

No. 138. ENTHRALLING SCHOOL AND DETECTIVE NOVEL

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"THE BO'SUN'S" PREDICAMENT.

Another exciting Story of NELSON LEE and NIPPER AT ST. FRANK'S COLLEGE.
Prepared for publication by the Author of "The Secret Menace," "The Japanese Schoolboy," "The Mystery of the Unstamped Letter," "The Flooded School," etc.

January 26th, 1918.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE.

Nelson Lee and Nipper are at St. Frank's College, to escape the grim attentions of the murderous Chinese Secret Society, the Fu Chang Tong, whose hatred they have incurred. Although living in the school in the characters of master and pupil, Nelson Lee and Nipper, nevertheless, find many opportunities to utilise their unique detective ability in various mysterious and adventurous cases.

CHAPTER I.

CECIL DE VALERIE AND RALPH LESLIE
FULLWOOD ENJOY THEMSELVES.

CECIL DE VALERIE, of the Remove Form at St. Frank's, sat up in bed as the school clock boomed out the hour of ten.

The dormitory was quiet, except for the steady breathing of the juniors, and a curious grunting noise which proceeded from Handforth's bed. Awake or asleep, Handforth found it quite impossible to be quiet.

"You fellows awake?" whispered De Valerie softly.

Three other juniors sat up. They were Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell—the noble leaders of the Ancient House Nuts. They were very much awake, for to-night was really an occasion.

"It's all serene," murmured Ralph Leslie Fullwood, pushing the bedclothes back. "These silly kids are asleep, and we sha'n't be missed. Quite a usual thing for us, De Valerie; done it dozens of times."

De Valerie, otherwise known as The Rotter, smiled.

He slipped out of bed, and commenced dressing. Fullwood and Co. followed

his example, and they grinned quietly to themselves as they pulled their clothes on. This was the first occasion on which De Valerie had consented to accompany them on an enjoyable jaunt to the White Harp.

De Valerie hadn't been at St. Frank's long, and, to start with, he had been rather mysterious in his habits and ways. He kept exclusively to himself, and would have nothing to do with the Nuts. The collection of young scamps, however, knew that the Rotter was of their own calibre. And now, at length, they had drawn De Valerie into their net. They prided themselves that they had overcome his scruples; but, as a matter of fact, De Valerie was a more complete rascal than any of them.

"Mind you don't wake that rotter, Bennett," murmured Albert Gulliver. "He'll kick up a fuss if he sees us going out—the interfering bounder. Blessed if I can understand why you let him become skipper of the Remove, Fullwood."

Ralph Leslie scowled.

"Don't jaw so much!" he muttered sourly.

Dick Bennett—otherwise Nipper—was a very prickly thorn in Fullwood's side.

Until Nipper arrived at St. Frank's, Fullwood had held complete sway over the Fossils—the Ancient House juniors. The House, in fact, had gone “to rot” under Fullwood's leadership; that is, the Remove particularly.

Since the moment of Nipper's advent, however, the Fossils had bucked up. And now Fullwood's power was broken; he only ruled over his own little circle. Among the bulk of the Removites Fullwood was a nonentity. Naturally, the elegant Nut did not rejoice in this change.

Even the frequent visits to the White Harp were risky nowadays. Unless extreme caution was exercised, the Nuts would find themselves kept in their beds by force. This state of affairs was galling, but it couldn't be altered. Besides, the Housemaster (Nelson Lee) was very strict regarding bounds, and he was a “tricky beast,” according to Fullwood. This view had been gained, probably, because Nelson Lee frequently took walks late at night. More than once the Nuts had been within an ace of discovery. Certainly, it was a difficult matter to be a gallant blade under the changed conditions.

“You chaps ready?” whispered De Valerie.

“Waiting for you,” came Fullwood's reply. “Buck up with that collar of yours, Bell. You're always behind—”

“Rot! I was ready two minutes ago!” snorted Bell.

The four juniors prepared to leave the dormitory. The hour was really early, of course, and the masters were not yet in bed. But, with caution, it would be easy enough to slip out into the dark night.

“Shiver my bows!” came a sleepy ejaculation from one of the beds. “What are you doing out of your bunks, mess-mates?”

Fullwood and Co. clenched their fists.

“If you make a sound, you rotten bargee, we'll smash you!” snapped De Valerie, enraged at this unexpected interruption. “We're just going to the bathroom for a drink, so you'd better go to sleep again.”

Tom Burton sat up in bed.

“By hokey!” he murmured. “That's queer, isn't it? I didn't think it was necessary to get dressed to go across the passage! Look here, you slab-sided landmen, you'd better get back to bed

yourselves. I reckon you're setting sail for the White Harp—that's your port, I'll bet. Souse me! You are inugs!”

Fullwood gritted his teeth.

“Don't talk so loud, you dirty seaman!” he hissed.

“Great marlinspikes!” exclaimed the Bo'sun warmly, and in tones which could scarcely be called soft. “I'm not going to be called a dirty seaman by a swab like you, Fullwood. By the great hook-block! You don't leave this craft until you—”

“Hallo! What's the squabble about?” demanded a sleepy voice.

“Begad! Who's that talkin'?” came a mumbled inquiry from another bed. “It's most distressin', dear fellows. I've been tryin' to sleep for hours, you know. Is there somethin' the matter?”

Nipper and Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson, and two or three other juniors sat up. The discomfited Nuts glared round them with unrepressed fury. Burton was responsible for this—his rumbling voice had awakened the fellows.

“Begad! It's Fullwood and Co!” exclaimed Sir Montie, instinctively putting his hand up to adjust the pince-nez which weren't there. “They're breaking bounds, the frightful cads!”

“Mind your own business, you stuck-up fashion plate!” snapped Fullwood.

“It's painful, but it's necessary,” sighed Tregellis-West, as he got out of bed. “I hate to punch your nose, Fullwood, because it's such a shockin' bore. But these things have to be done occasionally—”

“Let's get out!” whispered De Valerie furiously.

They hurried to the door. But, as though by magic, Nipper and Co. and Burton and several others sped after them. And, in less than a moment, a fierce tussle was proceeding. Tom Burton was enjoying himself hugely, for he was tackling both Fullwood and De Valerie.

The Bo'sun, as Burton was called in the Remove, was practically a new-comer to St. Frank's. He had arrived, in fact, during the recent flood, which had inundated the whole Stowe Valley. Even now the flood had not completely subsided in the low-lying marshland; but St. Frank's and Bellton were high and dry once more.

Tom Burton had gained immense popularity at once, for he had distinguished

guished himself by saving a heavily-laden boat from destruction; and, incidentally, he had also rescued Nelson Lee from certain death in the fierce current. The Bo'sun was an amazing swimmer, and a delightful fellow in every way.

Both Fullwood and De Valerie had reason to respect the new boy's fists. After two minutes, they were both bruised and sore. And then De Valerie managed to gain the advantage by a trick. He had his boots on, and he deliberately caught Burton a vicious kick on the bare ankle.

The Bo'sun staggered back and fell, but uttered no cry of pain. At the same second Yakama, the Japanese junior, who was taking part in the tussle with great gusto, met with disaster. He had been about to throw Gulliver, but the falling Bo'sun bumped against him and threw him off his balance.

Just for a few moments confusion reigned.

Nipper, who was grimly determined to prevent the Nuts from leaving the dormitory, was trying conclusions with Master Gulliver. They were embracing one another fiercely, Gulliver attempting to get away. In staggering backwards he crashed into the Bo'sun, who was just rising. Several bumps heralded the fact that the confusion was worse than ever.

But Gulliver and Bell were down, flat on their backs. When Nipper managed to get to his feet, he saw Handforth industriously pommelling a gasping junior, who lay on the floor face downwards.

"I've got Fullwood, anyhow," said Handforth triumphantly.

"You—you ass!" panted Nipper. "That's one of our chaps. Can't you see he's wearing pyjamas?"

Handforth started.

"Great pip!" he gasped. "I—I thought——"

He relaxed his efforts, but grinned unfeelingly when the red and indignant face of McClure, his own chum, turned upwards from the floor. McClure was hurt, for Handforth's fists were out of all proportion to the rest of his person.

"You—you mad idiot!" roared McClure.

"My dear chap, it was your own fault," said Handforth calmly. "How the diakens was I to know that you weren't Fullwood."

McClure tried to speak, but words failed him. Meanwhile, Nipper had dis-

covered the fact that the dormitory door was open. In the confusion De Valerie and Fullwood had slipped away.

"Well, I'm not going after 'em," said Nipper. "We've collared two of the bounders—and that's something. Off to the White Harp, I suppose?"

"You—you cad!" gasped Gulliver. "Let us go!"

"We'll make that rotten bargee pay for this!" snapped Bell venomously. "He gave the alarm, the cad!"

The Bo'sun grinned, and made no mention of the fact that his ankle was grazed and bleeding. He charitably tried to make himself believe that the kick had been an accident. He went back to his bed, and the other fellows followed suit. Gulliver and Bell, although fuming, wisely decided the trip, so far as they were concerned, had better be abandoned.

Meanwhile, Fullwood and De Valerie had crept downstairs. They slipped into Study A, in the Remove passage, and paused for breath. Down here all was dark and silent. De Valerie breathed hard.

"I'll make that sea urchin squirm!" he muttered. "My ear's tingling now! Buck up with those cigarettes, Fullwood. The cads may follow us down."

Fullwood fumbled in the cupboard, and, a minute later, the pair cautiously opened the window, and slipped out into the Triangle; for the Remove studies were on the ground floor. Then, having pulled the sash down again, they crept over to the low part of the school wall and dropped into the lane.

"We've done the trick, anyhow," murmured Fullwood. "It's just as well that Gully and Bell ain't with us. Four's a crowd, all said an' done. Silly asses, to get themselves collared!"

"You needn't gloat," said De Valerie. "We only escaped by accident. The Bo'sun fell over, and dragged the other chaps with him. I don't suppose this trip'll be worth the candle, but it's a bit of sport."

The two young rascals hurried on towards Bellton, keeping a sharp look-out. They had both felt the weight of the Bo'sun's fists, and their conversation was mainly composed of vicious threats against the burly new boy.

Tom Burton was certainly a novelty at St. Frank's. His quaint expressions caused amusement among the decent

fellows. He was the son of a retired sea captain, and had spent most of his childhood upon his father's own ship—a big sailing vessel of the old-fashioned type. Tom had been nick-named "The Bo'sun" by his father at the age of three, and it had stuck to him all along. The St. Frank's fellows declared that the name suited him down to the ground. For Burton was a brown-faced, burly fellow, with huge limbs.

The Nuts had loftily ignored him, considering that he was far beneath their contempt. But, as Nipper pointed out to the Bo'sun, sneers from Fullwood and Co. were quite complimentary. The Nuts sneered at every decent fellow.

Fullwood and De Valerie soon reached the disreputable inn, known as the White Harp, which stood on the outskirts of the village. Fullwood was well accustomed to these visits, and he led the way round to the back door. Two minutes later the young blackguards were shaking hands with Mr. Jonas Porlock, the landlord, in the smoke-laden rear parlour.

The atmosphere was not exactly sweet. The fumes of tobacco and strong spirits hung heavily in the air. There were two or three men there, and they welcomed the boys heartily. Both Fullwood and De Valerie had plenty of money—which accounted for the heartiness of the greeting.

In the billiard-room, adjoining, Mike Bradmore, a beery bookmaker and billiard sharp, was playing a game with another gentleman of his own calibre. Seated upon the lounge, with mugs of beer before them, were two individuals in shabby blue reefers and peaked caps. They were strangers in Bellton, and Fullwood eyed them with interest.

"Who are those chaps?" he asked, lounging over to the marker, a weedy, pimply youth, who lived on the premises.

"Them, sir?" said the marker, as Fullwood lit a cigarette. "Why, that's Captain Jelks an' his mate, Mr. Larson. They ain't been here for well-nigh a year. Ain't you seen 'em afore, Master Fullwood?"

"No," said Fullwood shortly.

"Great pals o' Mr. Porlock's, as I might say," said the marker, accepting a cigarette from De Valerie. "Thank ye, sir. Yes, great pals. Afore the boss came 'ere he used to keep a pub. down on the coast. Captain Jelks allus used it,

but now 'e don't 'ave much chance of seein' his old pals. He's stayin' 'ere for two or three days."

"Ship got torpedoed, or what?" asked De Valerie uninterestedly.

"Bless your life, no, sir," said the pimply youth. "The old schooner's lyin' off Caistowe, in the bay. Came in to escape the blow, which was a bit too strong for 'er. She's takin' more cargo aboard, too, I believe. Captain Jelks is off for the West Indies afore the week's out."

"He's welcome to go," said Fullwood, moving away.

He and De Valerie sat down on the lounge. They were waiting until the table was vacant. Meanwhile, they laid bets as to who would win the present game. They made themselves believe that they enjoyed this sordid "pleasure."

Captain Jelks entered into conversation with the Removites before long, and they found him to be an evil-tongued blackguard. He was partially drunk already, and was a disgrace to the British Merchant Service. Beery and dirty, he did not look the type of man to be master of an ocean-going schooner. But, although a blackguard, Jelks was a good navigator—and that was all his owners cared about. Larson, the mate, was a man of the same type.

Fullwood couldn't help thinking of Tom Burton. He knew, of course, that the Bo'sun's father was a highly respectable, bluff British skipper, of a type which was totally opposed to these drunkards here.

But, suddenly, Ralph Leslie Fullwood chuckled, and he grinned as De Valerie glanced at him inquiringly.

"I was just tickled by something," explained Fullwood, leaning over to his chum. "It wouldn't be a bad wheeze to set a yarn going that these two chaps are pals of Burton's father. They're awfully low-down blackguards, and Burton would look a bit sick—what? They're staying here for a day or two, and lots of fellows would see them. We could easily set the yarn on the go——"

"I've got a better idea than that," grinned De Valerie. "By Jove, it'll serve the young cad right! We'll show him up before the whole school—we'll make him squirm. Is it worth a quid, do you think?"

"What the deuce are you getting at?"

"You'll soon see," said De Valerie, tenderly rubbing a spot where the

Bo'sun's fist had thudded, and edging up the lounge towards Captain Jelks. "I say, skipper, are you willin' to join in a lark?"

Captain Jelks removed the pipe from his mouth slowly.

"A lark?" he repeated. "All depends what kind o' lark, young shaver."

"Well, there's a chap in our Form at the school who's the son of a retired sea-captain," explained De Valerie. "He's a stuck-up little beast, and I'd like to take him down a peg or two. You can swear, I suppose?"

Captain Jelks chuckled.

"Can I swear, Bill?" he asked, turning to the mate.

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared Mr. Larson hilariously. "O' course you can't, cap'n. It's only a blamed rumour! Swear? Why, you've got a tongue like a baby's! Haw, haw, haw!"

There was much mirth for a full minute.

"Well, what's the game, anyhow?" asked Captain Jelks, at last.

"I was thinking that you and Mr. Larson might take a stroll up to the school to-morrow evening," suggested De Valerie. "Of course, we'd pay your expenses," he added diplomatically. "A quid each will get you there, won't it?"

"We don't want to go to no blamed school," began Mr. Larson.

"Course we don't," agreed the skipper. "Sorry, sonny, but we don't cotton on to the idea. I s'pose you want us to see this 'ere nipper, an' treat 'im as an old pal? You want us to use a few cuss words in between like?"

"That's the idea," put in Fullwood eagerly. "We'll see there are plenty of chaps about. My hat! It'll be a fine showin' up for Burton! The fellows won't believe him when he says you're not his father's messmates——"

The skipper's grin vanished suddenly.

"Burton?" he said, removing his pipe from between his blackened teeth again. "Son of a retired cap'n?"

"That's right," said De Valerie, staring.

"Wot's 'is other name?"

"Tom."

"Oh, is it?" said Captain Jelks. "Hum! Well, I'm busted!"

"You seem to know Burton," remarked Fullwood. "By Jove! Did you really know Burton's father—or Burton himself?"

The skipper shook his head, but winked at Mr. Larson round the corner of his eye.

"Never heard o' the brat, nor 'is father neither," he said, taking a swig from his mug. "It ain't the chap I thought. Burton, you said, didn't you—not Barton? No, it ain't the bdy I was thinkin' on."

Mr. Larson winked back, but De Valerie and Fullwood didn't witness this little by-play. They were anxious to persuade the two blackguardly sailors to fall in with their idea; and De Valerie again pressed the matter.

"Well, I dunno," said the skipper slowly. "It might be done, young gents. I'm a good-natured bloke, as Mr. Larson'll tell you straight away. Ain't that a fact, Bill? Ain't I the best-natured skipper in the service?"

"You are, cap'n!" said Mr. Larson heartily.

"Let's talk o' this more deeply, as we might say," went on Jelks. "You want me an' Bill to go up to the school, an' treat this 'ere Burton boy like an old shipmate? An we're to cuss an' swear moderate-like?"

"That's the idea," said De Valerie, nodding.

And, after a little further conversation, the skipper and mate of the schooner Southern Cross agreed to fall in with De Valerie's plan. They accepted the "quid" each as a matter of course. De Valerie and Fullwood nearly hugged themselves. This would be a terrific show-up for the Bo'sun!

The two rascally Removites were playing billiards soon afterwards, and they remained at the White Harp until eleven-thirty. Then, bidding their questionable friends good-night, they hurried back to St. Frank's—intensely satisfied with what had been accomplished.

And on the lounge in the billiard-room Captain Jelks and Mr. Bill Larson talked together in low tones.

"It's the same name, skipper," said the mate. "But, bust me, the boy may be a different kid altogether. Burton ain't an uncommon name, an' 'Tom's' are knockin' about like flies."

"It's 'im!" declared Captain Jelks grimly. "Anyhow, we'll go up to the school an' make sure. We ain't never seen the kid, but we shall be able to reckonize 'im by the fam'ly likeness—or by questions. Any'ow, we'll find out."

"An' wot then?"

Captain Jelks waved his pipe vaguely.

"Wot then?" he repeated. "Why, wot!— Well, I dunno, exactly. Let's wait until we've made sure about the kid. It's your turn to pay for drinks, ain't it?"

And the pair proceeded to wish themselves luck with much spirit—of the liquid variety!

What did they know about Tom Burton, the Bo'sun?

CHAPTER II.

THE BO'SUN RECEIVES VISITORS, AND THEN GETS INTO HOT WATER!

TEA was nearly ready in Study F, in the Remove passage.

The Bo'sun and Conroy minor, who were study-mates, were busying themselves. The table was set for five, and quite a decent spread was laid out upon the clean but somewhat patched-up tablecloth. Juniors were not particular about such things.

"Better buck-up, old son," said Conroy minor, who was a decent fellow, although rather quiet. "They'll be here in a minute or two, and we don't want to keep visitors waiting."

"Ay, ay, messmate—you look after the galley!" said the Bo'sun cheerily. "It's this bread-an'-butter that's worrying me. I'm soused if I can spread the butter properly. I dare say it wants warmin'."

"Rats! Get on with it," said Conroy.

He turned his ruddy face back towards the "galley"—in other words, the fireplace. A pan was over the cheerful flames, and in the pan a number of sausages were frizzling and spluttering merrily. Small particles of soot floated in the gravy, but this little detail caused no worry. A few bits of soot wouldn't hurt anybody, anyhow. And frying sausages over an open grate was somewhat ticklish.

The three visitors arrived a few minutes later, cheerful and smiling. They were Nipper and Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson. For the time being they had deserted Study C.

"Sausages, eh?" said Tommy Watson comfortably. "Well, that's not so bad."

"Dear Tommy, it's shockin' bad form to pass remarks of that sort," protested Sir Montie. "Even if there was nothin' on the festive board but stale bread and cold water, it wouldn't be our place to pass remarks."

Tommy Watson grinned.

"No; we'd pass outside instead!" he exclaimed. "Our place would be Study C, my son! This ain't a formal tea, you ass. Sosses are jolly good, and that cake doesn't look so dusty, either. I was half-expecting to find ship's biscuits and salt junk!"

"Junk, dear boy?" repeated Sir Montie mildly. "That's Chinese, ain't it?"

"You chump!" grinned Nipper. "Salt junk is what they used to have on old sailing ships—hard, salt beef, months old! But that's been done away with for years, hasn't it, Bo'sun?"

Burton chuckled.

"I remember tasting salt junk once," he said. "By hokey, it ain't so bad when you're hungry, messmates. But I shouldn't think of giving you that stuff for tea. Besides, you can't get it—"

The door opened, and Teddy Long appeared.

This tubby youth was the busybody of the Ancient House, and just now his little eyes were gleaming with excitement and joy.

"Visitors for you in the lobby, Burton," he announced. "He, he, he! They've just been asking for you, and they're coming along."

"Visitors?" said the Bo'sun, puzzled. "Great cockles! My pater—"

"Your pater?" yelled Teddy Long. "Oh, my hat! I don't know who they are, but they've asked for you by name—called you Bo'sun, too. There can't be any mistake. Real gentlemen, they are. He, he, ho!"

"What are you cackling at, you young ass?" demanded Nipper sharply.

Teddy Long didn't answer, but scuttled out of the study. A chorus of voices from the passage caused the Bo'sun and the others to look round inquiringly. There seemed to be quite a lot of excitement in the corridor; the Bo'sun's visitors were evidently surrounded by a considerable crowd.

"Begad! Who can they be?" murmured Tregellis-West, securing his pince-nez on his nose more firmly and gazing

at the door. "Dear fellows, did you hear that? It was shockin'—"

"Is this 'ere the cabin?" asked a rough, beery voice. "Right you are, young shavers. I'm just dyin' to see the son o' my old shipmate, Burton. One o' the best pals I ever had!"

The Bo'sun threw the door open wide, and in stalked Captain Jelks and his obedient mate. The pair were well primed for the visit, and they brought an abominable smell of spirits and stale tobacco into the study with them. Jelks, indeed, had had just about as much as he could stand comfortably.

He leered round him, attempting to look pleasant. Larson stood just behind, not quite so confident. All the juniors could see that these men were low-class seafaring fellows of the worst type.

Jelks picked out the Bo'sun instantly, and he nodded slightly to himself, and gave Larson a nudge.

"That's 'im!" he exclaimed heartily. "That's the son o' my old pal. How d'ye do, Tom, boy? You're lookin' well, Bo'sun. Give me your 'and!"

Before Burton could draw back, his fist had been seized, and Captain Jelks was wringing it vigorously.

"You ain't changed a mite since you was a young nipper runnin' about the decks wi' bare feet," he exclaimed cordially. "Reminds me o' the old days when me an' y'r father used to go drinking together."

There was a yell from the crowd of juniors outside.

"Drinking! Oh, my hat!"

"What a show-up for Burton!"

"Rats! I don't believe it!" bawled Handforth, from the rear.

The Bo'sun wrenched his hand away, and stepped back. His face was flushed, and his eyes blazed with anger. He was disgusted, for Jelks's rum-laden breath had wafted over him.

"I don't know you!" he exclaimed quietly.

Captain Jelks swore.

"Don't know me!" he went on. "Too proud to reckonize your old shipmates? I'm surprised at yer, Bo'sun—"

"I don't know you!" repeated Burton hotly. "I—I suppose this is a joke? You'd better get over the gangway before you're chucked overside!"

"I knew it!" put in Larson, with bitter emphasis. "Wot did I tell yer, skipper? He won't own us. He's too

proud to speak to the likes o' me an' you now. An' us as used to dandle 'im about on our knees!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Own up, Bo'sun."

"Yah! You're too stuck up!"

Numerous shouts came from the juniors outside. Certainly this visit seemed to prove conclusively that Burton's tales of his father were all lies. The juniors, in the heat of the moment, did not think of a mean, practical joke. They naturally assumed that Burton was anxious to disown his former friends.

"I'm disappointed, my lad," said Captain Jelks sadly. "I thought you'd welcome me with open arms, busted if I didn't! Me an' your father was the best o' pals in the old days. Wot about when 'e was on his uppers, through that fight 'e 'ad in Wappin'? Got oiled, an' lost all 'is money, an' had to sign on wi' me as a fo'c'le 'and? Don't you remember it, Bo'sun?"

Tom Burton took a deep breath.

"It sounds all right, doesn't it?" he said grimly. "You've come here to make mischief, you scoundrel. I'm not afraid to tell anybody who my father is, or how I was brought up. These lies of yours—"

"Lies? Oh, Bo'sun!" said Captain Jelks reproachfully.

"'E's 'ard-earted!" exclaimed Bill. "It's 'orrid of 'im, cap'n."

"Why don't you recognise your old friends, you cad?" yelled Merrell, from the passage. "We knew what you were, you dock-urchin!"

"Fine come down for St. Frank's, ain't it?" sneered Fullwood. "I shall protest to the Head. We don't want sons of drunken sailors—"

"You'd better shut up, Fullwood!" snapped Nipper, with flashing eyes.

"Oh, of course, you'd stick up for the bargee!" jeered Fullwood.

Nipper looked at the Bo'sun, and nodded.

"This is a rotten trick, of course," he said. "We don't believe a word of it, Bo'sun."

"Hear, hear!" roared Handforth.

"We're with you, Burton!"

"Rather!"

"Good luck to the Bo'sun!"

Quite a chorus of shouts went up, and Captain Jelks scowled, and swore furiously. But the next moment the Nuts and their followers raised a chorus of

jeers and howls, and the amiable skipper smiled.

"I should never ha' thought it of yer, Bo'sun," he said. "Wot about the time when I 'elped y'r father after 'e'd served 'is stretch in quod? It's ungrateful——"

There was another yell.

"A jail-bird!" jeered De Valerie. "Oh, my hat!"

Nipper clenched his fists.

"You silly asses!" he roared. "This is a rotten trick of Fullwood's and De Valerie's! Ain't you got any sense? These blackguards have been put up to this dodge—paid for it, I expect!"

"Blackguards!" shouted Captain Jelks savagely.

And he went off into a string of oaths.

"Stop that!" ordered Nipper angrily. "Yes, blackguards! You'd better get off the premises before you're chucked out 'on your necks! Come on, Bo'sun—come on, you chaps! We can easily deal with a couple of drunken ruffians like these! Let's duck 'em in the fountain as a lesson!"

"Anythin' to oblige, dear boy!" said Sir Montie willingly.

"Souise me, we'll teach 'em!" roared the Bo'sun.

Captain Jelks and Mr. Larson backed away hastily. They hadn't bargained for this. The attitude of Nipper and Co. was decidedly aggressive, and the two scamps realised that they had gone a little too far. The skipper had let his tongue run more freely than he had intended.

"You young swabs!" he raved. "Can't you believe an honest man when 'e's talkin' to yer? Let's have no more of this foolery, Tom, my boy. I forgives yer. I can understand 'ow you feel. Come along down to the White 'Arp wi' me an' Bill. We'll have a real booze up, like the old days. You can soak it up as well as me, can't yer? Come on down, Bo'sun!"

"Go and have a tippie, Bo'sun!" yelled Gulliver. "Go—— Oh, my hat!" "Cave!"

There was a wild scamper in the corridor, and then a quick footstep, accompanied by the rustle of a gown. Mr. Crowell, the master of the Remove, looked into Study F in amazement.

"Good gracious!" he exclaimed. "Who—what—— Burton, are these—these gentlemen friends of yours?"

"Begad, that's hardly fair, sir!" protested Sir Montie.

"Of course they're not, sir," said the Bo'sun quietly. "I never saw them before in my life."

"Oh, wot lies 'e tells!" said Captain Jelks, in outraged tones. "Me an' Bill just come along to talk over old times——"

Mr. Crowell snapped his fingers.

"You will please leave the school at once," he said angrily. "I don't know who you are, but I do know you have been using outrageous language in front of junior boys. If you do not go at once, I will call the porter to come and throw you off the premises by force. You are blackguards!"

"We'll chuck 'em out, sir!" said Nipper eagerly.

"Silence, Bennett! Your intentions are good, no doubt, but these men are altogether too low for you to——"

"Oh, are we?" snarled Captain Jelks. "Don't you lay 'ands on me, you stuck-up swab! We'll go. Me an' Bill don't want to be where we ain't welcome! Burton's too proud to reckonise us, an' that's enough."

And Captain Jelks, with a fine air of dignity, strode down the passage, accompanied by the faithful Mr. Larson. Jelks turned and scowled.

"'E arsked us to come, the Bo'sun did!" he exclaimed viciously. "'E can deny it if 'e likes, an' bust 'im!"

Mr. Crowell pursed his lips and turned to Tom Burton.

"What does this mean, Burton?" he asked coldly.

"I don't know any more than you, sir," replied the Bo'sun. "We were just going to have tea when those two men appeared."

"They profess to be friends of yours——"

"That's a lie, sir—I mean, they told lies," said Burton hotly. "Those men are a disgrace to the merchant service."

"How did they know your name, if they are strangers?" asked the Form-master. "How did they know that you were at St. Frank's? Who gave them permission to enter the school? Tell me the truth, Burton. Don't deny that you know the ruffians if you have really met them before. I know, of course, that your father is a retired sea-captain——"

"Do you think my dad would have friends like that?" shouted the Bo'sun,

forgetting himself in his excited indignation. "Great marlinespikes! My father was one of the most respected captains in the service!"

"You must refrain from shouting, Burton," said Mr. Crowell tartly. "Follow me at once to the Housemaster's study. Bennett, go to the lobby and see if those ruffians have left the school. If not, send Warren to me."

The Bo'sun breathed hard.

"Why am I being taken to Mr. Alvington, sir?" he asked.

"Because I think it right that the Housemaster should know of this affair, Burton," said Mr. Crowell. "Come."

The Bo'sun, his face red with anger and indignation, followed the Form-master along the passage to Nelson Lee's study. Mr. Crowell entered, and Burton followed. The schoolmaster-detective looked up questioningly as his visitors entered. He smiled at the Removite, and then became grave.

"I trust you have not brought this boy to me for punishment, Mr. Crowell?" he asked concernedly.

"That rests with you, Mr. Alvington," said the Remove master. "A most disgraceful scene has just been enacted in the Remove passage, and Burton, I believe, can throw some light upon it."

Nelson Lee listened gravely while Mr. Crowell told of the visit of Captain Jelks and Mr. Larson.

"I distinctly heard the man using foul language as I came along the passage," concluded Mr. Crowell. "Upon my soul, it was altogether shocking. A crowd of juniors were collected round, and I think it is my duty to repeat to you, Mr. Alvington, a sentence of this blackguardly captain's."

"What is it, Mr. Crowell?" asked Nelson Lee quietly.

"The man requested Burton to accompany him to the White Harp Inn," replied the Form-master. "Furthermore, he suggested that they should have a drinking bout—a—ahem—a booze, to use his own low term. From what I heard, I was lead to believe that Burton had been in the habit, in the 'old days,' to indulge in strong liquor."

"I can scarcely believe that, Mr. Crowell."

"Indeed, sir," exclaimed the Form-master tartly. "I have merely repeated —"

"You mistake me, Mr. Crowell,"

smiled Lee. "I was not casting a doubt upon your veracity. I find it very difficult to believe, however, that Burton could ever have indulged in strong liquor, as these men suggested. What have you to say yourself, my boy?"

"Is it necessary for me to say anything, sir?" asked the Bo'sun quietly.

"The boy is evidently anxious to evade your questions—"

"I'm not, sir!" exclaimed the Bo'sun quickly. "Only—only it doesn't seem right that I should be asked to deny such a rotten accusation. By hokey! My dad's a teetotalor, sir, and I've never touched a drop of spirits in my life. And I never saw these two men until they came into the study. That's straight, skipper!" he added earnestly. "You can keelhaul me if I've told a lie!"

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Cannot you suggest why these men came, Burton?" he asked.

"No, skipper—I'm soused if I can!" replied the Bo'sun. "At least, I—I—"

"Well?"

"It's only a suspicion, sir, and I'd rather not say any more," said Burton uncomfortably. "The whole thing must have been somebody's idea of a joke."

"And you think you know the culprit, eh?"

The new boy remained silent.

"Well, Burton, we will let the matter rest as it is," said Nelson Lee. "You have told me that you know nothing of the men—and I believe you. I can only conclude that it was a singularly ill-natured practical joke. Take no notice of the incident, my boy; your school-fellows will know how much to believe of this preposterous story of Captain Jelks."

"Thank you, skipper," said the Bo'sun quietly.

And he left the study. Outside, in the passage, his good-natured face became very grim, and his jolly eyes took on a hard glitter.

CHAPTER III.

IN WHICH FULLWOOD AND DE VALERIE DON'T THINK THE JOKE AT ALL FUNNY!

ALTHOUGH Nelson Lee had believed the Bo'sun's statement, there was quite a number of juniors who were inclined to cast a doubt upon it. They spread the story far and wide that Tom Burton was

the son of a drunken seaman, who had been in jail.

The Bo'sun heard this from several quarters a few minutes after he had left Nelson Lee's study. He was taunted and jeered at by such cads as Gulliver and Merrell and Noys. Fullwood and De Valerie had done their work, and were now chuckling over the success of their scheme in Study A—the headquarters of the Nuts.

There wasn't a more good-natured boy at St. Frank's than Burton. He was simply a lumbering lump of sunny cheeriness. But there is a limit to all things. And even the Bo'sun's good nature could not put up with these outrageous taunts.

When he arrived at Study F he was practically boiling with wrath, and he made no attempt to conceal his emotion. Conroy minor and Nipper and Co. were waiting for him—waiting to start tea, as a matter of fact.

But Burton wasn't thinking of tea. He heard that Captain Jelks and his mate had left the school; and he told his companion what had taken place in Nelson Lee's study. Nipper nodded and grinned.

"Of course," he said, "Old Alvy wouldn't believe that fatheaded yarn, Bo'sun. Mr. Crowell was dotty to take you to the Housemaster at all. Don't look so jolly waxy, my dear chap. It's all over now——"

"Is it?" asked the Bo'sun grimly. "I reckon you're on the wrong tack, Bennett. It's not done with! Fullwood and De Valerie planned the whole thing, I'll bet my sea-boots!"

"Dear fellow, there's no question about it," agreed Sir Montie languidly. "Don't forget what happened last night. It was you who gave the warnin' that the cads were gettin' out of the dormitory, wasn't it?"

"Fullwood and De Valerie slipped away," said Nipper. "They went to the White Harp, of course, and met those rotters there. It's as plain as daylight. The whole thing was a faked up job."

Burton nodded.

"I'm going to fight those two cads," he said quietly. "At least, I'll fight 'em if they don't own up and apologise. Bust my maindeck! I ain't been so wild for years! I wouldn't care so much about myself, but a lot of the fellows believe that my dad——"

"Oh, rot!" laughed Nipper. "Who believes it? Only a few chaps who don't

count. I'm not advising you to let Fullwood and De Valerie off, but there's no need to do anything in a hurry. Squat down and have tea, old scout. You can smash Fullwood and De Valerie to a pulp afterwards."

The Bo'sun needed persuading, but at last he sat down, and tea proceeded. It was scarcely a merry meal, however, for Burton was silent and thoughtful. He had every reason to be enraged, and the others were all sympathy. They, of course, fully understood the position.

As soon as the meal was over, they all went along to the common-room. And here they found the apartment pretty well crowded. Fullwood and De Valerie were repeating Captain Jelks's statements with great gusto, and a grinning crowd of juniors were listening.

"Here he comes!" sneered Gulliver. "I say, it's a bit off-side, you know. Things have come to a pretty pass when we have to live under the same roof as a beer-swilling son of a jail-bird!"

The Bo'sun found it quite impossible to stand this taunt. His patience, already sorely tried, gave out completely. He walked over to Gulliver deliberately, and the cad stuck his hands in his pockets and grinned.

"You can say I'm beer-swilling if you like, Gulliver. But you're not going to call my father a jail-bird!" said Burton, between his teeth.

"Ain't I?" sneered Gulliver. "Your father's a jail——"

Smack!

The Bo'sun's open hand met Gulliver's face with a slap which resounded throughout the room. And Gulliver staggered back with a yell of surprise and pain. But he didn't come forward again; he slunk away behind the crowd.

There was quite a hush in the common-room.

"See here, messmates," said the Bo'sun, in his deep voice. "I'm not going to make any blamed speech. You've all got sense, I reckon, and it's up to you to think what you like. There are two caddish swabs in this room who told those men to fake up that yarn. And I'm going to give them the hiding of their lives—unless they apologise."

"This is rather humorous," said De Valerie mockingly. "Who are these interestin' swabs—what?"

"You're one of them—and Fullwood is the other!" said Burton quietly. "You can deny it if you like, but it's

the truth. You went down to the White Harp last night—everybody knows that—and you planned this affair with Captain Jelks and the other man."

"Of course they did!" bawled Handforth. "That's what I've been saying all along. I don't believe a word of it, Bo'sun."

Fullwood laughed sneeringly.

"Naturally, you want to fake up some explanation," he said. "I don't blame you, Burton. Those pals of yours have given us the tip as to what you used to be. We shall know how to treat you in future."

The Bo'sun's eyes flashed.

"Do you deny that you——"

"We don't deny anythin'," interrupted De Valerie calmly. "You can think what you please, you loafer. The fellows here have sense, as you remarked, and they know well enough that Captain Jelks told the truth. As soon as Fullwood mentioned your name to him he told us all about your precious father——"

"Oh, so you admit that you met Jelks at the pub last night?" cut in Nipper grimly. "That's about good enough, Bo'sun. How many chaps here believe that fathead yarn of the drunken skipper's?"

A perfect chorus of shouts went up in favour of the Bo'sun. Only the Nuts and a few others jeered. It was perfectly clear that Fullwood and De Valerie had been guilty of a mean trick—which, according to their idea, was a good joke.

"I'll give you lubbers one chance," said the Bo'sun quietly. "You'll apologise to me within one minute, or feel my fists. Understand? I mean business. Souse me, I'll make hay of you!"

Fullwood turned his back, but was twirled round at once by Sir Montie and Handforth.

"Hadn't you better apologise, dear fellow?" asked Tregellis-West languidly. "It'll save you ever so much trouble, begad! Just look at Burton's fists. They're clenched already, you know, an' they look quite dangerous!"

"Hang you!" snarled Fullwood. "Do you think that I'm going to beg that dock-urchin's pardon? Let's get out of this, De Valerie."

"You won't apologise?" asked the Bo'sun.

"Go an' eat coke!" snapped De Valerie.

"Yah! You're afraid!" roared a dozen voices.

"My dear chaps, I wouldn't soil my hands by touching the dirty bargee!" said Cecil De Valerie, with a sneer. "Besides, I'm not particularly anxious to smash his face up; I don't owe him any grudge."

The Bo'sun laughed without mirth.

"I haven't had a fight with anybody since I've been at St. Frank's," he said. "But, blow my tops'l, I can use my fists, messmates. I'm big—I'm a clumsy, great fellow, and I know it. It wouldn't be fair to take these shrimps on one at a time. So I'll fight the pair at once—one hand each."

Fullwood and De Valerie, who had been looking uneasy, grinned with derision.

"You can fight with somebody of your own class!" sneered the Rotter. "I wouldn't soil my hands by touchin' you!"

"Besides, it wouldn't be fair," put in Fullwood. "That brag doesn't go down, Burton. Personally, I could lick you with ease, and I'm not going to take part in any kid's squabble——"

"I'm going to fight the pair of you—one hand each!" repeated the Bo'sun deliberately. "You're afraid—you're shortening sail. Well, perhaps this'll make you fight!"

Burton stepped forward quickly. He caught the two cads fairly, and cracked their heads together with a bang. They weren't particularly hurt, but the yell of laughter which rose from the other juniors caused their faces to burn with indignation and fury. Burton had treated them like a couple of cheeky fags!

"Will you fight now?" asked the Bo'sun grimly.

"Begad!" gasped Ralph Leslie Fullwood. "We'll smash you! You've forced it on us, you gutter brat, and you'll have to take the consequences. We'll knock him out in less than three minutes, De Valerie!"

The Rotter remained calm, but he nodded, with an evil glitter in his eyes.

"Less than that!" he exclaimed. "It's his own doin', so he won't be able to grumble. I'll take him on first——"

"No you won't!" snapped the Bo'sun. "You'll both take me on together!"

De Valerie shrugged his shoulders.

"Just as you like, you bragging idiot!" he said calmly. "Hold my coat for me, Noys. Hold on, though— It won't be necessary to peel for a little job like this!"

The cads were not in the least perturbed. Between them they meant to give the Bo'sun the thrashing of his life. The other fellows couldn't say that it was unfair, because Burton had made the challenge himself.

"I say, you can't scrap here," put in Nipper. "We shall have a prefect along in less than a minute. Better go out to the gym., and do it in proper style."

"Hang it, it'll be over in less than a minute!" snapped Fullwood.

"Think so?" said Nipper calmly. "I don't!"

Everybody was in favour of adjourning to the gymnasium, where the combatants could rely upon being undisturbed. And, in less than a minute, the Removites were crowding out of the common-room in excited groups. A fight always aroused keen interest, and this fight promised to be quite a novel one.

Arriving in the gym., the electric lights were turned on, and the door was closed. Nipper appointed himself referee—at least, everybody agreed that he was the best man for the job. Fullwood and De Valerie, unable to back out of the affair, sneered at the whole procedure. They were firmly convinced that they could settle the Bo'sun within a couple of minutes.

And, undoubtedly, a great many other juniors shared that view. Fullwood and De Valerie were big fellows, with hard fists. The Bo'sun was bigger, it is true, but he would be tremendously handicapped.

Bob Christine and Yorke and Talmadge, and one or two other College House fellows dropped in to look on. They refrained from making any sarcastic remarks, for they were in a minority, and a House row wouldn't have been exactly successful from their point of view.

The fight was really an informal one, and it started practically at once. Fullwood and De Valerie both lunged at the Bo'sun with the amiable intention of knocking him out in the first round.

Strangely enough, however, the Bo'sun wasn't knocked out at all.

He met the rush of his opponents as

though they had been a couple of straws. He stood as firmly as a rock, and the Removites looked on in sheer astonishment. They had confidently expected to witness a mere rough-and-tumble.

The general opinion had been that the Bo'sun knew nothing of real boxing. As a matter of fact, Tom Burton gave a display of wonderful science.

He wasn't clumsy, and he didn't move about like an elephant, as Merrell had jeeringly predicted a minute before. On the contrary, the Bo'sun was as nimble as a feather-weight champion, and his foot work was astonishing. Fullwood and De Valerie, after that first rush, lost their sneering looks of confidence.

They realised, all at once, that their task wasn't so very easy, after all. And they were wildly enraged. It touched their dignity to know that even with the odds all on their side, they stood a chance of losing.

And, with vicious energy, they tackled their opponent.

The Bo'sun dealt with them exactly as he had stated—one hand each. His fists darted about in the most bewildering fashion, and after a few playful taps he got to work in earnest.

Smack! Bang!

Fullwood reeled back as the Bo'sun's right hand crashed upon his nose, and De Valerie gasped at the same second. It seemed as though a battering-ram had struck him in the chest, and he staggered and fell. In a moment he was on his feet again, however, and he rushed madly at the new boy.

"Time!" called Nipper.

"Hang you!" snarled the Rotter. "There's no time-keeping in a mill like this—it ain't a proper fight! Smash him, Fullwood!"

They simply hurled themselves at Burton, and he met the rush smilingly. The Bo'sun, in fact, had recovered his temper completely, and was enjoying himself.

"Tain't fair!" roared Handforth. "Keep time——"

"By hokey! I don't care!" said the Bo'sun genially. "Let 'em finish it, messmates! We don't want any rules! I'm just going to give these slabsided lubbers a thrashing. By the great hook-block! I'm ready!"

And, to prove his words, the Bo'sun sailed in with a vengeance. He didn't spare the cads now. His fists were everywhere, and Fullwood and De Valerie

gave ground in bewildered confusion. Their own blows were wild and useless.

Burton's fists rained blows upon the two Nuts with terrific rapidity. At the end of a minute the pair were panting with exhaustion. The pace was too fast for them, and they wished, heartily, that they had consented to proper time-keeping.

Fullwood crumpled up first. He went down from a heavy punch on the nose. He wasn't done, but he lay groaning, and refused to get up. He had had quite enough! The juniors yelled in derision, but Fullwood took no notice.

Meanwhile, De Valerie saw no reason why he should stand up to this tremendous fighter alone. Mad with rage, he made one blind rush, but had every reason to regret it. Something, which seemed like a ton weight, thudded upon his left eye, and as he staggered, a second blow caught him under the chin.

De Valerie went down with a crash. There was no question about his condition; he was fairly knocked out, and hadn't another ounce of fight in him. And the Bo'sun, curiously enough, was scarcely touched. A tiny trickle of blood was streaming down from a cut lip, but he wasn't marked anywhere else.

"Begad!" exclaimed Sir Montie. "It's amazin'. Dear Bo'sun, I must shake hands with you—I must, really!"

A great many other fellows wanted to shake hands with Burton. The gymnasium resounded with excited shouts of admiration. At the same time, the fellows regarded the victor with a certain amount of awe. A fellow who could fight like that had to be respected!

"You've done wonders, Burton," said Nipper, enthusiastically.

"I like to fight fellows who's got spunk!" said the Bo'sun quietly. "What's the good of hitting fellows who can't hit back? By hokey, I'm not feeling exactly pleased, although I have whacked 'em. Still, they deserved all they got, and I'm satisfied. I don't reckon they'll play any more of those lubbers' tricks!"

Fullwood and De Valerie picked themselves up after a few moments, and a great yell of laughter arose. The appearance of the elegant Nuts was decidedly comical—from the juniors' point of view.

They were marked fairly evenly—as

though they had been under the same steam-roller—to use an expression of the mighty Handforth. Both Fullwood and De Valerie possessed black eyes; their noses were swollen and had been bleeding copiously. Altogether, they had received very severe punishment, and were sore in a dozen places.

Without a word, they slunk out of the gym., and pelted for the Ancient House. A crowd of juniors rushed after them, yelling with laughter. In the lobby Nelson Lee was pinning a notice on the baize-covered board.

He looked round for a moment, and had a clear view of the unfortunate pair. But when they became aware of his presence, the Housemaster was giving all his attention to the board, and they slipped by unnoticed. At least, they believed so, and they breathed with relief when they reached the sanctuary of the bathroom.

Nelson Lee smiled to himself. He had discreetly failed to notice the hapless pair. For he guessed, at once, what had occurred. The Bo'sun had undoubtedly been at work, and it was clear that the mystery of Captain Jelks's visit had been planned by Fullwood and De Valerie.

Retribution had followed swiftly, and Nelson Lee saw no reason why he should interfere.

CHAPTER IV.

IN WHICH CAPTAIN JELKS SUGGESTS AN INTERESTING SCHEME.

CECIL DE VALERIE scowled furiously at his reflection in the mirror which reposed on the mantelpiece in Study M, in the Remove passage.

This study was De Valerie's exclusively. He had queer tastes, and generally chose to be alone. One of his favourite habits was to sit smoking on a pile of cushions before the fire.

Now, however, the electric light was full on, and he had a visitor in the person of Ralph Leslie Fullwood. The pair were in a shocking temper, and for some minutes they had been slanging one another fiercely for the mere pleasure of relieving their feelings.

"Hang it all, we don't want to squabble!" snapped the Rotter, still

gazing at his disfigured features in the glass. "Just look at my face, Fullwood!"

Fullwood grinned painfully.

"It's worse than mine, thank goodness!" he said.

"Rot! You're as bad as I am," replied De Valerie sourly. "We've got to face the fact, Fullwood; that confounded bargee licked the two of us—licked us hollow. It ain't nice to talk about, is it?"

"By Jove! The chaps will chip us for weeks!" growled Fullwood. "It's a rotten come-down, and I'm almost afraid to show my face. Licked by a chap like that—and with one hand, too!"

"Well, it's no good raving," said De Valerie, his eyes glittering with malicious anger. "Jawin' like this only makes things worse. Just listen! There's a rotten crowd of fellows out in the passage now. They're waitin'!"

"Waiting?" said Fullwood. "What for?"

"Why, to cackle when we leave the study," snapped the Rotter. "It's a jolly good thing we locked the door. They'll stay for hours if we don't go out. And I'm hanged if I'm going to face that beastly mob."

"I suppose you're going to stay in here until bedtime?" asked Fullwood, with sneering sarcasm. "The fools will be round at the window before long——"

De Valerie nodded.

"That's what I was thinking," he said. "We'd better slip out while we've got the chance. Dash it all, I'm not going to stay here to be laughed at. Let's go for a walk down to the village—our faces want cooling, anyhow. We can get some cigarettes, too. Anything to get away from this!"

Fullwood readily agreed to this suggestion. Although it was hateful to admit it, the pair were almost afraid of facing the Removites. They had had a terrific thrashing, and it had been delivered by one boy. The indignity was simply appalling, and Fullwood and De Valerie felt, just then, as though they could smash their self-made enemy to atoms, piece by piece, and enjoy the task.

This course, however, was hardly practicable. So they escaped from their jeering schoolfellows by slipping out through the window. Later on, the excitement would have subsided. The

lads left the light burning in the study, and closed the window carefully behind them.

Then they hurried across the Triangle, and walked out through the gateway—for it wasn't locking-up time yet. They struck out for the village savagely, and didn't talk much. Talking was rather painful; nearly every muscle of their faces seemed to be bruised.

De Valerie gave a growl at last, however.

"I've a jolly good mind to go into the White Harp!" he said recklessly. "A brandy would do us good, Fullwood——"

"Don't be a mad idiot!" snapped Fullwood, almost in alarm. "We might be spotted by a master, or a prefect—and, besides, I draw the line at drinking brandy. Champagne ain't so bad——"

"That's a distinction without a difference," said De Valerie. "Still, I don't think we'll risk it, Fully. There's no sense in asking for the sack. But I'm going to get some cigarettes, I tell you!"

They walked on in the gloom. It was a fine evening, and quite mild, with a moon somewhere behind the clouds. And just before they reached the White Harp they saw two figures walking along in front of them. They had intended passing the public-house without pausing, but now they changed their minds.

"Begad! Those two chaps are Jelks and the other fellow," muttered De Valerie. "We'll give 'em a piece of our mind, Fully. Jelks went altogether too far, with his yarns about boozing and choky. We didn't mention anything of that sort."

They soon overtook the skipper and mate of the Southern Cross. These gentlemen were lounging along easily, smoking and chatting in low, serious tones. They looked round quickly as they heard De Valerie address them.

"Why, darn me, we was just talkin' about you shavers," said Captain Jelks genially. "You've come at the right time; we want to 'ave a chat with you, confidential like."

"That's what we want!" said Fullwood grimly. "Why the dickens did you carry the game too far? We didn't tell you to——"

"Ho!" said Captain Jelks. "Went too far, did I? That's nice an' grateful, ain't it, Bill? S'welp me! Wot 'ave

you been doin' to your dials? Look, Bill! Did you ever see such a set of black eyes?"

Fullwood scowled.

"Oh, rats!" he grunted. "You leave our faces alone——"

"My dear young gent, I wouldn't touch 'em for anythin'!" said Captain Jelks earnestly. "You've been through it—I can see that plain. By thunder, that mate of yours must have fists like iron!"

"An' the two of 'em, too!" said Mr. Larson, with a grin. "It's queer 'ow you both came to be so busted about. Couldn't you 'andle 'im better than that, kids? I shall start larfin' in a minute——"

"You 'old your lip, Bill!" interjected the skipper severely. "These young gents—as been treated shameful. If you larf, I'll knock your 'ead off! I dare say these poor young fellers are just dyin' to think o' some scheme to get their own back. We want to 'elp 'em—not larf at their misfortune."

"How the dickens can you help?" asked Fullwood sullenly.

"Ah! That's just it, young gent," said Captain Jelks, wagging a gnarled forefinger to and fro. "'Ow can we 'elp? You don't know me—I'm full of ideas, as Bill will tell you in a minute. It strikes me that you'd be a deal 'appier if that Burton was out o' the school altogether."

"Oh, talk sense, for goodness' sake!" grunted De Valerie. "Burton's in the school—so what's the good of saying anything else? We can't kick him out, I suppose?"

Captain Jelks looked cunning.

"I ain't sayin' as you could," he exclaimed, in a whisper. "You can't kick 'im out, young gents—but the 'Ead-master can. Wot you want to do is to work some plan that'll 'cause the kid to be hoofed out neck an' crop."

"It's all very well, jawing," said Fullwood. "But it can't be done, Jelks. We should like to see Burton kicked out, I can tell you. But the game's too risky. Why, we might get the sack ourselves!"

"There ain't a more good-natured skipper than me," said Captain Jelks genially. "I'm goin' to 'elp you—just for the love of it. It's one o' my favourite pastimes, 'elpin other people. Ain't that so, Bill?"

Mr. Larson replied, with much emphasis, that it certainly was so.

"How the deuce can you help?" asked De Valerie curiously.

He and Fullwood were ready enough to take part in any scheme which would result in the Bo'sun being expelled from the school—provided they didn't run any risk themselves. Just now, especially, they hated Burton with particular intensity, for their faces were still aching and swollen.

Furthermore, they had suffered a great indignity at the Bo'sun's hands; and that, more than anything, made them long for vengeance. If they could only get Burton expelled they would feel that the triumph was theirs, after all.

"Yes, how can you help?" repeated Fullwood, after De Valerie.

"Well, there's a little idea runnin' round in my mind," explained Captain Jelks. "You young gents won't take no risk at all—not a-mite. You'll simply 'ave to look on an' see that everything goes all right. You see, I feel kind of sorry for them faces o' yours. I want to make 'em feel easier."

"You haven't explained the wheeze yet," growled Fullwood.

Captain Jelks lowered his voice when he spoke again. For five minutes or so the four plotters paced slowly down the lane, and paused against a gateway which led into a meadow. Jelks leaned against it, and filled his pipe.

"Well, young gents, 'ow will it do?" he asked easily.

De Valerie and Fullwood were looking flushed and excited.

"Why, it ought to work all right!" exclaimed the Rotter, in a whisper. "By gad, I don't see how it can go wrong! It'll be a jolly good riddance to that dirty son of a drunken skipper!"

"Easy on, young shaver—easy on!" said Captain Jelks. "Don't forget who you're a-talkin' to. A good many skippers get boozed when they're ashore, but they're good men, rightly speakin'. There ain't a better man than me, f'instance. Wot do you say, Bill?"

Bill, thus appealed to, agreed heartily.

"It'll be as easy as pullin' a rope through a hawse-hole," he declared. "There ain't nothin' to stop us, skipper. An', even if things go wrong, you an' me can't be touched. An' we're doin' it just for the sake o' these 'ere young gentlemen."

"Nothin' else," said the skipper. "Well, young sirs, I dowsay you'll be wantin' to get back to the school. Don't forget the arrangement, an' be ready to do your bit when the time comes. Savvy?"

"There's not much for us to do, anyhow," said De Valerie. "The whole thing really depends upon whether Burton will be shoved into the punishment-room or not. That's generally the case, so I don't think we need worry about that. And if Burton likes to run away, that's his doing, isn't it?"

"Sure," agreed Captain Jelks heartily. "Drink ain't good for boys, anyhow. 'E'll take the bait, never fear. An' arter that it'll be all plain sailin'. We shall have a favourable breeze with us right from the start."

A couple of minutes later Fullwood and De Valerie were walking sharply towards St. Frank's. They hardly spoke a word until they got back into Study M. They found that the window was still closed, and that the light was burning as they had left it. The Removites, evidently, had got tired of waiting.

"I say, I don't exactly like it, you know," remarked Fullwood uneasily.

"Oh, don't be scared!" exclaimed De Valerie. "You were anxious enough to get rid of the Bo'sun half-an-hour ago —"

"Idiot! I wasn't thinking of that," snapped Fullwood. "I was wondering if we should be safe. Come to think of it, though, I don't see how we can be suspected of helping in the job."

"My dear chap, we sha'n't help," said De Valerie calmly. "That's the beauty of it. Jelks is going to do everything. It was his idea, and he's going to work the wheeze. Even if it all fails, we shall be safe enough. And we're not supposed to be responsible for Jelks's actions, are we?"

It gave the rascally pair much pleasure to realise that they would take no part in the actual plot. It was Captain Jelks and Mr. Larson who would suffer if the truth came out.

The boys did not ask themselves why this blackguardly skipper should go to such pains to help them. They certainly did not suspect that Jelks was grinding an axe of his own. Why, indeed, should he be interested in the fate of Tom Burton?

In the dormitory that night the battered pair were chaffed unmercifully. They boiled, but kept sullenly silent. And any compunction they may have felt vanished completely.

They were only allowed to rest when the juniors had become too tired to continue their chipping. It galled Fullwood and De Valerie, too, to hear the Removites speaking with enthusiasm and pride of the Bo'sun's achievement.

Certainly, after that ignominious licking, St. Frank's would be an uncomfortable place for Fullwood and De Valerie for some time. Revenge on Burton, however, would be like unto balm to their wounds.

In the morning there was a fresh outburst of derision; the juniors had no intention of letting the matter rest. Fullwood and De Valerie writhed in their beds. But they couldn't hide their disfigurements, no matter how they tried. And it did not give them any great pleasure to realise that Mr. Crowell, in the Form-room, would undoubtedly give them heavy lines for fighting. And the Bo'sun would get off scott-free, for he was practically unmarked!

That was the galling part of it. Mr. Crowell would naturally assume that Fullwood and De Valerie had been fighting between themselves. The joke would be quite rich, from the Remove's point of view.

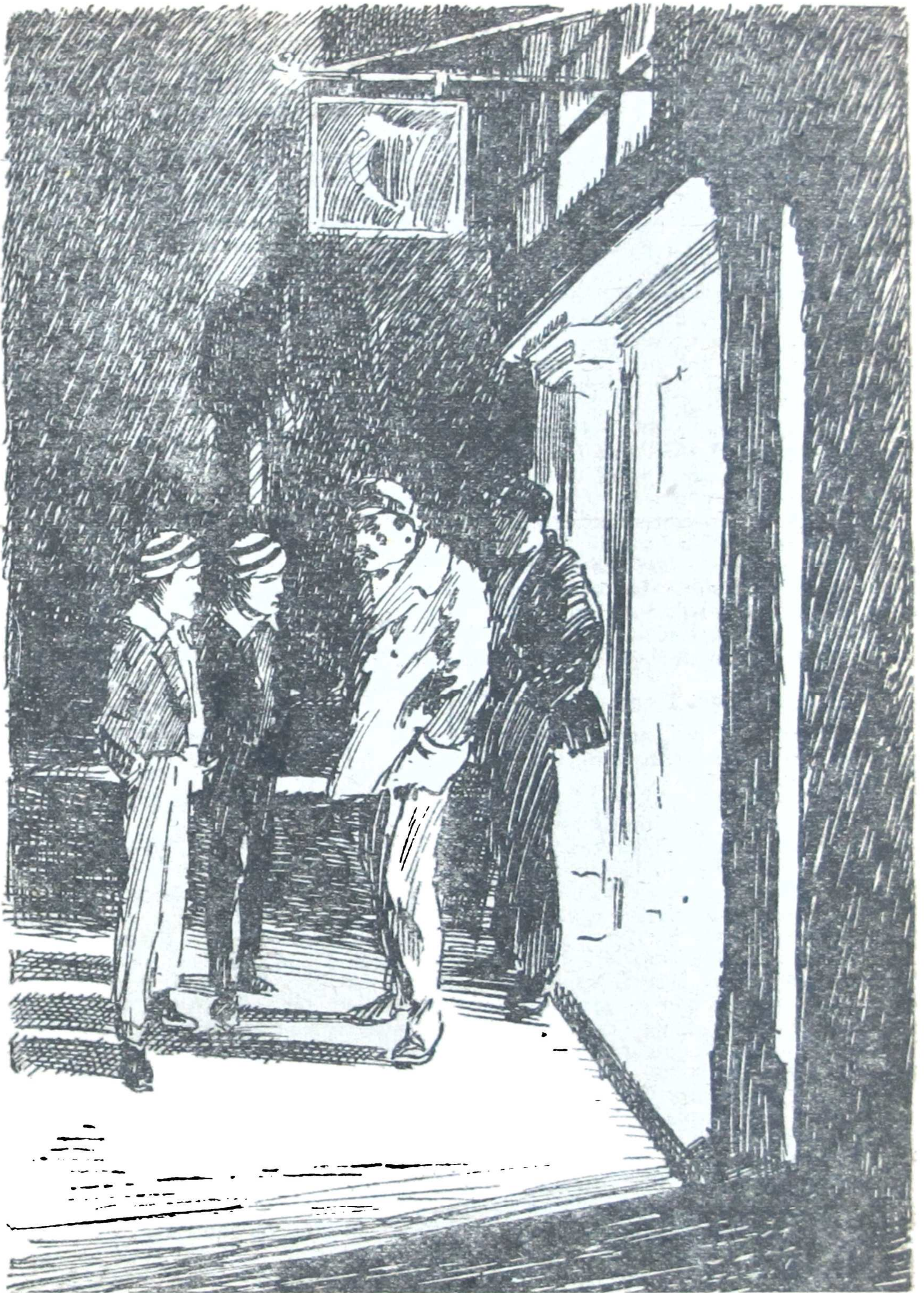
The Bo'sun himself was as cheerful as ever. He was extremely glad to find that the visit of Captain Jelks was regarded as a piece of knavish trickery. Hardly a fellow believed a word of the skipper's preposterous yarn.

Burton got a surprise before breakfast, however. Passing through the lobby, he was informed, by Bryant, of the Fifth, that a letter was lying in the rack for him. Bryant had seen it while looking hopefully for an expected remittance. The Bo'sun took his letter, and read it out in the Triangle.

He was alone, and stood under the old chestnut trees. The letter was unexpected, and it was a somewhat grubby missive. The postmark was Bellton, and this was surprising in itself.

"Well, shiver my bowsprit!" murmured the Bo'sun in astonishment.

For he had suddenly discovered that the letter was from Captain Jelks himself! It was a remarkable epistle, in a way, and ran as follows:



"You want me and Bill to go up to the school and treat this 'ere Burton boy like an old shipmate?"

"That's the idea," said De Valerie.—(See page 5.)

"The White Harp,
"Bellton, Sussex.

"My Dear Young Sir,—I feel that it is my duty to ask your pardon. It ain't often I've written to a cove apologising, but I'm a man who beleeves in being straight. That's me. I might as well own up, and say that I'd taken more aboard than I could comfortably hold. I wasn't boozed, but near the mark, so to say. I owe you an apolijy for insulting your grand old father.

"The fact is, Master Burton, I have a messige for you, and I was going to speak about it when that cove in a black gown came along and ordered me out of the skool. The fact is, I want to arsk you something about your dad. I knoo him years ago, and a fine skipper he is. Well, young sir, I shouldn't feel safe in coming up to the skool agin. So will you come down to my privit room, at the above address, to-morrer afternoon at three o'clock. It's most important. Don't tell nobody—but come. Their mite be big trouble for somebody as loves you if you don't turn up.

"Again arsking your pardon for making a fool of meself,—Yours respeckfully,

"EBERNEZER JELKS (Captain.)"

Tom Burton gazed at the letter in surprise, and he scratched his head thoughtfully.

"Mustn't tell anybody!" he murmured. "Souse me, that's queer! I wonder what Capt'n Jelks knows about me and my dad? Trouble for somebody who loves me if I don't turn up!" he added, consulting the letter again. "Oh, it must be a joke!"

He tried to make himself believe that this was the case. But there was such an air of frankness about Captain Jelks's letter—such a humble admission of guilt—that the simple-hearted Bo'sun was deceived.

It was a half-holiday that day, being a Wednesday, and Captain Jelks evidently knew it. It would be quite easy for Burton to slip down to the White Harp. He knew, of course, that such a place was out of bounds. But this was quite a different matter to visiting the place for a disreputable purpose.

The Bo'sun argued it out with himself.

"It'll be safe enough," he murmured. "Why, even if I'm spotted by a master, I've got my explanation all clear. I sha'n't be doing anything wrong. It ain't like breakin' bounds at night."

Thinking of it in that way, the Bo'sun saw no harm whatever in visiting the White Harp—and, indeed, there was no harm. He had been asked to go, and he had been asked to say nothing about it.

Moreover, the Bo'sun remembered, with a certain qualm of uneasiness, that his father had often refused to talk about one particular voyage of his—a voyage he had undertaken while the Bo'sun had stayed with an aunt. There was a mystery connected with that voyage—and, vaguely, Tom Burton suspected that Jelks referred to the matter in his letter.

And the Bo'sun came to a decision before stuffing the letter away. Captain Jelks had apologised, and that was satisfactory. He would go down to the White Harp and see the skipper after dinner.

The first step in the plot had succeeded—the Bo'sun had accepted the bait!

CHAPTER V.

THE TREACHERY OF CAPTAIN JELKS—
THE BO'SUN'S DOWNFALL—THE SENTENCE.

THE White Harp Inn looked a very peaceful, innocent place in the weak light of the wintry afternoon. Tom Burton pushed open the gate which led into the private garden, and walked up the path to the side door.

He thought it better not to go brazenly in at the "public-house" entrance.

During morning lessons, and afterwards, he had thought a great deal about Captain Jelks's letter. He had considered the question of asking Nipper's advice; but had decided to see Jelks first, at all events. The Bo'sun would have saved an enormous amount of trouble if he had followed his first impulse. For Nipper, without doubt, would have prevented him from keeping the appointment.

The Bo'sun wasn't a fool; he didn't blindly enter the White Harp, caught in a simple trap. To tell the truth, he was very wary; he shrewdly realised that there might be nothing whatever in Jelks' request.

A few minutes' conversation, however, would soon settle the point. That was how the Bo'sun looked at it. But, although keen, he wasn't prepared for the treachery of the blackguardly skipper.

Pushing open the side door, the Bo'sun entered the short, dark passage. And there, framed in the doorway of the back parlour, stood Captain Ebenezer Jelks. He waved his hand cheerily as the Bo'sun appeared.

"'Ere you are, young gent!" he exclaimed. "Come in, sir—come in!"

Burton walked into the little parlour, and wasn't particularly pleased with it. The atmosphere was rank with tobacco-smoke and the fumes of spirits. A fire burned in the grate, and Mr. Bill Larson dozed in an armchair.

"What did you write me that letter for?" asked the Bo'sun quietly.

Captain Jelks shut the door.

"Master Burton, I'm real sorry," he said penitently. "I was a hog last night, an' I know it. But when I've done wrong, I admit it. That's one of my characteristics, ain't it, Bill?"

"It is, cap'n—it is!" mumbled Bill sleepily.

"We don't want to talk about that," said the Removite. "But I'm glad your taking on this tone, Captain Jelks."

"An' you forgives me?" asked the skipper eagerly.

"Why, of course I do!" said the Bo'sun, smiling in spite of himself.

"You're a good 'un—bust me, you're a good 'un!" exclaimed Jelks. "We'll 'ave a drink on that!"

"No, thanks!" said the Bo'sun shortly.

"Oh, don't say that!" protested the skipper. "Just a little drink, young sir. You ain't agin drinkin' ginger-beer or lemonade? Which ever yer like——"

"Oh, well, I don't mind a glass of ginger-beer!" said Burton. "I am rather thirsty, as a matter of fact."

"That's right—that's right!"

The Bo'sun saw no harm in having a more bottle of pop. There wasn't any harm in it. Captain Jelks turned away to a sideboard, where there were several bottles. The Bo'sun took the bottle of ginger-beer himself, and poured it out into the glass which Captain Jelks handed him.

"Well, 'ere's good luck, young sir!" said the skipper cheerily. "Let's drink to the dregs, as the sayin' is!"

The Bo'sun drank his ginger-beer off at a draught, and set the glass down. Then he looked at the skipper inquiringly.

"Now, Captain Jelks, about that letter——"

"That's right, young gentleman: we'll talk about it now," said the skipper, lighting his pipe. "Sit down in that there easy chair, will ye? Ah, that's right! Now we're nice and comfortable like!"

The chair was near the fire, and Tom Burton lay back with a feeling of intense ease. It was strange, but, somehow, he seemed to be coming over sleepy. He yawned, shook himself, and sat forward.

Jelks was speaking, but, for the life of him, the Bo'sun could not take in the sense of the other's words. His brain seemed to be fuddled; and, after a moment or two, he didn't attempt to pull himself together. The effort was too much for him. But he spoke after a bit, and his words were all jumbled together.

"As I was sayin', Master Burton, we want to talk seriously together," said Captain Jelks, sitting forward in his chair. "Do you 'ear me? Why, darn me if 'e ain't gone to sleep!"

The boy was lying back in his chair, breathing evenly.

"It's worked, cap'n!" breathed Mr. Larson, very wide awake now.

"Stow your lip!" muttered the skipper. "We don't want to talk about it, do we, you fool? 'And over that bottle o' whisky!"

Jelks grinned as he bent over the Bo'sun. The Removite wasn't exactly asleep, for his eyes were still partially open. A stranger would have declared that he had taken a great deal more to drink than he could do with.

With nimble fingers, the skipper went through Burton's pockets, and, after a few moments, he found the letter which he had posted to Burton the previous evening. The envelope was there, intact, and Jelks chuckled as he examined his precious epistle.

"We don't want to leave no evidence as to wot brought 'im down 'ere, Bill," he murmured, as he tore the envelope and letter in two, and placed the fragments in the heart of the fire. "There's nothin' to show, now, why the kid come down. Of course, you an' me don't know nothin' about it!"

Jelks took the whisky-bottle, and proceeded to sprinkle a considerable quantity of the spirit over the Bo'sun's hair and face. He put some over his waist-

coat and shirt. In consequence, Burton simply recked of whisky.

"Wot a shameful waste!" muttered Mr. Larson regretfully.

"It's all in a good cause, Bill!" said Captain Jelks. "Don't you worry yer-self! It's a good thing old Jonas is a pal of ours. 'E's winkin' at this affair, an' won't arst no questions!"

The skipper passed out of the parlour and made his way to another room across the passage. There was a telephone instrument on the wall, and Jelks lifted the receiver and gave the school number. In a few minutes he was talking to Mr. Paget, the Fifth Form-master.

"I want to speak to the 'Ead," said Jelks firmly.

"If you will wait a moment, I will put you through," replied Mr. Paget.

Jelks waited, grinning to himself, and he soon heard the deep tones of Dr. Stafford at the other end of the wire.

"I've got something to tell you that might be of interest, sir," said the skipper. "There's a boy down 'ere, at the White 'Arp—one o' your boys—and 'e's larf-seas over—intoxicated, I might say!"

"I beg your pardon!" said the Head, in a startled voice. "Who are you, sir?"

"Me? Why, nobody—just one of the customers at the 'Arp," replied Jelks. "It didn't seem right to me that a young schoolboys should be swillin' whisky, so I've just rung you up. No offence, sir! 'E's down at the White 'Arp."

"Upon my soul! I am shocked!" exclaimed the Head. "Are you sure of this, sir?"

"The nipper's got a St. Frank's cap on, any'ow—that's all I knows!" said Jelks. "'E's lyin' in the back parlour, too far gorn to move. I thought, mebbe, you'd like to send down. It's a fair disgrace, that's wot it is! I don't like to see such things, an' I've rung you up out o' the goodness o' me 'art!"

"I am much obliged to you for this piece of astounding information," came the Head's reply. "Thank you, sir—thank you! Yes, I will send somebody down at once to look into this matter."

Captain Jelks was grinning broader than ever as he hung up the receiver. He returned to the back parlour, and eyed the Bo'sun's still form with great satisfaction.

"It's worked, Bill—worked a fair

treat!" he murmured. "You an' me 'ad better run afore the wind, now. We don't want to be cruisin' about while them masters are down 'ere. We don't know nothin'—see?"

The precious pair left the White Harp without further delay, and made a bee-line for another public-house in the village. Meanwhile, Nelson Lee and Mr. Crowell hurried down the lane and turned into the entrance of the White Harp. The Head had especially requested "Old Alvy" to undertake the mission.

The private bar was empty when Lee and the Form-master entered. Mr. Jonas Porlock, the rotund innkeeper, was lounging on the bar, greatly interested in a pink periodical. He looked up as his visitors entered.

"We have come in connection with a telephone message," explained Nelson Lee quietly. "Was it you who rang up the school, Mr. Porlock?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, sir," said the innkeeper shortly. "A telephone message? I ain't used the instrument since this morning."

"It was a hoax, then," said Mr. Crowell, with a thankful sigh. "How relieving!"

"We are sorry to have troubled you, Mr. Porlock," went on Nelson Lee. "There has evidently been a practical joke played upon the Headmaster. He was told that one of our boys was lying in your parlour, dead drunk."

The innkeeper removed a fat cigar from between his teeth.

"A boy in my back-parlour?" he repeated slowly. "Why, darn me, there was a boy there! Said he'd come down to wait for somebody. There's been several customers in and out this last half-hour, and I ain't got eyes about me everywhere. One of the customers might have telephoned. By thunder! There was a bottle of whisky on the sideboard, too! Has that young rip been getting at it?"

"Good gracious!" said Mr. Crowell, nearly going pale.

Nelson Lee opened the door at the end of the bar and strode through. In another moment or two he was in the rear parlour with the Form-master and Mr. Porlock. The place stank of whisky, and Tom Burton lay there completely intoxicated—to all appearances.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Mr. Crowell. "It is Burton—one of my own Form-boys! This is positively disgraceful—it is appalling! Pah! The atmosphere is disgusting in the extreme!"

"I didn't ask you to come in!" said Porlock sourly. "That kid didn't get any whisky served to him, you may be sure. He's pinched it, the young thief! That's what comes of leaving boys to themselves. Looked as innocent as a lamb, too! I'd have kicked him off the premises if I'd known!"

"You ruffian! You will be summoned for this!"

"None of your high talk!" snapped Porlock. "You summons me, that's all! I suppose you'd like to have it all come out in the papers? Look sweet, wouldn't it? Do your school a heap of good—eh? Besides, I didn't serve the boy with anything—and you can't prove that I did!"

"You utter scoundrel!"

"Come, Mr. Crowell," interjected Nelson Lee gently. "There is nothing to be gained by having an argument with this gentleman. He knows quite well that he holds the upper hand. Publicity must be avoided at all costs."

Mr. Crowell fumed. And, between them, he and Nelson Lee dragged the Bo'sun to his feet and shook him. The drug had had its full effect, and the poor boy was completely fuddled and dazed. He wasn't unconscious, for he smiled at the two masters in a sickly fashion, and mumbled some unintelligible words. And a strong smell of whisky rose from him. Captain Jelks was no amateur at this particular game. He had shipped many a man on his schooner by similar means. The "dope" was quite harmless in itself.

Nelson Lee and Mr. Crowell took their charge home by way of the fields, hoping to escape observation. They arrived at the rear of the Headmaster's garden, and hurried to Dr. Stafford's private door. The sharp eyes of Teddy Long, however, had already spotted the trio; and Teddy Long immediately hurried indoors with the gentle intention of listening at the door of the Head's study—if such a course was possible.

Tom Burton was half dragged into that famous apartment. And the Head, who had been waiting anxiously, started to his feet and came across the room.

"Burton!" he exclaimed. "Why, the boy seems to be half dazed—dear me! What an abominable smell of whisky! Is it—is it possible——"

"The boy is drunk, sir!" choked the Head gravely. "How could this have happened, Mr. Alvington? Burton has been exemplary in his conduct from the first moment of his arrival at the school. He has, indeed, proved himself to be possessed of wonderful courage. And this—this——"

The Head paused, at a loss for words.

"There can be no question about the miserable lad's condition," said Mr. Crowell. "He is hopelessly intoxicated. I think it my duty, Dr. Stafford, to tell you of an incident which occurred last night. Mr. Alvington appeared to think that the affair was a practical joke, but I held another view myself. Doubtless he has changed his attitude now."

"Not exactly, Mr. Crowell," said Nelson Lee drily. "But please proceed."

The Form-master told the Head all about the visit of Captain Jelks and Bill Larson to St. Frank's. He repeated the skipper's invitation to Burton to go down to the White Harp for "a drink like the old days."

"It is quite obvious," concluded Mr. Crowell, "that those men were, indeed, former friends of the boy's. This afternoon, being a half-holiday, he gave way to temptation, and went to the inn. And the captain, no doubt, is responsible for the wretched lad's present condition. Or he may have taken the whisky himself."

Nelson Lee looked very thoughtful. He made no comment, but, knowing nothing of the plot, he was half-inclined to believe the worst. But there was a stubborn doubt in his mind which he could not dispel.

"There is only one course for me to pursue," said Dr. Stafford sadly. "I am grieved more than I can say—I am intensely shocked. A telegram must be despatched to Captain Burton without delay. The boy must leave the school in the morning. He will, indeed, be publicly expelled."

"That is the only decision you could arrive at, sir," said Mr. Crowell approvingly. "It is quite impossible that this boy could remain at St. Frank's after what has occurred. I am fearful lest the truth should become known to the other boys."

A few moments later Nelson Lee took the apparently intoxicated boy upstairs to the punishment-room—a small apartment which was specially reserved for the accommodation of boys who had been sentenced to expulsion or flogging.

Lee was more grieved than the Head, even. Burton had saved the detective's life on a recent occasion, and Lee liked him immensely—not merely because of that service, but because of the boy's obvious manliness and sunny character.

He laid the Bo'sun gently on the bed, and stood looking down at him with an expression of tenderness.

"Really, I cannot believe it—I cannot believe it," he murmured. "He seems completely under the influence of drink, but—but— Burton! Can you hear me, my boy?"

The Bo'sun opened his eyes languidly. He tried to speak, but could not do so. Lee's eyes became keen as he noticed a discolouration of the boy's collar. Closer examination revealed the fact that the upper portion of his clothing was soaked with whisky. Nelson Lee pursed his lips.

"Strange—very strange!" he murmured. "Surely the boy did not swill himself in this astonishing fashion? He has been drenched with the spirit——"

Lee suddenly broke off, and bent down closely over the Bo'sun's face. He sniffed the boy's breath, and his expression altered at once. A cold, acute light came into his eyes.

"Not a trace!" he murmured. "Upon my soul, the boy has not swallowed a drop! But there is something else—something—— I must look into this strange matter more deeply. The poor lad is as innocent as I am myself!"

Nelson Lee was greatly relieved. He knew, however, that Burton was unable to speak to him. The telegram to Captain Burton had already been despatched, and it was too late to stop it.

"It will be four or five hours before the lad can speak lucidly," Nelson Lee decided. "I will leave him quite to himself, so that he may sleep off the effects. I will say nothing whatever—it will not harm the lad's father to pay St. Frank's a visit. And he may, possibly, know something of this Captain Julka."

And Nelson Lee, having come to that decision, retired from the punishment-room and locked the door behind him.

CHAPTER VI.

(Told by Nipper.)

IN WHICH I DO A LITTLE DETECTIVE WORK, AND LEARN MUCH!

ST. FRANK'S was in a buzz.

This wasn't very surprising, considering the nature of the yarn which was being talked of by seniors and juniors alike. I don't know who started it, but I've got an idea that Teddy Long, of the Remove, had been spying—as usual.

The Bo'sun was drunk! That was the yarn. The Bo'sun was completely drunk, and was to be publicly flogged and expelled in the morning! I nearly had a fit when I first heard the news. This was just before tea, when Sir Montie and Tommy and I had come in from the playing fields. We found a big crowd of fellows in the lobby, all talking at once.

Now, before I go any further, I'm going to shove in a word about myself. If you don't like it, you can skip this paragraph altogether—I don't care. The fact is, I've found that this writing has got a bit too steep for me. A fellow doesn't have much time to himself nowadays, and I've been unable to tell all these narratives in person. So the author-chap, who puts my stuff into ship-shape, has been writing up the adventures from the facts which I have supplied—the facts concerning all these various happenings at St. Frank's College. It's a lot better, really. He can do the job easier than I can, anyhow. I shall simply shove in a chapter here and there, telling of particular incidents in which I was mainly concerned. So that's that! Now we'll get along with the business.

I was simply knocked sideways when I heard about the Bo'sun. I wouldn't believe it. To make sure, I went along to the gov'nor's study, and asked him point-blank. And he told me that Burton had been found in the White Harp, apparently as drunk as a lord. I tumbled to it at once; that word "apparently" did the trick. But when I questioned the gov'nor, he wouldn't say another word. At least, he merely told me to wait until later on in the evening, when, perhaps, there would be more to tell. And he advised me not to jaw to the fellows.

The Bo'sun's condition was the sole

topic of conversation in the Ancient House. The Remove was divided into two parties—those who believed the worst of Burton, and those who stuck up for him.

Naturally, Sir Montie and Tommy and I poo-pooed the idea; we maintained that there was a bloomer somewhere, and advised the chaps to wait. The three fellows in Study D—Handforth and Church and McClure—were absolutely violent in their expressions of loyalty to the Bo'sun. Handforth willingly consented to fight anybody on the spot who said that the Bo'sun had got drunk. There were lots of other fellows, too, who were staunch—fellows like Farman and Owen major and Yakama, and Conroy minor.

On the other hand, a considerable crowd, led by Fullwood and Co. and De Valerie, stated their belief in the rumour—for it was only a rumour as yet. The fact that Burton was nowhere to be found, and the added fact that the punishment-room was locked, practically proved that something was wrong, at all events.

Personally, I had a strong belief that De Valerie and Fullwood had been up to their rotten tricks again.

"Just consider, you chaps," I said to a crowd in the lobby. "Is it like the Bo'sun to go and get drunk? Isn't it a jolly sight more likely that Fullwood and De Valerie have been plotting?"

"You silly idiot!" roared Fullwood. "Do you think we care tuppence about the boozin' son of a bargee?"

"I think that you and De Valerie were licked by him last night!" I replied grimly. "You can hardly see straight, even now. It'll be a week before you've got rid of those marks! I'll tell you, straight out, that I've got suspicions."

Fullwood and De Valerie stamped off, fuming.

Quite a number of Removites ridiculed my suggestion; but others thought about it seriously. It was quite on the cards that the two cads had planned the whole affair with Captain Jelks. They had every reason to hate the Bo'sun—and a scheme of this sort was just in keeping with their characters.

After tea I was very restless, and I proposed to my chums that we should

take a walk down to the village. It was just possible that we should hear some further news down there.

"The villagers are sure to gossip," I argued. "And they might know more than we do. I've got my suspicions about that blackguardly Jelks. Anyhow, we'll go down and keep our ears open. Poor old Bo'sun!"

"It's shockin', Benny boy," said Sir Montie, in grieved tones. "It'll all come right, though—it must, begad! He's one of the best chaps in the school, although he has got some frightfully queer expressions!"

And so, a few minutes later, we sallied out and walked briskly to the village. It was a bright evening, for a half-moon was shining from a clear sky. The air was mild and almost spring-like.

One side of the lane lay in deep, black shadow, and we walked along on this side, because the surface of the road was smoother. And we had a splendid piece of luck just before reaching the White Harp. As we were nearly passing the inn, I heard a rough, beery voice.

"Jelks!" I muttered. "Over here, my sons!"

We crouched against the hedge, only a few yards from the gate of the White Harp garden. And we saw the figures of Captain Jelks and his mate walk down the pathway and pass through the gate. The pair strolled off leisurely, and with a rolling gait, towards the bridge.

"Dear boy, what's the idea of this?" murmured Sir Montie.

"Fat lot of good crouching in this hedge, ain't it?" grumbled Tommy Watson.

"My dear chaps, there's no telling what we can do," I murmured. "We suspect Jelks, don't we? Well, we might be able to overhear something. Not much chance, of course, but I've always been told by the guv'nor to look for opportunities. Let's slip down the road quietly."

The wisdom of my plan was obvious a few minutes later. For Captain Jelks and Mr. Larson, having arrived at the bridge—which was situated on the edge of the village—leaned against the stone parapet in the moonlight, and remained there talking and smoking. The skipper consulted his watch.

"About . . . half-hour
reckon," we heard him say.

"That's good!" I whispered.
"They're going to wait there for half-an-hour—probably for Fullwood or De Valerie. My sons, this is where we do things. At least, this is where I do 'em!"

"Begad! Don't we come in anywhere?" murmured Tregellis-West.

"Well, look here, I've got an idea," I replied, as we crouched in the shadow. "If I can get through the hedge here, and creep along behind it, I shall be able to nip down under the bridge. There's a ledge there, and it'll be as easy as winking to slip through, and get right under those two beauties. Then I shall be able to hear what they're jawing about."

"That's all right," said Tommy Watson. "But what about us?"

"We can't all go," I replied impatiently. "If you chaps like to do the job yourselves, you're welcome. But I thought——"

"Of course, dear boy," interrupted Sir Montie. "Dry up, Tommy. Benny's much more capable of doin' a thing like this than we are. If we all went we should only give the game away, begad!"

"Oh, just as you like!" said Watson, who didn't like being left out.

I wasted no further time, but wormed my way through the bottom of the hedge, and stealthily crept along behind it until I came to the bank of the Stowe. The river was still rather high after the recent flood, but the ledge I had referred to, about a foot wide, was just above water. Normally, it was a clear two feet up.

It was a simple matter to creep along this ledge under the bridge—a bit ticklish, perhaps, because the stonework was slippery. Reaching the other end, I stood there, listening. Captain Jelks and the other man were just above me, leaning against the brickwork. A waft of strong tobacco came down.

"It's foolishness, Bill—that's what it is," the skipper declared quite plainly. "There ain't the slightest fear of us comin' to any 'arm. You're nervous—an' when a bloke's nervous, 'e's foolish."

"That's easy talk, cap'n," growled Mr. Larson. "I dossay we shall get 'old o' the boy, but wot about these 'ere

masters? They'll kick up blazes, sure as fate. Why, we may be took up——"

"Don't you be a idjit," said Captain Jelks sharply. "We've done our bit, Bill—the kid took the dope like a babby takes 'is milk! An' now them two young beauties wot we was a-talkin' to are goin' to work the rest. Burton'll be down 'ere afore 'arf-an-hour's past—you mark my words."

"Ay, but there's many a slip——"

"Blow my whiskers! You're allus a-grumblin'!" snapped the skipper. "There won't be no slip, Bill—not while I'm 'angin' about. This 'ere Burton has been shoved in a special room, ain't 'e? Well, that De Valley boy, or wotever 'is name is, is a-goin' to climb up through the winder—'e's doin' of it now, I reckon. Burton ain't got over the dope yet, an' 'e'll be as easy to 'andle as—as you are when you're 'arf-seas over, Bill!"

"We won't go into them details!" said Mr. Larson hastily. "But about this 'ere boy, cap'n. Supposin' 'e does come down? This idea o' yourn may be fust class, but I can see piles o' trouble. Supposin' the kid won't come with us?"

"I ain't goin' to suppose anything so blamed silly!" snapped Jelks. "We sha'n't need to arsk 'im—'e'll offer hisself. Just you wait."

And Captain Jelks and Bill Larson proceeded to wait. I didn't. I realised that my best course was to slip away as quickly as possible. And, in less than three minutes, I was back with my chums.

"Heard anything?" asked Tommy Watson eagerly.

"It's shockin' bad form, eavesdroppin'——"

"Eavesdropping be blowed!" I snapped. "Those men are scoundrels, Montie, and you can't keep your gloves on when you're dealing with that sort! There's a plot afoot, just as I suspected. They're trying to get the Bo'sun away."

And, as quickly as possible, I told my chums of what I had heard. They were almost scared, and certainly bewildered.

"Begad! What's goin' to be done?" asked Sir Montie blankly.

"Well, it's pretty evident that De Valerie is up to some rotten dodge," I replied. "He's getting up to the punishment-room window—by a ladder, I expect. We'd better rush to the school

"THE BO'SUN'S" PREDICAMENT

straight away, and scoot round to the punishment-room window. I don't know what all this trickery is, but I suspect that Fullwood and De Valerie are mainly responsible. They've got their knife into the Bo'sun, and they've got him into this trouble. Now, it seems, they're going to make matters worse by handing Burton over to these two blackguards."

One thing was certain—we should have to make all haste if we were to put a stop to the rotten game. And so, without losing another second, we scooted away for St. Frank's.

CHAPTER VII.

DE VALERIE WORKS THE TRICK, AND THE BO'SUN IS CAUGHT IN THE NET!

THE Bo'sun opened his eyes languidly.

"Rouse up, old chap," murmured a voice, close to his ear. "That's better. You'll be all right before long, after the effect of all this whisky's worn off. You had a drop too much, Bo'sun."

Tom Burton raised himself on the bed. His mind was still muddled, and he only half-comprehended what was being said to him. He was aware that his head was aching in the most splitting fashion, and the air simply reeked of strong spirits.

"Shiver my bows!" he mumbled. "What's happened?"

"Don't you know?" whispered the voice. "You're in the punishment-room, Burton. Don't you remember how you were carried home by Old Alvy and Crowell? You were blind drunk —"

"Great marlinspikes! Thash a lie!" muttered the Bo'sun shakily. "I—I — Wash all this smell of whisky? Oh, corks! Ish, me—ish me—"

He broke off, with horror in his voice. There was an expression of disgust upon his face. His mind became a little clearer, but he was still very much under the influence of the intoxicating drug.

The punishment-room was practically dark. The window-blind was up, and the lower sash raised. The top rungs of a ladder projected above the window-ledge, and by the bed stood a dim form. It was that of Cecil De Valerie.

"Don't speak so loud, Bo'sun," he murmured. "I'm Bennett—Dick Bennett. I've come to help you, old son."

"Whaffor?" mumbled Burton. "What do I want help for, Bennett? Souse me, I can't remember what's happened. I'm all dizzy."

"That's all right—you'll soon be better," whispered the Rotter. "Shake yourself up a bit, Bo'sun, and listen to me. I'm going to tell you exactly what's happened."

"All ri' Bennett—go ahead, mess-mate!"

De Valerie grinned to himself in the darkness. He had given Nipper's name deliberately, after a few minutes consideration. The room was dark, and Burton couldn't see anything but a dim shape. De Valerie disguised his voice easily enough by merely keeping to a whisper. And the Bo'sun, in his semi-dazed condition, would never detect the fraud. In this little deception the Rotter was displaying great cunning. He knew very well that the Bo'sun wouldn't listen to De Valerie—but he would listen to Dick Bennett!

"I've come here to do you a good turn, Bo'sun," whispered the impostor. "First of all, can you remember what you did at the White Harp?"

Tom Burton placed both his hands to his head.

"Souse me, I can't—I can't!" he muttered. "I went there, Bennett—I remember goin'. But I can't bring to mind what happened. Did—did I—I get— Oh, it's too horrible."

"But it's true, old son," whispered De Valerie. "You got completely drunk, Bo'sun. You were simply soaked with whisky, and Mr. Alvington and Mr. Crowell went down and fetched you home. Don't you remember it?"

The Bo'sun didn't reply for a minute or two. In his mind there were vague ideas, but he could not put any of them into shape. They eluded him as he tried to bring them into clearness.

But he did remember one or two slight details; he could see the Head talking angrily; he could feel himself being carried by the two masters; he had a notion that Mr. Alvington had tried to speak to him. And these half-formed recollections, together with De Valerie's story, left no doubt in his mind.

He had gone down to the White Harp

certainly. He knew that—he could remember it. But all that had happened since was a blurred muddle. Horrible as the thought was, he knew that he must have taken whisky—an appalling amount of it. Even now he literally stunk of the spirit. It filled his nostrils disgustingly.

"I—I got drunk!" he muttered dully. "Oh, I—I can't stand it, Bennett! I don't know how it happened—I can't remember! Oh, why can't I remember? It's terrible—horrible! Say it ain't true, Bennett!"

"It's no good going on like that, old chap," murmured De Valerie sympathetically. "It's a hateful thing to tell you, but it's true. You got completely sprung, and the Head was raving angry. You're in the punishment-room, you know. You're going to be flogged in the morning—and sacked afterwards."

"Sas-sacked!" gasped the Bo'sun.

"Expelled, you know. Sent away home."

Poor Burton was too stunned to say anything for the moment. Still muddled in his mind, the news was nevertheless appalling. Expelled! It was too ghastly to think about. But Bennett had said so, and Bennett wasn't the chap to tell lies for the sake of being nasty. Bennett had come to help him, and that proved how serious things were.

If only the Bo'sun had known that his visitor was Cecil De Valerie!

But the Rotter took care to keep some little distance away, and he never raised his voice above a whisper. In the darkness it was quite impossible for the Bo'sun to know the truth. On one other occasion De Valerie had played the same dodge—with Yakama, the Japanese boy—and it had been a failure. But the Bo'sun hadn't his full wits about him, and that made all the difference.

"It can't be true!" muttered Burton. "I—I don't believe it——"

"Sssh! Listen!" breathed De Valerie. Two or three juniors were passing in the corridor outside, and the occupants of the room kept quite still.

"No, don't call to him, you ass!" came the voice of Owen major. "We shall only get a prefect on our track."

"Say, it's real bad!" came Farman's voice. "I guess there's something wrong, Owen, but the Bo'sun's going to

be kicked out in the morning by the Head. Gee! I feel like gettin' busy somehow!"

"I can't understand why he got drunk like that——"

The words of the passing juniors were no longer audible. But the Bo'sun had taken the sense of their remarks in. Bennett was right! He was going to be publicly expelled in the morning!

A wave of shame and misery came over the Bo'sun. He knew—or thought he knew—that the story was true. He didn't try to ask himself how he had got drunk, or why. That didn't matter—now.

But he deserved the sack. He was only fit to be kicked out, neck and crop!

"I can't stand it!" he muttered brokenly. "Oh, I can't stand it, Bennett!"

"That's why I'm here, Bo'sun," whispered De Valerie. "I've come to lend you a hand. Have you realised what a terrible disgrace this will be—both for you and your dad? I've shoved a ladder up against the window, and I'll help you to escape, if you like."

"Escape!" muttered Tom Burton, starting up.

"That's the idea. You can run away, and get out of all this rotten trouble," went on the impostor softly. "It wouldn't be cowardly, old chap—there's nothing in it, really. And you've got your dad to think about. Swallow your own feelings, and spare him the disgrace. Cut while you've got the chance—run away to sea!"

The Bo'sun's eyes, dull until now, took on a sparkle.

"The sea!" he murmured, the appeal clutching him. "The sea! Bust my mains'l, it's the best way, Bennett. How can I do it?"

"That chap, Captain Jelks, isn't such a bad sort, really," said De Valerie. "He was half-tight when he came here the other night. I know, for a fact, that he wants another hand on his schooner. Look here, if you pop down to the village you'll find the skipper against the bridge. Go up to him boldly, Bo'sun, and ask him for a job. He'll give you one, I'll bet anything."

The Bo'sun breathed hard. An instinctive feeling of mistrust and dislike entered his head as soon as he heard the name of Captain Jelks. But the all-

powerful fact that he had to run away overwhelmed everything else. Moreover, he was partially dazed; his mind was confused and muddled. He simply did not possess the will-power to fight against his own judgment.

He only knew that a way of escape lay before him, and he took it! Under ordinary circumstances, his keen wits would have told him that something was gravely wrong. But now he wasn't capable of connected thought. The desire to flee was upon him—to flee anywhere, so long as he got away.

"At the bridge!" he muttered, getting off the bed unsteadily. "I'll go, Bennett; I'll weigh my anchor while I've got the chance! It's—it's splendid of you to help me like this."

"Nonsense! I should be a rotter if I didn't want to help, old man," whispered De Valerie, inwardly triumphant. "Get off as quickly as you can—dodge straight through the Head's garden, and out across the playing fields. It's dark, and you won't be seen by a soul. Good-bye, old chap!"

They shook hands in the darkness, and Tom Burton gave a kind of gulp. He had been wearing his overcoat and cap when Nelson Lee had brought him to the punishment-room, and they were at the foot of the bed. He struggled into them dreamily, and with a dull feeling of utter misery in his heart.

And then, with faltering steps, he descended the ladder to the ground beneath, which was a quiet part of the school grounds right behind the Ancient House.

De Valerie watched him from the window as he ran across to the Head's garden under the shadow of the trees.

"It's worked," muttered the Rotter victoriously. "Good riddance to him—that's what I say! Even if the truth comes out about Jelks, that oad won't come back to St. Frank's. And Fully and I are safe enough."

De Valerie climbed through the window, and closed it softly behind him. Then he swiftly and silently descended the ladder. As he was stepping off the last rung to the ground three dim figures loomed up.

"Collar him!" exclaimed a grim voice.

And Cecil De Valerie, to his utter consternation, found himself in the grasp of Nipper and Co.

CHAPTER VIII.

(Told by Nipper.)

IN WHICH WE MAKE A MAD RUSH IN CHASE OF THE BO'SUN—TOO LATE!

WE had arrived at the right second, it seemed.

Sir Montie and Tommy and I had pelted from the village at full speed; and we had hurried straight round to the back of the Ancient House. And, as we came into sight of the punishment-room window we saw a ladder leaning against the sill. The Bo'sun was just descending!

"Collar him!" I said grimly.

Trogellis-West and Watson grabbed the dim form, and I caught his shoulders.

"What's the meaning of this, Bo'sun?" I asked. "We thought that— Why, great Scott!" I added sharply, "you're—you're De Valerie!"

"Begad!" ejaculated Sir Montie.

"Let me go, you cads!" snarled the Rotter viciously.

"Not until we're ready," I said. "What have you been doing in the punishment-room, you plotting hound?"

"Find out!" muttered De Valerie pantingly, and with alarm.

"Where's the Bo'sun?" demanded Tommy Watson.

"Do you think I've eaten him?" snapped De Valerie, wrenching to get away. "Let me go, confound you! The Bo'sun's up in the punishment-room, of course. Where else would he be?"

There was a certain sneering note in the Rotter's voice which was unmistakable. The tone was almost one of triumph, and I quickly realised the truth. The plot had succeeded—Tom Burton had been lured away!

"Have you got the Bo'sun out?" I asked fiercely, gripping De Valerie's shoulders, and staring straight into his face. "Answer me, you cad!"

De Valerie laughed harshly.

"You'd better go and look for the blackguard!" he sneered. "I wish you luck, that's all!"

"You've persuaded the Bo'sun to run away—that's what you've done!" put in Sir Montie. "Begad! You're not goin' to get out of this affair so easily, you frightful bounder. I'm goin' to fight you on the spot—I am, really! Tommy, please hold my jacket——"

A footstep sounded upon the gravel path, and the next moment I was delighted to see the gov'nor.

"What are you boys doing here?" he asked sternly. "You know very well that this part of the school property is strictly out of bounds. Why, what are you doing, boys? Who is that you are holding?"

"I'm De Valerie, sir," exclaimed our prisoner calmly. "I was just tryin' to find out who put this ladder up here. I believe Bennett and these others have helped Burton to escape from the punishment-room!"

We simply gasped.

"Oh, what a howling whopper!" roared Tommy Watson excitedly. "It was De Valerie who shoved the ladder up, sir. He's been up to some of his rotten tricks! The Bo'sun's gone, and we caught this beast getting down the ladder."

"You rotten little sneak!" snarled De Valerie viciously.

"Silence, boy!" said Nelson Lee sternly. "Watson, you were quite right in telling me what you saw. I accept your word without question. Now, De Valerie, what have you got to say? Have you been helping Burton to escape from the school?"

De Valerie took a deep breath.

"Yes, sir," he replied calmly, evidently deciding to adopt a bold front. "I felt a bit sorry for the chap, and thought I'd do him a good turn——"

"That's a lie!" I cut in, hotly. "It's some mean trick of yours——"

"Let De Valerie finish, Bennett," said Nelson Lee quietly.

"There's nothing much to say, sir," went on the Rotter of the Remove. "The Bo'sun and I didn't get on very well together, but I felt compelled to do something for him, and so I thought I'd help him to slip away—so as to avoid the floggin'!"

"And has Burton gone?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where to?"

"I haven't the faintest idea, sir," said De Valerie coolly. "I'm quite willin' to take any punishment."

"Look here," I began furiously.

"Wait one minute, Bennett," interposed Nelson Lee smoothly. "De Valerie, you have told me some deliberate lies. I am well aware of that fact. No, don't deny it. You will do yourself no good by making the matter worse. Go indoors at once; we will thrash this matter out more thoroughly later on."

"Very well, sir," said De Valerie calmly.

He went off without another word. As soon as he had turned the corner of the building I burst into a torrent of explanations. The gov'nor listened carefully while I related what had happened at the bridge.

"There's not a moment to lose, gov'nor," I said almost wildly. "It's as clear as daylight, now, that the Bo'sun wasn't drunk at all. He was drugged, and De Valerie knows all about it, too."

"It seems to me that Captain Jelks is the chief culprit," said Nelson Lee grimly. "He may have been paid to accomplish this work. We don't know. It is clear, however, that the plotters feared the truth coming out, and so they have taken measures to get Burton completely away from the school."

"Hadn't we better rush down, sir?"

"That is exactly what I am going to do, young 'un," put in the gov'nor crisply. "Burton can only have been gone a few minutes, and I expect we shall soon catch him up. The poor lad is still under the influence of that intoxicating drug; that explains why he was so ready to listen to De Valerie's advice."

Without wasting another minute we hurried off. De Valerie, I could imagine, was feeling pretty rotten. We hadn't an atom of proof against him, and by maintaining a bold front he would possibly escape punishment; but he would certainly be terrifically uneasy.

For the time being, however, I didn't bother about the Rotter.

At the double, Nelson Lee and we three boys hurried down towards Bell-ton. At last we arrived at the bridge, which was still bathed in moonlight. My heart jumped as I saw two figures, for I thought they belonged to Captain Jelks and Mr. Larson.

Running up, however, we found two aged villagers, pausing to have a chat. They were well known to us as respectable, hard-working fellows. Nelson Lee did not beat about the bush.

"Can you tell me if two seafaring men were on this bridge a short while ago?" he asked quickly.

"Why, yes, sir," replied one of the villagers, removing a clay pipe from between his teeth. "They were here not five minutes ago. Captain Jenks, or Jilks, or summat like that, was one of 'em."

"Do you know if they had a boy with them?"

"That's queer, sir. Me an' Tom, 'ere, was only just a-talkin' about it," explained the rustic with exasperating slowness. "I sez to Tom, 'That's funny, ain't it?' I sez, and Tom agrees with me. 'That was one o' the boys from the school,' I sez. 'What be he a-doin' with these men, arstin' for a job?' I sez. I dessay you're after that there boy now?"

"Exactly," said Nelson Lee. "Please tell us, in as few words as possible, exactly what passed."

"Why, this 'ere boy come runnin' down from the school, sir," was the reply. "He went up to the seafarin' men an' sez, 'Can you gi'me a job aboard your ship, cap'n?' he sez. One o' the men scratched his head, and sez, 'I dunno, youngster. I may be able to find you summat to do,' he sez. An' they got talkin', an' presently me an' Tom heard the boy say, 'Thank you, cap'n,' he sez. 'That'll suit me fine,' he sez. An' that's all me an' Tom know."

"Nothin' more, sir," agreed Tom, nodding his head. "'Cept that all three of 'em walked off down the road, through the village."

Nelson Lee thanked the two old fellows, and we hastened on. The roar of a train in the distance made Nelson Lee click his teeth together sharply.

"Run, boys—run!" he exclaimed. "The rascals are taking Burton off to Caistowe, I have not the slightest doubt. We must make all haste to spoil their game."

We fairly raced down the High Street, and arrived at the station just as the train was moving out. I was only just behind the guv'nor as he dashed on to the platform. From one of the windows hung the head and shoulders of Captain Jelks. I don't think he saw us, for we were in shadow. But we saw him clearly, and he was smiling with smug satisfaction.

The train was only short, being a local, and had already gained a fair amount of speed. To board it was out of the question; even the guv'nor couldn't perform such a feat. Five seconds earlier, and we should have been in time.

"Begad!" panted Sir Montie. "That's done it, dear boys. This is the last train to Caistowe, ain't it?" "We're completely dished, you know."

"But we must do something," I almost yelled.

"And we shall, my boy—we shall!" said Nelson Lee firmly. "Captain Jelks and his mate have carried Burton off, and we must do our utmost to arrive at Caistowe within half an hour. Burton went off of his own accord, it seems, and that renders our task rather difficult. We have no excuse for bringing the police into the affair."

We left the station, the guv'nor looking very grim.

"But what's going to be done, sir?" I asked anxiously. "We can't hire a car in Bellton—there isn't one to hire! And a trap would be hopeless; it would take half an hour to get one ready!"

"We have one loophole," said "Old Alvy," hurrying along. "Dr. Brett is a most good-natured man, and he will not object, I am sure, when I ask for the loan of his motor-car. If he fails us, we are indeed, checked."

Dr. Brett, the village practitioner, was a splendid chap, and he and the guv'nor were great friends. The doctor owned a decent little car, and Lee had borrowed it on more than one occasion.

We ran as hard as we could go to Brett's house, and then met with a disappointment. The doctor was out—in his car!

"Upon my soul, how annoying—how exasperating!" exclaimed the guv'nor tensely, as we stood at the gate, looking up and down the road. "I had not anticipated such an event as this. The doctor very seldom used his car at this hour—"

"What's that, sir?" asked Tommy Watson abruptly.

A hum sounded on the air, and the next moment two points of light came into view. We yelled with delight, and rushed forward. The worthy doctor received something of a shock when we rushed into the roadway and waved our arms like mill sails. He stopped his car abruptly.

"What the deuce—Hallo! That you, Mr. Alvington?" he exclaimed, peering forward. "I thought—"

"Never mind what you thought, doctor," interrupted Nelson Lee crisply. "Will you lend me your car for an hour—at once?"

"My dear man, you can take it now."

"That's good of you, Brett," said the guv'nor. "Jump in, boys. I'll explain this tremendous haste later on, doctor."

The emergency is very vital, I can assure you, or I wouldn't press on your good nature to such a really inexcusable extent."

"That's all right," said Brett cheerily. "You're not going to pinch the car, I know. You'll bring it back whole, though, won't you? I shall probably want to use it to-morrow."

Nelson Lee smiled as he threw the clutch in. We started off, and were soon whizzing speedily along the Caistowe road. The distance was only just over three miles, and Nelson Lee made the car simply buzz.

It was only a two-seater, but Tommy and Montie were packed in at the front with the guv'nor, and I crouched on the step. It was an exciting ride, and the worthy doctor would probably have received a few shocks had he been with us. The guv'nor could drive a car better than most professional racers.

Caistowe Station was some little distance from the jetty, but we had to go right through the village, and up another road, to reach it—the jetty, I mean. When we arrived, we found everything dark and still.

Out in the bay we could see a schooner lying at anchor. We pulled up, and piled off the car. But, now that we had arrived, we hardly knew how to proceed. An old gentleman with a beard which looked like a hedge came to the rescue.

"Capt'n Jelks?" he repeated, in reply to the guv'nor's inquiry. "I dessey you'll find 'im up at the Red Lion—top o' the village. That's where 'e stays as a rule. 'E's fairly well known round these 'ere parts."

"Can you tell me when the schooner sails?" asked Lee.

"Well, rightly speakin', she should have sailed this mornin'," replied the old chap. "But the skipper was away, I 'eard. Mebbe he'll go out to-night; there's a fairish breeze blowin'."

"You have seen nothing of him this evening?"

"No, sir, that I ain't."

"Where's the schooner bound for?" I asked quickly.

"Why, the West Indies, I believe, master," was the reply. "She oughter

sailed this mornin', an' it's a puzzle to me why she didn't, wi' such a breeze."

We thanked our informant, and Nelson Lee decided that we had better make for the Red Lion, at the top of the village. Arriving there, we were informed by the landlord that he hadn't seen Captain Jelks for a couple of days; he believed that he was in Bellton.

All this was very exasperating; we seemed to have lost our quarry altogether. We descended to the jetty again, hoping to gain some information. And as we turned a bend, so that the sea came into view, Nelson Lee uttered a sharp ejaculation.

"Our work has been for nothing!" he exclaimed regretfully. "We are too late."

"What do you mean, sir?" I gasped.

The guv'nor pointed, and then I understood. The schooner was no longer lying at anchor! Her sails were being set, and she was preparing for sea!

"Begad!" said Sir Montie blankly.

"Can't we—can't we do anything?" I shouted.

"We could obtain a rowing-boat, I dare say," replied Nelson Lee. "But what would be the use, Nipper? We could not possibly overtake the schooner now. Luck has been dead against us."

"Can't we go to the police, sir?" panted Tommy Watson. "The Bo'sun's been carried off—"

"That's where the difficulty lies, boys," said the guv'nor quietly. "Burton has not been carried off—there is no question of kidnapping about the affair. The police would take no action, even if we informed them. Upon the evidence of those two villagers—which I have no reason to doubt—we know that Burton willingly went with the captain. So we are completely helpless. There has been no criminal action of any sort, so far as I can see."

"And—and we're going to let the Bo'sun go like this?" I asked desperately.

"No, Nipper—we are not!" replied the schoolmaster-detective. "I haven't finished yet, I can assure you!"

For the moment, De Valerie and Fullwood had won—they had got rid of Tom Burton!

But the game wasn't over yet!

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!—(See p. iv of cover.)

BEGIN OUR NEW SERIAL TO-DAY!

In the Grip of the Huns.

A Magnificent Tale of Thrilling Experiences in Germany.

By **CLEMENT HALE.**

NOTE.—As the title "In the Hands of the Huns" has already been used, we have altered the name of our Serial to the above.

The Chief Characters in this Story are:

GEORGE GRAY and his brother **JACK**, who are the English Staff of the Berlin Rovers, a football club in Germany.

OTTO BRACK is a scoundrelly German member of the team. But another German, named

CARL HOFFMAN, is friendly, and advises the Englishmen to leave Germany, which they refuse to do. The Grays are betrayed the next night by their landlord Kutz. They manage to leave the house, but are surrounded by a hostile crowd. Luckily the American Ambassador takes them in his car to the Embassy, and gets them passports. The next morning they go to the station. When half-way to the frontier they are ordered to detain at a way-side station. Here their papers are examined, and they are detained for several hours. They are then told that they are under arrest as spies, and are marched off under a guard to prison. The next day they are released from their cells and taken before the commandant. The commandant orders them back to their cells; and a few days after they are sent with other prisoners to a camp at Oberhemmel. On the way they are attacked by a mob of angry Huns.

(Now read on).

REPRISALS!

ONWARD, with swinging strides, the guards marched them, eager to reach the station, and safe cover, lest worse might happen.

After them swarmed a frenzied, yelling crowd.

And at last, after what seemed an endless walk, they swung through the station approach, passed under some of

the tunnels, and mounted to a platform, which was already swarming with soldiers and other prisoners, gathered from different parts of the State.

For a couple of hours they waited there, hungry, angry, and tired, and then a train steamed in, into the carriages of which the prisoners were bundled and packed like sardines, with four armed soldiers to every compartment, and several carriages loaded with officers and men armed to the teeth.

No matter what protest some of the unfortunate prisoners might have to make, they were bundled into the compartments, and the doors were fast locked.

And in the stifling heat of the confined space, with the sun blazing down upon the roofs of the carriages, hungry, wretched, and wondering what further misfortunes were to befall them, they were drawn onward in the suffocating train to their internment prison at Oberhemmel.

The nightmare of the journey which followed remained a vivid memory with George Gray for ever afterwards.

The train moved slowly. Again and again it was drawn up on a siding to allow the main lines to be used for more important traffic, for foreign prisoners of war did not count in the eyes of the Germans.

Then the stifling heat, the overcrowding, the lack of food and water, to say nothing of the mental anxiety of it all weighed upon the unfortunate Britishers with an overpowering heaviness.

To make matters worse, whenever they stopped at a station, as often happened, crowds of shrieking men and women, and delirious boys would press forward to look in at the windows and

almost the English prisoners, who were unable to defend themselves, and had to bear whatever insults were hurled at them with such resignation as they possessed.

Sometimes missiles were hurled in at them, and they had all the while to endure the jeers and the taunts of their guards.

Laure had fallen, they were told. Belgium was being overrun. Soon Paris would be a German town. From Calais huge fleets of warships and transports would convey the Hun troops to England, and then—

How the faces of the German soldiers lit up with fiendish delight at the prospect of venting their spite against the powerful nation they hated more than all others, and which had held arrogant German dreams of world domination in check for years.

One of the men accompanied his taunts with such insults and predictions as to what the Germans would do when they'd captured England that Jack Gray's blood boiled.

"You dirty cur!" cried the plucky boy, facing the brute with clenched fists and flashing eyes. "If only we were free to fight, I'd give you the biggest thrashing you ever had in your life, big though you are!"

The man laughed, and added a loathsome insult directed at the English which drew a cry of rage from the boy's trembling lips.

Jack struggled forward, and struck at the man.

The blow hit him full on the mouth, and cut his lip upon his teeth.

He reeled, and then, raising his rifle, drove the butt hard against Jack's chin.

The blow sent the boy staggering senseless into the arms of the prisoners who were seated. He was caught and gently held, while the coward who had so ill-used him raised the rifle again, intending to repeat the blow.

It was never delivered, for George Gray, leaping between, seized the rifle, and struggled desperately to wrench it from the hands of the brute.

In a moment the crowded compartment was in an uproar. The Hun's comrades tried to assist him. Gray's companions in misfortune were equally determined to help the plucky Englishman. And so, shouting, cursing, struggling, wrestling, and fighting at close

range they were all soon mixed up in indescribable confusion.

Some went down. Guard and prisoner, locked in a tight embrace, tumbled over on to a seat, and fought tooth and nail there.

George Gray had but one object in view, to punish the brute who had struck his brother down. The man's rifle was wrenched from his hold, and tumbled to the floor. The burly footballer gripped him, and wrestled him down.

The Hun kicked and scratched and spat like a fighting cat.

But if he ever fancied himself at the fighting game, he discovered then and there that he was no match for an Englishman. At odd moments, George Gray saw the square head and brutal face within range of his fist and drove his knuckles home.

What the end might have been one cannot say, but the train had drawn up in a station, and as the sounds of the struggle echoed along the platform, railway officials and armed guards—for they were posted everywhere—rushed headlong to the scene of action.

The door of the compartment was wrenched open, and George Gray and his bellowing antagonist went tumbling out on to the platform.

George got his man down. He was uppermost. His lips were curved in a smile, and his eyes blazed with triumph. Let them do what they liked with him now; he did not care, for he had avenged his brother.

Strong hands were laid forcibly upon him, and he was wrenched away, to be in a moment surrounded by yelling soldiers.

And what a time he had of it! He was kicked and punched, and hit with the butt ends of rifles, pushed, and kneed in the back, until at last, still trying to fight his enemies, he reeled from sheer exhaustion.

"You blackguards!" he panted. "Why don't you give a man a chance?"

They answered with a frightful yell, and came at him.

A mist swam before George Gray's eyes. He was almost incapable of further exertion. His brain reeled; he could hardly breathe.

He gave himself up for lost.

But just then one of the soldiers who

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had travelled in their compartment, seeing how things were with the Englishmen, sprang forward. He got between George and his enemies.

"Stand back!" he cried. "You have done enough. And the Englishman did not begin it. It was the soldier's fault."

The crowd of officials and soldiers hesitated, and George's champion swiftly explained.

A minute later the trouble was at an end, and George was led to his compartment and thrust in, his countrymen sympathetically making way for him.

And as his eyes cleared, he, to his grim delight, saw the brute he'd thrashed being led away, staggering as he went, his face out and bruised, his clothes torn and covered with dust, evidently incapable of continuing his duties.

Another man was appointed to fill his place, and a quarter of an hour later, amid howls of execration from the platform, the train steamed out, and the journey was resumed.

OBERHEMMELE.

THE incident just mentioned had its effect upon the behaviour of the German guards. From that moment they kept within the bounds of decency, George was glad to notice. Nor did they express any sympathy with their comrade. "He'd deserved what he'd got," they declared.

Yet this change of attitude did not relieve the physical distress of the unfortunate prisoners. The little food some of them had managed to bring with them was soon exhausted.

All were hungry and thirsty to the point of suffering, and the heat seemed to increase as the day wore on, and the sun began to sink.

Hour after hour passed, leaving them cramped and weary, white-faced, and sick at heart.

Jack had recovered from the cruel blow he'd received from the butt end of the German's rifle. True, a raised and discoloured lump was there to show where the blow had landed, and the bone of the jaw was extremely painful; but for the rest the boy wasn't as bad as George had feared he'd be.

And when he looked at his brother George his eyes were filled with hero-

worship. He'd heard what had happened, and was glad.

As the day lengthened, so did the spirits of the travellers droop lower and lower. White faced, dull eyed, and listless they sat, moving and wriggling every now and then, and exchanging places to try and find some relief for the intolerable confinement.

It seemed as if they would never reach their destination.

Yet as the day drew to a close the guards, looking out of the window, informed their captives that they were close to Oberhemmel.

"We sha'n't be long now," they cried.

How their hearts leapt at the news. Yet though the town was only a mile or two away, the minutes dragged and dragged into another full hour ere they drew up alongside the platform, and were informed that they'd arrived.

Open were flung the carriage doors, and out on to the platform leapt the guards. Bayonets were fixed and commands rang out. Then came the tramp of nail-studded boots, and several companies of spick and span German soldiers swung along the platform.

Glancing through the window at the other side, George Gray saw that there were more soldiers there.

Soldiers! Soldiers! Soldiers everywhere.

Now the prisoners were peremptorily commanded to alight.

Down to the platform they leapt, and were there marshalled into line.

George glanced curiously about him in the gathering darkness. The platforms were kept free of all save the prisoners and the troops.

But beyond the barriers, and in the great entrance to the station, a dense swaying and murmuring mass of humanity surged.

They peered through the barriers like wild beasts eager to leap upon their prey.

"Down with the English!" George heard them mutter.

It seemed as if the entire nation had been tarred with the same brush.

George Gray expected that they would be quickly marched to whatever place had been chosen for their prison. Such was not the case.

They were kept standing until they could have dropped from sheer fatigue.

(Continued overleaf.)

Hunger gnawed at their vitals; thirst parched them to frenzy.

Yet the officers who took their names, and pestered them with questions, filling in the usual forms and making out the usual records, forced them to stand at attention. If anyone slacked, he was brought to his senses with a blow from a rifle, or the prick of a bayonet.

In vain they asked for water and food. The officers, who, here at any rate, seemed to be worse than the men, only jeered.

One of them even went so far as to order some of his men to fetch cans filled to the brim with sparkling water.

The mouths of the prisoners grew moist at the sight of it, but if they imagined that it was intended for their relief, they were speedily undeceived. The men halted in front of them, exhibited the glistening water, their faces stretched and grinning, and then poured the lot of it on to the platform so that it ran guttering away.

"You infernal brutes," cried George, starting forward with his fists clenched, intending to hurl himself at the officer who had penetrated the brutal joke, but a strong hand grasped him and held him.

"Steady, steady," Gray," said one of the prisoners, a burly fellow named Wilson. "You can do no good!" And with a groan of resignation the footballer took his place again in the line.

An hour later they were ranked two

deep, and marched away under a strong guard.

As they approached the barriers they found themselves faced by a shrieking, yelling mob, such as must have battered at the gates of Versailles at the outbreak of the French Revolution. Men, women, youths, and boys, ay, and even German girls, filled with the lust of hate, waited for them there, and would have rent them to pieces had not the guards driven them back in summary fashion.

The mob surged around the glistening bayonets like an unruly sea. Their shouts and yells deafened the ear. At every few yards onward progress was stayed, and missiles of all kinds were flung at the defenceless prisoners.

But it was not always a prisoner who was struck. Two of the guards had their faces cut open, and one was felled senseless to the ground. Then, with a rush, came a rescuing party from another part of the station, a company of German soldiers, with bayonets pointed, at the double, who scattered the civilian crowd like dust before the wind. And so the hapless prisoners, urged on with many a push and blow, passed out into the busy streets of the German town, and marched onward, reviled and execrated every inch of the way, until they came to their prison, at the far side of the town.

(To be continued.)

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