwood had been responsible for Pitt's backsliding, but I was rather surprised, all the same.

"You beastly cads!" I exclaimed angrily. "Why can't you let the chap alone? He's been trying to keep straight——"

"Get out of this study!" interrupted Fullwood roughly. "Pitt came here and asked for a cigarette, if you want to know. We advised him not to smoke it, but he insisted."

I withdrew from the study without a word, but did not fail to notice that both Gulliver and Bell were grinning. I knew how much reliance to place upon Fullwood's words.

"Silly ass!" I muttered absently, as I entered Study C.

"Are you referrin' to me or to Tommy?" inquired Sir Montie languidly.

"I'm referring to Pitt," I replied. "I just found him in Fullwood's study, smoking!"

"Begad!" said Montie seriously. "That's shockingly disappointin', old boy."

"I'll give the ass a good talking to later on," I said grimly. "But I don't know whether it will be any good. Perhaps I'd better not interfere. It's not my place to give lectures."

Tommy Watson nodded wisely.

"I thought what it would be," he remarked. "Didn't I warn you? It's a beastly pity; but Pitt's a queer chap, and I suppose he'll always be a queer chap. Javings don't do him any good; they probably make him worse. But I wish he'd keep straight."

"It may be only a brief outbreak," I said. "He looked awfully uncomfortable when I spotted him, and checked the cigarette away without a word. I can't help feeling that Pitt's got some decency in him."

"Dear fellow, I wouldn't dare to deny it," said Tregollis-West. "But Pitt's decency requires such a frightful amount of findin', begad! It's so deep down that it'll take a long time to bring it to the surface. But it'll come up all right."

"And what's going to happen to Mason meanwhile?" I asked.

"To Mason, dear boy?"

"Yes, to Mason," I repeated grimly. "Pitt's influence won't do the new fellow any good, and I've half a mind to find Mason a different study. I would do, but I hate the idea of interfering."

Sir Montie adjusted his pince-nez.

"Dear boy, there's one thing you've overlooked," he remarked sagely. "Mason is a member of the downtrodden working classes, an' his standard of honour is, therefore, far higher than ours——"

"You silly ass!" sneered Watson.

"Pray let me finish, dear fellow," said Montie, beaming. "Mason's honour is somethin' to admire. Don't ask me how I know, because I can't tell you. But Mason is true blue—a splendid example of an upright British boy."

"The lecture will conclude at nine-thirty!" remarked Watson gravely.

"It's shockin'ly rude of you to make such facetious remarks, Tommy," protested Tregollis-West. "I'm not deliverin' a lecture, an' wouldn't dream of doin' such a thing. You won't allow me to get to the point——"

"Oh, is there a point?" I inquired politely.

"Of course there is, an' it's this," replied Montie. "You're afraid that Pitt will influence Mason, ain't you? Hasn't it struck you, dear boy, that Mason is just as likely to influence Pitt? Why,

I can see Pitt comin' out of his shell an' turnin' decent right through. An' if that does happen, it'll be because of Mason's influence. I think it's a splendid thing for those two to share the study. Pitt won't do the new fellow any harm, but it's quite likely that the new fellow will do Pitt good."

I nodded slowly.

"Well, that's a good way of reasoning," I admitted. "We shall have to wait and see what the result will be, Montie. And now we'd better get on with our prep."

"Whaj about thy French grammar?" asked Watson.

"It's rotten!" I replied protestingly.

"I mean the book, you ass!" roared Watson.

"Oh, I forgot to ask for it!" I grinned. "You'd better pop into Handforth's study next door, and borrow his."

And while we were getting on with our prep Reginald Pitt was having an argument with himself in the dark Triangle. He stood up and down, his hands deep in his pockets, brooding over the incident which had just occurred.

"What the dickens did Nipper want to come in for?" demanded Pitt savagely. "And why did I take any notice of him? Rats to him!"

He paced up and down for another few minutes.

"There's no harm in a smoke," he told himself.

"Dash it all, some of the kids in the third smoke! I don't see why I should deny myself just because a fathend like Nipper is against smoking."

Pitt knew all the time that he was weakly giving in. He knew that he would respect himself far more if he stuck to his resolve. But he was obstinate, and considered that it would be a loss of dignity if he forced himself to give up a habit which he wished to continue.

Just at present the Serpent was in a queer mood. And he suddenly came to a resolve. Striding indoors, he marched up to one of the box-rooms, and produced a packet of cigarettes from his trunk. Then he went downstairs, smiling sardonically, and entered Study E.

Jack Mason was there, sorting out various books and papers. He looked up with a smile of welcome, and nodded.

"I wanted you, Pitt," he said. "Can I have some space in that bookcase? I want to put these books somewhere——"

"You can have the middle shelf, if you like," said Pitt, dropping into a chair. "I don't mind. This is our study, Mason, and you've a right to have the available space."

The Serpent took out his cigarettes carelessly, placed one in his mouth, and lit it. Mason was not aware of the fact until a whiff of smoke went in his direction. Then he turned sharply.

He said nothing, but there was an expression of pained surprise in his eyes which Pitt did not miss. Rather to the Serpent's disappointment, Mason turned away without making any comment.

"Anything wrong?" asked Pitt.

"You ought to know," replied Jack shortly.

He went on sorting his books, and gave a little start as a cigarette was tossed on to the table in front of him.

"Here's a light," said Pitt generously.

Mason looked round, picked up the cigarette, and tossed it contemptuously into the fire.

"Thanks all the same!" he said coldly. "I don't act the fool like that!"

Reginald Pitt laughed.

"By Jove! You're rather blunt," he remarked. "But I'm hanged if I didn't deserve that rebuff, Mason. Thanks for the tip!"

He tossed his own cigarette into the fire, and followed this up by the whole packet. He watched

them burning with a queer smile on his lips, but did not refer to the matter again.

Was Mason's influence beginning to work already? It certainly looked like it. Pitt was doing his utmost to be decent, but the old habits had not yet been entirely eradicated, and the Serpent would need to be very strong if he was to keep to the straight path.

Had he sufficient strength?

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERY OF THE SHABBY STRANGER.

NELSON LEE, the famous private detective and Housemaster of the Ancient House, was in Bannington, the town about three miles from St. Frank's. I should probably have gone with him, but it was a half-holiday, and the St. Frank's junior eleven was playing the first really important match of the season. Our opponents were Bannington Grammar School, and their eleven was hot stuff.

Jack Mason had rather pleased Nelson Lee, for he had proved to be a very capable pupil, and a quiet, gentlemanly fellow in every way. Mr. Crowell, the Remove master, had given Nelson Lee a very favourable report.

Mason had been at St. Frank's for a week now, and he had shaken down with very little trouble. The rest of the Remove, unjustly enough, regarded him as a necessary evil, and allowed him to go his own sweet way. Mason, for his part, was quite content with this plan, for he did not seem to care for the noisy amusements of the other fellows. He was studious, and spent nearly all his spare time with his books.

Sir Montie and Tommy and I allowed him to see quite plainly that we were extremely friendly, and did not regard him as a freak, which was certainly the attitude of some of the Juniors.

Fullwood & Co. deemed it wise to let the new fellow alone. So, instead of trying to get him kicked out, they contented themselves with loftily ignoring him. Mason was undoubtedly glad of this. It was an honour to be ignored by Fullwood.

Pitt seemed more friendly with Mason after that first few days. I had not had much time to notice how Pitt was slipping, but he certainly gave no trouble, and was not much in evidence.

Mason, to my satisfaction, evinced a very strong interest in football; and I resolved to give him a chance before long. Some of the other Removes had the idea that it was a piece of cheek on Mason's part to take any notice of football at all. What right had he, a Council school boarder, to be interested in football? I made no reply to these remarks, but was quite ready to point out that he had as much right as any other fellow in the Remove.

My object in recording Nelson Lee's curious little adventure on this half-holiday will become apparent in due course. I don't know why the gov'ner went to Bannington—probably to make some purchases—but that's really nothing to do with it.

There had been a lot of rain the previous day, and the roads were inches thick in mud. This didn't affect the footer match, for the St. Frank's playing-fields were always splendidly kept.

But the gov'ner decided to travel by train instead of bicycle, and his little car was disabled owing to tyre trouble. A brace of new tyres was on order, but they hadn't arrived yet.

It was really no concern of Nelson Lee's at all, but he was undoubtedly interested. He noticed a well-dressed stranger step out of the London

express on to the Bannington platform—Lee himself having come to the station in order to catch the afternoon train back.

The schoolmaster-detective was attracted towards the man because he was obviously ill-at-ease. Upon leaving the express he walked quickly over to the local train, got in, and then gazed out with some anxiety. Lee could see no cause for this.

But what Nelson Lee did see was the spectacle of two shabby-dressed individuals—obviously racing men—hovering at the rear of the local train. Lee, who was casually interested, noted the fact that these two men dodged into the local train when the well-known stranger was looking in the opposite direction.

Lee pondered over this little piece of by-play. But, of course, he had no intention of interfering. It was none of his business, but the incident created a diversion while he waited.

The local train started at last. The afternoon was gloomy, heavy clouds obscuring the sky. Lee was at the window as the train was drawing into Belton, and he was somewhat astonished to see the two shabby-dressed individuals jump from their compartment before the train came to a stop. They dodged behind a pile of packing-cases before the aged ticket-collector knew that they had left the train.

And then something else occurred which really needed an explanation. A man stepped out of the train as soon as it stopped. He was elderly, and attired in somewhat shabby clothing. And, to Nelson Lee's astonishment, he recognised this down-at-heel person as the extremely smart gentleman who had boarded the train at Bannington.

What mystery was this? Why had the stranger changed his clothing during the short ride from Bannington? And who were the other men? Lee felt that he would be making a mistake in not giving the matter some attention.

He was all the more convinced of this when he left the station. For the shabby stranger had only just passed out of the station-yard when the horse-looking men followed him. Nelson Lee decided that it would do no harm for him to follow in turn.

He did so, and thus they all walked through the village. The shabby man was quite unconscious of his shadowers, for they took care to remain concealed from their quarry constantly. And Nelson Lee, who was an expert shadower, had not the slightest trouble in keeping his men under observation.

This went on until the lonely stretch of lane from the village to the school was entered upon. Rain was now falling slightly, and the lane, bordered on one side by Belton Wood, lay in dense gloom.

At this point Nelson Lee lightly slipped over the gate, and continued his way within the meadow, flugging the hedge, and walking with such speed that he rapidly overhauled the strangers without their being aware of his movements.

It was really just as well that the detective had taken this precaution. For quite abruptly an angry exclamation came to his ears from a point only twenty or so yards ahead.

"How dare you, sir!" came the voice. "If you attempt to molest me—"

"That's all right, old gent," said one of the men cheerfully. "Just step over this stile, will yer? Grab 'im, Bert! The lane's quiet just now, an'—Hold 'is mouth!"

"Help! You scound—"

The cry ended quite abruptly, then came the sounds of a struggle. Nelson Lee smiled grimly to himself—probably because his suspicions had turned out correct—and pushed quickly through a gap in the hedge.

A dozen running strides brought him to the stile. He leapt over cleanly. And there, amongst the trees, the two Bashy men were doing their utmost to force their victim upon his back.

"Look out, Bert!" gasped one of the men suddenly.

But the warning was too late. Nelson Lee was already on the spot, and his fist swung round with deadly purpose.

Crash!

Lee's knuckles went home squarely upon the jaw of one man. His companion was foolish enough to believe that he could get in a blow at this inter-rupter. He nearly did so, certainly, but Nelson Lee twisted round with astonishing speed, and his fist thudded heavily against the side of his opponent's head. The blow was so unexpected that the man rolled over, jumped up dazedly, and then rushed off blindly through the road.

The other fellow had already fled, taking advantage of the distraction.

"Is there anything missing, my dear sir?" asked Lee sharply.

"No—no, I think not!" gasped the stranger, who was sitting down in the damp grass. "Good gracious! What an alarming adventure! Thank you for coming to my rescue, sir—thank you exceedingly!"

Nelson Lee helped the shabby man to his feet. The two rascals had been put to flight, and there was really no object to be gained by giving chase, for in the tangle of Bellton Wood there was little prospect of capturing them.

"You must really honour me by letting me know your name, sir!" exclaimed the stranger. "I am Mr. David Strong, of London, and I have come down to visit St. Frank's College."

"Then it is rather fortunate we met," smiled Lee. "I am one of the Housemasters from the school you mention, and my name is Lee."

"Dear me—dear me! How very fortunate!" exclaimed Mr. Strong, grasping Lee's hand warmly. "I can now understand the better, for you are, of course, Mr. Nelson Lee, the celebrated detective. My dear sir, I am delighted to make your acquaintance."

He seized Lee's hand once again.

"Of course, I have heard that you are staying at St. Frank's for the present," he rattled on. "And I have no doubt that you are somewhat anxious to hear why those scoundrels were after me, and what it is they were anxious to obtain?"

"I am not at all inquisitive, Mr. Strong," smiled Lee. "At the same time, I must acknowledge that I am interested."

Possibly Nelson Lee was looking rather hard at his companion's clothing. At all events, Mr. Strong went red in the face and was plainly embarrassed. His age was possibly fifty, but scarcely any more, and his face was lined and greently wrinkled. And these wrinkles screwed themselves up about his eyes when he smiled, giving him the most genial expression.

"Of course you are interested, Mr. Lee!" he exclaimed heartily. "It is only natural that you should be. It is a most fortunate thing that you were close at hand to answer my call."

The detective smiled.

"I don't think I should have been at hand in the ordinary course of events, Mr. Strong," he replied. "As it happened, I was on the Bannington platform when you left the London express, and I observed the movements of the two men who recently attacked you. I took the liberty of keeping them under observation."

"Then, my dear sir, I owe you far greater thanks than I originally supposed!" exclaimed Mr. Strong. "How splendid of you! How truly remarkable

that—!" He paused abruptly. "But, good gracious me! You must surely have observed a— a difference in my attire—!"

"Quite a striking difference," smiled Lee. "But it is really none of my business—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Mr. Strong. "Why, bless my soul, you don't suppose I should allow you to remain in ignorance of the truth, do you? It is quite simple, Mr. Lee, and I think you will grant that my precautions were in no wise unnecessary. The only fault was that I did not keep my eyes sufficiently open. But come, my dear sir, we will be walking on. Oh, thank you—thank you!"

Lee had seized Mr. Strong's bag, and they both crossed the stile and walked up the road.

"As to the identity of the two ruffians, I have not the slightest idea," said Mr. Strong, offering Lee his cigar-case. "I should judge that the men are rascals of a scoundrel kind, and they were probably returning from a meeting—soddy out of pocket—when the incident occurred. Otherwise I should hardly imagine that they would indulge in high-way robbery. You see, Mr. Lee, I was travelling in the same compartment of the express, and I was unfortunate enough to drop my note-case. Quite a considerable amount of money—mainly in Treasury notes—slipped out. The two men easily observed that I was carrying a large sum, which is nothing unusual. The manner in which they regarded me almost made me nervous. But there were other people in the compartment, and I was safe."

"But you entered an empty compartment of the local train," Nelson Lee suggested.

"Ah, with an object!" chuckled Mr. Strong. "I should have alighted at once if the rascals had attempted to join me. But I could not very well change my attire in a crowded compartment, could I?" He chuckled again. "Dear me, no! For that was my object, Mr. Lee. I became shabby, as you see me now, foolishly imagining that I should throw the villains off the scent. Let me thank you once again, my dear sir, for assisting me so ably."

"Pray don't mention it, Mr. Strong," said Lee quietly.

The visitor offered no further remark, and he failed to observe that Nelson Lee was far from being satisfied with the explanation. The most important point had been completely ignored.

How was it that Mr. David Strong had this shabby suit of clothing in his bag—all ready for donning in the local train? Obviously Mr. Strong could not have prepared for the attempt at robbery before commencing his journey.

So Nelson Lee was perfectly convinced that he had been told only a portion of the truth, and Lee, accordingly, was not very gratified. He would have preferred Mr. Strong's complete confession, more especially as the visitor had intimated that he would tell him the whole story.

"By the way," said Lee, as the school gates were in sight. "I know of no boy at St. Frank's of your name, Mr. Strong. Possibly you are a relative—"

"Oh, no?" interrupted the other. "I am merely a friend of one of the boys—just a good friend, Mr. Lee. He has only recently arrived, and I am curious to see how he is shaping. The boy's name is Mason—Master Jack Mason."

"I will direct you to Mason's study at once, Mr. Strong," said Lee.

But the schoolmaster-detective could not help wondering how it was that the boy from Bermondsey could have such a friend as this aristocratic gentleman, whose pocket-book was stuffed with notes, and who had a weakness for changing his clothes in railway trains.

There was something behind it all—but what?

CHAPTER VI.

MR. STRONG IS CONFIDENTIAL.

"WHO'S the rag-and-bone merchant?" Handforth asked that question, and the object of his insulting remark was Mr. David Strong. That gentleman had just entered the gateway with Nelson Lee, and the fellows were greatly interested.

The junior eleven were in high spirits. We had whooped the Grammar School hollow, gaining three goals to their ail. And the Grammarians had gone off home feeling rather used up, for they had had a grueling time on the St. Frank's junior field.

There was really some excuse for Handforth's reference to a rag-and-bone merchant, for Mr. Strong looked highly disreputable—from a St. Frank's point of view. Visitors were generally "swell," and not attired in worn, shabby clothing. "Oh, he's a rate-collector, I expect!" said McClure.

"Rats!" snapped Handforth. "More likely a chap selling loaves— Now then, Owen major, look where you're going!"

Owen major had hurried up, and he was grinning hugely.

"See that moth-eaten old chap with Mr. Lee?" he asked. "Guess who he is, my son."

"What's all the mystery?" I demanded, strolling up with Tregellis-West and Watson in time to hear Owen major's remark. "Guess who who is?"

"That old buffer over there," grinned Owen. "He's a visitor—come to have tea with Mason!"

"Mason?" yelled Handforth.

"Come from Bermondsey, I suppose!" chuckled Owen major.

"Oh, my only hat!"

"Might have expected it," sneered Gulliver. "When we've got a rotten street urchin in the school, it's only natural that pub loafers should come to visit him. I call it disgustin'."

"There's nothing wrong with the gentleman," I remarked. "A bit shabby, perhaps, but he looks a ripping sort. Dukes and earls ain't the best dressed people sometimes, so don't judge by appearances."

"I'd expect you to stick up for him!" jeered Gulliver. "You were a beastly street urchin— You-ow! Oo, you beast!"

"And I'll give you another in a minute!" roared Handforth, who had punched Gulliver's nose with all his usual impetuosity and force. "I'll teach you to sneer at the best chap in the Remove—"

"Thanks for taking my part, Handy!" I grinned.

"But if Gulliver's nose wants punching, you might allow me the pleasure."

"Rats!" said Handforth. "I was nearer than you."

Gulliver backed away, scowling.

"There's going to be a row over this!" he shouted savagely. "We ain't going to stand this sort of thing. It's a bit too thick when Mason's Bermondsey relatives come down here, disgracin' the school!"

And there were quite a number of fellows who shared Gulliver's views—fellows like Hubbard and Owsa major, who were really decent. They felt that it was too thick altogether.

"It's frightfully unfair, you know," protested Sir Montic. "There's all this talk goin' on, an' the fellows really don't know who the visitor is, or anythin' about him. It ain't playin' the game, an' I'm feelin' quite disgusted. Begad! I'm ashamed of you!"

And Tregellis-West, having delivered himself thus, marched into the lobby with his nose in the air. Watson and I followed, grinning, but just

then Mr. Strong came into sight down the passage. He had evidently entered by the masters' doorway. As a matter of fact, the gov'nor had taken him to Study E, but Mason wasn't there. So the visitor had decided to find the Remove unaided.

"Ah, my dear lad," he exclaimed benevolently. "Will you have the goodness to tell me where I can find Master Mason? My name is Mr. Strong, and I take a great interest in Jack's welfare."

"I don't know where he is, sir," I replied, greatly liking the visitor's attitude and smile. "But I dare say some of the other fellows will soon put us on the track. Mason can't be far off."

"And do you come from Bermondsey, sir?" asked Watson bluntly.

Tommy was always blunt, and he sometimes asked questions which really sounded rude, but which were only thoughtless. Mr. Strong smiled and shook his head.

"No, my boy, I don't come from Bermondsey," he replied.

"Tell that to the Marines!" came a jeer from the doorway.

"Yah! Rag-and-bone man!"

"Clear out, you shabby old rotter!"

The next moment Fullwood & Co., strongly supported by their pals and some other misguided Removees, surged down the passage and surrounded us.

"Now then, you chaps!" I shouted sharply. "We don't want any rot. Remember that Mr. Strong is a visitor, and that he expects to be treated in a decent fashion by—by young gentlemen!"

This was a dig at Fullwood, but Ralph Leslie only sneered.

"Mr. Strong shouldn't come to St. Frank's if he doesn't want to be hosted!" yelled Fullwood.

"We don't want low-down old buffers like him here. He's going to be ragged—"

"I think not, Fullwood!" came Nelson Lee's sharp, cold tones.

Fullwood started back with a gasp, and there was a general rush of feet down the passage. But Nelson Lee took care to detain Fullwood and one or two others.

"I am sorry that you so completely forgot yourself as to be grossly insolent to a visitor, Fullwood," said the gov'nor. "You will write me five hundred lines, and I shall expect you to attend my study at half-past seven—when you will receive a severe caning."

"My dear sir," protested Mr. Strong. "The boy did not mean—"

"I really cannot allow Fullwood to go unpunished, Mr. Strong," interrupted the gov'nor quietly. "Fullwood, you will at once offer a complete apology to Mr. Strong for your insults."

Fullwood mumbled out an apology with an ill grace.

"And if I hear that Mr. Strong has been subjected to any further insolence, I shall punish the culprits even more severely," said Nelson Lee grimly. "I am absolutely astounded that my boys could be guilty of such vicious conduct."

"Jolly good!" I murmured to my cousin.

"I am grieved that I should be the cause of this distressing upset," said Mr. Strong painfully. "Thank you, Mr. Lee—thank you! I shall be glad to— Ah, here is Jack!"

Mason came up breathlessly.

"Why, fancy you coming down, Mr. Strong?" he exclaimed, his eyes sparkling with welcome. "It's jolly decent of you, and I'm tremendously glad to see you. Will you stay long, sir?"

"Only this evening, Jack, my boy," smiled the visitor.

"You'll have to come to tea in Study E, sir."

said Mason eagerly. "My study-mate is named Pitt, and he's a good sort of chap. Just fancy you coming down!"

Nelson Leo smiled, and walked down the passage, leaving Mason with his visitor, Fullwood & Co., at the other end, scowled savagely. Their little plan hadn't been at all successful.

"Yah! Detective Busybody!" hissed Gulliver, in a safe voice.

He glared at him, and mentally resolved that Gulliver should receive a punch in reply to that insult. But it wasn't quite so safe as Gulliver had fondly supposed. For Nelson Leo turned sharply.

"Come here, Gulliver!" he said, his voice very low.

"Mum-me, sir?" gasped Gulliver fearfully.

He came forward, and Nelson Leo regarded him sternly.

"You apparently overlooked the fact, Gulliver, that this passage has somewhat remarkable acoustic properties," he said evenly. "Moreover, I happen to possess quite respectable hearing. You referred to me a moment ago as 'Detective Busybody.'"

"I—I didn't breathe a word, sir!" stammered Gulliver.

"Silence!" snapped the gunner. "If you dare to lie to me again, Gulliver, I shall come you severely. You may, of course, refer to me in any terms you please when in private—that is none of my business. But I shall certainly not allow you to use insulting terms whilst I am within earshot. You will be confined to the school bounds for the remainder of this week. You may go!"

Gulliver went, shivering visibly. And after that there were no more whisperings. Nelson Leo was simply a terror in the eyes of Fullwood & Co., but the majority of the fellows chortled gleefully over that little incident. Lines for Fullwood and a guffing for Gulliver were distinctly satisfactory.

It must be admitted, however, that quite a number of Removites were inclined to treat Mr. Strong contemptuously. They would not go to such lengths of insult as Fullwood—even if there had been no fear of punishment—but they felt that this shabby visitor was lowering the tone of the school, and St. Frank's prided itself on its tone.

In Study E all was harmony. Pitt was quite genial, and he surprised Mason by treating Mr. Strong with great courtesy. Jack had grown to realize that Pitt was an uncertain fellow. You could never tell how he was going to act. And just at present he was acting in the most exemplary fashion.

"Well, my boy, and how are you getting on here?" asked Mr. Strong genially, when tea was served.

"Oh, quite decently, sir!" replied Mason.

"Ah, what's this?" asked the visitor. "I think I detect a certain hesitancy in your voice, boy. I suspect that your schoolfellows have been making things hard for you—eh? This is a high-class college, and we do not quite fit in with things." He chuckled. "Well, well, I dare say that matter will work itself right in time. I should be most sorry to think that you were unhappy—"

"But I'm not, sir," put in Mason quickly. "Some of the fellows have been rather hasty, but all the rest are as right as rain. I'm awfully glad that you've come down, Mr. Strong. I didn't think you took enough interest in me for that."

Mr. Strong laughed softly.

"I take a great deal of interest in you, my boy," he replied. "I shall probably come down again before long. You see, I have—certain business which brings me into Sussex, and it is quite an easy matter for me to slip over here."

"That's splendid, sir."

"Some more tea, Mr. Strong?" asked Pitt affably. "Let me pass you some of these cakes."

"Thank you, my boy, but I have finished—"

"Finished, sir!" broke in Mason. "But you're only had one cup of tea and a single slice of bread-and-butter?"

Mr. Strong beamed.

"Well, to tell you the truth, Jack—and I feel bound to confess—I had already accepted Mr. Leo's invitation to tea in his study," he explained. "I didn't like to refuse, so I came along here first, just to join you in a cup. You will forgive, I am sure."

"Oh, of course!" said Jack readily.

A few minutes later Mr. Strong rose from the table and patted Mason upon the back.

"I intend coming back shortly, and then I shall have something to show you," he smiled. "I shall be able to spend an hour with you, my boy, and I want you to show me over the school before I leave. I am quite delighted with everything I have seen so far, and I am very anxious to see more. Good-bye for the present, Jack!"

He passed out of the study, and Pitt glanced.

"Rather an affectionate old bird," he remarked. "He seems a bit taken with you, Mason."

"Mr. Strong is about the only real friend I've had in my life," replied Mason quietly. "I met him by accident in a London street a month or two ago, and he's been jolly good to me."

Mason said no more, although he could have done. Meanwhile, Mr. Strong made his way to Nelson Leo's study, and found his host all ready. The schoolmaster-detective smiled a welcome.

"I am afraid I don't deserve this consideration, Mr. Leo," said Mr. Strong deprecatingly. "Yet I am extremely glad of the opportunity to have another quiet chat with you. For I have a confession to make, and I more than suspect that you regard me with disfavour."

"Not at all, my dear sir," smiled Leo. "At the same time I must acknowledge that your story this afternoon did not quite convince me—"

"Of course it didn't—of course it didn't!" said Mr. Strong, his eyes twinkling. "And now I wish to tell you the absolute truth. Yes, one lump of sugar, please. Thank you, my dear sir! With regard to those thieving rascals, I have nothing to add. My story was quite truthful. I now wish to speak to you upon quite a different matter."

"Pray proceed, Mr. Strong."

"No doubt you have thought it peculiar that I should come to this school fully prepared to don my present shabby attire. But there is a reason, Mr. Leo. It is quite possible that you will set me down as an eccentric old crank. If so, I must accept the situation. But I am not. I assure you I am not a crank."

"You are making me very curious," said Nelson Leo.

"Splendid!" chuckled the other. "I make no claim to being keen-witted, but I am well aware of the fact that you did not accept the whole of my story. I should not have changed my clothing in the train had it not been for those infernal pick-pockets who were worrying me. My original intention was to book a room in one of the village hotels and to perform the transformation there—quietly and unobtrusively. For, I can assure you, I detest wearing shabby attire. Otherwise, I should have travelled from London as you now see me."

Nelson Leo laughed.

"You are certainly achieving your purpose, if that purpose is to bewilder me, Mr. Strong," he said. "I haven't the faintest idea what you are driving at, and I can think of no earthly reason why you should prefer to present yourself at St. Frank's as I now behold you."

Mr. Strong's eyes twinkled gleefully.

"It is a plot, my dear sir—a plot!" he whispered, bending forward. "What do you think of that? What do you think of a respectable person like myself descending to the depths of conspiracy? Is it not truly appalling?"

"It depends on the nature of the conspiracy," replied Lee.

"Well, that is perfectly innocent," said Mr. Strong. "Were it not, I should hardly be consulting upon it with you, Mr. Lee—eh? But to get to this point—and I admit I am a shocking person for wasting words—my little conspiracy concerns Master Jack Mason. I presume you know very little of the lad?"

"I am aware that he was recommended to the governors by Sir Crawford Grey, and that considerable pressure was brought to bear by that gentleman," replied Lee.

"Quite so—quite so," chuckled Mr. Strong. "I believe that Sir Crawford Grey was interested. But let us begin at the beginning, and tell you how it all came about.

"Jack Mason is a most quiet boy, and I met him under curious circumstances. In point of fact, Mr. Lee, the lad saved my life at the risk of his own. Egad, sir, it was a noble action! I was unfortunate enough to slip over whilst crossing Piccadilly Circus on a showery day. The road was disgustingly greasy, and I really thought that my last moment had come. You see, a motor-omnibus was bearing down upon me, and all the driver's efforts to stop it were in vain, the wheels being locked."

"Motor-buses are awkward things once they start skidding," commented Lee.

"Bless my soul and body! They are appalling!" agreed Mr. Strong. "I am not so young as I was at one time of day, Mr. Lee, and my fall robbed me of my breath. To move was impossible, and I fully expected to die at that minute. And then I met Master Jack Mason. Do you know, sir, what that boy did? He pushed past a crowd of gaping, shouting idiots, placed himself in the most dire peril imaginable, and pulled me out of danger. It was the nearest shave one could possibly conceive. Indeed, the boy was knocked over and badly bruised, and I regard it as a miracle that he was not killed on the spot."

"It was indeed a courageous action."

"And yet the lad thought nothing of it," said Mr. Strong, becoming serious. "He was so severely bruised that he could scarcely walk, so I took him home in a taxi. I discovered that he lived with his aunt—a Mrs. Grell—in quite a respectable street in Bermondsey. Now, I was rather struck by one fact. Mrs. Grell is not an educated woman, and yet Jack himself is a gentleman to his finger-tips. I asked no questions, but I easily gathered that the boy's home life was very miserable. He did not get on well with his aunt, and the fault, as you may imagine, was entirely on the woman's side."

"Pray proceed, Mr. Strong," said Nelson Lee, as the visitor paused.

"In some vague manner the boy attracted me—quite apart from the great debt of gratitude I owed him," said Mr. Strong. "Yet I could plainly perceive that Jack would be most unwilling to accept any monetary token of recognition. It pleased me, therefore, to pose before him as a man of limited means, whereas, as you may have gathered, I am quite the opposite. Do you follow me, Mr. Lee?"

"Perfectly."

"In due course I learned that Jack held a situation in London—in a publishing office," proceeded Mr. Strong. "By this time, you must understand, he and I had become great friends, he believing that I was an impetuous old chap. I learned that he was attending night schools, for he was

most anxious to improve his education. And then, Mr. Lee—then I resolved to concoct a little plot." Mr. Strong chuckled. "I am happy to say that my scheme has been an unqualified success. I wanted Jack to come to St. Frank's, but to suggest such a thing to him—to suggest that I should pay his fees—would have squashed the matter at once. He would have regarded it as an act of charity. And Jack—bless the boy!—is quite an independent young rascal.

"I consulted my solicitors, and the result was just this: The legal gentlemen communicated with Master Mason, and they deliberately made their epistle somewhat vague, in the true legal phraseology. The gist of their information was to the effect that a legacy had been placed in their care for the especial purpose of providing the lad with a thorough education at St. Frank's, and, later on, at Oxford. I had discovered that Jack's uncle went over to Canada some years ago—about five, I believe—and he recently died there. Without making any definite statement, but by vague references, Jack was given to understand that this legacy had been left by his uncle. At all events, Mr. Lee, the trick worked successfully."

"It was most generous of you—"

"Tut-tut! Nonsense, my dear sir!" interrupted Mr. Strong. "Good gracious me! Generous, when he has saved my life? I intended visiting Jack after about a week, and to hear the news. But, bless your life, the boy could not wait until then. He came to a little flat I had taken in London—a poltry furnished place—bubbling over with the great news. I was duly interested, and congratulated him heartily. The boy suspected nothing; he suspects nothing now. He has not the slightest notion that I am paying his fees and that the legacy is a mere myth. He simply regards me as a friend, and not as his benefactor. Do you quite understand, Mr. Lee? I naturally wished to come and see him down here, and that is why I took such precautions. I rely upon you to keep this little secret of mine."

"And you will not rely in vain, Mr. Strong," said Nelson Lee heartily. "Your whole idea is most generous and thoughtful, and you must allow me to express my very great admiration. I am very glad that you have told me, for it is far better that I should know."

Mr. Strong nodded.

"Quite so," he agreed. "And I also think it is far better that you should know something else, Mr. Lee."

He bent forward and made several whispered remarks.

"Indeed!" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "Why, this is better than ever. Now I grasp every point without the slightest difficulty. Splendid, Mr. Strong—splendid!"

Mr. David Strong lay back in his chair and nodded.

"Your approval is all that I desire, Mr. Lee," he said, rubbing his hands with satisfaction. "I feel quite comfortable, and a great load is now off my mind."

CHAPTER VII.

PITT IS VERY CURIOUS—AND VERY PUZZLED.

STUDY E. in the Remove passage, was looking neat and tidy when Mr. Strong again presented himself. Ten had been cleared away, and Jack Mason and Pitt were chatting together.

"Here again, boys?" exclaimed the visitor, bustling in. "Bless my soul and body! You have comfortable quarters here—most comfortable! Egad! I shouldn't mind a room of this sort myself!"

He chuckled as he sat down, and beamed good nature around him.

"What time are you going back, sir?" asked Mason.

"Glorious me, boy, do you want to get rid of me—"

"Rather not, sir!" protested Jack. "But I want to take you round the school grounds before it's dark. And then you'll have to have a look through the school, too."

"Of course I shall—most decidedly I shall!" replied Mr. Strong genially. "But there is just one little matter which I must attend to first. I have something to show you, Jack. I don't suppose you will be interested, but there is no telling—eh?"

The visitor took from his pocket a small paper package tied up with string. The knot was sealed with red wax, and there was nothing upon the package to show what it contained.

"Well, I'll be going," said Pitt, making for the door.

"Not at all, my boy. There is nothing private to be discussed between Jack and myself," said Mr. Strong. "Please stay— Upon my soul! What on earth—"

The door had burst open in a manner which could scarcely be described as gentle. And Edward Oswald Handforth strode in, closely followed by Church and McClure. A crowd of grinning juniors hovered about in the passage.

"Oh, I say, Handy, don't start any of your rot now!" protested Pitt. "Mr. Strong is a visitor, and—"

"When I want your advice, Pitt, I'll ask for it," said Handforth, glaring. "I've been thinking, and I've come to the conclusion that something must be done—"

"Hear, hear!" said Church and McClure.

"Really, boys, I trust you are not thinking of renewing that somewhat unfortunate scene which occurred before tea?" asked Mr. Strong quietly.

Handforth stared.

"Me?" he exclaimed. "Renewing that awful rot? 'Tain't likely, sir! I've come here to apologise."

"Oh, I see—I see!"

"What the dickens for, Handforth?" asked Mason. "You didn't insult Mr. Strong; so what's the idea of apologising?"

Handforth smiled pityingly.

"Of course, I don't expect you to understand," he exclaimed, waving his hand. "Half the Remove doesn't understand, and the fellows only grinned at me when I suggested this visit. I was born to be misunderstood, but that's my misfortune."

"Get on with it, you ass!" muttered McClure.

"Ain't I getting on with it?" roared Handforth. "The fellows, I repeat, jeered at me. Why? Perhaps you don't know, but I do. What did Carlyle say? Answer me that question."

"How the dickens do we know what Carlyle said?" demanded Pitt. "He's only a silly kid in the Second—"

"You—you thumping ass!" bellowed Handforth. "I mean the great Carlyle—Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish essayist. What did he say?"

"Have you come here to crib the information for your prep?" asked Pitt.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's no good talking!" snorted Handforth. "I'll tell you why the fellows jeered at me. Carlyle said that the British nation consisted of five hundred millions, and that the majority of them were silly asses! That's what nearly all the Remove chaps are!"

"You've got it wrong, haven't you?" asked

Mason, smiling. "There aren't five hundred millions—"

"Do you think you know better than I do?" demanded Handforth warmly.

"Pray, don't quarrel, my dear boys," said Mr. Strong gently. "You must allow me—ahem—to point out just a slight discrepancy, my lad. Carlyle, I believe, said that the British nation consisted of forty millions, that they were composed of wise men and fools—mostly fools."

Handforth nodded.

"Well, that's what I said—or near enough, anyhow," he replied. "And how can a fellow expect to be understood when the nation mainly consists of fools? Wise men always have that trouble."

"Dear me! Your modesty is most charming," smiled Mr. Strong.

A rear of laughter sounded in the passage, but Handforth took no notice. He probably set it down as unavoidable—since the fellows were mostly fools!

"Well, that's one point settled," he said grimly. "As for my modesty, Mr. Strong, there's not another chap in the Remove who can beat me at it. And now I'll get to the point."

"Thank goodness!" muttered Church.

"The other chaps can't understand why I'm going to apologise, but it's really simple," went on Handforth. "You were insulted, sir—grossly insulted by Fellwood and several other rotters. The honour of the Remove was cast into the dust, and it's my duty to fish it out and clean it. That's what I'm doing now."

"Egad!" murmured Mr. Strong. "How remarkable!"

"And I apologise, sir," said Handforth firmly. "I apologise in the most humble manner on behalf of those chaps who ragged you. They haven't got the decency to treat a visitor with respect, and so it falls upon me to do their dirty work!"

"You—you silly ass!" muttered McClure. "You've spoilt everything by saying that!"

"I am most gratified," said Mr. Strong graciously. "Please allow me to thank you for your kind consideration—"

"Don't mention it, sir," interrupted Handforth.

"It's my duty. Thank goodness I ain't a rotten snob like some of the other chaps! They haven't heard me insulting you, and they won't. I don't suppose it's your fault you come here in those shabby clothes, looking like a giddy tramp, and I wouldn't dream of throwing such a thing in your face. Poverty ain't a sin— What the dickens are you kicking my shin for, McClure? Keep your beastly hoofs to yourself!"

McClure, who had been growing redder and redder as Handforth's "apology" proceeded, now turned the colour of beetroot, and backed away in confusion. His efforts to stay his leader's flow of eloquence had fallen flat.

"You—you silly fatted!" he gasped. "Don't—don't take any notice of him, Mr. Strong. He means well, and it's only his way. But everybody knows that he's the biggest ass in St. Frank's!"

"Quite so!" smiled Mr. Strong.

"Eh?" said Handforth, starting.

"I certainly do not misunderstand you, my boy," said Mr. Strong hastily. "I realise that your motives are splendid—although, perhaps, you express yourself in a manner which is somewhat calculated to confuse. But I appreciate your thoughtfulness, my boy."

Handforth looked gratified.

"I thought you would, sir," he said. "Of course, when you came I mistook you for a rag-and-bone merchant—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But that wasn't my fault," went on Handforth.

"We're used to seeing people well dressed at St. Frank's, you know. But I don't suppose people trouble to dress very well in Bermondsey. Gulliver told me that you kept an oil-shop, but I don't believe that!"

Mr. Strong looked rather startled.

"Dear me! There is a mistake somewhere," he said. "I can assure you, my lad, that I have never knowingly entered an oil-shop in my life, much less one in Bermondsey."

"I thought it was a yarn, sir," said Handforth. "Bell's suggestion about a second-hand clothes shop was much more likely; but that's nothing to do with me. You're a visitor at St. Frank's, and I wouldn't dream of saying a word that might offend you. In fact, I'm going to suggest that you should come and have a look round the place under my escort. I'll see that nobody interferes with you, sir!"

"Is there any danger, then?" asked Mr. Strong mildly.

"Danger?" repeated Handforth, staring. "You don't suppose you could walk about safely, do you? Why, you'd be ragged by everybody, especially the fags. And I mean to protect you until you are off the premises. It won't take us more than five minutes to look all round—"

"It's jolly good of you, Handforth, but I'm going to show Mr. Strong over the school," put in Mason. "Thanks, all the same—"

Handforth shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, all right!" he said. "I've done my best, that's all. Don't say I didn't show the right spirit!"

He marched out of the study, and both Pitt and Mason grinned. Handforth had certainly been sincere, but he really had an unfortunate way of putting things.

Meanwhile, Mr. Strong chuckled greatly over the incident, and immediately left the study on a tour of inspection. But this is the main point. Mr. Strong completely forgot the little sealed package which was lying upon the study table, beneath a paper. It was Handforth who had caused Mr. Strong to forget the package, and the most startling results were to follow, although they did not follow immediately.

Mr. Strong spent a full hour round and within St. Frank's, and, needless to say, he was not molested, as Handforth had feared. And the visitor discovered that he had barely sufficient time to get to the station for the evening train.

So he bustled off, after bidding Nelson Lee goodbye, and Jack Mason went with him to the station.

Pitt remained alone in Study E. He sat in a chair, pulled out a cigarette, and lit it. The Black Sheep was smiling queerly as he did so. In fact, he was wondering why on earth he should consider Jack Mason in this matter of smoking. Yet Pitt did consider Mason. He refrained from smoking during the time that Jack was in the study.

"They can't diddle me," murmured Pitt. "Strong ain't quite such an old buffer as he pretends to be, and he hasn't worn these shabby clothes for long, either. I'm going to keep my eye on this affair."

Pitt was one of the keenest fellows in the Remove, and it was a difficult job to "diddle" him. There was no reason why he should concern himself about Mr. Strong; but Pitt was naturally curious, although he always took care to investigate a thing on the quiet.

After a few minutes he decided to get on with his prep. He disliked it intensely—in common with most other juniors—but it was an evil which could not be avoided without uncomfortable results.

He sat down at the table, pulled some papers

aside, and looked for his favourite pen. Then his eyes fell on a small, brown-paper package, tied with string, and sealed.

"The old chap forgot all about this," muttered Pitt, picking it up. "That was Handforth's doing. Now, I wonder what it is? Mason won't open it, I'll bet."

He turned the package over in his hands, wondering curiously what it contained. It was sealed, or he would have opened it without compunction. Pitt saw nothing wrong in that. After all, Mr. Strong had told him to stop within the study, so it couldn't be anything private.

"Oh, rags!" muttered Pitt. "I'm going to have a look."

There was plenty of string in the cupboard, and some red sealing-wax, too. He could fasten up the package again without anybody being the wiser—for the seal was quite plain, showing no impression.

He cut through the string with a table-knife, grinning coolly. Then he carefully unwrapped the paper and spread it out. A small box was revealed, one of those little cardboard boxes which jewellers send out brooches and suchlike trinkets in.

"A giddy present, I expect," Pitt told himself.

He rather enjoyed examining something which he ought not to examine. And he received a little surprise. Removing the lid of the box, he saw a plain gold locket, carelessly laid among some tissue-paper. It wasn't new, by any means, for the gold was scratched and tarnished, as though it had been carried carelessly in a trousers-pocket for years.

Pitt took it out, and then gave a start. It was only half a locket, he found; but this was not surprising in itself. He rose from the table and went to the bookcase.

Here he took down a half locket exactly identical with the one on the table. Both were plain, and were obviously fellows. Fitting them together, Pitt easily established this fact.

The second half was Mason's. Jack had been showing it to Pitt the previous day, and had forgotten to put it back in his pocket. So Pitt had placed it in a position of safety.

"I suppose the chap lost this other half, and Mr. Strong found it and brought it along," thought Pitt. "Well, it's a giddy disappointment. I thought I was going to see something interesting. Punishment for interfering with something that doesn't concern me," he added, grinning.

The door opened, and Tommy Watson looked in. "Mason here?" he asked.

"Come to the station with his beautiful visitor," replied Pitt.

"Oh, I'd forgotten that!" said Watson. "Thanks, Nipper wants to have a word with him in Study C. You might give him the tip when he comes in."

Watson went away, and Pitt fished out the two halves of the locket from the table-drawer, into which he had slipped them, and he suddenly whistled and stared into his hand.

"Now they're mixed up!" he muttered. "Just like somebody to interrupt! Oh, well, they're both about the same, so it doesn't matter."

To Pitt's eye they were undoubtedly the same. There were no miniature portraits inside, or anything of that sort—not even glass. The plain gold was roughly engraved with some curious signs which meant nothing to Pitt, and which he certainly did not recognise as Arabic writing.

Actually, the signs were totally different on each half, but to Pitt they looked the same. He didn't really care, for the matter was of no importance. So he just dropped one half in the box and put the other lock on the bookshelf. Within five minutes the little package was again sealed up, and there was no sign that he had opened it.

"I can't tell Mason anything about it, of course," decided Pitt. "He'd know, then, that I'd been nosing. And yet he'll go and send the giddy thing back, I suppose?"

Pitt went on with his prep, and he little realized that Handforth's interruption, seemingly so trivial, was to lead to much mystery and excitement. For, if Mr. Strong had known that Jack possessed the other half of the locket, much trouble would have been avoided. But it was a fact that Mr. Strong was in ignorance of this circumstance, and Jack, in his turn, knew nothing of Mr. Strong's half.

Mason returned, cheerful and smiling, and Pitt immediately indicated the package on the table.

"What about that?" he asked, looking up from his work.

CHAPTER VIII.

PROVING HIS METTLE.

JACK MASON whistled.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he exclaimed. "Mr. Strong forgot all about that—and he was going to show it to me, too. I shall have to keep it until he comes next time, or send it by post—"

"Why not open it?" suggested Pitt.

"No, I shan't do that," replied Mason coldly. "It wouldn't be the right thing, Pitt. It's not mine."

Pitt grinned.

"Your standard of honour is too high—what?" he remarked. "I ain't quite such a goody-goody bouncer as you are, Mason. I should open it if I were you. Mr. Strong said it was for you, anyhow."

"That doesn't make any difference," replied Jack, putting the package into the drawer. "You might shift up a bit, Pitt."

"Oh, I say, I was going to remind you!" said the Serpent. "The locket thing of yours is on the bookshelf."

"Oh, thanks!" said Mason, fetching it.

"Where's the other half?" asked Pitt.

"I don't know—I've never seen it."

"Never seen it?"

"No."

"How long have you had this half, then?"

"Ever since I was a baby, I think," replied Mason. "I don't know much about it, really. Pass that exercise-book along."

They went on with their prep. Pitt was certainly interested and puzzled now. He knew well enough that Mr. Strong had not met Mason until quite recently, and yet Mason had had the half locket since he was a baby. Pitt felt almost tempted to explain that the other half was in the pocket, but decided that he had better not. It would only make Mason distrust him afterwards.

"Oh, Nipper wants you!" remarked Pitt, after a bit. "I forgot to mention it when you came in."

"I'll go along when I've done my prep," replied Jack.

And so, for the next half-hour, the two juniors continued their prep in silence. Pitt had dismissed the locket affair from his mind. It wasn't his business, and it wasn't very interesting. But that locket was to lead to some stirring adventures before very long.

Mason presented himself at Study C when Sir Montie and Tommy and I were discussing football.

"You wanted me?" asked Jack.

"Oh, I was wondering if you're interested in football, Mason," I replied, looking round.

"Yes, rather!" said Jack eagerly.

"Oh, rats!" said Watson. "You can't play, can you?"

"A little," replied the new boy. "I was captain of a team we had in my district—"

"Oh, were you?" I said with interest. "That looks pretty promising. The fact is, Mason, I intend to give you a chance at footer, and it's up to you to make good. I'm out to make the Ancient House team the hottest stuff going, and if you can play a good game you'll be given a look in. But all dolls are ruthlessly cast aside—even if they're say own pals."

"Bogged?" murmured Sir Montie. "I hope you ain't referin' to me, old boy? I ain't exactly brilliant, but it's a shockin' thing to call me a dud."

"You haven't been ruthlessly cast aside, Montie," I grinned. "Well, Mason, what do you say?" Jack's eyes were gleaming with pleasure.

"I think it's awfully good of you," he replied. "I—I thought that I shouldn't be given a chance here, and I appreciate your kindness tremendously!"

"Kindness be jiggered!" I interrupted. "You won't find me very kind if you're N.G., Mason. The Ancient House Junior Eleven is selected on its merits, so you'll have to show pretty good form if you want to pass. You'd better come down to the ground with me to-morrow."

"Thanks awfully!" said Mason eagerly.

The very sight of his pleasure was sufficient reward, and I sincerely hoped that he would come out of the test successfully. It would make a great difference to him in the Remove.

Jack went down the passage, walking sprightly. The very fact that he was to be treated just as the other juniors and given a chance at football gave him a confidence which had hitherto been lacking. He felt that he was not an outsider, and his heart was thumping rather hard. But just as he was about to enter Study E he heard certain sounds which caused a frown to take the place of the smile.

"Leggo, you beast!" came a shrill hiss.

"If you yell, I'll twist it harder!" exclaimed Fullwood's voice. "Hold him, Gully. Now then, Owen minor, you've got to pop down to the village straight away an' do what I tell you—"

"I won't!" shouted Owen minor. "It's after lockin' up— Oh! Oo-ye! You—yee— Oh, you heasts!"

Mason set his teeth and walked down to the lobby. Fullwood and Gulliver were vigorously twisting the arms of Owen minor of the Third. And Jack Mason forgot everything in his anger and contempt. He strode forward.

"Leave that youngster alone!" he said calmly.

"Eh, what—?" Fullwood simply stared. "Why, you cheeky gutter-brut! Clear off before I knock you down!"

"Leave that kid alone!" repeated Mason grimly.

Fullwood deliberately twisted Owen minor's arm again, and this time with a vicious force which caused the lad to shriek with agony.

"You confounded cad!" shouted Mason.

Snock!

His fist caught Fullwood upon the nose, and Ralph Leslie went over like a ninepin. But he was on his feet in a second, his nose bleeding, his eyes glittering with hatred.

"I'll smash you for that!" he snarled.

Fullwood remembered how easily he had knocked Mason down once before. Everybody, in fact, regarded the new fellow as a punk. But Fullwood was destined to receive a big surprise.

He barred himself as Mason, and went down again with such shattering force that he wondered if the roof had fallen in. Mason's fist was like a sledge-hammer.

"I didn't want to fight," Mason said quietly, his

voice quivering. "But if I see a bully at work I forget things. Don't let me catch you playing these games again, Fullwood."

Those words revived Fullwood more than anything else. He sat up dazedly. He—Ralph Leslie Fullwood—was being warned by a beastly outsider like Mason! It was past all belief.

"Grab him, Gully!" muttered Fullwood savagely.

But by this time quite a number of fellows had appeared on the scene. Within two minutes the lobby was packed, and I was amongst the crowd with Montie and Tommy.

"A fight!" shouted somebody. "A fight!"

"Rot!" I roared. "You can't scrap here, you asses! What's the matter, anyhow?"

"Oh, nothing much!" replied Mason. "I found Fullwood doing something that I didn't like, so I knocked him down."

"Oh, my only hat!"

"Who said the age of miracles had passed?"

"I expect it served Fullwood right," I said grimly. "I'll bet he was bullying some fag or other. I heard a screech a minute or two ago. I remember. You'd better go and wash your face, Fullwood—"

Fullwood panted with rage.

"I'm going to half kill this slum beast!" he snarled.

And, before anybody could prevent him, he threw himself at Mason. The pair were going at it hammer and tongs within three seconds. And the crowd surged round excitedly.

Fullwood, for all his faults, was no mean fighter. He knew quite a lot about boxing, and he possessed a heavy set. It was his mistaken idea that Mason was a hopeless duffer.

But the new fellow just stood his ground, without giving an inch. He received Fullwood's onrush squarely, and the next moment things happened. Fullwood's great charge came to a stop, and his guard simply fell to pieces. About two dozen fists, so it seemed to him, hammered his face and neck and chest ceaselessly.

"Oh, my hat! Go it!"

"Good for you, Mason!"

"Oh, good man!"

Nearly everybody was on Mason's side. Fullwood was a ratter, detested by all the decent fellows in the Remove. And to see him thrashed—and thrashed by Mason—was just glorious.

Mason dispelled for ever the idea that he was a funk. He took blows without flinching, and displayed a knowledge of boxing which took everybody by surprise. His guard was splendid, and he remained serenely calm throughout the short, breathless scrap.

Crash, crash, crash!

Three times his fists went home. Fullwood staggered back, dazed and agonised. He fell to the floor, and remained there.

"Cave!" hissed a dozen voices.

The unmistakable cough of Nelson Lee sounded from the top of the stairs. The result was remarkable. The juniors simply vanished. Tommy Watson, De Valerie, Tregellis-West, and I yanked Mason out into the dark Triangle, and Fullwood's pals hustled their beaten leader out also.

When Nelson Lee arrived in the lobby he found it empty and deserted and wonderfully peaceful. The Housemaster-detective smiled—and did not make any further investigation.

As for Jack Mason, he went up in the estimation of the whole Remove, and Fullwood was obliged to crawl away and hide his diminished head. The boy from Bermondsey was not doing so badly, after all.

CHAPTER IX.

THE REMOVE AGAINST BILL.

H ANDFORTH shook his head. "I can't help feeling sorry for the kid," he remarked thoughtfully. "Dash it all, it ain't his fault that he was dragged up in Bermondsey, and that his pater was a giddy carpenter."

"I don't see that it matters whether his pater was a sweep," remarked McClure. "There's no snobbery about me, thank goodness. Mason himself is decent enough, and that's all that matters."

Handforth smiled in a superior fashion.

"My dear, innocent chap," he said, "you mustn't judge the rest of the Remove by us. We're different. We're right above the common ruck. We three have got more brains than all the rest of the Remove put together—barring Study U."

"Hear, hear!" said Church and McClure simultaneously.

"Nipper & Co. are quite sensible," admitted Handforth. "In fact, I might almost say that they're as brainy as we are. As for the rest, they're no class. I shouldn't have chosen you two chaps for my chums if you hadn't been sensible. So, of course, while we can see Mason's good points, most of the other fellows simply cut him," went on Handforth. "Tain't fair, of course, but I expect he'll shake down before the end of the term. He's only been here a week. Just look at him now—as miserable as sin."

Handforth & Co. were seated on the window ledge of the Common-room, and the window was wide open, the day being mild and sunny. Church and McClure looked round, and saw that Jack Mason was strolling beneath the chestnuts in the Triangle, his hands deep in his pockets, his expression grave and troubled.

"Poor chap!" remarked Church. "Let's go and cheer him up."

"Good idea!" said Handforth promptly. "I don't know that it would be wise, though," he added. "He might not like it—and what could we do, anyhow?"

"Invite him to tea," suggested McClure.

Handforth glared.

"You silly ass!" he snorted. "You've got no brains, McClure!"

"I thought that both Churchy and I were brainy chaps—"

"I didn't think what I was saying when I made that remark," said Handforth calmly. "Ain't you got a memory, you ass? How much money have you got?"

"Threepence ha'penny!" replied McClure gloomily.

"Church has got sixpence, I've run down to one and twopence, and our cupboard's empty!" said Handforth. "That's a pretty ghastly state of affairs, ain't it? And you talk about inviting people to tea—to cheer 'em up! They'd get a fat lot of cheer in Study D this afternoon!"

"I didn't say 'they'!" retorted McClure. "You speak as though twenty fellows were coming, and I only meant Mason."

"Well, it's just the same!" snorted Handforth. "We shall have to invite ourselves out to tea this afternoon, or else be miserable in the Hall. I don't know what things are coming to nowadays."

Handforth spoke with feeling. As a rule he was blessed with plenty of pocket-money, but an expected remittance had not turned up. It would doubtless do so in the morning, but that wasn't any good for to-day. And Handforth had a horror of borrowing. He would lend money without a thought, and, as often as not, he forgot to ask for it back. But a crisis would need to arise before he would borrow.

And so Jack Mason, instead of being invited to tea in Study D, was allowed to stroll beneath the trees while Handforth & Co. set about the difficult task of inviting themselves to tea.

McClure safely managed to instal himself in Study C, with Watson and Tregellis-West and myself. Church marched into Study M, saw that De Valerie and the Duke of Somerset were just about to sit down to a first-class spread, and asked point-blank if there was room for him. There was, and Church stayed.

Handforth, on the other hand, found that a great many juniors were suffering in a like manner to himself. At last he vent off to his own study and prepared his own tea—a somewhat frugal meal.

Meanwhile, Jack Mason glanced thoughtfully towards the Ancient House. The new boy in the Remove was not exactly happy.

Jack was deep in thought, and he walked up the steps with his eyes to the ground. It was because of this that he did not notice Starke and Kenmore, two prefects, who were standing on the top steps. The two were bullies of the worst type. Starke grinned, and deliberately bumped into the junior, sending him reeling.

"You cheeky young sweep!" exclaimed Starke harshly. "Why don't you look where you're going?"

Mason came out of his reverie.

"I'm sorry," he said simply. "I was thinking."

Starke took hold of Mason's shoulders, whirled him round, and sent him spinning down the steps to the gravel below.

"Come up here and beg my pardon for bumping into me!" snapped Starke.

Mason picked himself up, ran up the steps, and faced the prefect with blazing eyes.

"I'm not going to beg your pardon!" he shouted hotly. "I'm going to tell you that you're a cowardly and a beastly bully. And if you dare to lay hands on me again, I'll—"

"Chuck him down again!" growled Kenmore savagely.

"By thunder, I will!" panted Starke, grasping Mason fiercely.

This time matters looked really serious, for Starke was in a violent temper. But an interruption occurred.

"Release that boy at once!" exclaimed a sharp voice.

Starke let go Jack as though he had been red-hot. Nelson Lee had emerged from the gloom of the lobby, and Starke stared at him for a moment in alarm. Then he laughed easily.

"I was just correcting this insolent junior, sir," he said.

"So I observed, Starke," said Nelson Lee calmly.

"I have found it necessary once or twice to seriously think of depriving you of your prefectship. If anything of this nature ever occurs again I shall certainly do so."

"The kid was checking me, sir—" began Starke hotly.

"Silence!" snapped Lee. "I am fully aware of the facts, Starke. Mason refused to obey an order which you have absolutely no right to give, whereupon you deliberately threw him down the steps. Any future misdemeanour of Mason's must be reported to me. I forbid you to deal with it yourselves. Your punishment for this act of insolentism will follow later. You may go."

Starke and Kenmore, gritting their teeth with rage, walked away. Their little "amusement" had ended badly. Not only were they to receive punishment, but they were denied the pleasure of bullying Mason any further. This story, they had

no doubt, would be all over the House within an hour, and they felt like kicking themselves.

"Are you hurt, Mason?" asked Nelson Lee kindly.

"No, sir, not at all," replied the junior.

"And yet a nasty grace upon the wrist is painful, surely?" asked Lee, seizing Jack's arm and examining it. "H'm! You had better go and wash this, my boy, and then bandage it. You may be sure that I shall make Starke suffer for his brutality."

"I didn't want to cause any unpleasantness, sir, or—" Mason began.

"I can quite understand that, lad," said Lee, smiling. "And, indeed, you did no such thing. You need not tell me how this affair started. I am quite capable of drawing my own conclusions. And don't look so gloomy, Mason. I am sure that your life at St. Frank's will be much smoother in the near future."

CHAPTER X.

A REPTURE IN STUDY E.

REGINALD PITT was preparing tea in Study E when Mason entered, after washing his wrist and bandaging it.

"Hallo, I thought you'd got lost!" remarked Pitt. "Where the thunder did you put the tea? I've been searching for it for hours!"

Jack smiled.

"It's in the vase on the mantelpiece," he replied. "I fitted a cork to it, and it makes a splendid place for the tea—and looks tidy, too."

"What a giddy chap you are for neatness!" said Pitt. "I'm blest if I'd take so much trouble! And what the dickens have you done to your hand?"

"Oh, nothing!" said Mason. "Starke knocked me down the steps, that's all. But Mr. Lee made matters all right."

"Oh, you sneaked?" inquired Pitt, grinning.

"No, I didn't!" replied Mason shortly.

"Keep your hair on!" said Pitt. "You're a touchy beast, Mason. It's rather a bore, having a fellow for a study-mate who's always jumping down your throat."

"I'm sorry," said Jack. "Pass the butter over, please."

Pitt passed it, and nothing more was said for a few minutes. These two juniors were very different from the other denizens of the Remove passage. There had been tiffs on more than one occasion, and the pair were not exactly intimate.

Tea finished, Pitt lounged in the armchair.

"I want to have a chat with you, Mason," he said easily.

"All right," smiled Jack. "What's it about?"

"Smoking."

"Eh?"

"Smoking," repeated Pitt, producing a silver case and selecting a cigarette. "Oh, my hat! Don't scowl like that—"

"I wasn't scowling," said Mason quietly. "I'm disgusted, that's all."

The Serpant applied a light to his cigarette and puffed away for a few moments. Then he regarded Mason massedly through the cloud of blue smoke.

"Won't you have a cig?" he asked.

"No, thanks!" said Jack curtly.

"I had half made up my mind to chuck it all up," said Pitt. "But I'm blest if I can see any harm in it! Why don't you be a sport and join me? Come on, old chap!"

"I'd rather not be a sport," retorted Jack. "Please don't talk to me about it, Pitt. We shall only have a row, and I don't want that. I've often told you what I think about smoking."

"Why don't you object to me doing it?"

"It's not my business," said Mason. "We share this study, and I've no right to dictate what you shall do. But when you ask me to smoke it's a different matter."

"I know it is," replied Pitt smoothly. "Now, look here! We're not going to have a bust-up, but there's no reason why we shouldn't have a little argument. You don't know how ripping it is to have a fog now and again. I don't believe in over-doing it, like Fullwood. One cig every now and again is good enough for me. And as you share this study with me, I should like to see you joining in—"

"You can talk like that for hours, but it won't make any difference," interrupted Mason. "I'm not going to smoke, Pitt; and you can't make me. You ought to have more sense."

"Thanks?"

"We won't say any more about it—"
 "Yes, we will," interjected Pitt, crossing his legs comfortably. "Now that we're fairly on the subject, we might as well thrash it out—a heart-to-heart talk, so to speak. We've never really talked about the matter."

"I don't want to," said Jack grimly.
 "But I do. So, if you're a gentleman, you'll give way to me," was Pitt's calm reply. "I believe in smoking, and you don't. Personally, I don't see any harm in it. Now, I want you to tell me, in plain language, what your objections are. Don't consider my feelings. Just speak bluntly."

Jack Mason's eyes gleamed.
 "All right," he replied. "I'll take you at your word, Pitt. I've heard that smoking amongst juniors is quite common in a lot of public schools, but there's not much of it done at St. Frank's. The fellows don't see any harm in it, and they take it as a matter of course. You're one of that set, and you seem to glory in the whole rotten game."

"Proceed with the lecture," said Pitt calmly. Mason jumped up.
 "I knew you'd say that!" he shouted angrily. "I won't say another word. You goad me to talk, and then accuse me of lecturing you when I do what you ask. I've finished with it."

"I'm sorry," said Pitt quickly. "That was rather rotten of me, and I didn't mean it. I should like to hear your views, Mason, and I won't accuse you of lecturing again."

"Well, I'm not going to say much," exclaimed Jack. "You want to know why I don't approve of smoking, don't you? Well, for one thing, smoking is absolutely against the school rules, and every time you have a cigarette you're taking the risk of getting into trouble."

"That's nothing," said Pitt. "I don't mind a little risk."

"But that's not the point," retorted Mason. "Deliberately breaking a strict rule isn't creditable. And smoking, in any case, is a nag's game."

"Millions of men smoke—"
 "We're not talking about men!" broke in Jack quickly. "When a fellow becomes of age he can do what he likes. I shall probably smoke myself later on. But I'm a junior schoolboy now, and so are you. It's not only wrong, but it's absolutely silly, to puff at a cigarette and pretend to be manly. Why, you idiot, a boy with a cigarette in his lips only looks a young fool!"

"You told me to speak plainly, and I'm doing it," went on Mason. "And the most important aspect of the whole thing is the harm it does a fellow. Men can smoke as much as they like. If it does them any harm, that's their look-out, although a healthy man can stand it easily. In fact, it might be helpful to him. But it's not helpful to a boy. If you took more interest in outdoor

sports, you'd know what I mean. A fellow wants to be absolutely fit to play football and cricket, and he can't be very fit if he smokes cigarettes. And then, last of all, there's his self-respect. You know jolly well that you don't want to smoke, and you're only doing it out of bravado."

"Am I?"

"Of course you are," said Mason earnestly. "You tell yourself five or six times a day that you're a silly ass, and you make a firm resolve to give it all up. And then, instead of being strong, you weakly give in and get worse and worse. But I'm sick of it. I don't want to tell you what you should do. You've got plenty of sense, and you ought to use it. For goodness' sake dry up!"

Pitt sat in his chair, smiling. But it was a rather forced smile, and he knew very well that Mason's shots had gone home. He had argued with himself. He had decided to chuck it up, and he had given in weakly time after time. Mason was right—absolutely right, and it was for this very reason that Pitt became obstinate. He didn't like to realise that he had been "told off." Having asked for it, however, he couldn't say a word.

"All very interesting," he rapped. "But I don't see your point, Mason. You're dilly on the subject. Have one of these and forget these fat-headed ideas."

Pitt offered his cigarette-case, but Jack, in a sudden burst of anger, struck up his fist and sent the case flying.

"You're been jeering at me!" he shouted hoarse. "If you don't shut up, Pitt, I'll punch your nose!"
 "Oh, rats!" snapped Pitt, recovering his cigarettes. "Look what you're done to this! Look at these dents! I've a jolly good mind to knock you down!"

"You're at liberty to try!" snapped Mason grimly.

They stood facing one another, and Pitt wisely decided not to try conclusions with the athletic row fellow. He shrugged his shoulders and walked to the door.

"You can go and eat cobs!" he sneered. "I knew you were an ass, but I didn't think you were such a wishy-washy milk-sop!"

It was really fortunate for Pitt that he walked out after those words. For Mason, in his present mood, would certainly have gone for him, hammer and tongs.

Exactly as the new boy had predicted, a rupture had occurred, and he was sorry for it. If he and Pitt were obliged to share the same study, it was far better for them to be on speaking terms.

The Serpent was in a savage mood as he strode along the passage. He assured himself that he was angry with Mason, and that Mason was an arrant ass. As a matter of fact, Pitt was furious with himself, and he knew that the arrant ass was not his study-mate.

Of course, Mason was right, Pitt admitted in spite of himself. But to admit that this street urchin, as he chose to term him, was showing him the right path was altogether too humiliating.

Pitt felt like going the whole hog. There was no harm in smoking, and so what harm was there in gambling? The old spirit was being revived. But it was under very different conditions now. Previously he had never realised the absurdity of it—the silliness of it. But he realised it now, and persisted, all the same.

He marched into Study A, and found Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell just clearing up after tea.

"Hallo, what do you want?" demanded Fullwood. "We're just going to have a smoke, Pitt, and we might even indulge in a little gambling. So you'd better clear out."

"I'd like to join you," said Pitt savagely.

Fullwood stared.

"You don't look like it," he remarked. "You look as if you'd like to join in a free fight. Who's been rubbin' you the wrong way?"

"That beast of a new kid, I expect," said Gulliver.

"I'm fed-up with him!" snapped Pitt. "I tried to get him to smoke, but he wouldn't do anything so horribly wicked. I should like to join in your game, just to get me into a good humour."

"You're quite welcome," said Fullwood heartily. "Glad to see you're gettin' sense again. Out with the cards, Gully! Just turn the key in the lock, Pitt. We don't want anybody interferin'."

Chairs were drawn to the table, cards were produced, and the four young rascals settled down with keen enjoyment to a game of nap. In a very few minutes the air was heavy with cigarette smoke.

Fullwood & Co. and their visitor kidded themselves that they were gaining much pleasure from their questionable pastime. Pitt smiled genially, and excused at himself for ever having taken any notice of such an ass as Jack Mason.

In the fender a big screw of brown paper was kept handy. In the event of a master or a perfect coming, this would be quickly lighted and waved to and fro, filling the room with pungent smoke. It was a little precaution which had often saved the young rascals from punishment.

"Ripping game, this!" remarked Pitt, after a while.

"Beastly, I call it!" growled Gulliver.

"Two different points of view, that's all," chuckled Fullwood. "You've lost seven bob, Gully, an' Pitt's about nine bob in hand. We'll skin that out of him before we've finished."

"If I don't skin you," remarked Pitt presently.

Already his scruples were beginning to fade away. After all, why shouldn't he have some wild enjoyment? What was there in it? Nothing—absolutely nothing! And Pitt went on playing with an easy mind, forgetting all the good advice which Mason had indirectly given him.

At the end of an hour Reginald Pitt was chucking with real delight. It was rather unfortunate that he should have won the sum of nineteen shillings from his companions, for he felt convinced that gambling was splendid sport. If he had "gone down," he would have been far more likely to think seriously of Mason's words. But the day would come when he would "go down" with a mighty crash.

"Lucky beast!" remarked Fullwood. "Good thing there's not much of my tin there. I'm only about three bob out. Who's the giddy unfortunato?"

"I am!" groined Gulliver savagely.

"You should learn a lesson by it and give up gambling," grinned Fullwood. "It's a mug's game, you know. You'll say that until you do us down for a quid or two next time."

They decided to finish up just after the hour, for preparation had to be done, and there was no getting out of it. So the cards were put away, and Pitt took his departure.

He promised to drop in again, and went back to his own study, feeling in quite a genial mood. When he arrived he found the little apartment deserted. Mason had finished his own prep, and had gone off to the school library, to spend an hour amongst his beloved books.

Meanwhile, Fullwood & Co. were grinning.

"I thought he'd come back to the fold sooner or later," remarked Ralph Leslie. "All the better, my sons. He'll probably kick that pauper kid out of his study before long. If he doesn't, we'll give him some good advice."

"He won't need it," said Gulliver. "I'll let he's fed-up with Mason already. You mark my words, they'll have a regular bust-up before long."

And Gulliver was not very far wrong.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MYSTERY OF THE GOOD LOCKET.

RELATIONS were decidedly strained in Study E the next day. Pitt had anticipated that Mason would be sulky and morose; that he would refuse to speak.

But Pitt was wrong. The new fellow was just quiet and reserved. He answered readily enough when Pitt addressed him, and there was no renewal of the rupture.

Of course, a good many other fellows saw that Pitt and Mason were rather cold towards one another. I noticed it at once, and so did Tregellis-West. The latter was rather gloomy.

"I'm frightfully afraid that things ain't goin' well with Mason, old fellows," he remarked, after morning lessons. "Pitt's breakin' out again, but I'm not worryin' much."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Well, dear old boy, there's really nothin' to worry about," replied Sir Montie. "The very fact that Pitt an' Mason are at loggerheads proves that Pitt's influence ain't doin' the new fellow any harm. An' it's just possible that great changes will come about before long. I have hopes, you know—I have, really."

"So have I," I remarked. "I've hopes that Mason will show up well on the footer-field. It's only right that he should be given a fair chance. I'm going to try him this afternoon in the practice match."

Tummy Watson shook his head.

"There'll be trouble," he said grimly.

"Shoekin' trouble," added Meakin.

"Why should there be?"

"Bogad! I'm no good at conundrums, Nipper, dear boy," said Tregellis-West protestingly. "There's no reason why there should be trouble; but there will be. I am very disappointed with the way some of the fellows are actin'. They ain't sports—they ain't, really. Mason has as much right to play footer as I have, an' it's a frightful pity the chaps don't see it."

"They'll see it this afternoon," I said firmly. "I'm Remove skipper, and I'm going to play who I like. If they choose to kick up a row, they'll have to find somebody else to captain the team. I'm either going to be skipper with authority, or no skipper at all!"

And the matter was left at that.

I had said nothing to Mason so far, except that I intended giving him a chance. As a matter of fact, I had said nothing to anybody, except my chums. The bitter feeling against Mason—the unreasonable feeling—had led me to be cautious. It would be better to spring the thing as a surprise.

After dinner Mason and Pitt went to their study. Jack knew that a practice match was to take place that afternoon, and he intended being a greatly interested spectator.

Pitt had plans of his own. He had arranged with Fullwood & Co. to cycle over to Bannington. There was a nice, quiet little inn, where it was possible to have a really good game of billiards.

"You're looking cheerful this afternoon," remarked Pitt, as he prepared to leave. "Anything on?"

"Yes, the practice match."

"Oh, rats to that!" said Pitt. "I've got something far more interesting in view. But I sha'n't

tell you anything about it, because you'll only sneer at me."

"That's not fair," said Mason. "I've never sneered at you, Pitt. If you like to be silly, that's no concern of mine."

"I'm going to Basington," said Pitt. "Is there anything I can do for you? I don't mind any odd thing, you know."

"No, thanks!"

"I'd even go to the length of pawnning something if you wanted me to," said Pitt coolly. "You're used to pawnning things, ain't you? That gold locket of yours, for example. I could get ten bob on that if you want—"

"I know you're only joking, Pitt, so I shan't get wild," said the new boy. "I don't see why I should say anything; but it might interest you to know that I've never been in a pawnshop—not that there's anything disgraceful in it. Pawnshops are very handy for some people, and it's ridiculous to refer to them with contempt."

"Oh, all right, you can have your opinion!" said Pitt. "By the way, why didn't you sell that locket? It's no good to you, and you could realise some useful cash—"

"I've had it all my life," interrupted Jack. "It belonged to my mother, I believe, and I wouldn't part with it for any sum. I can't quite make you out, Pitt."

"Can't you? What's wrong?"

"Well, why are you so interested in that locket?"

Pitt laughed.

"Your imagination," he replied. "I don't care tuppence for it. But I've seen it so many times that I'm naturally curious. What are those queer signs on it?"

"They're Arabic, I think," replied Jack. "At least, that's what my uncle used to tell me. I believe they represent half a message of some sort."

"It's rather queer that you should keep that scratched old thing," remarked Pitt. "I suppose you're always hoping that the other half will turn up?"

"I never think about it," replied Mason. "Why should I?"

"Don't those Arabic signs mean anything?"

"They might. But it doesn't matter to me what they mean," said Jack. "I was going to show the locket to Mr. Strong, but I forgot all about it."

Pitt was glad of the opening.

"Talking about Mr. Strong," he said, "what are you going to do about that little package of his?"

"I'm keeping it until he comes next time, of course."

"Look here, Mr. Strong said that that package was for you," said Pitt. "Why don't you act sensibly?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's your package—"

"No, it isn't," replied Jack warmly. "I mean to keep it safely until Mr. Strong comes next time. What would he think of me if I interfered with it?"

Pitt grinned.

"My dear chap, there's no need for you to let him know that you've interfered with it," he said. "You're a surprisingly innocent chap, Mason. All you've got to do is to open it carefully, squint at the contents, and then do it up again."

"You can!" exclaimed Mason, with blazing eyes. "If you are capable of that sort of thing, Pitt, I'm not! It would be an act of absolute dishonesty."

"Not?" sneered Pitt. "Do as you like, of course; it's not my affair. But I know what I should do—"

"Look here, we've talked about this enough, haven't we?" asked Jack quietly. "I'm not quite an idiot, Pitt, and—"

"Really?" smiled Pitt jeeringly.

"No, I'm not!" snapped the other junior. "And I'm blest if I can see why you're so interested in my affairs. It's not an ordinary interest—you're simply inquisitive. I don't like to talk in this way, Pitt, but you force me to. Will you please drop the subject?"

Pitt shrugged his shoulders.

"Just as you please," he replied. "But I'll take jolly good care never to interest myself in any of your business again. I only wanted to be pally, and you turn round and insult me."

"I didn't mean to," said Mason quietly. "I've been trying for days past to get on with you, Pitt. But I can't. You evidently don't mean to be friendly—"

"That's sheer nonsense!" interrupted Pitt. "Haven't I asked you to join me in a smoke, and haven't you refused? But I'm willing to let bygones be bygones. Come out with me this afternoon and we'll have a good time."

"What do you call a good time?" asked Mason suspiciously.

"Well, we can play billiards at a little pub—"

"There's nothing wrong with billiards, but I wouldn't play in a public-house," interrupted Jack curtly. "It's against the rules—"

"There you go again!" sneered Pitt. "Against the rules. You're always saying that—like a giddy parrot. What does it matter a hang if it is against the rules? Do you think I care a jot about all that rot? I'm going to enjoy myself with Fullwood & Co. I shall probably win a quid or two this afternoon, and if you come with me you can get some pocket-money for yourself with ease."

Mason shook his head.

"I don't want pocket-money of that sort. Are you going, Pitt?" he asked quietly. "These talks only lead to quarrels. So we'd better finish up. I wish to goodness you wouldn't be such a cad! You don't seem to realise the difference between right and wrong?"

Reginald Pitt laughed.

"Do you?" he asked tauntingly. "You pretend to be so very good, don't you? I wouldn't mind betting a quid that you've already opened that packet of Strong's—"

"You confounded rotter!" shouted Mason angrily.

"Do you deny it?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then I don't believe you!" said Pitt calmly. "In other words, Mason, you're a first-class liar!"

Crash!

Jack's fist swung round fiercely, and Pitt went flying over the table in a heap. When he came to his feet he found Mason standing over him, his eyes blazing, his fists clenched.

"Call me a liar again!" he exclaimed tensely.

Pitt's glare was a bitter one. He had only called Mason a liar in the heat of the moment, because he wished to see the new fellow squirm. There was no foundation for his accusation. He knew that well enough. Indeed, Pitt was quite sure that Jack had been speaking the truth. But in his present ill-temper he allowed his tongue free play.

"I do call you a liar again!" he shouted, leaping up and punching fiercely at Mason.

The blow caught the new boy upon the chest, and he staggered back. The next moment the pair were fighting fiercely.

They went at it hammer and tongs, but Mason was easily the better of the two. But Pitt's fury was at its height, and all his old venom returned.

He snatched up an inkpot merrily and flung it at his opponent. Very fortunately Mason dodged, but not before great streaks of ink had smothered

his face and collar. The glass pot clattered and splintered into the fireplace.

"Oh, you said!" panted Jack.

Pitt sent the table flying, leaving the centre of the study clear. And then they came to grips once more and fought desperately. The noise they created was considerable, and the dust rose in clouds.

Pitt was certainly receiving the most punishment, and even in the heat of that moment he knew that he deserved it. It had been his fault from the start. He was in the wrong—of course he was in the wrong. And the very thought saddened him.

Handforth & Co., who resided next door, were in the middle of one of their heated arguments at the time, and, needless to say, no sound of the fight came to their ears until Handforth ceased speaking. His voice was capable of drowning a thunderstorm.

But in a hall, so to speak, McClure suddenly started.

"What's that?" he demanded.

"Do you think you're going to diddle me like that?" roared Handforth. "That's always your way when you're getting the worst of an argument! I tell you that the football is all mismanaged. I'm the only chap who knows anything about—"

"Listen!" exclaimed Church suddenly.

"I'm not going to! Oh, my hat!"

Handforth paused, and stared at the wall.

"There's trouble going on next door," he said. "Sounds as though half a dozen free fights were in—"

"Let's go and see what's wrong," suggested McClure.

They all made for the door, and out in the passage they ran into Tregellis-West and me. As a matter of fact, we were just about to pay a visit to Study E, and the noise which was proceeding from that quarter proved that something was wrong.

"Only shiftin' the furniture, I suppose," said Sir Montie.

"Then they're pretty original in their methods of doing it," said Handforth grimly. "Great pip! There goes the coal-scuttle! We'd better look in."

I was already opening the door. One glance told me that Jack Mason and Reginald Pitt were not on amiable terms. They were punching at one another furiously, and the study was half a wreck.

"Stop it, you asses!" I shouted sharply.

The fighters took no notice.

"Lend me a hand," I said grimly. "We can't show this sort of thing to go on. Separate 'em!"

Handforth and Church grasped Pitt, and Sir Montie and I gave our attention to Mason. The two heated jussors were dragged apart with great difficulty.

"Lemme go!" yelled Pitt. "I'm going to smash him!"

"No, you're not!" I said grimly. "What's the matter? If you want to fight, why can't you have it decently? These scraps will get you into trouble."

"We were both silly," said Mason, panting.

"Glad you know it," I remarked. "What's the trouble, anyhow? It's rotten for two study chums to fight like you were fighting—"

Pitt nodded.

"Quite right," he said, becoming calm. "Silly rot, ain't it? And I was getting the worst of it, too. Jolly good thing you chaps came. If not, I should have been beaten to the wide!"

"Extraordinary!" said Handforth. "He actually admits that he was getting whooped!"

"Why not?" asked the Serpent, wiping his face. "Mason's a better man than I am, and I should be an idiot to say anything else. Look at my freckles, and look at his! He's hardly touched."

"I didn't mean to hurt you, Pitt," exclaimed Mason quietly. "I don't know why I whooped you in the face, but you drove me to it. I'm sorry. Suppose we shake hands and forget it!"

"Pitt'll forget it in about a week!" grinned Handforth.

But the Serpent surprised us.

"I don't bear any malice, Mason," he said quietly. "After all, I drove you to it, didn't I? There's my fist!"

They both shook hands, and Pitt strolled out of the study. He was evidently in pain, but didn't seem to care a rap. And the very fact that he had taken Mason's hand made me delighted. It proved that his character was changing. At one time Pitt would have been bitterly antagonistic for days. Moreover, it was rather staggering that Pitt should have admitted that his was the blame.

"I'm awfully sorry that happened," said Mason, looking round.

"Yes, there's about two hours' work clearing up this mess," remarked Handforth. "What started it?"

"Oh, nothing much!" replied Mason.

"Don't be inquisitive, Handy," I put in. "It's none of our business. I'm glad it's all over, Jack."

Mason looked at me sharply.

"Thanks!" he said quietly.

"What the dickens for?"

"For calling me Jack," said the new boy. "It's the first time I've been called that since I've been at St. Frank's—and you're not even a champion of mine."

I laughed.

"There's no reason why I shouldn't be a champion of yours," I replied. "And Jack's your name, isn't it? I came here to fetch you, and I want to have a little chat. Come along to Study C."

"What's the idea?" asked Handforth.

"You'll find out if you live long enough," I replied sweetly.

Handforth snorted and walked away. And Sir Montie and I carried Jack Mason off to the privacy of Study C.

CHAPTER XII.

TROUBLE IN THE ELEVEN.

TOMMY WATSON was busily pumping up a football when we entered, and I noted that Mason's eyes gleamed with pleasure as he saw it. Watson paused in his efforts, and stared.

"Who's been ornamenting your face, Mason?" he asked politely.

"Oh, that's nothing!" I put in. "Mason only had a bit of a tiff with Pitt. It's all over now."

"Rather a forcible tiff, I should think."

"Dear fellow, you would have reason to say that if you could see Pitt's face," remarked Montie languidly. "It's in a shocking condition. I shall take good care to keep on good terms with Mason, begad! He'd simply cut me up, you know!"

Mason grinned awkwardly.

"I don't like you fellows to think that I'm a quarrelsome chap," he said. "Pitt said that it was his fault, but I don't think it was. I punched him first—"

"My dear man, we don't want to hear anything about it," I interrupted. "For one thing, we haven't got time. There's a practice match on this afternoon, and all the reserves will be playing. The Ancient House eleven will be divided up, and each

side will be made up to strength by reserves. I'm going to captain one side, and De Valerie will captain the other."

"That's splendid," said Mason. "I'll be a keen spectator."

"Wouldn't you like to play?" I asked.

"Play?" repeated Mason, catching in his breath. "Certainly!"

"You—you don't mean that you're going to give me a chance in this match?" he asked eagerly.

"Just to see what you're worth," I nodded.

"The other day you shaped pretty decently at the nets, but a fellow isn't really tested until he has a chance in a match. You'll play outside-left."

Mason's eyes were alight with excitement.

"Thanks awfully!" he exclaimed. "I—I say, it's jolly good of you, Nipper. In the forward line, too!"

"It's only a practice match, remember," I reminded him. "It doesn't matter which side wins, and I'm only having it to give some of the reserves a chance. If you turn out O.K., Jock, you might be included in a House team before long. It all depends upon how you shape, and I think your place in the field is in the forward line. Best upstairs and change."

Mason looked uncomfortable.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Well, I haven't got any footer togs," he admitted. "I had some at home, of course, but—"

"Oh, that's all right!" I interrupted. "We can rub up some for you. Come along upstairs and we'll see about it."

Twenty minutes later we were all in footer rig, and Mason looked well in that scanty attire. He was well built, and his athletic figure showed itself off to advantage.

He was greatly excited, although he strove to conceal it. And the pleasure with which he looked forward to the match was very manifest. But the very thing which I feared looked like taking place. I had said nothing to the other fellows about Mason's inclusion in the team. But now, of course, they would have to know.

Quite a crowd was collected round the pavilion, and other fellows were punting a football about in the field. All these near the pavilion stared when we came up.

"Hallo!" said Hubbard. "What's Mason doing here?"

"Going to watch the match, I suppose," said Owen major. "Rather a silly thing to get into that rig, though. He'll catch cold standing about."

"Don't be silly!" I exclaimed. "Mason's playing."

"What?" exclaimed Armstrong. "Here, I say, we're not going to play with that Bermondsey outsider!"

"Rather not!"

"Tain't likely!"

Mason flushed deeply.

"I—I didn't know that the eleven would object to me—" he began.

"Look here, Jack, you stand still and say nothing," I said grimly. "Don't take any notice of these cuds. I'm skipper of the Ancient House Junior Eleven, and I'm going to have my own way."

"Are you calling me a cud?" shouted Armstrong.

"Yes, I am!" I retorted. "Why can't you be decent? Has Mason done anything to you that you should be so confoundably bitter?"

"That's not the point."

"Of course not," put in Hubbard. "Mason ain't one of us."

"How do you make that out?" I demanded.

"Isn't Mason just as much a member of the Remove as you, Hubbard? Isn't he entitled to all the advantages that you get? If you talk that rot to me I shall get wild."

Hubbard frowned.

"Mason's an outsider," he muttered. "I don't see why we should be called upon to play in the same field with him. If he plays, I don't!"

My eyes gleamed.

"You'd better go and change your clothes, Hubbard," I said grimly.

"What do you mean?"

"That's an unnecessary question," I answered smoothly. "Mason's going to play, and, therefore, you're not."

Hubbard looked dismayed.

"I didn't mean it exactly——" he began hastily.

"You shouldn't say what you don't mean!" I snapped. "You're not playing in this match, Hubbard. You can get off the field as soon as you like. Understand? I'm skipper, and I'm not going to be dictated to. You elected to take up this attitude, and you can't grumble at the consequences."

"Hear, hear!" said De Valerie.

"Begod! You asked for it, Hubby—you did, really!" said Montie.

"Look here!" roared Hubbard violently. "Do you think I'm going to be pushed off the field by that cud?"

"You're being pushed off the field by me," I replied.

"I won't go!" roared Hubbard. "You can go and eat coke! I'm going to play in this game, and the other fellows will back me up, too. Mason ain't one of us!"

"Yes, I think you're riding the high horse," said Doyle warmly. "We ain't going to stand this sort of thing, Nipper. If Hubbard goes, I shall back him up—and a lot of other chaps will, too. It's not the thing to play a chap like Mason."

The new boy touched me on the arm.

"I won't play, Nipper," he said quietly.

"Won't you?" I said.

"No; I don't want to cause any discontent——"

"That's just where you're wrong," I said grimly.

"It's these snobs who are causing discontent. You can play as well as they can, and perhaps a lot better. I mean to include you in this match, and you needn't try backing out. I'll settle this point."

By this time there was quite an angry crowd round us. The really decent fellows were taking no part in the squabble. Handforth & Co. and Burton and Farman—in fact, quite a number—were standing in a group near by, grinning onusidly. They were entirely in sympathy with Mason, and were ready to back me up if necessary.

"Well, are we going to start?" I asked.

"I'm ready," said De Valerie. "Now then, you chaps, we've got to beat these other fellows. By the way, Nipper, who's Mason going to play for?"

"My side," I replied.

"He's not going to play at all!" bellowed Hubbard. "I call upon you chaps to back me up. We ought to make a stand over this. Mason has no right to be included with decent fellows——"

"Did you say decent fellows?" I interrupted.

"Yes, I did."

"Then you've made a bloomer," I retorted. "I shouldn't think of calling you a decent fellow after what's happened now. And you come under the same head, Armstrong—in fact, every fellow who's making this snobbish fuss."

"There's nothing snobbish about it at all!" snapped Armstrong. "We're betting against it because Mason isn't the sort of fellow to play. What does he know about decent football? I expect he's only played in a London street——"

"You don't know anything about it," I cut in. "And I'm just about fed-up with this waste of time. If it'll please you, I don't mind letting Watson captain my side."

"Good!" said Hubbard heartily. "I don't object," said Watson. "But you needn't look so jolly pleased about it, Hubbard. You're not going to play, anyhow. Mason, we'll get into the field—"

"This is sheer rot!" shouted Armstrong. "We're not going to have Watson captain of the side. He's just as bad as Nipper. The only thing to do is to make a stand and refuse to play. How many of us object to Mason?"

"Eight—no, nine!" said Hubbard viciously. "Well, we'll all strike," said Armstrong, grinning. "They can't play the giddy match without us, so Nipper will have to give in. That's the best way to settle it."

The other dissenters nodded. "You refuse to play?" I demanded. "Yes," they roared.

"All right, I'll give you just one minute!" I said angrily. "If you don't agree to play with Mason within a minute, I won't let a single one of you play at all!"

"Oh!" sneered Hubbard. "And what about the match?"

"I'll go and get nine Third-Formers!" I retorted grinsly. "Some of those kids can play a decent game, and they'd jump at the chance. It's only a practice-match, and my object is to test Mason thoroughly. He'll really have a better chance if some Third-Formers are included on his side, because he'll get more work."

"Rippin', old boy!" bellowed Sir Montie. "That's made them look sick!"

"I don't believe in that rot—" began Armstrong.

"Only half a minute left!" I interrupted. "I give you my plain word that you'll all be barred if you don't agree at once. As soon as the minute's up you won't have a chance. I'm going to have my way!"

The discontented juniors looked at one another in dismay.

"Time's up!" I said, stowing my watch away. "You've lost your chance now. Watson, you might run and fetch nine Third-Formers—"

"Here, I say!" gasped Armstrong. "We'll play!"

"And we won't object to Mason!" exclaimed Doyle quickly.

I hesitated.

"If I give in I shall be doing you a favour," I said. "Every chap who objects to Mason must shake hands with him and beg his pardon. If you don't, you don't play!"

There was much gnashing of teeth, but I had my way. All the discontented fellows were obliged to eat humble pie. They shook hands with Mason and apologised—rather than be chucked out of the match. But Hubbard refused, and I ordered him off.

This was rather a pity, because Hubbard was quite a decent chap, really. But I meant to put a stop to this nonsense once and for all. It was the only thing to do. Mason had been treated most unfairly, and it was only just that he should share the privileges of the whole Remove. To treat him as an outsider was outrageous.

He was very grateful for my championship. "Thanks, Nipper!" he said softly. "You're a brick."

"Rob!" I replied. "There's nothing to thank me for, my son. A football skipper is no skipper at all if he can't play whom he likes. I believe in consulting the clerica over general matters, but

this was quite different. It was snobbery, pure and simple."

"I hope I shall shape decently," said Mason. "I'll try to."

He did try—hard. The eleven lined up, and the match started. Clapsen of the College House was referee, and he was quite impartial. Just at first Mason showed signs of nervousness, and I noticed several smug grins when he missed a good kick.

But it wasn't long before he gained confidence, and then the fellows who objected began to wish they hadn't. For, to put it bluntly, Mason proved to be hot stuff.

I passed to him whenever I could, for my object was to give him as much work as possible. The first two or three times he shaped fairly, making no brilliant display. I wasn't expecting it, and I was quite surprised that he was displaying any good form at all.

And then he woke up. Trapping the ball neatly from Farman, he streaked down the field, dribbling the ball in the most finished manner. Two half-backs rushed at him. He stopped dead, calmly and coolly gave the ball a slight push, and the disgusted halves went past the mark. Meanwhile, Mason was speeding up again. It was really a very pretty piece of work.

Handforth roared with delight when the new fellow tricked the only back who barred his progress.

Whiz! The ball left Mason's foot, shot through the air as true as a die, and went into the net with such terrific speed that Courcy minor, in goal, was completely beaten.

"Goal!"

"Oh, well kicked!"

"Good man!"

Mason found himself surrounded by an enthusiastic mob. The goal itself didn't matter a ha'penny—for it was of no consequence which side won—but Mason had proved his worth with a vengeance.

"Great!" I exclaimed, thumping his back. "Why, you're better than any of my reserves, and as good as any outside-left in the team!"

Mason flushed.

"It's jolly good of you to say so—" he began.

"Why didn't you tell us that you were so hot?" asked the Duke of Somerset. "You're topping, old chap—simply topping!"

Owen major and Doyle and one or two others said nothing, but they looked rather uncomfortable. Armstrong, however, was heard to remark that it was only a flash in the pan.

But it wasn't.

By half-time Mason had conclusively proved that he was a player of excellent quality. His speed was remarkable, and there was no doubt that in placing him in the forward line I had done the right thing.

And it was rather a come-down for St. Frank's to find that this despised junior introduced some new tricks. He made us open our eyes by the manner in which he trapped the ball again and again. His dodging tactics were different from any I'd ever seen.

Instead of going at it deliberately he deceived his opponents time after time. They were simply left standing while he continued on his way.

By the time the game was nearly finished I had positively resolved to include Mason in the next House match. Indeed, there was no reason why he shouldn't be given a place in the Junior Eleven proper. Christine, the College House

shipper, had been looking on, and he was enthusiastic.

"Play him?" he exclaimed, when one of his clumps made a suggestion. "I should think we will play him! He's absolutely a mountain of strength. I've never seen— Look at that! Go it, Mason!"

Mason was going it. He bent everybody on the field, and slammed the leather into the net for the third time during the game. The enthusiasm was general.

There was no doubt that Mason had taken us all by storm. He wasn't merely good, but splendid. There was no player in the junior team who could beat him. And this sustained form proved that it was not merely an isolated effort.

It was Mason's game, pure and simple. My side scored five goals, and three of those were Mason's. I was responsible for one other, and Yregollie-West had scored the fifth—from a beautiful pass from the new fellow.

The other side was hopelessly whacked, for De Valerie's men only scored a single goal. And when the whistle blew, Jack Mason, the "outsider," was the centre of attention. He bore his honours modestly, and the most surprising thing was that he seemed almost as fresh as when he had started.

"You swindler!" I exclaimed grimly. "What do you mean by showing us up like this? Why didn't you tell us you were a giddy professional?"

Mason laughed.

"It would have sounded like boasting if I'd said anything," he replied. "It was better this way, wasn't it?"

"Yes, rather," I said heartily. "You'll play in the House match on Saturday, Jack, my son, and it's a ten-to-one chance that you'll be included in the School team when we go over to Redwood next week."

"It's very good of you—"

Mason was interrupted by the arrival of Hubbard.

"What the dickens do you want?" I demanded sharply.

"Oh, nothing much!" said Hubbard, looking red. "The fact is, Mason, I'm going to beg your pardon. I acted rottenly before the match, and it served me jolly well right to be kicked out. Will you shake?"

"Of course I will!" said Jack heartily.

"Good man!" I exclaimed, slapping Hubbard's back.

It was jolly decent of him to come forward in that way, for he had to swallow his dignity completely. But Mason's performance had wrought a very great change. All the other fellows who had objected to him had the decency to come forward and apologise for a second time. They had done so forcibly at first, but now they were sincere.

That afternoon was a triumph for Jack Mason, and the bitter feeling which had been growing in a certain section of the Remove had vanished completely.

And while that match had been in progress certain events were occurring in London which were to make a great difference to Mason's life at St. Frank's.

So I think we'd better shift to London for a bit.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE RETURN OF THE WANDERER.

MR. SIMON GRELL walked briskly along Thornley Street, Bermondsey. The district was not exactly a salubrious one, but Thornley Street was distinctly respectable and quiet.

Mr. Grell was a short, thick-set man, with a ruddy, bronzed complexion. His age was possibly

forty-five, and he was clean-shaven. Attired in a blue reefer suit, with a peaked cap, it was obvious to anybody that he was of the seafaring profession.

He came to a halt at the gate of No. 20, and glanced up at the windows of the house with a certain amount of interest. A smile flitted across his rugged face as he caught sight of a vase peeping between the curtains of the front parlour.

Mr. Grell recognised that vase, and a certain anxiety was lifted from his mind. It was nearly five years since he had walked down Thornley Street, and it was gratifying to discover that No. 20 had not changed its tenant.

He walked up the short strip of path and hammered at the door. After a short wait it was opened by a buxom lady with a somewhat hard cast of countenance. She gazed at the visitor without recognition for a few moments, and then her eyes opened very wide.

"Simon!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "Home at last, old girl!" said Mr. Grell, stepping inside. "There, there! Don't carry on like that. You're lookin' younger than ever, blessed if you ain't!"

"I thought you was dead, Simon!" exclaimed Mrs. Grell, in a startled voice, as she led her husband into the kitchen at the rear. "I thought you was dead!"

"You ain't got married agin?" asked Mr. Grell, staring.

"Don't talk such nonsense!" exclaimed his wife. "I should think one husband is enough for me. I might get somebody even worse than you next time. What have you come back for?"

Mr. Grell sat down and grinned.

"Well, I must say that you're givin' me a hearty welcome," he said sarcastically. "Ain't you pleased to see me?"

"Not particularly," replied Mrs. Grell, with great frankness. "I s'pose you've come 'ere after money? I can't think of no other reason why you should come!"

"You allus was quick with it," said the returned wanderer. "Yes, old girl, I've come back arter money."

"You won't get any here—"

"We'll see about that later on," said Mr. Grell. It will be easily understood that Mr. and Mrs. Grell had not spent an extremely happy married life together. The cold truth was rather distressing. They had had many quarrels in the past, and Mr. Grell had been absent for five years. His wife had been fondly hoping that he would never turn up again, but here he was. And his object was the same as of old.

"We won't see about it later on," said Mrs. Grell quickly. "Do you think I'm going to slave away at dressmaking for you? Ain't you big enough to earn your own money?"

"I've had bad luck—"

"Then you'd better go and find some good!" snapped Mrs. Grell, whose temper was of a very short nature. "I'm having a hard struggle now that the boy has gone—"

"The boy?" repeated Mr. Grell.

"Jack," explained his wife.

"Oh, that little nipper! He was only ten when I left," said the man, filling his pipe. "Where's he gone to? Dead?"

He spoke of the matter with perfect ease, as though he didn't care whether Jack were dead or not. As a matter of fact, he didn't.

"No, Jack ain't dead," said Mrs. Grell. "He's nigh on fifteen now, and he's at a big school in Sussex—St. Frank's they call it, I believe. It's a proper swell place."

Mr. Grell stared.

"Ho! So that's the game, is it?" he asked.

"You're slavin' away, an' spendin' all your money on payin' the fees of that darned kid at a swell school. Look here, missus, I won't allow—"

"Don't be such a fool, Simon!" snapped his wife. "How do you think I could pay such fees? It's pounds an' pounds—every month! I could live like a lady, with my carriage and pair, with the money that's bein' paid for that dratted boy!"

Mr. Grell laid his pipe aside.

"If you ain't payin' the fees, who is?" he demanded suspiciously. "What's the game, old woman? Jack ain't payin' all that money himself, an' I didn't know there was anybody kind enough to chuck money away on a little urchin—"

Mrs. Grell made an impatient gesture.

"It's no good talkin' to me," she interrupted. "I'm in a muddle ever it. We had a solicitor's letter, an' it said that some money had been left to pay for the boy's education at St. Frank's. I thought you had died out in Canada, an' that you'd left the money."

"Me!" repeated Mr. Grell incredulously. "Me leave money to be chucked away at a rotten duds' school?"

"I always thought it was impossible," said Mrs. Grell nastily.

"Let me see that letter," said her husband.

"I don't know where it is now; I've lost it," said the woman. "Jack went up and saw the solicitors, an' he made all the arrangements. I was glad to get rid of him, anyhow!"

"That's the worst of wimsons," said Mr. Grell contemptuously, reaching out for his pipe and lighting it. "I've allus said they was no good. You must have been mad to let the boy go. Why couldn't you have took charge of the money?"

Mrs. Grell smiled grimly.

"Don't you think I tried?" she asked. "It wasn't no good, Simon. The money was in the hands of the lawyer, an' he pays the fees an' does everything. Jack simply had to go down."

"An' supposin' he hadn't gone?" asked the man. "Couldn't he have touched the money? Not you, I don't mean, but him. Couldn't he have took the money for himself?"

"I don't know about that," said Mrs. Grell. "I was reg'lar muddled. But Jack was just mad to go to St. Frank's, an' he wouldn't have touched the money, even if he could. I thought you'd left it."

"That's rich!" growled Mr. Grell. "I s'pose you've been calling me all sorts o' nice names, an' hopin' that my soul will rest in peace, hey?"

"Yes, I have," said Mrs. Grell. "But I'll take care not to do that again. I was a silly thing to believe that you could have been so generous."

"I shall have to think about this affair," said the man. "We'll see wot Master Mason's game is. He must ha' bin up to somethin' without you knowin' it, old girl. And yet he wasn't wot I'd call an artful kid. It's mysterious, that's wot it is."

He got up from his chair and paced up and down for a few minutes.

"Look here, missus!" he said. "You don't want me here, do you?"

"No, I don't," replied Mrs. Grell. "What are the neighbours goin' to say? They've been thinkin' you dead for years, an' there'll be ever such a fuss— Did anybody see you come in?"

"Not that I know of," replied Mr. Grell. "You won't be bothered with me for long, Mariah. I don't love my home enough to want to stop here. Just give me five quid and I'll clear out."

"I haven't got five shillings," said Mrs. Grell grimly.

Her husband sat down.

"All right?" he said comfortably. "I'll stay here until you're able to tell the truth. An' you ain't

said nothin' about my face. I had a beard when I went away—"

"Do you think I didn't notice the difference?" snapped Mrs. Grell, going to the door. "You ain't improved your looks, Simon."

She went out, and Mr. Grell grinned placidly and winked at the fender. Three minutes later Mrs. Grell came back.

"It's all I've got," she said. "I've been scrapin' an' scrapin', an' now you come an' take it all. What sort of a husband do you call yourself?"

She handed over four pounds, and Mr. Grell took it.

"Thanks, old girl!" he said. "What sort of a husband do I call myself? Well, I'm a modest man, an' I don't believe in a feller payin' himself compliments. Where's that school, did you say?"

"In Sussex."

"What town's it in?"

"It's just beyond Bannington," replied Mrs. Grell. "But what do you want to know for? I s'pose you're goin' down there?"

"If you don't ask no questions you won't be told no lies," said Mr. Grell calmly. "Just you forget all about me, Mariah, an' go on with your dress-makin'. That kid's got money—lots o' money—an' I don't see why I shouldn't touch some of it."

Mrs. Grell sniffed.

"You'll have your pains for nothin'," she declared. "An' if you come back here again I sha'n't give you nothin' else. That's a fair warnin', Simon."

Mr. Grell grinned, and passed out of the house without even bidding his wife good-bye. Considering their strained relations, this was not very surprising.

The time was now late afternoon, and Mr. Grell left Bermondsey, and went to his lodgings in the neighbourhood of Commercial Road. Here he sat down and thought things out thoroughly.

As a direct consequence a stranger alighted from the evening train at Belton Station on the following day. It was fine and clear, with a touch of frost in the air. London had been somewhat foggy on this early November day, but Sussex was very different.

The stranger was Mr. Simon Grell. His attire was now different, consisting of a good tweed suit, an overcoat, and a soft felt hat. He could not, however, eradicate the bronzed colour of his face. It was obvious that he was a much-travelled man, and any observant person could tell that he had been accustomed to the sea.

Mr. Grell, of course, was Jack Mason's uncle, the uncle that had "died" out in Canada, Jack and his aunt had never had any direct communication, but a friend of Mr. Grell's had paid a visit one day, and he had given the information—probably in all sincerity—that Grell was dead.

There had been no love lost between Jack Mason and his aunt. It was for this reason that the benevolent Mr. Strong had been anxious to get the lad away. It was Mr. Strong who was the unknown benefactor, but he had concealed his activities very completely. Jack had no notion that his fees were being paid by the kindly old gentleman whose life he had saved.

It was only natural, perhaps, that Mr. Grell should be curious upon learning that his nephew was at St. Frank's. That famous school was only for the sons of rich people, and since Jack was there, it stood to reason that he had money.

Mr. Grell meant to find out all about it. If it could possibly be worked, he meant to take the boy away and appropriate the legacy for himself. There was no telling. And the first step was to discover the actual facts.

Jack's uncle considered that he had a perfect right to any money which had been left to the lad.

"I brought the kid up, looked arter him, an' treated him like a young prince," Mr. Grell untrustingly said himself. "He never had anything but kindness from me an' his aunt, an' he ought to be only too pleased to give us the benefit of this here legacy. It's his duty. An' if he don't turn out reasonable, I'll half skin him!"

It will thus be seen that Mr. Grell's love for his nephew was not of a very intense nature. He didn't care a snap of his fingers for the boy—he had proved that all through Jack's life—but he certainly did care for the money which was being used for Mason's education.

"What the thrasher does he want to be educated for?" demanded Mr. Grell, addressing the hedges as he walked into the village from the station. "It ain't reasonable. Jack wasn't brought up to be educated in a swell school like this. The lazy young kowld oughter be in an office, earnin' his livin'."

But there was a difficulty in the way. Mr. Grell could not walk up to St. Frank's boldly. He had sufficient sense to realize that his presence at the school would cause unwelcome comment. He might even be severely "ragged" by the boys. Mr. Grell had heard of such things.

And he met with a piece of luck.

After pausing at the White Harp, in order to obtain liquid refreshment, he entered upon the lane which led to St. Frank's. It was dusk, and Mr. Grell was feeling warmed and confident. He had no set idea as yet regarding what he should do. But he thought it highly probable that he would be able to spot Jack by looking in at the gates.

At all events, that would do for a start. And then he became aware of the fact that a boy was walking down the road towards him. He was a junior boy, of about Jack's size. Therefore, Mr. Grell decided to speak to him.

And this was the piece of luck. For the boy happened to be Reginald Pitt. There was nothing remarkable in this meeting, for Pitt was merely going into the village in order to make a purchase.

He eyed the stranger interestedly as they drew near to one another, and he was somewhat surprised when Mr. Grell addressed him.

"Just half a minute, matey," said the thick-set man genially.

Pitt stopped, and eyed Mr. Grell with even greater interest. For him to be called "matey" by such a respectably dressed man was rather puzzling.

"Well, what's wrong?" asked the Serpent.

"I don't know as anythin' is wrong," said Mr. Grell, removing his pipe from between his teeth. "I take it that you're one o' the boys from the big school—St. Frank's?"

"What a marvellous deduction!" said Pitt calmly.

"I don't want none o' your sauce, my boy!" frowned Mr. Grell. "Are you open to acceptin' a shillin'?"

"I couldn't take it," said Pitt gravely. "That's more than I got during the whole term. Why, if I had a shilling, I should only squander it and make a beast of myself."

Mr. Grell grinned.

"Quite a witty nipper, ain't you?" he remarked. "I was only jokin', young shaver. I just want you to do me a little favour. Can you tell me if there's a kid named Mason at your school?"

Pitt became intent at once.

"Jack Mason?" he asked.

"That's the boy."

"He's in the Remove," said Pitt.

"Oh, is he?" asked Mr. Grell. "An' wot may

the Remove happen to be? Is he goin' to be shifted?"

"The Remove is a Form—a class," grinned Pitt. "It's really the Fourth Form, but we always call it the Remove. And Mason's not going to be shifted that I know of. As it happens, you couldn't have spoken to a better chap than me if you're wanting to see Mason."

"Oh! How's that?"

"Well, I'm Mason's study-mate," exclaimed Pitt. "We both share the same room in the Ancient House."

Mr. Grell was very pleased.

"Then you're his chum?" he inquired.

"Well, I'm not going to say that," replied Pitt. "We don't exactly hit it off together, but there's no bad feeling, except for occasional rows. I suppose you want to see Mason about something?"

"That's the ticket," said Mr. Grell. "Now, look here, my boy, can you keep a little secret? Since you're Jack's chum, I don't mind tellin' you some-thing."

"I'll promise not to split," said Pitt solemnly.

"He's my nevy—see?" asked the stranger. "My name's Grell, an' I'm Jack Mason's uncle. I thought I'd come down just to have a look at him."

Pitt nodded.

"Good idea!" he said. "I'll show you the way up—"

"No, I ain't wantin' to go to the school," interrupted Mr. Grell. "If you could fetch my nevy down to me, you'd be doin' me a nice little favour. I want to have a chat with him in privy. Besides, them young hounds at the school—them young gents, I mean—might not care for my appearance."

"Quite likely," said Pitt calmly. "In fact, I think you'd cause a sensation. Mr. Strong was had enough, but— Well, I don't want to offend you, Mr. Grell, but we don't have many visitors like you at St. Frank's."

Simon Grell grinned.

"There's nethin' I like better than a outspoken boy," he said. "You're just the kind o' young shaver I like to meet. I know that you don't have visitors like me, an' that's why I don't want to go. But who's that Mr. Strong you were talkin' about?"

"Oh, a friend of Mason's!"

"Wot sort of a friend?"

"A seedy-looking sort of old chap," replied Pitt. "Well, look here, if you'll stay here I'll pop back to the school and bring Mason down to you. He'll be delighted to see you, I know."

Mr. Grell nodded.

"Breck it to him gently," he said. "Jack ain't seen me for years, an' you don't want to give him no shock. Tell him that his levin' uncle has come down to see him."

"Trust me," said Pitt, nodding.

He turned and walked rapidly back towards St. Frank's. Pitt, in fact, was highly pleased with himself. This development was rather rich. Fancy that beery-looking individual being Mason's uncle! Pitt's thoughts were not far wrong, for Mr. Grell's ruddiness was not entirely due to salt spray and tropic suns.

Pitt had not forgotten that fight in Study E. True, he had shaken hands with Mason at the finish. But the thought of that scrap rankled—more particularly since Pitt had had a chat with Fulwood & Co. The Nuts considered that Pitt ought to eat Mason dead; but the Serpent was not inclined to adopt this plan.

It would be sufficiently gratifying if he could cause Mason some little embarrassment; and it would be decidedly rich for the school to see this bright specimen of an uncle.

The vindictive strain in Pitt's character was not

so pronounced as it had been at one time of day, but it was still there. He had no intention whatever of keeping the secret which Mr. Grell had given him.

On the contrary, he meant to make the thing entirely public. He would fetch Mason, according to his promise, but he would fetch quite a crowd of other juniors, too!

Mason had been treated almost royally since his triumph on the football-field the previous day, and this "show up" would come as a very effective damper, and Reginald Pitt would obtain a neat revenge.

And the Serpent hurried on towards the school.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

NELSON LEE left the post-office in Bolton, glanced at his watch, and set off towards the school at his usual brisk pace.

He was very pleased with the manner in which Mason had "made good." He had chatted with me on the subject only that morning, and he certainly agreed that the new fellow ought to be included in the junior eleven.

Passing up the lane, Lee noted the figure of Mr. Simon Grell leaning carelessly against the old stile, placidly smoking his pipe. The man was a stranger, and strangers were not common in this quiet neighbourhood.

Mr. Grell, too, eyed Lee interestedly as the latter came along. The schoolmaster-detective was wearing his gown, and a mortar-board adorned his head. Lee had become quite accustomed to this attire of late. He was instantly labelled a schoolmaster, and Mr. Grell nodded genially to him as he came up.

"Evening, sir!" he said pleasantly.

"Good-evening!" returned Nelson Lee, looking at the other rather closely. "I don't think I have the pleasure of your acquaintance!"

"Oh, my name's Grell!" that individual replied. "I'm just waitin' here to have a chat with one of your boys."

Nelson Lee frowned. He did not like the look of this stranger, and to learn that he was waiting to interview a St. Frank's fellow was not very gratifying. Lee thought that it was necessary to inquire further.

"Indeed!" he exclaimed. "And what is your business, Mr. Grell?"

"Oh, a friendly chat——"

"No doubt. But may I inquire why you wish to have a friendly chat with one of my boys?" asked the Housemaster. "Whom do you wish to see?"

"That ain't no concern o' yours," said Grell, realising that he had made himself rather too agreeable.

"You will pardon me, but it is my concern," said the detective sharply. "You apparently do not understand that the St. Frank's boys are not at liberty to make just what friends they choose. I must ask you to state your business, and to tell me the name of the boy you are acquainted with."

Mr. Grell considered. After all, why shouldn't he tell this bumptious schoolmaster that he was Mason's uncle? There was nothing wrong in it, and he had a perfect right to visit the lad. It was only the boys Grell was nervous of. This master would probably take him straight to the school, ensuring him a safe passage, so to speak.

"Well, if you're so inquisitive, there's no reason why I shouldn't tell you everything," said Grell. "The boy I want to see is Master Jack Mason, an' I'm his uncle." No harm in a man comin' to see his nevy, I suppose?"

Lee looked at the man intently.

"Are you sure you are Mason's uncle?" he asked.

Grell laughed.

"I can prove it in half a minute if you want me to," he said. "My address is Number Thirty, Turnpike Street, Bermondsey. I can give you all the information you like about Jack, if you're so inclined."

"You need give no further details, Mr. Grell," said Lee.

The detective was somewhat astonished. Mr. Strong had told him that Grell was dead. Obviously there had been a mistake. Moreover, Nelson Lee was quite certain that he had met this man before—but with a beard.

For the moment, however, he could not "place" Mr. Grell. The latter was regarding him with an amused eye as he pulled at his pipe.

"Mebbe I'll come up the road to the school presently," he said easily. "Bein' a relative of one o' your boys, I reckon I'll be given a welcome—eh?"

"You will be treated with the consideration which is accorded to all visitors, Mr. Grell," replied Lee. "When you do come up, will you be good enough to ask for me? I will see that you are given full attention. I am Mason's Housemaster, and my name is Lee."

Grell removed his pipe.

"Lee?" he repeated. "What, Lee-i-g-h?" he added, spelling the name.

"No, L-e-e," said the detective. "My name is Nelson Lee——"

"Hey?"

Mr. Grell started visibly, and nearly dropped his pipe.

"There's a 'un named Nelson Lee," he said suspiciously, regarding his companion with greatly increased interest. "Why, blame me, I believe that you——"

"You are quite right," nodded Lee. "I am the person you refer to."

Mr. Grell's placid expression changed with amazing speed. A look of black hatred, intermingled with fear, came into his eyes. He stared glaringly, and then took a quick step forward.

It was a menacing step, and Grell's whole attitude was threatening. He seemed about to hurl himself bodily at Nelson Lee, and his eyes were blazing with fire. The detective stood as steady as a rock.

Then, abruptly, Mr. Grell remembered himself.

He cursed under his breath, laughed foolishly, and turned away. And as he walked down the lane he thrust his pipe into his pocket, kicked a stone violently, and spat into the hedge with vicious force.

Nelson Lee whistled softly to himself.

"Dear me!" he murmured. "This is quite remarkable."

He continued his walk to St. Frank's in a very thoughtful mood. Mr. Grell had looked back, and he saw that Nelson Lee had departed from the spot. And, remembering that Jack Mason would soon be down, he turned back.

"He don't know me," he told himself. "How should he know me? I ain't the same as I was at one time o' day. And what's the idea of him bein' here, a schoolmaster? There's somethin' queer about it."

And Mr. Grell, recovering from his alarm, re-seated himself on the stile. He was quite sure that he was safe, but he was puzzled; and he meant to ask Jack Mason a few questions of considerable importance.

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee was entering the gateway of the school. In the Triangle he nearly ran into me as I was crossing from the gymnasium.

"I want you, Nipper," said the governor.

Now, sir?"

"Yes."

"But I'm going over to Christine about the football—"

"Never mind the football," interjected Nelson grimly. "I want you at once. Follow me to my study, or, better still, come with me now."

"Oh, all right, sir?" I said.

I wondered what was in the wind. The gov'nor was certainly looking rather serious, and I judged that something special was afoot. We arrived at his study, and then Nelson Lee lit a cigarette.

"Where is Mason?" he asked abruptly.

"Somewhere in the Home, I expect."

"Do you know if he has been out this evening?"

"I don't think he has, gov'nor."

"Well, then, do you know if he has had any communication with his uncle recently?" asked Nelson Lee.

I stared.

"His uncle?" I repeated.

"Yes."

"But his uncle's dead!" I exclaimed. "You told me—"

"Quite so; but I have every reason to believe that Mason's uncle is as alive as I am myself," said the gov'nor. "Has the boy received a letter—?"

"I don't think so, sir," I broke in. "Anyhow, he hasn't said anything to me, and he's getting quite golly with me just now. Mason's a decent chap, and I like him better every day. I can't believe that he's only a common kid."

"He isn't, Nipper. He is a most uncommon boy," said Nelson Lee. "Mason has pleased me immensely since he arrived at St. Frank's. But we are getting away from the point. I wish to ask about his uncle."

"I don't follow you, sir," I said. "How do you know anything about Jack's uncle?"

"I met him ten minutes ago, in the lane."

"Mason's uncle?" I asked wonderingly.

"Exactly. And I received a very considerable surprise, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "I know, of course, that Mr. Grell was not exactly a man of gentle upbringing. Mr. Strong made that quite clear to me. Mason, indeed, has had a very unhappy home life, or what must be termed his home life. For his aunt and uncle never provided him with a real home. The lad has been badly treated."

"But what was the surprise, sir?" I asked.

"Just this, Nipper," replied the gov'nor. "When I met Mr. Grell I was quite certain that I had seen him before somewhere several years ago. I could not place him in my mind, until I told him my name."

"And how did that do the trick?" I asked.

"Simply because Mr. Grell changed his whole expression, and I knew him in a second," said Nelson Lee quietly. "You will not remember the affair, Nipper, but just about five years ago I was engaged upon a rather important case at the London docks. There is no need for me to go into any details, but one of the men suspected of being concerned in a series of marine robberies escaped at the last minute. That man, Nipper, is in the lane at this moment."

I gave a gasp.

"Mason's uncle?" I exclaimed, staring.

"Yes, Nipper—Mason's uncle," replied the gov'nor. "I do not think that he is the man—I positively know it. At that period Grell had another name—probably a false name. But he was known to the police as 'Captain Jim,' owing to the fact that he had knocked about the world a great deal in ships. He escaped to Canada or the United States. There was no actual proof against him, but there would have been plenty if he had remained."

I looked very serious.

"I say, it's rather rotten, sir," I exclaimed. "Fancy a chap like that—a giddy criminal—being the uncle of such a straight fellow as Jack Mason. Isn't there some mistake about it?"

Nelson Lee looked thoughtful.

"There may be, but I don't think so, young 'un," he replied slowly. "At all events, we shall be able to judge after Mason has seen his uncle. We can easily find that out without asking the lad any direct questions. Just keep your eyes open, and remain on the alert. If Mason meets this man and acknowledges him, then there can be little doubt about the matter. And he will certainly acknowledge him if he is really a relative."

"But it's rotten, sir—"

"My dear Nipper, I don't see it," interrupted Lee. "It would not be fair to judge Mason by his uncle. The man may be a crook, but Mason himself is one of the finest specimens of British boyhood I have met. He is admirable in every way, and his uncle is his misfortune."

"That's what I think, of course," I replied. "But when I said it was rotten, I was thinking of the other fellows. Mason's getting on nicely now, and if it becomes known that this bounder is his uncle, it'll do him a terrific amount of harm. Half the Home will shun him."

Nelson Lee frowned.

"That would be most unfair, but I suppose you are right," he said. "The boys are extremely hasty in their judgment, and I do not altogether approve of their methods. But there is only one way to guard against the danger, Nipper. Nobody must know this secret, and I am quite sure that Grell will not reveal it himself."

"Well, I shan't say a word," I promised. "Poor kid! How rotten it must be to have an uncle like that! Do you think the fellow will have the cheek to come to the school?"

"I don't think so, my boy," replied Lee. "If he does it will be a pity; but we really can't prevent him. He is the boy's uncle, and he has a right to pay a visit if he wishes to. Providing he does not make a nuisance of himself, he will be treated courteously. And there is another point."

"You mean regarding Grell's presence here?" I asked.

"Exactly. I don't believe for a moment that the man has come down for the mere pleasure of seeing his nephew," said Nelson Lee, stroking his chin. "There is some other motive for his visit, and I suspect that it is an evil one. We must keep our eyes open, Nipper."

"Rather, sir!" I agreed heartily. "And if Mr. Grell gets up to any tricks, he'll be sorry for himself. Our job is to guard Jack, and I'm rather glad that you're on the spot, gov'nor. There's no telling what might happen."

But I did not anticipate the somewhat startling events which were destined to take place before long. Mr. Grell's visit was a sign of coming excitements.

CHAPTER XV.

MASON ISN'T HAVING ANY.

"WHERE'S Fullwood?" Pitt asked that question with his head in the doorway of Study A. Gulliver, who was there alone, looked up from a book.

"I don't know," he exclaimed. "You might find him in Merrell's study. He said he was going along there—"

"All right. You come with me," interjected Pitt briskly.

"Rats! I'm reading this—"

"That doesn't matter. There's something on."

"Oh!" said Gulliver. "Who's concerned?"

"Mason."

Gulliver jumped up with alacrity.

"I'm in with you," he exclaimed, grinning.

"There's been too much said about Mason to-day. I've heard his name hundreds of times since that rotten football match. You might think he was a tin god!"

They passed along the passage until they came to Study G. Pitt tried to open the door, but it was locked.

"Who's that?" demanded a voice.

"Only me!" snapped Pitt. "Open the giddy door!"

It was unlocked, and the Serpent and Gulliver were admitted. The air was rather heavy with smoke, and both Fullwood and Bell were within, in addition to the study's rightful owners—Merrill and Neys and Marriott. They had been disturbed in the middle of a game of banker.

"Going to join us?" asked Fullwood genially. "The more the merrier. Hallo! So you've come along, Gully? I thought you wanted to finish that beastly book?"

"Pitt dragged me in here," explained Gulliver. "He said there's some game on against Mason."

"Oh, how Mason!" snapped Fullwood. "I'm fed-up with the chap. Give him a rest! Join us in this game, Pitt—"

"Not just now," replied Pitt. "Look here, we can play banker any old night, but we can't have such a ripping rag as we're going to have with Mason's uncle."

"His which?" asked Marriott.

"His uncle," grinned Pitt. "Oh, my hat! You'll have to come and see him; he's a regular bouncer. Looks like a bricklayer, with a heavy face, and talks regular Bermondsey style."

Fullwood & Co. were greatly impressed.

"Oh, crumbs!" said Bell. "Is this chap in the school?"

"No, he's down the lane," replied Pitt.

And he went into details concerning his meeting with Mr. Grell. The Nuts were unanimous in their decision to chuck up their game and to go down the lane in a body, in order to see the meeting between uncle and nephew.

"I'll tell you what," said Fullwood, with a chuckle. "We'll have a lot of fun out of this. You can take Mason down to the messin'-place, Pitt, an' we'll slip down on the quiet. It wouldn't do to give the chap a hint."

"My idea exactly," said Pitt. "You chaps get ready, and follow Mason and me down, and then spring out after we've met this Grell bouncer. Then we'll hustle him to the school—pretending to be genial—and we'll show him off to all the fellows. It'll be the joke of the term."

"Rather!" grinned Fullwood. "We'll rag him, too. I don't see why we should put up with Mason's rotten relatives at St. Frank's. He's had enough himself, but we don't want his whole beastly family. They'll be all treading down here if we don't give this uncle a lesson!"

Pitt nodded.

"There's no time to waste," he said. "You chaps had better slip out of the window into the Triangle, and wait there until you see Mason and me go out. Savvy? I'll pop along and find Mason and break the news to him."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We'll have the time of our lives to-night."

"And so will Mason's uncle!" grinned Gulliver.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Pitt left the study and passed along the passage. He entered his own study, and found Mason there,

buried in his books. The new boy looked up with a cheerful smile on his face. He little guessed the mean trick which Pitt was anxious to play upon him. But he soon received a hint.

"Hallo! Coming to do your prep?" he asked.

"Not just now," replied the Serpent easily. "I came for you, Mason. You're wanted by somebody in the lane."

Mason looked at his companion wonderingly.

"Who on earth can want me in the lane?"

"Well, it's rather a delicate matter," said Pitt mysteriously. "I don't want to give you a shock, old man, but you'd better prepare yourself for a surprise. You'll be overjoyed when you hear the news. You're not liable to faint, I suppose?"

"I don't know what you're getting at," said Jack quietly.

"Well, the truth is, there's a relative of your father's anxious to see you," explained Pitt. "Does that give you a hint?"

Jack Mason started.

"You don't mean——" he began. "You can't mean that my aunt has come to St. Frank's? Oh, but she wouldn't!" he added.

Pitt chuckled.

"No, not your aunt, but you're near the mark," he replied. "You see, I'm breaking it gently. It's somebody of the same nature, so to speak. Can't you guess now?"

"I think you're very silly!" said Jack, in his straight way.

"Thanks! But as it happens, I'm not a bit silly," was Pitt's reply. "And as you're so dense, I'll bring it out bluntly. Your uncle, Mr. Grell, is waiting to see you against the old stile. I've promised him that I'll take you down."

All Mason's wonderment left him.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, smiling.

And he went on with his work again with quiet unconcern. Pitt, feeling that his great news had fallen very flat, glared at his study-chum.

"You don't seem to care much!" he said sharply.

"Don't you think you'd better try something else?" asked Jack. "You startled me for a moment, Pitt; but that story's not quite good enough. And I must say that it isn't in very good taste, either."

"Don't you believe it!" roared Pitt.

"Of course I don't!"

Mason's smile was very irritating. Pitt had not thought of the possibility of this attitude, and he was rather nonplussed. If it had been a faked tale he wouldn't have been so taken aback. But it was true—actually true—and Mason wouldn't believe it.

"Of course you don't!" shouted Pitt, echoing Jack's words. "I tell you that Mr. Grell is waiting down the lane. I met him there, and he asked me to give you the tip. Do you believe that?"

"I'm not quite so silly," replied Jack.

He rose from his chair and stroked over to the window. It was getting dark outside, and Mason meant to pull down the blind before switching on the electric light. But his attention was attracted towards a knot of janitors who stood in the dusk a short distance away.

Mason looked at them casually, but his eyes gleamed.

For the fellows were Fullwood & Co. and several of their followers. They were all grinning and whispering together. Evidently some joke was afoot, and Jack needed only normal brain-power to put two and two together. He realised the truth in a second. Pitt was a deuce, and a jape was being prepared.

Jack pulled the blind down, and Pitt switched on the light.

"Well, are you coming, you disbelieving ass?" demanded the Serpent.

"No, thanks!"

"But your uncle's waiting!" roared Pitt, in exasperation.

"Look here, Pitt! I don't know why you are trying to fool me like this," said Jack quietly. "You've apparently forgotten what I told you the other day. My uncle is dead, so you can't expect me to credit that absurd story of yours."

Pitt nearly danced with annoyance.

"Haven't I told you that your uncle's alive?" he shouted. "I broke the news gently, and you won't believe it! Your silly uncle's waiting for you down the lane, and he asked me to fetch you—"

"Don't repeat it all over again," interrupted Mason. "If my uncle was actually alive he would come straight here, and I'm surprised at you attempting such a fathomed trick on me."

Pitt began to realise that the whole thing did seem like a trick.

"I give you my solemn word of honour—" he began.

"Don't go too far with it!" interjected Jack curtly.

"Are you coming?" howled Pitt.

"No."

"All right. Take the consequences!"

And the Serpent flung himself out of the study and slammed the door. If he had had any doubts about the "jape" he had been about to perform, they vanished now. He was wild, and Pitt was at his worst when he was in a temper.

He found Fullwood & Co waiting.

"That silly fool won't believe me!" growled Pitt savagely. "Says that his uncle's dead, and won't come. What do you think of that?"

"I expect he wants to think that his beastly uncle's dead," said Fullwood. "Well, I'll tell you what. You go down to this barge chup, and tell him that Mason wants him to come up to the school. It will be all the better, really, because we can rag him thoroughly. By gad! We'll make Mason squirm!"

"Supposing Grell won't come?" demanded Pitt.

"He will," said Fullwood. "If he doesn't like the idea, though, he shall be on hand, and we'll jolly well yank him here. I'm beastly curious to see the frightful bouncer."

"All right!" growled Pitt. "I'd better be going. I'm late as it is."

And he hastened across the Triangle and passed out through the gateway. Fullwood & Co. followed leisurely. The stile was just round the bend so the juniors could proceed almost openly down the lane without fear of being seen by the waiting Mr. Grell.

While this was going on I was telling my chums in Study C all about the arrival of Jack Mason's undesirable relative. They were rather concerned, and agreed that the matter ought to be kept secret—with regard to Grell's record, I mean. I had told Sir Montie and Tommy, because they could be trusted. Moreover, the gov'ner had given me permission to let them into the secret.

Mason was hard at work in his study, and I naturally concluded that everything was O.K. I didn't know that Reginald Pitt was intent on bringing the disreputable uncle up to the school, in order to "shes him off."

The Serpent found Mr. Simon Grell leaning against the stile in a somewhat savage mood. Captain Jim—to give him the name which the gov'nor had told me he was known by—had been thinking over things, and he wasn't altogether pleased. He was quite positive in his own mind that Nelson Lee had not recognised him, and so he was easy on that score.

Therefore, when he saw Pitt coming down alone his temper wasn't improved.

"Where's my nephew?" he demanded roughly.

"The fact is?" said Pitt. "Mason won't believe that you're here, and told me to bring you up to the school, just to prove that I was speaking the truth. So, if you'll come up, I'll lead you to his study."

Mr. Grell swore.

"What the thunder's the good o' that?" he snapped. "I want the boy here, d'ye understand? I want him here, an' if you don't go an' fetch him, I'll clip your ear!"

Pitt lost his good humour.

"You'd better not try it!" he retorted. "I've done the best I can for you, and this is all the thanks I got! I don't mind doing you a favour, but I like you to recognise it."

"Have you told anybody I'm here?" growled Captain Jim.

"No, not a soul!" said Pitt glibly.

It was a most unfortunate thing that Mr. Grell glanced up the road just then. For he caught sight of at least three heads, surmounted by school caps, peeping round the bend. Those heads belonged to Fullwood & Co., and were incraziously having a look on.

"You young liar!" roared Mr. Grell.

"Eh?" gasped Pitt. "What the dickens—"

"You've told all your sneakin' little pals!" shouted Grell. "You're tryin' to trick me, blame you!"

"Don't talk nonsense—"

"D'ye think I'm blind?" demanded Captain Jim hotly. "Look at them boys up the lane there! Why, I'll shake the life out of you for playin' this trick!"

Pitt backed away hastily, but not before Mr. Grell had grasped him angrily. And there was a look in the man's eyes which Pitt did not like.

"Here, leggo!" he yelled. "Rescue, Remove! Leggo!"

Pitt began to feel very sorry for himself. His scheme wasn't working out at all as he had planned. And he gritted his teeth as he realised that Fullwood & Co. were to blame—for allowing themselves to be seen.

"Yes, I'll let you go!" snarled Mr. Grell savagely. "Try to play games on me, would you? We'll see about that, young shaver!"

He cuff'd Pitt right and left, and the boy was quite unable to withstand the onslaught. Fullwood & Co. had come into view now, but they stood there and looked on, without offering any assistance.

"Help!" bellowed Pitt.

His assailant realised that he would not do himself any good by continuing the assault, so he gave Pitt a final cuff and sent him flying backwards on to the grass bordering the lane.

Pitt went staggering back, and Mr. Grell strode down the lane in a savage mood. He took no notice of a wild yell which sounded behind him. If he had remained he would have had the extreme pleasure of seeing Pitt perform a feat which had not been reckoned upon.

The Serpent was unable to recover his balance by the time he reached the grass border. He toppled over, rolled down a slope, and—*splash!* He plumped with a terrific force into the black mud at the bottom of the ditch.

The unfortunate junior went right in, for the mud was close upon two feet deep. Fullwood & Co. saw the disaster and came rushing up. They beheld a most remarkable sight.

A horrible black object staggered out of the ditch. Reginald Pitt was simply coated from head to foot with black, clinging mud. He was almost unrecognisable as a human being.

"Oh, my only hat!" gasped Fullwood. "What the dooce is it?"

"You ridders!" came a spluttering voice from the figure. "Why didn't you come to my rescue?"

"It's talkin'!" roared Gulliver.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"How are you feelin', Pitt?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—your awful beast—"

"It's no good blamin' us," said Fullwood. "It was your idea, anyhow, so what the dickens are you grumbin' at? It's a pity you made such a mess of it, an' such a mess of yourself. But we ain't to blame."

Fullwood & Co. roared again, and Pitt, gnashing his teeth, dashed in amongst the Nuts, squirting mud out like a dog which had just emerged from a duck-pond, and succeeded in hugging Gulliver and Harratt. Those two juniors were both in a shocking condition within ten seconds.

"Oh, you frightful cod!" howled Gulliver. "I'm smothered!"

"Serre you right!" snapped Pitt. "You shouldn't laugh at me!"

He didn't wait for any more, but rushed up the line at the double, hoping that he would be able to get into the Ancient House without being observed. Fullwood & Co., at least, did not feel like grinning any longer. The whole jape had been a most ghastly fiasco.

Pitt's hopes were in vain. He succeeded in reaching the lobby in perfect safety; but then he ran into Handforth & Co. Those three startled juniors stared at the apparition in dazed astonishment.

"Great pip!" ejaculated Handforth. "Look what's blown in!"

"Get out of my way!" hissed Pitt furiously.

"It's Pitt!" roared McClure. "Ha, ha, ha! Who's been treating you to a mud bath, Pitty?"

"You'll have the whole Remove down here if you cockle like that!" gasped Pitt. "Can't you let me pass, you blighters?"

He charged at the trio, and they scattered wildly. But the commotion had already brought other fellows out of their studies. The unfortunate Serpent was obliged to run the gamut of dozens of pairs of eyes, and by the time he reached the bath-room, half the House knew of the affair.

By great good luck, however, not a single prefect arrived in time to discover what was in the wind, and the Sixth-Formers did not think of looking into the bath-room. This was extremely lucky for Pitt, for he would have had some difficulty in accounting for his condition.

Sir Montie and I had seen him, and we were quite puzzled. But we both agreed that Pitt had probably deserved the mud dunking. At all events, Reginald Pitt did not receive much sympathy from the Remove.

He stripped himself completely, lathered, and dressed in a complete new rig. After that it was necessary to remove the traces in the bath-room. But Pitt was now feeling better and was capable of reasoning.

When he finally descended to the Remove passage he took so notice of the inquiries which were fired at him from all quarters. He marched straight into Study E, and found it empty.

The Serpent flung himself into a chair, and laughed. This was just like Pitt. He was a fellow of queer moods.

"Well, that was a nice jape—I don't think!" he muttered. "It only shows that it's a fathended thing to be too sure. I wanted to get Mason into trouble, and only got it in the neck myself!"

He suddenly rose to his feet and glared at his reflection in the mirror.

"I'll tell you what," he exclaimed, addressing his image. "That was a beastly caddish thing to do,

and I'm hanged if you didn't deserve that ducking!"

It was rather remarkable that Pitt should recognise his own fault in this manner. But it conclusively proved that he was no longer in that state of mind which failed to recognise the difference between right and wrong. He knew that he had been a cad, and he admitted it.

"And what's more," he went on, "you're a silly fool not to take more notice of what Mason tells you. He's a straight chap, and you're as crooked as a hairpin! You'd better straighten yourself out a bit!"

CHAPTER XVI.

REGINALD PITT IN HARD UP!

TEA was in progress in most junior studies in the Ancient House.

Jack Mason was in Study C, being our guest.

Mason being out to tea, Pitt invited himself to Study A. He found a plentiful supply of good things upon Fullwood's table. And Ralph Leslie Fullwood, although a cod of the first water, could never be accused of stinginess.

"Come in!" he said, when Pitt appeared. "Look in for some tea?"

"Well, I was thinking of inviting myself to your spread," replied Pitt calmly. "You'll never eat all that let unless you're helped out."

He entered the study and sat down. Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell were indulging themselves with a timed tongue, sardines, and other delicacies. Pitt helped himself to some tongue, landed a couple of slices of bread-and-butter upon his plate, and accepted a cup of tea from Gulliver, who was pouring out.

"Lucky beggars!" remarked Pitt. "It must be ripping to be in funds always."

"Hard up?" inquired Fullwood.

"Steady," said Pitt.

"You'll get some tin before long, I expect," remarked Gulliver. "I dare say you'll win a few bells to-night, if you join us in a game—or else you'll hand us a few L.O.U.'s. It all depends on your luck."

"I don't think I shall play," said Pitt, sipping his tea.

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know! There's not much fun in playing when you're got no money," replied the Serpent. "As a matter of fact, I really came here to borrow a couple of quid. Do you think you could manage it?"

"I'm rather tight just at present," said Gulliver carelessly.

"You fibber!" grinned Fullwood. "What about that lever you were fishing about half an hour ago?"

Gulliver turned red.

"That's—that's to buy some new togs with," he said lamely. "Besides, I can't change it just now."

"I'll give you change," said Fullwood.

Gulliver was tripped, and he knew it.

"If you want the truth, I don't believe in leading you money, Pitt," he said bluntly.

Pitt looked indignant.

"That's rather rotten!" he explained. "I've never failed to pay you back yet, Gulliver—"

"I don't mean that," said Gulliver. "I don't like to lend a fellow money who's associated with a beastly bouncer from Bermondsey?"

"Sounds like a comic paper character," grinned Bell. "Beastly bouncer from Bermondsey! That's rather good, you know."

"It's not far from the mark, anyhow," observed

Fullwood. "I was goin' to jaw about that, Pitt. What about Mason? Are you still pally with him?"

"He's my study-mate," said Pitt shortly.

"An' he's changin' you, too," put in Gulliver. "You ain't the same chap, Pitt. You're getting wishy-wishy, an' I'm rather sick of it. Every time we ask you to play nap or banker, you heatate."

Pitt grinned.

"That's nothing to do with Mason," he replied. "You don't think I'd allow him to make any difference to me, do you?"

"I don't think anything about it; I know he does!" said Fullwood grimly. "You're as squeamish as a beastly kitten, an' it's about time we had a talk. I reckon you ought to chuck that odd lot of your study."

Pitt helped himself to some more tongue.

"That's rot!" he said. "How can I chuck the chap out? He's settled there now, and I rather like him—"

"What!" ejaculated Fullwood, staring.

"I said I rather like him."

"Well, I'm hanged!" said Gulliver. "Do you mean to tell us, Pitt, that you like that rotten street urchin?"

"It may give you some pleasure to call him a street urchin, but it's sheer piffle," said Pitt. "He's as well educated as I am, and a gentleman to his finger-tips. So what's the good of keeping up that notion?"

"Look here, you'd better clear out!" snapped Gulliver hotly. "We don't want pals of Mason's in here—"

"Don't get excited," interrupted Fullwood. "You never know how to take Pitt, Gully. He doesn't mean half he says. If he had the chance he'd be the first to join in a jape against Mason. And, anyhow, I'm goin' to settle the point straight away."

"How?" asked Pitt calmly.

"Well, you can't be our pal if you're goin' to be Mason's pal," replied Ralph Leslie grimly. "That's certain. It ain't in the nature of things for you to be friendly with both parties at the same time. You'll have to choose between us, Pitt."

"I don't see that it matters to you," replied the Serpent warily. "I don't like rows all day, and I have to keep on good terms with Mason. I'm certainly not going to shift him out of the study."

"That means that you choose Mason?" asked Fullwood.

"It doesn't mean anything of the sort," retorted Pitt. "You know as well as I do that I hate the chap sometimes. But he's such a quiet fellow. It's jolly difficult to have a quarrel with him, and as long as he leaves me alone I don't trouble. I smoke in the study, and he doesn't say a word. Some fellows would kick up a frightful fuss. You'd better leave Mason out of it, Fullwood."

"I loathe the chap!" said Fullwood. "If you persist in sticking to him, Pitt, you won't be so welcome in this study. Why the dooce don't you take good advice when it's given to you? There's no reason why we shouldn't get on jolly well together. Finish up with Mason, and you'll find us easier to get on with."

The Serpent went on with his tea without speaking. He did not like the idea of this lecture. The Nuts were doing their utmost to estrange him with his study-mate, because they had their knife into Mason.

And Pitt hated being dictated to. He was a fellow with a will of his own, and he could be extremely obstinate when he chose. He certainly didn't see why he should break with Mason just because he was told to.

He even began to feel uncomfortable as he was eating this food. He didn't want to be beholden to Fullwood & Co. unless they were prepared to take him as they found him. And he suddenly set his cup down and looked up.

"We've been getting away from the point," he said. "Are you fellows going to grant that little favour for me?"

"Which favour?"

"I want you to lend me a quid or two—"

"I'll tell you what," interrupted Fullwood. "I've got a suggestion to make. This will be a test for you, Pitt."

He took out a silver-bound pocket-book and selected three one-pound currency notes. These he placed on the table.

"You're quite welcome to that three quid for as long as you like," he said smoothly. "You can pay me back any old time. I'm rather well off this week, an' I don't mind doing you a favour."

"Thanks!" said Pitt, reaching for the money.

"Silly no!" said Gulliver, glaring.

"Hold on!" smiled Fullwood. "There's just one little condition, Pitt."

"A condition?"

"Exactly," replied Fullwood. "You can have that money if you'll agree to do what I want. I rather like you, and—"

"What are you driving at?" demanded Pitt shortly.

"Just this," was Fullwood's grim reply. "You can have the loan of that three quid if you'll kick Mason out of your study. I don't care how you do it, but you've got to get it over this week."

"Oh, ripping!" grinned Gulliver.

"Splendid idea!" remarked Bell.

"That's all I want," went on Fullwood. "Chuck Mason out of your study, and finish with him. Providing you do that you're perfectly welcome to come here whenever you like an' to borrow money from me when you're short."

Pitt smiled.

"It's not at all a bad idea," he said thoughtfully. "You agree, then?" asked Fullwood, bending forward.

"I didn't say that—"

"Do you accept the condition?"

"No."

Pitt rose to his feet as he spoke. He picked up the three pounds, calmly screwed them into a ball, and tossed them into Fullwood's lap.

"Why, you rotter—"

"I always thought you were a beastly cad, Fullwood, but I didn't think you were quite such a cad as this," said Pitt. "Why, you must be mad to think I'd accept money from you on these putrid conditions. Mason is my study-mate, and I'm not going to kick him out for anybody."

Fullwood & Co. were on their feet, angry and hot.

"Hoof him out into the passage!" roared Gulliver.

Pitt turned like lightning.

"Try it on!" he snapped. "The first chap who lays a finger on me will be sorry for it. I'm fed-up with you. I was a fool to come here at all!"

And the Serpent opened the door and walked out. In doing so he knew that he had closed the only doorway through which he could reasonably hope to obtain funds. But he walked down the passage in a state of sheer delight. He had made Fullwood & Co. sit up, and that was most gratifying.

Under comparatively slight provocation he would have had no compunction in making Mason's life in Study E unbearable. But to be told to do it by other fellows was quite beyond the limit. Unconsciously, Fullwood had attached Pitt to the boy from Bermondsey more strongly than ever. It had

been a blunder on Fulwood's part, but he hadn't realised it at the time.

And Pitt was quite content with his empty pockets.

CHAPTER XVII.

NOT THE RIGHT NIPPER.

MR. SIMON GRELL knocked out his pipe in the fender, and proceeded to refill it from a well-packed pouch.

He was seated in the small back parlour of the White Harp Inn, situated in the village of Bellion, a mile from St. Frank's. Mr. Grell was alone, and he had been busy with his thoughts for some little time.

"Yes, there's only one way for it," he told himself, gazing into the fire. "I've got to see the kid this evening, an' I've got to see him on the quiet. It wouldn't be any good goin' up to the school. In fact, I should be a blamed fool to do anythin' of the sort."

He glanced at the clock, and then at the window. It would be getting dusk before long, and the November day was somewhat dull and overcast. It was quite cosy and warm in the parlour, but Mr. Grell knew that he would have to be making a move shortly.

He knew that he was not a gentleman in manner or appearance, and his presence at the school would do him no good. Moreover, there was Nelson Leo to be considered; and Mr. Grell was quite anxious to steer clear of Nelson Leo.

So he had decided upon a little plan to get his nephew out into a quiet place. He sat down at the table of the inn parlour, drew paper and pencil towards him, and scrawled a short note. When he had finished it he screwed it up and threw it into the fire.

"Don't want to mention no names," he muttered. "Somethin' simple will do—just enough to bring him out."

He made another attempt, and this time the result pleased him. He enclosed the half-sheet of note-paper in an envelope, sealed it, and stowed it in his pocket. Then he passed into the bar and partook of a drink.

Feeling refreshed, Captain Jim rolled out of the public-house and looked up and down the village street; or, rather, up it only, for the White Harp was situated on the outskirts of Bellion.

"Just the very young shaver I want!" murmured Mr. Grell.

A diminutive member of the village population was coming along the road, whistling cheerfully and shrilly. His age was about eight, and he was evidently the hopeful son of a farm labourer, or somebody of that class.

"Come here, young feller-me-lad!" said Captain Jim pleasantly, as the urchin was about to pass.

"Wot eber want?" inquired the lad bluntly.
 "You needn't be afraid. I sha'n't hurt ye," said Mr. Grell. "Look, here's a penny! It's all for ye, my sonny boy. Don't snatch it, mind!"

In spite of the injunction the child snatched it rather hurriedly, apparently fearing that Mr. Grell might change his mind. He gazed at the penny lovingly, and then looked up at Mr. Grell with perfect confidence. A man who could give him a penny for nothing at all was obviously to be trusted.

"What's your name, little man?" inquired Captain Jim.

"Bobby, sir."

"Bobby what?"

"Jenkins, sir," replied the urchin.

"Well, look here, Bobby Jenkins, I want you run

a little errand for me, an' I'll give you sixpence all for yourself," said Mr. Grell kindly.

"Oo, lumny!" exclaimed Master Jenkins, appalled.

"Do you know St. Frank's, my lad?"

"Course I do! It's the big school that all them young grubs go to," replied Bobby scornfully. "Don't yer know that?"

"I was askin' if you know it," smiled the man. "You do, so it's good enough. I want you to take this note—up to the school an' hand it to a nipper named Mason. Understand? Go straight up an' find that nipper, an' give him this note. Will you do this for me?"

"Where's the tanner?" asked Master Jenkins suspiciously.

"Blamed if you ain't smart on your money!" grinned Mr. Grell. "Here's the sixpence, young shaver. Now be off an' fast as you can go. Mason is one of the junior boys, an' you've got to give it into his own hands. Understand? Take it straight to the nipper, an' don't make no mistake. I'll wait here until you come back."

The village boy nodded brightly, and set off as fast as his legs would carry him towards St. Frank's, the note clutched tightly in his grubby hand. Mr. Grell watched him go up the road, and was quite sure that the note would be delivered safely. So that there could be no mistake, Mr. Grell had pencilled "Jack Mason" upon the outside of the envelope.

But he did not bargain for the grubby condition of Master Jenkins' hands. Long before the gates of St. Frank's were reached the pencilling was entirely rubbed off; or, at least, a considerable amount of dirt had been rubbed on, which amounted to the same thing. The name, at all events, was obliterated.

Master Jenkins, having received his sixpence, faithfully intended carrying out his instructions. But he was—unfortunately for Mr. Grell—labouring under a mistake.

It was really Captain Jim's fault, for having used the term "nipper" several times whilst giving his instructions to the youngster. In consequence, there was confusion in Bobby's simple mind.

"I've got to give it to Master Nipper, the gent told me," said the village lad, as he neared the gates. "I like Master Nipper; he give me a penny once."

Bobby had quite a good memory. That little incident had occurred a month or two back, when my cap had blown off in a high wind. Bobby had recovered it for me, and I had duly rewarded him.

His present mistake was quite pardonable.

Mason was a newcomer, and the name was not familiar. Mine was, for there wasn't a living soul in the village who hadn't heard of me by this time. My doings at St. Frank's, particularly in connection with the great barring-out, had made me something of a famous character in the neighbourhood. Amongst the junior population, particularly, I was well known.

So Bobby promptly seized upon "nipper" when Mr. Grell uttered the word. Bobby assumed that the note was to be given to Nipper. Under the circumstances it was only natural that he should make this mistake. Mr. Grell had not been explicit enough.

Tea was just over at about the time of Bobby's arrival in the Triangle. He entered the gateway tentatively, realising, with considerable awe, the imposing nature of his surroundings.

Handforth & Co. were emerging from the Ancient House, and Handforth frowned as he saw the shabby little figure approaching through the dusk.

"What the dickens does that urehla want here?" he demanded gruffly.

"No good asking me," said McClure. "And you needn't look so jolly fierce. No harm in the kid coming, is there?"

"Unless he's got some business here, I'll jolly well kick him out!" said Handforth majestically. "Can't allow this sort of thing, you know. There'll be no dealing with the village kids if dozens of them come running in here every minute of the day!"

Church grinned.

"Marvellous chap!" he remarked thoughtfully.

"Who's marvellous?"

"You are."

"Well, I know that, but I didn't expect you to be generous enough to say so," replied Handforth genially. "But where's the post?"

"Why, it's easy," said Church. "I can only see one village kid, but you said there were dozens. Of course, I wouldn't doubt your word for anything, Handy. I expect your eyesight's better than mine—"

"You—you silly ass!" roared Handforth, glaring.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth tried hard to think of some reply which would be suitable for the occasion. Failing, he visited his wrath upon the innocent Master Bobby.

"Hi! Clear off, you little sweep!" bellowed Handforth.

Bobby Jenkins came to a halt, rather uncertain as to the safety of advancing.

"I gotter note," he explained shrilly.

"You've got which?"

"A note, master. I brought it from a gent—"

"I'm not your master, you young donkey!" growled Handforth, noticing that Church and McClure were grinning. "Who's the note for—the post-boy?"

Bobby shook his head.

"No, sir; that be for Master Nipper," he replied, holding out the soiled letter.

"Oh, is it?" said Handforth. "For Master Nipper? What the dickens do you want to bring notes for Master Nipper—"

"Who's talking about me?"

Handforth turned as he heard my voice. He indicated the village lad with a wave of his hand.

"Some correspondence for you, Nipper," he replied. "It ain't my business, but I should say that the blacksmith has taken to writing letters for a change. Or it might be the sweep. Get your gloves with you!"

"No; it's not cold this evening—"

"Because I should advise you to have 'em ready," said Handforth, as he moved off. "That letter doesn't look exactly a-zeez."

"Begad! What's the frightful ass talkin' about?" inquired Sir Montie Tregellie-West, who had come out with me. "I have a faint idea, dear boy, that Handy was attemptin' to be witty, but I may be wrong."

"That kid's got a note," said Watson bluntly.

"Yes, so I see," I replied. "Hallo, my lad! What are you doing here? I seem to remember your smiling chivvy, somehow. Come to pay an afternoon call?"

Bobby grinned all over his face.

"A gent give me sixpence to bring this note to you, Master Nipper," he said, holding it out. "I promised I'd give it into your 'ands."

I took the letter wonderingly.

"Sure you're not making a mistake?" I asked.

"What sort of a gentleman was he, kid?"

"Oh, a nice gent—o give me sixpence?"

I grinned.

"You mentioned that before," I said. "But I'm not expecting a note, and perhaps this isn't for me at all."

"The gent told me to give it to Nipper. 'E told me that two or three times," said Master Bobby.

"I know it's for you, sir."

"All right, kid; you'd better get along," I said. "Just tell me one other thing. Was the gentleman a young one or an old one?"

"I dunno," replied Bobby slowly. "'E 'adn't got no whiskers, Master Nipper, an' 'is 'air was a bit reddish, like my brother Ted's!"

"Well, never mind your brother Ted," I said cheerfully. "Here's another sixpence for you, just for luck. And if I were you I shouldn't spend it all at once. It'll last quite a long time that way!"

Master Jenkins grinned hugely at this sound advice, and took himself off, feeling that his luck was too good to be true. Down the lane he duly reported that he had delivered the note, and Mr. Grell was satisfied. At all events, there was no indication that the note had fallen into the wrong hands.

And Captain Jim went back to the White Harp, feeling that something had been done.

It had!

CHAPTER XVIII.

KEEPING THE APPOINTMENT.

"WHAT is it?" asked Watson.

"Best if I know?" I replied, handling the letter dubiously. "At any rate, it can't be a mistake. We'll soon know the awful truth."

I pulled out the half sheet of notepaper, glanced at it, and grinned. There was no address, and nothing to indicate who it was intended for, neither was there any signature. The note itself was short:

"I want to see you urgent. Be at the old stile, down the lane, at half-past seven. And don't bring nobody else with you. This is most important. Be there at seven-thirty, sharp. You'll be sorry if you fail."

"Mystery!" I grinned. "Just have a look at this, my sons!"

Sir Montie and Tommy read it, and they frowned perplexedly. The writing was rather poor in quality, but that might have been deliberate.

"Begad! Who wants to see you down the lane, Nipper, old boy?" asked Sir Montie. "This is really frightfully interestin', you know. An' you haven't got to take nobody with you, so 'Tommy on' I can go."

"How do you make that out?" asked Watson.

"Dear fellow, it's obvious," smiled Tregellie-West. "If Nipper isn't to take nobody, it stands to reason that he must take somebody. But I suspect that it is really a case of bad grammar."

"Well, blow the grammar!" I said. "I know for certain that no man wants to have a private talk with me. This must be a decey, my bucks!"

"A which?"

"A decey. I shouldn't be surprised if those River House ends are responsible for it," I replied. "They want to get me down there alone, and then wipe up the road with me. They expect me to walk into the trap like a little innocent. Yes, I'll bet a quid it's an ambush."

"I shouldn't be surprised—I shouldn't, really," said Montie. "Wellhorse an' those other Bogs have been fairly quiet of late, but there's no tellin' when they'll break out again. Perhaps they're tryin' to break out now."

"Well, we'll break out as well," I said grimly.

"This trick doesn't deceive me; and I don't see why we shouldn't prepare a nice little surprise for them."

I had good reason for suspecting that the note was the work of the Hon. Aubrey de Vere Wellborne, the leader of the Honourables at Dr. Hogge's Academy, down the road—the River Home School. Certainly it never entered my head that the note was intended for somebody else, and that it was written by Mr. Simon Grell.

"Anyhow, we'll have a look into the matter," I remarked, pulling out my watch. "Nearly six o'clock. We've got heaps of time, and we'll prepare a nice little surprise for the would-be jaspers. This is an occasion for a meeting."

"A meeting?" repeated Watson.
"Exactly," I said briskly. "We shall want about eight or nine chaps—ten would be better. Just run round and call seven of the fellows into Study C. It's quite likely that Wellborne & Co. will be there in force—at the stile, I mean—and I want to have plenty of men ready."

"Forgive me for asking, old fellow, but what's the idea?" inquired Montie. "I'm a shockin'ly dull chap, an' I can't quite get the hang—"

"I'll tell you my whosers when we're all together," I interrupted. "Come on!"

Within five minutes the gathering was complete. In addition to ourselves there were Handforth, Church, and McClure; De Valerie and the Duke of Sonnetos; Tom Burton, Yakama, and Farman. This was one more than we had arranged for, but it was really all the better.

"What is the honourable stunt, my worthy Nipper?" inquired the Japanese junior. "The glint of the eye is significant, and I perceive that great events are in process of being evolved. It is with extreme pleasure that I attend the splendid gathering—"

"Very likely, Jappy," interrupted Handforth. "But we didn't come here to hear you gassing, old man. Once you start, there's no telling when you'll stop. As I've often had occasion to remark, meetings of this sort should be conducted in a business-like way. There's no sense in one chap monopolizing the whole conversation, and I consider that everybody ought to contribute to the jaw. Before we start I'd like to say—"

"I've been waiting for you to finish for quite a long time, Handy," I said politely. "But as you seem to be going on for ever, I'd better cut it short. It's just like your cheek to jaw at Yakama for gassing, and then gas at full steam yourself!"

"Look here—" began Handforth.
"Oh, great Scott!" I interrupted. "Don't start any of your rot now, for goodness' sake! I've called this meeting, and I'm going to do the jawing."

"Go ahead, old chap?" said Sonnetos. "What's the trouble?"

"Well, there's no trouble at all yet," I replied. "What do you make of this letter?"

I handed it round, and all the fellows read it with interest. But they confessed that they were puzzled, and looked at me for enlightenment. I explained how it had come into my hands, and Handforth shook his head.

"Looks bad!" he said grimly.
"How does it look bad, you say?"

"I suppose you haven't been getting into trouble?"

"Not that I am aware of."
"You don't happen to owe money to anybody?" asked Handforth. "This looks like a note from a chap who means to den you for some tin."

"Begud! Handy's got a frightfully good opinion of you, Nipper!" remarked Montie.

"Handy's an aw!" I replied. "I don't owe anybody a farthing, and I'm jolly certain this note

wasn't written by any man who wants a secret meeting with me. It must be a trick, and I suspect Wellborne & Co."

"Souse my suppers!" remarked the Bo'sun.

"And, what's more, the Hogs seem to gain a victory if they can," I went on. "See the idea? Once they've got me down there alone they'll simply proceed to slaughter me. It's just the style of jape they delight in—to get a fellow by himself and wrack their evil will upon him. Why, I should be rolled in the road and made into a guy, or some thing equally pleasant."

"So you're not going?" asked De Valerie.

"I think so."

"Eh? You are going?" asked Handforth.

"Yes."

Handforth shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, well, if you're anxious to be rolled in the mud, I've done with it," he said. "Personally, I shouldn't much care for the experience—"

"You silly ass!" I interrupted. "Do you think I should be such a blockhead as all that? My idea is to meet the Unknown at the stile, but certain preparations will be made before hand."

"I guess you'd best explain some," remarked Farman.

"Well, my notion is this," I went on. "If I keep this appointment I shall probably meet somebody at the stile—Wellborne, dressed up, perhaps. There'll be a whole crowd of others behind the hedge, ready to pounce on me whenever."

"That's quite likely, dear fellow," said Sir Montie.

"The time of the appointment is half-past seven," I continued. "Now, when do you reckon the Hogs will get into the ambush?"

"At about a quarter-past, or perhaps before that," said De Valerie.

"Not before seven?" I asked.

"I shouldn't think so."

"Well, if all you chaps take up your positions behind the hedge at about ten to eleven, I reckon you'll be there first," I said. "See the idea? They mean to lay an ambush for us, so we'll forestall them by laying an ambush of our own. You won't let yourselves be seen, and when they come they'll know nothing. Let 'em collar me before you act—just to give the bouders the idea that they are having everything their own way. Then you'll spring out, and—well, the fun will start!"

"A topknot wheeze!" declared the Duke heartily.

"I'm with you, Nipper," said De Valerie.

"Of course, it's simply a stunnin' jape, dear old boy!" Sir Montie remarked. "You won't hear me gramin' in the slightest—not even if I find it necessary to lie in a muddy ditch, gettin' my feet wet. It doesn't matter a hang about my trousers. I'm perfectly willin' to sacrifice them for the good cause!"

I grinned.

"I don't think you'll find it necessary to lie in a muddy ditch, Montie," I replied. "There hasn't been any rain for a few days, and you'll only need to get into the road, behind the trees."

"I'm frightfully glad to hear that," said Treghell-West, with relief.

All the others were in agreement.

"Of course, it's not certain that we're on the right track at all," said Handforth. "It might be something quite different. You ain't like the other chaps, Nipper, and this affair may be something serious."

"Such as which?" I inquired.

"Ain't Mr. Lee your gov'ner?" asked Handforth.

"Haven't you had all sorts of fights with murderers and burglars and forgers and convicts and pickpockets and anarchists and assassins, and—"

"Go on!" I said, as Handforth panted. "You haven't exhausted 'em all yet, have you?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly ass!" I grinned. "Do you think the gov'nor and I did nothing else but fight criminals all the time we were at work? At the same time, there might be something in that idea of yours, although I don't think it's probable. They wouldn't think I'm worth all the trouble."

"Well, supposing it's an escaped criminal?" asked Watson.

"Then our plan couldn't be better than it is," I answered. "If anybody tries to play a trick on me, you chaps will be on hand. So we're on the right side, in any case. All you fellows will start half an hour before me, because I shall'n't turn up until about twenty-five past seven."

We were all pretty certain that the affair was a joke, and didn't look upon it as anything else. It would be rather neat to turn the tables upon the trucksters. And at a quarter to seven the ambush party started out under De Valerie's leadership. Handforth considered himself leader, but that was only his little delusion.

I remained in the Common-room until a quarter-past seven. Then I donned my overcoat and emerged into the Triangle. It was dark, although a half moon was doing its best to penetrate a bank of clouds.

I chuckled as I strolled across the Triangle and passed out through the gateway. There was a prospect of some fun, and I was ready for it. As I neared the stile, I made out a dim figure leaning against it. And I started slightly as I saw the glow of a pipe.

So it was a man, after all! Wellborne was somewhat addicted to cigarette-smoking, but he certainly would never take to smoking a pipe. So my theory was knocked on the head at the start, and I was puzzled.

"That you, Jack?" came a low voice.

I didn't reply as I walked up. Jack! The only fellow of that name in the Remore who would be likely to receive a note was Jack Mason. There were one or two other Jacks, but they were not prominent juniors.

"I've come down in answer to that note," I said, without committing myself. "What's the trouble?"

The man peered at me in the gloom.

"I'm glad you've come, young sinner," he said, in a satisfied tone. "I thought maybe you'd be disrespectful enough to take no notice. But I reckon you're got more sense in that head of yours. Let's have a look at ye, boy."

"I don't understand what you're getting at," I said shortly.

"None o' your innocence——"

"Well, I am innocent," I interrupted. "I want to know why you sent me that note, and who you are. You forgot to sign your name."

The fact of the matter was I didn't like the look of the man—or, to be more exact, the sound of him. He was obviously of a low type, although he could have been better had he chosen. His breath smelt strongly of spirits. I couldn't make out who the man was, and I was greatly mystified.

"Don't you talk to me in that way, Jack, my boy," said the other. "What's come over ye? You was allus a meek kind o' kid, but I suppose five years makes a difference."

"I think you're making a mistake," I said, having no wish to pry into other people's affairs. "My name isn't Jack, and that village kid must have given me the note in mistake for somebody else."

The man laughed unpleasantly.

"So you want to deny your own uncle, do you?" he said. "Why, you little scab, I'll knock your

head off if you give me any o' your lip! Don't you dare to say that you don't know your Uncle Simon!"

"Is your name Mr. Grell?" I asked.

"Don't be a young fool——"

"Is it?" I persisted.

"You know it is, you cheeky imp!" growled Mr. Grell. "Now, look here——"

"I'd better tell you that I'm not Jack Mason," I interrupted. "The note was given to me, and I didn't know who it was from. It was intended for Mason, of course, so it wouldn't be right for me to let this conversation go on. If it had been daylight you wouldn't have made the mistake."

Simon Grell swore.

"You're lying to me, durn you!" he shouted. "Do you think I don't know my own nephew? It's five years since I saw you, an' a man's liable to make mistakes, but nobody else but you would have come down——"

"My name isn't Mason at all," I broke in warmly. "I'm Nipper of the Remore. So I'll bid you good-night, Mr. Grell."

A hand grasped my shoulder.

"There's no hurry!" snapped Captain Jim. "I'm beginning to think you ain't Jack, arter all."

"That's a good thing," I remarked. "You'll oblige me, Mr. Grell, by taking your hand off my shoulder. If you wish to see Mason, I'll tell him that you're waiting down here——"

"What name was that you said just now?" demanded Grell harshly.

"Nipper."

"Then you're the young cub who's allus been along of Nelson Lee!" snarled Mr. Grell, tightening his grip. "It's a plant. You've come down here on purpose to trick me, hang you——"

"Don't be silly!" I cut in sharply. "Didn't I tell you I wasn't Mason within the first minute? The note was given to me by mistake, and I shall certainly warn Mason not to come down. And if you don't release me at once, I'll not be answerable for the consequences——"

"You young whelp!" shouted Mr. Grell furiously. As he spoke he released my shoulder, and both his hands went up to my throat. His strength was enormous, and the next moment he had me on my back across the stile, half choking the life out of me.

"Rooco! Help!" I gurgled desperately.

As a matter of fact, I was becoming really alarmed. The man was in a blind rage, and hardly responsible for his actions. To fight him alone was utterly impossible, and I simply struggled with all my strength in vain.

"You can call for help all you like!" muttered the man savagely, his face close to my own. "You're come down here, and—— By thunder!"

The sound of quick footsteps came to my buzzing ears, and the next moment Mr. Simon Grell found himself surrounded by numerous dark forms. I dropped limply as he released me.

And I felt thankful that adequate precautions had been made!

CHAPTER XIX.

NELSON LEE TAKES A HAND.

"**B**EGAD! We're here, dear fellow!" Sir Montie Tregellis-West spoke breathlessly as he rushed up. De Valerie, the Bo'sun, Watson, and all the others were there, too. They had been concealed amongst the trees, and had come forward upon hearing my cry. "Grab him!" shouted De Valerie. "I knew I was right!" roared Handforth. "The chap's a giddy criminal!"

"You young hounds!" snapped Simon Grell, glaring round him with some alarm, for the sudden appearance of the juniors had startled him. "Clear out o' my way, or I'll half kill some of—"

He wasn't allowed to get any further. The juniors were in force, and they threw themselves at the man and bore him to the ground. It wasn't necessary for them all to engage in this tussle; eight were quite sufficient. Sir Montie and Watson bent over me and helped me up.

"Begad! Are you hurt, old boy?" asked Sir Montie anxiously.

"You are!" gasped Watson. "He's nearly dead!"
 "Not just yet, Tommy," I replied dazedly, holding on to him. "My only hat! The rotter would have finished me off, I believe, if you hadn't come up in time. He went dotty for the minute."

"I believe he's dotty now," said Watson, turning his head.

Mr. Grell was certainly making enough noise to warrant that statement. He was as strong as a horse, as the heaving mass of humanity near by proved. It was about as much as the eight Revivites could manage to hold him down. He was struggling with extraordinary fury.

"Let him fag himself," I advised. "It won't last long."

I was right. Grell's struggles were so exhausting that he subsided after another minute, being quite breathless for the time. He lay still, gasping out oaths, until Handforth jabbed a cap—somebody else's—over his face and held it there by the simple expedient of placing his knee on the top of it.

"The blackguard!" gasped Handforth. "What awful language, by George!"

"How's Nipper?" came De Valerie's inquiry.

"Oh, I'm all right now!" I replied. "Just a bit shivery, and I suppose my neck'll be sore for a week. But he didn't do any real harm, although he tried to, the scoundrel!"

"Well, what's to be done?" asked Handforth. "We can't sit on him here all the evening. I suggest lugging him off to the police-station and giving him in charge. He's committed an assault with violence."

"Go on!" I grinned. "Have you ever heard of an assault that wasn't violent?" But we won't take him to the police-station—"

"Why not?" asked Watson.

"I think it would be better to let Nelson Lee know all about it first," I replied. "We'll take the rotter to the school, and the gov'nor will know the best thing to do. Anyhow, we're not going to let him go!"

"Rather not!"

"Mr. Lee's the man to deal with the beast!"

Mr. Grell had commenced struggling again—in consequence, probably, of my decision, which he had undoubtedly heard.

"You brought it on yourself, you scoundrel!" I exclaimed sharply. "You attacked me without provocation, and I don't know what would have happened if these chaps hadn't been near by. You can't do things like that without paying for them."

"Yank him up!" said Handforth. "And look here, my beauty, if you start swearing again I'll tie McClure's coat round your beastly mouth!"

"Oh, will you?" demanded McClure warmly. "What's wrong with your coat?"

"Do you think I want to catch cold?" roared Handforth.

"You—you—"

"Always grumbling!" snapped Handforth.

"Can't make a little sacrifice like that, even, without growling about it?"

"If you think I'm going to have my coat tied round that rotter's mouth you're jolly well mistaken!" howled McClure. "You're dotty!"

"Don't start roving now," I broke in. "Don't take any notice of Handy, McClure. He's a wonderful chap for taking other people's property for unpleasant uses. That cap won't be much good by the time the prisoner's done with it!"

"Cap?" exclaimed Church, who had been looking round. "I wondered where the dickens my cap had got to! Of all the beastly cheek!"

And Church snatched Handforth's cap off and planted it upon his own head. Under ordinary conditions this action would have led to frightful consequences. But Handforth couldn't very well move now without causing trouble generally, and he was too excited to realise the full enormity of Church's crime.

"You wait, you rotter!" he gasped. "Now then, you rotter, up you get!"

This was hardly a nice compliment to Church, for Handforth had used the same disparaging term twice in one breath, thus placing Church in the same category as Mr. Grell. However, Church was thick-skinned.

Our prisoner was a truculent rascal. He gave us great trouble, struggling and kicking continuously. Although there were plenty of us, we only got in one another's way, and Mr. Grell was only pushed a dozen feet in two minutes.

"This won't do," I panted, at last. "Drop him down in the mud, and we'll tie our handkerchiefs round his wrists and ankles. He can't do much harm then, and it'll be easy enough to carry him bodily, five aside."

"Good wheeze!" exclaimed De Valerie.

But Mr. Simon Grell didn't think so.

"No need to do that," he muttered. "I'll go quiet, young genis."

"All right, I'll take your word!" I said grimly.

"I wouldn't take it, only we're strong enough to prevent you escaping. But if you show any sign of violence again, we'll soon have you trussed up. Remember that!"

But Mr. Grell knew that he was beaten, and marched along sullenly, held on both sides by many hands. And in this way we progressed towards the school. It was quite impossible for us all to hold him, so six performed that duty, and the others hovered near, in case of emergency.

I had made out that I wasn't hurt much. But Grell had nearly choked me, and I still felt dizzy and faint from the effect of it. And my throat was extremely sore.

"I vote we take the chap straight to the Head," said Handforth.

"Rot! Nelson Lee's the man—"

"Did you say 'rot' to me, Watson?" roared Handforth.

"Yes, I did—"

"Then I'll trouble you to apologise, or take a punch on the nose—whichever you like," said Handforth, dropping behind. "And I've got to punch Church's nose, too. Gimme my cap, Church."

"Rats!" retorted Church. "You can wear mine."

"After that beast's been chewing it!" bellowed Handforth. "I'll show you whether you can play those tricks with me, Walter Church!"

He made a grab at his faithful chum, and Church dodged. In doing so he blundered against Farman and the Bo'san. They lurched—unavoidably, and Mr. Grell recoiled from the concussion.

He let out a savage exclamation, wrenched his arms free, and knocked the unfortunate Church flying, with Farman on top of him. The next second Mr. Grell was tearing up the road at full speed.

"After him!" I roared, in alarm. "Oh, you asses— Whoop!"

I made that last startled remark as I fell headlong over the Bo'san's sprawling form. The utmost

confusion reigned, and when we had sorted ourselves out our late prisoner was no longer in sight.

"It's no good now!" I snorted. "He's in the wood by this time. Oh, you blithering idiot!"

"I should think he is!" roared Handforth.

"I meant you!" I declared fiercely.

"Me?"

"Didn't you start having a row?" I snapped. "It was all your fault, Handy, and you'll be jolly lucky if you ain't rolled in the mud! Tea or clerics of us, and we couldn't hold one man!"

"It's a disgustin'—it is, really!" protested Sir Montie.

"Well, it's no good growling!" I said. "We'd better get back to the Ancient House and say nothing about it. There's no sense in making a song. I'll tell the gov'nor all about it, and he'll take the right steps. The less we say about it to the other fellows the better."

"Why?" demanded Watson warmly.

"Well, I was considering Handforth, although he doesn't deserve it," I replied. "He caused this disaster, and he'd be the laughing-stock of the school if it came out. We should all be chipped to death, in fact. Eleven chaps, and we couldn't hold— Oh, what's the good of talking?"

For once in a way Handforth had nothing to say. He knew well enough that the fault was his, and he—and all the others—agreed that it would be better to keep the affair to ourselves.

But Mr. Simon Grell was not escaping so easily.

While we were sorting ourselves out he was very busily engaged. Rushing up the road, he ran clean into the arms of somebody who was walking down. And that somebody was Nelson Lee himself.

The gov'nor was nearly hoisted over, but he was instantly on the alert. The fugitive was obviously no ordinary pedestrian in a hurry. He was fleeing, and Nelson Lee's acute ears detected unmistakable shouts from down the lane. He instinctively grasped the stranger as he was about to tear on.

"Just a minute, please," said the schoolmaster-detective grimly. "I am afraid your undue haste is somewhat suspicious, Mr. Grell."

Captain Jim lashed out furiously with his fists. The fact that he had been recognised drove him into a fresh frenzy. He knew also that this man was Nelson Lee.

"Hang you!" he snarled. "Let me go!"

But if Mr. Grell was strong, Nelson Lee was his match. Furthermore, Captain Jim was partially exhausted from his previous struggles. He knew that he could not hope to escape in a fair tussle.

So he kicked out viciously with his heavy boot.

But Nelson Lee had been expecting that move, and Grell's foot beat the air idly. The effort, indeed, threw him off his balance, and the next moment he was down, with Lee on top of him.

After that attack the detective had excellent cause to detain the man, although he was unaware of the events which had already occurred. Those shouts had certainly warned him that some mystery was afoot, and it would be far better to hold Mr. Grell and ask questions afterwards.

But Captain Jim needed some holding.

He was like a madman, and Lee had all his work cut out to prevent his face being torn and his eyes injured, for Grell did not hesitate to use his formidable finger-nails. Ordinarily, perhaps, he would not have descended to this bestial style of fighting, but he was now half insane with alarm.

But Lee easily guarded himself.

"Calm yourself, you madman!" he shouted angrily. "I'm not going to hurt you—"

"By thunder!" snarled Grell. "I'm goin' to hurt you!"

They had rolled by this time to the side of the lane. And as they struggled amongst the rough

grass Grell's hand fell upon a heavy chunk of wood. He swung it up viciously, and it descended upon Lee's head with considerable force, although the blow was not at all a serious one.

In simple language, it made the gov'nor see stars for a few seconds. And it enabled Grell to haul himself free and stagger to his feet. Before the detective could rise Grell dashed across the road, broke through the hedge, and disappeared.

Nelson Lee was on his feet, fuming.

Although his head was aching, he attempted to follow. But just then I spotted the gov'nor, and ran forward. I was in advance of the other chaps, and I managed to have a few words in private.

"Yes, Nipper, it was Grell," said Lee quickly. "I don't know what the man's game is, but he's up to no good. No, I shall take no action, mainly for Mason's sake. Moreover, I am curious to see how the matter develops."

"But the man's dangerous—"

"I don't think so, young 'un—at least, not at ordinary times," replied Lee. "We must not judge him by this affair. He has probably been drinking, and was in a blind passion. I fancy he will give St. Frank's a wide berth, in any case. By the way, do the other boys know who he is?"

"No, sir; I haven't told them."

"Well, don't," advised the gov'nor. "If we can keep the thing quiet, all the better. Mason is an excellent boy, and I am afraid a great many juniors would make things difficult for him if the truth of this affair went abroad."

The rest of the fellows came up, and Nelson Lee said nothing about his adventure with Mr. Grell. And they, for their part, readily agreed to keep the thing quiet—more particularly now that their Housemaster had made the request.

Meanwhile, Captain Jim was making for the village across the meadows. As a matter of fact, the rascal had crouched behind the hedge, intending to trick Lee if he should follow. And Grell had overheard part of our conversation. He knew, at all events, that no action was to be taken. And he regained the road lower down, in a much calmer frame of mind.

"A blamed fool, that's what you are!" he told himself savagely. "This business ain't done you no good. By thunder! It's a good thing it wasn't worse—n' all my own fault for losin' my temper."

He walked on until he reached the White Hart. It was his intention to get in quietly, wash himself, and then take a long drink of spirits. He needed that drink to steady his nerves.

But just as he was about to turn into the gateway he saw a figure emerge from the post-office down the High Street. It was a boy, and Mr. Grell vaguely recognised something familiar about the lad's form.

He was Jack Mason!

CHAPTER XX.

THE MYSTERY OF THE ARABIC SIGNS.

CAPTAIN JIM caught his breath in sharply. "If that ain't the boy, I'll never believe my eyes agin!" he muttered. "It'll be darned queer if I run across him by accident, arter all my efforts to get hold of him. I'll make sure, anyway."

He walked quickly down the dark street. It was only comparatively light just outside one or two shops, and Mason had already left these behind. Mr. Grell meant to make no further mistakes.

"Obligo me with a match, young gent?" he asked, as the junior was passing.

"Sorry!" said Mason. "I haven't got one."

"That's all right, young 'un," said Mr. Grell,

recognising the voice. "I didn't really expect— Why, I've got a match all the time!"

He struck it, and allowed the light to fall full upon the boy. One glance was sufficient. He recognised his nephew in a moment, for five years had not made much alteration—except, of course, that Mason was now bigger, and that he was no longer a child.

"Why, bless me, if you ain't Jack—Jack Mason!" exclaimed Captain Jim, in a tone of surprise. "My little nerry! Well, boy, how are you? I'm real glad to see ye again, that I am!"

Jack Mason gave a little cry.

"Uncle?" he ejaculated, utterly startled.

"No need to shout, boy."

"But I thought you were dead! Aunt and I always thought you had died in Canada!" exclaimed Mason amazedly. "Then Pitt was right. Pitt told me that you were here, and I wouldn't believe him. I thought it was a joke!"

Mr. Groll laughed.

"So that's why you didn't come down to me?" he asked, feeling that this meeting was some little compensation for what had already passed. "Never mind, Jack—never mind! We've met now, ain't ye? An' we'll have a nice little chat."

Mason's feelings were somewhat mixed. As a child he had detested his uncle, for the latter had been harsh and cruel. So the news of his death had not been a very great blow. Indeed, the blow of finding that Mr. Groll was alive was even more serious. Jack Mason was not foolish enough to stoke himself believe that he was pleased to see his uncle. He wasn't, and a vague uneasiness filled him.

"Why have you come down here, uncle?" he asked quietly.

"Wot a question to ask!" protested Mr. Groll.

"Ain't I come to see you? Wot did ye think I come down for? Ye don't seem over pleased to greet me, Jack—me as you thought dead, too?"

"If you had written first it would have been better," said Jack. "You've taken me by surprise, uncle, and I hardly know what to say. If you'll come up to the school with me I'll show you round. I suppose you mean to take the last train home?"

Mr. Groll laughed nastily.

"Want to get rid of me—hey?" he suggested.

"Well, you wasn't—not until it pleases me to clear ed. See? An' we won't go up to the school, neither. I want a quiet talk with ye, so we'll stroll along this here lane."

They had reached a point on the outskirts of the village where a small lane led across to an outlying farm. It was a lane which was generally deserted after nightfall, and the pair would be certain of privacy there.

Jack Mason was filled with uneasiness and alarm. Having recovered from the first shock of finding that his uncle was alive, he realised that this visit could mean no good. For his uncle was a rascal, and it was past all belief that he had come down to St. Frank's for the mere pleasure of seeing his nephew.

"What do you want to talk about?" asked Jack. "Have you been home to aunt?"

Mr. Groll snorted.

"Don't talk about your aunt to me!" he snapped.

"Yes, I've bin home, an' you won't find me there agin. But look here, Jack, I want to ask you a few questions. I was a bit surprised when I heard that you'd come to this swell school."

"I don't wonder at it," said Jack. "It was a big surprise for me, too."

"I dossey," agreed the other. "But how did ye manage it, boy? I want to know the whole truth, mind. Her comes it that an orphan—a nerry of

a hard-working sailorman—is bein' educated at a first-class school of this sort?"

"My fees are being paid—"

"Who by?"

"I don't know exactly," replied Jack. "The lawyers do all the business, uncle. They told me not to worry—"

"That yarn won't wash," put in Mr. Groll grinsly. "Lawyers ain't generous folk, that I know of. It ain't their way to pay money for other people. They're slipy actin' for somebody else. Who is it? Why are your fees bein' paid—?"

"I don't know," interrupted Jack steadily. "I was told that some money had been left for the purpose of sending me to St. Frank's. I always thought that you had died, and that the legacy had been left by you."

"Bah!" jeered Mr. Groll. "D'ye suppose that I'd leave any money of mine to be wasted on such blamed foolery as this?"

"It was rather extraordinary," said Jack simply.

"That's a sneer at me!" retorted Mr. Groll. "Don't you dare to sneer at your own uncle, my boy. I won't stand no sauce, so you'd best understand that straight away. You know perfectly well all about this messey, so don't fake up any yarns to me. Understand?"

"I've already told you the truth—"

"You ain't! Who's paying this money?" demanded Captain Jim roughly. "An' how is it bein' supplied? Can you lay your hands on it if you want to?"

"I don't know who is paying it at all, now that you deny all knowledge of it," said Jack, in a puzzled tone. "It's a legacy, and the lawyers told me that everything was perfectly in order. It might have been left by one of my father's relations—somebody I've never seen."

"That's quite likely," agreed Mr. Groll. "What's the exact sum?"

"I don't know, uncle. I never have done."

"Can't you lay your hands on it?" demanded the other. "Understand, Jack, that I'm your uncle, and your legal guardian. You can't do nothin' without my consent—that's law. An' I don't hold with a kid of your class bein' educated at this place. That there money can be put to better use."

Mason was beginning to understand.

"I don't see why you should try to spoil everything like this, uncle," he said angrily. "The money was left for me, and I can't touch it. It was only left on condition that it was spent upon my education. The lawyers pay my fees and supply me with pocket-money. That's all I know."

"How much pocket-money do you get?"

"Ten shillings a week and an extra pound on the first of each month."

"By thunder!" ejaculated Mr. Groll. "That's enough for a man to keep a wife and family! What do you do with all that money?"

"I spend a lot of it on books, and there are all sorts of expenses at a school like St. Frank's. It isn't any too much. Ten in the study every day takes some of it, and there are other things, too."

"Darned foolishness, I call it!" said Mr. Groll. "Fifteen bob a week for a kid like you—that's what it amounts to. It's too much, Jack, an' you'll have to send to bob of it every week to me—understand? I don't hold with a boy having too much money."

"That's not fair—"

"I don't want no lip!" snapped Groll. "You're under my control, an' I'm goin' to have my way. What's more, you'll go an' see them lawyers, an' ask if you can't have the money in a lump. I'll take charge of it, an' see that it ain't wasted. When a boy has money left him, he don't want to

waste it on useless eddication. I'll shove it in the bank and put you to a job. That money will be a nice little nest egg for ye when ye come of age."

Jack Mason was boiling within him, but he remained calm outwardly.

"I won't leave St. Frank's!" he exclaimed grimly. "The legacy was especially provided for me, and it wouldn't be right to touch it. Besides, I don't think the lawyers would agree, in any case. They expressly told me that it was for no other purpose."

"Lawyers are the biggest liars on earth!" snapped Mr. Grell. "Anyhow, we'll talk about this some other time, and make all arrangements. For the present, you'd best hand me all the money you've got."

Mason was rebellious. His uncle had absolutely no right to demand a penny. With regard to the legacy, Jack was not at all alarmed. He knew well enough that Mr. Grell's plan could never be accomplished. The solicitors would never consent to the money being placed in the uncle's care.

Jack wanted to get away, so that he could think over this development alone. So he pulled out all the money he had on him.

"I've only got a few shillings," he said shortly. "None of your lies!" snapped Mr. Grell. "Bah! What d'ye call this? Five bob an' some coppers—

—Hallo, what's this thing?"

He picked up the half of a gold locket which lay in Mason's hand.

"That's nothing much," said Jack. "You've seen it before, uncle. Don't you remember? It's got some Arabic writing on it—"

"Fancy you keeping that thing all these years!" interrupted Mr. Grell, picking it up. "Why, you had this thing when you was just a little nipper! It's pretty heavy, an' it's solid gold, too. I reckon that would fetch a quid in a pawnshop!"

Jack pulled his hand away.

"You're not going to take that, uncle!" he protested. "It's a keepsake—"

"I can have a look at it, I suppose?" growled Captain Jim. "Bein' an eddicated man myself, I can read this here lingo. An' I never went to no school, neither. Experience is what you want, boy—no learnin'."

It was quite true that Mr. Grell could read Arabic. But this was mainly on account of the fact that he had voyaged frequently to Algiers, Alexandria, and other North African parts. He had spent years there in his earlier life, and had picked up a smattering of all sorts of languages. Arabic was one of those which he could read.

He struck a match, and looked at the half locket interestedly. He did not expect to discover anything of a startling nature. He was merely curious, wishing to look at the Arabic signs again, having vague memories that they were of a curious nature. Indeed, he even remembered a portion of the message.

For this Arabic writing was roughly scratched upon the inner side of the gold casing, several lines of signs being visible. Neither Jack nor his uncle knew how they had come there.

But Mr. Grell was startled with a vengeance!

"What's this—what's this?" he exclaimed suddenly. "Why, Name me— Curse the match! Here, strike another, boy!"

The match had burnt Captain Jim's fingers, and Jack took the box and struck another. He could not understand why his uncle was so excited. How could this half locket have affected him so? He had seen it often enough before.

"Well, I'm durned!" ejaculated Mr. Grell. "What's the meenin' of this? How did ye get this, Jack? Where's the other half?"

"What do you mean—how did I get it?"

"Don't fool with me, boy!" snapped Grell. "This ain't the half I've allus seen afore. It's the other half—the one what was measin'. How did ye get it, Jack? An' what have ye done with the other—"

"I don't know what you're talking about," interrupted Jack. "You're making a mistake, uncle. That's the half I've always had, and I don't know where the rest of the locket is. Why, what gave you the idea?"

Mr. Grell made no answer for a time. He made Jack strike match after match while he closely examined the interior of the locket.

"I don't understand you, uncle," Mason said, after Mr. Grell had spent fully three minutes in examining the locket. "You must be wrong—"

"Don't be a young fool!" snapped Mr. Grell, his eyes blazing excitedly. "Do you think I ain't got eyes. This writin' is quite different. I've never seen this half afore. Where's the other? Out with it, boy!"

"I tell you I haven't seen it," protested Jack angrily. "There is no other half. This is the piece I've always had—"

"Don't tell them lies to me!" rapped out the man. "You can say that till you're blue in the face, but I shan't believe ye! I want the whole locket—complete. I shan't take it away from ye, so don't be a young fool. I only want to have a look at the writin'."

"But I don't know—"

"There you go agin!" roared Mr. Grell. "I'll be at the stile to-morrow evening at half-past seven, just the same as I was to-night. An' you're got to come round an' bring me the other half. Now don't make no objections. You've got it, an' you needn't tell me that you ain't!"

Jack sighed.

"I don't understand what all the fuss is about," he said quietly. "If you won't believe me, uncle, you won't. But I tell you that you have made a blunder. How could I have the other half when I've never seen it? You must have forgotten, or you're mixing this locket up with another one. Give it back to me, please!"

"There's no hurry," said Mr. Grell. "Don't forget to be at the stile at half-past seven, and bring down the other half. I'll give ye the whole locket arter I've looked at the two of 'em. An' I'm goin' to keep this—"

"You're not!" shouted Jack angrily. "Give it to me!"

The lad knew his uncle well, and he was quite convinced that Mr. Grell would make for the nearest pawnshop in the morning. And then Jack would never see his keepsake again. The talk of the missing half was bewildering, but Mason was not thinking of that now. He only knew that his sentimental little prize was being stolen from him.

"I'll not give it to ye!" snapped Mr. Grell. "An' you needn't look so alarmed over a silly locket. Arter you've shown me the other half I'll let you have it back, and not afore. To-morrow evening I—"

But Jack Mason was taking no chances. The locket was still in his uncle's palm, and Jack suddenly thrust out his hand and snatched the locket away. Mr. Grell gave a roar, but it was too late.

"You young whelp!" he bellowed. "Ginans that—"

But Jack was fleeing down the road like a deer. Perhaps it hadn't been the right thing to do, but if he had neglected the opportunity he wouldn't have seen the locket again. Captain Jim tore after him.

"Come back, dura ye!" he shouted furiously. "I'll skin ye alive for this! Bring the locket complete to-morrow night—"

But Mr. Grell's orders fell on deaf ears. He was a fast runner for a somewhat heavy man, but Mason was like a greyhound by comparison. He shot away in the darkness, and only slowed down after he had reached the main lane to St. Frank's.

He felt excited and worried. But there was one cause for satisfaction. His precious locket was safe, and he had no intention of handing it to his uncle again.

CHAPTER XXI.

PITT MAKES A BARGAIN.

REGINALD PITT looked at his study-mate curiously, although Mason was unaware of the Serpent's examination. The two of them were at prep in Study E, and there was silence in the little apartment.

Pitt knew well enough that something had upset Jack. He was quiet enough, and he went on with his work in his usual methodical manner. But, at the same time, his face was flushed, and he could not conceal the anxiety in his eyes.

"Uncle Simon?" Pitt told himself. "That's the trouble."

Pitt was inclined to be pleasant, especially after the affair in Fullwood's study. But when prep was over Mason walked out of the room without a word. This was rather unfortunate, for Pitt took it as a slight, and he frowned unpleasantly.

As a matter of fact, Mason was too busy with his thoughts to realise that his action seemed rather queer. He quite forgot that Pitt was in the study, and walked out absent-mindedly. He wanted to think—to come to a decision.

And, pacing in the dark Triangle, he came to one.

Grell was not likely to come to the school, and Mason decided that it would be wiser to say nothing for the present. If his uncle actually did pay a visit, Jack would have no hesitation in appealing to Nelson Lee or the Head.

Jack felt quite justified in his action. Grell had no right to the locket, and he would certainly have stuck to it if Mason had not acted promptly. What the consequences would be remained to be seen, but Jack was not nervous.

Handforth and De Valerie and all the rest didn't even know that the man they had straggled with in the lane was Mason's uncle, and the affair was allowed to blow over without any reference being made to it.

I did not fail to notice a difference in Mason that evening, and I guessed that he had seen his precious uncle and was far from pleased. However, it was no concern of mine, and I asked no questions.

Mason seemed rather absent-minded when I had a chat with him about football—which was most remarkable. For Jack was as keen as mustard on football, and there was a distinct prospect that he would play for St. Frank's in the next big match.

His preoccupation, therefore, was an excellent measure of the worry in his mind. Only a very serious affair would have caused him to treat football as a kind of side interest, and that was certainly his attitude just then. Seeing this, I dropped the subject and left him alone.

I had half a mind to ask what the trouble was and to offer my help. But I have a horror of prying into other people's affairs, and I didn't want Mason to think that I was inquisitive. It would be better to wait a little longer and see how events turned.

On the following morning the boy from Bermondsey was more cheerful. A good sleep had driven the worry away, and he told himself there was nothing to concern himself about. Grell was down

there for just what he could get, and Mason did not consider it his duty to obey his uncle.

With regard to the appointment for that evening he didn't intend to keep it. Considering what had happened, he couldn't. And Captain Jim would certainly not expect the boy to be there.

Whether he expected Mason or not, however, Mr. Grell turned up. He thought, perhaps, that Jack would be afraid to keep away, and it would be just as well to be on the spot.

Naturally, Mason would not bring the locket. Grell was quite sure of that, but if he could get hold of the boy again he would adopt different tactics. Force was evidently useless, for Jack resisted it. So persuasion must be tried—persuasion and an assumed kindness.

But Jack wasn't there.

The long road between the village and the school was dark and deserted. The night was quite clear, the moon shining somewhere in the sky, although completely hidden by the high trees of Belton Wood. The lane was in deep gloom, and there was a touch of frost in the air.

Mr. Grell swore savagely as he glanced at his watch and found that the time was a quarter to eight. Jack wasn't coming, and Grell felt as though he could shake the boy like a rat. At that very moment Jack Mason was seated in his study, busy with his books.

Pitt was disgusted. If Mason hadn't been such a "scout," life would have been easier in Study E. But whenever Pitt wanted to talk, Mason was deeply immersed in work. It was most annoying. Even if Pitt interrupted, he only received short replies, and this sort of thing irritated him.

Pitt was a fellow who liked companionship, and it was only natural, perhaps, that he should seek the society of Fullwood & Co., for he was not made welcome in any other study. Juniors were polite, but Pitt knew that his presence was not desired. From one point of view, therefore, Mason was rather to blame for the feeling which existed between the two juniors.

Pitt lounged out into the Triangle at about eight o'clock, having finished his prep. He always "skipped" over it as hurriedly as possible. From the Triangle he strolled into the road, half deciding to walk down to the village in order to obtain some cigarettes. But he hesitated, wondering if the game was worth the candle. Pitt's desire for smoking was not nearly so great as it had been.

A form loomed up out of the gloom.

"That you, Jack?" came a soft voice.

"No, it isn't Jack!" retorted Pitt. "You're Grell, ain't you? What the deuce did you mean by chucking me into the ditch the other day—"

"Why, it's Master Pitt!" said Captain Jim, coming forward. "I'm glad you've come out, young shaver. I want a word with yo."

"I'm not particularly anxious," said Pitt shortly.

"Don't bear no malice, young 'un," said Grell pleasantly. "I was wild when I handled you rough. It's up to me to apologise, an' I don't want you to think I'm a bad sort o' chap. That's square enough, ain't it?"

Pitt laughed.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked calmly.

"Why, I'm only bein' friendly like—"

"Is that all?" asked Pitt. "I thought you were just resorting to flattery—or, at least, that you wanted to make things genial again. You're not the kind of man to waste words over a junior unless you want something out of it, Mr. Grell. And I haven't forgiven you for that ducking, so don't think I have."

"Well, that's unkind of yo," said Mr. Grell. "I didn't mean no harm, an' I've apologized. Wet

more can I do? I come here to meet my navvy, but the young rascal hasn't turned up."

"Did he know that you were coming?"

"Yes."

The Serpent laughed again.

"He didn't say anything about it," he remarked. "I left him in the study five minutes ago, busy at his work. That's how much he cared for your appointment, Mr. Grell. I don't think he likes you, somehow."

Captain Jim scowled.

"I'll make him smart!" he exclaimed savagely. "But, look here, Pitt, if you're willin' to lend me a hand I'll make it worth your while. If you can do somethin' for me you won't have no cause to grumble."

Pitt became interested.

"It all depends upon what you want," he replied. "If you're asking me to do anything dirty I sha'n't listen to you. I don't mind anything reasonable, but there's a limit. And what would it be worth?"

Pitt remembered that he was stony, and with no prospect of "raising the wind." Pitt hated being stony, and he was willing to seize any chance to improve his finances.

"I'll tell you wot it's worth when I know a bit more," said Captain Jim. "I'm Mason's uncle, an' the young varmint has deliberately disobeyed me. I s'pose you'll agree that I'm the right chap to control him?"

"I won't pass an opinion," said Pitt calmly.

"Well, you've got a fair nerve, but I reckon you're just the kid for my job," said Mr. Grell. "I'll git to the point. Do you know anythin' about a gold locket which Jack's got?"

"I know quite a bit about it," replied Pitt.

"By thunder!" murmured Mr. Grell. "We'd best stroll down the road, Pitt. You an' me can have a friendly little chat. Now, about this here locket. Do you know where you can lay your hand on it?"

"It's in Mason's pocket," replied Pitt. "I can't very well get at it, even if I wanted to. I don't happen to be a thief."

Captain Jim laughed heartily.

"You will have your joke!" he exclaimed, as they walked down the road. "Thief? That's all rot, young shaver. Ain't I the kid's uncle? That locket ain't his no more than it's yours. It's mine, an' he won't give it up to me. If you'll git hold of it you'll be doin' me a service, an' there'll be no question of thievin' about it. A man can't steal his own property."

"That's one way of lookin' at it," remarked Pitt. "But why the deuce are you so eager to get hold of that half locket? It's not worth much, is it?"

"Just a bit of sentiment," explained Mr. Grell. "That belonged to my poor mother, an' I've allus wanted it with me. But wot's that you said about a half locket? Ain't it all there?"

"Mason's only got half," replied the Serpent.

He did not mean to mention anything about the other half. He wasn't supposed to know of its existence, for it was in Mr. Strong's sealed package. And Pitt saw no reason why he should reveal that fact to Grell.

"Only half?" repeated Captain Jim. "That's queer. I allus thought he had the complete locket. If you'll git me that half, Pitt, I'll give you a quid. Good enough? A quid, all for yourself."

Pitt considered.

"I wouldn't do it at all, but I'm hard-up just now," he said at last. "And, as you say, it's not a question of stealing. You're his uncle, and it's only a family affair."

"That's all," agreed Mr. Grell promptly. "Well, wot d'ye say?"

"I want the quid—now," replied Pitt. "I shall feel safer if you pay in advance, Mr. Grell. I'll bring you the half locket to-morrow evening."

"I don't pay on them terms," said the man, curtly. "I don't mind lettin' you have five bob on account—"

"All right," said Pitt. "The deal's off."

"You ain't no ordinary kid, durned if you are!" declared Mr. Grell. "Let's talk this over a bit more. Jack's got the whole locket—I'll swear to that. An' for why? Because the piece I saw last night wasn't the half he allus had. See? He must have the two, or it couldn't have been changed."

Pitt nearly whistled. So he had mixed up the two halves after opening Mr. Strong's package! That action, evidently, was leading to unexpected consequences. And Pitt was very short of money.

"How much would you give to get the whole locket?" he asked slowly.

"Five quid—down!" replied Mr. Grell at once.

"It's not worth two—intrinsically," said the junior. "Look here, Mr. Grell, if you're willing to give a fiver for the locket, it stands to reason that it must be worth more. I bet those Arabic signs—"

"Bah!" interrupted Captain Jim hastily. "I dessey it ain't worth more than two quid, rightly speakin'; but it's worth five to me, because I'm a sentimental chap."

"You look it," remarked Pitt calmly. "Still, it's no business of mine, and I could certainly do with a fiver. I didn't mean to say anything about it, but I can't see that it'll do any harm, and five pounds is five pounds."

"You never spoke a truer word!" said the man eagerly. "I lace young Jack was lyin' to me, the young varmint!"

"He wasn't lyin' at all!" Pitt exclaimed. "He doesn't know anything about the other half. It's in a little sealed package, and it was left here by mistake by a Mr. Strong, a friend of Mason's."

"An' how do you know the locket's inside?"

"Well, I haven't got eyes like X-rays," replied Pitt. "How do you think I know? I opened it, of course, and did it up again, while Mason wasn't there. I suppose I'm a fool to tell you anything about it. But if the thing's worth a fiver to you, I don't see why I shouldn't make a bit for myself. You're Mason's uncle, and you must have a right to the things."

Pitt tried to make himself believe that he was justified; that Mr. Grell had every right to the gold locket. But Pitt was unsuccessful. He didn't convince himself at all. He knew he was doing wrong, but he didn't draw back.

"How are you goin' to get the things, any'ow?" asked Grell.

"Well, I don't want to take any risks, if that's what you mean," replied Pitt. "The game wouldn't be worth it. But if you'll make it six quid I'll outline a little scheme which will be as safe as boxes. Is it a go?"

"Let's hear the scheme first."

"If you adopt it will you pay me six quid?"

"Yes, you young Shylock!" growled Captain Jim. "You seem to think I'm a blasted millionaire! You'll skin me out, hang you!"

Pitt grinned, taking no notice of this statement. It wasn't quite true, for Mr. Grell had over ten pounds in his pocket at that moment, and he knew where he could lay hands on a further supply if necessary.

The scheme was outlined, and Mason's uncle was enthusiastic. It was close upon nine o'clock before the pair parted, and then the gates were closed. This didn't worry Reginald Pitt, for he slipped over the wall and stole into the Ancient House without being seen.

He felt extremely satisfied with the evening's events. Exactly one hour later, after getting into bed, his feelings had altered. The satisfaction was lacking, and he felt that he was several kinds of a rotter.

But the Serpent had committed himself now, and the scheme had to go through. Moreover, he had three pounds in his pocket, and three more were to come.

And that, at all events, was some consolation for his conscience. The very fact that he had a conscience was surprising. It even surprised Pitt himself.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SCHEME—AND A HITCH!

"TELEGRAM, Master Mason."

Tubby, the Ancient House page, came into Study E on the following afternoon, which happened to be a half-holiday. Mason was in the apartment alone, attired in footer rig-out, for he was to play in the House match.

"For Pitt?" he asked. "All right, Tubby. Put it on the table."

"It's for you, Master Mason," said the page-boy.

Jack took it wondering, for he couldn't imagine why a telegram should come for him. Tubby was about to leave, when Pitt strolled in, smiling.

"I'm going to watch the match this afternoon, Mason," he said slyly. "Hallo! Who's the telegram for?"

"Master Mason, sir," said Tubby.

The page-boy passed out, and Pitt closed the door.

"No gadding about this afternoon," he said, grinning. "I'm going to be quite a good boy and watch you playing football. The fact is, I'm getting rather interested in footer. Nipper's never given me a trial, but that's only because I didn't want one. But I'm not so dusty—"

Pitt paused as he realised he was addressing the empty air. Mason had opened his telegram, and was reading it with great eagerness.

"Oh, how ripping!" he exclaimed, his eyes shining.

"Somebody left you a fortune?" asked Pitt politely.

"Mr. Strong will be in Bannington this afternoon," said Jack. "I shall have to go over to see him, of course. He's asked me to go. It's about that package he left behind."

"How's the team going to fare without you?" asked Pitt.

"Oh!" Mason's face clouded. "I shall have to miss the match," he went on regretfully. "Look at the telegram!"

Pitt took it, and read the message:

"Will be at Bull Hotel, Bannington, this afternoon. Will you bring that package over to me—the one I left behind? Shall be very pleased to see you, Jack. Don't fail. DAVID STRONG."

"I suppose you'll have to go," said Pitt. "But there's no need for you to miss the match, that I can see. 'This afternoon' covers two or three hours, and the match'll be over by four. You can easily run over to Bannington on your bike after that. Mr. Strong will be waiting till five, I'll bet."

"Yes, I suppose he will," said Jack. "That's a good idea, Pitt. I should have gone right off if you hadn't given me that tip. The wire was dispatched at Helmsford, I see. Where's that?"

"Oh, a good way beyond Bannington," replied

Pitt. "I suppose your venerable friend went to Helmsford on business, so thought he might as well collect that package of his at the same time. Rather queer he didn't come to St. Frank's, though."

"Oh, I expect the trains were awkward!" said Jack. "If he had come here, he might have missed a good connection, and he knows I don't mind going over. Coming out?"

They left the study, Pitt in the rear. There was a smile upon the Serpent's face, but it was scarcely a contented one. He was telling himself how easily the new boy had fallen into the trap. Mason never suspected that the wire was not from Mr. Strong at all. He had no earthly reason to suspect such a thing.

The House match was nearly due to start, and Pitt kept his word and was an interested spectator. It was the first time he had stood by the ropes on Little Side since his arrival at St. Frank's.

He thought he would be bored. He wasn't. He found himself yelling with enthusiasm, and created quite a lot of attention. It was unusual to see Reginald Pitt cheering his side in a football match. But the fact remained, and it was an excellent sign.

I noticed Pitt's attitude on several occasions. I noticed his flushed face and his sparkling eyes. This all told of a change, and I began to feel that the day would soon come when the Serpent would cast aside his old habits altogether.

It is not my intention to go into any lengthy description of this match. It was quite an ordinary affair, the only outstanding feature being Mason's wonderful work in the forward line. He surpassed all expectations, and converted an easy victory for us into a positive triumph. We scored six goals in that match, and three of them were Mason's. The College House Eleven just managed to score a single goal within two minutes of the finish, when we had grown careless. I even suspect that Handforth, in the fullness of his heart, allowed the ball to slip past him into the net—Handforth being goalie. Edward Oswald was a kind-hearted fellow, and he knew that we could afford to give the Monks one goal.

Jack Mason's fate was sealed from that hour—a fate he delighted in. He was positively booked for his colours in the Junior Eleven, and there wasn't a single fellow in the Remove who raised a protest. It would have been madness to play a match without including Mason.

He was a modest youth, however, and when everybody looked for him to congratulate him, he had backed off the field. This wouldn't have been the case, perhaps, if Jack had had plenty of time. But he was anxious to get off to Bannington, in order to keep his appointment with the supposed Mr. Strong. Pitt went up into the dormitory with him, and offered to cycle over to Bannington at the same time.

"Thanks," said Mason. "I shall be awfully glad, Pitt. I say, can't we get on a bit better together?"

"That's what we are doing," said Pitt calmly. "I've been a bit of a beast sometimes, Mason, but you shouldn't take any notice of me."

As Pitt was uttering the words he felt how hollow his first remark was, and how truthful the latter. He had certainly been "a beast," and in saying that they were getting on better together was a mere farce. For Pitt was even now, at that very moment, planning a contemptible trick upon his study-mate.

He was half inclined to give it up then and there, to warn Mason of the whole scheme. Unfortunately, the thought of the three pounds to come prompted him otherwise. And Pitt, for all his faults, was a fellow of his word. When he made an arrangement he stuck to it.

He and Mason started off soon after four and cycled briskly along the road to Bannington. Reginald Pitt's plan was a cunning one. Mr. Grell had wanted him to obtain the lockset, but that would have involved a certain amount of risk for Pitt.

The present scheme left him out of it completely, and so Grell was satisfied, everything was all right. It had been Pitt's idea to send the wire. Mason would go over, taking the package, and, naturally, the half lockset of his own. Once within the private parlour of the Bull Hotel he would find himself face to face with his uncle. And Mr. Grell knew that he would have no difficulty in obtaining what he wanted.

Pitt himself did nothing, except think out the scheme. Also, he had been on hand when the telegram arrived, in case Mason should suspect treachery. Pitt would have scoffed at the idea under those circumstances, and would have persuaded Mason to go. But that had not been necessary.

He had no intention of going all the way with Mason. His idea was to stay behind in Bannington on the pretext of doing some shopping. The Bull Hotel was on the farther outskirts. Then Pitt would cycle on and arrive just in time to "rescue" Mason from his uncle—after Grell had obtained what he wanted. In this way Mason would not suspect him of being implicated, and would, indeed, believe the opposite.

But while the pair were cycling on, something was happening at St. Frank's which was destined to make a very big alteration in the scheme. I was chatting with Nelson Lee in the latter's study.

The subject of our conversation was football, and I had just changed into ordinary Ettons. Sir Montie and Tommy were preparing tea in Study C.

"A remarkable victory, Nipper," the *gav'nor* was saying. "If you go on at that rate the College House will have no look-in at all. And you say that Mason is quite good?"

"I didn't," I replied. "Good isn't the word, *sir*. It's no exaggeration to say that he's one of the finest men in the Junior Eleven. In fact, there are only about two chaps who can touch his form."

"One of them, of course, being yourself?" smiled Lee.

I grinned.

"I'm a modest chap, *gav'nor*," I replied. "There are certain things which I leave you to imagine for yourself. But, really, Mason— Oh, rats!"

The telephone-bell was ringing, and Lee pulled the instrument towards him.

"Yes," he said. "St. Frank's—that's quite right. You are speaking to Mr. Lee of the Ancient House— Oh, yes—I didn't quite catch the name? Mr. David Strong? Oh, quite so! How are you, Mr. Strong? Your voice sounds remarkably robust!"

I looked on and listened interestedly.

"Yes, of course, you may speak to Mason," said the *gav'nor*. "If you will hold the line, my dear *sir*, I will send for the lad at once. I have no doubt that he will be most delighted to speak to you."

"Another job for me!" I growled.

Nelson Lee turned his head.

"It is certainly another job for you, Nipper. Just run round and fetch Mason, will you? Mr. Strong is waiting."

"Where's he speaking from?" I asked.

"Brighton, you young rascal," said the *gav'nor*. "What on earth do you want to know that for? Tell Mason to come here."

I left the study. Brighton wasn't so very far off, and the phone call was quite a normal one. Mr. Strong possibly had an idea of getting Mason to

join him for the week-end at the seaside, although the weather wasn't very pleasant.

"Seen Mason?" I asked, as Church and McClure passed me.

"Not since the match," replied McClure. "Ain't he having tea?"

"Yes, I suppose so," I replied.

We walked up the passage together, and I turned into Study E. One look was sufficient—the room was empty, and there was certainly no sign of tea. If I found it necessary to chase Mason all over the House, Mr. Strong would be cut off by the time I found him.

"Gone out, by the look of it," I murmured. "Well, it's no good—"

And then I paused. I had caught sight of a familiar-looking envelope in the fireplace—a telegram envelope. This immediately suggested things, and I looked round the room with a searching eye.

My quest was a short one. Upon the bookshelf, neatly folded, was a telegram. I felt justified in reading it, especially after seeing that Jack Mason's name was upon the crumpled envelope.

"What's this?" I muttered, as I read the message. "Bull Hotel, Bannington? How the dickens can Mr. Strong be in Bannington if he's in Brighton?"

The thing was impossible, and I frowned with perplexity. At all events, there was a discrepancy somewhere. Mr. Strong would hardly tell the *gav'nor* that he was at Brighton if he wasn't; and, in just the same way, Mr. Strong would hardly ask Jack to go to him in Bannington if he wasn't there.

This led to a startling idea.

Something was wrong—either the phone call or the telegram. It suggested that the man at the other end of the wire was not Mr. Strong at all, or it was just as probable that the telegram was a fake one.

In any case, it was quite evident that Jack Mason had gone off to Bannington, so he couldn't go to the phone. I hastened back to Nelson Lee's study, and found him chatting amiably with Mr. Strong about things in general.

"Way, Nipper—" began the *gav'nor*.

"Mason's out, *sir*," I said in a low voice. "And look at this. I found it in his study."

Nelson Lee continued talking into the transmitter while he glanced at the telegram. His eyes grew a little grim, but he showed no other emotion.

"You are in Brighton, I understand, Mr. Strong?" he asked.

"Yes, yes; quite so," came the reply.

"Would it be inquisitive for me to ask if you have been there all day?"

"My dear *sir*, I have no secrets to keep," chuckled Mr. Strong. "I came down by the morning express from London. As I explained a few moments ago, I have an idle half-hour just now, and the whim seized me to ring up St. Frank's. You really must forgive me for being such a nuisance."

"My dear Mr. Strong, I am quite delighted to have this little chat," said Nelson Lee. "Indeed, I urge you to ring me up whenever you have an opportunity, and to pay me a personal visit, too."

"I'm afraid I can't get to St. Frank's just yet," replied Mr. Strong. "I am off to France tomorrow, and shall stay there a week or two on business connected with my estate. That is one reason why I wished to have a few words with Jack. I want to bring him a little souvenir lock, and he shall have a choice—"

"I am very sorry, Mr. Strong, but I have just learned that Mason is not in the school at the moment," said Nelson Lee. "It appears that he

has gone to Bannington, and will probably not be back for an hour."

"There!" ejaculated Mr. Strong. "I knew it! Even while I was ringing up I had an idea that something like this would turn up. How annoying, Mr. Lee. But no matter. The affair is of no importance. Please forgive me for bothering you so needlessly."

Two minutes later Nelson Lee hung up the receiver, and then he turned in his swivel-chair with the telegram in his hand.

"Now, Nipper, what is this?" he said intently.

"Well, I'm hanged if I know, sir," I replied.

"Why didn't you ask Mr. Strong about it? Why didn't you ask him if he'd sent a wire?"

"Because it is perfectly obvious, young 'un, that Mr. Strong did not send a wire."

"Do you think you were really speaking to Mr. Strong?" I asked.

Nelson Lee smiled at me.

"I think you'll give me credit, Nipper, for being sufficiently wide awake to detect a deception of that sort," he said. "It was Mr. Strong right enough, and it is the telegram which is at fault."

"But why didn't you mention it to him, guv'nor?" I persisted. "He ought to be told, you know."

"No doubt, Nipper; and he will be told. Indeed, I intended informing him of the fact at once, but then I learned that he is off for France in the morning. Now, a man who is just about to leave the country would not want a worrying matter of that sort put before him. I think we are quite capable of dealing with it ourselves, Nipper. Mr. Strong can hear about it when he returns, in a week or two."

"Oh, that alters it!" I said. "But what does this wire mean?"

Nelson Lee rose from his chair.

"That is what we are now about to find out, young 'un," he replied grimly.

CHAPTER XXIII.

NOT ACCORDING TO PROGRAMME.

SOMETHING was decidedly amiss.

"It is most fortunate that Mr. Strong happened to ring up this afternoon," remarked Nelson Lee, as he lit a cigarette.

"But for that fact, Nipper, we should have had no warning. And, let me tell you, there is not a moment to be lost. How long ago did Mason start out for Bannington?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Then find out, Nipper—find out!" rapped out the guv'nor. "I will get the car ready, and we'll start within five minutes."

"Can Montie and Tommy come, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"No, certainly not! Still, I don't know that it matters," added Lee. "There's no reason why they shouldn't have the benefit of the ride. Since Mr. Strong is in Brighton it is obviously impossible for him to be in Bannington. A telegram is a most handy method of deception, Nipper, since there is no handwriting to recognise, and it carries with it an urgency which is liable to disarm any possible suspicion. Such a trick could not deceive us, but Mason is inexperienced."

"Who's the culprit, then?" I asked.

"Why, Grell, of course—Mason's uncle," replied Lee. "Who else? You know as well as I do that Grell has been trying to see his nephew for the past two or three days, and it now appears that he is after a certain sealed package. Suggestive, Nipper. There is something behind all this."

"That's what I've been thinking, sir—"

"Well, don't think now," interrupted the guv'nor. "Be at the gates within five minutes, and not a moment later. We don't know the exact nature of this plot, but we do know that every minute is of value."

I hurried off, and soon learned that Mason had taken his departure with Pitt about twenty minutes before, so I had only missed him by a narrow margin. And with Pitt, too! Why was Pitt with him? Knowing the Serpent's record, I was a bit suspicious.

Grell was undoubtedly responsible for the trick. Instead of finding Mr. Strong at Bannington, Mason would find his own uncle. Nelson Lee could not have interfered if Captain Jim acted openly. But he had used another man's name and had descended to deliberate forgery, for that is what it amounted to. Therefore, the guv'nor was justified in taking a hand.

I burst into Study C like a whirlwind.

"About time you came!" said Watson. "Tea's been ready—"

"Bust the tea!" I interrupted. "Chuck it all aside, and come with me!"

"Begad! You're frightfully disturbin', Nipper," complained Montie. "What's the meanin' of all this whirlwind? Don't glare at me, old boy—"

"We're just going off to Bannington," I explained. "Mason's been tricked by some rotter, and the guv'nor's going to rescue him. If you don't like to come with us, you can stay behind. We're going by car."

"Begad! How beastly interestin'!" said Tregellis-West, raising to his feet. "I'm always there when there's somethin' on the go. Excitement suits me wonderfully, an' I thrive— Begad! Where are you goin', dear boys?"

"We hadn't time to wait for Montie to finish. Tommy Watson was full of enthusiasm in a moment, and we hurried down the passage. Sir Montie, with a sigh, followed us. We only paused for a moment at the cloak-room to obtain our caps and overcoats. And when we got outside we found Nelson Lee's car shooting round from the garage, with the guv'nor at the wheel.

"Jump in, boys!" he exclaimed briskly. "Well, Nipper?"

"About twenty-five minutes ago, guv'nor," I said, knowing what he meant. "Pitt's with him, and they must be nearly there by this time."

"All the more reason for us to hurry," said Nelson Lee.

We scrambled on board, and shot out into the roadway, to the enormous indignation of Handforth, who was rushing up behind with the object of asking us where we were off to. Handforth hated being left out of anything. He considered it a slight. But he was certainly left behind on this occasion.

We simply whizzed down to the village, the cold November air cutting against our faces as we sped along. But this was nothing compared with our rate of progress once we started along the straight road to Bannington.

"Rippin', ain't it?" I exclaimed.

"I think it's quite possible that things will be rippin' if we meet anybody comin' round that corner!" gasped Sir Montie. "We shall never do it, dear old boy. I do hope the fall won't spoil my trousers!"

"You silly ass!" panted Watson. "We're all right."

Nelson Lee was certainly driving furiously—in official language—but the corner was negotiated with perfect safety. That ride to Bannington, in fact, was nearly a record. Reckoning the time Mason must have taken on his bicycle, we couldn't be very far behind.

In the High Street I caught sight of Reginald Pitt. He saw us, too, and he waved his hand and smiled as we shot past. This made me think. It looked as though Pitt had nothing to do with the affair, otherwise he would have been with Mason now. The probable explanation was that Mason and Pitt had simply ridden to the town together, each on his own business.

There were ten-mile-an-hour limits within the town, but Nelson Lee ignored them completely. We went through Bannington at fully thirty, and two stout policemen gazed after us with strong disapproval.

The Bull Hotel wasn't well known to me, but I had heard of it. The place was only small, and had a somewhat questionable reputation. As we swung round a bend we came within sight of it, and saw a bicycle standing outside.

Jack Mason was already there, but he hadn't been there long.

He had arrived about ten minutes before us, full of eagerness to see Mr. Strong, whom I really believe he regarded as a father. Although thinking that Mr. Strong was poor and slabby, Mason actually loved him. He had saved the old man's life, and the pair had spent many happy hours together.

Jack had not had a father that he could remember, so it wasn't surprising that he should be so attached to Mr. David Strong. The boy's home life had been a constant misery ever since he could remember. He hadn't known what it was to have kindly words spoken to him until he met Mr. Strong.

So he was dismounted from his bicycle, eager and expectant. There was a small "hotel" entrance, and he went in that way, encountering an untidily clad woman in the passage. She looked at him curiously.

"Is Mr. Strong here?" asked Jack.

"Mr. Strong? Yes, he's in the parlour," said the woman, jerking her hand. "In that door there."

Mason walked down the passage to the door of the little parlour. He certainly wondered why Mr. Strong should have come to such a disreputable place as this; but it was probably cheap.

Grell had taken the precaution to give himself the name of Mr. Strong at this inn. It dismayed Mason at once, even if he had been suspicious. He walked straight into the parlour, never dreaming of treachery.

"Hallo, Mr. Strong!" he exclaimed cheerily. "I got your wire—"

"An' I've got you, Master Jack!" said a harsh, jarring voice. "Now then, my lad, I'm goin' to have a straight talk with you!"

Mason turned, gasping with dismay. Simon Grell was behind him, having been just near the door. And he turned the key in the lock and removed it. The lock wasn't much good, certainly, because the woodwork was old, and the lock looked as though it had come out of the Ark.

"Uncle!" muttered Jack, staring.

"Yes, uncle!" sneered Captain Jim. "Surprised, ain't you? Didn't expect to see me here, hey? Well, you—"

"Where's Mr. Strong?" demanded Jack hotly. "That woman out there told me that Mr. Strong was in here. What have you done with him?"

"Eaten him for my tea," said Mr. Grell calmly. "You silly young fool! Did ye think that the old doll was here? I allus thought you was—"

"But he sent me a wire!" shouted Mason.

"Did he? You recognised the handwriting, I suppose?" sneered Mr. Grell. "It was no wire sent that telegram, Jack, my lad. I used somebody else's name just because I know it would fetch ye.

You wouldn't come for your uncle, you young bound!"

Mason started back, with clenched fists.

"You've tricked me!" he exclaimed fiercely.

"You don't say so," smiled Mr. Grell. "Why, it was all arranged— Now, then! None o' your foolery! Get away from that window, d'ye hear? An' if you shout out for help, it'll be the worse for ye!"

Mason regarded his uncle steadily.

"I'm going to shout for help!" he declared. "You've no right to keep me here—"

"No right!" roared Mr. Grell. "No right, an' I'm your uncle! You impudent young whelp! I'll show you whether I've the right!"

Jack looked round him helplessly.

"An' don't make no noise, neither!" went on Captain Jim. "You've got your own safety to think of, remember. You wouldn't like to be kicked out of that big school, would you?"

"I don't know what you mean!" said Jack angrily.

"Then I'll tell ye," said Mr. Grell, taking hold of the boy's arm. "If you make any fuss, it'll get to the ears of your headmaster. I'll see to that, mind. How would it look, hey? A junior boy from St. Frank's visitin' a low pub in Bannington—a low hotel like this here Bull Hotel. How would it look, Master Jack? Why, you'd get sacked within an hour!"

Mason could have cried aloud with rage. Grell was right. If it reached the ears of the Head that he had visited this place he would certainly get into dire disgrace. It might even mean expulsion.

"Well," he muttered, "what do you want?"

"Ah, that's better!" said Captain Jim, lighting a cigar. "That's a heap better, my young shaver. Don't make no noise, an' you'll be all right. You've brought a sealed package with you—hey?"

Mason started.

"That package is Mr. Strong's!" he protested hotly.

"I'm Mr. Strong for the time bein'," grinned his uncle. "See? Give me that package, and give me that half locket o' yours. Hand 'em over—"

"I won't!" shouted Jack. "I won't do anything of the sort! They're not yours, and you've no right to demand them. Open that door so that I can get out. If you don't I'll shout for help."

"An' get kicked out of St. Frank's?" jeered Grell.

"I don't care!" retorted Mason. "I'd rather be kicked out of St. Frank's than give you something which belongs to Mr. Strong! And I don't believe the headmaster would kick me out, either. I shall tell him everything—"

"You little puppy!" snarled Mr. Grell savagely.

He grabbed Jack's arm and held him tightly. In vain the boy struggled. Mr. Grell's muller was thrust over his face and drawn tight—a wise precaution, for Jack would have yelled lustily a moment later.

"We'll see who's master!" panted the man.

He shoved his hand into Jack's coat-pocket, and cursed as he withdrew it, empty. He tried another pocket—

And then came a sharp rap at the door.

"Go away!" roared Grell furiously. "I don't want to be disturbed now!"

"Open this door, please!" came a woman's voice, shaking the handle.

"I'll call out when I want something!" snapped Grell.

He held Mason tightly so that he couldn't make an outcry. Captain Jim meant to get that locket. Afterwards Jack could do what he liked. It wouldn't make any difference then, anyhow.

But Mr. Simon Grell couldn't see through the door. If so, he would have discovered that the

landlady wasn't alone. Nelson Lee was there, and I hovered behind with Sir Montie and Tommy. The guv'nor had quickly explained that "Mr. Strong" was there for an evil purpose, and the woman had been eager to assist us.

"Open the door!" she repeated shrilly.
"Curse you, go away!" came Grell's coarse voice.
"Let me come, please!" murmured Nelson Lee.

He could see that one shove would send the door flying inwards—and he shied. As he had expected, the look gave way in a moment. And the guv'nor strode into the room, with the rest of us piling behind.

Grell turned with a bellow of fury, which somehow faded away when he saw who the intruders were. Jack Mason was released like a hot brick, and he staggered over to the table.

"Wat's the meanin' of this?" snarled Grell.
"You need not ask that question!" roared out Nelson Lee. "You tricked this boy to come to you, and you were ill-using him, Mr. Grell. Mason, have you anything to say?"

"No, sir!" panted Jack.
"Has this man persecuted you at all?"
"He—he was going to take something of mine, sir," replied Jack hesitatingly. "You just came in time to prevent him. Thank you, sir! I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't come."

Grell swore horribly.
"He's my nephew!" he shouted with great violence. "I'll do what I like—"

"No, Mr. Grell, you will not!" snapped Lee curtly. "Mason has told me that you were in the act of stealing some property of his. I give you just ten seconds to get out of this place."

"Why, you—"

"Begad! Shall we kick him out, sir?" asked Montie eagerly.

"I'll have the law on ye—" began Grell, screaming again.

Nelson Lee made no bones about it this time. He seized the rascal by the coat-collar, ran him along the passage, and literally hurled him into the roadway. Simon Grell feared more, for he scrambled up, and tore away into the dusk for all he was worth. He disappeared round a bend in the road.

"Why didn't you give him in-charge, sir?" asked Watson.

"Because he is Mason's uncle, and we must consider the lad," replied Nelson Lee quietly. "I fancy he will think twice before resorting to any further tricks of this sort. Come, boys!"

We entered the passage again, and found Jack Mason still in the parlour. He had recovered his composure by this time, and thanked Nelson Lee quietly for coming to his rescue.

Nelson Lee gave the landlady five shillings for damages to the door, which really amounted to about tuppence. After that we all got into the motor-car and went sedately home.

There is one other little point. Mason, upon being asked about the sealed package, told Nelson Lee that it had been left behind by Mr. Strong. And the guv'nor suggested that it should be left in his charge, a suggestion which Jack eagerly consented to. He felt that it would be safer with Nelson Lee.

CHAPTER XXIV.

JACK MASON SEEKS ADVICE.

JACK MASON stared moodily at the letter he had just opened, and frowned with worry. His gaze fell upon Reginald Pitt, who had entered Study K at that moment.

"Confound it!" exclaimed Mason impatiently.

"Same to you," said Pitt, "and many of 'em!"
"I didn't mean you, Pitt. I was thinking about this letter," said Jack, with a faint smile. "I don't know what to do about it, and I'm worried."

"You look it," said Pitt candidly. "What's the trouble? Some awful person duping you for an account?"

"It's from my uncle," explained the boy from Bermondsey. "This is the second letter he's written me this week, and he's threatening all sorts of things now. Says I must meet him this evening."

"That's a long way off," remarked the Serpent. "It's only just breakfast-time, so you needn't worry about that until after tea. Besides, it's not a calamity, in any case. It won't kill you to see your uncle, I suppose?"

Jack Mason crumpled the letter in his fingers.
"I won't see him!" he declared hotly.

"Keep your wool on! No need to jump down my throat," said Pitt. "If you won't see him, you won't! Mr. Simon Grell isn't exactly the type of man I should care to be pally with. But he's your uncle, ain't he? I don't wish to be rude, but I must say that your choice in uncles is pretty rotten!"

"I don't intend to see him!" exclaimed Mason frantically. "Why should I? He acted like a second-rate other day, and he is a second-rate! I can't help saying so, and I'm ashamed to own that he's a relative of mine. But if I don't see him he'll keep writing these letters, and he might even come to the school."

Reginald Pitt shuddered.
"Don't let it come to that!" he said, in alarm. "We don't want the beauty here, you know. Why don't you take some good advice and see him this evening? Talk to him like a Dutch uncle—one uncle to another, so to speak—and tell him what you think of him. Say that you're not going to stand any of his nonsense, and that you'll make things hot for him if he plays the giddy ex. In short, tell him off!"

Mason smiled.
"I suppose you mean well, Pitt, but it's not so easy as it sounds," he said. "You know what my uncle did the other day. He tricked me to Boringington and tried to steal that letter and Mr. Strong's package. The whole plot was absolutely contemptible, and only an utter cad would have thought of it!"

Pitt winced unconsciously. That shot had gone home, although Mason was quite unaware of the fact.
"Well, I should leave it till tea-time," said Pitt. "Don't let it worry you."
But Pitt's advice was not accepted. After breakfast Jack strolled in the Triangle, attempting to think of some way out of the difficulty. More than anything else he wanted to see Mr. Strong and seek his fatherly advice. But, although Jack didn't know it, Mr. Strong was now in France on a brief visit.

There was a very anxious look upon Mason's face as he pined under the almost leafless chestnuts. The morning was fine and rather mild, and the sun was shining quite brilliantly.

Nelson Lee, crossing from the College House to the Ancient House, did not fail to see the worried expression on Mason's face. And the Housemaster, knowing something of what had occurred, approached Jack and laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"You are looking worried, Mason," he said kindly. "Is there anything wrong, boy?"

Mason hesitated.
"I don't want to bother you, sir," he said slowly.
"Come, come; that won't do!" said Nelson Lee. "What are I here for if not to take an interest in

the boys under my care? You will not bother me, Mason, if you confide in me. I don't like to see that frown on your face. It oughtn't to be there, and I must try to remove it."

"It's about my uncle, sir," began Jack.

"I thought as much," said Nelson Lee. "Come, Mason, we will go to my study and have a little chat. Tell me just as much as you wish, and I will give you the advice I think best."

"Thank you, sir!" said Mason gratefully.

They entered the Ancient House and passed along the passage until they came to Nelson Lee's study. A cheerful fire was blazing in the grate, and Nelson Lee took his stand before it and invited the junior to sit down.

"Now, Mason," he said quietly, "I understand that you are worried because of your uncle. I have already had some little experience of Mr. Grell, and I am convinced that he is a man of an unscrupulous character. I have no wish to hurt your feelings, my boy—"

"You're not, sir," put in Jack quickly. "It would be silly of me to resent a statement like that. My uncle is unscrupulous. He's an absolute rascal! Before he left my aunt, five years ago, he treated us terribly, and I—I hated him. I thought he was dead until he turned up again the other day."

"But why is he bothering you, Mason?"

"Well, I don't know exactly, sir," replied the Fenovite. "I should like your advice on that question. He told me that he wanted money at first, but I don't believe it. His game is a different one."

"You are referring, of course, to that sealed package of Mr. Strong's?" asked Lee, selecting a cigarette from a box on the mantelpiece. "You gave that package into my charge, Mason, and it is at present quite secure."

Mason nodded.

"That's one thing, sir," he agreed. "And then there's this locket, or, rather, half a locket. My uncle is very anxious to get hold of it. He seems to believe that it isn't the same half that I've always had, and I can't understand why he wants it. It's not at all valuable."

"Let me see it, my boy."

The schoolmaster-detective took the half locket and examined it with great interest.

"H'm! Arabic signs," remarked Nelson Lee.

"Most interesting, Mason."

"Does that writing mean anything, sir?" asked Jack eagerly.

"I can't tell you off-hand," said Lee. "The writing is in Arabic, but it was evidently written in a great hurry, or under great difficulties. I have little doubt that Mr. Grell is only interested in this writing. Can it be possible that he is capable of reading Arabic?"

"He might be able to, sir," replied Jack. "He's been to sea most of his life, and travelled a great deal between England and Africa."

"That, I think, is sufficient evidence," said Nelson Lee. "Well, Mason, do I understand that this locket is in danger?"

"My uncle tried to make me give it to him, sir, and I believe he means to make another attempt to get both the locket and the package," replied Jack. "I don't like to ask you to take care of it for me. It's—it's imposing on your good nature, sir, and the responsibility—"

"I do not think I am overawed by the responsibility, Mason," snarled Nelson Lee. "Yes, certainly, I will take care of the locket for you. You may positively rely upon your property being kept secure. Now, with regard to your uncle. The man is still in Bellion, I believe?"

"Yes, sir, and he's been writing me letters—"

"Indeed!" exclaimed Nelson Lee quickly. "Threatening letters, Mason?"

"Look, sir!" said Jack, handing over the one which had come that morning.

The detective perused it with a frown upon his brow. It was a somewhat illiterate composition, and instructed Mason to be at a certain spot that evening alone. If he failed to keep the appointment the consequences would be serious. It was undoubtedly a threat.

"What was your intention, my boy?" asked Lee, looking up.

"I didn't mean to take any notice of it, sir."

"Splendid! That is the very best course you could adopt," said the Housemaster approvingly. "You asked me for some advice, Mason, and I will give it to you. Take no notice of this letter, or any letters which may come in future. Ignore them completely, no matter what threats they contain. If Mr. Grell becomes really violent in his warnings, bring such letters to me. I shall take advantage of the very first opportunity to rid the neighbourhood of this disreputable relative of yours. It is painful to speak in those terms, Mason, but it cannot be helped."

"I know that, sir," agreed Mason readily. "But what if my uncle comes up to the school?"

"In that event I shall have much pleasure in ordering Mr. Grell off the premises," said Nelson Lee. "Indeed, I shall rather welcome the opportunity of dealing with the man on a square basis. But I do not think he will come, my boy."

"I hope not, sir."

"It is just possible that Mr. Grell will attempt to molest you on the road," went on the detective. "I should, therefore, advise you, Mason, to take two or three companions with you when you have occasion to enter the village. I don't suppose that sort of thing will continue for long. Grell will soon get tired of it again if he finds himself ignored completely."

"Thank you, sir!" said Mason, getting up. "I feel much more comfortable now, and I'll do exactly as you say. And I hope that my uncle will soon leave the neighbourhood for good."

"That's right, my boy," said Nelson Lee smiling. "Don't worry yourself any more; the matter isn't really worth it."

A minute later Jack Mason took his departure. And he was now smiling and easy. That little talk with Nelson Lee had worked wonders. But Jack was to find that Mr. Grell was not so easily choked off.

CHAPTER XXV.

GOING TO THE SEA

AFTER lessons that day there was still plenty of light for practice on Little Side, and I led my men out cheerfully. Mason was there, and I was glad to see that he looked care-free and cheerful.

He played splendidly, and his form, if anything, showed signs of improvement. It was nearly dark by the time we finished up, and we should all arrive indoors late for tea. But this didn't matter, since tea was a free-and-easy meal, and it was portakew of in our own studies.

"I expect Pitt will have finished his tea by now. In fact, nearly everybody will," I remarked, as we strode across the Triangle. "You'd better join us in Study C, Mason. What do you say?"

"Thanks, I should like to," said Jack readily.

"That's ripping!" remarked Sir Montie Tregollis-West. "We're always glad to receive visitors—when we've a good supply of grub in the cupboard. When we haven't, visitors are a frightful worry. Appearances have to be kept up, an' it's simply a

shockin' bother to make one sardine go round amongst five!"

"I don't think that'll happen to-night," I grinned. "We've got some tinned salmon and some of Mrs. Hako's special rissoles. We don't know what's in 'em, but that makes it all the more interesting."

"You always were keen on mysteries, old boy," remarked Montie languidly.

We chuckled, and entered the Ancient House. It took us about ten minutes to change into Etoms, and then we made for Study C. But just as we were passing the door of Study E, Jack paused and frowned slightly.

Laughter sounded within the apartment, and we had no difficulty in recognising the voice of Ralph Leslie Fullwood. There were other voices, too, and Mason looked at us steadily.

"I'll be along in two minutes, Nipper," he said. "I just want to pop in here to have a word with Pitt."

"Right-ho!" I said, and I passed along with my elbows.

"Trouble brewin', dear fellows," remarked Sir Montie angrily, as we entered Study C. "I ain't a prophet, but you mark my words. There'll be the most appallin' bust-up soon—there will, really!"

Jack Mason was still frowning as he grasped the handle of the study door and turned it. But the door refused to budge. It was locked. This was significant, and Jack's frown deepened.

The study was as much Mason's as Pitt's, and he had a perfect right to make objections.

"Open this door, please!" he called out quietly.

"That you, Mason?" came Pitt's voice.

"Yes."

"Go away, you slum beast!" roared Fullwood.

"We don't want you here!"

"Open this door!" replied Mason steadily.

"I thought you weren't coming to tea, so I invited these chumps," called Pitt. "Just run along and rake up some tea in another study, Mason. You'll be made welcome somewhere or other."

"We provided the grub in here," came Gulliver's voice. "An' we're not going to share any of it with a beastly council school wrchin! Clear off! Pass us another of those cakes, Bell!"

For one moment Jack thought that it would be best to retire. After all, he was invited to tea in Study C, and Pitt was at liberty to invite his own friends if he wanted to. There was really no occasion to make a fuss.

But why was the door locked? In order to keep Mason out—the boy was sure of that. And he rebelled against this treatment. He was not a masterful junior, but he was always willing to stand up for his rights. Pitt, he felt sure, had been persuaded by his questionable friends, and Mason did not mean to go away until he had gained admittance. Things had come to a fine pass when he was locked out of his own quarters.

"Pitt, don't be an ass!" exclaimed Mason. "I don't want to join your pals at tea, but I'm not going to be barred by them from my own study. Please open this door, and don't act the fool!"

"Can't you wait?" demanded Pitt impatiently.

"No."

"Then you'll have to!" retorted Pitt. "More tea, Fullwood?"

Mason's own self-respect would not allow him to depart now. To do so would be to admit defeat, and Jack was not a boy who would willingly humbuckle under. He commenced to hammer upon the door panels with great energy. The noise was considerable, and angry exclamations sounded from within.

"You'll have the prefects on us if you make that din!" shouted Pitt savagely. "Go away, you roter!"

Thump, thump, thump, thump!

It didn't sound as though Mason was going away, and several heads came out of several studies, and there were numerous inquiries as to when the bombardment was going to cease. But Mason persisted.

Then the door of Study E opened and Pitt's face appeared.

"Can't we have tea in peace now?" he demanded hotly.

Mason was about to reply, when he sniffed sharply. The next moment he forced open the door and pushed Pitt right back. The scene which Mason witnessed caused his eyes to blaze with fury.

The "tea" was a most curious one, for the study table was littered with playing-cards and little piles of money. The air was thick with cigarette smoke, and Fullwood & Co. were sitting round the table at their ease.

"You cods!" shouted Mason hotly.

"Oh, don't make a fuss!" muttered Pitt.

"There's no harm done—"

"Who threw my books over in that corner?" demanded Jack, quivering with anger.

Fullwood grinned, and Mason had little doubt that Fullwood was the culprit. Those books were new ones, which Mason had purchased only the previous week. A glance told him that their covers were half torn off, and that they were covered with ink. It could have been no accident, but a vindictive act of malice.

"You shouldn't leave your books lyin' about the table!" sneered Fullwood. "Clear out of this study, you confounded little toad!"

In Mason's present mood that was a most unwise remark for Fullwood to make. Slap! Jack's palm smote Fullwood's cheek forcibly, and the loser of the Nuts uttered a howl as he collapsed backwards, chair and all.

"Steady on—steady on!" exclaimed Pitt hastily.

"I'll give you one minute to get out of this study—the lot of you!" shouted Mason furiously. "Do you think I'm going to have this room turned into a rotten gambling-den? You ought to be downright ashamed of yourself, Pitt!"

Pitt scowled, and clenched his fists. Somehow, he couldn't quite face Mason's wrath. He felt that his study-mate was right. After enough Pitt promised to throw up smoking and gambling. It had seemed, indeed, as though he had been sincere. And now this had happened.

Pitt was never to be relied upon. He was always breaking out. In this present instance he was not so much to blame as Fullwood, for the Nuts had invaded Study E, and had commenced playing. They thought it would be rather a good trick upon the gutter-brat. And Reginald Pitt, instead of resisting, had allowed them to remain. But that, after all, was no excuse for him.

"Can't you keep quiet?" hissed Gulliver, in alarm. "If you go shouting about like that you'll get us all the sack—"

"You'll get yourselves the sack, you rotes!" retorted Mason. "That minute's nearly up, and I ain't to give you a second's grace."

Fullwood scrambled up, white with passion.

"You silly fools!" he muttered. "Are you going to let this beast frighten you? We can chuck him out in two seconds—and we know he won't squeak. Now then, all together!"

"I'm not in it!" said Pitt. "I was an ass to let you—"

Mason did not wait for more. He grabbed Gulliver's collar, yanked him off his feet, and shot him out in the passage with terrific force. The attack was so sudden that Gulliver was taken off his guard. He collided violently with a junior who was just passing. The terrific uproar which ensued

proved beyond doubt that the junior was Edward Oswald Handforth. Nobody else could possibly create such a din.

"Who the— Great pip!" gasped Handforth, sitting up. "What the dickens was that? Why, you— you awful beast! What do you mean by butting into me, Gulliver?"

"I couldn't help it!" howled Gulliver violently.

"Oh, couldn't you?" snorted Handforth.

Wauwk, wauwk, wauwk!

"Yarsoosh!" roared Gulliver, as Handforth proceeded to punch him liberally. "Stoppit, you frightful bully! I'll—I'll smash you—"

"What the dickens is all the row about?" I demanded, coming out of Study C. "Oh, it's you, Handforth! I might have known it—"

Handforth glared.

"You silly fathead!" he roared. "Gulliver butted into me as I was walking along the passage. Great Scott! What a niff of smoke! It's coming out of Mason's study, too!"

I walked forward grimly.

"You needn't look suspicious," I said, addressing the crowd in general. "Mason was with me until about two minutes ago. Hallo! Fullwood doesn't seem to be very happy, does he?"

Fullwood, in fact, had just come hurtling through the doorway of Study E. He was saved from falling by bumping into Gulliver, who was just about to enter. This was rather unfortunate for Gulliver, for he staggered backwards, caught his head with a terrific crash against the opposite wall, and collapsed dazedly.

Handforth grinned.

"Oh, good!" he said callously. "Sorres you right, you rotter!"

Fullwood had charged back into the study, and a most terrific din was proceeding. This wouldn't do at all. Prefects were liable to rally out with canes if any commotion occurred. There was, of course, always a certain amount of din proceeding in junior quarters, but this was something quite out of the ordinary.

I hurried into Study E, followed by Sir Montie, Tommy Watson, and several others. Handforth attempted to get in first, but became squashed in the doorway, and my elbow accidentally got in the way of his nose. At all events, Handforth added to the din generously—almost doubling it, in fact.

Within the study pandemonium reigned.

Jack Mason was fighting three fellows at the same time, and Reginald Pitt stood by the window, looking on gloweringly. Fullwood, just before I entered, had sprung upon Mason from behind, and the junior was borne to the floor.

The cards and the money on the table told their own story, to say nothing of the smoke-laden atmosphere. It was little wonder that Mason was enraged.

"Great Scott!" I shouted. "Kick these cads out!"

The next few minutes were very interesting. Fullwood & Co. were hurled out violently, and their belongings were kicked into the passage after them. But their troubles did not end there. The passage was filled with juniors, who took a keen delight in making the Nuts run the gauntlet to their own study.

By the time they reached that haven of refuge they were dishevelled, sore, and exhausted. Somehow that little party in Study E had not been a complete success.

Reginald Pitt was simply furious. He had wanted to keep the whole thing secret, and now it was public knowledge.

"Well, are you satisfied?" he demanded hotly. "No, I'm not!" I replied. "Don't chip in, Mason. I'm skipper of the Remove, and I reckon

this is a time for action. You're an absolute cad, Pitt, for having those chaps in here for the purpose of smoking and card-playing."

"Mind your own business!" roared Pitt.

"It is my business!" I retorted. "I thought you were going to turn over a new leaf, but you're a disgrace to the Form!"

"I didn't want the rotters in here!" snapped Pitt. "They forced their way in—"

"And made you play?" I asked sarcastically. "It's your study—and Mason's—and you wouldn't have let Fullwood & Co. remain if you hadn't wanted them. We're going to give you a Form rugging as a lesson."

"Hear, hear!"

"Jolly good idea!" declared Handforth heartily. "I vote we duck him in the fountain, too. He needs cooling down!"

"Look here, don't you touch me—" began Pitt, in alarm.

"Oh, leave him alone!" said Mason. "Those rotters have gone, so there's no need to carry it further!"

But Mason was ignored. I might have been inclined to let him have his way; for, after all, he was Pitt's study-mate. But the other fellows were determined, and Pitt was grasped by many hands and hustled out.

He undoubtedly needed a sharp lesson, and he got it!

As a commencement he was forced to run the gauntlet down the Remove passage. After that he was frog-marched round the Triangle, an operation which was punctuated by a series of bumps which couldn't have done Pitt any good. It certainly didn't do his clothes any good.

The frog-marching finished, Reginald was like a limp rag, and his heart was filled with bitterness and hatred. His feelings were not improved when Handforth suggested that he should be rolled in the mud as a finale. As Handforth pointed out, it couldn't possibly harm Pitt's clothes more than they were harmed already, and it would be a fitting round-off.

So Reginald Pitt was rolled in the mud. Incidentally, his face was rolled in it, too. He was debauched with grit and gravel. It penetrated down his neck and into his ears, and his hair was in a shocking state. Possibly the juniors went a little too far, but there was no real harm done. A wash and a change of clothes would make Pitt all right again, except for his aches and pains.

He crawled away at last, and his cup of bitterness was filled to the brim when he met a prefect on the stairs, who promptly gave him five hundred lines for being dirty.

Handforth wanted to treat Fullwood & Co. in the same way, but the other fellows were not in favour of it. They were rather fagged after their efforts already, and they considered that Pitt was the actual culprit—as, indeed, he was. Pitt had been under no obligation to entertain the Nuts.

His rage was a terrible one, and it had not subsided when he came down an hour later, cleaned and in different attire. In his bitter mood he accused Mason of being the cause of all the trouble. Mason had started the row; Mason had caused the whole disaster by persisting in his efforts to enter the study.

And the Serpent's old vindictive spirit was revived. Whether it would last was a problem. On the morrow, perhaps, he would realize that the fault had been entirely on his own side.

For the present, however, he was sulky, and the occupants of Study E were no longer on speaking terms.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SECRET OF THE ARABIC SIGNS.

"DURN the kid—that's wot I say!" Mr. Simon Grell addressed his own pipe, and he glared at it as though it had done him an injury. He was in a savage mood, and there was much fury in his tone of voice.

Captain Jim was seated in his private room at the White Hart Inn, and he was impatiently expecting the arrival of a visitor. The evening train was already in—Mr. Grell had heard it stop at the station—and it should have been carrying a gentleman who was bound for Mr. Grell's lodgings.

Jack Mason's uncle was enraged because the boy had studiously ignored his letters. The last one had been delivered that morning—the one which Jack had shown to Nelson Lee—and Mr. Grell had attended the meeting-spot in vain. It was only too obvious that the boy meant to take no notice of his uncle.

Grell knocked his pipe out in the fender, and rose to his feet as he heard voices outside in the passage. A moment later the door opened and Mr. Jonas Porlock appeared. The landlord smiled expansively.

"Visitor for you, Mr. Grell," he announced. "I was expectin' him, Porlock," replied Mr. Grell. "Hallo, Jake! I thought you'd come down. Always willin' to oblige an old acquaintance, hey?"

"There ain't a more obligin' feller than me in this 'ere world!" exclaimed Mr. Jake Starkey, shaking hands warmly. "Ow are you, Simon, old mate? I must say as ow you're lookin' reg'lar fine!"

The two friends partook of whiskey, and Mr. Porlock retired. The visitor was not a prepossessing-looking man. He was long, lean, and decidedly gawky. There was a stouter expression about his little, bead-like eyes.

"Got into a queer place this trip, ain't you?" asked Mr. Starkey, looking round him with interest. "We ain't far from Custons, are we? I remember puttin' in there in the old schooner, and—"

"Never mind about that!" interrupted Grell. "The fact is, Jake, I'm on a big thing just now—boastings, it may turn out a big thing. I don't quite know yet whether we shall touch lucky or not."

"A sportin' chance, so to speak?" asked Mr. Starkey.

"That's it," agreed Captain Jim. "Sit ye in that chair, mate, an' listen to me. Have one o' them cigars—they're good. I come down here because my nephew's at the big school up the road—St. Frank's."

"Wot!" exclaimed the visitor. "A nephew o' yours at a school like that? You're kiddin' me, Simon!"

Mr. Grell smiled. "No, I ain't," he replied. "I don't know the rights of it myself yet. But there's the fact as it stands. Jack's at St. Frank's, an' I reely come down here to make him dub up the brass."

"Oh, so that's the guss—"

"Don't you keep interruptin'," said Grell. "It ain't the game, Jake. It was at first, but it ain't now. I found that I couldn't touch the money. The kid's expenses are bein' paid by some lawyers. I don't know why, but that don't worry me. Wot I do know is that Jack is in possession of a secret which might be worth thousands, an' yet he den's know it."

Mr. Starkey scratched his head. "It's a bit mixed," he remarked. "I don't get the 'ang of it, old man."

"You will presently," said Mr. Grell. "This secret is one which I first suspected years ago. My nery's got half a gold locket, and there's some Arabic writin' on it. As you know, I can read the lingo arter a bit o' trouble, and I was always curious about that locket. But the message wasn't complete, only half the locket bein' there. So I never troubled my head about it."

"Then wot's the good of troublein' now?" asked the other.

"Every good. When I saw Jack the other day I had a look at that locket an' found that he'd got the missing half," exclaimed Mr. Grell impressively. "I wasn't able to read everything on it, but I got the gist of it. An' then the young varmint snatched it away from me an' cut off."

"Haven't you got it now?"

"No. That's where the trouble lies," replied Captain Jim. "Y'see, I got a bit pally with a smart kid named Pitt. Seems he's a bit of a scorchy in his way, an' ain't very particular about honesty."

"Somethin' like you, Simon—eh?" remarked Mr. Starkey placidly.

"No need to be personal," frowned Grell. "Well, this kid Pitt gave me some information which came in handy. It seems that the other half o' the locket is wrapped up in a little sealed package which Jack has got. I don't know how it got there, nor anythin' about it—an' it reely don't matter a brass penny to us. We know that the whole locket—or the two halves, strictly speakin'—as been kept by Master Jack. He don't know how valuable they are, but I do. An' we've got to get them afore he can get wind o' the real guss."

"That's all very well," said Starkey, his little eyes fixed upon his companion. "But 'ow are we goin' to do the trick? We can't break into a school, can'n, an' it'll be a queer job nasin' round a place where there are 'undreds o' boys."

Mr. Grell nodded. "That's the trouble," he said. "Wot's more, my nephew won't take no notice o' me. He won't come down to see me, an' I can't get a word with him, try as I will. Twice he passed me to-night, but there was three or four kids with him, an' he went past as though he didn't know me."

"Young rascal!" exclaimed Mr. Starkey disapprovingly.

"So we shall have to think o' some idea," continued Mr. Grell. "I was wonderin' if we couldn't make that kid help us again—Pitt, I mean. He's got three quid o' mine, an' I've never had no satisfaction. Still, it'll be all the better if we can work the trick without him. All we've got to do is to wait our opportunity—keep our eyes open until we find Master Jack alone."

"We might 'ave to wait weeks!" protested the other.

"I ain't denyin' it, but we ain't goin' to wait weeks!" said Mr. Grell. "It won't be hard to trick a kid like Jack. Is only wants a bit o' brain-work, Jake."

"That's why you asked me down, I s'pose?"

"No, it ain't!" snapped Mr. Grell. "If there's any brainwork to be done, I'll do it! Well, there's the position, an' now we've got to think o'—"

"'Old 'and!' interposed the other. "Where do I come in?"

"Wot do you mean?"

"Where do I touch?" asked Mr. Starkey. "I'll see that you don't come to no harm," said Grell. "I'm payin' your expenses, an' you won't be a loser, whatever happens. An' there's more than a chance that we shall strike it rich, an' then you'll have enough to keep you in luxury for the rest o' your life."

"I'll believe it when I see it!" said Mr. Starkey.

doubtfully. "Wat's the game, anyhow? You 'aven't told me nothin' about this locket yet."

"I'm goin' to tell you now," said Mr. Grell.

He spoke mysteriously, and the two men drew their chairs together and spoke in lower tones.

"It's this way," said Captain Jim. "I've read a good bit o' the Arabic on that locket—quite enough to get the hang of the message which is scratched on the gold."

"Then wat do you want the locket for?"

"Do you think I kept it all in my mesary, you fool?" snapped Grell. "I didn't find out no details, only the main idea of it. An' without the locket we can't do a Muzed thing. Them words written on it are significant, an' it appears that the locket was found on a little oasis in an African desert."

"Lummy!" exclaimed Mr. Starkey.

"It must ha' been left there by some pore feller that was dyin'," went on the other. "Leas'tways, there was mention of threst an' no water. So it's easy to gather wat that means. An' the man—an Arab, I s'pose—wrote down on the locket where he'd hid his belongin's."

"Ah!" exclaimed Starkey, greatly interested.

"Them belongin's are diamonds an' jewels by the fardful," said Mr. Grell impressively. "That's just the truth, Jake. See? That locket tells us where a big fortune is hid, an' once we've got the information we can ship on board an African-bound steamer—before the mast, if necessary—an' make our way inland once we arrive on the coast. There'll be trouble, an' the job won't be as easy as drinkin' milk out of a bottle. But the game's worth tryin' on."

Jake considered.

"Strikes me there's a good few doubts about it," he remarked. "How do we know that somebody who 'asn't got that treasure? Why, we might go out there an' find that we're five or ten years late! It don't seem good enough to me, Simon."

Mr. Grell swore.

"You never was a man for a bit o' sport!" he snorted. "O' course we might be late. I ain't denyin' it. But it won't cost us anythin' to git to Africa. Both you an' me would slip somewhere, in any case. An' as for gettin' to the oasis, we can take our time over that, an' maybe do some profitable business amongst the natives at the same time. So, even if the whole thing falls flat, we shan't come to no harm. That's my way o' lookin' at it."

He thumped at the table.

"An' I don't believe it will fall flat!" he went on. "If that treasure had been recovered, we should have heard somethin' about it. An' the locket wouldn't have been lyin' about as if it was of no use. It must have been found by some fool tourist who couldn't read Arabic, and he brought it away never knowin' that a treasure was there. I tell you, Jake, this thing's goin' to make our fortunes. I can absolutely feel it in my bones!"

"I wish I 'ad that feelin'!" said Starkey, shaking his head. "Still, as you've pointed out, it ain't the time to grumble. Arter you've got the locket it'll be easier to git the 'ang o' things."

"That's wat I say," declared Mr. Grell. "The first thing for us to do is to get that locket into our hands, an' it's worth a bit o' trouble an' risk. The chances are that there's a fortune at the end of it, an' I was alius a man for a bit o' sport. We can't reely know whether the treasure's still there until we git to the spot, but I wouldn't mind bettin' you five quid this here minute that I'm right. That'll show you wat faith I've got."

Jake Starkey thrust out his hand.

"I'm with you, old man," he said heartily. "But there's one little point which seems set o'

queer to me. Why 'as the kid got that locket in two 'arves, an' why is one 'arf wrapped up in a packet?"

"Didn't I tell you I don't know?" replied Grell. "Jack's alius had one half, an' that's another reason why I've got an idea that we shall win. These two halves ain't never been together afore, so nobody could read the message. It might have been broken in half by two fellers when it was found—as keepsakes—an' they never took the trouble to read it. It seems that some old chap who's friendly with Jack—name o' Strong, I believe—left the package by mistake. Anyhow, I know that Pitt opened it an' found the other half o' the locket inside. So we don't want to trouble about nothin' else. O' course, Jack himself don't know a thing about that package; he don't even know that there is another half of the locket. We've just got to get 'em, an' then we can clear."

Mr. Starkey filled his pipe.

"Well, you know more about it than wat I do," he said. "An' now, Simon, how do you reckon we're goin' to begin?"

Mr. Grell reached for the whisky bottle.

"We'll have a little drink, an' then we'll talk it over," he said. "I've got several ideas in my mind, but the best way, I reckon, is to wait until we get the chance of travellin' Jack on the quiet. Trips are all very well, but they're liable to fail. One o' these days the kid will come out by himself, an' then we shall git him."

The opportunity was to come sooner than Mr. Simon Grell expected!

CHAPTER XXVII.

BERNARD PITTS'S SISTERS.

WEDNESDAY was quite a fine day and a half-holiday.

There was no football on for that afternoon. By this, I mean that we, ourselves, were not playing. For there was actually a great deal of football on. The First Eleven was playing one of its most important matches with a visiting team of renowned quality. We had every faith in Fenton, the First Eleven skipper, and were confident that he would pull off a victory.

The match was so important, in fact, that junior football was put in the shade for the time being. The crowd round Big Side would certainly be a record one, for every junior footballer would be a spectator.

It was one of the really vital matches, and there was naturally a good deal of speculation amongst the fellows. A wave of subdued excitement prevailed throughout the school after dinner had been disposed of.

Fullwood & Co., I believe, were busily making bets on the result of the match. Pitt was risking ten shillings, probably out of sheer bravado. For since that terrific ragging he had been regarded with ill-favour.

So far, he had not spoken a word to Jack Mason; and Jack, for his part, was determined to remain silent until Pitt emerged from his "sulks." It was really up to Pitt to make the first overture.

And he did so in Study E when Mason was just getting out his book for an hour's work. He could easily do this, and still be on Big Side for the start of the match. Mason did not believe in wasting good time. The other juniors were quite content to hang about the playing-fields, punting a ball up and down, or ragging about.

"Sweeting again?" asked Pitt, entering the study.

Jack looked up in some surprise.

"Yes," he replied.

"What about the match?"

"Oh, it won't start for an hour!" replied Jack shortly.

"I say, Mason, we're a couple of fatheads, you know," said Pitt, sitting on a corner of the table. "At least, I'm one. It's potty to keep up this ill-feeling. Suppose we call a truce?"

Mason looked at his study-mate squarely. "I don't think I'm vindictive," he said. "I'm ready to be sociable, Pitt. But you can't expect me to be friends with you while you continue your present games. It isn't reasonable to suppose that I can be your friend while you're so thick with those cads of Study A."

Pitt laughed sardonically.

"I suppose I can choose my own pals?" he asked. "It strikes me, Mason, that you're too jolly particular. What the dickens does it matter to you whether I'm thick with Fullwood & Co. or not?"

"I think you know what it matters!" replied Jack quietly. "For one thing, I don't believe in having this study turned into a beastly gambling-den. I didn't mean to say anything about it—it's all over—but you force me to."

"Oh, all right, have your own way!" said Pitt. "I shouldn't have said anything, either, only I don't want my sister to find us at loggerheads. It would look fine, wouldn't it, for her to come here and find us squabbling like two monkeys?"

Jack Mason laid down his pen.

"You never said anything about your sister," he remarked.

"I got a letter this morning, and I didn't tell you anything about it because we weren't on speaking terms," replied Pitt. "Of course, you can start the row all over again if you want to—after she's gone. But let's have a truce—"

"Don't be so silly," interrupted Jack. "I sha'n't start anything over again, Pitt. It seems to me that you've done that more than once. If your sister's coming here I sha'n't let her see that there's been trouble between us."

"Good man!" said Pitt. "She's rather a decent sort of girl, and she thinks a good bit of me. That's because she doesn't know me—oh? Well, I don't suppose she knows so much about me as you do. She's staying with some friends at Calstone, and she's promised to cycle over on Thursday—tomorrow. I expect she'll get here about tea-time, so I'm going to lay in an extra-special feed. That's why I've spoken, Mason. We might as well be a happy party."

"Oh, of course!" agreed Mason readily.

"Well, that's settled," observed Pitt, with satisfaction. "By to-morrow perhaps we shall have made up our squabble altogether. You won't have cause to grumble at me again, Mason. You see, you're such a particular boulder that you require a bit of getting used to. Now that we're becoming more intimate I know exactly how to get along."

"I'm only particular with regard to ordinary decency," replied Jack. "I don't believe in gambling or smoking, and I couldn't be sincerely friendly with you while you set the foul like that."

"Thanks!" yawned Pitt. "It's just as well to know your opinions."

He walked to the door, went outside, and then put his head into the study again.

"Coming over to Bannington?" he inquired.

"What on earth for?"

"I'm going to look in at the picture palace," replied Pitt. "They've got a ripping picture on this afternoon. Charlie Chaplin, or Leuesene Lake, or somebody. Anyhow, the amusements seem first-class."

"What about the match?" asked Jack.

"My dear, innocent chap," said the Serpent. "Do you suppose I'd rather stop for the match than see Charlie Chaplin? Football is all very well, but

I'd prefer to wait until I can be a player myself. Coming?"

"No, thanks!"

"Well, you can't say that I haven't tried to be pally," said Pitt. "If you change your mind you'll find me in the box seats."

"I don't think I shall find you there, because I sha'n't come," replied Mason, with a smile. "I'd much prefer the match, thanks."

For two or three minutes after Pitt had gone Mason sat drumming the table with the end of a pencil. He was glad that the Serpent had come round, for he hated discord. And he believed that Pitt had profited by the lesson.

The boy from Bernondssey got to work in a more cheerful frame of mind, and the time soon passed. The Ancient House was singularly quiet, practically everybody being out upon the playing-fields.

A round of cheering told Mason that the visitors had arrived, and he knew that the game would start almost at once. And he was just putting his books away when footsteps sounded in the passage and a tap sounded on the door.

"Come in!" said Mason, in surprise.

Tubbs, the page-boy, entered, grinning.

"Young lady to see Master Pitt, sir," he said.

Mason gave a start.

"A—a young lady?" he repeated.

"Name o' Miss Pitt," replied Tubbs. "I suppose she's Master Pitt's sister, sir. Just arrived on her bicycle."

"Well, Pitt isn't here just now," said Jack, looking troubled.

Why on earth had Pitt gone out? Obviously he had made a mistake, for he had positively said that his sister was not coming over until Thursday. Mason hardly knew what to do, but decided that the best thing was to instruct Tubbs to take the fair visitor to the Housemaster.

"Pitt has gone over to Bannington," he went on.

"You'd better tell the young lady that—"

"She's here, sir, just be'ind me," said Tubbs.

Jack Mason jumped up.

"Why, you silly young man!" he said wrathfully.

"Why didn't you tell me so before? I shall look an awful idiot!"

Tubbs grinned sheepishly and stepped aside. And Mason saw that a young lady was standing out in the passage. She was very neatly attired, slim, and had dark eyes. A mass of dark chestnut hair adorned her head, and it was arranged very becomingly over her ears.

Although not exactly pretty, Miss Pitt was undoubtedly an attractive-looking girl. Tubbs's introduction would have been quite unnecessary, for Mason could see at a glance that she was Reginald Pitt's sister, the family likeness being apparent.

"I'm awfully sorry that Pitt isn't here," said Mason apologetically. "I didn't know you were standing out in the passage, Miss Pitt. You can clear off, Tubbs."

"Yes, sir," said the page-boy, grinning.

Jack felt rather uncomfortable, especially as he noted that the fair visitor was regarding him with quite a cool, self-possessed air. She sat down and looked round the study with a critical eye.

"Is this where Reggie does his lessons?" she asked.

"Well, not exactly," replied Jack, smiling.

"We've got proper Form-rooms, and this is just our study. Pitt and I share it between us."

"How splendid!" exclaimed Miss Pitt. "But I wish you'd tell me where Reggie is. I have come over especially to see him on something really important, and I mustn't waste any time. I meant to come over to-morrow—"

"Oh, then Pitt didn't make any mistake?" asked Jack.

"Of course not," said the girl. "He had a letter this morning, hadn't he?"

"Yes."
"Well, I didn't know until after that was written that it would be necessary for me to come over so soon," said Miss Dolly Pitt. "You see, mother is terribly ill just now, and she's staying at Chisstone for her health. We're terribly afraid that she is—she is getting worse. And I want Reggie to come back with me at once."

Mason was all concern in a moment.
"I say, that's awfully rotten!" he exclaimed. "Pitt's gone over to Bannington."
"To Bannington!" exclaimed the girl. "Oh, whatever shall I do? I must take him back with me. Mother made me promise, and she'll be terribly upset if I go back without him. When do you think he'll be back?"

"Not until tea-time."
"But that's hours!" protested Miss Dolly, in dismay. "Can't I go over to him—er—er—"
"My name's Mason," said Jack, smiling.
"Well, can't I go over for him, Mason?" she asked. "I suppose you know where he's gone, don't you?"

"To the picture palace, I believe—well, I'm sure of it," answered Jack.
"Oh dear! I don't know where Bannington is, or where the picture palace is!" exclaimed the girl in a worried voice. "And I'm in such a dreadful hurry, too. I don't know what to do at all."

Jack Mason saw the football match fading away.
"Why, I'll take you to Bannington with pleasure," he offered gallantly.
"Will you—will you, really?"

"Of course."
"Thank you—thank you ever so much!" exclaimed the girl eagerly. "It's just splendid of you, and I'm awfully grateful. I shall give Reggie a talking to when I see him."

"That wouldn't be fair," smiled Jack. "He didn't know that you were coming this afternoon, you know."

They left the study together, and one or two jammers who were hurrying out to the playing-fields stared hard, and then grinned. Mason went rather red. He knew well enough that the whole Remove would be talking about it before tea-time.

He did not overlook the fact, either, that he would be venturing out without an escort. But he thought it hardly probable that his uncle would interfere with him while he was with a young lady. Besides, he would be cycling.

Mason borrowed my bicycle, a spanking new one. He didn't trouble to ask me for it, because I was on Big Side at the time. But I had told him a day or two before that he could take it whenever he wished—if I wasn't contemplating using it myself, of course. So he was quite justified.

He and his fair companion were just about to start, when the girl gave a little cry.

"Oh, I believe I left a little parcel on your table!" she exclaimed. "Would it be troubling you too much if I asked you—"

"That's all right," said Jack readily.

He laid his machine against the gatepost and ran across the Triangle to the Ancient House. The situation was curious, but Jack didn't exactly dislike it. He always took a pleasure in obliging people, and Miss Pitt was so self-possessed that he was not at all awkward in her presence. And she wasn't one of those silly, giggling girls whom Mason detested.

He found the little parcel on the table, and then hurried back.

The pair mounted, and rode easily down the lane. Jack Mason little realised what this unexpected journey was to mean to him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AN UNFORTUNATE MEETING.

MISS DOLLY PITT could ride splendidly, and Jack had no reason to retard his speed in order to keep level. She was quite capable of maintaining the brisk pace which her escort set.

"It's rather a good thing that Pitt told me where he was going," said Jack, after they had passed through the village. "We shall find him in the shilling seats at the picture theatre, so you won't waste much time, after all. I believe you can get to Chisstone direct from Bannington without troubling to come round these by-roads."

"Oh, that will be splendid!" said the girl. Mason rode on by her side. It was hard lines, missing the big match; but he would be back by half-time probably. At the very worst he would be in time to see the finish.

He felt glad that the weather was fine, and the roads in good condition. It made cycling so much more pleasant. The girl talked brightly, and her conversation was free from all silliness.

She particularly wanted to know how her brother was getting on at St. Frank's.

"Oh, he's all right!" said Mason. "I think the majority of the fellows like him all right. But Pitt's rather queer at times, you know."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I really believe that he's one of the best chaps going, Miss Pitt," replied Mason. "He and I are study-chums, and I see a lot more of him than the other fellows. Some of them are inclined to misunderstand him, but I don't. At heart, your brother's as good as gold. But his temper spoils him now and again."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said the girl. "But I know exactly what you mean. My brother is simply terrible sometimes. He's so cunning, and he doesn't seem to realise the value of a good chum when he's got one. I expect he will be better towards you after I've had a talk with him."

"Oh, but I don't want you to—"
began Jack quickly.

"I shall tell him that his study-mate is very nice," smiled the girl. "And I shall make him promise that he'll listen to your advice. Reggie is awfully tricky, and I'm afraid he's rather vindictive. I think that— Oh!"

She had uttered a cry of dismay, and looked round.

"Puncture?" inquired Mason.

"No, my bag's gone!" exclaimed Miss Pitt, applying the brakes and coming to a standstill. "My bag was swinging on this side of the handle-bars, and now it's gone!"

They had both dismounted, and Jack stared back along the road.

"It must have slipped off," he said. "Don't you remember—"

"Oh, when we were coming through that little dark stretch of road—just against that wooden bridge, I mean—I felt something hit my foot," said the girl quickly. "I thought it was a twig thrown up by the front wheel, but it must have been my bag. And we're in such a hurry, too!"

"I'll run back for it," said Mason. "There's a pretty stiff hill just ahead, so you can be walking up it while I'm gone. We sha'n't lose much time. I'll ride like the dickens!"

"It's very kind of you," said Miss Dolly, looking at him seriously. "I'm afraid you'll think I'm terribly careless!"

"Bags are always liable to slip off," said Jack, with a laugh. "You'll have to slip it over your arm, Miss Pitt."

"I hope you'll find it—"

"It's bound to be lying in the road," said Mason,

turning his machine round. "Is there anything valuable in it?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm afraid there is," replied the girl. "There's my purse, and that contains twenty pounds in currency notes and silver. And there's a diamond brooch of mine, too. I do hope you'll find the bag."

"It's a good thing this road is a quiet one," said Mason, as he jumped on to his machine. "Don't you worry, Miss Pitt. I'll find it all right!"

"I'll be walking up the hill," called Miss Pitt.

Mason rode away rapidly. The spot the girl had referred to was nearly a mile distant, and Jack reckoned that the bag must be lying right in the centre of the road. He watched anxiously for the sign of any other vehicle coming along. He knew only too well that some people would be quite capable of keeping the bag and saying nothing about it.

But the road was fortunately clear. As he whizzed along he kept his eyes well open, in case Miss Pitt should have been mistaken about the spot. Inwardly he resolved that she was undoubtedly careless. She ought not to have carried a bag containing such valuables loosely swung over the handle-bars.

Mason was relieved when he came within sight of the little wooden bridge. This particular spot was very lonely, and the road was clear. It was practically certain that nobody had come along the road recently, except themselves. He slowed down as he reached the spot.

Three times he cycled backwards and forwards, making the distance longer each time. But there was no sign of the bag. And at last he dismounted, intending to look closely in the coarse grass which bordered the road.

And then something unexpected happened.

It was singularly unfortunate; but, then, things generally occur in that way. For as Mason was searching in the grass he heard footsteps just behind him. There was a tiny side lane across the road—a mere farm-track—and he expected to see a labourer, or somebody of that class.

Two men came into sight, and Jack Mason started.

They were Simon Grell and Jake Starkey! Jack had never seen the latter, but the sight of his uncle was quite sufficient. As he caught sight of them, they recognised him. Mr. Grell uttered a roar of surprise.

"It's Jack!" he shouted. "By thunder, it's the boy!"

Mason forgot all about Miss Pitt's bag in that tense moment. He whirled his bicycle round and leapt into the saddle. But Grell was running, and the boy naturally lost a few precious seconds in mounting.

"You young cub!" bellowed Mr. Grell.

As Jack was pedalling away, telling himself that he was safe, he felt the machine jolt violently. He took a quick, startled glance behind, and there was Captain Jim, hanging on to the rear bar of the parcel-carrier.

"Get you?" pouted the man roughly. "Better get off, my fine ruff!"

"Let me go—let me go!" shouted the boy, pedalling vainly.

It was a hopeless effort. With Grell hanging on behind, it was impossible for Jack to make any progress. Indeed, he was quickly jerked to a standstill, and he fell off the machine. He attempted to dash away, but Starkey was there.

Mason was completely captured, and the bicycle was roughly flung against the hedge. Then the men forced their prisoner down the farm-track and out of sight of the road. They were highly elated.

"Talk about luck!" chuckled Mr. Grell. "Was

do you think of it, Jake? Run right into the zipper as though we'd planned it! Hold still, durn you!"

Mason was hot with rage and alarm.

"You're no right to molest me!" he shouted. "I shall refuse to tell you anything, and it's a shameful thing to force me—"

"Stow your lip!" growled Mr. Grell. "You've got a sight too much to say, young shaver. You're under my control, don't forget, me bein' your kind uncle. I've half a mind to take you straight to London, an' shove you aboard ship as cabin-boy. That 'ud make you tame, my lad!"

Jack said nothing. For, truth to tell, he was half afraid that his uncle would carry out the threat. Mr. Grell was quite capable of it. Not that Jack himself would have allowed such a thing. He would have resisted fiercely.

"Ere we are, Simon!" said Mr. Starkey.

They had proceeded about a hundred yards down the rough track. And now they turned into a gateway, and Mason saw a ramshackle building just in front, apparently an old cowshed, or something of that kind. It was isolated from the road and extremely lonely.

Jack bitterly realised the unfortunate nature of this meeting. He had thought of the possibility before starting out, but had dismissed it. But how had he known that his uncle would be taking a walk with his friend on this very afternoon?

And what would Miss Dolly Pitt think? What would happen when Mason failed to return with the bag? All sorts of thoughts crowded into Jack's mind; but the foremost, of course, concerned his own position.

Once within the cowshed, the door was closed and he was released. Grell stood with his back to the door, and Starkey took up his position against the window. It was quite a small place, and there was no prospect of Jack escaping.

He stood in the centre of the space, looking angrily at his uncle. But the latter calmly lit a cigarette and chuckled.

"Quite a nice meetin', Jack," he said pleasantly. "Now, my boy, I don't mean to waste no time on you. Give me that locket o' yours!"

Jack Mason laughed with real enjoyment.

"You'll have a job to get it, uncle," he said. "I haven't got the locket on me, and it's now safely—"

"Well!" demanded Grell, as the boy panted.

"That's all," said Jack. "I'm not going to tell you where it is."

"You infernal young puppy!" snapped Grell.

"You'll tell me where it is, an' you'll tell me where that package is, too. Understand? I won't have no half measures, my lad. If you don't speak up the truth—"

"I won't tell you a thing!" declared Jack hotly.

"Hold him, old mate!" grated out Captain Jim. "I don't believe the kid's tellin' the truth. He's got the locket on him all the time—an' the packet, too, as likely as not. Hold him, Jake!"

Mr. Starkey obliged, and Mason remained still.

"You needn't trouble," he said quietly. "You won't find anything."

They didn't, although they turned every pocket out, and even went to the length of feeling all over the lining of his coat. Grell stepped back at last, his eyes glittering with fury.

"Where are them things—the locket an' the package?" he asked harshly. "If ye don't speak up, durn you, I'll half kill you!"

Jack remained silent.

"Are you goin' to speak?" demanded Grell, shaking the boy.

"No!" muttered Jack.

"I'll give you just one minute—no, I won't!" exclaimed Captain Jim. "I'll give you twenty

seconds. If you don't say where you've put that locket, I'll put you across that bin an' tan you till you're half raw!"

Even this prospect failed to move Jack Mason. "It wasn't likely that he would explain to his uncle but both the half locket and the package were in the hands of Nelson Lee.

"Time's up!" said Mr. Grell grimly. "Now then?"

"Please, I—I——" began Jack cringingly.

"Ah, that's a better tone!" grinned Captain Jim. "I thought you wouldn't be likely to stand a good lookin'! I don't want to hurt ye, boy, so you'd best speak up while you're safe!"

"The—locket is——"

Again Mason paused, and he seemed to be in mortal terror. Grell thrust his hands into his pockets and stood by. Then he gave a bellow of rage and pain. For, in a twinkling of an eye, Jack had huddled into his stomach. Mr. Grell went over like a ninepin.

Jack was at the door in a flash, and he tore it open, his heart beating madly with excitement. It seemed as though his little trick would succeed, for of course he hadn't been terrified in the least.

With just ordinary luck Jack would have escaped, but the luck he met with was of the most abominable character. He dragged the door open all right, and shot out before Starkey could get at him, and before Grell could rise.

But Jack hadn't noticed an iron spike projecting out of the doopost, rusty with age and rather dangerous. As he attempted to rush out the spike caught a portion of his jacket and pulled him back.

With a gasp, he tried to tear himself free, but couldn't. It was necessary to disentangle the coat. And whilst he was doing so Starkey made a fierce grab at his shoulder and yanked him headlong backwards into the shed again.

"Oh!" panted Jack, ready to cry with disappointment.

"Hold him!" snarled Grell. "By thunder! I'll make the best pay for this! Tried to trick me, did you? We'll see, my lad—we'll see!"

Captain Jim had partially recovered by this time—he had been nearly winded—and he whisked a pliable cane through the air with fierce energy. Jack's heart sank, for he knew that his effort to escape had only made matters worse.

"Lay him across that bin!" rapped out Mr. Grell.

Jack struggled fiercely, but he was almost powerless in the iron grip of Jake Starkey, whose muscles appeared to be made of whipcord. Gaunt and lean, Starkey was, nevertheless, as strong as an ox.

There was an old bin in the shed, and Jack was held across this while Mr. Grell brought the walking-cane down again and again. It was a tricky task, however, for the prisoner persisted in shifting about continuously, in spite of Starkey's grip. And he received his punishment without uttering a cry.

He was in great agony, for Grell laid it on with a heavy hand. At last the rascal tired himself out, and he paused, panting heavily.

"Now will you speak?" he gasped furiously.

"I've told you three or four times already that I won't say a word!" said Jack, breathing hard. "Oh, you're a cowardly bully, a brute, a scoundrel! You ought to be put in prison——"

Shah!

Again the cane descended, and several more cuts followed. But Mason positively refused to speak any further. At last, thoroughly disgusted, Simon Grell delivered himself of several curses, and glared at his victim helplessly.

"Hang the boy!" he snarled. "Wot's to be done, Jake?"

"There's some rope 'ere," said Mr. Starkey,

"Why not truss the kid up an' leave 'im in this 'ere place until 'e's 'arf starved? That'll do 'im a sight more good than a tannin'. But you know more about it than wot I do, Simon, so I'll leave it to you!"

"We'll starve 'im!" declared Grell promptly. "That's a good idea, old man. This shed looks as if it hadn't been used for years, an' if we make a good job o' the kid, there's no fear of his bein' discovered. By to-morrow evening he'll be as mook as a lamb!"

And then and there the two rascals roped Jack Mason up with extreme viciousness. A muffer was tied round his face, and he was finally deposited in the empty bin, which was quite large enough to accommodate him. There was a great wooden lid, rotten, and with several holes in it. This was thrust over the top, and Grell and Starkey left the building.

They secured the door so that it couldn't possibly be opened from within. The window was only small, and a heavy piece of timber thrust into position against it, and then propped, made it quite secure. Jack Mason was a prisoner within the shed. Even if he succeeded in getting free from his bonds—which seemed impossible—he would be unable to leave the building.

And this was the result of performing a gallant act! How it was to end, Mason had no idea. And he was too sore to think such at the moment. He could only lie in the bin, bitterly realising that everything had gone wrong.

And, meanwhile, things were going still further wrong!

CHAPTER XXIX.

A TERRIBLE SUSPICION.

"GOAL!"

A mighty roar went up when Fenton of the Sixth scored the first goal in the First Eleven match for St. Frank's. It was getting on towards half-time, and this was the first goal. The game had been hard and fierce, and all the spectators were worked up to a fine pitch of excitement.

That goal, therefore, put everybody in a good humour. I yelled as lustily as the rest, although I didn't chuck my cap into the air. I wanted it for my own use.

Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson were just beside me. We were standing near the ropes, just against that point of Big Side from which it was possible to look into the Triangle.

Owen major and one or two others were standing a short distance off, and I noticed that Owen suddenly turned and gazed over towards the gates.

"Who's the flapper?" he asked, with interest. We looked round then, and saw that a girl, wheeling a bicycle, had just entered the Triangle. She came to a halt, and looked about her uncertainly. Sir Montie adjusted his pince-nez and coughed.

"The young lady appears to be in doubt," he remarked. "Surely this is a moment for us to distinguish ourselves, old boys? Ah! pray refrain from usin' that horrid word in my honour, Owen major."

"What, 'flapper'?" asked Owen. "Well, she's a flapper, ain't she?"

"It's a frightful word, dear boy. And I really can't understand why all the girls don't get up a protest against it," said Tregellis-West. "I would if I happened to be a girl—I would, really."

"Well, we won't start an argument about the merits of the word 'flapper,' Montie," I grinned. "It's nearly half-time, so we might as well make

ourselves useful by seeing what the young lady wants."

She was already wheeling her bicycle in the direction of Big Side, having evidently failed to see anybody near the school. As we drew near we saw that the girl was looking anxious and worried; also, she seemed familiar.

"Why, you're Pitt's sister, ain't you?" asked Watson, as bluntly as usual.

"Yes," replied the girl. "How did you know?"

"Easy!" said Tommy. "You look just like Pitt, except, of course, that you're a girl. Can't you find him?"

"I'm not really looking for him," replied Miss Dolly. "I was wondering if Mason was here—"

"Mason?" put in Hubbard, who had strolled over. "Why, I saw you leaving the school with him three-quarters of an hour ago, Miss Pitt?"

We all looked at her somewhat curiously.

"Isn't he here?" she asked, her voice very anxious.

"Not that I know of," I replied. "If he'd come back, Miss Pitt, he would have made a bee-line for the foster-field, so you can reckon that he isn't on the school premises. Why, is anything the matter?"

"I don't know. I hardly know what to think," said the girl. "You see, I came here for my brother, and Mason told me that Reggie was in Bannington, and he offered to cycle over with me to show me the way."

"Who wouldn't?" asked Orea major blandly.

"And I really don't know what has become of him," continued Miss Pitt. "I dropped my bag on the road, and Mason very kindly went back for it. I waited for ever so long, but he didn't return. I thought that he had perhaps come to the school, but it doesn't look as though he has."

"You must have missed him on the road," I said.

"But I couldn't have done," she replied quickly.

"It's quite a straight road, and he had no reason to go in any other direction—unless it was some reason of his own. I'm sure he found the bag, because it was nowhere to be seen, and it must have been lying in the road."

"Oh, I say!" protested Watson. "Mason wouldn't go off with your bag, you know!"

Gulliver, who had strolled up, laughed.

"I'm not so sure of that," he said sneeringly. "Mason used to be a County Council School kid, an' he lived in all sorts of slums—bobnobbed with pickpockets, I expect. It all depends upon how much the bag contained."

"Shut up, you rotter!" I said angrily. "It's a beastly shame to say such a thing as that, Gulliver. If you repeat it I'll knock you down!"

"Oh, keep your hair on!" growled Gulliver.

"How much did the bag contain, Miss Pitt?" asked Watson.

"Oh, quite a lot!" replied the girl. "Twenty pounds in notes and silver, and a diamond brooch."

"Phew!" I whistled. "And you're lost it?"

"I don't see how it can be lost," replied Miss Pitt. "It only just slipped off the handle-bar, and there wasn't another soul on the road. I think that Mason must have gone to Bannington in some other way. He wouldn't steal the bag, would he? That would be a terrible thing to do."

"Well, it looks jolly queer!" sneered Gulliver.

"You can take my word for it, Miss Pitt, that Mason isn't a thief," I said quietly. "You needn't take any notice of this old standing here. If Mason found your bag he'll return it. He's probably still searching on the road, or, as you say, he might have gone to Bannington, although I don't quite see how he could do that without meeting you again."

The girl looked very worried.

"I don't know what to think," she said, in distress. "I don't like to suspect Mason, but—but— Well, he knew that the money was in the bag, and it might have been a temptation to him. But it's such an awful thing to suspect. Oh, I'm sure he's gone on to Bannington!"

"Something of that sort, you may be sure, dear gal!" observed Sir Mason.

"I thought he had come back here, perhaps," said Miss Pitt. "But as he hasn't, I'll hurry on to Bannington at once!"

"I say, shall we escort you?" inquired several juniors.

"No, thank you!" said the girl firmly. "I wouldn't dream of putting you to the trouble, Good-bye!"

She mounted her machine and rode swiftly towards the gates. It was obvious that she was in a state of alarm and concern. We looked at one another curiously after she had gone.

"Something fishy about this, my sons," I said grimly. "Mason wouldn't pinch the girl's bag, I'll swear. There must be some other explanation."

As a matter of fact, I was thinking of Mr. Simon Grell. The idea had struck me that Mason might have recovered the bag, and had then been seized by his rascally uncle. This would easily account for the disappearance of both Mason and the bag. But I couldn't air this view aloud.

"I'll bet an even fiver that Mason's done the pinchin' act!" said Fullwood calmly. "It's just the sort of thing we could expect from a Bermondsey kid. A jolly good thing if he's found out an' socked. The sooner we get rid of him the better."

To my regret, quite a number of fellows were ready to believe that Mason had been guilty of sticking to Miss Pitt's valuable bag. The facts were undoubtedly significant, but I didn't believe in forming any opinion until there was much stronger evidence, and until Jack Mason could speak for himself.

But the other juniors were liable to draw hasty conclusions. And while the second half of the senior match was proceeding there was much speculation concerning Miss Pitt's loss, and Mason's connection with it.

The match itself had an exciting finish. The visitors had equalised, and it was only in the last minute of play that the home team scored the winning goal. There was much enthusiasm and excitement, and after it had died down the Triangle was filled with groups of juniors discussing the merits of senior football compared with junior. Needless to say, the majority of the fellows considered that the Junior Rovers was far and away superior to the First.

In the midst of the discussion somebody let out a snarl. Reginald Pitt had just cycled swiftly in at the gateway, and he came straight over towards us and dismounted. I was standing with my elbows against the Ancient House steps. Pitt was rather breathless, and his expression was grim and anxious.

"Where's Mason?" he asked quickly.

"I don't think he's come in yet," I replied. "Why, what's up, Pitt? Where's your sister? Do you mean to say that you missed her, after all?"

"No, I met her on the road," replied Pitt anxiously. "Careless little bouncer! She's lost her bag, with piles of tin in it, and some of it was for me, too."

"No wonder you're worried—what?" said De Valerio.

"Oh, don't be funny!" snapped Pitt. "I told Dolly to buzz off back to Custisno. A girl's no good in this sort of thing. She'll get into a frightful row about the bag, but that's her look-out. Mason must have got it, so I'll return it to Dolly by post this evening."

"Yes, if Mason admits that he found it," said Fullwood calmly.

"Do you think he'd steal it?" demanded Pitt. "Don't be such an ass, Fullwood! But I certainly don't understand why the chap hasn't turned up— he had time enough, goodness knows."

"He's probably chasing your sister about," I remarked. "You know what girls are, Pitt. She must have taken the wrong road, or something, and missed Mason on the way."

The Serpent nodded.

"Yes, I suppose so," he remarked. "Dash it all, I don't like to think that Mason would run off with Dady's bag, but there was a good bit of money in it, you know."

Fullwood grinned.

"I thought you told me not to be an ass!" he remarked calmly.

"Oh, well, I was a bit wild!" said Pitt. "Mason's absence is jolly queer, whatever you say. He couldn't have gone to Bannington, because I should have passed him, and he couldn't have come back here, either."

"Perhaps he met somebody," I said. "No need to get alarmed, Pitt. Wait until Mason comes back, and then you'll be able to understand."

"Begad! It's a shockin' thing to raise all these beastly suspicions, you know," said Tregellis-West, shaking his head. "There may be twenty ways of explaining why Mason hasn't come back."

"Hear, hear!"

"Quite right!" agreed Fullwood. "But I wouldn't mind betting that I suggested the only real explanation. The ratter has run off with that bag— Yarrook! Mind where you're shovin' your beastly feet, Handforth!"

"Did I tread on you?" said Handforth ominously. "It's just possible that my fat might accidentally hit your nose—in fact, it will do if you make any more of those rotten remarks!"

"Oh, rats!" snapped Fullwood.

Handforth glared.

"Did you say rats to me?" he demanded.

"Yes, I did!" roared Fullwood savagely.

Smack!

Ralph Leslie staggered back, his cheek burning. "And you can repeat it as many times as you like," said Handforth. "I don't mind a bit. But the next time I sha'n't smack—I shall punch. Mason ain't exactly a chum of mine, but I'm not going to stand here and hear him accused of being a thief. If he is a thief, I'll be down on him like a ton of bricks. But until the proof is here I believe him innocent."

"Good man!" I said heartily.

Fullwood growled something under his breath and walked off. And Reginald Pitt strolled towards the gates with his hands in his pockets. He was worried and troubled, and knew that nothing could be done until Jack Mason turned up.

There was quite an amount of speculation in the Bazaar. The story was significant, especially as Mason showed no sign of appearing. Twenty pounds, to say nothing of a diamond brooch, is a pretty decent sum. But I found it very hard to believe that Mason could have taken it. In fact, I didn't believe it. I laughed at the very idea.

And, meanwhile, the boy from Bermondsey remained absent.

CHAPTER XXX.

A SURPRISE FOR NELSON LEE.

DR. BRETT had been most genial, and Nelson Lee was feeling in a good humour as he strolled along the Bannington Road. The village melico, in fact, had taken advantage of the Wednesday half-holiday to ask Nelson Lee over for an hour or two.

It was no half-holiday for Brett, of course, but the afternoon was free for Nelson Lee. And the object in view was to inspect some old ruins midway between Bellon and Bannington, but some little distance from the road.

The pair had arrived, and had spent quite an interesting time, for Dr. Brett, of course, was one of Lee's firmest friends in the district. He was a well-informed man, an excellent talker, and possessed plenty of sound common-sense.

As luck would have it, however, Dr. Brett had met a woman of the labouring class in a tiny hamlet near the ruins. She, it appeared, was even then on her way to Bellon for the doctor, her worthy husband having suddenly fallen ill. From the symptoms described, Brett had a suspicion that the man had been partaking of something which did not agree with him. At all events, as the matter seemed rather serious, the doctor accompanied the woman to her cottage.

And Nelson Lee, therefore, wended his way homewards alone. Brett was profuse in his apology, but Lee laughed it aside.

"My dear man, a doctor is not a free agent," he smiled. "You are always at the beck and call of everybody, and you can call no time your own. So be off to attend to this patient of yours. We have had quite an enjoyable afternoon, and I don't mind walking back alone in the least. I may drop in this evening for a smoke and a chat."

"Do!" said Dr. Brett heartily.

And that's why Nelson Lee found himself striding along a narrow lane between Bellon and Bannington that afternoon—alone. He certainly had no idea that he would meet with any untoward incident.

But chance is a curious thing, and it was purely a piece of luck which led Nelson Lee down the farm track near the old wooden bridge. It was a short cut on to the main road, and he took it.

As a direct result, he turned a corner just in time to see Mr. Simon Grell and Mr. Jake Starkey wheeling a bicycle into a gateway. Their backs were towards Nelson Lee, and he instinctively came to a halt.

The two men had no much right in the lane as the detective had. But the fact which aroused Lee's interest was that they were calmly handling a bicycle which undoubtedly belonged to me. For the gun'or had recognised my jigger. It will be remembered that Mason had borrowed it.

It was not a very marvellous feat for Nelson Lee to spot my jigger. For it was practically a new one, and was camouflaged olive green instead of the customary black. Further, the handle-bars were of an unusual design, and the lamp was a spanking one of an expensive pattern.

One glance told the gun'or that it was my machine. Then what was it doing in the hands of Mason's uncle? Nelson Lee considered that the point needed looking into. And he waited, creeping forward a yard or two.

This gave him the advantage of a break in the hedge. Peering through, he saw that the men approached an old cowshed, the door of which was scroogily fastened. They freed it, placed the bicycle inside, and then secured the door again.

This was rather suspicious. As a matter of fact, Mr. Grell had completely forgotten the bicycle while he was attending to Jack Mason. And he and Starkey, striding down the lane, had spotted it.

They couldn't very well leave it there, so the best thing to do was to put it in the shed with the boy—which they did. There was now no clue which would lead anybody to suppose that Mason was in the vicinity.

The two rascals made off, intending to hold a discussion in their lodgings at the White Harp. Mason was safe enough; he couldn't possibly escape. But they wouldn't have been so confident had they known that their movements had been watched—by Nelson Lee, of all people!

"This is quite a pretty problem," Lee told himself. "That was Nipper's bicycle, and yet there is no sign of Nipper. Has the careless young rascal left it by the roadside for some reason? If so, Grell probably took advantage of the situation to conceal the machine—with the possible idea of profit later on."

The schoolmaster-detective considered that it was his affair to look into the matter. He wasted no time, but strode down the rutty lane, leapt lightly over the gate, and approached the old cowshed.

He gained admittance in a minute or two, and found the shed to be empty, except for the bicycle, a big old bin, and some odds and ends. Yes, the bicycle was certainly interesting.

"It's Nipper's right enough!" murmured the governor. "Now, why on earth did those two men—

"Dear me!"

A most distinct sound came from the bin, and Nelson Lee turned and stared at it with curiosity. A wooden lid was in position, but the sound seemed to indicate that a human being was within.

"Can it be possible that Nipper is—"

Nelson Lee paused and strode across the shed. The next moment the lid was off, and he looked down upon Jack Mason's doubled-up form.

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Lee, startled. He jerked the boy upright, and was greatly relieved when he observed that Mason's eyes were open and alight with excitement and gratitude. Lee pulled off the muffer, and Mason gave a little gasp.

"Oh, thanks awfully, sir!" he exclaimed breathlessly.

"Are you hurt, lad?" asked Lee, lifting him bodily on to the door. "You must tell me what this dastardly outrage means—"

"I'm not really hurt, sir," said Mason. "My uncle beat me with a stick, and I'm rather tender. But that's nothing to cry over. Oh, this is simply splendid! How did you find me, sir?"

"I am afraid I must take no credit upon myself, my boy," said Nelson Lee. "It was quite accidental, I can assure you. But you must tell me the exact truth, Mason. This affair is simply beyond all bounds. It is an outrage, and your uncle has laid himself open to prosecution—"

"Oh, don't let it go as far as that!" exclaimed Jack anxiously. "You've rescued me, so what does it matter? I—I'm not thinking of my uncle, but it would be simply awful for me at St. Frank's if it all came out in a police-court."

"You are quite right, Mason," said Lee. "As you say, it would be far better to take no action, seeing that Grell has been fooled. But if he goes on at this rate he will over-reach himself, and he will find himself in serious trouble. But how is it that he got hold of you, lad? Did I not tell you to be very careful—"

"I was, sir," exclaimed Mason, whose bonds had been cut free by this time. "But something unexpected happened."

And he told the detective of Miss Pitt's visit, and how he had been captured while looking for the missing bag. Lee realised, of course, that the position had been practically forced upon the lad.

"The circumstances were quite exceptional, Mason, and you are not at all to blame!" he declared. "At the same time, you must be very wary—"

"By thunder!" exclaimed a harsh voice outside. "The kid's gone! Look at the door, Simon! You didn't fasten it—"

Only an oath came in reply. Nelson Lee motioned to Mason to get in the rear, and he stood ready, grimly amused. Grell and Starkey had returned for some reason. Lee never understood why, but in all probability Mr. Grell had thought of some fresh question to ask his nephew, or it might even have changed his plans.

Grell and Starkey entered the shed at the same moment, and they started back in dismay as they saw Nelson Lee facing them.

"Why, what—?" began Captain Jim furiously. "Get out of this place, damn you! Leave that kid alone! Here, Jake, help to kick him out!"

Nelson Lee laughed as the two men charged. They lent one another strength, and strongly believed that they would be able to vanquish this intruder. But that's just where they made a big mistake.

Lee allowed them to come right on. Then he let himself go. He hit them left and right, delivering the most powerful blows, and Nelson Lee, when he gets fairly going, can punch like a steam-hammer.

Grell went down with a crash, and Starkey followed him, wincing if his jaw was in three pieces or two. At all events, the rascal felt sure that it was broken, and he rolled over backwards with a scream of pain and alarm.

In a second he was on his feet, streaking away for all he was worth. Simon Grell did not wait for any more, but lurched to his feet, swearing horribly. For this he received another punch, which sent him flying once more. And this time he got up and fled precipitately.

"They are soon settled, Mason," smiled Nelson Lee, gently rubbing his knuckles. "I was hoping for something far more entertaining. Well, the rascals know that you are safe now, but I should advise you to be very careful in future. Cut off on your bicycle, and go straight to the school. The ruffians have fled from the main road, so you will not run into them."

Mason was very grateful. "It's wonderfully good of you, sir!" he exclaimed warmly. "I—I don't know how to thank you—"

"Don't try, young 'un. Hurry off as fast as you can go," interrupted Nelson Lee. "As for Miss Pitt's bag, you can't stop behind for that. In any case, I expect she has recovered it herself by this time."

"Unless my uncle took it, sir," put in Jack. "There is that possibility, of course, but I do not think it is probable," said Lee. "You would surely have seen some sign of it, or would have heard some reference to it, if Grell had it in his possession. In any case, that can be settled later."

Mason was soon off, and Lee remained behind to have a look round. He also suspected that Grell and Starkey might be prowling about, and he would have welcomed another opportunity of meeting them.

Jack pedalled for all he was worth as he went home. Not that he was scared. Nelson Lee had told him to hurry, and he was hurrying. The match would be over by this time, of course, but Mason had much to be thankful for. If Nelson Lee hadn't appeared upon the scene he might have been kept in that shed for days.

Jack was worried about Miss Pitt's bag. He had promised to recover it, and had failed. This was his fault, but he was in the unfortunate position of being unable to explain what had actually occurred.

If he did do so the whole school would know about his rascally uncle. And if he concealed the identity of Mr. Grell, the juniors would almost certainly refuse to believe the yarn. It was far better to say nothing about it. Indeed, at the last moment, Nelson Lee had warned the boy to say nothing at all. Neither he nor Jack realised how

Mason's absence had been construed by a great many fellows.

Jack had become quite calm by the time the school gates were in sight. It was rather painful for him to ride, owing to the energy of Mr. Grell. That gentleman had wielded his cane so effectively that Mason was extremely sore.

But the main trouble was over, and Jack could stand a little pain. He thought it quite possible that Miss Pitt herself would be at the school, having returned to make inquiries about the bag. Indeed, Mason remembered the incident of the forgotten parcel—when he and the girl had been starting off. Was it not likely that she had forgotten her bag, too? It would be rather rich if the missing article turned up in Study E, after all.

Mason turned into the Triangle, and there was an immediate shout. There were still several groups of jussies standing about, my chums and myself being included. And Reginald Pitt ran forward.

"I say, Mason!" he exclaimed anxiously.

Jack turned his bicycle away from the cycle-house—where he was making for—and dismounted. Then he walked over to Pitt. The other fellows crowded round interestedly.

"I say, Pitt, where's your sister?" asked Mason quickly.

"She's gone, and I want to know what the dickens you mean by running off?" was Pitt's grim reply. "You offered to escort her to Bunnington, and then deserted her half-way along the road—"

"I didn't do anything of the sort!" retorted Jack hotly. "She dropped her bag, and I went back to find it."

"Then where have you been all this time?"

Jack coloured slightly.

"I—I was detained," he said uncomfortably.

"I'm awfully sorry, and I hope your sister doesn't think I acted rudely. But I couldn't help it, Pitt, I was hoping to find her here." He looked straight into Pitt's eyes. "I'll explain everything to you in private," he added quietly.

"All right, but you'd better hand that bag over at once," said the Serpent. "Some of the fellows here been making nasty suggestions—"

"Why, I didn't find the bag," said Jack quietly. "I searched along the road, but it wasn't there. I thought that your sister perhaps left it behind in the study. Why are you looking so queerly at me?"

"I should think you ought to know that," said Pitt. "The bag wasn't left behind, Mason, and you know jolly well that my sister dropped it on the road. You went back to find it, and didn't return it to Dolly. You're been absent for close upon two hours, and now you turn up and say that you haven't seen the bag? Do you think that's quite good enough?"

Jack Mason started back.

"What do you mean?" he asked hoarsely.

"That!" came a hiss from the rear.

"You're mad!" gasped Jack, going white. "Do you think I kept the bag? It's a horrible thing to say."

"Begad! An' so it is!" said Sir Montie.

"Mason, dear old boy, you can rely on me to back you up. Don't take any notice of these cads!"

"We don't believe you took the bag," I said smilingly.

"If Mason will tell me what he did and why he has been so long away I'll believe him, too," said Reginald Pitt. "I can't say anything fairer than that. Why didn't you go back to my sister?"

"I'll tell you—later on," said Jack steadily.

"That's no good to me," snapped Pitt. "If you can't say it in front of these other fellows, it

proves that there's something wrong. I hate suspecting you, but you must see that the facts look jolly rotten."

"Search him!" advised Fullwood, from the rear.

"I don't mind!" shouted Mason hastily. "You can search me all you like!"

Handforth snorted.

"Don't you let them touch you, Mason!" he roared.

"I think it would be just as well, Handy," I put in. "I'm certain that Mason hasn't got the bag, and it's only fair to him to give him a chance of showing that he's not a thief. If I were in his position I should prefer to be searched."

So Mason was searched—without result.

"It proves nothing!" jeered Fullwood. "He's had time to hide the bag miles away, an' I'll bet that's what he's done, too."

"What about the bike?" suggested Morrell.

"By gad!" ejaculated Pitt quickly. "We'd forgotten the jigger!"

Ready hands—mainly the hands of Fullwood & Co.—seized my bicycle and examined it. They were intensely eager to prove Mason guilty. They hated him, and wanted to see him kicked out of the school.

"Go easy with that jigger!" I said sharply.

The cads were pulling it about roughly, and they took a delight in damaging any property of mine. I pushed forward with my chums, and took the bicycle out of Fullwood & Co.'s hands.

There was an extra big tool-bag fixed to the carrier, one that I had ordered specially. It was not made to carry tools only; there was space for quite a decent lunch. When on a picnicking trip this was most handy.

"The whole thing's a disgrace!" I snapped, as I unfastened the straps. "Do you think Mason would shove your sister's bag in here—"

"I didn't suggest looking in your bicycle," interrupted Pitt. "I think it's potty. You needn't open that bag unless you like. It's simply a waste of time, anyhow. I don't accuse Mason of anything, but I think he ought to be frank with us, considering what's happened."

"If you understood everything as I do, you wouldn't say that," put in Mason quietly. "I don't blame you, it does look queer, I'll admit. I think it's quite possible that after ten I'll be able to tell you everything."

Jack, in fact, had determined to explain why he had been detained, but he wouldn't do that until he sought Nelson Lee's advice.

"There you are—squint inside!" I exclaimed impatiently, as I freed the last strap. "I think it's utterly rotten— Oh, great Scott!"

I broke off blankly as I caught sight of something. The next second I pulled out a lady's small leather bag, and there was a rear. Mason himself started back as though dazed.

"Somebody put it there!" he panted huskily.

"Of course!" snarled Fullwood. "You put it there, you sneakin' thief! By gad! That'll mean the sack for you, and a jolly good thing, too!"

Pitt took the bag without a word and opened it.

"There's no money in here," he said quietly.

"Where is it, Mason?"

"Do you think I know?" shouted Jack, in a fury. "I haven't seen the bag before. I don't know anything about it. I—I don't know—"

He panted helplessly.

"You'd better go straight to the Head, Pitt," advised Fullwood.

"And you'd better mind your own business!" snapped the Serpent. "I'm not going to the Head. I'm not going to do anything. The matter can drop, for all I care. My sister shouldn't be so jolly careless!"

"Oh, I say, we ain't goin' to have a thief in

the Remove!" yelled Gulliver. "Take't likely! I'll go to the Head myself!"

"I think you'll have to, Pitt," I interrupted quietly. "You can't let the thing drop in that way. Even if the Head knows nothing about it, Mason's life will be made a misery, now that there's suspicion against him. The whole thing's got to be cleared up."

Pitt laughed uselessly. "No need for any fuss!" he said. "What does it matter to you? What does it matter to the other chaps? It's my affair—and Mason's. Everybody else can mind their own confounded business!"

Jack Mason was deadly calm now. "Do you think I took that bag, Pitt?" he asked deliberately.

"No, I don't!" said Pitt, speaking distinctly. "I think somebody has been up to some rotten trick. That's all. The less said about it the better. I don't believe you're guilty for a second; and here's my hand."

Mason took it, but there was an angry roar from the fellows.

"That is all very well, but it can't finish as you'd wish, Pitt," I said grimly. "You may think Mason innocent, but there's plenty of fellows who don't. And it's only fair to have it cleared up. He went to search for the bag, came back after two hours, and wouldn't say where he'd been. On the top of denying where the bag had got to, it's found on the bicycle that Mason was using. That looks jolly suspicious, and everybody knows it!"

"He's guilty—of course he's guilty!" yelled a dozen Removites.

"That's just my point," I said quietly. "You—you don't believe Mason's a thief?"

grogged Tommy Watson blankly. "I know he's not a thief!" I replied, looking round with perfect calmness. "I just pointed out the significance of the case. All the evidence is against Mason, and it's only fair that he should have evidence in his favour. In other words, I mean to conduct a Form trial—at once. That'll be absolutely fair."

"A trial isn't necessary——" began Pitt. "You may not think so, but I do," I replied. "I must say, Pitt, that I'm surprised at your attitude, and I'm jolly pleased, too. It points to the fact that you've got more decency in you than I supposed."

"Thanks!" said Pitt coolly. "And I can quite understand your not wanting a Form trial," I went on, looking at him straight. "You're willing to let the matter drop, and you've said that you believe in Mason's innocence. That's good of you, but the whole truth has got to come out. You can't escape it, Pitt."

"What the dickens do you mean?" he asked uselessly.

"I think you know better than I do," was my reply. "Some fellows here can be deceived, but I'm not quite so inexperienced. That's touched you on the raw—oh? Well, you brought this thing on, Pitt, and you'll have to go through with it to the end. A Form trial is the only way to settle things."

And that same evening the trial took place.

CHAPTER XXXI.

TRIED BY THE REMOVE.

CECIL DE VALERIE looked very imposing. He had borrowed one of Mr. Crowell's gowns from the Form-room cupboard, and although it was several sizes too large it nevertheless lent a solemnity to De Valerie's appearance which fitted the occasion.

Far De Valerie had been appointed judge, and he occupied the "bench" in the court. This was the Common-room, and De Valerie's seat was elevated by the simple process of putting a chair on to the table and shoving the table against the wall.

The witness-box and the dock were provided by other chairs, and the body of the court was filled with excited Removites. They were somewhat inclined to treat the matter as a joke, but it was really very serious.

Pitt didn't like it at all, but the matter had now passed beyond his control. And, as he refused to prosecute, Fullwood appointed himself for the prosecution. I didn't object, because it would be rather good to see Fullwood defeated.

Naturally, I was counsel for the defence, and I had several witnesses all ready to be called upon. But nobody else knew this at the time, and they hadn't the slightest suspicion that I had one or two cards up my sleeve.

There was some little commotion because Handforth insisted upon being judge. As he was going to be a witness, this could hardly be possible. Besides, if Handforth had been judge, he would have declared Mason innocent before the proceedings had been going five minutes. Handforth was not exactly impartial.

"Oh, all right! Have your own way!" he snorted at last. "Only, if Mason's found guilty, don't blame me! I'll be foreman of the jury——"

"You silly ass!" I exclaimed. "A jurymen can't be a witness! The jury's got to be twelve fellows who don't know a goddy thing about the case at all. They're got to hear the evidence and give their verdict."

"Quite right," said the judge. "But all the chaps knew the whole giddy yarn——what? Why can't Fifth-Formers lend a hand——"

"No need for that," I interrupted. "I've already arranged with Christine & Co. of the College House. They're impartial, and they don't know anything of what's happened. They ought to be here by this time."

The door opened, and a crowd of Monks appeared.

"Talk of angels and they appear!" grinned the judge.

"Jurymen ain't angels," said Bob Christine calmly. "Now, what's all the giddy trouble? I've brought eleven chaps with me, and we've come here with the solemn determination to see that justice is done. I'm foreman of the jury, and, as a first act of justice, I suggest that Fullwood is cleared out of court!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" "You silly idiot!" roared Fullwood. "I'm prosecuting counsel!"

"Oh, my mistake!" said Christine. "It's rather a bad look-out for the prisoner if you're against him, Fullwood. It wouldn't matter if you only told the truth. But you're quite capable of faking up a story of your own."

When things had quietened down—for there was a considerable commotion for a few minutes—the jurymen took their seats, and the Common-room assumed a grave aspect. Jack Mason was sitting in the dock, looking calm and composed. Just before entering he had paid a visit to Nelson Lee, and he had nothing to fear from this trial. In fact, he was in agreement with me that it would be the best way of clearing the matter up.

"In opening the case for the prosecution," began Fullwood, looking round him importantly. "I should like to make a few remarks concerning the record of the prisoner who now stands in the dock accused of committing a particularly outrageous theft——"

"Rats!" said Pitt. "I never accused him. Besides, he's not standing in the dock at all; he's sitting."

"I cannot allow this levity," said the judge severely. "And is it necessary to rake up Mason's past record, as you call it? What's that got to do with the case? We don't want any vindictiveness, Fullwood."

"I contend that Mason's record is necessary," declared Fullwood.

"What kind of a record is it?" asked Handforth.

"A gramophone record?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"This joking is most unseemly!" exclaimed De Valerie, frowning. "If there's any more of it, I shall instruct the ushers to clear the court!"

"There ain't any ushers, your ass?" shouted somebody.

It was, of course, quite illegal to address the judge as an ass, but his lordship overlooked the point, and Fullwood was allowed to proceed.

"Mason is not the same as the other boys of this school," he declared. "He was previously educated in a low, common Council school, and we have every reason to believe that he lived in a slum in Bermondsey. Is it not reasonable to suppose that such a boy as that would be tempted by the sight of such a valuable—"

"I protest against this!" I shouted, jumping up. "The prosecuting counsel has no right to make suggestions. It is his job to stick to the facts. I wish to have him called to order."

"Shut up, Fullwood!" said the judge severely. "Stick to the case!"

"Oh, all right!" growled the prosecuting counsel. "Only I wish the jury to know the character of the prisoner. The facts of this theft are quite simple, and they do not allow of any doubt. I now call upon Reginald Pitt."

"Lot of tommy-rot!" snapped Pitt. "Rats to you!"

"Enter the witness-box, Reginald Pitt!" ordered the judge.

The Serpent walked over unhesitatingly. His attitude was a surprise to most of the fellows, for it was thought that he would welcome an opportunity of getting in a blow at Mason. But Pitt didn't seem to like it at all.

"Now, sir," said counsel. "What is your name?"

"Oh, get on with it!" snapped Pitt.

"That is no answer. I asked for your name."

"William Shakespeare!" said Pitt calmly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The witness is inclined to be foolish," said Fullwood sourly. "We will let the point pass, and get on to another one. Now, Reginald Pitt, your sister came to St. Frank's this afternoon for the purpose of seeing you. I can't understand why she should, but I believe I am right?"

"I understand that your suggestion is correct," said Pitt guardedly.

"Where were you this afternoon?"

"In Bannington."

"Did you see your sister at all?"

"I met her on my way home," replied Pitt. "She told me about the loss of the bag, and explained everything. Mason had been escorting her to Bannington when she missed the bag. Mason went back for it, and nothing more was learned until Mason came in."

"And what happened then?"

"My sister's bag was found on Mason's bicycle."

"After he had positively denied seeing it or touching it?"

"Yes."

"Then the inference is obvious," said Fullwood. "Mason kept the bag for himself, and meant to stick to it, deavin' havin' found it. There's no

doubt about that, because he swore that he hadn't seen it. An' yet it was found in his tool-bag! I contend that no further evidence is necessary."

"I jumped to my feet.

"I wish to re-examine the witness—"

I began. "I don't see that it'll do any good," said Fullwood. "The prisoner was caught red-handed, with a lie on his lips. He denied takin' the bag, an' it was on his bicycle all the time. There's nothin' more to be said."

The jury was impressed. So far, it certainly looked as though the evidence was going against the prisoner.

"Now, Reginald Pitt, you declare that you met your sister on the road between Bolton and Bannington?" I asked softly.

"Yes."

"Whereabouts—exactly?"

"How can I tell you that, your ass?" growled Pitt.

"Has it not struck you that our most important witness is missing?" I went on. "I think that Miss Pitt should be called. She is the only one who can really corroborate any statement of Mason's or Pitt's. I put it to the jury that this court should be adjourned until Miss Pitt is able to come over."

"Don't talk rot!" shouted the Serpent, with alarm in his voice.

"To facilitate our trial, I think it is necessary that we should be given Miss Pitt's address at once," I continued. "I call upon you, Pitt, to supply that address."

"I—I don't know it!" exclaimed Pitt sulkily.

"And yet you received a letter from your sister this morning?" I snapped.

"She didn't give the address, and I'm not going to give it to you!" exclaimed the Serpent, suddenly firing up. "I can't give it to you."

"And why can't you?" I asked quietly.

"Oh, rats!"

"Shall I tell you why you can't?" I persisted.

"This is all nonsense!"

"You can't produce Miss Pitt's address, because there is no such person as Miss Pitt!" I declared grimly.

There was a tremendous sensation in the court. Nearly every fellow thought that I had suddenly gone off my head. There was much jeering and much incredulous joking. But I held my ground and called upon Mason as a witness.

There was no pretence of sticking to the rules of a proper court. This trial was conducted in our own special way, and, from a legal point of view, was horribly out of order. But that didn't matter a loss. We wanted to get at the truth, and not prolong the trial for the sake of collecting enormous fees.

Mason entered the witness-box.

"Please tell your story to the jury," I said quietly.

Jack obliged, and related exactly what had occurred, going over the incidents concerning Miss Pitt's arrival, her forgetfulness concerning the little parcel, and the incident of the missing bag.

"I went back for it," said Mason. "But when I arrived at the spot where it was supposedly dropped, two men set about me and forced me into an old shed. I was kept there for over an hour, and that's why I was late in getting back. I come straight to the school because I thought that Miss Pitt might be here."

"A likely story, isn't it?" sneered Fullwood. "Why, it's nothing but a fake, and the jury knows it, too!"

The jury certainly looked doubtful.

"How did you get away from the shed?" I asked.

"Mr. Nelson Lee, our Housemaster, rescued me."

replied Mason. "I was roped up, and Mr. Lee set me free. He advised me to say nothing about the affair, but I realised that my silence looked queer. So before this trial commenced I asked him if I might speak, and he gave me permission."

"It's a lie!" shouted Fullwood furiously.
"Silence!" ordered the judge. "Am I to understand, prisoner at the bar—or, rather, in the witness-box—that you are willing to have Mr. Lee called as a witness?"

"You can call him when you like," said Mason.
"That's good enough," remarked the foreman of the jury. "We're all satisfied, so you needn't go to those lengths."

Fullwood jumped up.
"We will take it for granted that this story is correct," he said. "What of it? How does it prove Mason's innocence? I maintain that it proves nothing, it merely accounts for the delay in the prisoner's return. He took the bag before the men attacked him. I'm fed-up with the way this case is being conducted, and I now conclude the case for the prosecution. Mason stands guilty before you all. He was caught red-handed, and that ought to be enough."

A murmur ran through the court, and I knew very well that the majority of the fellows were still very doubtful. Reginald Pitt was looking more uneasy than ever, and he was afraid of the truth coming out.

"In conducting my case for the defence," I said, "I find it necessary to justify my statement made some little time ago, to the effect that there is no such person as Miss Pitt. That statement was treated as a joke. I now repeat it, and I defy Reginald Pitt to swear that he met his sister this afternoon."

"I will make no statement at all!" declared Pitt.
"Why not?" demanded the judge. "If you met your sister, Pitt, as you have already stated, there is no reason why you shouldn't reply to counsel's challenge. Did you meet your sister this afternoon?"

"Go and eat coke!" said Pitt disrespectfully.
"That answer is contempt of court!" snorted the judge. "Another offence and you'll receive the judicial fist on your beastly nose!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"The whole thing's a farse," said Pitt. "I've maintained all along that Mason is innocent, and I don't want the case proceeded with."

"You can't always have what you want, my son," I said grimly. "You called the tune, and you're got to pay the piper. If you don't like paying, that's your look-out. Strictly speaking, you oughtn't to say anything just now, because you're not in the witness-box. I call upon Edward Oswald Handforth."

Handforth came forward with an important air.
"About time, too!" he exclaimed. "I ought to have been counsel for the defence, really. You ain't conducting it on the lines I should have adopted at all. Now, what I've got to say is this—"

"A witness must make no statement unless it is in answer to a question," put in the judge. "You must only answer questions, Handforth."

"Well, back up and ask 'em!" said Handforth tartly.

"I have reason to believe that you were in Basington yesterday evening?" I said.

"Yes, I was. Church and McClure wouldn't come, the rotter—"

"Never mind Church and McClure," I interrupted. "Did you see Reginald Pitt in Basington?"

"I did."

"What was he doing?"

"He was coming out of the big costamier's in the High Street carrying a parcel."

"Did he see you?"

"No, I don't think so," replied Handforth.

"And what did Pitt do after that?"

"He went along to that toilet saloon place, where you can hire wigs for amateur theatricals," replied Handforth. "I didn't think anything of it at the time, and I don't know what the dickens you're driving at now."

"Then I'll tell you," I said grimly. "Miss Pitt was nothing but a fake. She was Reginald Pitt himself, dressed up in girl's clothing, and made up to suit the occasion. That's what I contend."

There was a series of yells, most of them incredulous.

"Impossible!" exclaimed Mason, jumping to his feet.

"I am going to let Pitt answer for himself," I said. "It was a jolly clever impersonation, and the way he disguised his voice was wonderful. For two or three minutes I was deceived, but then I tumbled to it. I didn't say anything because I wanted to find out what Pitt's game was. I now know that he made a deliberate attempt to blacken Jack Mason's character."

This startling revelation had taken everybody by surprise. The majesty of the fellows didn't believe it. I proceeded to go over the facts, point by point, showing the weak places and proving my case. I produced grease-paints which I had found in Study E, and finally defied Pitt to invite his "sister" to the school.

"This fact disposes of all the evidence against Mason," I concluded. "It is quite obvious that the bag never contained any money, and Pitt's original scheme was to involve Mason so deeply that he would be disgraced and probably sacked. For some reason best known to himself, Pitt changed at the last moment and attempted to undo the harm he had wrought. For that he is to be commended. Now, Pitt, what have you got to say in answer to this charge?"

Reginald Pitt crossed over to the witness-box.
"There's one thing I wish to make clear at the very start," he said, all his old coolness returning.

"I thought I was pretty smart, but now I find I'm about ten kinds of a silly fool. Nipper seems to know more about this affair than I do myself. When I started the scheme I overlooked the fact that we have a detective in our midst. That's where I've blundered."

"You admit you are guilty?" demanded the judge.

"Yes."

There was another uproar, but it soon subsided. The crowded Court-room was now seething with excitement. The interest had become doubled since my startling statement had been made. And Pitt admitted it.

"Tell the jury your story!" I said grimly.

"I can see that my best plan is to be absolutely frank," declared Pitt. "Yes, I acknowledge that I played a beastly, low-down trick. You may remember that there was a bust-up the other day. I was ragged by the Form. I reckoned that Mason had been the cause of it, although I realise now that it was my own fault entirely, although perhaps Fullwood was the actual culprit. I allowed him to come into Study E with the rest of his mouly crew—"

"What!" roared Fullwood.

"You heard what I said!" exclaimed Pitt quietly. "But I really take all the blame myself. At the same time, though, I felt jolly bitter against Mason, and decided to get my own back. The idea which came to me was a rotten one, but I carried it out. I wanted to get Mason involved in a drift, and I didn't care what became of him."

There's no need for me to go over all the details, because you know most of them. I shored the lady's bag into the tool-wallet of the bicorne when Mason went back for that little parcel. You see, I planned every little detail beforehand. I didn't make such a bad girl, did I?" he added, with a grin.

"It was marvellous!" exclaimed Mason admiringly. "You acted amazingly, Pitt, and you tracked me all along the line! You awful hound!"

"I'm worse than that," admitted Pitt. "If it had been a joke I should have enjoyed it. But soon after I'd started the game I realised what a contemptible thing it was. It wasn't until I'd actually done the whole trick that I came to the conclusion that it was rascally and rotten."

"Eatin' humble pie, ain't you?" sneered Gulliver. "A lot of chaps, I dare say, would be afraid to admit they're wrong when they know they're wrong," replied Pitt quietly. "I'm not that sort, and I'm not ashamed to tell the absolute truth. I'm not doing it because I want to escape punishment. I deserve the sack for playing such a low-down game. But I want to remind everybody that I did my utmost to undo the harm at the last minute."

Reginald Pitt's attitude had impressed the court greatly. There was no doubt at all about his sincerity. And a fellow who had the courage to admit his wrong was to be respected. A month or two back Pitt wouldn't have dreamed of talking as he had talked just now. I felt that the words came from his heart, and I looked rather anxiously at the jury and the judge.

Christine stood up. "We find the prisoner guilty," he said. "Of course, Pitt's the prisoner now. Mason's been acquitted. We find Reginald Pitt guilty of one of the meanest tricks we have ever heard of. But in consideration of his courageous admission of guilt, we strongly recommend him to mercy."

Cecil De Valerio gave a judicial cough. "Good!" he exclaimed. "It is left for me to pass sentence. Under the circumstances I shall sentence Reginald Pitt to a Form ragging, to take the shape of running the gauntlet in the dormitory after lights-out to-night."

Pitt took his sentence without uttering a word of complaint, and after it was over vowed he would make amends.

CHAPTER XXXII.

PLANNING AN OFFENSIVE.

THERE was a very thoughtful expression upon Bob Christine's face as he emerged from the College House. He turned back after a few seconds, coughing and spluttering. "Beastly fog!" he muttered disgustedly.

Christine, in fact, had been so deep in thought that he had wandered through the doorway without realising where he was going. He had come along from the junior Common-room, intending to go to his study.

"Now, what the dickens made me march outside?" he asked himself, as he stood in the lobby. "My hat! What a blasket! Couldn't be better."

This last remark was rather contradictory, considering that Bob Christine had referred to the fog as "beastly" only a moment before.

The evening was certainly an unusual one at St. Frank's. After a dull, heavy day a dense blanket of fog had come inland from the sea, three miles distant. It was white and cold, and so impenetrable that the Ancient House, across the Triangle, was wondrously invisible.

Such a dense mist was seldom seen at St.

Frank's, and the majority of the boys did not care for it at all. For the air was raw and chill, and everything was miserably damp. The fog penetrated into the class-rooms and studies, and the electric-lights looked yellowish and weak.

There had been a rather severe frost a day or two before—quite an early frost—and some of the optimistic juniors had been foolish enough to imagine that skating would be possible. But frosts during the latter part of November are seldom lasting, and invariably slight.

This one had not stuck to the rule, for it had been hard—for about twelve hours. And now this fog had come hard on its heels, dampening the juniors' spirits, and everything else at the same time.

But Bob Christine had been thinking deeply. He was wondering if capital could be made out of the inclement condition of the weather. He was inclined to think that it could.

And he strode into Study Q, and found his two chums, Yorke and Talmadge, getting ready for their prep. They looked up as Christine entered, and he could easily see that they were not in a very excellent humour.

"What's up with you?" growled Talmadge. "What do you want to come here with a face as long as a mile for?"

"Is it long?" asked Christine. "I've been thinking, my sons. And, what's more, I've been thinking to some purpose. I've got a number one, gilt-edged, spanking wheeze. What do you think of that?"

"This isn't an evening for wheezes," said Yorke tartly.

Christine stood with his back to the fire. "That's just where you're mistaken," he replied. "This is the evening for wheezes—the finest evening we could possibly have."

"In this rotten fog?"

"Yes."

"A wheeze against the Fossils?"

"Exactly."

"And this is the finest evening we could have for it?"

"Certainly!" said Christine.

Talmadge looked over to Yorke and tapped his head.

"It's beastly stuff, this fog," he said; "but I didn't think it would affect poor old Bob in this way. Sit down, old man, and take it gently. I'll go to the matron for some brandy if you're feeling weak."

Christine grinned.

"I'm not joking," he said. "We may not get another opportunity for weeks. This fog is pretty rotten, I'll admit, but it's all for the good, in one way. It's an ill wind which blows nobody any good—"

"What's the good of firing off mouldy old proverbs?" asked Talmadge tartly. "There isn't any wind, anyhow. And if you think you're going to fetch me out in this miserable mist, you're jolly well mistaken."

"Same here," said Yorke. "Shore that ink across, Talby."

Christine's chums were annoyingly indifferent, but the leader of the Monks did not lose his temper. After all, it was a beastly night, and Study Q was warm and cosy.

It would be necessary to explain the idea.

"You chaps needn't start work just yet," he said grimly. "You've got to listen to me. I'm your leader, and I've decided that the time has arrived for us to strike a blow at the enemy."

"Why can't you make the time arrive on a fine evening?" demanded Yorke crossly.

"Because a fine evening wouldn't suit our purpose," replied Christine. "Now, I ask you, isn't

it time we showed Nipper that we're not going to stand being trampled on any longer?"

"He hasn't been trampling on us, you fathead!" said Talmadge.

"Not literally, but, figuratively speaking, we've been trampled severely," said Bob Christine. "For weeks and weeks we haven't struck a single blow. Isn't it time we started an offensive?"

"Well, not exactly this evening—"

"Isn't it time we showed the Fossils that they are behind us when it comes to strategy?" demanded Christine, waxing enthusiastic. "Isn't it time we worked off some gorgeous stunt on them?"

"Isn't it time you turned off the gas?" suggested Yorke.

Christine banged the table with his fist.

"You chaps are supposed to be my generals!" he roared. "What do you mean by it? Are you going to shirk your duty because of a beastly fog?"

"Are you going to let a fine opportunity for a raid slip by without lifting a finger?"

"I shall lift my whole giddy fat in a minute!" growled Talmadge.

"You're at liberty to lift both of 'em if you like!" said Christine. "Why is the College House under dog at St. Frank's?"

"Rats! It isn't!" retorted Yorke hotly.

"It is!"

"I say it isn't!"

"And I say it is!" bellowed Christine, banging the table anew. "The College House is miles behind the Ancient House, and I'll tell you why. I'll tell you exactly why we— Who the dickens opened that door?"

Several heads appeared in the doorway.

"Want any help in here?" inquired Nation politely.

"Because if so, we'll lend you a hand," Oldfield added. "What's the matter with Christine? There's no lunatic asylum nearer than Colney Hatch that I know of, but we might be able to fake up a strait-jacket—"

"You silly asses!" roared Christine, glaring.

"Look out!" said Nation. "He's getting violent!"

"Yes, I am!" retorted Christine. "Who wouldn't be violent with a set of sleepy fatheads like you? Come inside, all of you!"

"No fear."

"We'll wait until you're a bit calmer—"

"You silly chumps, I've thought of a ripping wheeze, and these two dolts won't take any notice of me!" snapped Christine. "Come in and give me your support!"

Nation, Oldfield, and Clapson entered Study Q, followed by one or two other juniors. They did so cautiously, keeping a wary eye upon Christine. Christine was all right so long as he remained calm—one of the best fellows breathing—but he was undoubtedly rather excitable.

"I was explaining why the Ancient House beats us every time," said Christine warmly.

"Then you must be mad!" declared Oldfield.

"What the dickens do you mean by saying that?"

"Isn't it true?"

"No, it jolly well isn't!"

"Then we'll start the argument all over again!" declared Christine grimly. "Goodness knows, I hate having to admit the thing, but it's glaring. It's positively glowing!"

"You are!" remarked Nation.

"I'm what?"

"Positively glaring!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You look as though you were trying to bore holes through us," added Nation.

"What can I do with such idiots as these round nosed?" asked Christine despairingly, appealing to the

ceiling. "Here am I, in the middle of a serious speech, and you can only make fatuous jokes."

"Which jokes?" inquired Yorke politely.

"I don't expect you to understand ordinary English!" sneered Christine. "I maintain that the College House ranks behind the Ancient House when it comes to strategy. Nipper is absolutely full of wheezes, and he's always up to something fresh. What do we do? We just look on—and do nothing."

"How can we do nothing if we're looking on?" asked Oldfield. "You might as well stick to the reasonable truth, Christine. Looking on is doing something, isn't it?"

Christine breathed hard.

"I'll tell you why we only look on—why we don't do things!" he exclaimed fiercely. "The cause of it is apathy—apathy—apathy!"

"That's three apathies!" remarked Talmadge. "Add what are they, anyhow? Something to eat?"

"I know jolly well that you're only laughing at me, but you know it's true!" exclaimed Christine grimly. "The difference between us and the Fossils is that they're full of life and we're apathetic. Instead of showing the initiative, we remain in our shells and do nothing."

"What do you think we are—snails?" asked Yorke humorously.

Bob Christine banged the table.

"You couldn't have said a better word!" he declared. "It was meant to be funny, but it was the truth. Snails—that's just what we are."

"Are you calling me a snail?" roared Yorke, jumping up.

"I'm including myself as well, so you needn't get touchy!" snapped Christine. "And you needn't try to throw dust in our eyes."

"You're doing that," said Clapson. "How long is it since you shook this tablecloth? It's simply full—"

"I shall punch somebody in the eye in a minute!" snorted Christine. "Just consider the points. When the Fossils have worked off a trick on us we've worked off a trick on them. Isn't that so?"

"Of course it is."

"But can you tell me the time when we've taken the offensive first?" demanded Christine. "That's a question for you to answer!"

"Well, I don't suppose we have thought such of planning a wheeze until Nipper's shown us the way," admitted Clapson.

"That's just my argument," said Christine. "Tonight we have a splendid opportunity of getting the laugh over the Fossils. And when I suggested it to Yorke and Talmadge they scoffed at me."

"I don't wonder at it," said Nation. "Do you think we want to choose a night like this—foggy and damp and cold?"

"An able general chooses the night which is most suitable for his purpose," replied Christine. "He doesn't worry himself about inconvenience and discomfort. He aims higher, and—aims there!"

"Geis where—higher?" asked Oldfield.

"No, he does what he planned to do," replied Christine. "And if you chaps are willing to back me up now, we'll make those Ancient House fellows the laughing-stock of the school. But I'll leave it to you to decide. If you think my wheeze is no good—well, we'll chuck it up. I'm an obliging chap."

"Let's hear the wheeze!" said Billy Nation.

And Bob Christine forthwith proceeded to outline the scheme which had caused him to walk out into the fog. His listeners became more attentive as he proceeded. Grins broke out on every face, and those were succeeded by broader grins. Finally, Study Q resounded with yells of laughter. Bob Christine's good humor was completely restored by this gratifying reception accorded to his plan.

"Well, what do you think of it?" he asked at last.

"Great!" chuckled Clapson.

"And you'll book me up?"

"Every man of us, and we'll make it a success, too!"

And the Monks roared with laughter afresh.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

PITT ISN'T HAVING ANY.

MR. SIMON GRELL thundered heavily into one of the gateposts of the imposing entrance of St. Frank's. He came to a halt, and addressed a series of lurid remarks to the gatopost in question.

These remarks did no harm to the post, but they relieved Mr. Grell. The dense masses of white fog hemmed him in everywhere, and he could scarcely see his own useless fist when held before his face.

"Like a blessed London partic'lar, down Wapping way," muttered Mr. Grell, pulling his woollen scarf more tightly round his throat. "Still, it might come in handy for me, so I won't grumble. Fog's ain't all honey; but, then, they ain't all gall, neither. They have their uses."

The use of this particular fog was obvious. It concealed Mr. Grell while he made his way into the Triangle. It rendered him safe while he roamed about at will. If anybody came along he would be unheard and unseen.

Simon Grell was getting impatient and desperate. He knew well enough that the keen eyes of Nelson Lee were upon him, and he wished to get out of the neighbourhood at the earliest possible moment. To admit defeat was not in his nature, and he intended quitting victorious.

He found his way into the Triangle after some little difficulty. Dense white walls enveloped him everywhere, and all sounds were subdued and muffled. But he struck out straight ahead, and eventually saw the lights of the Ancient House gleaming dully before him.

"Yes, that is right," he muttered. "These here lower windows belong to the kids' studies. That young Pitt feller told me that. An' the fifth window from this end belongs to Jack's room."

Mr. Grell had made certain of that fact some nights earlier, when he had come up to find out the lin of the land. During that visit he had remained outside the school wall, and his object had been to get the position of Mason's window firmly in his mind. There was no telling when the information might be useful, and it seemed that it would be useful this evening.

The fog was a great help. Without it, Grell could not have entered the Triangle so openly. It was a public place, somebody or other constantly passing to and fro. In such a big school this was only to be expected.

Quite possibly fellows were out in the Triangle even now, but they were hidden from Mr. Grell and Mr. Grell was hidden from them. Even if he was spotted, he would be able to slip into the fog and get away easily.

He edged his way along the wall, and soon arrived outside the window of Study E. It was closed, but in the dead silence caused by the fog—the silence from without—he could distinctly hear the voices of boys within the study.

Under ordinary conditions this would have been difficult, for sounds of all descriptions would have come from across the Triangle, from the lobby, from various quarters. But now everything was deadened by the dense masses of fog.

Listening, Mr. Grell heard the voice of his

nephew. He leaned against the window-sill, and bent his head towards the glass.

"All depends upon Nipper, I expect," Jack was saying. "He might give you a chance if you showed a strong inclination towards footer, Pitt. But you must admit that you've been rather slack up till now."

"I do admit it," came the voice of Reginald Pitt. "But I'm rather keen on football, really. I don't suppose you'll believe me—"

"I'll believe it if you say so," interrupted Mason. "Do you trust me so much that you'll take my bare word, then?" chuckled Pitt. "We haven't been getting on very well together, Mason, but that's been my fault. There's no reason why we shouldn't jog along smoothly."

Mr. Grell listened at the window without enthusiasm.

"You haven't seen anything of your uncle lately, have you?" asked Pitt.

The listener became more intent.

"Not for three or four days," replied Jack Mason. "I hope he's gone out of the neighbourhood. It would be a great relief to me, anyhow. My uncle's a rascal, Pitt, and I don't mind telling you so."

"Oh, is he?" growled Mr. Grell, under his breath savagely. "They say that listeners never hear so good of themselves, an' this don't seem to be no exception. I'll make the boy smart for them words!"

"My uncle wants to get that locket, and Mr. Strong's package, too," went on Mason.

"Yes, I know," said Pitt. "He won't get them now, old son. They're as safe as eggs in Mr. Lee's study. Mr. Grell might just as well clear off to-night."

"I'm glad I gave them to our Housemaster," said Mason. "He's locked them away in his bureau, I believe, and there's no possibility of my uncle finding them. If he ever catches me again I shan't breathe a word. But you understand, Pitt, that it's all private, don't you?"

"Of course," replied Pitt. "You can trust me, old chap."

Mr. Grell gritted his teeth.

The news he had just heard was not palatable. At the same time he was glad that he had heard it, for it put him in possession of a fact which he had hitherto been unaware of. The boy no longer had the two halves of the locket. They were being kept by Nelson Lee of all people!

Captain Jim was also aware of the fact that it would be a sheer waste of time for him to bother about Jack any longer. The boy was obstinate, and even severe thrashings would not make him speak. And if he did speak, what then? Mr. Grell would simply hear the news that he had heard just now. Nelson Lee had the locket, and this piece of bad news made Grell savage.

He thought deeply, and decided to return to the White Harp in order to discuss the matter with Mr. Starkey. And then his eyes gleamed. After all, the news might be turned to account. Perhaps the situation was really improved. The subject needed careful handling.

Grell heard the study door open.

"Want you, Mason," somebody said. "Just come along to my study for ten minutes, will you?"

"Certainly!" said Jack. "Shan't be long, Pitt."

The study door closed again, and Mr. Grell heard a soft whistle proceeding from within. Reginald Pitt was now alone, and he was probably lolling in one of the chairs, whistling to himself. This was an opportunity which Captain Jim did not allow to slip by. Already a scheme was taking form in his cunning mind.

He tapped upon the glass of the window and waited.

The whistling ceased, but as nothing else happened, Grell tapped again. This time he heard a chair pushed back, and then the blind was drawn aside, and the silhouette of Reginald Pitt appeared against the light.

He evidently recognised the man at once, for he softly pushed up the lower sash.

"You alone?" whispered Grell.

"Yes. What the dickens do you want here?" asked Pitt. "I—I say, you'll get into trouble if you're found—"

"This fog's as thick as soup!" interrupted Grell. "Come out here, boy, I want a few words with you."

"Sorry, but I can't."

"I'll make it worth your while," whispered Captain Jim quickly.

Just for a moment Pitt hesitated, then he nodded and stepped backwards into the study again. When he appeared he was wearing his cap, and a muffler was round his throat. He switched off the light, climbed through the window, and gently lowered the sash. If Jack returned he would simply think that Pitt had gone out in the ordinary way.

"I suppose I'm an ass to come out," said Pitt. "What's the trouble?"

"We can't talk here, right against the building's," said Grell. "Wait until we get out in the road, then I'll explain."

With some little difficulty they made their way to the gates, losing themselves once or twice before locating the gateway. The mist, if anything, was growing thicker, and it struck chill to Pitt, after leaving the warm study.

"Look here, I'm not going to stay out here for long!" he exclaimed. "I don't want to be laid up in the sanny for a fortnight with influenza. I'm an ass for coming out at all."

"Don't forget that you had three quid off me once," said Mr. Grell. "Three quid for doin' nothin'—"

"That wasn't my fault," said Pitt. "I performed the work we agreed upon, but Fate was against you. That was your trouble. You wanted to get that half locket and the package, didn't you? Are you still on the same game?"

"Durn you, boy, you know I am!" snapped Captain Jim. "An' wot's more, I know that them things are in your Housemaster's study. They're locked away in a bureau, which ain't difficult to break into."

"Oh, so you were listening outside the window, were you?" said Pitt. "That was very thoughtful of you, Mr. Grell. But you mustn't forget that it's a pretty hard job to break into a school like this—if that's what you're thinking of."

Grell seized Pitt's arm.

"If you was a right-minded kid you'd know that you never earned that money," he said. "But I won't ask you to do this job for nothin'. I'll give you another three quid if you're open to a little job which will be as simple as drinkin' tea out of a basin. Are you game?"

"I might be," said Pitt calmly. "Money isn't to be lightly chucked away, you know. I never have too much in my pockets."

Simon Grell chuckled.

"You're the young shaver for me!" he declared, picturing an easy victory in his evil mind. "Look here, Pitt, my lad! I'll be waitin' just outside the school wall—at this here very spot—at midnight."

"What for?" asked Pitt. "It'll be rather cold, won't it?"

"I've been in worse cold than this," said Mr. Grell. "I shall be waitin' for you, my lad. Your job is to get out o' bed when everybody else is asleep—at about half-past eleven, say. You'll go down to Lee's study, git those things out o' the

bureau, an' bring them out to me. It'll be deasy."

"No doubt about that," replied Pitt. "And what then?"

"I'll hand you the three quid, an' you'll be able to git back to bed without a soul bein' the wiser."

"And what will you do?" asked Pitt. "Those things will be missed, you know, and Mr. Lee will suspect you. If you're still at the White Hart you might find yourself arrested in the morning—"

"D'you think I'd be such a durned fool!" chuckled Mr. Grell. "Me an' Starkey will stay in that old rained mill until the early mornin', then we'll just walk into Bannin'ton an' take the first train. We shall be in London afore anythin's discovered. Why, it's a splendid plan!"

Pitt nodded.

"I don't see how it can fail," he remarked calmly. "But there's one thing about it, Mr. Grell, that might be altered."

"An' wot's that?"

"The three quid for me—"

"I might even make it four if you bring me the things I want," said Grell generously.

"I don't mean that. I think it's too much," said Pitt. "I wouldn't dream of taking three pounds. In fact, I sha'n't take a penny!"

"By thunder!" exclaimed Mr. Grell. "You've changed, ain't you?"

"Well, I suppose I have."

"An' why don't you want to take no money?"

"My conscience wouldn't allow me to," replied Pitt coolly. "Besides, I sha'n't earn it. At midnight, when you're waiting out here, I shall be fast asleep in the Horner dormitory."

Mr. Grell stared through the fog at his young companion.

"How can you be in the dormitory at midnight if you're goin' to hand me that locket?" he asked gruffly. "You're a young fool—"

"Not exactly," said Pitt. "You see, Mr. Grell, I should be a young fool if I had anything to do with this rotten scheme of yours. But I shall be in bed, because I haven't the slightest intention of doing what you want. I wouldn't do it if you paid me twenty pounds!"

"Wot!" snarled Captain Jim.

"I've been willing enough to lend you a hand on other occasions," went on the Serpent, "but it's a different thing when you want me to descend to burglary. No, thanks, Mr. Grell, that's not in my line!"

"Now, look here—"

"We shall only be wasting your time and mine," said Pitt. "Sorry I can't oblige you, but I'd much prefer to be asleep in bed—thanks all the same! And I may as well inform you, Mr. Grell, that I think you're a dirty scoundrel, and I've been a confounded fool for having anything to do with you at all. And I sincerely hope that you will end up by breaking stones at Portland!"

Simon Grell made a fierce grab at his young companion. But Reginald Pitt easily dodged, and Captain Jim only lurched into the fog. An amused chuckle came from behind him, and he turned round. But Pitt was nowhere to be seen. Only the white walls of fog loomed up before Mr. Grell.

He swore furiously and at great length. But the Serpent had gone. He was walking across the Triangle, smiling serenely and feeling quite contented. Reginald Pitt was learning sense.

And the one fact which he had learned to-night was that it gave him more satisfaction to thwart Mr. Grell than it gave him to lend assistance. Pitt had not felt quite so happy for weeks.

There was certainly a change for the better in this self-possessed junior.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A BIT OF BAD LOCK.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH gave one of his expressive snorts.

"Some funny idiot!" he exclaimed. "Shouldn't be surprised if Fullwood & Co. did it. Looks like their foolery!"

"What's the excitement?" I asked. I was just on my way to the Common-room from Study C, accompanied by Sir Montie and Tommy Watson. In the lobby, however, we found Handforth staring at the notice-board and making remarks at it. Church and McClure were there, too, and they all seemed to be interested.

"Have a look at this, Nipper," said McClure. "Anything startling, dear fellow?" inquired Tregellis-West languidly. "I hope it is—I do, really. I could just do with some excitement now to buck me up. It's been a frightfully dull day, an' this fog has a most depressin' effect upon a fellow. Don't take up all the room, old boys."

We stood in front of the notice-board, and then saw the cause of Handforth's forcible remarks. A square sheet of paper had been mysteriously pinned upon the board. I say mysteriously, because nobody knew how it had come there, or who had placed it there. And it simply bore the words, daubed in ink:

"LOOK OUT FOR SQUALLS!"

"That doesn't seem quite appropriate, you know," said Sir Montie critically. "How can there be squalls this evenin', dear boys? The air's perfectly still, an' I believe the glass is gain' up. But, then, we can't rely upon the barometer in the Hall. I really think somebody has been messin' about with it, because it always falls when it's fine, an' rises when it's gain' to be wet."

"What's the use jabbering about?" demanded Handforth. "This notice hasn't got anything to do with the weather. It doesn't mean that kind of squall, you see?"

"Really?" yawned Montie. "I'm shakin'ly dull, you know."

"Just about as dull as a razor blade," I said calmly. "But you like to make chaps think that you're slow, don't you? We all know your little ways, Montie, old son. But about this notice. I rather fancy that Christine & Co. could explain it."

"What's it got to do with those cheeky Monks?" asked Handforth.

"Well, it looks to me as though they took advantage of the fog to steal in and pin that to the board," I said. "Who else would tell us to look out for squalls? There's one thing about it, we're quite ready to welcome any old wind that blows from the College House quarter."

"I should think so," sniffed Handforth. "Do those uses imagine for a moment that they can get the better of us? Why, I wouldn't allow such a thing!"

"Of course you wouldn't," I said solemnly. "Why, if it wasn't for you, Handy, I don't know what we should do in the Ancient House. Things would crumple up in the most disastrous manner."

Handforth smiled. "Well, I wouldn't go as far as that," he said modestly. "They'd be bad, of course. The Remove would go to pot, and all the rest of it; but I dare say you'd manage to pull along in some way or other."

"Ha, ha, ha!" Handforth turned round, glaring. "What the thunder are you cackling at, McClure?" he demanded.

McClure became very grave in a second.

"I—oh, I just thought of something!" he stammered.

"Well, keep your laughs to yourself!" snapped Handforth.

"He might have been grinning at the thought of you leaving us in the lurch, Handy," I said. "He was probably picturing the peaceful condition of the Ancient House without your presence. Things would go on with delightful smoothness. No longer would sounds of strife come from Study D. No longer would your dulcet tones echo down the passage. No longer would noses be in danger—"

"You silly idiot!" roared Handforth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You've been pulling my leg!" declared Handforth, in surprised tones. "You've been leading me on, you awful rotter!"

"Really?" I grinned. "Is that possible, Handy?"

"It's always the same. You seem to take a special delight in sneering at me!" said Handforth bitterly. "Of course, I know the reason. It's obvious."

"Go on!"

"You're jealous! It's nothing but rank jealousy!" declared Handforth. "If there was such a thing as justice I should be skipper of the Remove, and skipper of the eleven, too. But I've ceased to expect justice from the fellows in this House. They've all got warped minds—every one of 'em!"

"Hasn't it struck you that yours might be a warped one?" I suggested.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Cockle away. Spilt your faces!" said Handforth, with a snarl. "Do you think I care? I hope I'm above taking any notice of this ribald laughter. If you yell like that, Church, I'll punch your nose!"

Church proceeded to yell harder, but stopped very abruptly when Handforth's huge fist came in contact with his nose.

"Ow!" he howled. "Oh, you rotter!"

"Don't you laugh at me, then!" snorted Handforth.

"I thought you didn't care!" I grinned. "I thought you were above such petty things, Handy—"

"Go and eat coke!" snapped Handforth, turning away. "Why, great pip! Look at those two beastly grinning monkeys!"

De Valerie and Burton and one or two others had entered the lobby by this time, and they were all standing by. But Handforth was staring at the big doorway. The door had opened without anybody noticing, and now we saw the faces of Yorke and Talmadge of the College House in the opening. The fog was oozing past their heads in little wisps.

"Shut that door, you cheeky asses!" I shouted. "Do you think we want all the fog in here? Bass off— Well, my hat!"

Yorke and Talmadge, far from buzzing off, had deliberately pushed the door wide open. They stood upon the step, grinning and making insulting gesticulations.

"Think yourselves everybody, don't you?" yelled Talmadge. "Why, I wouldn't belong to this moth-eaten old barn for anything! You're a lot of out-of-date fossils, and it's a wonder—"

"Are you talking to us?" bellowed Handforth, quite unnecessarily.

"Rather!" shouted Yorke. "Yah! Haven't got the pluck of a mouse—not one of you! Coddle yourselves up because of a bit of fog! There's not one of you dare come outside—"

"Are you going to stand this?" asked De Valerie calmly. "Is it possible? Personally, I think that we'd better administer a prompt lesson—what?"

"Yah! You daren't!" yelled Talmadge.

The utter audacity of this insulting behaviour

took us by surprise. No College House juniors had ever dared to beard us in our den like this before. They were absolutely asking for it.

Without waiting another second we all made a rush. We fondly hoped to capture the pair and make an example of them. But they dodged back quickly, and vanished into the fog. We went charging down the steps in hot pursuit.

"Dear me! What—?"

The voice came out of the fog, and the next second it changed into a cry of alarm. Watson and I, leading the way, had hawked somebody over with considerable violence. We went flying ourselves, but all the other fellows checked in time, and came to a halt at the foot of the steps.

"Who's—who's that?" I asked breathlessly, scrambling up.

Dimly in the fog I saw a gowned figure sit up in a dazed fashion. And then, to our horror, came Mr. Crowell's voice. In our haste to capture the flying Monks we had knocked our Form master crashing over.

"How—how dare you!" gasped Mr. Crowell furiously. "This—this is most disgraceful— No, don't go away—don't move an inch!"

"We're awfully sorry, sir," I began hastily.

"Don't dare to excuse yourself, Nipper!" snapped Mr. Crowell. "I am quite all right. You needn't help me up. Things have reached a pretty pass when it is impossible for me to enter the House without being knocked over with the utmost violence!"

"We didn't see you, sir," came Handforth's voice through the fog.

"That is no excuse whatever!" declared Mr. Crowell angrily. "In a mist such as this you have no right to charge about as though you were upon the football-field. Every boy who took part in this scene will go at once to the Form-room and remain there until the supper-bell rings!"

"Oh, sir!"

"Every boy will write five hundred lines during that time!" roared Mr. Crowell, with unusual heat. "It is necessary to teach you a lesson—to make you realise that you must not hurt yourselves through a dense fog, utterly careless as to who may be about. Go—every one of you!"

We saw Mr. Crowell stride off into the fog. I had little doubt that he was considerably muddy, and he was bent upon entering by the side door. And I had little doubt, either, that Yorke and Talmside had been aware of Mr. Crowell's approach, and that they had deliberately insulted us so that we should bow into the Form master. It was their idea of a joke, but I didn't think much of it. We might have hurt Mr. Crowell quite seriously.

"I say, Church and I weren't in it, you know," said McClure, as we collected in the lobby. "We hadn't even got over the giddy step—"

"That doesn't matter," I interrupted. "You were rushing out with us, and you ought to take part in the punishment. We were all in it, and it's only right that we should obey old Crowell's order."

"What ghostly luck!" remarked De Valerie.

"Why not find old Crowell and put it to him gently?" suggested Handforth. "Apologies, and all the rest of it—"

"Can't be did," I said. "He's in a ramping rage, and he wouldn't listen to us. No, my sons, we're detained till supper-time, so let's get along. If he finds us still here, he'll probably give us a going as well."

"Beyond! Let's be movin'," said Sir Montie, in alarm.

And we proceeded to the Form-room—eleven of us altogether. Hurton and De Valerie had been right behind, but they had certainly been rushing

out at the time of the collision, and their consciences told them that it was up to them to share the punishment—if only in sympathy for us.

There was nothing else to do but get to work, and we ground away at lines resignedly. It was a thankless task. The Form-room was cold and cheerless, and lines are never entertaining at the best of times. An hour passed draggily, and we still had quite a lot to do. Besides, it was only just after eight, and there was a long time to go before the supper-bell would ring.

"Ain't it awfully cold?" shivered Handforth.

"I say, Crowell's a bit of a beast, you know."

"He's worse than that!" growled Watson, rubbing his cold hands.

"A bit thick, ordering us into the giddy Form-room, anyhow," said De Valerie. "He might have let us do the lines in our own studies. It's like an ice-house here."

"Grumbling won't make it any better," I said shortly.

And with stiff hands, we continued our labours, our thoughts concerning Mr. Crowell being really too murderous to find expression in mere words. Another half-hour passed, and we felt happier when we realised that supper-time would soon be at hand.

And then the door opened and Mr. Crowell strode in.

"Good gracious!" he exclaimed in astonishment. "What is the meaning of this, boys? What on earth are you doing in the Form-room at this time of night, and in this chilling atmosphere, too?"

"What are we doing, sir?" I gasped. "Why, writing lines!"

Mr. Crowell gazed at us in amazement.

"I observed the light under the door, and came to investigate," he said. "This is surely extraordinary. Why are you writing lines in this cold room?"

We stared rather helplessly.

"Didn't you give 'em to us, sir?" growled Handforth. "We're nearly freezing, but you ordered us to come into the Form-room, and it wasn't our place to object."

"What did you say, Handforth?" asked Mr. Crowell sharply. "I ordered you to come into the Form-room?"

"Why, of course you did, sir—"

"Nonsense!" interjected Mr. Crowell. "I am not quite so harsh as that. This room is icy cold, and I would never dream of ordering boys to sit here—"

"But you gave us five hundred lines each, sir?" I protested.

The Form master shook his head.

"I do not pretend to know what this means," he said grimly, "but I can assure you, boys, that I have given you no lines whatever, and you were obeying no order of mine when you came to this room!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

TAPING THE PAPERS.

UTTER silence reigned for several seconds.

We gazed at one another blankly, and Mr. Crowell looked on in as much mystification as ourselves. A twinkle was beginning to appear in his eyes, however, and he smiled good-naturedly.

"You're—you're dreaming, sir!" exclaimed Handforth dazedly. "Didn't you give us lines for bowling you over accidentally in the fog—?"

"My dear Handforth, I have not stopped outside the House during the whole evening," interrupted Mr. Crowell. "It is only too obvious to me that some person, humorously inclined, has been playing

a trick upon you. I do not think it will be necessary for me to make any inquiries. You had better go and warm yourselves up in the short interval before supper.

Mr. Crowell was now doing his utmost to prevent himself laughing, and as we trooped out of the Form-room he laughed in real earnest.

"Shiver my main-deck!" exclaimed the Bo'sun. "What do you think of this, messmates? I'm soused if we haven't been diddled!"

"That's no word for it!" I exclaimed bitterly. "Oh, of all the fatheaded asses! It is as clear as daylight now. And we fell into the trap—"

"Are you calling me a fatheaded ass?" demanded Handforth warmly.

"Yes, I am."

"Then I'll punch your nose—"

"Oh, don't rot!" I interrupted. "We're all in the same boat; we've all been tricked. Those Monks will be cackling like a lot of old hens all tomorrow. It's a victory for them, and we can't deny it."

"The Monks!" repeated De Valeris. "By god!"

"But it was Mr. Crowell who was bowled over!" exclaimed McClure. "We heard him—we heard him distinctly—"

"That's just it," I said. "We heard Mr. Crowell's voice, but the fog concealed the chap who was imitating it. Of course, the whole thing was a trick, and I wouldn't mind betting a cricket-stump that Oldfield was the chap we knocked over. He's rather good at imitating voices."

"Well, I'm jiggered!" exclaimed Handforth.

"Then—then Oldfield was deliberately waiting out there, wearing a cap and gown, so that we should bow him over? Oh, my only ass! It's a proper swindle, you know."

I couldn't help grinning at Handforth's dismay.

"Of course it's a swindle," I agreed. "We must have been asleep to be dished so easily. It was the fog that did it, of course. Yerke and Yalmadge were the decoys, and they lured us into the fog. Oldfield—at least, one of the Monks—was waiting there, and he allowed himself to be bowled over. In the fog we couldn't see anything distinctly."

"Bogged!" exclaimed Sir Montie. "I can't help admiring the thing—I can't, really. It was a stunning' wheeze."

Handforth sniffed.

"Some chaps have queer ideas!" he exclaimed. "If you call it stunning to sit for eight or nine hours in a beastly cold Form-room, with fingers and toes covered with frost, I don't!"

"It wasn't so bad as that, Handy, surely!" said Tregellis-West mildly. "I thought we were only there for an hour or a half, an' although my toes were cold, I don't remember any frost—"

"Fathead!" snapped Handforth sourly.

"Politeness is a wonderful gift!" I exclaimed.

"Getting wild won't make things any better, Handy. The Monks have scored a victory—and a jolly decent one, too. We shall be the laughing-stock of the Remorse, but things won't be made better by getting wild. We've got to organise a reprisal and take the wind out of the Monks' sails."

"That's all very well," growled Watson. "There's no time for reprisals to-night. It's nearly supper-time already. Oh, my hat! Here they come!"

The Monks had probably been watching, and had seen the light extinguished in the Form-room. So they had made it known far and wide that they had triumphed. A yelling crowd of College House juniors stood outside the lobby. Within five minutes the whole junior section of the Ancient House knew all about it.

Inquiries of a sarcastic nature were hurled at us. How did we like writing lines? Was it nice sitting in a cold Form-room? Didn't we know the

difference between Mr. Crowell and a junior? These were merely a mild selection of the sarcasms which we were subjected to.

We, the recognised leaders of the Fossils, had suffered a ghastly defeat. We sought refuge in our studies, and plans for revenge were concocted by the dozen.

Handforth, in Study D, nearly turned his chum's hair grey by his wild proposals. Something had to be done, he declared, and he was the fellow to do it. There was no sense in delaying matters.

"Study D has been insulted!" he exclaimed fiercely. "I've been insulted, and a prompt reprisal is the only course. I vote we get Christine & Co. into the woodshed and lock them there for the night!"

"Splendid!" sneered McClure. "How are you going to get 'em there?"

"That's a detail—"

"Plans can't be carried out without details," said McClure obstinately. "It's all very well to suggest getting Christine & Co. into the woodshed, but it couldn't be done. I think it's a potty idea."

"What!" roared Handforth.

"How the dickens are you going to keep 'em quiet?" demanded McClure. "Gag the whole lot, or stand there and talk to 'em until they faint with weakness?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you laugh at McClure's rotten jokes I'll punch you into next week, Walter Church!" belated Handforth. "Who's idea is this—yours or mine?"

"I don't want it," said Church. "I wouldn't own it."

"Better bury it!" suggested McClure.

Handforth breathed hard.

"By the time I've finished with you you'll need burying!" he exclaimed, thumping the table violently. "As it happens, that idea was only a suggestion. I don't propose carrying it out. I've got another stunning wheeze."

"Some brand?" asked McClure politely.

"No, this wheeze is absolutely top-hole!" declared Handforth. "Christine & Co. deceived us into bowling Oldfield over, didn't they? Well, we're going to decoy them—"

"That's a second-hand idea!" said Church, with a sniff.

"Not the way we shall work it!" snapped Handforth. "I'll just explain. You two chaps have got to go over to the College House, kick up a row, and draw the Monks out into the Triangle. While they're attending to you, I shall lead two or three dozen fellows into their studies, and we'll wreck 'em!"

"Oh, terrific!" said Church tarily. "But what about McClure and me?"

"You'll be outside in the Triangle, doing your part."

"Getting bumped and half squashed, I suppose?"

"Well, it's only natural that the Monks will give you a high old time," said Handforth. "But it's all for the good of the cause. I dare say you'll be black and blue by the time they're done—they might even duck you in the fountain—but that's nothing!"

"Nothing at all!" said Church.

"We love being ducked!" added McClure. "We simply gloat over being made black and blue in every limb!"

Handforth glared.

"I didn't ask you to be funny!" he exclaimed. "This idea of mine is capable of being wrecked, and I shall expect you chaps to sacrifice yourselves for the honor of the Remorse. What do you say?"

Church and McClure exchanged glances.

"Well, I don't know whether there are words in

the English language capable of describing what we want to say," exclaimed McClure. "But there's no need for two chaps to act as decoys, Handy. One's quite sufficient. Church needn't go."

"Well, I suppose you'd do the job all right," said Handforth. "Jolly good of you, Clurey. It's just the spirit I like—"

"My dear chap, I was thinking of you!" explained McClure.

"Eh?"

"You can be the decoy—"

"What?" roared Handforth, light dawning upon him.

"Do you think I'd be so mean as to deprive you of the honour?" said McClure generously. "My dear chap, if you think that you've mistaken your man, I wouldn't be a mean beast like that. Not likely! It's your wheeze, and I'll willingly sacrifice all the honour, so that you can come up smiling. Of course, you'll probably be black and blue, and you might even be ducked in the fountain; but that's nothing. It's all for the honour of the Remore."

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Church.

"You—your blithering idiot!" he gasped at last. "Ain't I the general? Does a general go into action himself? It's my place to command—Hi! Come back, you asses! Where the dickens are you off to?"

But the supper-hell was ringing, and Church and McClure thought it quite unnecessary to remain in Study D listening to the wonderful suggestions of Edward Oswald Handforth. It was quite surprising how Handforth saw the idea in a different light when it was suggested that he should be the decoy.

Meanwhile, in Study C a much more serious confab was proceeding. At least, it had been proceeding during Handforth's eloquence.

I was talking soberly to Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West. As I explained, a reprisal was quite essential, but there was no need to have half the Remore in the wheeze.

"We'll do it ourselves—just we three!" I declared. "It'll be all the better, because it'll come as a surprise to the fellows in the morning. They'll see that we've wiped out the stain. As captain of the Fossils, it's absolutely necessary for me to take revenge promptly."

"Splendid, old boy, but how's it goin' to be done?" inquired Sir Montie languidly. "How do you propose to wipe out the stain? I don't wish to be pessimistic, but I really can't see how anything's goin' to be done to-night."

Tommy and Montie were rather sceptical, but their faces brightened wonderfully while I outlined the scheme to them. Finally, they chuckled with delight, and promised to back me up all along the line.

Just before supper I paid a flying visit to the Ancient House laboratory. In consequence of this I didn't arrive in Hall until supper was half over. But I was satisfied, and that was the main thing.

In the dormitory a considerable amount of chaff went on. These fellows who had not shared our ignominy in the Fern-rooms could plainly see the humour of the occasion. Fullwood & Co. were particularly sarcastic, but wished they hadn't been. They were pelted with articles of every description. It wasn't likely that we were going to stand success from the Nuts.

"They won't be able to cackle in the morning!" I whispered to my chums. "It'll be a tremendous triumph for us."

Everybody got off to sleep at last, including Tregellis-West and Watson. Considering that they were supposed to keep awake, this was most inconsiderate of them. But they probably knew that

they could rely on me, having done so on former occasions. As the clock was striking eleven-thirty I sat up in bed.

"Out you get, you lubbers!" I whispered.

No reply.

I slipped out, pulled on some clothing, and shook Montie and Tommy. They sat up, looked at me in the dense gloom, and blinked.

"That you, Nipper!" mumbled Watson. "Blast if I can see anything in this beastly darkness! I say, what's the time?"

"Half-past eleven!"

"Bogad!" breathed Montie. "Ain't it shockin'ly cold?"

"Don't you think we'd better give up the idea for to-night?" asked Watson. "It would do just as well to-morrow, Nipper. It's awfully cold and shivery—"

"There's a jug of cold water almost within reach of my hand," I said grimly. "If you chaps are still in bed after ten seconds have elapsed, that water won't be in the jug any longer. Is my meaning clear?"

Tregellis-West and Watson were out of bed in two seconds.

"It's tyranny!" complained Montie. "But still, it ain't our place to grumble. Ours not to question why, old boy—ours but to do an' die! That's how Shakespeare puts it, anyhow!"

"Rats!" shivered Watson. "Tennyson said that, or something after the same style. I don't reckon it's right to break bounds just for the sake of playing a silly jape. It's all right in the summer-time, but in this beastly fog I'm inclined to jib."

"There's always that jug of water," I said grimly. "What's the good of making arrangements with chaps like you?"

"Pray, don't include me, dear old fellow," said Montie. "Now that I'm out of bed, I'm as willin' as anybody. But you'll be frightfully careful with that stuff, won't you?"

"You needn't worry your head about that, my son," I replied. "I've got too much respect for my own comfort to let any of it escape. It's all reserved for one purpose, and I wouldn't dream of depriving Christine & Co. of even a drop."

"Yes, by jingo," said Watson, brightening up. "It'll be worth a bit of discomfort, won't it? Our own sleep will be interrupted for half an hour, but the Monks will be in misery for the rest of the giddy night! Well, while we are delivering a reprisal we might as well do it thoroughly."

By the time we were all dressed both Tommy and Montie were in excellent spirits. It is always the actual getting out of bed which is the worst minute. We little realised, as we crept out of the dormitory, that a much longer space than half an hour was destined to elapse before we tumbled into bed again.

Everything had been prepared in advance, and when we arrived in Study C, I lit a small bicycle lamp. I had an electric-torch, but there was no fun in running down a battery when the bike lamp would do just as well.

We donned our boots, overcoats, and caps. Since we were going out into the fog it was necessary to take a few wise precautions. From the cupboard I produced three bottles. Each was carefully wrapped up, and we stowed them away in our pockets.

"I trust the coaks are secure, dear fellow!" said Montie anxiously.

"Tight as a drum."

"Bogad! I want to use this overcoat again, you know, an' if that stuff oozed out it would be frightfully destructive—"

"Rats!" I interrupted. "There's nothing destructive in it, Montie. If there was I shouldn't use it. I don't mind a joke, but I draw the line

at destruction. This affair is just an offensive measure in payment for that jape."

Sir Montie nodded.

"You're quite right, old boy," he agreed. "An offensive measure is a perfect description, judging from the sample of the stuff you showed us before supper. But ain't we wastin' time?"

I flew the lamp out and felt my way across to the window. Pulling the heavy curtains aside, I slipped up the lower sash. A mass of white fog rolled in upon me, and I could see nothing in the mist.

"My hat!" I breathed. "The fog seems to be thicker than ever. It's really all the better for us. If any monsters are prowling about we shall be able to get away as easy as winking an eyelid."

"But can we find our way?" asked Watson dubiously.

"Leave it to your uncle," I replied. "I've found my way across London in fogs about twenty times as bad as this. After all, this is only a white mist, and not a greasy, yellow mass like a London extra-special. Follow me!"

I led my chums across the Triangle, trusting to my sense of direction. By a piece of good luck I halted at the spot we had prearranged. There at our feet lay Warren's ladder. It had been placed there just before bedtime.

Without difficulty we carried it across to the College House. Some few minutes were spent in locating the window of the Remore dormitory. We didn't want to open a master's window by mistake.

At the foot of the ladder I pulled out my electric torch—it was necessary here—and quickly mounted the ladder. Arriving at the window, I easily opened it, for the catch, was unfastened, the window already being open at the top. I noiselessly slid up the lower sash and stepped into the room. One flash of my torch showed me that we had made no mistake. I was standing in the Remore dormitory, and Christine & Co. were all soundly asleep.

"Up you come!" I breathed, leaning out into the fog.

It wasn't really necessary for Tregellis-West and Watson to come up, but they were anxious to have an actual hand in the jape, and there was no reason why they shouldn't. We all stood in the dormitory, and then proceeded to tie our handkerchiefs securely over the lower parts of our faces.

Then we took out our bottles, uncorked them, and methodically sprinkled the contents over the whole dormitory floor. If any of the juniors awakened it wouldn't matter now. In fact, we wanted them to awaken. But they all slept on soundly.

The latter part of our mission was accomplished with great haste, and for a very obvious reason. Even our mufflers were not exactly proof against the overpowering odour with which the dormitory was filled.

In short, we had sprinkled on the floor a diabolical chemical compound of my own manufacture. I had discovered it in the gov'nor's laboratory one day when we were at Gray's Inn Road. I still have painful recollections of the interview which followed when Nelson Lee arrived on the scene.

But now my invention was being put to practical use. The awful aroma was such that no mere words can possibly do justice to it. It was something like the rottenest of rotten eggs, only sixty times as bad.

We staggered back to the window, scrambled out, and nearly pushed one another down the ladder in our haste. I went last and slammed the sash down with a loud thud. Then I tore my handkerchief off and breathed deeply. The fog was

perfectly delicious after the atmosphere within the dormitory.

"Oh, begad!" gasped Sir Montie, who was just below me. "Are you sure it's quite safe, Nipper, old boy? Won't it kill everybody in the room?"

I chuckled.

"It's guaranteed not to do any harm," I whispered. "There they go! Just listen to 'em! Revenge is sweet, and this is where we gris!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

SOMETHING UNEXPECTED!

THERE was certainly a tremendous din proceeding in the Remore dormitory. Gasps and cries came to our ears. The sounds of hurried movements, collisions in the darkness, and general confusion wafted out into the fog.

"I'll bet they won't sleep in their little beds any more to-night!" I grinned. "Of course, it's hard-hearted, but Christine & Co. need a lesson. They must understand that it's a dangerous game to play japes on the leaders of the Fossils!"

"I hope that stuff won't do any harm," said Watson dubiously. "It's about five thousand horse-power, you know, and the dormitory won't be fit to live in for a month! They'll have to fumigate it, and—"

"Rat!" I interrupted. "I wouldn't do a dirty trick of that sort. We can go back to bed with easy minds. The chemical will be exhausted within five hours, and by breakfast-time there'll be no odour at all. That's the beauty of it. When the Head comes on the scene in the morning—as I suppose he will—there'll be nothing for him to sniff. He'll put it down to exaggeration."

"Begad! There ain't such exaggeration about it now, old fellow!" said Sir Montie. "It's good to know that the stuff ain't dangerous."

"They could breathe it for hours and wouldn't come to any harm," I replied. "As a matter of fact, I believe it would do 'em good. It's invigorating—only I don't suppose they'll look at it in that light."

Confusion was certainly proceeding amongst our victims. The slam of the sash, which I had done deliberately, had awakened Bob Christine and two or three others. They sat up, gasping.

"Oh, my only hat!" said Christine faintly. "What's happened? Gimme some scent—quick! Oh, my goodness!"

"I'm—I'm poisoned!" panted Nation, burying his head in the clothes. "It—it must be fog! Great pip!"

"Great Scott!" spluttered Oldfield, jumping out of bed. "Who's been smashing rotten eggs up here? Oh, great Scott! I've trodden in some of it now. My feet are all wet! What's happened? Strike a light, somebody! I shall die in two minutes!"

Everybody was awake by this time, and the confusion we had heard outside was soon in progress. Everybody crowded out into the passage, but, needless to say, the odour overtook them. The shivering crowd was by no means silent, and Mr. Stockdale, the Housemaster of the College House, was soon on the scene.

"Good gracious!" he exclaimed, striding down the passage in his dressing-gown. "What is the meaning of this, boys? Go back to your beds at once—!" Mr. Stockdale paused, swallowing hard. "Dear me! What—er— Upon my soul! There is a most abominable smell in this passage!"

"It's nothing, sir!" said Christine weakly. "You ought to go into the dormitory. It's enough to knock you down backwards! I—I think there must be something in the fog! It's frightful, sir!"

"Nonsense!" said the Housemaster sharply. "How dare you make such absurd suggestions, Christine. There is no—abs—obnoxious effluvia in my own bed-room, so the fog cannot be responsible."

"Is—is that what you call it, sir?" asked Talnadge, holding his nose. "I think it's a horrible stink! Oh, great guns! It's coming out here now! Where the dickens are we going to sleep for the rest of the night?"

Mr. Stockdale snapped his fingers. "This is most absurd!" he exclaimed. "You are exaggerating, boys. Go back to your dormitory at once, and I will accompany you."

"We can't sir!" gasped Christine. "It's too awful for words!"

"Nonsense!" retorted the Housemaster again. "You will follow me at once, boys. I cannot allow you to stand out here in your night attire in such a cold atmosphere. Follow me immediately!"

Mr. Stockdale strode down the passage, but nobody followed him. They preferred to face his wrath rather than face that smell again. The master entered the dormitory, stayed there about two seconds, and then doubled back, coughing and spluttering. It was some moments before he found his breath.

"Good heavens!" he gasped. "How—how utterly appalling! This is most singular—most extraordinary! Good gracious me! The smell in the dormitory is—is overpowering! Have you been experimenting with chemicals, boys?"

"On ourselves, sir?" asked Christine, shivering. "Do you think we'd lose that stuff in our own dormitory? We woke up and found it there, sir."

"It is utterly disgraceful," said Mr. Stockdale. "You cannot remain in your dormitory to-night, boys. I am afraid you will find it necessary to make up beds in other dormitories, unless all the other rooms are similarly affected. There must be something wrong with the drains!"

Christine started. "Oh, my hat!" he whispered to Talnadge. "I'll bet a quid it's those Fossils—Nipper and the others! They've done this—as revenge!"

"This is what comes of making the first move!" said Talnadge bitterly. "You've let us into a pretty pickle, you have! We can't sneeze, and those Fossils will be cooking like mad to-morrow. Of course they did it!"

Outside, Sir Montie and Tommy and I, having completed our foolish work, felt satisfied. Dire consternation and chaos reigned in the enemy's camp, and we felt that we had retrieved the honour of the Ancient House.

"We'd better get back to bed, my sons!" I breathed. "They'll be opening the window soon, and we don't want to be spotted."

We had already descended the ladder, and we now carried that article back to its place of concealment. Then we slipped across the Triangle in the fog to the Ancient House. But this time I overshot the mark, the first window I saw being that of Mr. Crowell's study. I was just about to turn back when I heard a sound further along the wall, although the fog hid everything.

"What was that?" I breathed.

"Sounded like somebody moving," whispered Tommy. "Who the dickens can it be?"

We edged along the wall, and then distinctly saw a haze of light coming out of a window further along. I knew in a moment that it was the window of Nelson Lee's study. A yell of alarm sounded, followed by the sound of a scuffle. Then we saw two figures come tumbling out of the window. They vanished into the fog, and I gave a quick gasp.

"Burglars!" I hissed tensely. "After 'em!"

But just as we were dashing forward a third

figure came tumbling out of the gov'ner's study. We pounced upon it like so many wolves and bore it to the ground.

"Hold him!" I panted. "We've got one of the rotters, anyhow! Hold his legs, Tommy, you ass!"

"He's kicking!" roared Watson.

"Confound you, Nipper!" came a muffled shout from beneath me. "Get up at once! You infernal young idiot—"

"Oh, my hat!" I gasped. "It's the gov'nor!"

We jumped off our prisoner as though he had become electrified, and Nelson Lee staggered to his feet, fuming.

"Have you got no more sense than to spring upon me at such a moment as this?" he snapped furiously. "Confound it all! The fellows have escaped now; they are lost in the fog. What are you doing out of your dormitory at this time of night?"

"We—we didn't know it was you, sir!" I explained hastily. "We thought we were collar-ing one of the burglars. Have they pinched anything, gov'nor?"

Nelson Lee calmed down.

"I will question you about your presence here later on," he said grimly. "Yes, the burglars have pinched something, as you put it. I am simply furious. The two men were Grell and Starkey. They took advantage of the fog, and they have completely escaped. I heard a suspicious sound, but I was too late to prevent the robbery. It is most unfortunate."

"Have they taken your money, sir?" I asked.

"That would not be at all distressing, Nipper," replied the gov'nor. "No, the rascals have gone off with two articles which were entrusted to my care by Mason of the Remove—a half bucket and a sealed package."

"They've got them?" I gasped.

"Yes, and I am absolutely furious," replied Lee.

"By George!"

The exclamation came from above our heads, but we didn't hear it in the fog. But Reginald Pitt was at the dormitory window, having been awakened by the noise. He had heard practically everything which had been said.

"So that's the game?" he whispered to himself. "Grell's acted on his own hook. The cunning rascal!"

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee had re-entered his study by means of the window, and we all followed him in. A chase through the fog was utterly impracticable. Grell and Starkey might be within a yard of us all the while, but we should miss them.

"There's only one course to pursue," said Nelson Lee grimly. "Hurry round and fetch that little dog of yours, Nipper. If ever he can be of use, that time has now arrived. He will be given an opportunity of proving his worth!"

"By Jupiter! That's a good idea!" I exclaimed. "But how can we get Box on the track, sir? He must have—"

"Don't waste any time by asking questions, Nipper," said Lee. "Hurry off!"

Watson came with me, and we hurried round to the kennels in the rear. Box, my little spaniel, was sound asleep in his warm bed, but he was as frisky as anything as soon as he discovered the identity of his disturbers.

Box was a most remarkable dog, having a scent so keen that he could follow any trail with as much assurance as a trained bloodhound. Of course, Nelson Lee and I had trained him, too, and he had been quick to learn.

Arriving back at the window of Nelson Lee's study, we found him waiting outside with Sir Montie.

"Good!" he exclaimed briskly. "Now, look here, Nipper! Grell and Starkey have got a clear start.

and this fog has been a wonderful help to them. Indeed, without its shrouding help they would have been unable to escape at all. Pursuit in the ordinary way would have been utterly pointless."

"Box'll track them, sir," I said eagerly.

"Possibly, Nipper—possibly," agreed the gov'nor. "We must not overlook the fact, however, that the men may have bicycles, or even a motor-car. In such an event our efforts will be useless. But I must recover the package and the locket. If I fail, I shall never forgive myself."

"But you didn't know that burglars would come and—"

"I ought to have placed the things in a more secure place than my bureau, and I should have done so had I the slightest suspicion that Grell and Starkey go to such criminal lengths. But, good gracious me! We are wasting time!"

The gov'nor, who was in an irritable mood, held something to Box's nose. It was a portion of a woollen scarf. Nelson Lee had grabbed this in his attempt to delay the fleeing housebreakers. The scarf had torn, and only a small portion remained in his fingers. It was quite sufficient, however, for Box.

Within a minute he had struck the trail, and trotted off across the Triangle with an eager little yelp. The scent was hot, and there was not much fear of Box making a mistake so long as the trail remained unbroken.

"I don't reckon the rotters have got bikes, sir," I said keenly. "They're been staying at the White Harp, and I expect they went back there, and—"

"I think not, young 'un," interjected the gov'nor. "They know that I recognised them, and they would not be fools enough to return to their lodgings. However, it may have been their original plan. If so, they have certainly got no bicycles, and our chances are quite good. With the help of Box, it is quite likely that we shall overtake the rascals within an hour."

"Begod! I hope so, sir," said Sir Montie.

We continued our course. Contrary to my suggestion, the trail led along the road away from the village.

"They're making for the moor," remarked Nelson Lee shortly.

This seemed obvious, and we hurried on in the rear of Box with never a falter. The fog was dense, and we could see nothing before us. Our coats were already damp and clammy, but we took no notice of this.

Box led the way past the gate of the Mount, the old house which stood close to the moor. We only dimly saw it, but it was the only house in the vicinity, so there could be no mistake. And presently we struck the moor itself.

Here the trail led over the coarse grass, and we had not progressed a hundred yards before Nelson Lee uttered a little exclamation of satisfaction.

"This is interesting, Nipper," he said softly. "Have you not noticed how the trail winds? We are now walking almost back on our own tracks— Ah! Now we are breaking away to the left. It is very significant."

"Of what, sir?"

"Surely Grell and Starkey have lost their way in the fog?" said the gov'nor. "Otherwise, why this aimless wandering? The two men left the road—a foolish thing to do—with the evident intention of striking across the moor. But a fog is an awkward customer to follow when there is an open space on every side, with nothing to guide one."

"Then the rotters may be wandering about even now?" I suggested.

"It is quite likely," said Nelson Lee. "Speak

only in a whisper, boys, for there is no telling how near we are to our quarry. Once having lost their bearings, it will be extremely difficult for Grell and Starkey to find them again. I remember wandering about Hampstead Heath in a fog for fully three hours, and then I found myself at my starting-point, having walked round in circles. A man in a fog is like a ship without a compass. But here we strike to the right again."

From the aimless manner of our progress it was now quite obvious that the fugitives had gone astray in the fog. Our chances of success increased, for it was quite likely that we should come upon the rascals at any moment. We now went forward silently, without saying a word.

And we noticed that the heavy mist was thinning slightly—or, what was more likely, we had walked into a thinner belt of the fog. Nelson Lee was leading, and quite abruptly he came to a halt. Box stood in front, barking excitedly.

"Begod!" murmured Sir Montie, running forward.

"Stop, boys—stop!" exclaimed Lee sharply. "There is danger!"

We all came to a halt just in the rear of the gov'nor. I could not understand why he had called a halt, for there was no sign of the fugitives. The white blanket enveloped us on every side.

"We have found a quarry, but of a wrong sort!" said Nelson Lee grimly. "Another step, and I should have blundered over the edge of this cliff. It is fortunate that Box is with us. Grell and his companion, I am afraid, have met with disaster."

And then I understood.

The old moor quarry lay right before us. It was a treacherous place, even on an ordinary dark night. In a fog it was a terrible danger. The quarry edge was not protected by any railings, and it was perfectly simple to walk over into space. And in some places the cliff was dangerous.

"The trail ends here," said Nelson Lee. "I think we can reconstruct what happened. Grell and Starkey, hurrying along, either forgot the quarry, or were unaware of its existence. They blundered over the edge."

"Then—then they're lying down there now!" I gasped.

"I'm afraid that such is the case," said the gov'nor. "I did not hope for anything of this sort, Nipper. It is good to know that we have overtaken the rascals, but they may be gravely injured!"

Sir Montie suddenly gave a yell.

"Begod! Look out, sir!" he gasped.

We turned, and saw two forms looming out of the fog. They charged, and Montie and Tommy were sent flying over the edge of the quarry. They went down with yells. I followed before I could move a finger, and Nelson Lee rushed forward with the intention of fighting. But there were two against him, and a heavy blow from a stick struck his knee and caused him to stumble.

A violent shove sent him pitching over the edge. And Box, barking like fury, received a vicious kick, which lifted him completely off his feet. He half fell over the edge, clung desperately for a moment, and then fell backwards with a yelp.

Grell and Starkey, owing to the complete nature of their surprise, had won!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

REGINALD FITT IS VERY CUTE.

REGINALD FITT was wide awake. He stood in the Remise dormitory, close against the window. These words he had overheard told him much. Mr. Simon Grell, having failed to induce Pitt to obtain the locket,

had noted upon his own account. And, what was more, he had succeeded in getting away with his booty.

Starkey had been with him, and now the pair had succeeded in getting clear away into the fog. Pitt knew that Box was to be put on the trail, but he hadn't much faith in the little dog. Pitt, in fact, was almost certain that Grell would get clear away with the stolen property.

"By George! The cheek of the thing!" murmured the Serpent. "Coming here and burgling Nelson Lee's study! That giddy locket must be worth a bit—a fat lot more than Grell tried to make me believe. A man doesn't break into a house unless he has a thundering good cause."

Pitt remembered the plan which Grell had outlined to him.

The two rascals were to make their way to the old ruined mill on the edge of the moor. There they would wait until dawn, and slip across to Bannington with the intention of catching the first London train.

Had that plan been altered now?

Pitt did not think it likely, for Grell would assume that Pitt would be fast asleep in bed, and would know nothing of the matter until the morning, when it would be too late to give any information. Moreover, Grell believed that Pitt would not dare to breathe a word, owing to his own complicity in former attempts to obtain the locket.

As a matter of fact, Reginald Pitt had no intention of giving information. But he saw no reason why he should not take a hand in the game himself. The locket was worth an enormous amount, it seemed.

"And if I get hold of it things will be heaps better," Pitt told himself. "Nobody will think that I played any part in the affair, and I shan't even be suspected. By Jove! I'll get busy!"

He knew very well that he would have to make haste. Grell and Starkey would make straight for the old mill. It was hardly likely that Pitt could get there first. He didn't hope for such a thing.

But he cunningly realised that the pair would snatch some sleep before dawn. And while they were sleeping Pitt could act.

He dressed rapidly, then hurried downstairs, and made his exit by means of the study window. He took his departure about five minutes after we had passed out of the Triangle.

Although he hurried he heard nothing of us and saw no signs of us up to the time he reached the stile which led across the meadows skirting Bellton Wood. By following the footpath he would arrive directly opposite the old mill, and he had no doubt that Grell and Starkey had passed that way.

As he halted he heard faint sounds, and smiled. "Mr. Lee and those chaps have gone straight on," he murmured. "They've over-shot their mark, and that's all the better."

A moment later Pitt was hurrying along the footpath. His surmise that Mr. Grell had passed that way was wrong. The Serpent overlooked the fact that Mason's uncle was comparatively a stranger in the district. Grell was not aware of the footpath, and so had gone the longer way round.

Pitt himself made no blunders. He went swiftly, but not with undue haste. By keeping his gaze upon the ground immediately ahead of him he had no difficulty in following the footpath, in spite of the fog.

Once off the path, he would have gone astray, and he knew it. So he stuck carefully to the beaten track, and at last found himself upon the edge of the moor. He stood there for a moment, surrounded by the enveloping folds of vapour.

The footpath ended here, and there was nothing to guide him. The old mill lay directly ahead.

He knew that. There was only a short strip of ground to cover before he reached the moor road.

His only course was to go straight ahead and chance it. If he lost himself it would be unfortunate, but he had no other choice. And so, meaning to get it over quickly, he ran forward in a straight line, and was at once swallowed up in the fog.

Twice he stumbled over clumps of gorse, and he was sorely afraid that he had lost his bearings. As a matter of fact, he did lose them, for when he struck the road he was some little distance from the mill, and many precious minutes had been wasted.

But he had found the road, and that was the main thing.

Running lightly along, he at last faintly saw the old ruin looming up right against him. He found the door, and stood listening. Utter silence reigned within, and the door was slightly open.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" muttered Pitt. "They're not here."

His quick wits told him that the door would certainly have been bolted on the inside if Grell and Starkey had arrived. And the fact that they were not here caused him a moment of uneasiness. Had Mr. Grell changed his plan, after all?

It looked very much like it. But there was always the chance that the pair had lost themselves in the fog. And now Pitt was here he was certainly not going back without having a look round.

He entered the mill, leaving the door exactly as he had found it. Then he felt his way to the first flight of steps and mounted. He pulled out a half candle and lit it. He didn't know the mill well, and a light was necessary. But he meant to blow it out at the earliest moment possible.

One glance round the floor told him that this place was not much use for sleeping accommodation. He mounted to the next level, and there his gaze met a different picture. A pile of straw up one side looked inviting. Two handbags lay against the wall, and on an upturned box stood two or three bottles of beer, a loaf, and some cold meat.

Pitt grinned as he regarded the scene. Not only was it certain that Grell and Starkey were intent upon coming, but it was equally certain that Pitt had arrived first. This was eminently satisfactory.

Pitt did not touch anything. The window had a large piece of sack over it, and on the box near the bread stood two candles. Mr. Grell had prepared everything well in advance.

Pitt's eyes gleamed as he saw some old barrels against one wall. An examination proved that they were too small for him to get into. But there was a space behind, and he crouched down, and was practically certain that he would not be seen by the two men when they arrived. At all events, he would have to chance it.

He took the candle with him, and then carefully extinguished it with wet fingers, so that no tell-tale smell should arise from the hot wick. Then he waited, his heart beating rather rapidly. For he knew well enough that, if discovered, his position was likely to be precarious. Mr. Simon Grell had no love for Reginald Pitt after what had occurred that evening.

Fully fifteen minutes passed before any sound broke the stillness. The first indication Pitt received was a gentle thud which made itself felt through the flooring. The lower door had been closed and bolted.

Then he heard voices, and a moment later a match was struck.

"Well, we've done 'em!" exclaimed Mr. Grell, with savage satisfaction. "It's a darned good thing this fog's so thick, Jake."

"Fog ain't all honey!" growled Starkey. "We

went over that blamed quarry pretty rough, didn't we? My arm's scratched 'orrible, an' I can't hardly use it."

"That'll be all right to-morrow," said Mr. Grell comfortably. "No sense in makin' a fuss over trifles, Jake. It'll be hours afore they git out o' that quarry, an' they'll never think o' comin' here."

"I reckon we'd best clear off at once," said Starkey uneasily. "Seems to me too risky, Simon. Supposin' they come—"

Mr. Grell swore.

"We're best where we are!" he snapped. "D'ye think I'm goin' to git lost in this bloomin' fog agin? I've had enough of it, old mate. We'll stick here until daylight, as we planned. We're as safe as eggs now."

"Oh, well, you know best. I 'spose!" said Mr. Starkey. "Let's 'ave some of this 'ere beer. The fog's got in my throat eras!"

Pitt listened while the two men partook of beer—by the simple process of wringing it out of the bottles. Then they had a supper of bread and cold meat, washed down with further beer.

"Our best course is to git to sleep," said Simon Grell. "There ain't much time, Jake, an' I dare say we shall have a hard day to-morrow. Best git all the sleep we can while we've got the chance. I've got that locket safe—"

"Better put it in your bag, 'adn't you?" suggested Starkey. "If anybody comes we can chuck the bag out o' the window into the fog. Then we could be searched, an' nothin' found."

"That ain't a bad idea," agreed Mr. Grell. "I'll do it."

Pitt nearly chuckled with satisfaction. Nothing could have suited him better. He had been wondering how on earth he could get the things from Grell without awakening the man. But now everything would be simple.

The candle was extinguished, and Pitt heard the pair rustling in the straw. Less than ten minutes later they were both sound asleep. The rascals little realised that their success was not so complete as they had imagined.

Pitt gave them another five minutes. Then he softly left his place of concealment, and crept across to the spot where he reckoned the two bags to be. For five minutes he felt in them without success, and his patience was exhausted.

Grell and Starkey were snoring, and he decided that it would be safe to strike a match. He did so, and then had no difficulty in finding what he was looking for. Both the locket and the package were tucked into a side pocket of the bag, which Pitt had overlooked in his fumbling.

He slipped them into his own pocket and blew out the match. And at that very moment Simon Grell sat up with a sleepy yawn.

"Who's that?" he rapped out hoarsely.

Pitt's heart nearly stood still, but he did not lose his nerve. He quickly crossed to the trapdoor and jerked at the iron ring, which was lifted up. But there was a bolt fixed, and this had been pushed home. Pitt had not reckoned upon this, and his escape was cut off.

"Oh, my hat!" he gasped.

He felt for the bolt, found it, and shot it back. But as he lifted the door Simon Grell's hands grasped his shoulders, and he was swung clear, reeling across the apartment to the other wall.

"A light, Starkey! Get a light, you fool!" panted Grell. "There's somebody here!"

Pitt, who was crouching against the wall, did not lose his coolness even now. He crept forward, hoping to trick Grell before the light was obtained. But a match was struck before he had moved a yard, and a candle was lit.

There was relief on Grell's face as he gazed upon the junior.

"You, is it?" he snapped. "You give me quite a turn, boy! What the thunder do you mean by coming here?"

"I was a fool to come," said Pitt steadily. "I'm jolly sure I don't want to stay. You'd better let me go—"

"E's bin at the bag, Simon!" exclaimed Starkey. "An' wasn't the doors all locked? 'E must 'ave bin 'ere when we come in!"

"By thunder!" exclaimed Mr. Grell savagely.

Pitt knew very well that his only chance of escape was by employing force. And how could he possibly hope to outwit these two powerful men? It seemed that Pitt would be forced to give up his gains, after all.

"Now, look here, my young friend," said Grell. "You've just got to explain wot you was doin' here, and wot your game is. Have you been inter-ferin' with them bags over there?"

"Find out!" said Pitt calmly.

"You cheeky young whelp?" roared Mr. Grell. "Hold him, Jake—"

Pitt acted. Once held, all hope would be gone. He dashed forward, buffed Mr. Grell violently, and nearly succeeded in reaching the opening in the floor. But Grell recovered his balance just in time, and seized the junior by the collar.

"You stand aside, Jake!" he snarled. "I'll attend to this cub. By gosh! I'll half smash him!"

There was no doubt that Grell's intention was a violent one. His fist came round, and the blow would have knocked Pitt silly had it gone home. But the Serpent was not exactly misnamed. He twisted sideways with incredible speed, and Grell's fist whizzed past his shoulder.

At the same second Pitt's own fist came in contact with Captain Jim's nose. The man uttered a bellow of fury and pain. But he was more dangerous now than ever before, and things looked bad for the Renovite.

If Mr. Grell had only delivered the blow he aimed, Pitt would have been half killed. But he was saved, curiously enough, by one of these very blows. And, what was more, he was enabled to escape.

For Captain Jim, with a roar of rage, drove his fist at Pitt's chest. The punch only partially succeeded, but it sent the boy hurfling backwards. One foot went into space, and the next moment he dropped headlong through the trapdoor opening down to the floor beneath.

"You've killed him!" gasped out Starkey.

But Pitt was very much alive. He had fallen upon his feet—heavily, it is true; but the distance was not very great, and he only collapsed in a heap on the floor, considerably shaken and jarred, but otherwise unharmed.

And he acted promptly. Before he struggled up he grasped the foot of the ladder and pulled with all his strength. It was secured to the floor, but the wood was rotten with age and the fastenings loose.

The ladder gave way with a crumbling crack, and came crashing down almost upon Pitt himself. This ladder had been upright against the wall, and had, therefore, allowed Pitt to drop clear.

Grell was a big man, and it would take him some time to drop down so to the lower floor. He was roaring out imprecations at the top of his voice—not that these did much good.

Pitt, rather shaky, hastily made for the other trapdoor, and he descended to the ground floor. He had hardly reached the outer door when heavy thuds above him told that both his enemies had dropped down. They were simply furious that the boy had been able to get free, and excitedly owing to

one of Grell's own punches. Captain Jim had actually helped Pitt to escape.

The boy knew that it was still touch and go. The outer door had to be unbolted, and he hastily strook a match in order to discover his bearings. Above him the men were descending rapidly.

The sudden gleam of flickering light revealed the door, with its two heavy bolts. Pitt tugged at them with all his strength, for they worked stiffly. The first one had just been conquered when Grell's feet appeared at the top of the ladder—at least, Pitt heard them. His match had been thrown away by this time, and he was working in darkness.

As he pulled at the top bolt he was almost seized with despair. It seemed impossible that he could have the door open in time. But the thought of being recaptured within a hair's breadth of escape gave him added strength.

Thud!

The bolt slid back in its rusty socket, and Pitt pulled at the door with all his strength. Even as he did so Grell came charging across, almost mad with fury and alarm.

"Got you, you young hound!" gasped Captain Jim savagely.

And it really seemed as though the words were true. Pitt felt the man's fingers brush his shoulder. But he had got the door partially open by now, and wiggled through like an eel.

Mason's uncle, in the darkness, probably thought that the door was wide open, and the result of that mistake was disastrous. He crashed heavily into the edge of the door, catching his head with considerable violence against the woodwork. His fingers, already tightened upon Pitt's shoulder, relaxed in a moment.

The Serpent dashed away into the fog, stumbling heavily over some stones which lay near. When Simon Grell pulled the door open, to the accompaniment of violent oaths, he found himself staring into the thick fog.

"Arter him, Starkey!" panted the man. "He's only just out there. Quick, or he'll git completely away!"

The precious pair rushed out into the fog. But that friendly vapour now turned upon them cruelly. It had previously been their protector, but now it was their enemy. Pitt was swallowed up in its wreathing masses, and Grell and Starkey floundered about helplessly.

Reginald Pitt was cute. He only moved a few yards, and then came to a halt, crouching low. Grell, pausing to listen, heard nothing; but Pitt was in no danger, because he knew exactly where the men stood.

They finally went off towards the rear of the mill, and Pitt quietly and calmly walked over the rough ground until he reached the road. Then he set off at the double to St. Frank's.

The half locket and the package were in his pocket. He had completely defeated the designs of Mr. Simon Grell.

And Pitt didn't mind his aches and pains in the least.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

MOST MYSTERIOUS!

"BEGAD!"

Sir Mautie Tregellis-West uttered that ejaculation in a gasping tone of dismay and pain. Considering that he was in an inverted position, half-buried in loose earth, this was not very surprising.

I was near by, but I had managed to alight on my feet, and was now knee-deep in the sloping

grave of the quarry. Tommy Watson was somewhere far below us, having failed to stick, and having rolled down the slope like a human ball.

"Where's the guv'nor?" I gasped, spitting out a mouthful of sand. "I say, guv'nor! Are you hurt?"

The fog confused us a lot, for we couldn't see a yard in any direction. But a voice came from a point within a few feet of me.

"I was unable to speak before, Nipper," spluttered Nelson Lee. "I was unfortunate enough to fall awkwardly, and for the last minute my head has been completely buried. It is extremely lucky that my coat flew up and protected my face, otherwise I should be badly scratched. But where are the others, Nipper?"

"I'm here, sir," said Tregellis-West. "I believe poor old Tommy's right down at the bottom. I'm frightfully worried about him."

"Watson!" shouted Nelson Lee anxiously.

"I'm all right, sir!" came Tommy's voice through the fog. "I ain't hurt a bit, only bruised in about fifty-six places. Have you collared the ratters who shovelled us over?"

The guv'nor gave a short laugh.

"I wish I could answer that question satisfactorily!" he exclaimed tensely. "The fact is, boys, Mr. Grell has caught us. We have been completely outwitted. What an absurd fiasco!"

"But it wasn't our fault, sir—" I began.

"Tut-tut!" snapped the guv'nor. "It is foolish to talk that way, Nipper. It was most decidedly our fault—or, to be more precise, my own proposer's carelessness. I was utterly incautious."

"But how, sir?" I asked.

Nelson Lee had extricated himself, and now loomed up through the fog. I saw that he was hugging Box, who had fallen practically on the top of him. But in the excitement of the moment I did not give two thoughts to the little spaniel.

"How, Nipper?" repeated the guv'nor. "I was incautious because I ought to have been prepared for such a trick—"

"But the awful ruffians didn't lay a trap for us, sir?" asked Sir Mautie, in mild astonishment.

"No, I do not say that, Tregellis-West!" exclaimed Nelson Lee. "But Grell certainly took advantage of the situation. As we have discovered, this cliff is only sheer for about five feet, and then slopes, the surface being soft and loose. Consequently, we fell without harming ourselves to any particular extent. Grell and his companion probably walked over in the fog, and relied over to the very bottom, just as Watson has done."

"I'm all right, sir," came a panting voice through the mist. "Oh, my only aunt! I thought it was all up for a minute or two."

"Begad! It was certainly all down!" remarked Mautie.

"We must make haste to reach the top once more," said Nelson Lee. "I am afraid we cannot accomplish that purpose at this spot. We must follow the example of our quarry, and edge round to a spot where the slope extends to the top."

"But how did they catch us like that, sir?" asked Watson.

"My dear lad, that question is surely unnecessary," said Lee. "The two rascals heard us approach the quarry edge, and rushed out through the fog upon us, and hurled us over, knowing that we should not be particularly harmed. I must acknowledge that the move was an astute one, for they now have quite a good start."

I laughed.

"Why, there's nothing to worry over," I exclaimed briskly. "The ratters will probably lose themselves in the fog again, and Box will lead us along the trail all right. We shall overtake the ratters within twenty minutes."

But the first move was to reach the top. And we edged our way round the slope, Nelson Lee leading the way with Box in his arms. I couldn't quite understand why the guv'nor was carrying the little spaniel, but it was very thoughtful of him.

And at last we stood upon the moor again, the fog slightly thinner, but still enveloping.

"Box will easily pick up the trail," I began.

"I am afraid not, Nipper," put in the guv'nor quietly.

"But it's as fresh as paint, sir—"

"No doubt, but our poor little tracker is placed hors de combat for the time being," said Lee. "I am convinced that he is of no further use to-night."

"Why, what's the matter with him?"

I stepped to the guv'nor's side anxiously, and peered through the fog. Then I saw that Box was tenderly licking his front legs against the knee-joints. There were some signs of blood, too.

"Poor little beggar!" I exclaimed. "He must have fallen heavily—"

"I hardly think that Box would be so clumsy as all that, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "You may remember that he gave a yelp of pain? But possibly you were too engaged at the moment. It is rather difficult to notice other sounds and occurrences when one is falling headlong through space. But Box, I am convinced, received a brutal kick upon his forelegs."

"Oh, the awful cuds!" I exclaimed angrily.

"Are his legs broken, sir?" asked Watson.

"Oh, no! But they are badly bruised, and are already swelling in so uncertain a manner," replied the detective. "Indeed, I think it will be difficult for him to walk at all. But we will give him a rest."

The guv'nor placed Box upon the ground, and the little dog whimpered with pain as the weight of his body rested upon his injured legs. He made no attempt to walk, but flopped down and licked himself again. Then he looked up at us in an apologetic sort of way and wagged his bushy tail.

"You see, boys, he is telling us quite plainly that his services are no longer available," said Nelson Lee. "Box must be carried home. It is quite impossible for him to follow the trail of the thieves any longer."

And so we turned in the direction of the school. It was considerably past midnight now, and another half-hour elapsed before the gates of St. Frank's loomed through the fog.

The great school lay in complete silence. Even the College House was quiet. I wondered how Christine & Co. were faring, but had little doubt that the Monks had found other sleeping accommodation by this time. That incident seemed very paltry in comparison with this other excitement.

The window of Nelson Lee's study had been left unfastened, and the guv'nor pushed up the sash and entered the room. As soon as he switched on the light I laid Box in the easy-chair and patted him.

"You had better get off to bed, boys," said the guv'nor. "I will rub some lotion upon our little friend's legs, Nipper, and you need have no fear for him. By the way, I have heard no explanation as yet regarding your presence in the Triangle long after lights-out."

Sir Mosaic and Tommy looked dismayed, but I grinned.

"Oh, you don't want to be bothered with that, do you, sir?" I asked.

"I shall not consider it a bother, Nipper."

"Of course, if you like to insist, I suppose I shall have to tell you," I said cheerfully. "But you're a good sort, guv'nor, and nobody could accuse you of being a spoilsport. If you hear come rather

surprising news in the morning, you won't connect it with us, will you?"

"That all depends, you young rascal."

"Well, you're rather inclined to put two and two together, guv'nor," I explained. "When you hear this news, and remember that we were discovered under sinister circumstances after lights-out, you'll guess things. But we know jolly well that you won't take any action. We trust you, sir. It ain't in you to ruin a jolly good jape."

Nelson Lee tried to look stern.

"Am I to understand, Nipper, that you have the audacity to attempt persuasion?" he demanded. "Are you actually trying to make me a party to some *harm-secrum escapade*? I can assure you that—"

"Oh, come off it, guv'nor!" I grinned. "After all, we came forward of our own accord, didn't we?"

"I can heartily agree on that point," said Nelson Lee feelingly. "My elbow aches considerably sore where you drove them into the gravel, and I am not at all sure that I ought not to report you to the headmaster for gross misbehavior."

"But that wouldn't be fair," I protested. "You're the second chap—"

"The second what, Nipper?"

"Chap, sir," I said coolly. "You're the second one who bowled over to-night in the fog. First it was Mr. Crowell—and then we found out that it wasn't Mr. Crowell. It was those beastly Monks who—"

"Begad!" whispered Sir Mortie. "You're frightfully incantious, old boy!"

"So that's the game, is it?" said Nelson Lee. "Your deadly rivals from across the way performed that trick upon you—eh? Mr. Crowell mentioned something about it to me. And you have taken a prompt revenge. Well, well, perhaps I shall forget all about it—although I must admit you have made me curious regarding the disclosure which is to come in the morning. Off to bed with you!"

Tregellis-West and Watson breathed with relief, visions of cushions vanishing before their eyes. I had never had any visions of that sort, because I knew the guv'nor wouldn't take advantage of the situation. As we moved towards the door I glanced at the broken bureau.

"Didn't they take anything else, sir?" I asked.

"Well, to tell you the truth, Nipper, I had no opportunity of making a careful search," said Nelson Lee, crossing to the bureau. "The locket and package were missing, and that was sufficient. I will just see—"

The guv'nor paused, catching in his breath. He stood staring down into one of the pigeon-holes with an expression of amazement upon his face. Then he turned slowly and regarded us.

"Good gracious me!" he exclaimed wonderingly.

"What's wrong, sir?" I asked.

"Well, upon my soul, I cannot tell you, Nipper!" said the guv'nor. "But I will swear that Grell rushed through the window carrying both the locket and the package in his hand. I saw them distinctly, and my eyesight, as you are aware, is not exactly defective. I examined the bureau, too, and—"

"I don't know what you're getting at, sir," I interrupted.

"The thing is simply extraordinary, young 'un," said Lee. "Both the pocket and the locket are here—in a different pigeon-hole, it is true—"

"Here!" I yelled.

"Great Scott!" gasped Tommy Watson.

"Begad!" was Mosaic's mild contribution.

We all stared into the bureau. And there, sure enough, were the articles which we fondly believed

Simon Grell to have taken! Jack Mason's half locket lay upon the sealed package, and they were both in full sight in one of the pigeon-holes. The electric light, indeed, glittered on the gold locket in such a manner that it could not possibly be ignored.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" I panted. "And we've been chasing about, falling down quarries, and I don't know what the dickens else! Oh, guv'nor!" I added reproachfully.

"Why that tone, Nipper?"

"Your eyesight ain't so good as you make out!" I explained. "You don't expect us to believe that Mr. Grell was seized with remorse, do you? You don't suppose that he came back and put the things in the bureau again?"

"That is hardly a likely supposition."

"Why, it's as clear as daylight that you surprised the rotters before they took the loot," I said. "They've been here all the time."

Nelson Lee shook his head.

"I am not so easily mistaken, Nipper," he said. "I don't pretend to know who put these things back, or how they came back. But I will willingly swear that Simon Grell took them away with him, incredible though it may sound. The affair is astounding—I will grant that. And at the same time it is extremely gratifying. I wonder whom we have to thank for this?"

I was quite prepared to accept the guv'nor's word. He couldn't have made a blunder of that sort. He wasn't perfect—nobody is—but it was inconceivable that he should make such a palpable blunder. The locket and the package had been taken by Simon Grell. Some other factor had been working unknown to us. That was the only possible explanation.

Mentie and Tommy were frankly sceptical. They didn't know Nelson Lee as I know him. And then I received a flash of light in the darkness. Looking at the bureau, I observed a thumb-mark upon the polished woodwork, which happened to be dusty. It was no ordinary thumb-mark, for there was an irregular line right across it, proving that the thumb was scarred.

And I knew the truth in a second.

Reginald Pitt had been in the guv'nor's study! Pitt's thumb had been burnt and injured in a fire at Bevington, and the scar was still prominent. Only his thumb could have made this particular mark, and it was quite fresh.

I said nothing. Indeed, I actually rubbed the impression out and looked to see if there were any others. But there were none. Pitt had evidently rested his hand upon the woodwork for a moment while he slipped the things into the pigeon-hole.

But what could this mean?

Nelson Lee transferred the locket and the package from the bureau into his neat little safe.

"I ought to have done this earlier," he declared. "But I had no idea that an attempt would be made to steal them. Now, boys, only we four know of this affair, and I rely upon you not to chatter."

"Trust us, sir," said Mentie.

"I shall do, my lad," said the guv'nor. "There is no reason why the attempted burglary should be made public property. It would only cause idle talk. Mason need know nothing of what has happened. Grell will certainly have no further opportunity of robbing this study."

"But he ought to be locked up, sir," protested Watson.

"Undoubtedly," agreed Nelson Lee. "But we should be put to no inconsiderable trouble to lock Mr. Grell up, Watson. Furthermore, the whole business would become known, and we wish to avoid that. Let it be sufficient that the property is recovered. How it came about I do not presume

to know, probably I shall receive further light later on. For the present—bed!"

"Right, sir!" I said promptly.

We had the guv'nor good-night, and then went upstairs to the Remove dormitory.

It was not till next morning that we were able to explain to Christine & Co. exactly how they had been japed.

What Mr. Stockdale thought about it we never knew. At any rate, nothing more was heard about bad drains.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

HANDFORTH FINDS TROUBLE.

McCLURE glanced at the clock. A couple of days had passed since we had japed Christine & Co.

"We shall have to buck up," he remarked briskly. "It's twenty past six, Churchy, and we promised to meet Handforth in the village at half-past. You know what an ace he is for kicking up a fuss."

"Rats!" said Church. "That clock's over five minutes fast. Still, we'd better start now. We don't want to go in a tearing hurry. I wish Handy wouldn't get such dotty ideas!"

Church and McClure were quite loyal to Handforth, however, and they didn't really mind going to the village to help their leader carry a hamper home from the station. Besides, the matter was of some urgency. That hamper was full of tuck, from one of Handforth's loving aunts, and it would never do for Church and McClure to fail Handforth at such a time.

The two Ancient House juniors left their study just as the door of the next apartment was opened, and Jack Mason emerged.

"Anything you want from the village, Mason?" asked McClure generously. "We're just running down—"

"Oh, good!" said Mason promptly. "I'm going down to Bellton myself, so I'll go with you, if you don't mind."

"Come on, then!" said Church.

"Going to the tuckshop?" asked Church as they donned their overcoats in the cloak-room. "We're going to meet Handforth there."

"That's all right," said Mason. "I'm bound for the tuckshop myself. What's Handy doing down there all alone?"

"Oh, he's having his watch mended—a new glass in—so he went down half an hour ago," replied McClure. "Church and I didn't see the fun of hurrying over our tea just for that. So we arranged to meet him down there. It really serves Handy right for chucking rulers across the room."

"How could that smash his watch glass?" asked Mason.

"Well, Church checked it back!" grinned McClure. "You ought to have seen Handy's face. But he was reasonable for once, after consideration, and I'll bet he won't chuck things about so freely again."

They called out into the Triangle, and found the winter evening dark and slightly frosty. The sky was clear, but there was no moon. The stars were quite bright, so the trees and buildings stood out fairly distinctly against the bespangled background of sky.

"Handforth has asked us to go down to his place for the holidays," said Church. "It's quite probable that we shall—"

"Great Scott!" gasped McClure, halting abruptly.

"What's the matter with you, now?"

"Didn't—didn't you see it?"

"See what?"

"That face!" muttered McClure. "Oh, my hat!" He was staring at the hedge, with the back-ground of Belton Wood beyond. But, although March and Mason stared as well, they saw nothing out of the hedge swaying to and fro in the high wind which was blowing.

"A face?" repeated Mason slowly. "You must have fancied it."

"Of course!" said Church, looking behind him uneasily.

"I didn't! It was a horrible-looking face!" said McClure shakily. "Not English, I'll swear, and there was a kind of white thing over the top of it. Let's walk on quickly."

"I didn't know you were a nervous chap before," said Church. "You must have been reading some beastly ghost stories. Ghost stories ain't good for a fellow. They make him imagine things—"

"You stilly on!" snapped McClure. "I haven't been reading any stories, and I'll bet there's no chap in the Remove less nervous than I am. I see a face, an' if you don't like to believe me, you needn't. I don't care tuppence!"

McClure was annoyed. He didn't like his companions to think that he had been imagining things, like a kid of the Second.

"Keep your giddy hair on," said Church. "I'll admit I've never known you to have fancies before, but—"

"I haven't had fancies now!" roared McClure fiercely.

"All right, don't bite me!" grinned Church. "I'm willing to accept your word. I dare say the face was the property of a tramp, or somebody of that sort. Tramps generally camp out in this weather, or sleep in ditches—I don't think."

"I'm inclined to believe that McClure did see a face," said Mason quietly. "At any rate, there's no need to scoff him."

"There you are!" growled McClure.

"Still, I shouldn't worry about it—"

"Who's worrying?" demanded McClure. "I don't care for a dozen rotten faces! Don't talk about it any more, for goodness' sake!"

They were nearing the bridge now, and soon passed along the old High Street, with the dimly illuminated little shops on either hand. Half-past six had already struck before the trio entered the tuckshop—which was, in reality, a kind of miniature Whiteley's as well. The juniors were in the habit of making all manner of purchases in that establishment.

Edward Oswald Handforth, who was sitting at a table, rose to his feet with a rustling of his waistcoat, and glared at the newcomers.

"About time, too!" he said tartly.

"We're only a minute late—" began Church.

"I've been waiting here for a quarter of an hour," said Handforth. "That's the worst of making arrangements with chaps I can't rely on. Hallo, Mason! What are you doing here?"

"I'm going to buy some things," smiled Mason.

"Buy the shop, if you like," said Handforth generously. "I can recommend the hot drinks. I've just had a peppermint. Ripping stuff for a cold night like this. We shall see you, probably, as we come back. We're just going to the station."

"I dare say you'll have finished by the time we get back here," remarked Church. "We might as well all walk up together. McClure will like plenty of company, anyhow."

Mason nodded. Nothing would suit him better, for he would have the benefit of Handforth & Co.'s companionship on the way home. And Mason had his own ideas about that face in the hedge.

"What do you mean—I shall like company?" demanded McClure warmly.

"Well, you're full of fancies—"

"Do you want your nose punched?" roared McClure.

"Young gentlemen—young gentlemen!" protested the proprietor, from behind the counter. "There is no need to quarrel, surely?"

"I'll see after the asses, Mr. Binks," said Handforth confidently. "Now, my sons, what's the trouble? What fancies have you been having, McClure?"

They passed out of the shop and walked along towards the station. McClure maintained a stony silence. He didn't intend to say anything more about the affair. He was fed-up with it.

"McClure thought he saw a face in the hedge as we were coming down," explained Church, grinning. "Of course, he may have been right, but I should say that he was wrong. Just as if anybody would be looking over the hedge—"

"And why not?" demanded Handforth.

"Eh?"

"Why not?"

"Well, who'd be looking—"

"I don't know," said Handforth. "If that's what's the matter, I think you need a punch on the nose, Church! I believe McClure. It's quite likely he saw a face over the hedge. Tramps often come in this district."

Church stared in dismay. He had not expected Handforth to champion McClure in this fashion. But, then, there was never any telling what Handforth would do next. McClure grinned with genuine pleasure.

"Of course, it doesn't matter," he said. "What made me wild was being scoffed at. My eyesight ain't bad, and just because Church and Mason didn't see the face, they say I'm fanciful—at least, Church did. Mason believed me."

Handforth snorted.

"A lot of fuss over nothing," he said. "I don't suppose there was a face—"

"What!" gasped McClure.

"It's dark to-night, and a chap sees—"

"But you said that you believed me!" exclaimed McClure blankly.

"Did I?" asked Handforth. "Well, I'm bless if I know what to believe. I suggest dropping the subject altogether. I don't want to argue. I always hate having arguments, as you chaps know."

"Oh, yes!" gasped Church. "Exactly!"

Considering that arguments arose in Study D about twenty times a day—all of them brought on by Handforth—it was not surprising that Church and McClure were rather at a loss for words.

They wisely considered that it would be better to say nothing further. Handforth's hamper was packed with good things, and Church and McClure wanted to share them. If they ruffled their great leader now, he was quite capable of sharing his tuck with other juniors. Under no circumstances would Handforth keep it all for himself. He was the most generous fellow in the Remove.

"Train came in five minutes ago," said Church carelessly.

"Then the hamper will be waiting for us," remarked Handforth. "I know it's coming by this train, because it was sent off yesterday."

"It might have been held up," suggested McClure.

"Rats! If it isn't here, I shall write to the general manager," said Handforth. "I don't believe in being humbugged about— Oh, cork!"

Handforth made a wild movement, and came to a halt.

"What's the matter?" asked Church.

"My cap!" snapped Handforth. "That rotten gust of wind lifted it off, and it's blown away. Where did it go to?"

"How should I know—"

"Fat lot of good having chaps like you with

McClure started Handforth. "That was a nearly new cap, and now it's smothered in mud, I expect. You'd better go and get that hamper while I search round."

"Right-ho!" said Church and McClure promptly. They hurried off, in case Handforth should call them back. They knew that Handforth was quite capable of blaming them for the catastrophe. It was rather surprising that he hadn't insisted upon them searching for the cap while he went for the hamper. But Handforth was always an uncertain quantity.

He searched about for some few minutes before he located the missing headgear. This section of the road was very still and quiet, except for the high wind. The station was at the end of the village, and the road was blank just here, no cottages being nearer than two hundred yards.

Handforth found his cap just against the hedge. He donned it, and was just about to move into the road when he heard a sound behind him.

Before he could turn a startling thing happened.

Three mysterious-looking forms seemed to materialise out of the very hedge, and they seized him before he could move a finger.

"What the dickens—?" gasped Handforth, started.

"Silence, boy!" muttered a harsh voice.

"Yes—you beastly rotters— Ooooop!"

Handforth ceased speaking abruptly, for a heavy pad had been thrust over his mouth. And the next second he was forced through the hedge, thrown down, and bulky forms overwhelmed him.

CHAPTER XL.

MOST EXTRAORDINARY!

H ANDFORTH was utterly bewildered—and scared.

At least, he was scared for the first minute. This was because of the startling suddenness of the attack. But then he became indignant, and finally his fury came to the surface.

He struggled with all his strength, but it was useless. The mysterious forms held him tightly, and his efforts were wasted. He couldn't speak, but his eyes were free. And he saw, with considerable amazement, that the three figures were clothed in strange, flowing robes—and they wore turbans!

Handforth was thunderstruck for a moment, and then he arrived at the truth. At all events, he thought that he had arrived at the truth—and became more indignantly furious than before.

His feelings were not improved when he felt his ankles being tightly and roughly bound. This task completed, his wrists were forced forward, and he knew that they were to suffer the fate of his ankles.

Then another dim form loomed up from the background of the shadows.

A dazzling light was thrown upon the prisoner's face, and a harsh, angry exclamation sounded. The light snapped out, and Handforth heard muttered voices, raised in anger. The language seemed to be foreign.

The surprises of the adventure were not over yet, however.

Handforth was roughly yanked to his feet. Again the electric-torch blazed in his face, but it was only for a second.

He received a violent shove, and, his feet being bound, it was impossible for him to retain his balance. He went over with a thud, rolled down the muddy bank near the hedge, and—

Splash!

Edward Oswald Handforth sprawled into the

ditch with a yell which might have been heard half a mile away, for the muffer had been removed now. And, certainly, there was an excellent reason for Handforth's roar. That ditch served its purpose well, for it was half filled with water. Ditches are generally made for the purpose of draining fields, and this one was most efficient. And it contained not only water, but a considerable quantity of sticky mud.

Handforth descended into this, and was submerged for a few horrible seconds. There was no danger of his coming to any actual harm, for the muddy water was only sufficient to cover him while lying at full length. He sat up, gasping, spluttering, and spitting out muddy water.

He didn't exactly know how he crawled out of the ditch, but he did it somehow. And then, more furious than he had ever been in his life, he attempted to regain his breath.

"Oh, the cads!" he panted. "The frightful, unutterable cads! If I don't pay 'em out for this, I'll let 'em duck me again!"

He tore at his bonds, but found that the knots were too much for him, and the soaking condition of the ropes did not make his task any easier. So with some difficulty he thrust a hand into his muddy pocket and brought out a clasp-knife.

A minute later he was on his feet, gazing round into the gloom.

He was alone—not a sign of a living soul was to be seen. His attackers had faded away as mysteriously as they had appeared. Shivering with cold, Handforth blundered through the hedge and found the road once more. Two dim figures were approaching.

"Haven't you found it yet?" came a hail in McClure's voice. "Was that you yelling just now, Handy?"

"Come here!" chattered Handforth, his teeth clashing together with cold.

"What the dickens are you mumbling about, you ass?" asked Church, as he and the other Removite came up. "Your giddy hamper hasn't come, Handy. It'll arrive by the morning train, I suppose, and the carrier will bring it up—"

"Great Scott!" gasped McClure suddenly. "Look at him!"

Church stared with round eyes, as well he might. Handforth presented a startling spectacle now that the two juniors were close at hand. He was muddy from head to foot; his face was streaked and nearly as black as a nigger's. And water was dripping from him as he stood there.

"Have you been indulging in a mud-bath?" asked McClure.

"For your health?" asked Church, Handforth nearly choked.

"You—you mixing fatheads!" he roared. "I've been nearly killed! Can't you see it without making fatheaded remarks?"

"You don't sound killed, anyhow," said Church. "Don't make that noise, Handy; you'll have half the village round us soon. I suppose you fell in the ditch? Just like you to go muddering—"

"You silly chump!" shrieked Handforth. "Three awful cads sprang at me, bound my ankles, and then pitched me into the ditch! What do you think of it? There's going to be a terrific row over this!"

Church and McClure were serious now.

"I should think so, too!" declared Church. "It's a bit thick when a chap is hurled into a ditch in this weather. Who did it, Handy?"

"Christine & Co.!" exclaimed Handforth, his teeth chattering with cold and rage. "Christine and Yorke and Talsnudge. I didn't think they were such horrible cads! By George! We'll make 'em pay for it!"

Handforth's statement was a positive one. He did not think it necessary to add that he only suspected Christine & Co., and that he had no actual evidence of his attackers' identity. Handforth's line of reasoning was not exactly an ideal one. He knew that the College House juniors were rehearsing a new play, and that fowling robes were included in the "props." And he took it for granted that the Monks had used these robes for the purpose of disguising themselves. Handforth was quite convinced that Christine & Co. were the culprits.

"I say, I didn't think Christine was a chap of that sort!" objected Church. "It's more like one of Fullwood's rotten tricks. But you mustn't stand here, Handy. You'll catch cold, or Spanish flu, or something!"

"I—I'm in a frightful state!" shivered Handforth.

"We shall have to run," said McClure. "Never mind about getting fagged, Handy. Running's the only thing that'll save you from a chill."

Handforth realised the soundness of his chum's words. And he commenced running without delay, Church and McClure accompanying him. They raced through the village as though on ainderpath, and completely forgot that Jack Mason was waiting for them in Mr. Binks' shop. Under the exceptional circumstances, this oversight was not at all surprising. It was really urgent that Handforth should not wait about in the cold.

By the time the gates of St. Frank's were reached Handforth was glowing from head to foot. The run had done him a world of good, and, without doubt, it prevented the chill which would certainly have set in had he merely walked. To stand about now would be even more serious than before.

"Come on!" panted Church.

They dashed across the Triangle, and, as luck would have it, several janitors were in the lobby when they entered the Ancient House. There was a general yell when the suddy apparition appeared.

"By gad!" said De Valerie. "What's this thing? What have you brought into the House, you fellows? Is it human?"

"It's Handforth!" exclaimed McClure.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You can yell!" gasped Handforth wildly. "You sneaking rotters! I'm looked for pneumonia, or I might even die—"

"Never?" said Owen major promptly. "Chaps like you don't die, Handforth. It's only good people who die!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What's all the commotion?" I asked, entering the lobby from the Remove passage, accompanied by Tregellis-West, Watson, and Pitt. "Great goodness! Is—is that awful-looking object Handforth?"

"He's been trying a mud-bath, by the look of it!" grinned Hubbard.

"Dear fellows, it's no laughin' matter!" exclaimed Sir Montie Tregellis-West, adjusting his pipe-nose and gazing at Handforth with enormous interest. "Begod! What a shockin' state you're in, dear old boy. I'm afraid your trousers will be utterly useless, an' that jacket—"

"What do I care about clothes?" stammered Handforth. "I'm going to kick up the dust over this affair—"

"Kick up the mud, you mean—what?" grinned De Valerie.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, it's hardly fair to laugh," I protested. "Poor old Handy has had an accident, or some-

thing. Let him get past, you chaps. He ought to rip those wet things off at once and have a bath."

"Yes, I should certainly advise a bath," said Sir Montie, shaking his head.

Handforth fed upstairs, and I yelled after him that he had better report himself to the House dame. But I don't think he took any notice of that excellent advice. We turned to Church and McClure for enlightenment.

"I suppose the silly ass fell into a ditch!" I asked.

"He says he was chucked in."

"What?"

"Chucked in," repeated McClure. "Of course, it may be a yarn of his. We haven't had time to ask him any questions. We rushed him up here so that he shouldn't catch cold. What's more, he told us that Christine & Co. did it."

"Christine & Co.!" I repeated blankly.

"Rot!" declared Watson.

"The Monks wouldn't do anything like that!" protested Pitt.

"Well, that's what Handforth said," remarked Church. "According to him, Christine & Co. sprang out on him, bound his ankles, and pitched him into the ditch. If it's true, those Monks ought to be ragged until they can't stand!"

I shook my head.

"Well, we're not going to believe it yet," I said. "We'll wait till Handforth comes down, and then question him. You two chaps had better go and help him to clean that mud off."

"My hat!" said McClure.

"What's the matter?"

"Why, Handforth told us that the chaps who collared him were dressed in flowing robes, like—like Arabs, or something."

"Arabs!" exclaimed Pitt sharply.

"Yes. And, what's more, I saw a face looking through the hedge as Church and I went down to the village with Mason—"

"Mason!" exclaimed Pitt.

"Do you think you're a parrot?" asked McClure irritably. "I tell you I saw a face looking over the hedge—a foreign-looking face it was, with a white kind of hat on. It might have been a turban, like Arabs wear. Church says I fancied it, but I know jolly well I didn't!"

"Where's Mason now?" I asked.

"Oh, my hat!" said Church. "We promised to go back to the tackshop for him—we were all going to walk up together—but we were too busy with Handy to think any more about Mason. I suppose he'll be in soon."

"I'm blast if I can understand it!" remarked Watson. "Just as if Christine and those chaps would dress up like Arabs. Besides, Christine wouldn't be such a cad as to pitch Handforth into a ditch. The Monks haven't got any grudge against Handy. It's all tommy-rot!"

Church and McClure went off to assist their unfortunate leader in getting himself clean. Meanwhile, the fellows dribbled down into the Common-room, for the lobby was not exactly a cosy place for a discussion.

"I guess those guys have got kind o' rattled," remarked Justin B. Farman.

"They're got which?" asked Owen major.

"Rattled—bleed!"

"You ass! What does that mean?"

"Gee! I guess you can understand plain language, can't you?" asked the American boy. "Rattled—confused—muddled-up some. They don't know what's happened, an' they're sort o' skeered. I'll allow we've had a few strange things gettin' busy around this ranch, but Arabs don't seem to fit it."

"Somebody dressed up, of course," I remarked thoughtfully.

"Perhaps," said Reginald Pitt.

Nobody took any notice of his remark—at least, there was no comment made. But I certainly noted the rather curious tone with which he uttered the word. Pitt seemed to be even more thoughtful than myself, and he looked just a little worried, too.

Handforth was remarkably swift in changing his attire. This was accounted for by his desire for instant revenge. He came down into the Common-room, his face red from much towelling, and partly because he was angry and excited.

His toilet was most careless, indicating the haste with which he had dressed. And he came into the Common-room with a firm step and a grim face.

"Seen the matron?" I asked.

"No!" said Handforth tartly. "What do you think I am—a giddy kid? I can stand a ducking, I suppose? I ran all the way up to the school, and there's nothing wrong with me now."

"Church says that Christine chucked you into the ditch—"

"And so he did, Nipper," interrupted Handforth. "Christine and Yorke and Talmadge."

"It wants a bit of believin', old boy—"

"Do you think I'm a liar?" roared Handforth.

"Bogud! Pray keep your temper, dear old fellow," said Sir Montie. "You're lookin' frightfully ferocious, Handy. I shouldn't like to fight you just now—I shouldn't, really. You might knock me down!"

Handforth looked round the room steadily.

"Are you chaps going to back me up?" he demanded. "What do you think of fellows who spring on me in the dark, bind my feet up, and chuck me into a ditch where I might be drowned? Do you call that a jape?"

"It was an outrage," I replied. "It was an utterly rotten piece of work."

"That's what I say!" declared Handforth. "I'm sorry to make the statement, but Christine and his pals are responsible. You know jolly well that the Monks have been rehearsing some silly new play of theirs, and that they've hired some costumes for Hindus, or Bedouins, or something."

"By jings! So they have!" said Watson, starting.

"Well, they thought they'd work off a trick on the Ancient House, and that's why they dropped on me," said Handforth grimly. "Do you think I don't know? I call upon every fellow here to back me up."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to give Christine the hiding of his life," replied Handforth firmly.

And he stalked out of the Common-rooms with a fierce expression on his heated face. I looked round at the other fellows, and, as though by general consent, we all crowded out.

It was up to us to see this thing through.

CHAPTER XL.

NOT GUILTY!

EXCITEMENT was running high by this time, and practically every fellow in the Ancient House Remore followed Edward Oswald Handforth out into the Triangle. It was dark, and the cold wind came whistling round the buildings in gusts.

Handforth's expedition of vengeance was not to be stopped by icy winds, however, and the crowd of juniors marched across to the College House grimly. Personally, I wasn't at all satisfied that Christine & Co. were responsible for the cowardly trick upon Handforth. But they would soon give an account of themselves.

By a piece of luck, Christine and Yorke and Talmadge were just leaving the College House when the avengers arrived. They stared rather curiously at the noisy crowd, and came to a halt.

"What's this, a new game?" asked Christine.

He and his chums were surrounded. And we noticed that the three Monks were carrying some curious articles of apparel over their arms—white garments of some kind.

"Fax!" exclaimed Yorke chastily. "No larks, you chaps!"

"We're on our way to the gym," said Talmadge. "Our new play is going to knock spots off any meudly old—"

"You cads!" roared Handforth hoily.

"Eh?"

"What?"

"You heently rotters!" bellowed Handforth.

"Are you trying to start a House row?" inquired Christine politely. "It's rather off-side, considering that we're outnumbered—"

"I don't know anything about a House row!" said Handforth. "But I'm going to punch your nose, Robert Christine! And I'm going to punch Yorke's nose, and I'm going to punch Talmadge's nose!"

"Quite an entertainment, in fact!" asked Christine. "Why don't you fellows take this poor idiot away and lock him up? It isn't safe to let him run loose about the premises— Yarecooh!"

Christine concluded with a terrific bowl. Handforth, without troubling to ask questions, punched Christine's nose with all the force he could command at the moment, and this was quite considerable.

Christine tumbled over backwards in the mud, completely taken by surprise. Handforth lunged out at Talmadge, but that wary youth had already dodged, and it was Yorke who received the blow.

"Rescue!" howled Talmadge. "Monks—Monks! Rescue!"

He dashed forward valiantly, courage being lent him by the sight of several College House juniors charging out into the open. Christine was already upon his feet, and he was rushing at Handforth in the most determined manner.

The result was inevitable.

Within ten seconds a free fight was in progress. The feeling of hostility between the two factions at St. Frank's was generally asleep, but House rows broke out at periodical intervals. And then things happened.

There was no actual ill-feeling—certainly nothing vindictive on either side. The rivalry between the Ancient House and the College House was more of a friendly character. But when Christine's nose was punched with great violence, Christine considered that it was a time for drastic action.

His chums rallied round him nobly. The commotion which was caused was probably heard throughout the school. The majority of the fellows had no idea why they were fighting. It was simply a scrap, and it was their business to join in.

Upon the whole, we got the better of it. But before any decisive victory could be claimed by either side, prefects arrived upon the scene. Morrow and Wilson of the Ancient House, and Jeann, Carlisle, and Mills of the College House, sallied out with their canes.

"Now then!" roared Morrow. "Stop this, you young sweeps!"

"Rats!"

"Go it, the Fossils!"

"Give 'em socks!"

Whack, whack, whack!

Cases descended with clock-like regularity, and the juniors began to realise that scrapping with one another was one thing, but accepting cuts from

a hefty cane was another. And the excited warriors scattered like chaff before the wind.

"And if there's any more of it you'll be gated!" declared Jesson angrily.

"Get into your Houses——" began Morrow.

"You've stopped the row, so don't go any further," Morrow, I put in. "We won't begin again, and I want to ask Christine some questions. Just toddle indoors and forget all about it."

The battle was certainly over, and the wounds were being attended to. Bleeding noses, black eyes, and thick ears had been distributed broadcast. I had come out of the scrap scatheless, but I had delivered a good number of blows. I don't know who received them, but they had gone home all right.

"I ain't satisfied!" panted Handforth. "A House row is all rot, anyhow. I challenge Christine to a fight behind the gym, and Yorke and Talmadge, too!"

Bob Christine breathed hard. "If I didn't know you were such a dotty idiot, I'd accept that challenge!" he exclaimed warmly. "But I don't want to knock you into next week, Handforth. You punched my nose and started the whole thing; but I think I've punched yours just as hard, so we're quits. Your nose looks pretty swollen."

"Fathead!" said Owen majee. "That's it's natural size!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go on! Jeer all you like!" bellowed Handforth. "My nose is swollen, and it's been bleeding, too! But that's nothing. I'm going to fight Christine for chucking me into that ditch——"

"Eh?" said Christine, staring. "Handforth says that you and two other fellows sprang on him near the station, bound him up, and pitched him into the mud," I explained. "It was a beastly thing to do, Christine, and I can't quite believe——"

"I don't know what you're talking about," interrupted Christine tartly.

"By George!" exclaimed Handforth. "By George?"

He stared at Christine, and took a deep breath.

"By George!" he repeated.

"Is that all you can say?" demanded Christine sourly.

"No. I'm just trying to think of something which'll fit the case!" retorted Handforth. "But there ain't words. The English language isn't any good for this job. Of all the confounded fibbers, you——"

"Hold on!" I interrupted.

"You mind your own business——"

"This is my business," I said. "I'm your skipper, Handforth, and it seems to me that you're being sooting the giddy goat—as usual. I never believed that Christine & Co. handled you as you described, but I didn't have a chance to say anything before the scrap started. You're off your rocker!"

"What?" said Handforth faintly.

"What do you mean by accusing Christine & Co.?" I went on. "Haven't you any more sense than to suspect decent chaps——"

"If you're bluffing, I'm not!" bellowed Handforth. "I don't expect you to sympathize with me, anyhow. I'm not the chap to take things lying down, and Christine is going to fight me, or I'll know the reason why."

Bob Christine sighed.

"My dear ass," he said, "if you're particularly anxious to fight me, I'll oblige. I don't mind in the least. You might grumble, of course, but after I've knocked you flat I shan't expect you to grumble. A fellow who asks for trouble hasn't any right to grumble when he finds it!"

Handforth laughed bitterly.

"So you think you could whack me, do you?" he demanded. "Well, I dare say you could if you used the same methods as you employed down at the station. Three of you piling on to one chap! It's—it's disgusting!"

"Hit him in the eye, Christy!" yelled Yorke excitedly.

"Too much fag," said Christine. "I'm a patient chap, and I should be tremendously pleased to know what all this fuss is about. Does Handforth have those fits very often? Is it a habit of his to suffer from delusions?"

"You—you——"

"Hold on, Handy!" went on Christine. "You've had your say, and now I'm going to have mine. I don't know what the dickens you mean about somebody chucking you into the ditch, and I think it would be as well if we straightened things out. I won't say anything about the rottenness of believing that I could be capable of such a caddish trick. You're excited, and don't know what you're up to. But Talmadge and Yorke and I were in our study every minute since tea-time, until you all butted into us ten minutes ago. We haven't been out for a minute!"

Handforth simply gasped. "It beats me!" he said blankly. "You, generally a decent fellow, can stand there telling the most frightful whoppers——"

"They're not whoppers!" roared Yorke.

"Didn't you duck Handforth, then?" asked De Valerie.

"No."

"Of course we didn't!"

There was a quick buzz of excitement.

"I don't say that he doesn't deserve ducking," said Christine. "In fact, it's quite likely that he will be ducked if he doesn't change his tone. I'm patient, as I said before, but there's a limit."

"Well, I'm jiggered!" exclaimed Tommy Watson. "Handforth positively said that you chaps had done the trick. He was so certain that we believed him. My only hat! I'm sorry I gave you a thick ear, Talmadge!"

"So am I!" growled Talmadge feelingly.

Handforth began to look rather dazed. He was by no means convinced that the College House fellows were entirely innocent of the outrage. But there was such a noise going on that Handforth couldn't make himself heard for a few moments.

"Dry up a minute!" I yelled. "We don't want any misunderstandings, and we'd better get the hang of this affair straight away. You say that Christine and his chums collared you near the station, Handforth?"

"Yes, they did!" replied Handforth warmly.

"They treated you like hooligans would!"

"Exactly! I was knocked over and squashed into the mud——"

"Yes, we know all about that," I interrupted. "Now, look here, Handy, did you recognise Christine's voice?"

"No, not exactly."

"Or Yorke's voice?"

"No."

"Or Talmadge's?"

"You silly ass!" roared Handforth. "How do you think I could recognise their voices when they disguised them?"

"If you didn't recognise their voices, how on earth do you know that they're the chaps who did it?" I asked. "Did you see them clearly?"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" snapped Handforth. "How could I see properly in the dark? I just caught a glimpse of those flowing robes, and it didn't take me half a tick to guess that Christine & Co.——"

"Oh, so that's it!" I exclaimed. "You guessed,

Handy? It simply amounts to this—that you didn't recognise the voices, you didn't recognise the faces, but you took it for granted that Christine & Co. were the culprits."

Handforth began to look rather confused.

"I—I was sure of it!" he exclaimed weakly.

"In your own mind, very possibly," I said. "But that was no reason for you to come here and positively state that these Monks handled you. It was simply a supposition on your part, and it only proves that you mustn't take things for granted. It's a fatal mistake to make. Christine has positively declared that he hasn't been off the school premises since tea-time. Do you believe him?"

Handforth looked sheepish.

"Well, I—I suppose he's right!" he admitted. "Perhaps I was rather hasty; but if Christine & Co. didn't do it, who did?"

"This isn't a time to ask riddles," I retorted. "You'd better apologise to Christine for punching his nose. He's a good chap, and he won't mind, once the thing's settled up."

I expected Handforth to go up in the air. He didn't like apologising to anybody, and was rather inclined to ride the high horse when he happened to be in the wrong. But just now he was different.

"Well, I suppose I have been a silly fustled!" he said candidly. "I hope I didn't hurt you, Christine?"

"Not at all," said Christine. "I enjoy having my nose punched."

"Oh, rat!" growled Handforth. "I'm sorry, old man. You gave me a few swipes, so we're about equal. I'd jolly well like to know who pushed me into that ditch, though."

"Begad! I should advise you to give up bekin' for the culprits, old boy," said Sir Montie. "You might make another mistake, you know—you might, really. It's even remotely possible that I might be accused, an' I couldn't dream of havin' my nose punched by a fat like yours!"

"I think Handforth ought to be ragged," suggested Watson. "He caused a Heuse row over nothing, and every fellow who's got a thick ear or a black eye ought to be allowed the privilege of giving Handforth thick ears and black eyes!"

I grinned.

"At that rate Handy would have a dozen of each by the time you'd done," I said. "No, the thing's over, and Handy's suffered enough, taking it altogether. But we shall have to get at the truth somehow or other."

The juniors dispersed, some of them rather disappointed that Handforth was to escape a ragging. Through his preposterous habit of jumping to conclusions he had caused a free fight in the Triangle, and a great many fellows were feeling sore. But it was far better to let the thing drop.

Most of the Removites concluded that Handforth had imagined nearly the whole incident. But I didn't. Handforth was an ass, but he wasn't given to delusions. He had been attacked by three mysterious men.

Who were they? And why had they dropped upon Handforth, only to let him go before they had finished binding him?

The problem was rather an interesting one.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE MYSTERIOUS ARMS OF EL SAFFRA!

JACK MASON stood at the door of Mr. Binks' shop, and looked impatiently up the dark High Street. Handforth & Co. hadn't tarred up yet, and Mason concluded that the juniors were being detained for some reason.

He was not aware of the fact that Handforth &

Co. had pelted past the shop at the double over ten minutes before. He had been busy at the counter at that time, and had heard nothing. And Handforth & Co., as I have already described, quite overlooked Mason in the tuckshop.

"Oh, this is absurd!" muttered Jack to himself. "Mr. Binks will be wondering why I don't go, and he's getting ready to put up the shutters, too. If the asses don't turn up in two minutes I'll go and look for them."

Mason was by no means nervous, but he could not forget the face which McClure had seen through the hedge on the way down. Was it merely the face of an ordinary tramp, or had Mr. Grell been skulking in the wood? The possibility was by no means an absurd one.

But Mason considered himself quite safe in the village. It was on the lonely stretch to the school that his uncle might molest him. And Jack, plucky enough though he was, knew that he was no match for Grell and Starkey. Apart from any possible peril, he disliked his uncle intensely, and was particularly anxious not to meet him, nor to have anything to do with him.

Mr. Binks hustled about, and Mason decided to stroll along towards the station, feeling almost certain that he would meet the other juniors within a minute or two. He bade the shopkeeper good-night, picked up his parcel, and went out.

He saw no sign of Handforth & Co. as he walked along. He would have been a remarkable fellow if he had seen them, for they were within the Ancient House at that very moment. But Jack never imagined that the three juniors would forget all about him. He naturally assumed that some delay had occurred.

He neared the station, and found the road very dark and deserted. He walked briskly, and, although on the alert, was not quite prepared for the startling thing which happened.

The incident, in fact, was a repetition of the disaster to Handforth.

Dim forms crept up behind Mason. The high wind made it impossible for him to hear the soft footfalls. And he was seized before he knew that any other being was near him.

"This is the boy!" exclaimed a deep, harsh voice. "Look here!" shouted Jack. "What the dickens do—"

He got no further. The same muffer which had gagged Handforth was forced over his mouth. He was pulled backwards through a gap in the hedge, and thrown down upon the ground. One fact was apparent to Mason above all else. His captors were not Grell and Starkey. They were complete strangers, and foreigners at that. In the gloom Mason saw the flowing robes and turbans, and he was greatly startled.

But his struggles were useless, and his wrists and feet were rapidly bound. While this was in progress an electric-torch flashed out and dazzled him. Not a word was said, but he heard several grunts of satisfaction.

Then the light went out, and something soft and thick was bound round his eyes, blindfolding him. He was pulled to his feet at last, his moustach suddy and crumpled. And then his captors lifted him bodily and carried him away.

It was rather an alarming adventure.

Unable to cry out, unable to see, unable to struggle, he was like a log in the hands of his persecutors. They carried him across the meadow slowly and steadily, and no words were said. Jack's mind was in a whirl, for he couldn't possibly imagine who these people were, or why they had attacked him.

Like Handforth, he half believed that it was a joke of some sort. Perhaps Fullwood & Co. had

decided to play an elaborate trick— But Jack dismissed the idea almost at once. Even Fullwood wouldn't plan such an affair as this.

Mason did not know that Handforth had already shaved a certain portion of his own trials. If he had known that fact he would have at once realised that Handforth had been seized in error, in mistake for Mason himself.

Having crossed the meadow, a ploughed field was negotiated. Fortunately, it was only a narrow one, and it was soon apparent to Mason that he was being carried through trees. For the wind was sighing and whistling in the branches overhead.

A steep decline came next, and here it was necessary to go slowly. Obviously the party was descending into a gully of some sort, probably a steep hollow in the wood. There were many such hollows in the neighbourhood, completely isolated, and far from houses and buildings.

At length a halt was called, and Mason was set down. Muttering voices sounded close by, but he could not catch any words that were spoken. Then he was lifted once again and carried into what struck him as being a confined space, probably an old shed, or something like that.

He was roughly pulled upright, and then placed in a kneeling position. The gag was removed, and his eyes were freed from the cloth. Jack Mason gazed around him wonderingly, and not without a little trace of alarm.

He was kneeling in a tent—a curiously shaped tent—and the air was filled with a blue haze, while a pungent, aromatic scent caught his throat and filled his nostrils. This smoke, he saw, was arising from a small brazier almost immediately in front of him. The brazier stood upon a stool, and the glowing embers within provided the only light in the tent—a ruddy, flickering radiance.

Not a word had been spoken to the boy so far. Mason saw, in the dim glow, three curious forms on the other side of the tent. The brazier, with its curling wisps of smoke, intervened, and the whole scene was most inconspicuous and mysterious, reminding Mason of stories he had read of the East.

The three figures were clothed in voluminous robes which reached to the ankles. On their feet they wore sandals, and turbans adorned the three heads. The men were dark and bearded, and their eyes glittered in the strange light.

"Who—who are you?" asked Mason hesitatingly. Frush to tell, he was rather bewildered. There was something unreal about the whole adventure, and he couldn't help wondering if it wasn't all a dream. Certainly, nothing like it had ever happened in his life before.

Within the space of fifteen minutes he had been transported from a cold, wintry Sussex road to the shores of Arabia! That's how it seemed to Mason, and it was hardly surprising that he was almost at a loss for words.

"Tell me thy name, boy!" exclaimed the man in the centre, in a deep, rumbling voice which betrayed an imperfect knowledge of English.

"Who are you?" demanded Mason again.

"Thou hast not answered my question," said the stranger. "Beware, lest thou anger me. Thy name, infidel!"

"It's Mason—Jack Mason."

"Thou art not deceiving me?"

"No, of course I'm not," replied Mason, recovering his composure in some measure, although still sorely confused in mind.

"It is well, Mason," said the spokesman. "Know, then, that thou art in the presence of Sheikh Akram away on the great wide deserts in hotter climes."

"Oh, my hat!" exclaimed Jack, rather awed.

"Thou art pleased to make a foolish remark!" said the high priest harshly. "Do not dare to play with me, boy. I have been to much trouble to arrive at this vile spot, and now my will must be accomplished. Dost thou understand?"

"No, I don't understand," replied Mason quietly.

"Then let me tell thee that which I require," said Sheikh Akram, folding his arms and gazing with embarrassing steadiness into Jack's eyes. "Thou hast in thy possession the half of a locket of gold— Ah, I observe thy start!"

Mason had indeed started, and his interest was increased.

"What about the locket?" he asked humbly.

"It is my order that thou shalt bring thy half locket to me," said the high priest. "Further, thou must understand that there is a sealed package also in thy possession. Art thou aware, boy, that this package contains the other half of the locket?"

"No, I'm not aware of it," replied Mason. "It's all nonsense. That little parcel was left behind by a friend of mine, and it can't possibly contain the other half of my locket. It's been missing for years—"

"Thy brains are of water!" snapped Sheikh Akram. "What madness is this, to tell me to my face that I know not what I sayest? I tell thee, Mason, that the missing half is in that package. Dost thou know what the two halves comprise?"

Mason made no reply.

"I will tell thee," proceeded the high priest. "Thou art in possession of the wondrous Sacred Locket of El Sufra, and it is decreed that thou shalt return the golden charm before midnight strikes again."

Mason became hot with anger. These people, too, were after the locket. He didn't believe that Mr. Strong's package contained the missing half, but he was quite certain that these men were greatly determined to have their way.

Jack recalled the quaint Arabic signs which were engraved upon the inside surface of the locket. He remembered his uncle's startled expression when looking at the Arabic writing. What could it mean? What significance did that curious Arabic charm possess? Apparently the locket was a sinister thing to own.

"Has thy tongue dropped down thy throat, boy?" demanded the priest at last.

"No. I've been thinking," replied Mason. "I'm not going to bring you that locket. It's mine. I've had it ever since I was a baby. As for the other half, I don't know—"

"Silence, thou wretched youth!" thundered Sheikh Akram. "Is it that thou hast dared to refuse my demand?"

"Yes, I have!" replied Mason, between his teeth.

"By Allah!" hissed the priest. "Thou shalt suffer for thy impertinence. Seize the wretched boy, my slaves! Smash him thrice with the whip, and maybe his mind will be different."

The two other Arabs came round to the helpless junior, and one held him tight whilst the other wielded a heavy whip. The slashes, however, were of a mild character, and only stung for a moment or two.

"That is just a taste of what might follow!" exclaimed the sheikh. "Be warned, boy, not to thwart me again."

"You can thrash me all you like, but I sha'n't give—"

"Seize him!" shouted the Arab priest furiously. "By the beard of the Prophet I will show this bent that I am the master! Wield the whip hereby, my slaves! Spare him not!"

This time Mason's back was considerably sore. The slashes were fierce and heavy, and the

Bemovite panted with pain and rage. At the same time he did not overlook the fact that these heathens had him completely in their power.

"You—you brutes!" he gasped painfully.

"Ah! Thy tone is different now," said the priest, smiling. "It is well, infidel youth. Thou art to heed my orders, and I warn thee to listen with care. At eleven of the clock to-night my slave will await nigh the hedge at the spot where thou wert seized. Dost thou understand?"

"Well?" asked Mason shortly.

"My orders are that thou shalt meet my slave," continued Akram. "Thou must bring with thee the articles I mentioned—the half locket which has been thine for years and the sealed package. Thou must bring the two."

Mason set his teeth.

"I won't!" he declared grimly. "You can see that whip again if you like, but you won't get me to consent. I'm not afraid of pain, and I'm not going to be forced into—"

"Fool!" interrupted the sheikh. "Thrice fool! I have other weapons which thou wilt fear to a far greater extent. Refusal to comply with my demand will mean—death!"

Jack Mason shivered involuntarily.

"You—you wouldn't dare!" he muttered.

"I mean not thy own death," said the high priest softly. "No, that would not suit me, boy. If thou art absent from the meeting-place at eleven of the clock to-night, thy friend, Mr. Strong, will die ere the dawn comes."

"You—you murderous ruffians!" gasped Mason hotly.

"Thy words are merely those of passion," exclaimed the priest. "I care not a scrap of the fingers for such expressions. A death will result if thou art obstinate. And know, also, that thy life must be sealed. If a single word of this scene is breathed to thy schoolfellows, even though the locket is handed to me, Sahib Strong will die just the same. Is my meaning clear?"

"It's only a threat!" said Jack huskily.

"Thou art even more foolish than I took thee to be," thundered the priest angrily. "Art thou mad enough to suppose that I should use threats alone? Hast thou not read of the mysterious death of two men in London, the great city? I ordered that they should die—and they died. It will be the same in thy case. And, remember, thy own life will be sacrificed after that of Sahib Strong, unless the locket is within my hands to-night. I have spoken my word!"

Mason was quite scared, and he didn't mind owing it. He had reason to be startled. The mysterious nature of this whole adventure, the sinister threat which had just been uttered, the terrible fear that Mr. Strong would lose his life, all contributed to Jack's perturbation.

What could he do but comply?

The statement that Mr. Strong would die might be hollow, but Jack Mason knew that he could not risk the thing. Neither could he seek the advice of his chums or of Nelson Lee. If he did so, or if he failed to obey the order, Mr. Strong would be murdered! And Mason would be responsible, for it was in his power to avert the disaster.

What possible course was there for him except to give his word?

It was a terrible position for the lad, and his state of mind was pitiful just then. His whole being revolted against knuckling under to these Arab scoundrels. But he had read stories of men who had refused to obey similar orders, and he knew that splendid men had been killed for less.

"What's the good of the locket to you?" he asked at last.

The sheikh laughed harshly.

"Thy question is a needless one," he said. "Have I not told thee that it is the Sacred Locket of El Sufra? Were I to wield my full power, I could have thee struck down for even placing thy infidel fingers upon the property of Allah. Well, boy, hast thou decided?"

"Yes."

"And what is thy will?"

"I don't understand why you are so murderous," replied Mason quietly. "How can I do anything but agree? It's not so much the locket—that's mine, and nobody else is responsible for it—but the package belongs to Mr. Strong, and you're no right to force me—"

"Hold thy foolish tongue!" interrupted the Arab sharply. "Is it not known to thee that the package contains the half of the Sacred Locket which has been missing for so many years? Thou wilt not believe me? It matters not. But thou must bring both articles to the agreed upon spot at eleven of the clock. Dost thou agree?"

"Yes," said Mason, in a low voice.

"It is well. Thou hast sense, after all," said the sheikh pleasantly. "Be, then, prepared to take thy departure. And let me warn thee, boy, to hold thy tongue. One slip, and others might know. There must be no word spoken. Thou art already aware of the consequences which follow to thy friend, Sahib Strong, if the truth becomes public. Go, Mason, and return later!"

"Just against the station?" asked Jack.

"Thou art correct," replied the high priest. "Thou wilt see my slave appear at thy approach. If thou art late in arriving the consequences will be serious. Go, and bear in mind my wise words."

The two slaves had walked round behind Mason, and they quickly secured the cloths round his face, so that he could neither cry out nor see. Then he was carried out of the tent, the scent of the burning incense still in his nostrils.

As before, he was carried bodily, and his captors had some little trouble in getting him up the steep gully. And then Mason lost his sense of direction, and had no idea as to where he was being carried.

He was jugged along for an eternity, as it seemed to him. Actually, the journey probably occupied about fifteen minutes. At last he was set down. No words were spoken, and he assumed that the slaves were taking a rest.

But the minutes passed and nothing happened.

Mason, numbed with cold, moved his hands, and was astonished to find that the ropes which bound his wrists were loose. He jerked them, and his hands came free. At the same moment he knew that his ankle bonds had also been cut, although not unbound. A few kicks and he was able to get to his feet. And he had been lying there without even knowing that he was free!

He tore the bandages from his head and looked round dazedly.

He was just against the hedge bordering the road. The wind whistled cuttingly against him. He could see quite distinctly in the starlight, but he was alone—nearly alone.

The mysterious Arabs had vanished as though by magic into the night.

"Oh, great Scott!" muttered Jack. "It—it seems absolutely mad!"

There was no trace of his late captors, and it required all his efforts to assure himself that the startling events had actually taken place. It seemed as though he must have been lying there, suffering from nightmare.

But the ropes were still on the ground, and his clothing faintly exuded the smell of the pungent incense.

He broke through the hedge and found himself

on the road. The bewilderment had now left him, but his worry was intense. At eleven o'clock he must be back again with the locket and the package.

At all costs he must obey the high priest of Ebra Temple.

CHAPTER XLIII.

REGINALD PITT MAKES DISCOVERIES.

STUDY E, in the Removite passage, was quiet. A cheerful fire blazed in the grate, and the electric light was on. Reginald Pitt sat in the easy-chair, gazing absently before him.

"It's queer—jolly queer!" he told himself. "I'm not if I knew what to do, exactly. Handforth was attacked by Arabs, but nobody knows who they were or why they poisoned our old Handy. Arabs! And Mason hasn't come in! I shall certainly have to make a move in some direction or other."

The cunning expression which had been almost habitual with Pitt was no longer in evidence. His somewhat sharp features had softened in a subtle manner, and his eyes were not at all shifty, as they had been.

The change in Pitt was really astonishing. had noticed it more than ever of late. And I was quite certain that Jack Mason's influence had a great deal to do with the transformation.

There was a determined light in those keen eyes of Pitt's as he got up from his chair and crossed over to the door. No matter how the Removite's character changed for the better, he would always be as sharp as a needle and as cool as any fellow could be. Hitherto, Pitt had used his sharpness for evil purposes, but that sharpness had other values.

He switched off the light and left the study. The journey he made was not a long one, for he merely went next door to Study D. Handforth and Church and McClure were in the midst of their prep.

"Buzz off!" said Handforth politely. "No time to jaw now—"

"I shan't keep you a minute," said Pitt, closing the door calmly. "I should just like to ask you one or two questions about those Arabs, Handy."

Handforth glared.

"If you're looking for trouble you'll find some!" he said darkly. "I'm just about fed-up with those rotten Arabs! Half the chaps think I've been having delusions, and I don't want any sneers—"

"My dear old chap, I'm not going to sneer," said Pitt. "I believe your story in every detail, and I think you've had every cause to feel annoyed. Being ducked in a muddy ditch is enough to make any fellow ratty."

Handforth laid down his pen.

"If you're not going to sneer, I don't mind talking for a minute or two," he said generously. "Do you know that half a dozen fellows have struck their heads into the door during the last twenty minutes? Do you know that they've advised me to take liver salts and fruit salts, and goodness knows what else? They all seem to think my tummy's out of order! I'm rather wild— What the dickens are you grinning at, Church?"

"Oh—er—nun—nothing!" said Church hastily.

"Most unfeeling of the fellows," said Pitt, in a consoling voice. "But let me give you a word of advice, Handy. Don't take any notice; place yourself above all that cheap humour. Ignore it."

"That's what I have been doing," said Handforth.

Considering that half the books in Study D had been hurl'd at the doorway during the last twenty minutes, this statement was hardly accurate. Some of those books had scored a bull's-eye, too. The

fact that the volumes belonged to Church and McClure did not worry Handforth in the least, although they were looking the worse for wear. To be just, however, it must be said that Handforth was just as ready to hurl his own books about if necessary.

"I just want to ask you about Mason," said Pitt. "He went down to the village with Church and McClure, didn't he?"

"Yes," said McClure. "We meant to look in at the tuckshop for him on our way back, but forgot all about it."

"So you left him in the village?"

"Yes."

"How long ago?"

"Over an hour. Oh, more than that!" said Church. "Hasn't he come in yet?"

"No; but I expect he'll turn up soon," replied Pitt. "About that face you saw, McClure. Do you think it was an Arab—one of the rotters who attacked Handforth?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," replied McClure cautiously.

"But you couldn't say anything definite?"

"No."

"Well, what kind of overcoat was Mason wearing?" asked Pitt.

Handforth & Co. stared.

"What's that got to do with it?" asked Church.

"It may have nothing to do with it, but I've a fancy to know," smiled Pitt.

"Well, he wasn't wearing an overcoat at all—"

"Are you sure?" cut in Pitt sharply.

"He was wearing a macintosh," grinned Church.

"You ought to know, I should think, considering that you're his study-mate. It's just like Handy's—or was. Handy's isn't fit to give to a tramp now."

Reginald Pitt nodded.

"Thanks!" he said, opening the door. "So long!"

He passed outside, quite satisfied with the result of his inquiry. And he went back into Study E and stood staring into the fire.

"A macintosh just like Handforth's—and the three of them were seen as they walked down to the village," he murmured. "Why, it's as clear as daylight. I don't need to be Mr. Nelson Lee to deduce a few facts out of this material."

Pitt dropped into the easy-chair, frowning.

"Those Arabs were after Mason, of course," he told himself. "That's obvious, considering the locket with the Arabic writing on it. And it's easy to see how the mistake came about. Mason, in a light-coloured macintosh, went down to the village with Church and McClure. On the way a face was seen in the hedge—one of the Arab merchants on the watch. He spotted Mason, and considered that everything was all serene. He scooted on ahead, and warned his pals, who were probably on the watch, too, near the village. So far, I'm on safe ground. Now, what was the next move?"

Pitt stared steadily into the fire and nodded.

"Mason and Church and McClure were watched as they entered old Binks' shop," he muttered keenly. "Nothing easier than to watch the High Street on such a dark night. The three of them went into the shop—two in ordinary overcoats, and Mason in a macintosh. Naturally, he was distinct from the others. They met Handforth in the tuckshop, and that's where the confusion arose."

There was no doubt that Pitt was on the right track. He was reconstructing the events in the village with singular astuteness, and Nelson Lee would have been quite pleased if he could have heard him. Strictly speaking, I ought to have been doing this detective business, but I didn't know the facts as Pitt knew them. Moreover, my time was full up with football matters just then,

and I really didn't give Jack Mason a thought. Reginald Pitt was personally interested in his study-chum.

"Yes, that's where the confusion arose," repeated Pitt. "Handforth, also wearing a light-coloured macintosh, had the shop with Church and McClure. At a distance he must have looked exactly like Mason, who had entered a minute before. How were the shadowers to know that the three fellows who went into Bink's place weren't the three who came out? They naturally mistook Handforth for Mason. It was the easiest thing in the world. The Arabs waited for their chance, and it came when Handy's cap blew off."

Pitt was quite pleased with himself, but he was worried, too.

"The rotters pounced on him, thinking he was Mason," he went on. "Within a couple of minutes, of course, they found out their mistake, and hurried Handforth aside. I expect he rolled into the ditch by accident. His own clumsiness, probably. And he was so wild, and Church and McClure were so excited, that they forgot all about Mason in the tuckshop. That was an hour and a half ago, and Mason hasn't come back yet. It looks rotten."

There was every reason for Pitt's anxiety. He knew that Mr. Bink's must have closed his shop very soon after Handforth & Co. had left, and the other shops closed at about the same time. There was no earthly reason why Jack Mason should remain in Bellion. Moreover, it was past locking-up time, and Mason was always particular about getting in early. He had taught Pitt many lessons with regard to abiding by the school rules.

It was more than likely that Mason had suffered the same fate as Handforth—with this difference. Mason was the fellow who was wanted, and he hadn't been thrown aside at once. What had happened to him?

Pitt wondered what he should do. All his thoughts were concerned with helping Mason. He had done enough against the boy from Bermondsey in the past, and now he was doing his utmost to make amends.

There was no pretence about his anxiety for Jack. If he didn't come in within twenty minutes, Pitt decided, he would go to Nelson Lee.

But this measure was not necessary.

Pitt strolled out into the lobby, and then opened the big door and passed out on to the wide steps. The night was still starlight, and Pitt could easily see across the Triangle. And at that very moment he spotted a form drop over the wall and come running towards the Ancient House. Pitt started forward.

"That you, Jack?" he asked quickly.

"Yes," said the newcomer, panting. "I'm late, Pitt. Let's get indoors. I shall be reported if I'm seen—"

"Rot!" said Pitt. "Nobody knows you've just come in. I'm jolly glad to see you. I thought you'd got lost. Where the thunder have you been all this time?"

"Oh, in—in the village!" said Mason awkwardly. They passed inside, and made their way to Study E. When the door was closed Pitt glanced at his study-mate with interest. Jack Mason was not the same fellow as he had been at tea-time.

There was a gleam of real alarm in his eyes, and his cheeks were pale, except for two red spots caused by his exertion in running to the school. His macintosh, too, was smeared with mud in places. And Pitt's keen eyes did not overlook the red condition of his chum's wrists. It was quite a big clue.

"Is Handforth in?" asked Mason, with assumed carelessness.

"Hours ago," replied Pitt. "They went to the

station—Handforth and his chums, I mean—and forgot all about you. I've been gondaring where on earth you'd blown off to. You don't usually stay out after locking-up."

Mason looked at Pitt with eyes that were full of worry.

"I want you to do me a favour, Pitt," he said quietly.

"Go ahead!"

"It's only natural that you'll question me as to where I've been all this time," said Mason. "Please don't. You'll only distress me, Pitt, because I can't possibly answer. I'm not in the habit of telling lies, so I shan't fake up any yarn; and I know you're too sensible to be put off with one, anyhow. Will you please ask no questions at all?"

Pitt lay back in his chair.

"In other words, you don't want to tell me anything?" he asked.

"I—I can't!"

"Why can't you?"

"Because— Oh, I can't say anything!" said Jack, getting to his feet and paring up and down restlessly. "I know it looks awfully queer, but I hope you won't think rotten things."

Reginald Pitt laughed.

"Shall I tell you what has happened this evening?" he asked. "To you, I mean."

"How can you tell me that?" demanded Jack sharply. "Have you been watching— Oh, but I know you wouldn't do that, Pitt?"

"I've told a few fibs in my time," said Pitt coolly. "But lying is a rotten game, Mason, and I've given it up. I haven't been outside the school grounds since tea-time. That's the truth."

"I—I'm sorry," said Pitt. "But I'm upset, Pitt, and—"

"—And I don't wonder," interrupted the Serpent. "Squat down, my son, and just listen to me. I'm going to tell you, approximately, what's happened. Don't interrupt until I've finished, but I'll bet I don't go far wrong."

Mason didn't know what to make of his study-chum, but sat still and listened with great anxiety. He was quite sure that Pitt would give voice to an altogether wrong account of the events. How could it be otherwise? How could Pitt know what had occurred?

"You waited for Handforth & Co. in the tuckshop," said Pitt. "After that, getting fed-up, you walked out. I don't know which way you walked, whether it was towards the station or the school; but that doesn't matter much. You were suddenly collared by two or three mysterious forms—Arabs, in fact."

"How—how did—?" Mason gulped. "Gah on!"

"I'll tell you," said Pitt. And in a few clear sentences he explained the whole matter.

Mason sat for some moments without comment. Pitt knew everything. By a very simple train of reasoning he knew all about Mason's dilemma. Jack badly wanted to take his study-mate into his confidence. Well, why not? The Arabs had warned him to say nothing, under pain of dire consequences. But Pitt already knew the truth.

"I'm going to tell you something else, Pitt," said Jack. "I'm going to trust you with a secret, and I hope you'll respect it."

"If I had always been a decent fellow I should resent that remark," said Pitt calmly. "But you've had every cause to doubt me in the past, Mason. Well, if you tell me anything, you needn't be afraid. I give you my word of honour that I won't do a thing which will bring you the slightest harm."

Mason was satisfied. He did not take heed of the fact that Pitt had made no promise not to speak to anybody else. Pitt's reply had been carefully worded, but it was frank and absolutely sincere.

"Well, those Arabs have come from some temple or other," said Mason quietly. "It seems that the locket is sacred, and I've been told that the missing half is wrapped up in that neat little package of Mr. Strong's."

"Do these Arabs want you to give them the locket?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Mason. "I feel like ignoring the whole thing, Pitt, but I can't. It's hateful to be forced to give up something which I have had all my life. And that package isn't mine at all. Yet I'm bound to deliver it."

"Why?"

"If I don't those Arabs will murder Mr. Strong!" exclaimed Jack, his voice trembling. "I don't know whether to believe it or not, Pitt, but I can't risk it. I'm almost certain that nothing would happen if I refused, but how am I to be sure? Just think how ghastly it would be if poor old Mr. Strong was killed?"

Pitt laughed lightly.

"My dear chap, a yarn—nothing but a yarn!" he declared. "If you'll take my advice, you'll do nothing. Let those Arab beasts go to the dickens. Ignore them completely."

"That's how I feel!" declared Jack fiercely. "If the danger was only to myself, I wouldn't move a finger. But it's Mr. Strong who will suffer, and I'm bound to obey the order. And I want you to keep quiet, because I was told that if I breathed a word about what has happened, the consequences would be just the same."

Pitt lay back in his chair and regarded Mason steadily.

"You don't believe all this rot, do you?" he asked. "You can't tell me that you've been gulled into crediting such a string of idiotic lies? You've got more sense, Mason?"

Jack looked very distressed.

"It's a terrible position," he said. "I'm just like you, Pitt. In my heart I don't believe a thing of it. I'm almost certain that it's nothing more than a fake. But it is right for us to accept that as positive certainty? I can't afford to take the risk. I'd rather lose the locket than place Mr. Strong's life in danger. Although I'm doubtful, Pitt, I must obey the order. Besides, there's no drawing back now, because I gave my word."

"And you really mean to knuckle under?"

"Don't put it like that!" said Jack uncomfortably. "What else can I do? I've got to meet one of those Arabs down the lane at eleven o'clock. It's no good trying to get out of it, Pitt."

The Serpent rose to his feet.

"Do you want to hear my advice?" he asked slowly.

"What is it?"

"Take no notice of the whole affair. Go to bed to-night, and sleep like a top," said Pitt. "Mr. Strong won't come to any harm, and you needn't be uneasy. Just snap your fingers at those heathen rotters!"

"That's the very advice I should like to take," replied Jack Mason. "But I've given my word, Pitt, and I've got to go through with it."

There was a note of finality in Mason's voice which Pitt could not ignore. He knew that further discussion was quite useless.

Jack Mason was determined.

CHAPTER XLIV.

PITT SEEMS AID—AND FUNDS IT.

"DEAR fellows, it's simply amazing—that's all I can say!" declared Sir Montie Tregillis-West, as he placed his slippered foot upon the fender. "Why was Handforth captured? Why was he thrown into the ditch? Why

was he released two minutes after Fein' made a prisoner? It's up to you, Nipper, old boy, to explain things. You're a detective, an' it's your job."

"Well, I haven't thought much about it," I replied. "We've been too busy with these football arrangements. Do you know I've written six letters this evening to skippers of other clerens, and—"

"Come in!" growled Watson, as the door-handle rattled.

"That's just what I am doing," said Pitt, entering Study C. "It's a good thing you invited me to come in, because I was coming, all the same. I want to have a word with you fellows—a very private word."

Pitt closed the door mysteriously, and I nodded.

"We've got some cotton-wool in the cupboard," I remarked. "We'll stuff up the keyhole and all the cracks, if you're very particular. I'm quite obliging, you know, and I don't mind taking a little trouble."

Pitt frowned.

"This is no joking matter, let me tell you," he said. "Honestly, it's rather serious. Have you thought anything more about that attack on Handforth? Do you know its significance?"

I sat up.

"I was just thinking about it. I've been too busy up till now," I explained. "Now, let me see. Handforth was collared, wasn't he? It stands to reason that nobody would collar Handforth by design, therefore it must have been a bloomer."

"Good!" said Pitt. "You're rather hot stuff at reasoning things out, ain't you? I've had a shot at it, and I'm feeling rather pleased with myself. Let's see if you can go one better."

"So you've been having a shot, have you?" I remarked. "Well, I must say that you're as keen as mustard, Pitt, and it's quite possible that I shan't be able to whack you. But perhaps you know more facts than I do?"

"I don't think so," said Pitt. "Church and McClure went down to the village with Mason. They left him in the tuckshop and went to the station—Handforth with them. Handforth was seized and roughly handled by a bunch of rotters who looked like Arabs. That's all the material I had to go upon."

I suddenly became quite serious.

"Mason went down to the village with Church and McClure," I repeated. "By Jupiter! I hadn't quite realised the significance of that before. What an axe I've been to bother about these foster fixtures when I ought to have been attending to this other business. There's only one thing to think, Pitt."

"What's that?"

"We know that somebody looked through the hedge while Mason was going to the village with Church and McClure," I replied. "That somebody was on the watch. He saw Mason, and, later on, Handforth was mistaken for your study-mate. It was Mason who ought to have fallen into the trap. By the way, has he come in?"

"Yes."

"Oh, that's good!" I said, with relief. "That chap Grell has been hanging about, as you know, and he's a pretty desperate rascal. How long ago did Mason come in?"

"He arrived about a quarter of an hour ago."

"Then what the dickens was he doing in the village all that time?" I asked sharply. "Look here, Pitt, you know something more than you're stated, don't you?"

"As it happens, I do," replied the Serpent, sitting on the edge of the table. "I'm not feeling quite so bucked as I was. My deductions weren't

anything out of the ordinary, after all, because you've repeated 'em. But I went a little farther than you've gone."

"Bogged! This won't do!" remarked Sir Montie. "You mustn't let Pitt beat you, old boy."

"You don't seem to understand that Pitt is hot stuff," I replied. "I haven't had a word with Mason, and so I'm handicapped. Has he explained why he kept out so long, Pitt?"

"He refused to explain at first."

"Then that looks as though something happened," I went on. "I should say that he was collared by those Arabs, in connection with that locket of his. But he can't have given it up, because it's in my gov'nor's keeping. By Jupiter! Has he promised— No, he's got more sense!"

Pitt leaned forward.

"You've practically hit it," he said, in a low voice. "Mason made me promise that I should respect his secret—"

"Then you can't say anything to us, my dear chap," I put in promptly.

"I can, because I left a loophole," said Pitt. "Surprising, isn't it? You wouldn't think that I should care tuppence about respecting a secret, would you? But my ideas have changed a bit, and I'm not such a howling roister as I used to be."

"Glad you admit it!" remarked Watson, with a nod.

"A chap who admits his faults gains respect," I said grimly. "You've gained my respect, Pitt, and I've high hopes that you'll be a credit to the House yet. Mind you don't backslide."

Reginald Pitt grinned.

"What were we talking about?" he said. "Oh, Mason's secret! I told him that I would respect it, and I gave him my word of honour that I wouldn't do a single thing which could bring him the slightest harm. That doesn't prevent me from doing something for his good, does it?"

"You artful bounder!" I exclaimed. "Well, what's the idea?"

Pitt came right over to the hearthrug, and forthwith told us what had happened to Mason only a short time before. He told us of the threat to kill Mr. Strong if the locket was not handed over. And we finally learned that Mason was determined to keep his appointment at eleven o'clock.

"He mustn't know that I've said anything to you," concluded Pitt. "I'm talking to you fellows in absolute confidence, and I know that I can trust you. It's no good arguing with Mason; he's as firm as a rock."

"The chap's dotty!" snorted Watson. "Fancy believing that both! Those Arabs wouldn't dare to kill—"

"That's not the point," interrupted Pitt. "Mason's not dotty, either. He's practically certain that the threat's a hollow one; but there's just a slimy chance that it isn't. And Mason won't dream of leaving the thing as it stands. He's not going to take any risks, because of his regard for Mr. Strong."

"Well, Mason is to be honoured for it," I said quietly. "I'm glad to learn that he hasn't been completely spoofed. But I'm of the opinion that those Arabs are no more Oriental than I am!"

Pitt nodded.

"Grell!" he said calmly. "Grell and his pals!" Sir Montie adjusted his pince-nez and gazed at us.

"But how could Grell be an Arab?" he asked mildly. "I understood that Mr. Simon Grell was an English rascal—I did, really."

"It's a trick, Montie," I explained. "I'll bet my boots on it."

"Dear fellow, I shouldn't do that if I were you,"

said Tregellis-West, shaking his noble head. "Bet-sin's a bad practice, and it would be shockin' if you lost your boots, you know. But all this talk is beyond the limits of my small brain. I'm out of my depth, begad!"

"It's rather queer how we agree on every point," said Pitt. "Mason hasn't a single suspicion, but I have. Grell is at the bottom of this Arab stunt, I'll swear. It's just a trick to scare him."

I nodded grimly.

"I've had a few experiences with Nelson Lee," I remarked. "I can't remember any case of Arabs coming to England after a locket and threatening to murder somebody. It's no— Well, I can't swallow it. But we know for an absolute fact that Mason's made Grell, is anxious to get hold of that half locket and the package. He's made several attempts already, and we've had no indication that he intends to give it up. It's my belief that Grell is lying low, and has decided on this scheme in order to play upon Mason's fears. It's nothing more nor less than a piece of elaborate bluff!"

"Of course it is," agreed Pitt. "It's no good saying that to Mason, though, because he's too fond of that friend of his—Mr. Strong. He'd rather die himself than have anything happen to the old chap. He'd say that he couldn't risk placing Mr. Strong's life in danger. Those Arabs have made it quite clear that all they want is the gold locket. Grell is after that locket, and he wants it badly. Therefore, isn't it natural to suppose that the Arabs are merely tools in the game?"

"Of course," I nodded. "Grell is in the background somewhere, and we're certainly not going to let him diddle Mason in this bare-faced fashion. Yet I don't think it would be wise to say anything to Mason himself. It would put you in a queer position, Pitt, and Mason would probably refuse to drop the thing."

"He's already refused," said Pitt. "I think the responsibility is too great for us to carry on our own shoulders. I'm agreeable, of course, but I should feel far more comfortable if Mr. Lee knew all about it."

"Pitt, you're getting more sense every day," I said heartily. "We'll go straight to Mr. Lee's study and tell him all about it. Something's got to be done, and my gov'nor is the man to map out the course of action. He'll be jolly pleased with you, Pitt."

"That's what I was wondering," said the Serpent thoughtfully. "Will he? Don't you think that he'll consider that I've betrayed Jack's confidence? I sha'n't like Mr. Lee to—"

"Don't be an ass!" I interrupted. "You've betrayed no confidence. You told Mason that you wouldn't do anything to harm him, and Mr. Lee will fully understand that you acted in this way because you're genuinely anxious to do your study-mate a good turn. Anyhow, we'd better let the gov'nor hear about it."

And so, leaving Sir Montie and Tommy in Study C—for we didn't want to cause comment by going in a crowd—Pitt and I went along the passage and tapped at the door of Nelson Lee's apartment.

"Come in!" came the Housemaster's voice.

We entered, and found Nelson Lee at his desk, writing. He laid his pen down as I closed the door and regarded us closely. He could tell that our mission was a serious one.

"Well, Nipper?" he asked. "Sit down, my boy—sit down, Pitt!"

"We've come about Mason, sir," I said, getting straight to the point. "Something queer has happened this evening, and Pitt is rather anxious. He came to me, and I thought the best thing we could do was to tell you all about it, and so did Pitt himself. In fact, he suggested this visit."

Without further ado we explained the whole

position, and Nelson Lee listened with a grave expression upon his keen, clear-cut face. When we had finished he sat silent for some few moments. Then he rose to his feet.

"Undoubtedly Simon Grell is at the bottom of the business," he said grimly. "Pitt, you were very sensible in going to Nipper, and you did the right thing when you came to my study. Left to himself, Mason might easily have played into his rascally uncle's hands. I am not intimating that Mason is a foolish boy, or even simple. He possesses his full share of common-sense. But that threat against Mr. Strong—how hollow though it undoubtedly was—impressed him, and he is even willing to relinquish the locket, although his better sense tells him that he ought not to do so."

"And what shall we do, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"I will decide later, Nipper," said Lee. "Some action must be taken, of course—some decisive action, too. It is possible that Mason will come here at any minute, and it would not do for him to find you in this study. He would suspect things at once, and we wish to give him no hint of the measures which are to be taken for his benefit."

"We'll clear, then," I said, jumping to my feet.

"Come on, Pitt!"

We left the gun'ror's study a moment later—after he had quite unnecessarily warned us to refrain from chatter. Pitt was looking thoughtful as we re-entered Study C in the Remore passage.

"Do you think Mr. Lee will do anything?" he asked.

"Do anything?" I repeated. "Why, my dear ass, he's as keen as pepper on this job. And we shan't be left out of it, either. Just you wait."

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee was standing with his back to the fire in his study, smoking a cigarette with slow deliberation. He had not finished the cigarette when a tap sounded on the door, and Jack Mason appeared. The gun'ror's hint that Pitt and I would be better out of the way had not been ill-timed.

"What is it, Mason?" asked Nelson Lee smilingly.

"I—I've come about that locket of mine, sir, and the sealed package," said Mason, with obvious embarrassment. "You're taking charge of them for me."

"Well, my boy?"

"Can I have them, sir?" asked Mason.

"Certainly, Mason!" replied Lee, at once. "They are yours, and if you wish to have them returned to you I raise no objection. I should advise you to be very careful, however, considering what has happened in the past."

"Yes, sir," said Mason; "I will be."

Nelson Lee walked over to his safe, unlocked it, and produced the little sealed packet and the half locket. He slipped them both into a foolscap envelope and sealed it up. Then he handed it across his desk.

"There you are, my boy," he said, smiling. "I don't like to see you looking so worried, Mason. Can I help you in any way?"

"I—I don't think so, sir, thank you," said Jack quietly.

He was extremely glad to leave the study, for he realized that it looked very queer asking for the return of the articles in this way. He had feared that Nelson Lee would ask him all sorts of questions—questions which he couldn't answer. It was, therefore, a relief for him to be spared that ordeal. Mason would have understood better had he known that Nelson Lee was already in possession of the facts.

The gun'ror himself smiled after Mason had closed the door.

"I have given them to you, my lad," he murmured, "but I have an idea that they are still

quite safe. At all events, they will not be handed over to your oncles on this occasion."

For Nelson Lee's scheme for safeguarding Jack Mason was already complete.

CHAPTER XLV.

NO JOY FOR MR. SIMON GRELL.

TEN-THIRTY sounded from the old tower, and by that time the Remore ought to have been fast asleep. But a figure rose from one of the beds and quickly commenced dressing. Jack Mason was bent upon keeping his appointment.

He had been awake ever since lights-out, and had been listening for the half-hour to strike. He reckoned that he would be able to get down to the station comfortably by eleven o'clock.

Within five minutes he was dressed, and then he crept down the dormitory, and silently passed out into the passage. Mason disliked this part of the business as much as any. He was acting like a thief in the night, creeping out of his bed and stealing off whilst others slept.

But in this he was mistaken. His fond belief that every other Remore junior was sound asleep would have received a bit of a shock if he had decided to go back into the dormitory. For I was already out of bed, and Pitt, on the other side of the dormitory, was slipping his coat and waistcoat on.

Tregellis-West and Watson, having fallen asleep, as usual, had been roused by two heavy digs from me, and they were on the floor at once. We had taken precautions earlier.

Immediately after lights-out, while there was still a certain amount of noise going on in the dormitory, we had slipped into nearly all our clothing—unseen in the darkness. Then we had got into bed between the top blanket and the quilt. By adopting this scheme we were ready to leave the dormitory less than a minute after Mason.

He had no idea that so many well-wishers were looking after him. Creeping downstairs, he entered his own study and slipped into his overcoat and cap, which had been left there in readiness.

Immediately afterwards we crept into Study C. Here, also, everything was ready. The only light we used was my electric-torch, and this was carefully placed so that the beam did not show towards the window.

"Slip your boots on quickly!" I muttered. "And don't make a sound. If Mason receives a hint that we're after him, there's no telling what he'll do. We're going to see that he comes to no harm, but he mustn't know it."

"I'm ready!" breathed Pitt.

"Pray wait for me, dear fellows!" gasped Sir Montie. "One of my laces positively refuses to come out of a knot. Isn't it shockin'? Whenever a fellow is in a hurry, his bootlaces always get into the most frightful knots!"

Our boots had been specially prepared for the work in hand. Some old stockings had been raked up, and these were donned over the boots—an old trick, but an effective one. Our feet would make very little noise upon the roads.

Going to the window, I cautiously opened it after the light had been extinguished. And I was just in time to see Jack Mason hurrying across the Triangle towards the wall. I turned my head.

"We'll pop out in about half a minute," I breathed.

Meanwhile, Mason had reached the road, and he set off at a brisk walk, the high wind whistling past him noisily. This wind was an ally for us, for it prevented Mason hearing any slight sounds in his rear.

And we were not the only shadowers. For after Mason had been walking for a hundred yards a dim figure emerged from behind the hedge and softly followed in his tracks. Farther behind still, we kept this second figure in view.

Needless to say, the other shadower was Nelson Lee. We formed quite a nice little procession, and there was not much fear of Mason coming to any harm with so many guardians on his track.

Nelson Lee's scheme was quite simple.

He intended keeping as close to Mason as possible, and he knew that in the event of any emergency we should be on hand. The chief idea was to discover the identity of the Arab—so supposed Arabs.

Mason continued his way to the village without even once glancing behind him. He was entirely unsuspecting, and when he arrived at the section of road near the station he came to a halt and peered into the darkness.

Nelson Lee was comparatively close by, but he took great care to remain quite still. There were probably other eyes in addition to Mason's on the watch. Indeed, it was quite likely that Mason himself would be under observation by the people he was going to meet until they were satisfied that he was quite alone.

I followed on quite a long way behind, with Pitt and the others just in my rear. We felt glad that the night was very dark, for our mission would have been extremely difficult otherwise.

"Now then, you asses!" I whispered, turning my head as I heard Montie and Tommy murmuring together. "Don't give the game away!"

"Dear boy, I was just remarkin'—"

"Well, don't remark!"

"But there's zotbin' to be seen, Nipper," objected Tregelle-West. "Mason's a long way ahead, round the bend. And I ain't at all sure that Mr. Lee is with us. I haven't seen a sign of him."

"I have," I replied. "Your job is to stick behind me and be ready to charge to the death if necessary."

"We're the reserves, so to speak," grinned Pitt.

"I'm going to slip forward now," I went on. "You come after me when I warn, but don't move before. The gu'nor would never forgive us if we gave the show away by acting rashly."

I left them, and crept along close against the hedge until I faintly made out the shape of Mason some two hundred yards ahead. Nelson Lee was between Mason and the spot where I stood, but there was certainly no sign of him.

And just then a form appeared from a gap and came into the road. It was the figure of a man, but he was clothed in long, flowing garments. Mason walked forward a pace or two.

"Thou art here in good time, boy," came a foreign-sounding voice from the figure. "It is well. Stand quite still and make no cry."

Mason knew that this man was not the high priest or sheikh, or whatever he called himself. He was one of the slaves, and Mason allowed himself to be manacled, and then his wrists were bound behind his back.

"What's the need of this?" he asked, rather impatiently.

"Thou must ask no questions," murmured the other. "Walk, and I will guide thee."

The junior realised the futility of argument. Besides, what did it matter? He wanted to get the whole thing over as soon as possible. And the Arab led him across the meadow swiftly and without speaking.

Nelson Lee was quite satisfied that nobody else was on the watch, and he beckoned to me, in the

dense gloom I only just managed to see him. In my turn, I waved to the others behind.

"Well, sir!" I whispered, as I came up.

"They have gone across the meadow," said the gu'nor softly. "I intend to follow, Nipper, but I think it will be as well if you and the other boys remain in somewhat closer attendance. There might be some rough work to accomplish. And your support will be welcome. I am half inclined to think that I was foolish in not scaring outside aid—"

"We can manage the rosters all right," I put in quickly.

"Very well, we will do our best," breathed Nelson Lee. "Lead your companions up to the next meadow, Nipper, and then run along behind the cover of the hedge as fast as you can go. You'll reach the next field in advance, probably, so you'll have to be careful. Wait there until I give you further instructions."

Sir Montie and the others had heard, and they quickly followed me farther along the road, while Nelson Lee crossed the meadow direct. He could rely upon himself doing so unobserved, but with five of us it was a different proposition.

So my chums and I hurried round, and were soon racing up the adjoining meadow. At one spot, where the hedge was low, I took a good look, and saw Mason and his escort going along a short distance away.

This whole adventure was rather mysterious, and I wondered what would happen if it turned out that Simon Grell had nothing to do with it. But this was a possibility which really didn't enter into our calculations.

We reached the top of the meadow, and then waited. Before us lay a ploughed field—a long field, but comparatively narrow. We had not to wait long before the figures of Mason and the Arab appeared, and they went straight across the field without pausing, or without looking to right or left.

Nelson Lee himself was soon on hand, and now he came towards us.

"You must remain here, boys, until the others have disappeared into the wood which stretches along the other side of the field," he whispered sharply. "This position is very exposed, and even I must take extra care."

"What shall we do then, sir?"

"Come across as quickly as possible."

Nelson Lee went off at once, and he crouched low as he walked across the rough earth of the ploughed field. By this time Mason and the robed figure had practically reached the other side, and they merged into the hedges and trees almost at once. Nelson Lee soon followed their example.

"We seem to be out of it, Nipper, old boy," murmured Sir Montie. "All the fun might be over before—"

"We're going ahead now," I whispered loudly. "Come on!"

As a matter of fact, I was getting impatient. I didn't like the idea of Nelson Lee going on first. So we ran across the ploughed field quickly, making straight for the spot where I had last seen the gu'nor.

As it turned out, I need have had no fear of losing him, for there was a quite well-defined path leading through the wood, and it was quite certain that Mason had been led along this, and that Nelson Lee was following.

Mason, in fact, was already down in the deep hollow.

His guide had stuck closely to him during the whole journey, and at length pushed him into the small tent which stood in the tiny clearing at the bottom of the hollow. The Arab followed Mason in, and the flap closed.

The bandage was removed, and Jack saw the same scene as before. The high priest stood before him, expectant and with outstretched hand.

"By Allah!" he exclaimed. "Thou hast fulfilled thy mission?"

Mason did not speak, but he handed over the locket and the little package, which he had removed from the envelope. Sheikh Akram seized them eagerly, and nodded his head several times.

"It is well!" he exclaimed. "Receive thy blessing—"

"Am I to understand that Mr. Strong isn't in any danger now?" asked Mason steadily.

"Let thy mind be easy, O infidel boy!" said the high priest. "Thou hast fulfilled thy trust, and the high priest of the El Sofra Temple is a man of his word. Go, and all will be well. Thou hast pleased me—"

And then, breaking upon the sheikh's soft voice, a cry of warning came from outside. The three Arabs gazed at one another anxiously. What was the meaning of that cry?

The meaning was quite clear, much to Nelson Lee's fury.

The gun'ner had crept to the edge of the hollow, and was still lying there when the others came up. We could dimly see a curiously shaped tent below us, with a light glowing through—a very dim light.

"Mason has just gone in," breathed the gun'ner. "Really, boys, nothing could be better. We have merely to creep down, surround the tent, and call upon the occupants to surrender. I fancy they will do so at once. If not, a slight amount of force will be of some avail."

Without waiting further, we commenced the descent. And it was then that the cry of warning sounded. Unsuspected by us, somebody was on the watch outside, or, if not on the watch, somebody happened to be there. We saw a dark form dash down ahead of us and tear open the flap.

"Quick, you fools!" shouted a harsh voice. "Run—run like mad!"

All was confusion a moment later. Nelson Lee charged down just as the two Arab "slaves" came staggering out.

Crash!

One of them collided with Lee, and went down, dead. The other attempted to get away, but the gun'ner's fat decided that he shouldn't leave the spot. The tent was swaying about wildly, and Nelson Lee burst inside, while Pitt and I rushed round to the back.

We just caught a glimpse of a form fleeing up the slope among the trees. He disappeared, and we knew that it was almost futile to follow. The tent by this time had collapsed, and wild movements underneath it proved that somebody else was there.

"Help me, boys!" rapped out Nelson Lee sharply. "I fear that Mason is hurt."

We tore the canvas aside, and Jack Mason crawled out, gasping, but by no means harmed. He stared at us with amazement and consternation.

"How—how did you—"

"I will explain later, Mason," interrupted the gun'ner. "Hold these two men, boys. I wish to question them closely. I fear, Mason, that you have been the victim of a trick—"

"A trick, sir!" gasped Jack.

"Exactly."

Nelson Lee's torch blazed out, and within a minute the robes had been torn from the Arabs, revealing ordinary suits beneath. Their beards followed, and the men were revealed as common-looking fellows of a foreign type.

"Who are you?" demanded Lee sternly.

"Don't take us, sir!" gasped one of the men in broken English. "We do nothing. We only paid to make effort."

The other fellow maintained a stolid silence. Both were passive, and made no attempt to get away. The truth was they were thoroughly scared, and knew that escape was hopeless for them.

"But—but I don't understand, sir!" pouted Mason wildly.

"As you can see for yourself, Mason, these fellows are not Arabs," said Nelson Lee. "The whole story they told you was a fabrication—a trick. I have not the slightest doubt that your uncle is at the bottom of the whole affair. It is extremely fortunate that I was able to take a hand in the game, and thus prevent the plot succeeding."

Mason looked around him shakily.

"But—but it has succeeded, sir!" he shouted hoarsely. "I gave the things to the man who played the high priest, and he's vanished. Oh, what an idiot I've been, and Pitt warned me, too."

"I think I may safely say that Pitt is the real cause of this satisfactory ending to the affair," said Nelson Lee pleasantly. "As for your locket and Mr. Strong's package—well, Mason, you needn't worry. I have an idea that they are safer than you imagine."

"But the man took them away, sir!" I said quickly.

"Yet they are not lost, Nipper," replied the gun'ner.

I couldn't understand what he meant, but I should have received enlightenment if I had been in a meadow at that moment about half a mile away. Akram had fled, and with him went the man who had given the warning, who was none other than Mr. Jake Starkey.

Simon Grell was hovering on the edge of the hollow, awaiting the delivery of the locket. At last, he told himself, he was to succeed in his plans. When he heard the commotion he was anxious, but the "high priest" handed over the locket and the package, safe and sound.

"By thunder!" said Mr. Grell, his eyes glittering. "I thought things had gone wrong, old man. These are the things I want, and you'll git your extra two quid straight away. I reckon—"

Mr. Grell had struck a match in order to gaze upon his prize more closely. And then a string of oaths left his lips as the match blew out.

"Curse the boy!" he snarled. "We planned to trick him, and he's tricked us! This ain't the locket; it's a spy! And the package ain't worth a brass farthing! We've been done, Jake—proper done!"

Mr. Starkey was too utterly disgusted to say a word. Certainly Mr. Grell made up for this lack of eloquence, for he made the night air literally blue. But bad language did not improve matters in the least.

In spite of all Simon Grell's elaborate trickery he had failed in the end. It had cost him a great deal more than he could afford to pay the men he had hired for the occasion. It wouldn't have mattered if the end had been satisfactory. But he had gained nothing.

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee had come to a decision. It was quite evident that the two captured wretches were only tools, and utterly in ignorance of the true state of affairs.

"You can clear off as soon as you like," said Nelson Lee sternly. "And you may consider yourself lucky that you have not been handed over to the police. Do you understand me? Go!"

The two fellows understood perfectly, and they scuttled away into the darkness, hardly able to believe their good fortune.

"We should have gained nothing by taking the two rascals to the police-station, Mason," said Nelson Lee. "They are merely ignorant men, paid to do this particular piece of deception. Your

nucle, Grell, is the actual culprit, and he has not been in evidence, although I strongly suspect that he was hovering near."

"But—the locket, sir—"

"The locket is safe, Mason," interrupted the gay 'un smilingly. "I took the precaution to purchase a locket in Bunnington some days ago, in the event of an attempt at burglary. It was quite a fair match, and it was a simple task to scratch a few haphazard Arabic signs upon the inner surface. The package, of course, presented no difficulty. It was easy enough to make a duplicate."

"My hat!" I exclaimed, grinning. "That was a smart wheeze, sir. I'd give quids to see Grell's face when he examines these things! He'll have about five fits in recession!"

But that, of course, was impossible.

CHAPTER XLVI.

FULLWOOD IS VERY CLEVER.

"SNOW is coming before long," remarked Ralph Leslie Fullwood, casting a critical eye up at the sky. "I hope it doesn't come before we break up, that's all. Snow's a rotten loon when you're travellin'."

"I don't know so much about that," said Gulliver. "A good fall of snow will make it seem more like Christmas, anyhow."

The Nuts of the Ancient House of St. Frank's were lounging against the gateway. Morning lessons were over, and the dinner gong would soon sound out. The December day was rather cold and the sky was overcast.

Fullwood & Co., well wrapped up in overcoats and mufflers, preferred to lounge about idly whilst other fellows punted a football about the Triangle, or engaged in other healthy exercise of a like nature.

"Who's this kid coming up the road?" asked Bell languidly. "Looks like one of the telegraph-boys from the post-office. Perhaps he's got a wire for you, Fully, calling you home before the end of the term."

"No such luck," grunted Fullwood.

They watched the telegraph-messenger approach. He was a very small boy, rather untidy, and decidedly timid-looking. It was characteristic of Fullwood & Co. to bar the gateway so that he could not pass. He looked at them doubtfully as he came up, and Fullwood & Co. grinned.

"May I get past, please?" said the little boy nervously.

"You can if you call me 'sir,'" said Fullwood, grinning more than ever. "I say, who's the wire for, anyhow?"

"It's for Master Mason, of the Ancient House," replied the messenger, studying the inscription upon the buff envelope.

Fullwood & Co. exchanged glances.

"Oh, is it?" said Fullwood. "All right, kid, you can hand it to me. We're just going in, and we'll give it to Mason. He's one of our pals."

The boy hesitated for a moment, but decided it would be quite safe to hand over the telegram to Mason's friends. It was rather unfortunate that some decent fellows were not near the spot, or Fullwood & Co. wouldn't have had things their own way.

"Silly game, I call it," remarked Gulliver, as the boy went back towards the village. "What the deuce did you want to do that for, Fully? I don't see why we should make ourselves Mason's giddy errands!"

"Come indoors!" said Fullwood languidly. "What right has that beastly Bermondsey kid to have telegrams, as though he were somebody of

importance? We'll deliver this at our leisure—so?"

"I say, you can't stick to that wire," objected Bell. "You'll get into a frightful row if a master gets to know—"

"Come indoors," repeated Fullwood, "and don't be an ass!"

He led the way towards the Ancient House, and his chums followed. They were quite ready to perform any vindictive action against Jack Mason, but Gulliver and Bell did not relish taking any risks.

Reaching Study A, the three young rascals threw aside their overcoats and caps and collected in front of the cheerful fire. Fullwood held the telegram in his hands, and looked at it with a grin.

"You'd better hand it over to Mason," said Gulliver uneasily. "It's nearly dinner-time, Fully, an' there's no time to play any tricks. Goodness knows, I ain't a nervous chap, but I draw the line at tampering with other fellows' telegrams. We might get into trouble."

Fullwood's lip curled.

"That's all you think about—your own beastly skin!" he sneered. "Look at this flap. It's nearly unstuck. Why shouldn't we squint at the wire? It might be from one of Mason's beastly relatives, an' there's no tellin' what use we can make of it. Anyhow, I'm goin' to risk it."

It was a simple matter to pull up the flap without damaging it, and Fullwood and his two chums read the wire with great interest and curiosity. It was quite short, and rather disappointing:

"Jack Mason, Remove, Ancient House, St. Frank's College, Sussex.

"Will arrive Bellon at 5.15 this evening.

"Davin Smooc."

"Serve you jolly well right!" said Gulliver. "There's a fat lot of information in that, ain't there? Strong is that old chap who came down some weeks ago, lookin' like a giddy rag-merchant."

"Yes, I knew that," said Fullwood. "Sawce, I call it, comin' to a place like St. Frank's. Can't we think of some wheeze to choke him off?"

"Oh, don't be potty!" snapped Bell. "Stick it up again!"

Fullwood grinned suddenly.

"I'll tell you what?" he said, with a chuckle. "Strong's comin' by the 5.15 train, an' these figures ain't very clearly written. Check over a piece of indiarubber, Gully."

Gulliver stared.

"What's the idea?" he demanded.

"You'll see."

Fullwood chuckled again as he proceeded to erase the figures from the telegram. This was quite a simple task. Then he opened the drawer of his desk and pulled out a length of black crayon. The point was sharp, and he carefully filled in the now blank space with the figures "7.25." The crayon impression did not shine as lead pencil would have done, and it was almost impossible to detect it from the carbon writing of the telegram.

"What's the good of that?" asked Bell testily.

"I'll tell you the idea after dinner," said Fullwood. "The gang will go in two ticks, an' we can't waste any time. Mason will think that his precious visitor ain't comin' till the 7.25 train, an' that'll give us a chance."

Gulliver and Bell began to get an inkling of the scheme, and they felt more comfortable when the telegram was resealed in its envelope. A glance from the window showed that Jack Mason was just crossing the Triangle from the playing-fields with Pitt and De Valeria.

"Now's our chance," said Fullwood calmly.

He crossed to the door, motioning to his chums to stay where they were. It was the work of a few seconds to slip into Study E and place the telegram on the table. Nobody saw Fullwood enter or leave.

Consequently, Mason would naturally assume that the wire had come while he was on the playing-fields, and that Tubbs, the page-boy, had placed it on his table. There was nothing to indicate that the telegram had been tampered with.

Mason came in a few minutes later, just as the dinner-gong was sounding. He and Pitt parted with De Valerie in the passage, and turned into Study E.

"Hallo, what's this?" said Pitt. "Something for you, Jack."

Mason turned, and took the telegram with surprise.

"I suppose it must have come while we were out on Little Side," he remarked. "I wonder who it can be from? By jingo! I—I don't suppose—"

Jack paused and tore open the flap. A moment later his eyes were sparkling with excitement and delight.

"It's from Mr. Strong," he explained. "Have a look at this, Pitt. He'll arrive by the 7.25 train this evening."

Pitt only took a casual glance at the wire, otherwise his keen eyesight might have detected the alteration, for Pitt didn't miss much.

"I'm glad Mr. Strong's coming," he said. "It's a good time since he was down here, and perhaps that mystery of the sealed package will be cleared up now. About time it was, too."

"Rather!" agreed Jack. "I'll tell Mr. Lee about this. We'll go and meet that train, old man. What do you say?"

"Any old thing you like," said Pitt. "It's just as well he's not coming till the 7.25, because our cupboard's rather bare, and we couldn't very well entertain a visitor to tea. Still, it wouldn't take long to get some grub in, if necessary."

"It won't be, worse luck," remarked Mason. "It's no good asking Mr. Strong to tea at eight o'clock, is it? It's rather a pity he couldn't get here earlier, but I'm not going to grumble."

Jack Mason, indeed, was thoroughly delighted, and a few minutes later he ran into me in the passage.

"Mr. Strong's coming this evening, Nipper," said Mason cheerfully.

"That's good," I replied. "I'm jolly pleased to hear it, Mason. I've been expecting that Mr. Strong would put in an appearance for some few days past. Perhaps he'll be able to help you out that locket business. Your precious uncle won't have any more chance of getting hold of it, anyhow."

"Bogus! He nearly did the trick last time, old boys," said Froggie-West. "It only shows how necessary it is to be careful. I'm a frightfully careful chap, an' if I had those things of yours, Mason, they'd be as safe as houses."

"For about two minutes," I added, "and then you'd forget all about 'em! A tailor's circular would come in, or something, and then you'd forget all earthly matters in coming over the absorbing questions of fancy vests, trousers, and all the latest styles of rainbow socks!"

Sir Montie gazed at me frigidly.

"There's not a fellow in the Ancient House who likes a joke better than I," he exclaimed, with deliberation. "But jokes about clothes is rather bad taste—it is, really. An' I must refute the suggestion that I should permit fancy vests to interfere with matters of greater importance."

"Are there matters of greater importance?" I asked, in surprise.

"Bogus! I refuse to answer."

And Sir Montie adjusted his pince-nez upon his noble nose and walked along the passage with much dignity.

CHAPTER XLVII.

MEETING THE FIVE-FIFTEEN.

BELFON STATION was dim and gloomy in the darkness of the December evening. The feeble platform lamps cast a dim glow immediately beneath each post, and there were only three altogether.

Fullwood peered up and down the platform with a genial smile upon his features. He was intent upon performing an ill-natured trick, and Fullwood was always happy at such times.

It was already a quarter-past five, and the train was signalled. Fullwood's plan was cut and dried, and he knew exactly what he had to do. During Mr. Strong's previous visit the Nuts had made themselves very objectionable but Fullwood trusted to the gloom of the platform and to the nature of the story he had to tell. Besides, Mr. Strong would probably have forgotten all about the other affair.

The train came into sight, and finally pulled up with many jerks against the platform. It was only a "local," being the connection from Baginbun Junction.

Fullwood looked up and down quickly, and had no difficulty in spotting Mr. Strong as he emerged from a first-class compartment. This was rather strange, for Fullwood had always thought that Mason's elderly friend was quite poor. However, this was no time for thinking over the matter.

Fullwood waited till the old chap was in a dark part of the platform, and then he approached. Mr. Strong gazed at him benevolently.

"Ah, Jack, my dear boy, I'm pleased—" Mr. Strong paused. "Dear me! I beg your pardon, my young friend. I mistook you for a boy I expected to see on this platform. You belong to St. Frank's? Do you know if Jack Mason—"

"I've just come from Mason, sir," interrupted Fullwood, his voice betraying a note of anxiety. "He asked me to come along and meet you. The poor chap's met with an accident."

"Good gracious me!" exclaimed Mr. Strong, starting.

"And he wants me to take you to him, sir," went on Fullwood. "I think—"

"But, my dear lad, you are not telling me that Jack has met with a serious accident?" interrupted the old gentleman, clutching Fullwood's arm. "Such a thought is appalling—terrible! Tell me quickly, boy—is Jack hurt much?"

"Well, it all depends, sir," replied Fullwood glibly. "He was on his way to the station when a man on a bicycle knocked him down. I happened to be coming close behind, and I was asked to meet you. I'm not one of Mason's friends, but I couldn't exactly refuse such a request."

"It is very considerate of you, my boy—very considerate indeed!" exclaimed Mr. Strong, with much agitation. "Thank you—thank you exceedingly!"

Fullwood almost grinned. His candour about not being a friend of Mason's completely disarmed Mr. Strong, it seemed, who might have had suspicions. But the story was straightforward. Jack had been knocked down by a cyclist, and Fullwood had come to the station to impart the news.

"I don't think he's very badly hurt, sir," went on Fullwood. "They picked him up unconscious, but I don't believe in the yarn that his skull's fractured. Just a little bump, I expect. Anyhow, they took him into the parlour of the White Hart

an' sent for the doctor. I came here to tell you, sir."

"I must go to Jack at once," said Mr. Strong concernedly. "Poor boy—poor boy! But I am almost a stranger in this village, and I have not the slightest idea where the White Harp is situated. I presume, from the name, that the establishment is an inn?"

"That's right, sir," agreed Fullwood. "I don't mind showin' you the way in the least. I'm goin' in that direction myself, anyhow. It would be rather a pity if you got there too late, but I don't think Mason's as bad as that."

They left the station together, Mr. Strong exceedingly perturbed. Fullwood took advantage of the darkness to grin. He was hugely pleased over the success of his ill-natured scheme, and saw that it was going to be a complete triumph all along. For the game wasn't half played yet.

They passed through the village quickly. Mr. Strong walking with rapid footsteps. Fullwood's elegant lounge would have left him far behind, so he was compelled to hurry, too.

The White Harp, although Mr. Strong didn't know it, was the most disreputable public-house in the village—a very low place indeed. Several lights were gleaming from the gabby windows as Fullwood and Mr. Strong approached.

"They took him into the front entrance, sir," said Fullwood, pausing. "If you'll go in that doorway you'll soon get to know all the facts. I'd come in with you, but I mustn't."

"Indeed! Why not?"

"St. Frank's boys ain't allowed in public-houses, an' I wouldn't dream of breakin' the rules," said Fullwood, in a shocked voice—"not even in an exceptional case like this. I shouldn't mind the foggin', but it's a question of principle."

"Quite right, my boy—quite right!" said Mr. Strong approvingly. "Thank you for your guidance. I am much obliged."

And the old gentleman pushed his way into the shabby entrance and the door swung to behind him. Fullwood turned quickly, grinning all over his face, and five figures emerged from beside the hedge opposite.

"As tame as a newly-hatched chicken," grinned Fullwood softly.

There were many chuckles from the other five—Gulliver and Bell, and Merrell, Marriott, and Noys.

"Well, there'll be six witnesses," grinned Gulliver.

"I didn't think you'd do the trick, Fully. It's a wonder he wasn't suspicious."

Fullwood chuckled.

"He was ready to cut out of my hand!" he said calmly. "Just wait until he comes out. We'll greet him with a general roar. The disgraceful old bounder! Can't walk up to St. Frank's without goin' into a pub for a booze?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We'll have the yarn all over St. Frank's within an hour," went on Fullwood maliciously. "Let's hope somebody else comes by at the same moment, that's all. Mason's friends becomin' in the White Harp!"

"Oh, my hat!" grinned Merrell. "Ain't it rich?"

"The best joke of the term!" said Gulliver.

There was no doubt that the plan had worked beautifully so far. It had the advantage, also, of being the partial truth. Mr. Strong would be unable to deny that he had entered the White Harp, and that fact alone would be sufficient for quite a number of fellows.

Fullwood & Co. waited, hugging themselves, and getting ready for the roar.

But Mr. Strong did not emerge. At the end of five minutes the Nuts began to wonder, and concluded that the old gentleman had indeed stayed

to partake of liquid refreshment. No other reason could keep him there.

"All the better," said Fullwood. "We shall have a stronger case."

"Cave!" whispered Marriott suddenly.

"What for?"

"Old Crowell's just coming down the road!" hissed Marriott.

Fullwood & Co. faded into the darkness behind the hedge, and watched. Mr. Crowell, the Remove Form master, was striding down towards the village, and Fullwood's eyes gleamed.

"By gad! I hope old Strong comes out now!" he murmured.

"Yes, rather!"

But the Nuts were disappointed, for Mr. Crowell strode right past, and Mr. David Strong had made no sign of emerging. Somebody had left the White Harp—a farm labourer—but Mr. Crowell was not interested in him, neither were the Nuts.

"Rotton!" grunted Fullwood. "Look here, it's over five minutes since old Crowell came in sight, and still Strong hasn't come out. It's a good ten minutes ago that he went in there."

"What's he doing all this time?" asked Bell wonderingly.

"Better go an' see!" grunted Gulliver, stamping about. "I'm gettin' fed-up with this! My feet are like chunks of ice already. I don't think much of your rippin' wheeze, Fully!"

"Oh, give it a chance!" snapped Fullwood.

They descended to the road once more, now thoroughly impatient. It was most inconsiderate of Mr. Strong to keep them waiting such a long time. Fullwood's yarn about Jack Mason being run over by a bicycle was, of course, a mere fabrication. Mason was still at St. Frank's, probably partaking of tea.

Fullwood & Co. had delayed their tea an hour in order to indulge in this terrific jape. They were hungry, and the December evening was decidedly cold, the wind blowing icy along the muddy road.

The Nuts waited and waited. The ten minutes lengthened into fifteen, and then into twenty. It was now practically certain that something had occurred quite outside their calculations.

"We must have missed him," suggested Merrell gloomily.

"Rot!" snapped Fullwood.

"That's all very well——"

"Rot!" repeated Ralph Leslie. "Haven't you been watchin' the door all the time? He's still in there, an' I expect he's gaslin' beer or whisky—makin' hay while the sun shines, so to speak."

"I wish the sun was shinin' out here," said Gulliver, trucking his hands under his arms. "I'm chilled all through. What's the good of a jape like this? I call it a fat-headed idea——"

"How were we to know that the old fool would stick in there all this time?" snarled Fullwood, thoroughly losing his temper. "Hallo! There's somebody comin' out now! Get ready to yell!"

His companions grunted, but were not very enthusiastic. The next moment they saw that the man emerging was only Madford, the village postman.

"Let's ask him if Strong's in there!" whispered Bell hurriedly.

Fullwood nodded, and crossed the road to Madford, who was passing to light his pipe. The postman was rather startled to find himself surrounded by the six juniors, and he looked at them uncertainly.

"None o' your larks, young gents," he said. "I ain't——"

"That's all right, Maddy," said Fullwood. "We only want to ask you a question. You've just come out of the pub, haven't you?"

"The first glass I've 'ad since dinner-time!" protested the postman. "There ain't no 'arm in a man 'avin' a glass now an' 'agin. My missus allus wants me to 'ave my own way, an'—"

"Never mind about your missus," interrupted Fullwood. "Were you in the bar when an old gentleman came in—about twenty minutes ago?"

Mudford nodded.

"Why, yes, a stranger in these 'ere parts?" he said. "A nice-lookin' sort, with wrinkles all over 'is face."

"That's right," said Fullwood. "You saw him?"

"O' course I did. He come in while I was talkin' to Bill Walters about the lock-gates they're settin' up down the river," said Mudford. "He 'ad a few words with Mr. Porlock, an' then went out."

"Went out?" yelled Gulliver.

"That's wot I said, young gent."

"Don't talk rot!" snapped Fullwood. "We're been watchin' the door all the time, Muddy, an' we saw no sign of him."

"Which it ain't 'ackly surprisin', Master Fullwood," said the postman, with a grin. "The gent was took through the back passage, an' I reckon 'e went out by the side door. The gate's farther along, behind them trees, so you wouldn't see 'im come out."

"Oo, my hat!" gasped Fullwood blankly.

"I suppose you're not havin' a game with us, Muddy?" demanded Gulliver.

"I wouldn't dream of no such thing!" declared the postman. "Seems to me that you've been playin' some o' your games, an' things ain't goin' right. Ah! It oughter teach you not to try such tricks on pore old gentlemen!"

"Go an' eat coals!" snapped Fullwood savagely.

This was scarcely a nice method of thanking Mudford for the information he had imparted. But the Nuts were feeling decidedly sore at that moment, and they were not made happier when they heard the postman trudge off chuckling to himself.

"You silly ass!" said Marriott witheringly.

"Are you talkin' to me?" demanded Fullwood.

"Yes, I am!"

"Look here—"

"I've been waitin' about long enough!" snapped Marriott. "We've missed our tea, an' got ourselves cold to the bone, an' you've let us into it. A fat lot of good your japes are, ain't they?"

Fullwood nearly danced with rage.

"You—your awful rotters!" he shouted. "Weren't you just as keen as I was? How the dickens was I to know that Strong would go out by the back way? I expect he thought it would look queer for him to be seen—"

"Piffle!" interrupted Gulliver. "He guessed what you were up to all along, I expect, an' went in the White Harp on purpose to get rid of you. He suspected that something was on. Let's get up to the school!"

"An' don't suggest any more dud ideas," said Marriott sourly.

Fullwood had nothing to say. He and his noble Nuts were feeling very sick, for they were forced to the conclusion that Mr. David Strong had been "wise" and that he had tricked the tricksters.

The jape had fallen flat and was a ghastly failure. It was Fullwood & Co. who had been made to look extremely foolish. It was a bitter pill to swallow, and the Nuts were in a vile temper.

Their little jape was to bear fruit, after all, but it was fruit of a very different character from that which was intended.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

MR. SIMON GRELL IS DESPERATE.

MR. SIMON GRELL was very much like Fullwood in one respect.

He was in a vile temper, and his companion, Mr. Jake Starkey, was in no better condition. The pair were seated in the back parlour of the White Harp, and their expressions were eloquent of their feelings.

The close atmosphere of the little room was filled with strong tobacco smoke and spirit fumes, and the table was littered with glasses and bottles. Simon Grell sat in the big chair before the fire, and Starkey pretended to read the morning's local paper.

"It's no good, Jake; I can't see no way!" growled Captain Jim. "It's all because that bound of a Nelson Lee is on the spot. Without him we could do jest wot we liked."

Jake Starkey nodded.

"That's wot I've said all along, Simon," he replied. "Why don't you take my advice?"

"Wot advice?" growled the other.

"Pack up an' clear out!"

"Durn you!" snapped Mr. Grell. "You're allus rammin' that down my throat! If you don't like to see the thing through, clear! I don't care. Shove off as soon as you like. But if you do you won't git no more brass out o' me."

Mr. Starkey looked pained.

"Now, there's no need for us to quarrel, old mate," he said. "Why don't you look at this thing sensible like? We've tried time an' again to git that blamed locket, an' we don't 'ave no luck. Besides, I don't reckon we're safe 'ere. We might be pinched any minute, Lee knows that we brake into the school."

"You're a fool, Jake; that's wot's the matter with you!" snapped Grell. "Do you think Lee's goin' to waste his time by juggin' us? Wot good would it do? Nethin'. And young Masson would be in disgrace. We're safe enough."

"Well, I won't argify," said Mr. Starkey, filling his pipe. "I'll leave it to you, Simon. Arter that last affair, though, I don't see wot we can do. It must 'ave cost you ten quid to git them three blokes down 'ere with the Arab dresses an' the top—"

"Nee sort o' comforter, ain't you?" said Captain Jim harshly. "It didn't cost me no more than four-pax-ten. Them costumes an' the tent ain't paid for, an' never will be if I can help it. We had to leave 'em behind in the hurry, an' then we didn't get that durned locket!"

The other man shook his head sagely.

"Tricks won't do no more," he said. "They'll be on the look-out for 'em, an' it 'ud be a waste o' time. That locket's bein' kep' by Lee, an' it's in a safe place. Give it up, Simon, an' let's git back to London. I'm fed-up with this place. Who's that old cove out there?"

Starkey nodded towards the glass-topped door of the parlour. There was a heavy blind fixed, but it was not down at present. And through the clear glass both Grell and Starkey saw a well-dressed old gentleman talking to the landlord in the bar. At least, he was well-dressed regarded from Grell's standpoint.

"Why, by thunder!" muttered Captain Jim. "I ain't never seen him, but I'll bet a fiver that chop's Strong!"

"E don't look it!" remarked Starkey, shaking his head.

"Don't look wot?"

"Strong," replied the other. "Rather weak-chested—"

"You blamed fool!" rapped out Mr. Grell. "I mean Mr. Strong, that old cove who's made a pal

of young Jack. Didn't the kid tell me that this old gent was all wrinkled an' clean-shaven? Why, it fits to a T! It's Mr. Strong, an' we're done!"

"Ow do you make that out?"

"Shut up!" muttered Grell. "Listen!"

They remained silent, and could distinctly hear the words which were being uttered.

"Yes, I shall be most obliged if you'll allow me to make use of your back way," Mr. Strong was saying. "Of course, I am quite prepared to pay for the favour, my dear sir. Will this cover the expense?"

Grell saw a half-crown pushed across the bar.

"That's all right, sir," said Mr. Porlock genially. "Wat's the trouble?"

"Oh, nothing much!" smiled Mr. Strong. "Some impertinent boys are attempting to play a joke with me. I observed several of them opposite your establishment as I came along. I am quite certain they intend to play some trick upon me when I emerge. That is why I should like to turn the tables."

"Of course, sir," said the landlord, grinning. "Just follow me, an' you'll be as right as anything. I take it you're a stranger hereabouts?"

"Quite so—quite so!" replied Mr. Strong. "I am visiting St. Frank's."

They passed out of hearing down the passage, and Mr. Grell gave his companion a significant look.

"That settles it!" he exclaimed tensely. "Visitin' at St. Frank's! We're done, Jake—we're properly done!"

"That's wot you said afore."

"Ain't that package the property of this Strong?" demanded Grell fiercely. "There's the half locket in that package, an' Strong will get hold of it. Wot chance shall we have, then, you fool?"

"No need to git abusive——" began Starkey.

"To-night's our last chance!" went on Grell, ignoring the interruption. "Strong will take his half of the locket away with him. Mobbe he'll take the whole thing. Then we'll be left out of it altogether."

Starkey grunted.

"Wot's the good of grumblin'?" he demanded. "We can't do nothin', can we? It's 'ard luck, that's wot it is, Simon. We'll 'ave to take ourselves off, as I said, an' give it all up. I sha'n't be sorry."

"I'm not going to be put off like that!" snapped Captain Jim. "Look here, Jake, we must act now—at once—or not at all! Understand that! It's the last chance, an' we should be fools to let it slip by."

"Wot can we do?" asked the other.

"I'm goin' to follow Strong up to the school," said Grell rapidly. "I might be able to peep in through the window. It's as dark as Old Harry to-night. You come along arter me, an' stay just outside the school gates."

"Yes, but I can't do nothin' there."

"I never said you could," exclaimed Captain Jim. "I'll do all there is to be done, if I get the chance. See? You wait outside in the road until I come. That's all. I'm goin' now, an' you can follow in a minute."

Mr. Starkey was inclined to protest, but Grell had left the room before he could frame any words. His private opinion, however, was that Grell was on a fool's errand, and that his wild idea was probably the outcome of disgusting selfishness regarding the whisky bottle.

Mason's uncle, meanwhile, had left the White Harp garden by means of the little side gate, unseen by the waiting Fullwood & Co. Grell hurried for the first hundred yards or so, but

showed down when he dimly saw the figure of Mr. David Strong striding along ahead.

"I ain't goin' to be done now!" muttered Grell savagely. "By thunder! Arter all I've risked: arter all my trouble! I'll get that blasted locket to-night, or go to quod!"

He was certainly rather desperate, and he was in just that state when he would commit actions which he would not dream of committing at ordinary times. He was reckless. The very thought that all his work had been in vain was maddening.

Mr. Strong turned in at the imposing gateway of St. Frank's, and made straight for the Ancient House. Grell, arriving a moment later, dimly saw the visitor entering the wide doorway into the lobby.

Grell couldn't follow now. He couldn't enter the Ancient House himself. But he saw that the Triangle was quite deserted and bare. The fellows who weren't at tea in their studies were either in the Common-rooms or in other parts of the building. It wasn't an evening for remaining in the cold Triangle.

The intruder knew well enough which was the window of Nelson Lee's study.

He guessed that Mr. Strong would go to the Housemaster, and then, of course, the matter of the golden locket would be referred to. That was only natural. So it seemed that Grell's only course was to get to Nelson Lee's study.

What he could do when he got there was a problem. He certainly had no plan in mind. With light footsteps he crossed the Triangle until he stood immediately outside Lee's window. He realised that this was by no means an advantageous position. He could be seen by people crossing from one House to the other. And although the Triangle was deserted at present, there was no guarantee that it would remain deserted for long.

Moreover, Mr. Grell's ears, although sharp, were quite unequal to the task of bearing any sounds or voices which came from within the study. The window was only slightly open at the top, and so Mr. Grell's spirits sunk.

The reckless feeling was still on him, and he pressed his face close to the window-panes, and then found that he could obtain a clear view into the apartment. There were thick curtains placed across the deep window recess, and these were not pulled closely together. Consequently, Mr. Grell distinctly saw Nelson Lee sitting at his desk.

This was by no means satisfactory. Grell knew that Nelson Lee was there, so seeing him was nothing of a surprise. In fact, the rascal began to tell himself that his last chance had gone, and that he was only taking unnecessary risks by remaining in his present precarious position.

But just then something occurred.

Captain Jim saw Nelson Lee get to his feet, walk round the desk, and go to the door. He switched off the electric light and passed out. A second later he returned, turning on the lights again, and taking a paper which he had apparently forgotten. This time he left the light burning and the door ajar.

Mr. Grell's wits were unusually sharp just then.

Although he couldn't see all the room, he knew that it was now empty. Lee would never have switched off the light on the first occasion otherwise. And the fact that the detective had now left it on proved that his absence would only be a brief one. Mr. Grell would have to act quickly, if at all.

But how could he act? What could he do?

Possibly the whisky he had inhaled at the White Harp had something to do with his next action. For Simon Grell cast all caution to the winds and acted with utter rashness. It was all or nothing

with him, and he was not the type of man to tamely give in without a big fight at the last.

Here his final opportunity had presented itself. It was a risk—an enormous risk—and probably Mr. Grell did not fully appreciate the extent of it. What he did was quickly and silently to push up the lower sash, climb through the window, pull the sash down again, and stand in the recess.

There was ample room for him, so long as he remained perfectly still. A movement of the curtain would betray him, but there was no reason why Nelson Lee should pull the curtains aside. And in this position Grell could hear every word which was uttered in the room.

The die was cast now, and the man regretted his action.

He had been a fool, he told himself, for there would be no escape, and he would stand before his captors a housebreaker—caught red-handed. Moreover, there was nothing to indicate that Mr. Strong would talk to Lee in the latter's study.

Grell cursed himself for being a mad idiot. But he fought down the desire to turn and escape. As likely as not he would be spotted by somebody in the Triangle and captured. Besides, footsteps were sounding in the passage already.

Grell set his teeth and stood his ground. There was nothing else for it. This position was one of his own making, and he could blame only himself if he met with disaster. It was too late to withdraw, and, mad as his actions had been, there was still a faint hope within him that events might pan out in his favour.

Mr. Simon Grell, quickly changing again, cast aside his doubts, and waited with every nerve on the stretch. Would he be able to achieve his purpose? Would luck come his way? There was certainly a chance that it would.

Captain Jim was nothing if not an optimist!

CHAPTER XLIX.

AN Astonishing REVELATION!

"BUCK up!" said Reginald Pitt crisply. "Sha'n't be long," replied Mason, glancing up at the clock. "Why, there's no particular hurry, is there?"

"Well, we've hardly started yet, and it'll take us a good hour to do our prep," replied Pitt. "It's just upon six now, and the train comes in at seven-twenty-five. So there's no time to waste."

Jack Mason nodded, and settled himself to work. The two Removites were in Study E, and they were hurrying over their prep, in order to get it done before the time to start for Beilton, in order to meet the train. They had already obtained permits from Mr. Croxell to be out after locking-up, so everything was all right.

Mason and Pitt were silent as they worked away; only the scratching of their pens and an occasional creakle from the fire broke the stillness of the study, except, of course, for the loud voices which proceeded from next door.

But Pitt suddenly lifted his head and looked at the door. A footstep had sounded in the passage, and it was a footstep which was quite unfamiliar. The next moment the door of Study E opened and Mr. David Strong stood framed in the doorway.

"Ah, Jack!" he exclaimed heartily. "How are you, my boy?"

Jack Mason jumped up in surprise and delight. "Why, Mr. Strong, I—I didn't expect to see you yet!" he exclaimed, hurrying forward. "I'm tremendously glad you've come, sir."

Mr. Strong wagged his finger. "Why didn't you come to meet me at the station, you young rascal!" he asked, his face wreathed in

smiles. "But thank, I suppose you were too busy with—"

"But—but you said in your telegram that you wouldn't arrive until the seven-twenty-five train!" exclaimed Jack quickly. "Pitt and I were hurrying over our evening lessons so that we should be able to meet the train!"

Mr. Strong closed the door. "There is surely some little mistake?" he suggested mildly. "I distinctly wrote on the form '5.15.' I really cannot understand how it could have been mistaken for '7.25,' Jack. But it is a minor matter—"

"No, it isn't, sir!" declared Mason. "I'm feeling awfully ashamed of myself for making such a mistake. The telegram's here, so we'll soon see."

He fetched it from the bookcase and opened it. "Yes, here it is, sir—7.25!" he exclaimed. "It's quite plain, too—"

"Dear me—dear me!" murmured Mr. Strong, gazing at the wire through his spectacles. "You are quite right, Jack. Ah! I am beginning to suspect— Look at these figures, my boy!"

Both Mason and Pitt regarded them closely; and then, of course, they detected the crayoned alteration. Without very careful attention the deception had been invisible.

"Somebody's been tampering with it!" gasped Jack, staring at Pitt. "The wire was on the table when we came in at dinner-time, wasn't it? Who would open the telegram and alter the figures?"

Mr. Strong polished his spectacles.

"I have my suspicions," he said gravely. "But I'm not going to sneak, my boys. That's the word, isn't it? I'm not going to sneak. A certain young rascal met me at the station with a fine story, and nearly hoodwinked me, too. But I turned the tables on him—and on his companions. I'm afraid they will be getting cold by this time, Jack—very cold!"

And Mr. Strong chuckled, while Mason and Pitt regarded him in astonishment.

"But I don't understand, sir," said Jack at last. "It was merely a joke, lad—rather ill-natured, but a joke," explained Mr. Strong softly. "For a few minutes, too, I was deceived; but I think the young beggars are being adequately punished."

Without giving his young companions any inkling as to the identity of the culprits, Mr. Strong related the principal points of his adventure in the village. Pitt and Mason grinned with delight at the neat way in which Fullwood & Co. had been foiled. For, of course, they instantly guessed that the Nuts were responsible.

"As it happens, sir," said Jack, "there's no harm done. But I'm sorry some of our chaps should have been so disrespectful. You'll have tea with us in here, won't you?"

"Why, yes, certainly," said Mr. Strong. "A cup of tea is just what I do want. Capital! How long will you require to make your—or—preparations?"

"About twenty minutes, sir," replied Jack.

"More like half an hour," put in Reginald Pitt quickly.

Mr. Strong beamed. "Admirable!" he declared. "Half an hour will suit me very well indeed. I am anxious to have a few words with Mr. Nelson Lee, your Housemaster. I am well aware that you will not want me bothering about just now. I'll return by six-thirty—so, we'll say a quarter to seven, boys. That will give you ample time."

And the visitor took his departure. As the door closed Mason and Pitt looked at one another with curious expressions.

"By George!" said Pitt grimly. "I'll make Fullwood sit up for this!"

"No, we can't do that," interrupted Mason. "We don't know for certain that it was Fullwood,

and Mr. Strong dished them, anyhow. But what the dickens are we going to do for tea? That's the main point at present."

Pitt grinned.
 "Twenty minutes!" he exclaimed. "We couldn't have done it in the time, my son. I said half an hour, and that only just gives us a minute or two to spare. Mrs. Hako's stock is exhausted, so we shall have to go to the village. It won't take us long if we hurry ourselves."

They didn't waste much time in getting off. And, meanwhile, Mr. Strong proceeded to Nelson Lee's study. As it happened, he met the school-master-detective in the passage outside. Lee had been to Mr. Crowell's study for a few minutes, and he came forward with extended hand.

"I am delighted to see you, Mr. Strong," he said pleasantly. "Come in—come in, my dear sir! Have you seen Mason?"

"I have just left him," replied Mr. Strong. "I have promised to have tea in the lad's study, and have arranged to get back in about half an hour. Meanwhile, I have taken the opportunity to renew my acquaintance with you, Mr. Lee."

"I expected to see you at St. Frank's before this—or—Mr. Strong," said Lee, with a smile. "But now that you have come I have quite a lot to tell you. I believe you will be able to clear up one or two points which have been somewhat puzzling."

Mr. Strong elevated his eyebrows as he took a seat.

"I must really confess that I do not know to what you are referring, my dear sir," he said mildly. "And please be perfectly frank with me. If I am hindering your work in any way, pitch me out. Do not consider me in the slightest."

Nelson Lee laughed.
 "My work is not of such importance that I cannot put it aside for an hour," he said, proffering his cigar-case. "Yes, Mr. Strong, the fact is, Mason's uncle has been causing him a great deal of worry and annoyance."

"Mason's uncle?" ejaculated Mr. Strong blankly. "But—but, my dear sir! Pray consider what you are saying! The lad's uncle is dead."

"I don't think you would say so if you had been at St. Frank's during this last three or four weeks," replied Nelson Lee. "I was quite surprised when I learned the news, but it is an undoubted fact that Mr. Simon Grell is as much alive as I am, and he is in this district at the present time."

Nelson Lee would have been considerably astonished had he known that Mr. Simon Grell was in that very room! The reckless rascal stood behind the curtains, hardly daring to breathe, and certainly not daring to move!

"Good gracious me!" exclaimed the visitor, taking a deep breath. "I am astounded, Mr. Lee. Not only that, but this piece of news is most disconcerting. Jack understood that his uncle left him the money for his education. What on earth can the lad think now? I really don't know what I can say to him—"

"Surely there is no necessity to say anything?" put in Nelson Lee. "The boy is content, and has a vague idea, I believe, that some obscure relative of his thought of him before dying. And that point, after all, is of very secondary importance. The main thing is to settle this affair of Grell. The man is a scoundrel, and I am anxious to drive him out of the neighbourhood."

"A scoundrel!" echoed the other. "I am well aware of that fact. Jack never made any complaints, but I was able to gather that Grell made the lad's early boyhood an utter misery. Then, of course, he left his wife and home for years together, and no man who could do that is worth his salt. I

will say, however, that Mrs. Grell is a most objectionable person, and probably as bad as her good-for-nothing husband. A pair, Mr. Lee—a most disreputable pair! That is why I was so anxious to get that splendid lad away."

Mr. Grell, in concealment, ground his teeth together helplessly. It was not at all pleasant to listen to this portion of the conversation.

"I really don't know what brought Grell here originally," said Lee. "But he very soon displayed an intense desire to obtain possession of Jack Mason's half locket—"

"I beg your pardon?" interrupted Mr. Strong, starting.

"Surely you are aware of the fact that Jack possesses half a gold locket, which bears some Arabic signs?" asked Nelson Lee.

"Indeed, I was not aware of the fact?" ejaculated the other quickly. "I really think that you must be mistaken. Ah, but wait—wait one moment! Of course—of course! During my last visit I inadvertently left behind a small sealed package. That package contained the half locket to which you refer, Mr. Lee, and I was naturally rather startled when you spoke of it belonging to Jack. The lad evidently opened the package under the impression that it was left for him."

Nelson Lee pulled his keys out and walked over to the safe. He returned after a moment with Jack's half locket.

"Is this it, Mr. Strong?" he asked.

"Why, yes," said Mr. Strong at once, examining the thing. "I merely brought it to St. Frank's to show it to Jack, because I value it highly—not on account of its intrinsic value, which is comparatively little, but because it has a most remarkable history—indeed, a sad, terrible history. I cannot understand why this scoundrelly uncle should desire to possess it."

"The Arabic writing relates, I believe, to some valuable treasure, although the message is incomplete," said Nelson Lee. "Mason asked me to take care of it for him, and I have been doing so. But I think that there is some mistake, Mr. Strong. You believe that this locket was within your sealed package?"

Mr. Strong looked up wonderingly.

"I do not believe it—I know it!" he replied.
 "Then how is it that the sealed package is still perfectly whole?" said Nelson Lee quietly. "Either there are two half lockets, or there has been a substitution of some kind."

"Dear me!" exclaimed the visitor. "This is most extraordinary, Mr. Lee. The seals appear to be unbroken, and yet this half locket was certainly wrapped up— Good heavens! What is this—what is this?"

The seals had been broken by now, and Mr. Strong stared in utter amazement at the second half of the locket, which lay revealed. Nelson Lee, too, was astonished.

"I am amazed—I am utterly amazed!" exclaimed Mr. Strong. "This is—this is more than staggering. I have had that locket since— Oh, but I cannot grasp the full significance of this very singular discovery."

Mr. Strong rose to his feet and paced up and down with great agitation.

"It is beyond me, Mr. Lee," he went on. "I feel that I must confide in you—that it will be necessary for me to explain how my one half of the locket came into my possession—or, indeed, the whole locket. For this other piece is the fellow, without the shadow of a doubt."

Nelson Lee indicated Mr. Strong's chair.
 "Pray reseal yourself, my dear sir," he said gently. "There is not the slightest need for you to become agitated. It is only too apparent that this locket has far greater significance than we

know of at the present moment. Complete frankness, however, will possibly put us on the right trail."

Mr. Strong sat down again, but his expression was one of bewilderment and suppressed excitement. Simon Grell, behind the curtains, was now intensely eager. The locket was on the table, almost within reach of his grasp—and he had come here to obtain it!

"Well, Mr. Lee, you are already aware of my little secret," said Mr. Strong. "You know that I pretended to be poor, whilst I am actually rich. You know that I gave myself another name, so that Jack should be deceived. It would have disturbed him, possibly, had he known that my real name is Sir Crawford Grey, and that I am a baronet."

Nelson Lee nodded.

"I understand your motives, Sir Crawford," he exclaimed. "After all, we are quite alone here, and there is really no reason why we should keep up the little pretence in private. I have done so hitherto because you have not referred to the matter, but I do not think it is at all necessary."

Here was another surprise for Mr. Grell. The somewhat shabby-looking "David Strong" was none other than Sir Crawford Grey, the immensely rich baronet! He had been mentioned in the newspapers only recently, in connection with a large donation to charitable funds.

Jack Mason would certainly have been astonished had he known the truth. Sir Crawford had taken Nelson Lee into his confidence from the very first, and it was owing to the baronet's influence that the school governors had allowed Jack Mason to enter St. Frank's as a scholar. Without such powerful influence the lad could never have gained an entry.

I know all about "Mr. Strong's" identity soon afterwards, for Nelson Lee told me. Therefore, in order to avoid confusion, I shall always refer to him from this point by his real name. It will be much better.

"With regard to the locket, I shall take your advice and be perfectly frank," said Sir Crawford quietly. "The story is a most sad one, Mr. Lee, but it will not take long in telling. The discovery that Jack possesses the missing half of the locket is leading me to think the most outrageous things, and I scarcely know whether I am on my head or my heels. My dear sir, I am bewildered. I am becoming mad with a hope which has been dead for thirteen years!"

"You are puzzling me, Sir Crawford," said Nelson Lee quietly.

"Of course—of course," the baronet hastened to explain. "But you must remember that I am excited, and I crave your indulgence. I was attracted to the boy, too, because he reminded me so much of— Oh, but it is hopeless—quite hopeless! I am crazy to imagine such an impossible thing!"

Sir Crawford sat forward suddenly, gripping the arms of his chair.

"But again I am wandering," he went on. "If you only knew what this revelation has awakened in my heart, Mr. Lee, you would share my excitement. The lad has the same eyes as— Upon my soul! What is the matter with me? I must begin at the beginning, and not ramble on in this aimless fashion."

"It would certainly be more satisfactory, my dear sir,"

"You will have no cause to complain again, Mr. Lee," said Sir Crawford Grey. "The history of this locket is a terribly tragic one, but the passing years have softened the blow, and I can tell the story without flinching. Well, you are aware that I am a widower, Mr. Lee. My poor wife died

close upon thirteen years ago, when my little son was just two years old. He, poor little lad, died at the same time. Unless—unless— Oh, but it is impossible!" he added hurriedly. "We were on a railway journey, Mr. Lee—my wife, myself, and our little child. For a companion we had a very old friend of mine—Colonel Morley. All this, you must understand, occurred thirteen years ago."

"I am following you perfectly," said Nelson Lee.

"Well, the first I saw of this locket was from Colonel Morley," continued Grey. "He had been a great explorer in his time, and was, indeed, intent upon fitting out an expedition to a remote region of Northern Africa at the time of his death. He presented this locket to my little baby son while we were travelling upon that never-to-be-forgotten journey. Little Norman—that was my boy's name—was naturally delighted with his present, and, child-like, immediately tried to open the locket, as all babies will. Colonel Morley, however, declared that it would not open, and believed that it was not made in that way. He had found it near the bones of a dead man in an African desert oasis, and had never given it very much thought, having slipped it into his pocket as a mere souvenir of that particular trip. Being interested in the thing we made serious attempts to force it open, and succeeded. Naturally, the colonel was astounded."

"On account of the inscription?"

"Of course. For it seemed pretty obvious that the Arabic writing on the locket—as you now see—related to a treasure of diamonds and other precious stones cached on that little-known oasis. To my belief, that treasure still exists there, having never been recovered. According to the locket, it must be worth an enormous sum!"

Mr. Simon Grell nearly betrayed his presence by the sudden excitement which assailed him. Here was cause for jubilation, indeed! His belief that the locket was of value had now received first-hand corroboration. The treasure was worth an enormous sum! It was indeed worth a great amount of risk to obtain the thing!

"I presume that Colonel Morley regretted having given the locket to your little son?" asked Nelson Lee.

"No, he was a true sportsman, Mr. Lee," replied Sir Crawford. "He declared that the locket was the property of my baby boy, and the treasure, too, if it could be recovered. But Morley was, of course, immensely rich. Poor fellow! He only lived a few minutes after making that presentation."

"An accident happened?" asked the detective. "Now that you have reminded me, Sir Crawford, I seem vaguely to remember a disaster about that period."

"The train ran off the tracks at a curve," said Sir Crawford, his voice suddenly becoming grave and sad. "I will go into no details, because to talk long on the subject pains me exceedingly. While we were looking at the locket the crash came, and I have only vague memories of what followed. By a miracle I escaped almost unhurt, but all the other occupants of the compartment were—killed!" The baronet was silent for a moment or two. "My darling wife—and a better wife no man could ever have—was taken from me," he went on huskily. "My baby son was killed also, and Colonel Morley died before he could be extricated from the wreck."

"A terrible affair, indeed," said Nelson Lee quietly. "I realise that it must sadden you immeasurably to converse on the subject, and I beg of you to—"

"No, Mr. Lee, I must complete my story," interrupted the baronet firmly. "The years have passed, and they have softened my grief. The locket was never recovered complete. Only half came to light, and I found that myself, lying on the permanent

way. The other half had completely vanished, and I have never set eyes on it until this evening. You will readily understand my complete amazement and excitement. For this lad—this brave lad who saved me from death—possesses the half which was lost in that railway accident. It is almost unbelievable, Mr. Lee. What can it mean? What is Heaven's name can it mean?"

"There may be any one of many explanations," replied Nelson Lee gently. "This world is not so big, and England is only a tiny morsel of it. There were other passengers on the train, and I can only suggest that some stranger picked up the half locket and kept it, not knowing the real owner."

Sir Crawford nodded sadly.

"That, I am afraid, is the real explanation," he said. "You have thrown a cold douche over me, Mr. Lee, and it was necessary. I had allowed my brain to run riot for a moment. It is a singular fact, however, that I was strangely drawn towards Jack as soon as I got to know him, some months ago. He reminded me so much of my poor wife. Heavens above! How much he reminded me of her! And now comes this fresh revelation. I am beginning to hope—"

"Let me advise you, Sir Crawford, not to allow these thoughts to carry you too far," said Nelson Lee gravely. "A terrible disappointment may be the result. I will admit that there is a chance that Jack Mason is your real son—your own boy—"

Sir Crawford jumped up, his face flushing with excitement again.

"You think there is a chance, Mr. Lee?" he asked tensely. "Oh, you have given me fresh hope—fresh spirit!"

"Then my words have had the opposite effect to that which I intended," said the detective softly. "I repeat, my dear sir, that such a chance is not absolutely untenable, but the probability is that Jack Mason is really Jack Mason. However, the facts are most significant, and I shall use my utmost efforts to help you in this investigation."

"Thank you, Mr. Lee! You are indeed a friend!" exclaimed the baronet enthusiastically. "To think that Jack may be my own flesh and blood! Somehow, I have a feeling that Heaven will be merciful, that this apparent miracle will turn out to be true. My dear sir, I scarcely know what else to say, and I fear that I shall betray myself when I go back to the lad's study."

"You must not do that," said Nelson Lee. "It will be far better for you to say nothing whatever until the point is either proved or disproved. Moreover, it will be just as well for you to remain 'Mr. Strong' for the time being. Rest assured that I will not let the grass grow under my feet."

A minute later Sir Crawford Grey took his leave from the study. And Nelson Lee was not blind to the fact that his visitor now seemed ten years younger. He no longer looked an old gentleman, but an upright man in the prime of life. He had grown inches taller during that short interview, and left the study with a springy, light step.

And, truth to tell, although Nelson Lee had discouraged the idea, he was becoming more and more convinced that Sir Crawford's hope would prove no idle one. It was an intensely interesting matter, and Nelson Lee was enthusiastic.

He looked at the locket, which still lay upon the table, and then turned to the mantelpiece in order to help himself to a cigarette from the box which stood there. And at that very moment Simon Grell acted.

The hidden seconded knew that his chance had come now, that he would probably never get another opportunity of seizing the coveted locket. And so he sprang out from behind the curtain. In his hand he held a small cloth bag, half filled

with silver—one of those old-fashioned purses which are sometimes seen. In a moment of emergency it proved to be an excellent weapon.

It swung through the air as Nelson Lee was in the act of turning, and caught the detective heavily upon the head. He stumbled back and collapsed over a chair—by no means put out of action, but greatly handicapped.

Grell, panting hoarsely with excitement, did not follow up his attack, or take advantage of Nelson Lee's position. He made a grab at the locket, seized the two halves, and dashed to the window.

Slam!

The sash went up, and Captain Jim recklessly dived head-first out into the darkness of the Triangle. He had succeeded. That thought lent him speed, and he pelted across towards the gates like a rabbit.

His desperate venture had ended in victory, but would he be able to retain the advantage he had gained?

CHAPTER I.

REGINALD PITT ON THE TRACK!

"WE shall only just do it!" Jack Mason made that remark in a rather breathless voice as he and Reginald Pitt hurried along the muddy lane from Bellion to the school.

They were both loaded, having made extensive purchases at the tuck establishment presided over by Mr. Binks. This was a special occasion, and it was necessary to do Mr. Strong honour. For, of course, both the juniors imagined their visitor to be just plain "Mr. Strong"—and an impeccable gentleman at that.

They had been longer than they had reckoned upon, and were now harrrying.

"We don't want to find the guest of honour squatting down in the study twiddling his thumbs," remarked Pitt. "Let's hope Mr. Lee kept him talking. Once we get this stuff into the study, Jack, we can do the rest in five minutes."

"Yes, there's nothing to be cooked," replied Mason.

"Except the tea," grinned Pitt. "But we left the kettle on the fire, so it ought to be boiling by the time we get in. What about that locket, old son? Are you going to tell Mr. Strong anything about it?"

"Of course. I shall tell him everything," replied Jack. "But it's pretty certain that Mr. Lee will have given him most of the facts. I dare say all that mystery will be cleared up now."

"Let's hope so," replied Pitt.

"Somebody coming down the lane," said Mason a moment later.

"Somebody in a hurry, too," remarked Pitt. "Well, we're safe enough. It's not locking-up time yet, and we've got permits, anyhow. By jingo! They are in a hurry, and no mistake."

For it was now seen that there were two figures hastening down. They approached at a run, and Mason and Pitt stood still in order to see who the couple were. Something was apparently wrong, for they were running very swiftly.

The boys recognised the men at about the same second as the men recognised the boys.

Simon Grell and Jake Starkey!

What were they doing, running down from the school in this hurried fashion? Pitt was instantly suspicious, and so was Jack Mason. They expected to see the two men rush past, but Mr. Grell came to a halt.

"Quick, Jake!" he snapped. "It's the boy! It's Jack. Hold him!"

"By George!" muttered Pitt. "Dodge, Jack. We can't possibly fight these two rotters——"

Before Pitt could get another word out Starkey's fist crashed upon the side of his head, and he went over like a ninepin. It was a brutal blow, and Pitt lay motionless upon the ground.

And Jack Mason, attempting to flee—for that was his only course—found himself held tightly by his uncle and Starkey.

"Bring him along!" hissed Grell. "Never mind the other kid! He'll come to himself afore long. Quick, Jake, into the wood!"

Jake Starkey grunted.

"I don't see what the game is, Simon——" he began.

"Dars you?" snarled Grell. "Don't waste time now, you fool!"

Starkey offered no further objection, but helped the other man to force Mason down the road. Jack struggled valiantly, but he knew very well that his task was a hopeless one. How could he expect to get away from these two powerful men?

Meanwhile, Reginald Pitt lay upon the road perfectly still. He had been knocked over by a savage blow, and Jake Starkey, as he helped his chief to force Mason along, was troubled with doubts. Pitt had looked very white and still, lying there upon the road.

Had he come to any grave harm?

If Mr. Starkey could have seen Reginald Pitt at that moment his fears would not only have been allayed, but he would have been considerably surprised.

For Pitt was on his feet, and he didn't look at all stunned. He certainly rubbed the side of his head rather tenderly, but there was no sign of any serious damage. He gazed down the lane grimly.

"So that's the game!" he muttered. "Well, there's only one thing that I can do. Why aren't there a dozen of our chaps handy? We'd soon settle those rotters, then!"

But the lane was quite deserted except for Simon Grell, Starkey, and their prisoner. Pitt walked down the road softly but swiftly.

As a matter of fact, he hadn't been stunned at all. He hadn't even been particularly hurt. But this does not mean to say that he had faked a fight with the scoundrels who had attacked Mason.

No, Pitt was very keen.

He knew quite well that no help was at hand, and Grell had already seized Jack. Pitt might have fled, but that would have told the rascals that a rescue party would soon come rushing down.

To attack Starkey would have been fatal, and so Pitt had remained upon the ground, quite still, pretending to be stunned. He knew that if he struggled to his feet he would go down again, and this time he would almost certainly be stunned in earnest. It was a cute dodge on his part to remain inactive.

Pitt, full of eagerness, followed down the lane, and saw Mason's captors plunge into the wood.

"This is going to be tricky!" muttered Pitt grimly.

His head was aching abominably, but he took no notice of this. He was the only person who could be of any use to the unfortunate junior in the wood, and Pitt did not hesitate to take action, although he did not feel like exerting himself.

But his determination to help Mason was strong.

Of late Pitt had grown to like his study-mate more and more. And he was now filled with alarm lest Jack should be in any peril. It was a great change, for not so long before—only a few weeks—Pitt had been very different in his attitude.

Grell and Starkey tried to make no noise as they forced their way through the wood. But Pitt was easily able to follow—not by the use of his eyes, but by keeping his ears on the stretch.

The darkness beneath the leafless trees was intense, and Pitt became more and more alarmed. Why were these men taking the lad into the recesses of the wood? What was their object in doing so?

Pitt had no intention of leaving until he had discovered the truth. Besides, there was quite a good chance that he would be able to help. His presence was unknown to the scoundrels, and he might be provided with a sudden opportunity. This, indeed, was the main reason for Pitt's eager desire to keep on the track.

He wanted to rescue Mason—single-handed.

For this would prove his friendship more than anything else; and Reginald Pitt, in his changed frame of mind, was doing his utmost to make amends for his vindictive actions of the past.

At last the crackling of the dead twigs ceased, and by this time Pitt reckoned that Grell and Starkey were near the other end of the wood, where it jutted out close to the village, against the tiny side lane which led to one or two outlying farms.

Very cautiously Pitt crept forward.

He heard voices now, and his movements were like those of an experienced tracker. Finally, he lay full length at the edge of a little hollow. Gazing down he could see two dim figures moving about.

"He'll do, Jake," came Grell's voice. "I don't reckon he'll be able to move an inch with these strings round him. You git off, an' be back here within ten minutes."

"It can't be done, cap'n——"

"It can't if you stay here talkin'!" snapped Grell. "Git off!"

Starkey disappeared, and Pitt wondered where he was going and what his object was. At all events, an idea which had come into Pitt's head was quickly dismissed. He had thought of rushing back to the school and fetching help.

But that would occupy fully twenty minutes, and by that time Mason would have been taken off into the night by his captors. And then, of course, any chase would be practically hopeless.

It was far better to remain here on the watch. The very fact that Grell had bound Mason proved that he intended taking him off somewhere without unnecessary delay. So the best thing would be to wait and to track the scoundrels to their ultimate destination.

"Don't you git frightened, Jack," came Mr. Grell's voice out of the hollow. "As long as you remain quiet you won't come to no harm. You've given me enough trouble these last weeks, an' I'm not going to stand no more."

"Oh, you scoundrel!" panted Mason hotly. "You've half killed poor Pitt!"

"Not quite," murmured Pitt, grinning to himself.

Mr. Grell laughed harshly.

"Bah! Don't git them fears into your head," he said. "The kid didn't come to no harm—only a punch from Starkey's fist. I expect he's all right by this time, an' squealin' to his kind master. But they won't git on our track, Jack, my boy. We've bin too quick for 'em."

"What are you going to do with me——?"

"It ain't your place to ask questions," interrupted Grell. "Just you lay quiet an' do as you're told. Not a hair of your head will be hurt, an' you'll be given a real holiday."

Jack made no reply, and Pitt wondered if he could do anything now. He decided that a rescue would be impossible. Grell was on guard, and Mason was bound. If Pitt revealed his presence he would soon be rendered helpless.

He could, of course, creep up behind Captain Jim and take him by surprise—but only by great good

back. The chances were that his approach would be heard, and then only disaster would follow.

Grell was on the alert, listening intently, and keeping his eyes well open. And the minutes passed steadily, and at last Pitt heard the grating of iron-tired wheels upon the lane, just beyond the trees.

A trap was approaching, evidently.

Just for a second Pitt thought of yelling for help, but an exclamation of satisfaction from Grell made him change his mind. The arrival of the trap was expected, and the truth came to Pitt on the instant.

Starkey had been to the village to fetch the trap—Porlock's, from the White Harp, probably. The distance to the inn was very short from this point, for the wood lay just behind the White Harp garden.

Grell and Starkey intended carrying Mason away in the trap. It was a daring scheme, but there was really nothing against it. Bound and helpless, and probably gagged, Jack would lie at the bottom of the trap unseen. The darkness of the night was intense, and the prisoner would certainly not be seen.

Less than a minute later Pitt knew that his surmise was correct.

Jack Starkey appeared, and he and Grell lifted their prisoner and carried him through the trees towards the lane. The watching Removite followed. Grell called a halt before entering the lane, and Pitt guessed that the gag was being applied.

Then Mason was huddled into the trap, the two men took their seats, and the vehicle drove off. It went towards the village, and Pitt stood in the centre of the lane, helpless—in a state of complete consternation.

What was he to do now?

How could he follow? For the moment the only method was to run, and Pitt pelted down the lane at full speed. But he was hopelessly outdistanced by the fast trap, and when he reached the main road he saw the vehicle bowling down the High Street boldly and daringly.

It was already at the other end of the village, and Pitt knew perfectly well that he could do nothing further. He clenched his fists fiercely, and determined to rush to the policeman's cottage. This, at all events, would be the best thing to do under the circumstances.

But then he changed his mind. And this was caused by catching sight of Bob Christine of the College House.

Christine had just ridden along the High Street on his bicycle, and he halted outside a shop within a hundred yards of Pitt. He entered, leaving his bike outside, with the lamps burning.

"By jingo!" muttered Pitt tensely.

He didn't wait another second, but dashed forward and jumped on to the bicycle straight away. There was no time to ask for permission. Christine was a good fellow, and he wouldn't mind in the least when the affair was explained to him afterwards.

Intensely eager again, Pitt pedalled down the street with all his power. Arriving at the end, there were two roads to choose from—the one leading to Bannington and the other to Calstowe. For up the latter road, which was straight for half a mile, Pitt saw two twinkling little red lights.

He grinned to himself, and followed.

Before he had proceeded a hundred yards, however, he bent over his machine as he was riding, and turned out both the lamps. He didn't want his quarry to know that a bicycle was following.

Pitt was in his element now.

He was on the track in earnest, and he told himself that he would thank Bob Christine in the

most cordial terms for arriving on the scene with his bicycle just at that very critical moment.

Nothing could have happened better. It was far more satisfactory to follow the trap than to inform the spaddle-headed police-constable at Bellton. P.-c. Sparrow, no doubt, would have got into a fine fluster, and would have done his best. But the chances were that Grell and Starkey would have eluded pursuit. There was also the possibility that the policeman would have scouted the idea, thinking it to be a joke, for Pitt's story would certainly have sounded tall.

To follow direct was much better. The trap could not go very far, and Pitt had no difficulty in guessing that the destination was to be Calstowe. At all events, he would stick to the trail until the journey's end was reached.

He kept quite a long way behind, but never allowed the trap to get out of sight, except at occasional corners. The vehicle was travelling smartly, but Pitt had no difficulty in keeping pace with it.

At length Calstowe was reached, but the trap drove straight through the sleepy little place until it arrived on the sea-front. All the shops were closed by this time, and the darkness was intense.

Rather to Pitt's surprise, the trap drove straight to the dark quayside, and there came to a halt. There was not a soul in sight, and everything was still and quiet. Out in the Channel a small steamer was riding at anchor, and near by were other craft—most of them fishing vessels, snug for the night.

Pitt dismounted from his machine and waited. Dimly he saw Mason lifted out, carried down the steps, and then the watching junior could see no more. Starkey came up almost at once and drove off in the trap.

Pitt crept nearer, wondering what on earth it could mean. Why had Mason been taken to this spot? A cold shiver passed down the junior's back when he thought that murder might be in Grell's heart.

The Removite edged nearer, until he could gaze down over the side of the quay and look along to the steps. To his relief, he saw Mr. Grell sitting in a boat, and Mason was certainly there also, although Pitt could not see him.

"Don't you get frightened, my boy," Grell was saying, in a low voice. "You're just going to be took out to that nice little steamer. You'll have a sea voyage for your health. How does that strike you—hey?"

Mason, of course, could make no reply, and Pitt judged that Grell was waiting until Starkey returned. There was no possibility of anybody interfering, for there was nobody within sight. And here, again, Pitt knew that he would have no opportunity of carrying out a rescue. Starkey had only driven to one of the piers which lined the front, and he had probably handed the trap over to an ostler.

This conjecture was probably correct, for Starkey returned while Pitt was turning over one or two alternatives in his mind. They were useless, for there was no time for action.

A reckless fellow would probably have dashed forward without thinking, and disaster would have followed. Reginald Pitt, by remaining in the background all the time, was not proving himself deficient in pluck, but full of quick-wittedness. Grell and Starkey thought themselves secure—and they weren't. It was far better to let them go on thinking it.

Mason was to be taken to the steamer which was lying just out in the channel. That information, at all events, was of the first importance. Pitt knew his chem's exact destination.

All he had to do was to hurry back to St.

Frank's and give the alarm. Nelson Lee would attend to the rest. Pitt had great faith in the Housemaster-detective, and he knew that Lee would be able to awaken the local authorities and have Jack Mason rescued in a very little time.

Pitt had done splendid service, and he only waited to see the boat being pulled out towards the steamer. Then he remounted Christine's bicycle and peddled back towards St. Frank's with every ounce of speed of which he was capable.

CHAPTER LI.

ROUTES IN COUNCIL.

BUT Jack Mason was not inclined to suffer his fate without attempting to break away. So far he had had no chance, having been bound almost since the moment of his capture. But the determination was firm within him.

He was worried concerning Pitt, for he firmly believed that that junior had been seriously hurt by Starkey's blow. He was not aware of the fact that Pitt had deliberately lain upon the road, pretending to be injured, while only momentarily dazed.

And Mason was also startled with regard to his own position. What could it mean? Why had Grell captured him in this way? It was utterly unaccountable, because Grell knew well enough that the locket was being taken care of by Nelson Lee.

And the very nature of his adventure was startling. He was not merely being taken to some prepared retreat of Grell's, but to a steamer—a ship that might be bound for some place a thousand miles away! It was small wonder that Jack Mason became rather bewildered and scared.

And to happen on this day, of all days! Just when Mr. Strong had come down to St. Frank's! It was the height of misfortune.

Jack was left in the boat with Starkey while Grell climbed on board the steamer. Fully a quarter of an hour passed before Grell returned, and then the captive was hauled up to the deck.

The steamer was only a small one, and looked, and smelt, extremely dirty. Apparently, scarcely a soul was on board, for Jack saw nobody until a short man in a shabby uniform appeared out of a deckhouse.

This was the skipper, and every member of the crew was at present ashore, although they would come on board within the next fifteen minutes or so, for the tide would then be favourable.

The skipper—Captain Davis—looked at Mason critically.

"Bring him inside, Grell!" he said, removing a pipe from between his teeth.

Mason was taken into the grubby deckhouse, and the skipper regarded him closely and with great interest.

"So this is the kid?" he said. "Well, Grell, I don't much care for the job, but you're willin' to pay my terms, so I'll take it on. You'd best come with me to the cabin, an' we'll talk it over a bit more."

Jack was left in Starkey's care, and Grell followed Captain Davis down the companion into a somewhat foul cabin. Here the pair partook of rum, and then Grell comfortably lit a cigar.

"It's this way, Davis," he said. "You an' me are old pals, an' I took advantage of your bein' in Calstone with your ship. This job ain't goin' to harm you in the least, an' it'll do me a good turn. The kid's my nephew, an' I've got a right to do wot I like with him. See?"

"That's all very well, but I don't see it," said the other. "I didn't know that a man could treat

his relatives like this 'ere—bringin' 'em aboard a steamer, bound up an' gagged. You're likely to get into trouble if the kid's found, Grell, an' then I shall git into trouble, too."

"No, you won't," said Captain Jim easily. "The whole thing's easy. All I want you to do is to take the youngster to London. You're startin' within half an hour, so there won't be no inquiries this end, an' you can't come to no harm. I sha'n't make the voyage with you, 'cos that 'ud be too risky. Me an' Starkey will go by train, an' we'll be down at Wappin' by the time you arrive. Everything will be arranged, an' all you've got to do is to pocket the brass."

"An' suppose the ship's searched?"

"Well, they can't touch you—"

"Not if the boy's found?"

"No. You can shove him down in a hold or in some odd corner, an' keep him there unknown to the crew," replied Grell. "I should pack him away aft, if I were you. If he's found, you can swear you don't know nothin'. Understand? The kid'll be took for a stowaway, an' you ain't responsible for stowaways, are you?"

Captain Davis nodded.

"It ain't a bad idea," he agreed. "You won't be aboard, so there'll be no complications like that. An' the kid will be a stowaway, as you say. I sha'n't even tell my mate."

"That's the best way," said Simon Grell. "Nothin' can't be proved. You're safe either way, an' you're gettin' your own price. As for grub, the kid won't want more than one feed, an' you can take that down to him in the middle watch, some time arter midnight."

"An' you'll see me in London?"

"As soon as ever you drop anchor in the river!" declared Grell. "Me an' Starkey will git up there to-night, an' you won't arrive until to-morrow evenin'. So that gives me plenty o' time to make arrangements."

"Well, you'd best git off the ship as soon as you can," said Captain Davis. "The crew'll be aboard soon now, an' there's no reason for you to be seen."

"You're right, Davis. We'll clear."

They went up on deck, and returned to the place where Mason was being guarded by Jack Starkey.

"He's a quiet youngster," said Mr. Grell, regarding Jack. "You won't have no trouble with him, cap'n. I'll leave it to you wot to do—where you stow him—but I shouldn't think it 'ud be necessary to keep him bound up. Might as well give the kid a bit o' freedom. I'm a soft-hearted man, an' the journey'll be a lung one."

"An' wot about us, Simon?" asked Starkey.

"Us?" repeated Grell. "Why, we're goin' straight to London by train, old man—back to our old lodgin's at Mether Hackett's, in George Terrace, Wappin'. Sounds a swell address, don't it?"

"It ain't!" said Starkey, with conviction. "Still, you know best, Simon. I'm in your 'ands, but I'm durned if I know wot your game is!"

"I haven't had time to tell you yet, but you'll soon know," replied Grell. "Now, Jack, my boy, don't you be frightened. Just take it quiet, an' you'll see your kind uncle agin to-morrow evenin'."

Mason was unable to reply, but he was inwardly furious at this treatment. He began to fear that he would have no opportunity of breaking away. Before Grell and Starkey left they helped Captain Davis to take the prisoner below. He was stowed into a small store-room aft, which was well away from the men's quarters, and could not be visited without permission from the captain.

It was a noisome hole, small, with iron walls and a heavy door, the latter being provided with an extra-stout lock.

"This'll do fine," said Grell, looking round approvingly. "He'll be able to yell to his heart's content, an' won't attract no attention."

"Mebbe!" said Captain Davis grimly. "But if I hear 'im yellin', he'll soon git somethin' he don't want. You'll 'ave to do without a bed, kid, until we're at sea. I'll bring you down some blankets an' some grub later on."

Mason's ropes were cut and the ruffler was removed from his face. But the lad knew better than to speak. Any words he uttered would only be jeered at, and, although he felt like shouting out what he thought of his uncle, he kept himself in check, and only glared defiance.

"That's right!" grinned Mr. Grell. "Look at your uncle as though you'd like to eat him. I don't mind!"

Grell and Starkey took their departure, and Captain Davis looked at the prisoner searchingly.

"What's your name, kid?" he asked.

Mason made no reply.

"Sulky—ah!" went on the captain. "Well, it ain't to be wondered at. But it wants a bit o' believin' that a swell kid like you is the nerry of old Simon Grell. I've got an idea there's some trickery somewhere. Are you Grell's nerry?"

"Yes," said Jack quietly. "I'm not going to ask you to help me, but perhaps you don't know that you might get yourself into prison for keeping me on this ship? My uncle is an absolute scoundrel, and—"

"I ain't denyin' it," said Captain Davis. "Grell's a man I don't trust much, but if you say you're 'is nerry, I reckon I'm safe. No need to look scared, kid. I sha'n't hurt you while you're aboard this ship."

Just for a moment Jack clenched his fists, intending to make a dash to the doorway. But the skipper forestalled the movement, and closed the door until only an inch or two remained open.

"An' don't git shoutin'," he said. "You'll only make yourself 'orse, an' git a 'idin' arterwards. I do as I like on my own ship, an' you'll stay in this 'ere steer-room till we reach London."

The door closed, and Jack Mason was left in darkness. He heard the key turn in the lock, and he heard Captain Davis walk along the passage, and then the footsteps died into silence.

The thing which bewildered Jack more than anything else was why on earth he had been kidnapped at all.

But Jack would not have been so puzzled had he been able to hear the conversation which was even then proceeding between the two rascals who had succeeded in spiriting him away from St. Frank's.

They had left the ship, and even on their way back to the quay had passed a boat filled with loudly talking men, obviously members of the old roasting-steamers' crew. The vessel would take her departure almost at once.

Grell and Starkey paid a short visit to the inn where the trap had been left, arranging that it should be taken back to the White Harp on the morrow. Then they turned their steps towards the station.

"We shall jest be in comfortable time to catch the last train," said Grell. "Things have been happenin' quick to-night, old man—so quick that you're lookin' fair bewildered."

"I ain't only lookin' bewildered, but I'm all muddled up," confessed Starkey. "I can't see wot your game is, Simon. You ain't explained a single wote to me. Since you come out o' the school gates we've bin on the go the 'ole time. Wot happened at the school, anyway?"

Mr. Grell chuckled.

"You'd never believe it, Jake," he replied. "Talk about luck! I've never had such luck as

that of to-night! We've had some disappointments jost lately, but they're all made up for now—every darned one of 'em!"

"Well, I can't see it," said Starkey flatly. "It looks like a fool's game to me to take that kid an' shove 'im on that boat. Wot's the good of it, Simon? Wot in thunder's name's the good of it?"

"I'm arter making money—that's the good of it," replied Mr. Grell. "I've found out things wot I'd never dreamed of afore this evenin', an' I'll tell you all about 'em. First an' foremost, Jake, I've got that locket."

"You 'ave?" said Mr. Starkey incredulously.

"In my pocket at this minnit," went on Grell. "Not only half of it, but the whole thing. An' this old chap named Strong ain't such an innocent oove as he looks. He's Sir Crawford Grey, Baronet."

Starkey halted in the road.

"You will 'ave your joke, cap'n," he said weakly.

"You needn't believe it unless you like," went on the other. "But here we are at the station. We'll continue this talk on the platform, while we're waitin' for the train. It'll be in within five minutes."

They took their tickets, and then waited on a secluded spot on the little platform. Starkey was greatly astonished, and more so when Grell proceeded to tell him of the events which had occurred at St. Frank's.

"I heard everything," concluded Mr. Grell. "Ordinary luck ain't in it, Jake. It was wonderful luck, an' no mistake. Mebbe you ain't heard mush o' this Sir Crawford Grey?"

"Ain't 'e a Cabinet Minister?" asked Starkey vaguely.

"No, he ain't!" replied Grell. "He's a privit gentleman o' means. He's got piles of money—piles of it. That's why I seized the opportunity to bring Jack along with us. It was only a bit o' chance that brought Jack into our way to-night. But, there, when once my luck sets in, it does it proper."

Starkey shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't foller you now," he said impatiently.

"Well, you was born thick-headed, so I don't blame you," said Mr. Grell genially. "Wot about that story I heard? Why, it's pretty certain that that kid ain't my nerry at all; in fact, I've had an inkling of it for years past. This seems to prove it. He's the son of Sir Crawford Grey, an' the old baronet himself is pretty certain of it, too. Wot will be do when he finds that Jack is missin'?"

"Raise a Nones of a fuss, I should think," replied Jake.

"That's just where you're wrong. He won't do nothin' o' the sort," replied Grell cunningly. "He an' Lee will guess within an hour that I've took the boy, an' they won't want to make any big fuss of it. They'll try an' find Jack on the quiet, an' won't. Then this Sir Crawford will get a letter from me, sayin' that he can have the boy back for keeps if he hands over the sum of five thousand quid."

"Ow much?" gasped Starkey faintly.

"Five thousand quid!"

"You're mad! You're stark, starin' mad!" ejaculated the other. "Why, 'e wouldn't pay all that money, Simon!"

Mr. Grell laughed softly.

"Wouldn't he?" he said. "Well, I'm goin' to try it on, an' that's why I've took the boy. See? The idea struck me all at once, an' I believe it'll work. If I can't git five thousand, I'll git three—or even two."

"You're comin' down," remarked Starkey.

"I sha'n't go below two, that's the limit," continued Grell firmly. "Wot can the old feller do but pay up?"

"Well, 'e could put the cops on to us——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Grell. "Sir Crawford Grey won't want the whole thing talked of in the papers, don't you make no mistake. He'll do it quiet, an' he'll pay up willin'ly, rather than that the boy should be lost. He thinks Jack's his son, an' he's aigh off his head with excitement. I tell you, Jake, we'll get the five thousand easy."

"But it's an awful lot," said Starkey wonderingly.

"Mebbe it is to you. To him it's just a trifle," went on Captain Jim. "He's worth hundreds of thousands, an' a measly five ain't goin' to hurt him for a minute. An' how can he put the cops on us? You seem to forget, Jake, that Jack Mason is my nery in the eyes of the law, an' I'm his guardian. Ain't I brought him up since he was a baby? He's under age, an' he's in my care. Nobody can't force me to give him up."

"But you said that 'e's Sir Crawford's son——"

"No, I didn't. I said he might be," replied Grell. "There's no proof of it, Jake, an' until there is proof the boy's mine. If I like to send him to London on a ship, that's my business. I shall tell the old gent that I'll do him a great favour an' renounce all right to the boy for the sum of five thousand o' the best. That's business. There's nothin' crooked in the game at all, an' you an' me are absolutely safe."

Mr. Starkey regarded his chief admiringly.

"My! If you ain't got some brains, Simon!" he exclaimed. "I see it all now. Why, we'll git it; but that there locket business is a different matter. You might stumble over that there, old mate."

"I'm too fly," said Mr. Grell, getting to his feet as the signal went down. "You won't find me cousin' no cropper over the locket. Nobody saw me take it—not even Lee himself—an' they can't prove nothin'. An' you don't seem to have realised the importance of this other business."

"What other business?"

"Why, bleedin' Sir Crawford for money," replied Grell. "We've got the locket, an' I know for certain now that there's a big treasure tacked on to it. How are we goin' to git it? Who's goin' to pay our expenses? Why, Sir Crawford Grey himself—see? Ain't it rich?"

"That—that five thousand?" gasped Starkey.

"Exactly," agreed his astute companion. "With that money we shall be able to go to Africa in style, an' all our expenses paid. Did you ever look at such a rosy picture, Jake?"

"I 'ope it ain't too rosy," said Jake cautiously.

Mr. Grell slapped his friend's back.

"You ailes was a wet blanket, Jake," he said.

"But our luck's fair turned, an' we're in for a good time. You trust me. Gettin' the locket was good, but it wasn't much use to us alone. I've realised that all along. But this way we're goin' to provide ourselves with the brass to do the trip. It's all connected, an' takin' the boy away was necessary."

It could not be denied that Simon Grell's scheme was undoubtedly a clever one. He had seized his opportunity swiftly and without hesitation. Just when things had seemed their blackest the tide had turned.

And now, as Grell himself had said, the prospect was rosy in the extreme. The two rascals had the locket in their possession, and Jack Mason was a prisoner. There seemed nothing in the way of complete victory.

The train steamed into the station, and the precious rogues took their seats in a smoking compartment. They left the scene of their many adventures, not bowed down with gloom, as they had half expected, but buoyed up with the greatest hopes of winning a fortune.

Everything had gone splendidly from their point of view. But they would not have been so easy in mind had they known that nearly all their secret movements of that evening had been watched by Reginald Pitt of the Remore.

CHAPTER LII.

THE RACE TO CAISTOWE.

"**D**EAR fellow, it's appallin'!" exclaimed Sir Montie Truggles-West, panting hard. "I don't know what it means—I don't, really."

"Well, I can tell you," I said grimly. "Both Mason and Pitt have been collared, and it's almost certain that Grell is at the bottom of it. The locket's gone, too, and I'm blest if I know what we're to do."

I was standing with my chums almost in the centre of the Triangle. We had just been scouring the school grounds from end to end, but had found no sign whatever of Pitt or Mason.

What we had found, however, was sufficiently significant, and, after all, I suppose it was a sign. In the lane, quite near the school, two or three parcels of cabbages had come to light. Pitt and Mason had gone to the village to buy things for tea, so it was obvious that they had been attacked on their way back, and had been forced to abandon their packages.

The first we knew of it was that Mr. Strong—or, rather, Sir Crawford Grey—came into Study C, asking if we knew where Mason was. We didn't, but had been making inquiries when the gunner appeared.

Nelson Lee was looking rather pale, and there was a decided bump showing upon the side of his head. Taking us to his study, he explained that somebody had sprung at him from behind the curtains, had bowled him over, and had succeeded in getting away with the gold locket.

He was simply furious, and Sir Crawford went nearly off his head. But his anxiety was nothing compared with that which followed, for, while hurrying down the road to see if we could find any trace of the thief, we came upon the parcels. They told their own story.

Without the slightest doubt Simon Grell was responsible. He had kidnapped Jack for some reason. Presumably Pitt had been taken as well, but Pitt's inclusion was only because he had been with Mason at the time, and it had been unsafe to take one without the other.

The gunner was in a shocking temper at first, but then he became as cool as ice. He knew well enough that Grell must have been in the room during the interview with Sir Crawford. Therefore, Grell knew the truth, and there was a distinct motive for his crime of kidnapping Jack Mason.

Nothing was absolutely certain. We had no evidence of any kind. So Tommy and Montie and I rushed about looking for the missing juniors, on the faint off-chance that our original surmise was incorrect. The College House fellows might have been up to a jape, or something of that kind.

But our quest had been fruitless, and we were now taking a breather in the Triangle. I hadn't taken much active part in this affair so far, but it certainly seemed as though there was excitement brewing now.

Bob Christine had been raving about for some time, but we were not interested in his woes. Some scoundrel, it seemed, had gone off with Christine's bicycle whilst Bob was in a shop. But we did not connect this incident with Mr. Simon Grell—not at first, at all events.

But after every other suggestion had been cast

side, after every field of inquiry had been exhausted, I thought of that affair of the stolen bicycle. It was certainly unusual for a bike to be pinched in Bellton. Had Grell taken it in order to aid his fight?

It was just possible, and Nelson Lee was even now busy at the telephone, sending warnings to the police at Bannington, Helmsford, Caistowe, and other surrounding places. Sir Crawford Grey had aged again with this fresh worry, and he scarcely knew how to contain himself.

And while Sir Montie and Tommy and I stood in the Triangle we heard the tinkle of a bicycle bell out in the road. As we turned we saw a machine shoot in at the gateway, and it came straight across to where we were standing.

"Hallo! Who's that?" shouted Watson.

"Just the fellows that I wanted!" replied a breathless voice.

"Pitt!" I yelled, dashing forward.

"Begad! Just as we were bemoaning your fate, old boy!" exclaimed Tregollis-West. "Where's Mason? Have you brought him with you?"

Pitt stood before us, perspiring freely, splashed with mud from head to foot. It was easy to see that he had been riding furiously.

"Poor old Jack is in the wars!" he said tensely.

"Where's Mr. Lee? There's not a minute to waste, you chaps. Grell's got Mason, and there's no telling what he's going to do with him. We've got to dash to the rescue."

"Come on!" I exclaimed. "Good for you, Pitt! I'm blent if you're not better than all the lot of us put together!"

We were just making for the Ancient House when I paused.

"Whose bike is that?" I asked keenly.

"I don't know. Christine's, I think," replied Pitt, grinning. "I found it outside a shop in Bellton, and borrowed it—without asking permission."

"So that explains it," I said. "Christine's nearly raving. He'll have your blood later on. But I reckon the emergency was an acute one, and he might forgive you, after you've explained."

There was no time to give Christine the tip that his machine was safe and sound, for Pitt was wildly anxious to see Nelson Lee.

Tregollis-West and Watson were rather doubtful as to whether they should come, too, but I told them to chance it. It seemed as though some quick action would be necessary, and we all wanted to be in the excitement.

The return of Pitt meant an enormous lot, for he obviously knew exactly what had happened. His very attitude told that. Besides, he had been riding hard, and I gathered that he had been following the scoundrels, and had located their destination.

When we arrived at Nelson Lee's study we found the gov'nor still busy at the telephone. Sir Crawford was pacing up and down restlessly, his hands clasped together, his eyes gleaming with anxiety.

He turned quickly as we entered.

"Ah, boys—!" he broke off. "Why, what is this? My dear lads! Have you—have you brought news of Jack—?"

"Yes, sir," said Pitt promptly.

"Thank Heaven for that!" said Sir Crawford fervently. "Did you hear, Lee? Pitt has returned with news—with news!"

Nelson Lee hung up the receiver and turned in his chair.

"You are very welcome, Pitt," he said, eyeing the junior with favour. "I can see that you have been riding rather hard. No doubt you can tell us what happened in the lane, and where Mason is at the present moment?"

Reginald Pitt leaned against the table rather shakily.

"Sit down, my boy—sit down!" said the gov'nor quickly.

"I've been riding rather hard, sir, as you said, and it's taken it out of me a bit," said the junior. "Besides, I had a punch on the head which made me see stars, and that ride hasn't improved matters. Mason's at Caistowe, sir—"

"We must go at once—at once!" interrupted Sir Crawford.

"I really think it would be better to hear Pitt's story from the beginning, Mr. Strong," said Nelson Lee, calling the old gentleman by his assumed name now that they were in the presence of the juniors. "It will make things so much clearer, and time will be saved in the long run. Now, Pitt."

It's not necessary to give Pitt's full story, because I've already related it. He described how he had tracked Grell and Starkey into the wood; how he had followed to Caistowe; and how he had seen Jack Mason taken on board the steamer.

When he arrived at the conclusion of his narrative Sir Crawford's agitation was greater than ever. He jumped up, his eyes blazing, his fists clenched.

"The scoundrels!" he exclaimed angrily. "The impudent scoundrels! To place that boy upon a steamer, with the intention, no doubt, of sending him to China, or some such place."

"I think not, my dear sir," interrupted Nelson Lee. "To my knowledge, the only steamships which call at Caistowe are small coasting vessels. Probably the intention of Mr. Grell was to take Mason up to London, and this method presents the fewest difficulties. I think I can fathom his motive."

"But we must rescue the lad! We must go to him at once!" exclaimed Sir Crawford quickly.

"Good gracious me! There must not be a moment's loss of time. That wretched steamer must be delayed. It might even now be putting out to sea."

Nelson Lee rose to his feet.

"We must certainly not promptly," he agreed.

"Pitt, my boy, I congratulate you heartily upon your achievement. You have shown wonderful ingenuity and persistence, and I am quite sure that you have earned the gratitude of Mr. Strong. You have certainly earned mine. Your behaviour has been splendid."

"Oh, I say, sir!" protested Pitt, flushing with pleasure. "I was only thinking of Jack. He's a friend of mine, and—and I'm anxious."

"Of course you are, my lad. We are all anxious," said Sir Crawford, grasping Pitt's hand warmly. "I am sure I don't know what we should have done had you not acted in this brave and ingenious manner. By your strenuous efforts we now know exactly where poor Jack is located, and we can go straight to the spot and rescue him. I must thank you later on, my boy, for I am too agitated now to choose adequate words."

"Pitt, you're a brick!" I said quietly, slapping his shoulder, and looking straight into his eyes. "You and I haven't been very friendly until recently, but I hope we shall be the best of pals in future. You've done wonders, and we're all proud of you."

"Begad! Rather, old boy!"

"Oh, pile it on!" grinned Pitt calmly. "I've done nothing to make a scog about. Can't a chap help his own chum?"

"That's just it!" I said. "You've hit the nail on the head, Pitt. Mason's your chum, and you've proved your friendship. That's why I'm so jolly pleased. I always knew that you'd turn out to be one of the best."

"Thanks, Nipper!" said Pitt quietly.

Nelson Lee was making active preparations. All his inquiries were now cast aside, and the instructions he had sent broadcast were unnecessary. Pitt had supplied all the information he wanted, and the only thing was to act upon it without a moment's delay.

The gov'nor's plan was quite simple—indeed, it could be nothing else. He would ride to Caistowe without a moment's delay and detain the ship—if, indeed, it was necessary to detain it. The vessel might not be sailing until the morning.

Sir Crawford suggested ringing up the police at Caistowe, but Nelson Lee pointed out that that would be quite useless. Pitt's evidence, although valuable, was not sufficiently strong for the country police. There was no proof that Mason was on board the ship; and, indeed, it would be necessary to obtain a warrant before the authorities could search the vessel. They couldn't walk aboard without a warrant.

If possible, Lee wanted to effect Mason's rescue unofficially. He knew well enough that the police would be useless at this juncture. There would be so many delays owing to red tape that the game would be more trouble than it would be worth.

So the gov'nor hurried out and fetched his powerful touring-car out of the school garage. He always kept it ready for instant departure. It was roomy, and accommodated the lot of us—that is, Nelson Lee, Sir Crawford, Pitt, Tregellis-West, Watson, and myself. Sir Montie and Tommy really had no excuse for accompanying us, but as Nelson Lee didn't order them out of the car when they entered they naturally stepped there. It wasn't likely that they'd allow this adventure to come to a close without their presence—if they could help it.

The loss of the locket was of secondary importance just now. The main thing was to recover Jack Mason, and, if possible, to get hold of Simon Grell and Jake Starkey. They would certainly have no mercy this time.

Pitt and my chums were rather at a loss to account for "Mr. Stroug's" terrible anxiety concerning Mason. They had always looked upon the old gentleman as a mere friend. But he was now acting as though Mason was his own son, and it was certainly rather mysterious.

I, of course, was in the same boat at the time. But I afterwards learned the truth, as I have set down. Sir Crawford believed that Mason actually was his own son, and he was naturally wild with worry now.

We drove to Caistowe like the wind. It was absolutely a race, and we covered the ground at terrific speed. But even this was not fast enough for Sir Crawford. He was certainly not nervous.

At last we arrived at Caistowe, and Nelson Lee swung the car round on to the quay and pulled it to a halt. Pitt was standing up in his seat, gazing out into the channel of the River Stone.

"The steamer's gone, sir?" he exclaimed huskily.

"Gone!"

"It's not there now, sir—"

"How dreadful!" exclaimed Sir Crawford, his voice quivering. "But you must be mistaken, Pitt. There has not been sufficient time—"

"I think the lad is correct," put in Nelson Lee. "If you will look, my dear sir, you will see the lights of the vessel out in the bay. She can only have raised her anchor a short time ago."

We all gazed out, and then faintly saw the steamer's lights in the haze. For a mist was drifting in over the bay, obscuring the headlands and overshadowing the fishing craft which were anchored close by.

"This is a disaster—a sheer disaster!" exclaimed Sir Crawford huskily. "Poor boy! To think that

he is on that vessel and we can do nothing to aid him. But we must, Mr. Lee—we must!"

"You can be assured, Mr. Stroug, that Jack will come to no real harm," said Nelson Lee soothingly. "Pray do not allow your fears to get the better of your judgment. I urge you to remain calm."

"But can't we do anything, sir?" asked Pitt. "Oh, this is rotten! I thought we should be able to rescue him. There must be some motor-boats in the town, and we could easily overtake that old tramp."

"No doubt, Pitt," said Nelson Lee. "But such a step is impracticable."

"Why is it, sir?" I asked quickly.

"Because, for one reason, the captain of the vessel would almost certainly refuse to allow us on board," replied Nelson Lee. "We may take it that the man is a rascal, and it is most probable that Grell is on board, too. When at sea a captain is the absolute master of his craft, and this man would certainly resist any attempt to board the ship. To go in chase would be a mere waste of time."

I realised that the gov'nor was right. It sounded easy enough—hire a motor-boat and chase a ship; but it was an impossible task. We might catch up with the ship, but that was no guarantee that we should get on board. We couldn't fire revolvers, and act like people in a cinema play.

"Then what is to be done?" asked Sir Crawford Grey, pacing up and down beside the car. "What's to be done, Mr. Lee?"

"Our first plan must be to make inquiries here," replied the gov'nor.

And this plan was carried out. It wasn't long before we learned that the steamer was called the *Foreland*, and that her port of destination was London. She would drop anchor in the Thames, and was due to arrive on the following evening. A most important point was that she had no intermediate call.

Our next inquiry was at the station, and here we learned that Grell and Starkey had taken the train to London. The clerk remembered them perfectly, and this disposed of the idea that the rascals were on board the *Foreland*.

We collected outside the station, an anxious group, for it seemed to most of us that we had failed miserably, and that there was no telling when we should see poor Jack Mason again.

But Nelson Lee was calmly confident.

"Let me say at once that the position is entirely satisfactory," he exclaimed. "There is no cause for alarm whatever—"

"Satisfactory!" echoed "Mr. Stroug," denouncing his facts agitatedly. "No cause for alarm! Why, bless my soul, I cannot understand you, Mr. Lee. There is every cause for alarm, and the position is serious."

"That's what I think, sir," said Pitt.

"Then I must alter that point of view," said Nelson Lee easily. "To begin with, the *Foreland* will not touch land until it arrives in the Thames to-morrow evening. That gives us plenty of time to make our preparations. The school breaks up to-morrow for the Christmas holidays, and we can get to London in good time, and be on hand to board the vessel as soon as she drops anchor. Jack Mason will come to no harm meanwhile, although he may spend a rather uncomfortable twenty-four hours. Viewed calmly, the position is really excellent. By careful planning we can rescue Mason, recover the locket, and have Grell arrested. After that our other inquiry will go forward apace."

Sir Crawford knew exactly what Nelson Lee meant, and he was greatly relieved in mind. He lost his agitation, and actually smiled.

"I trust you, Mr. Lee," he said simply.

"Thank you!" said the great detective. "I hope

that I shall prove worthy of your trust, Mr. Strong. At all events, I shall do my very utmost to bring this affair to a satisfactory conclusion to-morrow evening. For the present we must restrain our impatience and return to St. Frank's."

And that's what we did, hoping for the best.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE LAST DAY OF TERM.

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH grinned.

"Looks like rain," he said genially.

"Nothing to grin at, is it?" demanded Church, surveying the sky with a certain amount of misgiving.

Handforth regarded Church rather witheringly.

"My dear chap, what does it matter what the weather is?" he asked. "Have you overlooked the fact that this is the last day of term—absolutely the last giddy day? We break up to-day and go home for the merry old Christmas holidays. Rain? I don't care if it snows!"

"Well, I shouldn't care if it snowed," admitted McClure. "Snow's different to rain, Handy. Besides, it's Christmassy. It would be rather ripping if we went home in a snowstorm."

The three chums of Study D of the Ancient House at St. Frank's were standing in the Triangle. They had only just come down, and breakfast wasn't ready yet. Other juniors were down, too. It was quite surprising how quickly everybody had jumped out of bed on that particular morning, in spite of the cold.

There were no lessons, of course, and both Houses at St. Frank's were full of that buzz and bustle which always prevailed on the last day of term. Everybody was genial, and House rows were distinctly "off."

"Here's Tregellis-West and Nipper," remarked Handforth, turning towards the Ancient House steps as Sir Montie and I emerged. "Hallo, you chaps! What's the matter? Anybody would think it was the first day of term, instead of the last!"

Sir Montie and I had certainly been looking very thoughtful, as though preoccupied. And Handforth's sarcastic remark reminded us that our faces ought to be broad and our smiles large.

"Dear fellow, I don't expect you to understand," said Sir Montie condescendingly. "But Nipper and I are thinkin' of greater things than breakin'-up. This is a time of great worry an' stress—"

"Dotty?" inquired Handforth, staring.

"Not that I am aware of, dear old boy," replied Tregellis-West languidly. "Of course, Nipper and Watson often hint that my brain is somewhat deficient, but they ain't just. My brain's all right, once it starts workin', but it requires a good push of, you know. It's workin' now—it is, really."

"Well, I don't care what it's doing," said Handforth. "And I'm blest if I can understand why you fellows should look so absent. Watson's just the same. He was like it last night in the dormitory."

"I expect it's because of Mason," remarked McClure. "Mason's gone off on his holidays before the rest of us, the cheeky bouncer. Went last night without saying a word."

Handforth smiled knowingly.

"Don't you believe it," he said. "If Mason's gone on his holidays, why is old Mr. Strong still at St. Frank's?"

"Is that a riddle?" I inquired politely.

"Very innocent, ain't you?" said Handforth. "There's something queer about Mason's disappearance last night. You can't diddle me. Most of the chaps are too excited to think of anything but their own affairs, but I don't get excited. I'm a

calm chap. And I can see that something unusual happened yesterday."

"Well, you needn't jaw about it, Handy," I said. "As a matter of fact, Mason was away last night because he couldn't help it, but there's no need to spread a yarn that anything queer has happened. No sense in making a mystery out of nothing, you know."

Handforth shrugged his shoulders.

"It's not my business," he said. "I don't care if Mason's gone to Timbuctoo. I wish him joy. What about our bags, Church? Somebody's pinched one of mine, or it's got mislaid, so I shall have to borrow yours."

"Oh, will you?" said Church warily. "What about me?"

"My dear chap, you'll have to make do with what you can," replied Handforth. "You don't suppose I'm going to carry a parcel, do you? If you don't let me have that bag of yours, I'll punch your giddy nose!"

Handforth & Co. strolled off, arguing, and Sir Montie and I continued our walk in the Triangle, and we were joined a minute later by Tomney Watson and Reginald Pitt, who had just emerged from the lobby.

"Rather a good thing it's the last day of term," I said thoughtfully. "As Handforth remarked, the majority of the fellows are too excited to think of much, and so that affair last night attracted practically no attention."

"Yes, old boy, it's quite good," said Sir Montie. "It wouldn't be nice to have the thing talked about. Has your gov'nor made all the arrangements for to-day? He said he was pain' to."

"You leave it to him," I replied confidently. "Mr. Lee won't let the grass grow under his feet, I'll bet. Poor old Mason! He's on that rotten old steamer now, on his way to London."

"He'll be reasoned this evening, so there's nothing such to worry about," remarked Watson. "But what I'm thinking of is this. Who's going to London to see the giddy business through?"

"We are," I replied promptly.

"All of us?"

"I don't see why not," I went on. "The gov'nor and I will spend the holidays at Gray's Inn Road. Montie has to go through London to get up to Tregellis Castle, and Pitt's people live in town, don't they, Pitt?"

"Yes," replied the Serpent.

"So do mine," said Watson.

"Well, what's to prevent us all going up together?" I asked. "If this Wapping business keeps us until late, you can all come along to the gov'nor's place in Gray's Inn Road until to-morrow. A telegram or two will do the trick."

"Rats!" said Pitt. "You'll have to come to my pater's place. He'd be jolly pleased to have you there. I can tell you."

"Well, we won't argue about it," I said. "The chief point is that we're going up to London together by the eleven-twenty train—or perhaps not until the twelve-forty. Either will do all right. It all depends upon whether Mr. Lee gets his plans fixed up all right. We shall all go up to London together—we four chaps, the gov'nor, and Mr. Strong."

"That's ripping," said Pitt, his eyes gleaming. "And we shall rescue poor old Jack in the evening. Er George! Won't we have a fine time after we've got him back. I hope we succeed!" he said, with sudden gravity.

All our plans were turned topsy-turvy, however. For a piece of news arrived which made everything else seem to fade into insignificance. It was something totally unexpected, and took us unawares.

Pitt had gone off to see about some packing, or, rather, preparation for packing, for there was not

much time to do anything before breakfast, Tommy Watson and Tregellis-West went along to Study C, and I seized the opportunity to run along to Nelson Lee's room in order to ask how things were going. I knew that the gov'nor was in telephonic communication with all sorts of people.

When I entered his study I got quite a shock.

Nelson Lee was standing at his desk, staring straight in front of him, and his cheeks were unusually pale. When he looked at me I saw that there was an expression of strange consternation in his eyes.

"You shouldn't have come now, Nipper," he said quietly. "I have just received a piece of shocking news."

"About Mason, sir?" I asked quickly.

"Yes, my lad; at least, I fear that Mason is affected," replied the gov'nor. "Perhaps it is just as well that you came, however, for you will have to learn the news sooner or later."

"But what's happened, sir?" I asked huskily, startled by his look.

"I think I hear Sir Crawford's footsteps in the passage. I sent Tubbs for him," replied Nelson Lee. "You will have to wait a moment, Nipper."

It was intensely aggravating, but I couldn't do anything else but wait. Sir Crawford Grey entered the study.

"Dear me! Is anything the matter, Mr. Lee?" he asked curiously. "You are looking quite agitated, and—"

"I have reason to be, my dear sir," interrupted Nelson Lee quietly. "I am afraid that I have some very bad news for you, although it may not necessarily be grave. It all depends upon the result of further inquiry. I urge you to steel yourself for the information—"

"You are startling me, Mr. Lee!" exclaimed the baronet quickly. "Pray be frank. This suspense is worse than any shock."

"Yes, let's have the news, sir," I put in.

"Well, I have just had reliable news over the phone that the steamship *Foreland* was in collision in a fog-bank during the night, soon after leaving Calstone," replied Nelson Lee gravely. "The vessel was sunk, and—"

Sir Crawford staggered back, and clutched at the desk.

"The ship was sunk!" he shouted hoarsely. "Great Heaven above! You are not telling me that—that Jack is dead?"

"Oh, gov'nor!" I gasped, horrified.

"Dear me! I was afraid of this!" exclaimed Nelson Lee sharply. "No, there is not the slightest evidence that Jack has been killed. Some survivors have been landed at the small village of Wrexton, farther along the coast."

"And is Mason amongst them, sir?" I panted.

"I have not been able to ascertain, although I tried my utmost," replied the gov'nor. "The survivors number five, but I have not been able to find out whether one of them is a boy. I sincerely hope that Jack is safe."

From the gov'nor's tone I knew well enough that he was doubtful, and was only trying to break the news gently. As for myself, I was almost stunned. Sir Crawford stood perfectly still, his face ashen. This piece of news was so totally unlooked-for, so ghastly, that we were momentarily robbed of our composure.

"Is this news verified, Mr. Lee?" asked Sir Crawford at last. "Is there not a possibility that it is a ghastly error? Some other ship, perhaps—"

"No, I am afraid there can be no doubt that the vessel was the *Foreland*."

"But the sea is calm; there has been no wind!" said the baronet. "I never dreamed of a disaster at sea, Mr. Lee."

"It appears that the ship collided with another vessel in the fog," replied the schoolmaster-detektiv. "There has been no fog inland, but, I understand, a considerable mist round the coast. I know no details, and I am afraid the telephone will be most unsatisfactory."

"Where is this village—this Wrexton?"

"About fifteen miles away, I think—possibly more," replied the gov'nor. "I suggest that we visit the village at once, Mr. Strong. We can do the journey within half an hour easily. What do you say?"

"Decidedly—decidedly!" replied Sir Crawford agitatedly. "I will be ready within five minutes, Mr. Lee. Dear Heaven! I hope the boy is safe!"

The baronet retired from the room, walking rather unsteadily. He was merely going to don his boots, his great-coat, and his hat. Nelson Lee turned to me, and shook his head gravely.

"I am worried, Nipper," he said. "I do not wish to be unduly pessimistic, but the absence of any news concerning Mason is most disconcerting. That is why I intend paying a visit to the spot at once."

"Do you think Mason's—drowned, sir?" I asked, in a low voice.

"It would be foolish to ignore the possibility," said Nelson Lee quietly. "We know that Mason was practically a prisoner on board, and, therefore, in a sudden confusion, he would stand less chance than the others. I am terribly afraid, Nipper, that a tragedy has occurred. I pray that my fears are groundless."

"It's—it's terrible, sir!" I muttered. "Shall I—shall I tell the others? Shall I tell Pitt and Montie—"

"I do not see how we can avoid it," interrupted the gov'nor, going to the door. "Yes, Nipper, you may as well tell them, only do so quietly and in private. On no account allow the story to get abroad. And tell your chums that there is no reason for undue alarm. Mason will possibly turn up safe and sound, after all."

The gov'nor did not wait for any more, but hurried off to get his car ready. I thought about asking him to let me go, too, but I was afraid to. I didn't want to be in the way during such a grave journey. Besides, I realised my presence at St. Frank's would be required. I should have my hands quite full in keeping my chums and Pitt in hand.

Nelson Lee and Sir Crawford started off less than five minutes later—just as the breakfast-gong was sounding. I couldn't get the other fellows alone just then, and so I decided to wait until breakfast was over.

Then I got them into Study C together, and explained the reason for my pale, troubled face—for they had seen that something was wrong.

Needless to say, they were terribly startled. Pitt, if anything, was more affected than Tommy and Montie, although this was scarcely to be wondered at, for Mason had been Pitt's own particular chum.

"It's no good worrying," I said firmly. "All we know is that the ship has been sunk, but that doesn't mean to say that Mason has sunk, too. It's quite likely that he's rescued, and will be brought back by the gov'nor. If so, it'll really be all the better, because we shall be saved heaps of trouble."

I did my best to lighten the blow, but Reginald Pitt, at least, was not deceived. He knew that the chances were all against Mason having been rescued, and he scarcely said a thing. He seemed completely bowled over.

Packing was forgotten completely, and we waited, filled with anxiety and suspense, for the return of Nelson Lee and Sir Crawford Grey.

What news would they bring?

CHAPTER LIV.

THE TERRIBLE TRUTH!

WREXTON was a tiny place on the coast, miles from anywhere, so to speak. There was no railway-station within three or four miles, and no phone, either, for there was no post-office there, except a tiny shop where one could procure stamps.

The place was actually nothing more than a few fishermen's cottages hunched together on the shores of a small bay. And it was in this bay that a boat had put in its appearance in the early dawn, carrying the survivors from the Foreland.

Such news spread quickly, and all manner of stories concerning the collision were soon in circulation. That is why Nelson Lee was not positively certain of the actual state of affairs.

According to his information, five men had been saved. As a matter of fact, there were eight survivors, only two or three men having perished, for the Foreland had been a small steamer, and undermanned at that.

Nelson Lee's car descended a long, winding hill into the village just after nine o'clock. There was a certain animation about the place, the fisher-folk standing at their doors and talking together.

There was one small inn in the place, and Nelson Lee soon learned that the shipwrecked men had found accommodation there. The landlord of the place was only too willing to tell all that he knew.

"Yes, gentlemen, it was the Foreland that went down," he said, standing close against the ear, out in the road. "The captain was saved, an' he's in my parlour now. Several pore fellers was in a bad state, but I reckon they'll pull round. Sittin' in a boat with soakin' clothes in this weather ain't the treatment to do a man good."

"But is there a boy here—a schoolboy?" asked Sir Crawford quickly.

The landlord looked surprised. "A schoolboy, sir?" he repeated. "From off the wreck?"

"Yes, yes." "You're mistook, sir. There wasn't no school-boy," said the landlord. "Leastways, I ain't seen a sign o' one."

"Not a sign of any boy?" persisted Lee.

"No, sir; they was all men."

"Poor Jack—poor Jack!" exclaimed Sir Crawford dazedly. "He has been drowned, Mr. Lee. Oh, what a terrible catastrophe! What a ghastly ending to all my hopes!"

Nelson Lee set his teeth grimly.

"We will interview the captain, Sir Crawford," he said. "I have no doubt that we shall be able to gain some further information from him. You must not despair yet. There was probably another boat, and that may have found its way into another bay or port."

"I don't think so, gentlemen," said the landlord. "Still, there's no tellin'."

He escorted the visitors down the stone-flagged passage into the low-ceilinged parlour. Here two rough-looking men were seated before a roaring fire, with glasses of hot rum at their elbows.

"Good-morning!" said Nelson Lee. "I wish to have a few words with the captain of the steamship Foreland, which was in collision during the night."

"That's me, sir," said one of the men. "My name's Cap'n Davis. Wet might yours be?"

"I'm a Housemaster from St. Frank's College, and my name is Lee," replied the detective. "My inquiries are of an important nature, Captain Davis."

Lee had been eying the man narrowly without appearing to do so. And he had seen Captain Davis give a distinct start at the mention of St. Frank's College.

"I don't know wet inquiries you should make, sir," said the skipper. "I'm waitin' to hear from my owners. It was the fault o' that blasted schooner, ussain' through the fog like as if she was blind drunk. Stove a hole through our plates big enough to drive a bus through."

"How soon did the vessel sink?" asked Sir Crawford quickly.

"She filled afore we could turn round n'most," replied Captain Davis. "We only just got a boat clear by chance, an' some o' my poor fellers were sucked down afore they could be rescued."

"We are interested in a schoolboy named Jack Mason," said Nelson Lee steadily. "He was on your ship, Captain Davis, and we wish to know if he was rescued. I should advise you to be perfectly frank."

Captain Davis laughed unpleasantly.

"I don't know nothin' about no boy!" he exclaimed, with a shrug of his shoulders. "I don't know wet the gent's talkin' about, Bill. Do you?"

"Ain't the faintest idea," replied Bill—probably the mate.

"Then—then poor Jack went down?" asked Sir Crawford huskily.

"There was no boy on my ship," said the skipper roughly. "Wot's the good o' this talk? I don't carry passengers—least of all swell schoolboys. My ship wasn't a first-class liner."

"Then the lad was not on board?" asked the baronet, his eyes gleaming.

"Course 'e wasn't!"

"Thank Heaven for that——"

"My dear sir, you must not take that statement as being true," interrupted Nelson Lee sharply. "Please do not raise hopes in your breast which are certainly doomed to disappointment. Jack Mason was on board the Foreland when she sailed from Caistero last night."

"I s'pose you know best—hey?" demanded Captain Davis gruffly.

"In this case I do."

"Then I say that no boy was aboard my ship!" declared the skipper. "You'll be callin' me a liar next."

"That is quite possible!" snapped Nelson Lee curtly. "In fact, Captain Davis, I tell you to your face that you have been lying——"

"Wot?" roared the skipper, jumping up.

"I advise you to remain calm," went on Lee icily. "By maintaining this attitude, Captain Davis, you are doing yourself no good whatever. This tragedy has occurred, and you must surely realize that you are making your position highly dangerous by professing ignorance. I am not suggesting that the poor lad was deliberately left to his fate, but I know positively that he was on board. Why do you not admit the truth?"

The captain set his teeth.

"Becos it ain't the truth," he replied sullenly.

"Do you deny that you are acquainted with a man named Groll?"

"Yes. Leastways, I only know 'im to speak to," said Davis, rather confusedly. "Groll's no friend o' mine."

"Did he not visit your ship last night?"

"Wot's that got to do with it?"

"Everything."

"Well, there's no 'arm in my sayin' that Groll did come aboard for a few minutes?" growled the skipper. "But as for any boy, you must be dreamin'." "I've told you all I can, so——"

"You have not told me all, by any means," interrupted Lee. "Again let me urge you to tell me the truth. I understand that the Foreland is sunk in comparatively shallow water, and you may rest assured, Captain Davis, that a very thorough investigation will be made. If that lad's body is found imprisoned within the sunken vessel your

position will be a very grave one indeed—unless you are frank now."

There was a moment's silence. Captain Davis had obviously been taken aback, and his look was one of uneasiness and alarm. His attempt at bluster was palpable, and Nelson Lee was certain that he had been lying.

He had admitted that Grell had gone aboard the previous night—he could scarcely deny the fact—and, having admitted that much, he tacitly admitted the other. Pitt had seen Mason taken aboard by Grell, and there was not the slightest doubt that the poor lad had been on the vessel at the time of the collision.

"I should like to know who you are, to talk about my position?" demanded Captain Davis harshly. "I ain't responsible to you—"

"You are responsible for the life of the boy you carried on board your ship, you scoundrel!" shouted Sir Crawford. "You are the captain, and it is your duty to save every soul on board! You will go to the gallows for this, you infernal rascal!"

"I don't know nothin' of any boy!" persisted Davis uneasily. "The ship was ripped open, an' she sunk in a few minutes. I ain't desavin' that there might 'ave been a kid on board. It's quite probable 'e was."

"You are telling a different story now, my friend," said Nelson Lee grimly.

"How can a man think clearly when 'e's accused o' such things as wot you've been sayin'?" growled the skipper. "It's just struck me that this boy might 'ave come aboard on the quiet—a stowaway. I've 'ad such things afore, and I wouldn't say as it wasn't the case this time. If that boy was brought on board my ship it was done unknown to me, an' 'e must 'ave been stowed away somewhere without my knowin' it. That's all I can say."

"Were you on board when Grell arrived?"

"Yes," replied the captain. "Hin an' a pal o' his, named Starkey, came to 'ave a word with me. I was asleep when they come on deck, an' the crew was ashore. I ain't sayin' as Grell mightn't ha' shoved the boy down somewhere without my knowin' it. It's possible, although I can't say nothin' for sure. Any'er, its none to me that any kid was aboard my craft."

There was just a faint possibility that Captain Davis was telling the truth; that he was, indeed, in ignorance of Mason's presence. Grell might have placed the lad in some remote corner of the ship, unknown to the captain. But this theory was most unlikely, and Nelson Lee did not entertain it. He preferred to believe that Captain Davis was lying, and that, of course, was actually the case.

"Very well, captain," he said quietly. "I can do nothing but accept your story for the present. You may be sure, however, that the whole matter will be put before your owners and thoroughly investigated. I know that the boy was on board, and my main object in coming here was to learn if he had been rescued."

"We've seen no sign of 'im, sir," said Captain Davis. "If 'e was stowed away at the time of the collision, as you say, 'e's gone down with the ship—that's certain. I hope you're wrong, that's all."

Inwardly, Captain Davis' feelings were bitter. He called himself a fool for ever having listened to the soft tongue of Simon Grell. Davis knew well enough that Mason had been concealed below; but so long as he stuck to his story that the lad was a stowaway he was safe. Mason had gone down, and the fact alarmed Captain Davis more than he admitted to himself.

Realising that no more information could be obtained, Nelson Lee led the way out of the parlour, and returned with Sir Crawford to the

motor-car. The baronet walked as though stunned, and appeared to be quite dazed.

"I am terribly sorry that our inquiry has had such a tragic result," said Nelson Lee gravely. "There can be no doubt, Sir Crawford, that the poor boy is dead. I refrain from saying anything further, since I know that every word pains you exceedingly."

Sir Crawford looked up dully. "Oh, what a ghastly catastrophe, Mr. Lee!" he said, his voice a mere whisper. "I do not know how I shall be able to stand this awful shock. There is no hope now—no hope whatever. The poor boy—Heaven has been unkind!"

They took their seats in the car, and Nelson Lee made no further comment as they drove back towards St. Frank's. There was no need to make further inquiries. The captain of the ship himself had stated that Mason, if aboard, had perished. And who could know better than the captain?

The schooner which had been in collision with the *Ferndale* had not been seen since, but it was presumed that the vessel was still out in the fog, or it was quite possible that she had gone to the bottom, too. In any case, that side of the affair was of no importance.

Nelson Lee was greatly shocked by this news of Jack Mason's untimely death. He knew that a gloom would be cast over the whole school, in spite of the fact that the Christmas holidays were just commencing.

And there was another aspect of the case to be considered.

Simon Grell, hearing the news, would have no occasion to visit the London docks—by which means Nelson Lee had hoped to entrap him. Grell would lie low, and there was no way of finding out where he was. And he had the gold lockets, which was now truly valuable—from a sentimental point of view alone—to the bereaved Sir Crawford.

The whole affair had taken a turn which had never been deemed possible. This tragedy was terrible, and Nelson Lee himself was far more affected than he would have believed possible.

Jack Mason had been one of the best fellows in the Ancient House, and it was very hard that he should have been taken just when there was a possibility of proof being forthcoming that he was the son of Sir Crawford Grey.

Nelson Lee's heart was heavy within him as he drove in at the gateway of St. Frank's. Naturally enough, it was on the watch, keenly anxious, and Watson, Tregellis-West, and Pitt were with me.

"What's the news, sir?" asked Pitt huskily.

We dreaded to hear the answer, for the absence of Mason in the car seemed sufficiently convincing. Nelson Lee climbed out of the driving-seat and looked at us steadily. He also saw that other fellows were drawing near, and their curiosity was aroused.

"Come into my study, boys!" said Nelson Lee quietly.

We followed him in, and Sir Crawford Grey accompanied us. And then, amid a dead silence, the gov'nor told us the dreadful news. We were all immeasurably shocked, and Pitt's face had gone as white as a sheet.

"And I saw him taken on board," he muttered, his voice quivering. "Oh, what a fool I was! Why didn't I risk everything and pull him back? It's my fault—all my fault! I was a coward, a funk! I ought to have rushed forward and saved him before he was taken—"

"Do not talk so wildly, Pitt," interrupted Nelson Lee, going over and putting the boy's shoulder. "You were a coward? What nonsense! You acted in the most courageous manner, and this tragedy was entirely unforeseen by us all."

It was an indication of the complete change in

Pitt's character. The lad was totally different now, and this blow had unsewed him, and robbed him of that coolness which had been so characteristic.

It was pitiful to see him. Sir Montie and Tenney were terribly upset, but they did not reveal their feelings in this manner—neither did I. Not that we did not care. We felt the blow in the most unmistakable fashion. But poor Pitt was bowled over, and I felt a lump in my throat as I heard those sob.

CHAPTER LV.

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED.

JACK MASON was in the same position as that once occupied by the late lamented Mr. Mark Twain—the report of his death had been “grossly exaggerated.” He was just about as dead as I was!

He was certainly a prisoner, but he was quite unharmed.

He sat upon the floor in darkness and discomfort, for there was nothing soft for him to lie upon, and the cold was really intense. The Removite was shivering, and chilled in every limb.

Possibly he dozed as he sat. At all events, he lost count of time, and suddenly realized that the door was being unlocked. He got to his feet stiffly, and blinked as the light of a lantern flashed into the store-room.

“Here we are, my lad!” said the gruff voice of the skipper, not unkindly. “Why, darn me if you ain’t here all over! I meant to come afore, kid, but this blamed fog kep’ me at the wheel. It’s only because I’m kind’erated that I’m down ’ere now. I couldn’t abear to think o’ you sufferin’.”

This was probably hater for the most part, but there might have been a few grains of sincerity in the skipper’s remark. For he brought with him three thick, warm blankets, a plate of bread and meat, and a tin mug of hot tea. Jack felt almost grateful as he saw this.

“No need to look scared,” went on the captain. “You won’t come to no ’arm, youngster. Git this ’ot tea inside o’ you to begin with.”

“I didn’t expect you’d think of me at all,” said Mason huskily.

“Which only shows that you don’t know me,” replied the skipper. “I ain’t a ’ard-hearted brute like Simon Grel. You needn’t ’ave no fear that I—”

“Can’t you tell me why I’m being taken to London?” asked Jack, half eagerly.

“That ain’t my business, young feller-me-lad,” replied Davis. “I’d tell you in a minute if I knew, but I don’t. You don’t look a bad sort o’ kid, and I’m ’arf sorry I took the job on. Still, I can’t make you wink back, so you’ll ’ave to put up with it now. I’ll make things comfy— By thunder! Wet’s that?”

The captain half leaned out of the doorway and anxiously looked up the passage. Several raucous shouts rang down from the deck, and the thudding of heavy feet could be heard. In addition, both the skipper and Jack Mason heard the engine-room telegraph sharply clang “Full speed astern.”

“Something wrong,” growled Davis harshly. “I must go, boy—”

Cr-r-r-rash!

It was a deep, rending sound, like the tearing of heavy sheets of metal and the splintering of wood-work. Captain Davis and Jack Mason were flung down violently, and the lamp went out. There was just one moment of silence, and then a perfect pandemonium of yells and shouts sounded on deck.

The skipper awoke furiously, and blundered away, but not before he had slammed the door of the

store-room. In the darkness he did not see that the lamp prevented the door closing. And the skipper, in that moment of crisis, was thinking of his ship, and not of the prisoner.

Jack was quivering with excitement. He knew well enough that an accident had happened, and he believed that the Foreland had struck some rocks in the fog. At all events, the door of his prison was open, and he hurried out.

Feeling his way along the passage, he reached the companion at once, and nimbly got to the deck. He could see nothing, for a dense fog blotted out every object more than a yard distant. But yells and curses filled the air.

Running forward blindly Jack suddenly became aware of the fact that the deck was splintered and wrecked. Voices appeared to be coming from immediately below him. He peered forward and downwards.

Whether the mist swirled away for a few moments, or whether Jack’s eyes had become more accustomed to the conditions, he didn’t exactly know. But he saw the fore-castle of a wooden sailing-ship right before him. It was wrecked and splintered, embedded into the side of the old tramp steamer.

The two vessels were locked together, but this state of affairs wouldn’t last for long. Water was pouring in through the gaps at a tremendous pace, and it would enter in one great body as soon as the two ships drifted apart.

Both vessels were damaged, but the Foreland was positively doomed. Her plates were as rotten as cardboard, and the bows of the sailing-ship had dug their way clean through.

Jack was wildly excited, and he acted in a manner which surprised him considerably when he thought over it afterwards in cool moments. The main idea which dinned through his brain was to get away—to escape from this ship which was a prison.

And, unseen by a soul, he took a flying leap down on to the fore-castle of the other ship. Jack didn’t realise the desperation of that act at all at the moment. It seemed quite a natural thing to do.

But barely ten seconds later the two ships drifted apart and lost one another in the fog. The sound of the rushing waters, as they tore into the Foreland, could plainly be heard. The old steamer was filling like a riddled bucket.

The leap which Jack had made had been nothing in itself, the distance being comparatively slight. He landed squarely on a sail, which had probably tumbled down as a consequence of the impact. At all events, Jack was grazed upon the stiff, rough canvas, and he lay for some moments, hardly daring to breathe.

The confusion around him seemed worse than ever. The hoarse cries of rough men sounded on all sides. But these were different men. The Foreland, crippled and sinking, had vanished into the enveloping mist.

After a while Jack became less excited, and wondered if he had bettered his position or made it worse. He told himself that it was probably better, because this vessel might be making for one of the small south-coast ports. And, in any case, it was splendid to know that Simon Grel was defeated. Jack would not fall into his rascally uncle’s hands again.

This thought, coming to him suddenly, gave him such comfort. And he burrowed his way into the mass of canvas and lay quiet. His common-sense told him that this was no opportune time for him to reveal his presence aboard. It would be far better to remain hidden until the confusion had passed.

An uneasy feeling was stealing over him—a

sensation of utter loneliness and isolation. The absence of human voices was no longer a comfort to him, but something to be dreaded. He wanted to be found now, and he cleared his throat and gave a lusty hail.

There was no answering sound, except the continuous splash of the sea.

Jack felt something move against his feet, and he looked down with a start. Then his fears were allayed, for he saw that the "something" was a cat.

The animal was purring loudly, and proceeded to rub itself against Jack's legs, as though pleased at having found company.

"All right, old son!" said Jack, bending down and stroking the cat.

Again he gave a hail, but there was no reply. And he moved forward amidships, finding it necessary to grasp some support occasionally. The rolling was not severe, for the sea was calm, but Jack was unaccustomed to ships.

He arrived at the poop, and paced the quarter-deck in solitary state, except for the cat, which had closely followed him.

And now the truth came to him.

While he had been lying under the canvas the officers and crew had taken to the boats, abandoning the ship! They had known nothing of Jack's presence, and so had not searched for him. Apparently they had taken to the boats in a panic, but the fact that they had gone was significant.

For it meant that the ship was sinking, and Jack now noticed that the list was far more pronounced, and a soft, steady, roaring noise impressed itself upon his ears.

The schooner was going down, and the only person on board was Jack Mason? Not a being remained, and he was shut in by the enveloping mist.

The position was startling enough to any experienced seaman, let alone a mere schoolboy. Jack breathed quickly, and his blood seemed to run cold when he realised the dreadful truth.

He was alone—alone on a sinking ship!

Just for a few moments Jack Mason stood quite still, hardly able to grasp the full peril of his position.

But then activity quickly returned, and he knew that he must do something to save himself. There was nobody else to rely upon now. And yet there was no boat, and he hadn't the faintest idea how far from land he was, or what dangers there were to face.

It was dark, and the fog was thick. It would be necessary for him to grope about to find the various articles which were needed for the manufacture of something which would give him support in the water.

The lad's excitement had passed now, and he faced the situation coolly and steadily. The best had come, and Jack Mason did not fail. He knew well enough that death would almost certainly follow if he plunged into the water with only a grab, or something of that nature, to support him.

It was December, and the sea was icy. He couldn't endure a long immersion in the water. After an hour or two at the most he would become numbed and frozen, and would slip down to his death.

The chance of being picked up was remote, unless the fog cleared. This did not seem likely by the look of it. Jack, of course, was unaccustomed to sea fogs, or he would have known that this was probably a belt of mist, which might drift off at any moment without warning.

But even if the fog did go his position would not be much improved. Ships did not pass in crowds, and if this sinking schooner went to the bottom

and left Jack struggling in the water, it was very unlikely that he would be seen.

All this was perfectly clear to Jack Mason, and he knew, therefore, that his only chance of surviving was to construct a raft upon which he could stand clear of the water. Even this exposure would be bad enough, for he would certainly be wet through with spray in no time. The situation was a desperate one, and there was no sense in overlooking that fact.

And there was no telling how long the schooner would last. She might go down at once, within ten minutes, or she might remain afloat for an hour. These thoughts were worrying, but there was no sense in anticipating disaster.

Jack set to work with a will, the cat keeping close to him constantly. The animal apparently knew that the ship was doomed. As Jack worked he wondered whether he had acted wisely or foolishly in jumping from the Foreland. It almost seemed as though he had merely jumped out of the frying-pan only to land in the fire.

But, upon second thoughts, Jack felt sure that his action had been for the best. The Foreland must have sank within a minute or two, and probably a great number of the crew had perished. Here, at least, Jack was safe so far, and he had no intention of looking upon the worst side of things.

He was alive, and he meant to remain alive if it could be managed. The deck was littered with all sorts of debris, and Jack remembered reading a sea story in which a party of shipwrecked men constructed a raft with empty barrels.

There were three or four here, rolling about rather dangerously as the ship lurched. With great difficulty Jack managed to bind some long spars to the barrels, and in the end he constructed a platform about four feet wide by eight feet long. The whole thing might capsize as soon as he launched it, but that would have to be chance. And the launch in itself would be no easy task.

Scowder or other he must get the thing over-side, and quickly, too, for the sailing ship was now assuming an acute angle, being right down by the bows, her stern clear of the water.

He was so busy at his task that he lost count of time, and forgot to worry about the possibility of the ship sinking under his feet, and sucking him down into the vortex of icy waters.

The chilling numbness had left him, too, the exercise putting him into a glow of warmth which almost made him cheerful. He was perspiring freely, indeed, and at last surveyed his handiwork with much satisfaction.

"A pretty rotten job, but it's the best I can do," he told himself. "But how the dickens am I going to get it overboard?"

He looked up, having an idea that he might be able to make use of the hand winch, which was provided for use in discharging the cargo. By the aid of this he might be able to sling the raft over the side into the water.

And as he looked up he gave a start.

The dawn had come, and the fog was showing drab grey instead of black. He had been so busy that he hadn't noticed the change until now. The time was evidently getting on, and the hour must have been between seven and eight.

Jack's watch had stopped because he hadn't wound it, and he had no means of telling the time—not that it mattered at all. But a sudden thrill of excitement came over him, and he looked all round into the enveloping mist. Everything was hidden from him except the sea in the immediate vicinity of the ship.

Now and again he had heard the hooting of a steamer in the distance. At first this had given him sudden hope; but he soon lost it, knowing that

a dozen ships might be within a mile, and his position would be scarcely improved.

But for the last hour he had heard nothing, and knew that the schooner had either drifted near the shore, or that he was now out of the track of other vessels.

He was rather surprised that the ship had not sunk yet, but he knew that it would be foolish to entertain hopes. She might slip beneath the surface at any moment, and it was highly necessary to get the raft afloat as quickly as possible.

But it was easier said than done.

By toiling hard he at last managed to get the rough thing close against the starboard side of the schooner, and slung a rope round it, and then looked it on to the winch fastening. By now daylight had come, and the fog had cleared slightly. But the angle of the deck was ominous, and Jack made all haste.

His exertions, however, were such that it was positively necessary to take a breather before long. And then he became aware of a dull noise over towards the port side, and he started.

It was the sound of waves breaking upon rocks. And Jack ran over the deck and leaned against the side, peering through the mist. At first he could see nothing, but then, dimly, he made out the outlines of jagged rocks immediately ahead—that is, to the port side of the ship.

And she was drifting that way!

The lad forgot all about his attempts to float the raft, and stood there, watching. Five minutes passed perhaps, but they seemed like hours to Jack. The rocks crept nearer and nearer, and became more clearly defined.

Crash!

It was not at all violent—just a dull thud, which caused the decks to quiver and the rigging overhead to tremble. But the schooner was stationary, except for a rocking motion as it lifted to the waves.

In a rough sea the vessel would have smashed to atoms on those rocks within ten minutes. But the sea was now comparatively calm, and the schooner had simply drifted aimlessly ashore.

The impact with the rocks had stove her side in, for Jack could distinctly hear a fresh sound of rushing water. The old craft would sink now, and it was quite possible that she would fall back into deep water.

And then the mist cleared as if by magic, although there was nothing remarkable in this. Such fogs are generally shifting about, and for it to lift in this way was quite commonplace.

Jack found himself gazing upon a rough stretch of coast-line, with frowning cliffs immediately ahead, and rocks strewn about in great confusion. There was no sign of any human habitation, and it was several moments before he could realize that this coast was British.

The idea struck him, in fact, that the ship had drifted on to some rocky island, and he wasn't quite sure even now that such was not the case. At all events, that could wait. The most important thing was to get ashore.

The rocks against which the ship had struck were isolated, being some little distance from the shore. Jack gave all his attention to the raft once more, and by sheer physical effort he managed to hoist it so that it was almost balanced. A heavy push then sent it plunging overboard.

But the lad had secured it with ropes, so that there was no danger of it drifting away. It plunged beneath the surface at first, but rapidly came up, and assumed an even "keel."

"Ripping!" muttered Jack excitedly.

He knew that he would be able to propel the unstable craft to a point from which he could reach

safety. The schooner's crew had taken all the boats, but a couple of oars were lying amongst the litter, and Jack seized one of them.

He didn't forget the cat, but caught it up in his arms and scrambled down a rope slowly and awkwardly. He felt extremely unsafe, once upon the raft, for it bobbed about in the most disconcerting fashion.

At length, however, he succeeded in pushing off towards the shore, using his oar as a paddle. The poor cat, drenched with spray, crouched low, probably knowing that safety lay within sight if it only remained still.

How Jack got the raft ashore he didn't exactly know. It was a terribly long job, for the current carried him half across the rugged bay, finally landing him at a spot he had never expected to arrive at.

The cat was ashore first. It simply streaked across the rocky beach and vanished before Jack had got his foot ashore. He didn't mind much, for the animal was not exactly handsome, and as long as it was safe Jack was content.

His feelings as he set foot upon solid ground were deep, for he had almost given himself up for lost on one or two occasions. But now he was safe, and he watched the raft drift back into the waves quite contentedly. It had served its purpose, and nothing more had been expected of it.

The next thing was to find out where he was, and he suddenly became aware that he was enormously hungry and rather faint. His desperate position had made him forget fatigue; but now that the danger had passed he was feeling the effects of his perilous adventure.

Fortunately, he was not wet through. Only his feet were really soaked, and his legs had been splashed well past the knees. But Jack was remarkably fortunate in having escaped so luckily, and he was intensely grateful.

He set his teeth, and marched up the beach to the cliff. He found that he would be able to climb the rocks to the summit, and he set about the task with a will. The exertion warmed him up again, and by the time he was at the top of the cliff he was glowing in the cold, wintry air.

His feelings were higher than ever now, and he presently found himself in the street of a little village. He meant to inquire where he was, but knew that such an inquiry would look curious, and it would be necessary for him to explain. However, it had to be done, he decided.

But it was unnecessary, after all, for before he saw anybody he noticed an old signpost at the corner of a branch road, and he glanced up at it. That first look told him, at all events, that he was in England. For the sign read: "To Hallbury Station, 2 miles."

That was quite good enough for Jack. There was obviously no station here, or the signpost wouldn't have that inscription. Jack set off at a brisk pace.

Hallbury, he found, was quite a decent little town. He could see it nestling in a hollow as he approached, and the first thing he encountered was the station, which couldn't have been better.

He immediately made inquiries, and found that he was barely forty miles from St. Frank's, and that a train would take him to Beilton, via Bannington, within forty minutes—that is, it would draw into Hallbury in forty minutes' time. The journey itself took an hour and a half.

There was a little refreshment-room on the station, and he eagerly purchased some sandwiches and some hot coffee. The coffee was vile and the sandwiches were stale, but Jack Mason thought he had never tasted nicer food or drink in his life.

He was feeling wonderfully refreshed when he took his seat in the train. He hadn't sent any

telegram, although he would have preferred to do so. But there was no office at the station—at least, it wasn't open—and the post-office was right in the town.

However, perhaps it would be just as well to give everybody a surprise, for Jack was quite sure that Mr. Strong and Nelson Lee were worrying over him, to say nothing of Pitt and the other fellows.

Altogether, Jack Mason had passed through a remarkable adventure, but he didn't seem to be much impressed, for the first thing he did after leaving Hallbury was to close his eyes and fall sound asleep.

CHAPTER LVI.

BACK FROM THE DEAD!

NELSON LEE cleared his throat. "You must try to control yourself, Pitt, my boy," he said kindly. "I am greatly touched by this grief on your part, but matters will not be mended by giving way to despair."

"But—but Mason's dead, sir!" muttered Pitt huskily. "There's no hope at all. He went down in that ship. Is there any hope, sir?" he added, looking up quickly. "Just a spark of hope—"

"No, Pitt, I am afraid that I can give you no comfort whatever," replied Lee. "It would be cruel for me to tell you that there might be a chance, because everything points to the fact that the poor boy met his death."

Sir Crawford Grey rose to his feet, pale and ill. "But there is a chance, Mr. Lee—a faint, flimsy chance, I will admit," he said. "Poor Jack has not been found, and is it not possible that he has been picked up by some outward-bound ship?"

"It is possible, of course," agreed Nelson Lee gravely.

"Great Scott!" I yelled. I was staring out into the Triangle, and the exclamation had left my lips involuntarily. Just for a few seconds I thought that I was off my head, and I went hot all over and quivered in every limb.

For Jack Mason had just entered the gateway! "What is the matter, Nipper?" asked the gov'nor sharply.

"Nun-nothing, sir!" I gasped. "I—I didn't mean to yell out like that. Let's be going, you chaps!" I added hurriedly.

Mason had passed out of view of the window by now, and I knew that the others in the room couldn't see him. I rushed to the door, and Sir Montie and Tommy followed me. Nelson Lee looked after us with a frown, but Sir Crawford and Pitt took no notice.

Outside in the passage my chums seized me. "Yes—you unfeeling rotter!" said Watson, glaring.

"I must admit that Tommy is quite right," said Sir Montie severely. "I'm surprised at you, Nipper—I am, really! Fancy yelling out like that—"

"I think I'm dotty!" I exclaimed, breathing hard.

"I jolly well know you are!" snapped Watson.

"I saw Mason," I said deliberately. "I saw him come in at the gateway, as briskly as anything—"

"You saw Mason!" gasped Sir Montie.

"Yes."

"Dear fellow, it's too bad of you," said Tregellios-West sadly. "You oughtn't to imagine those things durin' such a time of grief. It was somebody else you saw, old fellow. Mason's dead, poor chap—"

"Come along to the lobby!" I said huskily.

To tell the truth, I half believed that I had been dreaming, for after the evidence we had received

it seemed utterly impossible that Jack Mason could have appeared at St. Frank's.

I had heard of visions, and I found myself thinking queer things as I hastened down the passage. Visions have often been seen at the moment of a person's death. Perhaps Jack Mason had died at that very moment. But I wasn't convinced. It seemed too preposterous.

We entered the lobby and found it deserted, except for Owen major. He regarded us curiously. "Anything up?" he asked. "Any ghosts about, or what? Have you been putting white paint on your faces?"

"Did—did you see Mason just now?" I gasped. Owen major jerked his head towards the study passage.

"Yes," he replied shortly. "Mason came in a minute ago."

"What!" shrieked Watson.

"Oh, begad!"

Owen major stared more than ever. "Blest if I can see anything to yell at!" he said impatiently. "Mason ain't a ghost, I suppose? He looked a bit untidy, I'll admit, but that's his business. I thought he went away for the holidays last night."

We didn't wait to hear any more, but rushed down the Remove passage like three maniacs. The door of Study E was ajar, and we piled in one after the other. And there, standing in the middle of the study, was Jack Mason!

"It's—it's his spirit!" panted Watson fearfully.

"Where's Pitt?" asked the apparition, in almost matter-of-fact tones. "I've been anxious about him—"

"Anxious about him?" I shouted. "He's all right. But we've been worried terribly over you, Mason. We thought you were dead. We thought you'd gone down on the Foreland. Oh, my goodness! It's ripping to see you alive!"

Jack Mason smiled.

"I've had a narrow squeak," he said wearily. "I thought you'd be worrying, somehow. Where's Mr. Strong? I hope he hasn't left the school yet, and I hope that I haven't caused anybody a lot of trouble through—"

"Dear fellow, there's goin' to be an explosion soon!" said Sir Montie solemnly. "Pitt will nearly go off his head when he finds you're safe. Begad! It's too good for words. I'm so frightfully pleased I don't know what to say. Dear old boy, let's feel if your hand's solid!"

The next moment we were vigorously shaking hands with Mason, and there was no longer any doubt in our minds that he was real enough. In some miraculous fashion he had escaped, and had come to tell us the news in person.

"I'm glad I didn't say anything in the gov'nor's study!" I exclaimed, with glittering eyes. "By jingo! What a surprise we'll give 'em! Mr. Strong will be sent into a fit with delight if we don't set to work carefully."

"And so will Pitt!" put in Watson.

"Pitt?" echoed Mason. "Why, Pitt isn't cut up, is he?"

"You don't know how you've changed Pitt this last month or two," I said quietly. "We all thought you were dead, Mason, and Pitt absolutely broke down and sobbed. He's a splendid chap, and you'll never be able to thank him when you find out what he did for you last night."

Mason's eyes gleamed.

"I'm glad," he said slowly. "Good old Pitt!"

"I'll go along first," I went on. "You'd better come with Tommy and Montie, Mason. Stand just outside the door while I break the news. I honestly believe that if you walk straight in you'll cause a terrific commotion."

Mason couldn't quite believe it, but I decided

that it would be better to give a hint in advance. And we went down the passage again and halted outside Nelson Lee's door. I plosed my finger to my lips, and then tapped on the panel.

"Oh, it's you, Nipper!" said Nelson Lee, as I entered. "Good gracious! You're looking quite excited, young 'un!"

Sir Crawford Grey was now heading over Pitt, talking to him quietly. They both looked up at me as they heard the gov'nor's words. And I suppose I was looking rather excited, too.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Sir Crawford. "Dear me! Have you heard any fresh news, Nipper? I sincerely trust so."

"Well, sir, I have got a bit of news," I admitted cautiously.

"Concerning Jack?"

"Yes, sir."

"What is it—what is it?" demanded Pitt, almost fiercely. "What news have you heard, Nipper? Is he alive? Has he been saved? Get it out, man. I can see you've you've heard something startling!" "You mustn't anticipate, Pitt!" protested Nelson Lee, in distress. "You will only receive a fresh disappointment—"

"I don't think so," I interrupted serenely. "Pitt happens to be right. Jack Mason has been saved!"

"What!" shouted Pitt.

"Good gracious me!" gasped Sir Crawford. "Open my soul! I—I hope your information is correct, Nipper. I pray Heaven that it is correct. Dear me! I really do not know what to say!"

"I only hope that Nipper has not spoken prematurely," said Nelson Lee gravely. "Tell me, young 'un, where did you get this information? Why are you so sure of its authenticity? I can scarcely believe that Mason is alive."

"You will in a minute, sir," I grinned. "Smile, everybody. There's nothing to worry over at all. I thought I'd better break the news gently, because it's a bit startling. Mason is not only safe, but he's here!"

"At—at St. Frank's?" shouted Pitt excitedly.

"Yes, I'm here all right," said Jack Mason, entering the study. "I didn't know that you were so concerned—"

But his voice was drowned the next second. Pitt dashed up to him and grabbed his hand. Just for the time his custom was such that he couldn't articulate his words, but the warmth of his grip was eloquent enough. And Jack was in Sir Crawford's embrace almost immediately, much to his surprise and embarrassment. He hadn't known that "Mr. Strong" cared for him so much.

"My boy—my boy!" exclaimed the baronet fervently. "Thank Heaven that you are safe! But I am amazed. I am bewildered. This sudden appearance is like a miracle, for we had given you up for lost!"

"You have evidently a remarkable story to tell us, Mason," said Nelson Lee. "How you escaped from the Foreland is quite beyond my comprehension, for I observe that you have not even received an immersion."

"I've had an awful time, sir," said Jack Mason quietly. "But I can't understand how you knew I was on the Foreland at all."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"I think it would be as well if we had explanations all round," he said. "We are naturally anxious to hear your story, Mason, and so we should like you to relate it at once. Afterwards you shall bear our side."

"One moment, Mr. Lee," interrupted Sir Crawford concernedly. "Perhaps Jack is hungry and thirsty. Would it not be better to provide him with—"

"That's all right, sir," interrupted Jack. "I

had some coffee and sandwiches at Hallbury Station, and I'm all right for a bit. I want to tell you everything, and to know all the rest before I have anything else to eat."

So, without further delay, Jack Mason related exactly what had occurred, and we listened with great interest. He told the story in simple language, and tried to make out that he had done nothing at all remarkable.

But we knew well enough that this was only his modesty, for it was quite evident that he had acted in a manner that was worthy of the utmost praise. In conclusion, he put in a word for Captain Davis of the Foreland.

"I don't think he's actually bad, sir," said Mason. "It was my uncle who took me on board the ship, and Captain Davis didn't much care for the idea of keeping me a prisoner. He was giving me some warm blankets and some food when the collision occurred, and told me that I shouldn't be hurt. I don't think it would be fair to prosecute him. My uncle was to blame entirely."

"Not entirely, Mason," said Nelson Lee. "Captain Davis acted in a disreputable manner by imprisoning you in the first place, but I don't think he realized the gravity of the offence, and I am sure we shall not trouble to prosecute him, since you do not wish it. As for your own part in the affair, I can only tell you that I am filled with the greatest admiration."

"Admiration!" echoed Sir Crawford, his eyes gleaming. "Why, bless my soul, the lad is a wonder! You have covered yourself with glory, Jack, and I cannot find words to express my intense pride. You were in a most frightful predicament, and yet, by your own efforts alone, you managed to extricate yourself unharmed. But you must not think that we did not attempt to aid you."

"How did you know I was on the Foreland, sir?"

"It was Pitt's doing," replied Sir Crawford. "Pitt distinguished himself wonderfully last night, and—"

"Oh, I say, sir!" protested Pitt.

"You may say what you like, my boy, but the fact remains that you proved your pluck and loyalty in a most remarkable manner," said the baronet. "It seemed that sheer disaster had occurred; but Heaven has been merciful. My boy, I am grateful that you have been spared."

And Sir Crawford placed a gentle hand upon Jack's shoulder.

Jack looked worried.

"I can't understand why my uncle tried to get me away, sir," he said slowly. "And it's not necessary to go after him now, is it? I'm safe, and he can't do me any further harm—"

"My dear lad, you do not understand," interrupted Sir Crawford. "Your uncle stole a gold locket from this very room last night—a locket which is of the utmost value to me. Half of it was yours, I am told—"

"Why, is there another half, sir?" asked Mason, in surprise. "I had heard that that sealed package of yours contained the other half of my locket, but I couldn't believe it. It seems so impossible."

"You may well say that, Jack," replied Sir Crawford. "But there is a secret concerning that locket which may prove something absolutely wonderful. I hardly dare speak of the matter now, until some reliable evidence is forthcoming. It is most important that the locket should be recovered, so that inquiries may be made."

"Our main difficulty is that we do not know where Groll is situated," said Nelson Lee thoughtfully. "Close inquiry, perhaps, will aid us in locating—"

"Why, I think I can tell you something, sir," put in Jack quickly. "My uncle was talking with

that man Starkey, and he said that he would stay at lodgings in Wapping until the ship arrived."

Nelson Lee turned quickly. "Indeed!" he exclaimed. "This is very interesting, Mason. Did Grell mention any address? Think carefully."

"Well, sir, it wasn't an absolute address," replied Jack. "Mr. Uncle said that he and Starkey would stay at Mother Somebody's, in George Terrace, Wapping."

"Dear me! That is quite sufficient," said Lee grimly. "I have little doubt, Mason, that the name was Hackett—Mother Hackett's."

"That's the name, sir," replied Jack promptly. "How did you know?"

"It is a somewhat notorious lodging-house," smiled the gun'or, "and Mother Hackett is very well known to the police. So Mr. Grell is staying there? Our troubles are greatly reduced, for we can lay hands upon Grell at once. I really think we had better start for London without delay—or—Mr. Strong."

Sir Crawford chuckled. "Don't you think that my little deception has gone far enough?" he asked. "I have a mind to tell the boys the truth, Mr. Lee."

"It would certainly do no harm," admitted Nelson Lee smilingly.

"What deception, sir?" asked Jack, looking puzzled.

"I must plead guilty to having played a little trick upon you, Jack," said Sir Crawford, placing his arms round the lad's shoulders. "When you saved my life some months ago I readily saw that you were not in prosperous circumstances, and I felt that you would be embarrassed if you knew that I was rich. So I called myself 'Mr. Strong,' and made you believe that I was quite poor."

"But—but aren't you Mr. Strong?" asked Jack amazedly.

"No, my boy; that is merely a name," replied the baronet. "I thought that you would be uncomfortable if you knew my real name, which is Sir Crawford Grey. But I am not a terrible person, and—"

"Well, I'm figgered!" exclaimed Tommy Watson bluntly. "Then—then you're a baronet, sir—like old Montie?"

Sir Crawford chuckled. "Exactly—exactly!" he agreed. "Like old Montie. Baronets are quite common, I can assure you, Jack, and you won't think any the worse of me, will you? I was usually sensitive, perhaps, and I deeply apologise—"

"Oh, I say, sir!" protested Jack, flushing. "You needn't do that! It doesn't make much difference what your name is, does it?—You're just the same, and I shall always look upon you as the first real friend I ever had in the world."

"I could wish for nothing better," said Sir Crawford quietly. "But stay! I do wish for something better, lad. I pray to Heaven that I shall be more than a friend to you before long. There is a chance that— Oh, I mustn't speak now!" he added, shaking his head. "I am filled with high hopes, but the matter is not certain. There, there, lad! You look puzzled, and I'm not surprised. But all will come straight before long."

Jack knew that his curiosity was not to be satisfied. Already he was filled with wonder, and couldn't in the least understand the affair of the gold locket.

And Nelson Lee, after glancing at his watch, laid down the law.

"Now, Nipper," he said briskly. "Take Mason away, and get the mutton to supply him with a hearty meal at once, or you can make something up in your own study if you like. After that you must get yourselves ready quickly, for we start for

London by one o'clock, if possible. I thought about going by train originally, but the weather is fine and we might as well go by motor-car."

"Who, sir?" asked Watson eagerly. "Sir Crawford, Mason, Nipper, Montie, and yourself," replied the gun'or. "Of course, Pitt is at liberty to come if he wishes to." Nelson Lee turned to Pitt. "But I don't know your arrangements, my boy."

"I'd love to come with you, sir—with Jack," said Pitt eagerly.

"Then you shall," smiled Lee. "Thank you, sir!" said Pitt gratefully. "Oh, isn't it simply splendid!" he added, with shining eyes. "An hour ago everything was terrible, but now I feel that I could jump for joy."

"You'd better go in the Triangle, then," chuckled Nelson Lee.

Good humour was completely restored. The change in us all was remarkable—most particularly in Sir Crawford Grey. The worried lines had left his face, and he was looking not a year older than fifty.

Pitt came with us while he gave Jack some breakfast—or, at least, a meal, for it was getting on for dinner-time. And in due course we got ourselves ready, and reported ourselves at Nelson Lee's study by a quarter to one.

Jack Mason was looking wonderfully fresh, considering the nature of the adventure he had recently passed through. Attired in a new suit, washed and tidy, he seemed as though he had spent the night in bed, instead of on the sea, struggling to escape from death.

We didn't waste much time over bidding the other fellows good-bye. As a matter of fact, the rest of the juniors were busy with their own concerns, and they didn't notice that anything special was going on. It was quite usual for motor-cars to take juniors home for the holidays.

At last we started, and we little guessed that this trip was to mean a great deal more than appeared on the surface—at least, for Jack Mason.

CHAPTER LVII.

TRAPPED!

JAKE STARKEY filled his pipe with a rather shaky hand.

"I don't like it, Simon," he said nervously. "The boy's dead—as dead as wot this 'ere piece o' beef is on the table. An' we're responsible, in a way o' speakin'. There'll be trouble—"

"Slow your lip!" snapped Simon Grell savagely. "You always was a croaker, Jake. There's no danger, you fool. We sha'n't come to no harm. How was we to know that the ship would sink? We didn't try to kill the kid, did we? It means the loss of five thousand quid to us, more or less."

"Yes; but you put the boy on board," said Starkey. "If the truth ever gets out, Simon, we shall find ourselves in a queer fix. Wot about Davis? As likely as not he'll give us away."

Grell shook his head. "Cap'n Davis won't be such a blamed fool!" he said confidently. "He'll keep his tongue between his teeth an' say nothing. He's got himself to think of, don't forget. Why, if the truth came out he'd suffer more than we should."

But Starkey was not comforted. He was very nervous, and made no attempt to hide his feelings. The rascally pair were seated in a rear apartment at Mother Hackett's, in George Terrace, Wapping.

It was getting on towards evening. In fact, the blinds had already been drawn, and the incandescent gas was alight.

"We're all right, in any case!" Grell declared.

"Supposin' the kid's body is found, wot then? Why, Davis will say he didn't know nothin' about the boy bein' aboard, and every member of the crew will bear out the statement. It'll be took that Jack was a stowaway, an' there's nobody to blame for his death but himself. From the way you talk, Jake, anybody might think that we tried to kill the kid."

"An' wot are we goin' to do?" asked Starkey.

"I wanted that money to pay our expenses out to Africa," went on Groll thoughtfully. "Well, it's no good grumblin'. We shall have to do the best we can without the money. Arter all, we've got the locket, an' that's the main thing."

"Supposin' there ain't any treasure—"

Simon Groll swore.

"You're always supposin', darn you!" he snapped harshly. "The treasure's there—I heard Sir Crawford say so 'isself—an' it can't be recovered without this 'ere locket. Understand? I've got the locket, an' I'm goin' to study it careful, an' copy down the Arabic writin' so that we shall be safe. We'll leave all the actual plannin' 'untill later on, but I don't intend to waste no time."

As Groll was speaking he removed the locket from his pocket and examined it with interest. While he was doing so Jake Starkey bent over his shoulder, and they were both silent for a few minutes.

"You see, Jake," said Groll at last, "this treasure was hidden by some poor Arab chap wot died of thirst on the desert. You can see wot it says here—"

"Ow can I see?" growled Starkey. "I can't read that queer-lookin' lingo."

"Well, I can't read it proper," said Groll. "Still, I've sailed in a good few ships travellin' to Morocco and such-like places, and I've picked up a bit of Arabic. I can read enough to make it certain that this treasure is worth fetchin'. I mean to get hold of a pal o' mine this week, and we'll get the thing clear. He can talk Arabic like a native, and read it, too. If this thing only comes off, Jake, we're rich for life, and there's no reason why it shouldn't come off."

"I've never understood how you found out about it first," remarked Starkey.

"That's only because you're so blamed dense," said Groll politely. "When I went down to that school to begin with I never thought of the locket. I wanted to know what Jack was up to, bein' at such a swell place. Then I saw this locket—at least, half of it. An' it set me on another game. It's worth all the risk we've had, Jake. We had some trouble down there, but all the danger's over now. We're as safe as houses, in spite of that smart 'oc down at the school. He thought that he could spoil our little game, but he didn't know the man he was dealin' with."

While Groll was speaking, footsteps sounded on the stairs outside, and Groll, after a quick glance at his companion, slipped the locket into his waistcoat-pocket. Starkey almost went pale.

"Who—who's that?" he whispered.

"Nerrons agin'" snapped Groll. "It might be that feller I was talkin' about just now—the man we can read Arabic like a native. I asked him to come round, but I didn't think he was in London this week."

Groll was certainly not alarmed, and he proceeded to knock the ashes from his pipe as the door opened and somebody entered. Groll did not even trouble to look up at first, but he did so as Starkey uttered an ejaculation of amazement.

"By thunder!" gasped Simon Groll.

For, standing in the doorway, was Jack Mason!

Just for a moment both Groll and Starkey stared at the boy as though they couldn't believe the

evidence of their own eyes. This was staggering! Jack was not dead, and he had actually come to his uncle!

"Come in 'ere!" exclaimed Groll hoarsely. "How did you get 'ere, boy? How did you escape from that steamer?"

Groll recovered himself far more quickly than Starkey, and walked round the table and grabbed Jack Mason's hand. He dragged the boy farther into the room and slammed the door. Truth to tell, the racial was rather alarmed. Jack Mason alive was far more dangerous than Jack Mason dead. He knew too much.

"Have you told anybody anything about the ship?" demanded Groll fiercely.

"What if I have?" asked Mason.

"What if you have!" snapped Groll. "Why, I'll twist your confounded little neck for you if you've breathed a word. You might get your uncle into trouble. The police wouldn't understand the thing like I do. They wouldn't know that I've got a perfect right to stop you on board a ship if I want to. I'm glad you ain't killed, Jack, although I thought you'd gone down. Who've you told?"

"Mr. Nelson Lee, for one," replied Jack steadily.

"You young bound!" snarled Groll, twisting Jack's arm fiercely, and drawing him towards him. "You're lyin' to me—"

"I don't think so, Mr. Groll," said Nelson Lee, entering the room. "And you will save yourself a lot of trouble if you submit quietly. Your words to Mason were perfectly convincing, and we are well aware of the fact that you deliberately kidnaped the lad from St. Frank's College."

Simon Groll had started back, his eyes glittering evilly. If he imagined that he would be able to make a bid for freedom, he was very much mistaken, for Nelson Lee was not alone. A burly individual in an overcoat and bowler came immediately behind the schoolmaster-detective. And out in the passage I stood with Sir Montie and Tommy and Pitt. We were all in this affair, and we wanted to see the last of it. The burly individual was our old friend, Chief-Detective-Inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard.

Groll was sensible enough to see that any resistance would be out of the question. And so he attempted bluff. With a gruff laugh he sat down and pretended to be busy with filling his pipe.

"I'd like to know what you mean by burstin' into a honest man's lodgin', an' makin' out that you own the blamed place!" he asked sarcastically. "This boy is my nephew, an' you daren't touch him. If you do, I'll have the police on you."

"You had better start straight away," said Nelson Lee quietly. "This gentleman is Chief-Detective-Inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard, and it largely depends upon your attitude now whether you are forthwith arrested—"

"On what charge?" roared Groll violently.

"On several charges," put in the inspector. "I am aware of the fact, Simon Groll, that you kidnaped this boy from St. Frank's College, and that you also committed a theft at the same school last night. Oh, yes, you are in quite a difficult position, so you need not imagine otherwise."

Groll clenched his fists.

"You can say wot you like!" he growled. "I don't know nothin' about any theft. I wasn't near the school last night. As for the boy, he's my nephew! An' I've got a right to do wot I like with him."

"Within certain limits, no doubt," agreed Nelson Lee. "But a man has no right to kidnap even his own nephew, Mr. Groll. You need not think that bluff will aid you in the slightest degree. It won't. There is plenty of evidence that you grossly assaulted the lads last night, with the help of your

companion, Starkey. One of those lads was knocked down, and the other was took away with you. However, it rests with you whether the matter remains private or passes into the hands of the police. Mr. Leonard is at present here unofficially—as a friend of mine—but there are several officers within easy call."

"Wot do you mean—rests with me?" demanded Grell roughly.

"I mean that if you are straightforward there is just a chance that you will not be given in charge," replied Nelson Lee. "Do not imagine that this leniency is out of consideration for you. It will be solely for the lad's benefit, since it would be unfortunate to have the facts made public that you, his uncle, are an unmitigated scoundrel."

Simon Grell nearly choked.

"I have been straightforward," he growled. "You'd best clear out of this room afore I lose my temper."

"I shall certainly not clear out until you have handed me the locket which you stole from St. Frank's College last night," said the gun'ner grimly. "You have already denied that you were there, but I should not advise you to stick to that story."

"I'll stick to the truth!" rapped out Grell. "You think you can frighten me, esmin' here an accusin' me of bein' a thief. You can go to the dickens, the whole crowd of you!"

"You worthless scoundrel!" shouted Sir Crawford Grey angrily, for the baronet was also with us, and had stood silent until now. "I can see that kindness is useless with such a man as you, Nipper, would you mind calling the policemen who are on duty outside?"

Grell caught his breath in sharply, but he was obstinate.

"You can't give me in charge for nothing!" he muttered.

"Why not hold him, sir, and search him?" I suggested practically. "I don't see why we should put up with any of his nonsense. Let's search him!"

"Yes, rather!" said Pitt quickly.

"Dear boys, it's a ripping idea—it is, really?" said Sir Montie.

Nelson Lee glanced quickly at Lennard.

"By Jove, I think the boys are right!" he said. "If you do not produce the locket at once, Grell, you will be forcibly searched. That is final."

Jake Starkey laughed huskily.

"You'd best give up, Simon?" he growled. "What's the good of lyin' any more? There's no way out. You might as well take the locket out o' your weskit straight away. It'll save trouble in the end."

"You durned fool!" snarled Grell.

It was quite impossible for him to keep up the game any longer after that. He took out the locket and flung it upon the table, cursing under his breath. It was a bitter pill for him to swallow. Just when he thought that success was complete, this disaster had occurred.

"There you are, Sir Crawford," said Detective-Inspector Lennard. "I think we'd better hand the man over to the police, after all. We gave him his chance, and he didn't accept it. Until forced, he chose to deny that he stole this locket. I think it would have been far better if I had come here in my official capacity."

"Wait!" said Sir Crawford quietly, picking up the locket. "There are a few questions I have to ask of this man. I have reason to believe, Grell, that this lad here is not your nephew. You brought him up as such, but I should like you to tell me the truth regarding his real identity."

"I don't know what you mean!" growled Simon

Grell. "The boy is the son of my wife's sister, an' I'm 'is guardian."

"That's right, sir," put in Jack wonderingly. "I never told you that he wasn't my uncle—"

"No, my lad; but I have suspicions," said Sir Crawford. "We intend to treat you leniently, Grell, and the least you can do is to tell us what you know concerning the boy who believes himself to be your nephew."

"He is my nephew, an' that's all I'll say!" snapped Grell.

"I should advise you to alter your decision," said Nelson Lee grimly. "It may interest you to know, Mr. Grell, that I have made some inquiries concerning a railway disaster which occurred thirteen years ago. Since you are not implicated in that affair, there is nothing to prevent you speaking."

Grell's eyes gleamed suddenly.

"If I tell you wot I know, wot shall I get as a reward?" he demanded.

"You have no right to demand anything, or expect anything," replied Nelson Lee. "But I have no doubt that Sir Crawford will give you your liberty, and that, in my opinion, is a reward which is not in the slightest degree deserved."

"Do you promise that I'll go free?"

"Yes, if you are quite frank."

"That's good enough," said Grell snily. "Well, it don't matter to me. I shall be glad to get rid of the lad. To the best of my belief, Jack Mason ain't Jack Mason at all."

"Who—who am I, then?" asked Jack amazedly.

"Ain't you got any sense?" asked Grell. "Why, you're Norman Grey, the son of this gent here—the son of Sir Crawford Grey?"

CHAPTER LVIII.

JACK MASON'S LUCK!

THE most astounded person in the whole room was Jack Mason himself. He stood perfectly still, his face pale with excitement, staring straight before him, as though dazed. Grell's statement had almost bowled him over.

"But—but it can't be true, can it?" asked Pitt huskily. "Oh, my hat! Talk about a surprise! Jack Mason your son!"

"It's too good to be true!" muttered Jack chokingly. "Oh, I can't believe it! It's too much to hope for! There must be some mistake."

"Wait a while, Mason," said Nelson Lee. "We shall get this matter cleared up before so very long. I have been making inquiries, and I have learned positively that a certain Mrs. Mason was a survivor in a big railway disaster about thirteen years ago. Her two-year-old boy was also saved—you, Mason. Further inquiries elicited the fact that this Mrs. Mason was the sister of your wife, Grell."

"That's all right," agreed the man. "She was travelling on that train. A fair shockin' smash it was, too. But where does this gent come in?" he added, nodding to Sir Crawford. "I've bin goin' by the locket. That's why I believe that Jack is Sir Crawford's son. He had one half, an' the boy had the other, which looked very significant, to my mind."

"Your deduction was a fairly obvious one, Grell," said the baronet. "I was travelling on that train, too—travelling with my dear wife and son, who was just two years old. I believed that my little boy had been burnt to atoms in one of the blazing coaches. My wife, I know, perished. We had been examining the locket at the time of the accident. It was in my baby son's hand. Only half was recovered, and I supposed that the other half was lost for ever. That is my side of the story, Grell. What is yours?"

"It strikes me that the most hopeful thing about the case is that your son, Sir Crawford, was never actually found," put in Inspector Lennard. "He was presumed dead, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"His remains were never discovered?"

"That is so, although remains of some sort were brought to light, of course," replied the baronet quietly. "It is a distressing subject for discussion, but I suppose it is necessary. There were many poor souls consumed in the blazing coach, and it was utterly impossible to recognise anything resembling a human relic."

"That's exactly what I mean," said Lennard. "Your son never came to light, Sir Crawford, and it was only natural that you should believe that he had been killed. Mr. Grell, I have no doubt, will be able to tell us exactly what happened."

Grell shook his head.

"I can't do that," he said. "I can't tell you exactly. The best I can do is to repeat what I've heard from my wife. It was years ago, an' my memory ain't good for such things as that."

"Well, do your best," said Nelson Lee.

Grell passed to light his pipe.

"You've treated me well, gents, an' I'm goin' to do wot I can," he said, sitting back in his chair. "Edith—that's my wife's sister—was on that train you've bin speakin' about. She had her little nipper with her. They was risin' some friends, I believe. Well, when the accident happened, Edith wasn't hurt much—not tore about, I mean—but the kid was killed on the spot. Naturally, she was half mad at the time. Not only the shock of seein' the kid wiped out, but the shock o' the accident itself was all the worse for her. She went into hysterics, like wimmin will."

"And what did she do?" asked the gov'nor hoonly.

"Sarcely, you can tell us that, Grell?"

"Yes, sir, I can tell you that," replied the other. "She got hold of somebody else's baby—a youngster of about two years. I ain't got a word to say agin Edith. She was a good woman, an' didn't panic that kid deliberate. She was half dazed at the time, an' just grabbed hold of the first baby she set eyes on. She might have believed it was her own, but I don't think so. She just took it up in a kind o' fit, without knowin' whose it was."

"I can quite understand that," said Nelson Lee. "The poor woman was utterly distracted, as you intimate, and could scarcely be held responsible for her actions. Well, and what followed, Grell?"

"She fainted dead away, I think, on the embankment, with that strange kid in her arms," replied Simon Grell. "It was stunned, I believe, an' didn't cry nor nothin'. Edith was found by a party of rescuers, and took straight into the relief train wot come up behind. How was they to know it wasn't her kid? She was clutchin' it, an' they naturally thought it was hers."

"Emetly—exactly?" exclaimed Sir Crawford eagerly. "But how was the baby clothed, Grell. That is the question. I remember every detail of little Norman's attire, and can tell you if—"

"I can't say a word about the kid's clothes!" declared Grell. "I never took no interest in their sort o' things."

"But you saw the clothing afterwards, probably?"

Grell resumed the pipe from his teeth.

"Well, I got a kind o' idea that there was a little frock thing, such as babies wear, knockin' about the house," he said thoughtfully. "White it was, with blue stripes—queer kind o' blue stripes, too, not like the ordinary."

"Upon my soul!" exclaimed the baronet. "This is proof indeed! My little son was wearing the very article of attire you have described, Grell. I

really think it is unnecessary to proceed further with—"

"I should like to hear the full story," interrupted Nelson Lee. "For example, why was the lad brought up by you, Grell, and not by Mrs. Mason?"

"Well, there's a good reason for that," said Grell. "Poor Edith was never the same woman arterwards. She was fair worried to death, I believe—worried over that kid. She knew she'd done wrong, but swore she didn't know wot she was about. An' the worst of it was, she didn't know whose baby she'd taken. There wasn't a sign on it to prove anything, except that half locket, an' that, as you know, wasn't much use for identifyin' purposes."

"Not at the time; but it is now," said Sir Crawford feelingly.

"That's right enough," agreed Grell. "Poor Edith suffered badly from the shock of the accident, too, an' she was in her grave six months arter the smash. Not havin' anybody else, she gave the kid to my wife to bring up—to her own sister. An' we brought up the child just as if he was our own nephew, an' called him Jack Mason—Jack bein' the name of Edith's own kid wot was killed."

"Well, there is really very little more to be discussed," said Nelson Lee. "There is not a shadow of a doubt, Sir Crawford, that this lad here is your own son. It is not merely a chance, but a certainty."

There were tears in the baronet's eyes as he turned to Jack.

"My boy—my son!" he exclaimed softly. "Thank Heaven that you have been restored to me after all these years!"

But Jack Mason hung back.

"I—I can't believe it, sir," he said huskily.

"But you must believe it, my dear lad—it is true," said Sir Crawford. "It was something more than chance which led to that meeting of ours when you saved my life in Piccadilly Circus."

The next moment the fellow we had known as Jack Mason was in his father's arms, and when he looked up his cheeks were rather tear-stained, but his eyes were brimming with joy.

For the time being he seemed quite incapable of speech, and I wasn't surprised. This amazing revelation had knocked him over, so to speak. It was more than he could believe, and it would probably be some days before he could fully bring himself to the realisation that he was Norman Grey, the son of an immensely rich baronet.

It was a change, indeed!

Fullwood & Co., and the other St. Frank's fellows who had sneered at Jack because he had come from Bermondsey, would find it necessary to draw in their horns. But I was certain of one thing. This startling change in Jack's fortune would make absolutely no difference to him, except, of course, that he would be immeasurably happier.

And it was because of this feeling of happiness that Jack did not wish to prosecute Grell and Starkey. Sir Crawford, too, was of his son's opinion. Therefore, the two rascals, whose schemes had gone astray, were allowed to depart with no fear of being arrested. Only Detective-Inspector Lennard showed disappointment at this decision. But Lennard, of course, was all for hide-bound police methods. And his bark was always worse than his bite.

We all drove to Gray's Inn Road, where a fine tea was ready for us.

And so the party of us sat down to a merry, joyous meal—Sir Crawford and his son, Nelson Lee and I, Sir Montie, Watson, and Pitt. Our faces were all happy, for all the trouble was over, and the Christmas holidays had already commenced.

"The very instant I saw you Jack, I felt strangely attracted towards you," said Sir Crawford affectionately. "Gad! I don't know what it was about you that made me feel so anxious to protect you; but the feeling was there, and I couldn't force it away. That is why I took you away from your aunt and sent you to St. Frank's."

Jack opened his eyes wide.

"But I thought somebody left me a legacy——" he began.

"Splendid!" chuckled Sir Crawford. "My dear boy, you must forgive me. I have been guilty of another little deception—in addition to the name. It was I who paid your expenses at St. Frank's, but I was afraid to tell you so, lest you would be offended. You've got a proud spirit, you know—the spirit of your old father—eh? I tricked you into going, lad, and you went meekly."

Jack was quite surprised, and very pleased, too. For it was splendid to know that it was his father who had been paying his fees at St. Frank's.

And as the meal progressed the conversation turned from the past to the future. For the holidays had now begun.

Sitting in Nelson Lee's comfortable room, we enthusiastically discussed plans for the splendid days of freedom ahead.

We were all going to have a jolly good time. Yet perhaps the two who would enjoy themselves most were Sir Crawford Grey and Jack—father and son—united so strangely after so many years of parting.

And with them during the holidays would be Reginald Pitt, the one who had treated Jack so rottenly, only later to make amends in no uncertain fashion.

And in the days to come, it may be said, there were no firmer pals at St. Frank's than the inmates of Study E—Reggie Pitt, once known as the Black Sheep or the Serpent, and Jack Grey, formerly Jack Mason, the Boy from Bermondsey.

THE END.

THE CASE OF THE CABINET SECRETS.

An Early Adventure of NELSON LEE.

CHAPTER I.

LORD MARTINDALE'S TRICKLE.

AT eleven o'clock on a summer's morning, in a cab that was speeding down the Gray's Inn Road, sat an elderly, dignified gentleman, with Barid features and an aquiline nose, shaggy eyebrows, and a fierce, white moustache. This was Lord Martindale, Prime Minister of Great Britain.

The cab drew up before the house in which lodged Nelson Lee. Lord Martindale hurried across the pavement, pulled the bell, and was quickly admitted.

"Good-morning, my lord!" said Nelson Lee as his visitor entered the room. "I rather expected you would come."

"You did, eh? How's that?"

"Well, sir, I have just been reading the 'Daily Messenger,'" was the reply. "For the second time this week, I perceive, it has published Cabinet secrets. I judged that some underhanded work has been going on, and that you might want my help in solving the mystery."

"You are quite right. There is a mystery, and that is why I am here. I hope you will be able to get to the bottom of it, Mr. Lee, as easily as you have fathomed my purpose."

"Will you let me have the facts, please?"

"You must be partly acquainted with them," said Lord Martindale, as he paced the floor with nervous steps, "but I had better tell all from the beginning. You know what recently happened in West Africa? The Sultan of Chard, a native state that is under British suzerainty, boldly disregarded his obligations. A small force under Major Darnell marched up through the hinterland to Chard, and there encountered another force that had hoisted the flag of a certain great European Power. Bloodshed was happily averted, but neither force could withdraw, and both are now encamped on the spot, waiting for orders from their respective governments. The news was cabled to England a week

ago, and at once, on behalf of his Majesty's Government, I opened negotiations with this European power, insisting, of course on our rights.

"Last Monday night I laid important papers before the Cabinet, at a secret meeting at the Foreign Office, and the next morning I was horrified to find a full account of the proceedings in that Radical paper, the 'Daily Messenger.' How they got hold of it I could not imagine, but I determined that it should not happen again, so I called the next Cabinet meeting at my private residence, in St. James' Square. That was last night, and again this morning, to my consternation, the 'Daily Messenger' published all that transpired. They must have received the information between midnight and the time of going to press, which leaves but a narrow margin."

"This is a serious business, I suppose?"

"Very serious," said Lord Martindale. "Naturally, these negotiations are of a delicate nature, and up to the present the action of the Cabinet, which was meant to be kept secret, might be construed—as the 'Daily Messenger' has stated—as a sign of vacillation. And the chance may come if anything should leak out at the next meeting, when the affair will have reached a crisis seemingly unfavourable to the Government; though I can assure you that we are standing firm, and that the European Power which is playing a game of bluff will ultimately be compelled to back down. But, before that, the Government may fall unless you can help us."

"I am more than willing to do that," replied Lee. "It may be a difficult task, however. You have certainly been betrayed by a man who is in the pay of the 'Daily Messenger.'"

"Of course, there is no doubt of that. But where are we to look for him? All the members of the Cabinet, you will admit, are beyond suspicion."

"Yes, undoubtedly. We must look elsewhere. You suspect no one, my lord?"

"I did, at first," replied Lord Martindale. "I refer to my private secretary, Randolph Weston, who came to me three months ago with the best recommendations from the Duke of Barminster. He attended the Cabinet meeting with me on Monday night, at the Foreign Office, and he drove home in my carriage. It occurred to me the next morning that he might have dropped a letter from his window to somebody writing outside. I tested the theory and I found it wrong. Randolph Weston was present at last night's meeting in my house in St. James' Square, and, after the proceedings, he went straight to his room.

From that time until morning two constables were on guard outside my house—one at the front and one at the rear—while the better remained awake in the lower hall. No one attempted to slip out, and nothing was thrown from any of the windows. Yet this morning, as you see, the 'Messenger' prints an accurate account of the meeting. As for as young Weston is concerned I am satisfied that he is innocent."

"There is no telephone in his room?"
 "No; that is in my own apartment."
 "How many are in your household?"
 "My wife and daughter, the secretary, and five servants. The guilty person is not to be found there. The test that I applied to Randolph Weston exonerates the servants as well."

"Quite true," assented the detective. "This is a very deep mystery, my lord."
 "But you will solve it, Mr. Lee? The Government is at stake."

"I will do my best," replied Nelson Lee. "And, meanwhile, don't worry."

Not long after Lord Martindale's departure as the detective was puffing clouds of smoke, and puzzling over the mysterious case that he had promised to undertake, his landlady brought him a card. An odd light flashed to his eyes as he read the name.

"Show the gentlemen in," he said.
 A moment later, Mr. Randolph Weston entered the room—a tall, fair-haired young man of perhaps twenty-five, with brown eyes and a slight moustache, wearing a morning suit of grey tweeds. He came to the point at once.

"I happened to see Lord Martindale leaving your place," he said, "and I can guess what he wanted with you. He suspects me of that wretched newspaper business, Mr. Lee, but I am entirely innocent. That is why I am here—to ask for your help, and to prevent you from wasting your time on any false clue."

"In other words, to work for and not against you?"
 "Exactly! I am anxious that the mystery should be cleared up as soon as possible."

"Do you suspect anybody?" inquired the detective.

"I leave that to you," replied Randolph Weston. "You must feel convinced, if you have heard the circumstances, that the guilty person is a member of the Cabinet."

"I can hardly doubt it," said Lee, truthfully enough. "Everything points to that. I have undertaken the case," he added, "and I may have some news for you in a day or so."

"I hope you will," said the young secretary, who had made a favourable impression on the detective.

He turned to go, and as he pulled a handkerchief from the side-pocket of his coat, a little shower of tiny white objects fell to the floor. He did not observe this. The door closed behind him, and the next instant Nelson Lee was on his knees, his fingers darting here and there over the carpet.

"Bread-crumbs!" he muttered in surprise as he rose, and gazed at the collection in the palm of his hand. "What can they mean? By Jove, I begin to see daylight! I have it! Yes, I think I have the clue! Randolph Weston must have pocketed those at breakfast!"

That Lord Martindale had gone into the country overnight, for a change of air, was the news that greeted Nelson Lee when he called at St. James' Square; but at eleven o'clock the next morning he had an interview with his lordship at the Foreign Office, and, in the course of the afternoon he went again to St. James' Square.

"The coast is clear," said Lord Martindale. "I have put young Weston to work in the library at the Foreign Office. And I must tell you that I have just received most important despatches. The Government has won its point, and the European Power will withdraw its soldiers from Chard. There will be a Cabinet meeting here to-night."

"We will speak of that again," replied the detective. "Just now I want to see your secretary's room."

They ascended three flights of stair and entered a small and comfortably-furnished apartment, used as a bed and sitting-room. Glancing around, Lee observed that the wall at one side was a painted wooden partition, and that there was a door in it.

"I believe this is the top floor of the house?" he inquired.

"Yes, it is."
 "And where does that door lead?"

"To a part of the room that I had partitioned off years ago, when I was Secretary of State for the Colonies. It is full of old Parliamentary papers and Blue Books."

"The door is locked. Have you a key?"

Lord Martindale had. Nelson Lee opened the door, mounted to the top of a great pile of dusty documents and volumes, and found a small trap-door within reach directly over his head. He lifted it up, drew his head above the opening, and looked for a moment at the flat roof. He quickly returned to the outer room, closing and locking the door.

"Have you discovered anything?" asked Lord Martindale, in a puzzled tone.

"No more than I expected," said Lee. "I will tell you about it later. By the way, is there another trapdoor that leads to the roof?"

"Yes, from the other side of the house."

"Good! You and I are going to make use of it before we are many hours older. I have solved the mystery, my lord, and I have a certain plan by which the guilty spy and the proprietors of the 'Daily Messenger' will be punished as they deserve. You say there will be a Cabinet meeting here to-night? Very well! That meeting will be a bogus one. You will discuss only matters that are astrue and misleading—pure fiction. To-morrow morning, at another meeting held at the Foreign Office, you will lay the facts of the Chard affair before your Cabinet, and make them public."

"But I don't understand?" Lord Martindale exclaimed, in bewilderment.

"You soon will," said Nelson Lee.

And, as cheerfully as a schoolboy, rubbing his hands and chuckling, he briefly explained his plan.

"Splendid—splendid!" cried Lord Martindale. "Nothing could be better! How simple the trick was, after all! I will do exactly as you say. Come here to-night at eight o'clock. I will smuggle you up to the roof, and join you at the proper time."

For nearly five hours Nelson Lee had been keeping lonely vigil on the top of the big house in St. James' Square, smoking pipe after pipe, and gazing around him at the glowing, fiery sea of smoky London, picking out the main thoroughfares by the furnace-like glare, and listening to the incessant roar of traffic. As Big Ben struck the hour of midnight a trapdoor was quietly lifted, close to where the detective sat, and from it emerged Lord Martindale, in overcoat and cap.

"Here I am," he said. "What a time you have been waiting! The meeting passed off all right, and exactly as arranged. We all played our parts well, and I am quite sure that young Weston cannot have had any suspicions. He went off to his room at once. I hope there will be no hitch."

CHAPTER II.

WESTON'S PUNISHMENT.

"Does your secretary write shorthand?" asked Lee.

"Yes, fluently," replied Lord Martindale.

"Then he may be here at any minute. Come, we must be ready."

The two shifted their position to a row of chimney-pots, and here they silently crouched, peering towards the opposite side of the house for another five minutes. Then the other trapdoor was raised, within eight yards of them, and a dusky figure mounted against the skyline. He stood erect, and the dim light revealed the slender form of Randolph Weston.

"Great Scott!" murmured Lord Martindale.

"Hush, or you will spoil all!" whispered Nelson Lee.

The young secretary stooped for a moment by the low parapet of the roof, and when he rose it could be seen that he held something white in his hands. It was a bird, and the little creature flittered and struggled as a thin roll of paper was tied around its neck. For a few seconds Randolph Weston hesitated, as if he was staggered by the fatal infamy that he believed he was about to perpetrate. Then there was a sudden whirr of flapping wings, and a carrier-pigeon darted upward. Twice, three times, it circled round in the air, and then soared straight away to the eastward. After watching its flight for an instant, the secretary turned and climbed down into the trap, drawing the door noiselessly shut.

"That settles it," said Nelson Lee. "There goes our winged courier, bearing an account of to-night's Cabinet meeting to the editorial-room of the 'Daily Messenger.' To-morrow the storm will burst, in recoil on the guilty parties."

"The scoundrel!" muttered Lord Martindale, as he rose to his feet. "I can hardly believe it. But there is no doubt whatever. Surely this has gone far enough. Let us beard Weston in his room, and confront him with our knowledge of his dastardly conduct."

"By no means, my lord," urged Nelson Lee. "Why spoil the climax? You would have to keep Randolph Weston a prisoner for some hours, and he might possibly escape. No; let us carry out the plan to the end. In the morning you will send your secretary to the editor of the 'Messenger,' with a sealed letter."

"Very well," assented Lord Martindale. "That will be best, after all."

"EXCLUSIVE news! The Government deems! The Prime Minister insists on withdrawing the British force from Chard! A stormy Cabinet meeting in St. James' Square! Half the members resign!"

Such, in big type, were the headlines that confronted Nelson Lee when he opened the "Daily Messenger" at breakfast the next morning. He read the full account that followed with huge delight, smoked numerous pipes to pass away the time, and towards twelve o'clock walked over to Trafalgar Square and posted himself at the corner of Whitehall. A private car presently drew up before him, unmarked by any crest, and he took his seat beside Britain's Premier.

"What a storm, Lee!" exclaimed Lord Martindale. "The very air throbs with the news! But the pendulum will soon swing! The genuine Cabinet meeting is over, and a report has been issued to half a dozen of the leading journals."

"Including the 'Daily Messenger,' my lord?"

"Yes; I have sent my unsuspecting secretary—he was not at the meeting—with a sealed letter to the paper. He is about five minutes ahead of us."

"I don't envy him!" said the detective.

The brougham made its way along the Strand, where newsboys were shouting themselves hoarse, and stopped in front of the premises of the "Daily Messenger," in Fleet Street. Lee stepped out, and for a short time he stood idly on the kerb. Then from the door he was watching burst a young man, as if impelled by a catapult. It was Randolph Weston, though he was scarcely to be recognised. His hat was battered in, and his clothing was dishevelled. His collar was torn half off, his lip was cut, and one eye was turning purple.

"When rogues fall out, honest men agree," said Lee, as he clapped the startled secretary on the shoulder.

Randolph Weston gaped for a moment, his face white with confusion and fear. Then he turned, bailed into a side-street, and took to his heels in the direction of the river.

"I don't think you will see that young man again," said Lee as he entered the cab, which was driven rapidly away.

An hour later extra editions of the London journals were selling by the thousand, exposing the trick that had been played, and which, thanks to Nelson Lee, had been brought to light.



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