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THE SIGN OF THE PURPLE CIRCLE!
A Tale of NELSON LEE and NIPPER AT ST. FRANK'S. By the Author of
No. 143. "A Terrible Lesson," "The Flooded School," etc. March 2nd, 1918.

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THE SIGN OF THE PURPLE CIRCLE!

A Tale of NELSON LEE and NIPPER
AT ST. FRANK'S.

By the Author of "A Terrible Lesson," "The
Flooded School," etc.

AUTHOR'S NOTE.

Nelson Lee and Nipper are at St. Frank's College, to escape the 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.

(Related by Nipper)

THE MYSTERY OF THE OLD "SANNY" IS RE-
VEALED—THE CIRCLE OF TERROR AGAIN

EDWARD OSWALD HANDFORTH, of the Remove Form at St. Frank's, glared round him aggressively. Somebody had dared to differ from him in a matter of opinion—and that was quite sufficient to cause Handforth's eyes to blaze. The "somebody" who had committed this awful crime was a cheerful youth known as Dick Bennett—otherwise Nipper—to wit, myself.

"Say that again, Bennett!" bawled Handforth warmly.

"My dear chap, I'm always ready to oblige," I grinned. "Your idea is simply fatheaded. I'll go further, and add that it's not only fatheaded, but the pitiful drivell of a lunatic!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth attempted to speak, but words failed him.

"Begad, Benny ain't so far wrong," said Sir Montie Tregellis-West languidly. "You know, Handy, I've often wondered why your people sent you to St. Frank's. It ain't the kind of place for you at all, really. Now, Colney Hatch——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Handforth's fury suddenly gave place to a deadly calm.

"What else can I expect?" he exclaimed, with exaggerated bitterness. "I'm the only chap at St. Frank's with decent ideas, and I'm always sneered at. It's jealousy! But do you think I care? I hope I'm above such petty rot as that! Rats to you—go and eat coke!"

And Edward Oswald turned his back with a sniff, evidently being under the humorous impression that we should feel chastened. The yeil of laughter which assailed his burning ears probably acquainted him with the fact that we were hardened cases.

The argument was of no importance at all, really. It was a Wednesday afternoon, and the Ancient House Junior Team—my own—had just given the College House a sound thrashing on the footer field. We had won by two goals to nil, and Bob Christine and Co. were looking somewhat glum in consequence.

The afternoon was very fine, and the sun, low in the sky, was still shining with a certain amount of warmth. I and a crowd of other Removites were lounging round the Ancient House steps.

"Of course, Handforth's idea is potty," remarked Tommy Watson. "His ideas generally are potty, come to that. It's all rot to suppose that the old Sanny is to be turned into a school! Just as if they'd open another school near St. Frank's! Besides, the place used to be a sanatorium."

"And that's what it'll be again, I expect," I observed. "A place for convalescent officers, or something like that. Anyhow, Handy's suggestion is a bit too wide of the mark. Mind you, it might be a baby's school——"

"Oh, rats!" put in Armstrong. "It'll be a hospital—a private hospital."

"Well, it isn't a matter of life or death," I chuckled. "Suppose we wait in patience, my sons, until it's opened? We shall know then all right."

And the discussion, for the time being, was dropped. Most of the fellows went in to prepare tea. But Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson and I, having paid a short visit to Study C, decided that a single sardine

and a few stale biscuits wouldn't quite satisfy our appetites.

Mrs. Hake, who presided over the tuck-shop in a corner of the Triangle, was experiencing a lean period. Her shelves were nearly empty, and to-day especially her stock was low—so low, in fact, that we were obliged to take a run down to the village in order to obtain supplies. There were no restrictions regarding honey and tinned fruit and things of that sort, and the three of us were all pretty "flush."

The argument concerning the old Sanny was of considerable interest to the St. Frank's fellows. Just near the river, and standing within its own grounds, was a huge, rambling house surrounded by high trees. It was on the outskirts of Bellton, and had been built originally as a sanatorium. Years ago, however, the old place had failed, and had been sold to some aged Army officer. He had turned it into a private residence, and had lived there until recently. He'd moved now into the cemetery. And his relations had sold the River House (as the old Sanny was called) to somebody in London. And for weeks past great activity had been going on.

Workmen—scarce as they were—had been swarming over the building in dozens. Additional wings had been added to the house, and the whole place was modernised and painted and decorated superbly.

There wasn't any secrecy about the matter; but, curiously enough, nobody knew what the River House was to be turned into. I daresay the workmen on the building knew all about it, but the St. Frank's chaps—even the juniors—considered themselves a bit above asking prying questions.

The River House was finished now, and I must acknowledge that its appearance had been vastly improved. Instead of being a dull, dingy old pile, the establishment was smart and clean and looked inviting. The workmen had taken their departure, for the contractors had finished their job. Only one or two men still remained, putting the finishing touches on the place.

Anyone could see that it wasn't destined for a private residence. The mystery was rather interesting, and we were all eager to learn the truth. So, having made our purchases, Sir Montie and Tommy and I decided to have another look at the River House as we passed. Going home by the towing path, it was necessary to pass the gates of the rejuvenated building.

"There's nothing more to see," remarked Tommy Watson, as we approached. "Hold on, though," he added. "I believe there's a big board—Yes, by jingo, so there is!"

We had turned a slight bend, and, although we were over a hundred yards distant, we saw that a huge ornamental board, supported by two carved pillars, was projecting over the top of the red-brick wall. It stood between the two wrought-iron gates of the drive, and couldn't possibly be overlooked. It was a most elaborate affair, with the wording upon it in heavy gold lettering.

We approached, and, quite abruptly, Sir Montie stopped dead and gasped.

"Begad!" he ejaculated faintly.

"What's the matter, ass?" was Tommy's irritable inquiry.

"Dear fellows, don't you see?" asked Tregellis-West. "Don't you remember how we chipped Handforth? An' the dear boy was right all the time—he was, really! Begad, we owe him an apology!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!" I exclaimed blankly.

For there, upon the board, was the following inscription:

**"THE RIVER HOUSE SCHOOL.
A Select Academy for Young Gentlemen.
Principal: Dr. Molyneux Hogge, M.A."**

There was other information on the board, of course, but I can't remember it all now. The above is sufficient, however, to make it clear to you that Edward Oswald Handforth, miraculously enough, had been correct.

And I had referred to his suggestion as "the drivell of a lunatic"! Certainly I owed old Handy an apology. I didn't suspect him of having gained positive information on the subject beforehand.

"A giddy school!" I exclaimed, taking a breath. "A school for young gentlemen, too. May I ask what we are?"

"Benny, boy, we don't count," drawled Sir Montie, with a quiet grin. "St. Frank's ain't in the same street as this place, begad! Just look at all the new paint, an' all the rest of it! 'A Select Academy'!"

Montie stood gazing at the board with the full admiration it deserved. And Tommy and I followed his example.

"I'll tell you one thing," said Watson gruffly. "if the kids of this school try any games, we'll jolly soon shove them in their places! Like their cheek, putting up another school within a mile of St. Frank's! Rather above the limit, I call it!"

I grinned.

"My dear chap, England's a free country—to a certain degree," I said. "Of course it ain't free, really. It used to be, years ago; but what with politicians, and other fat-heads of the same kidney, poor old England's freedom is a bit of a farce. Still, it's the best place in the world, for all that!"

"Dear boy, is this a lecture?" inquired Sir Montie politely.

"No, you ass, it isn't!" I replied. "I wonder when this school is going to open? And just squint at the headmaster's name—Dr. Molyneux Hogge."

Sir Montie adjusted his pince-nez.

"It's rather novel, certainly," he agreed. "Dear fellows, I shouldn't be surprised if the gentleman turns out to be a bit of a pig!"

"Is that where we laugh?" asked Tommy sarcastically.

"I leave it to you, dear boys," said Tregellis-West serenely.

Having punched him to our satisfaction—but not to his—we continued our way to the towing-path, and walked briskly to St. Frank's. As it happened, Handforth and Church and McClure—all denizens of Study

D—were in the lobby with a few other juniors.

"News, you chaps—news!" said Tommy Watson. "We've found out what the old River House is to be turned into."

"A school!" said Handforth promptly. "You needn't tell me!"

"Rats!"

"Dry up, Handy!"

"Strange to relate, Handforth's right for once," I said, grinning. "Handy, old man, allow me to apologise profusely. What you said wasn't drivel, and you're not quite potty enough to go to Colney Hatch!"

"What do you mean, you chump?" growled Handforth, staring.

I explained matters.

"There you are!" roared Handforth, looking round triumphantly. "What did I say, you disbelieving bounders? You can always trust me to— What the dickens do you think you're doing, Church?"

Church had collapsed into McClure's arms, and was feebly fanning himself with one hand.

Handforth simply glared at him.

"What's the matter with you, idiot?" he bawled.

"You were right, Handy!" murmured Church weakly. "You can't expect me to stand a shock like that without fainting, you know. It's about the first time I've known you to be right—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you silly ass!" shouted Handforth warmly. "You need reviving—that's what's the matter with you!"

Handforth's system of reviving a fellow was somewhat drastic, but undoubtedly effective. He suddenly kicked Church's feet from under him, and the junior sat down on the floor of the lobby with a bump which shook it.

"Ow—yow!" he howled. "Oh, crumbs!"

"Perhaps you won't be so funny next time?" said Handforth calmly. "All right, Bennett, you needn't look so scared. I'm not going to hurt you, although you do deserve punching in the eye!"

"Spare me!" I grinned.

With great generosity Handforth decided to spare me. It amused him to imagine that I had been looking scared. Considering that a broad grin had adorned my manly features I couldn't see where the point came in.

Naturally, Handforth crowed continuously up and down the passages of the Ancient House—as Owen major disgustedly put it—"like a giddy old hen!" He crowed in the common room, and he crowed in the studies. At last he was forcibly gagged and hurled into the Triangle. After that Handforth thought it advisable to keep silent.

There was much animated discussion among the fellows. It was generally agreed that Dr. Hogge's name suited him to perfection—although the poor gentleman was probably a very meek individual. But the juniors considered that it was rather "nervy" to open a school so near to St. Frank's. It was something in the nature of an insult; but it couldn't be helped.

With complete unanimity everybody agreed to show the newcomers that they were of no importance—that St. Frank's was the only school in the district. The River House fellows were really beneath notice.

The next day we discovered that Dr. Hogge's school wasn't a new one at all. It had been established twenty years before, but had grown tired of its surroundings. It was situated, I believe, in the neighbourhood of Catford.

But the school, a fine old place, had been practically swallowed up by rows and rows of cheap villas, with the result that the district had become almost common. At last, after thinking about it for four or five years, Dr. Hogge had decided to change his quarters, and, having come to that decision, he did the thing properly. He was moving his entire establishment to the South Coast, for Bellton was only three miles from the sea. The boys and masters and domestic staff would all come down at one fixed time, when everything was in readiness.

Everybody at St. Frank's was now expectantly awaiting the arrival of Dr. Hogge and his following. Before the invaders arrived, however, a little incident occurred which drove the River House School and all its works completely from my mind.

Sir Montie and Tommy and I went down to the village one evening to fetch a parcel from the station—some books which Tregellis-West had ordered. We arrived at the station just as a train was slowing down against the platform. Darkness had set in early, for the sky was heavily clouded. And as we walked briskly along the platform, a man in a heavy overcoat emerged from a first-class compartment. He was rather tall, and carried a neat leather bag with him.

He stood in the full light of one of the lamps, whilst my chums and I were in the gloom. As we passed I glanced at him carelessly, and without interest. But my jaw suddenly fell, and I stopped dead.

"Great Scott!" I gasped blankly.

Then, in a second, I recovered myself, and stared at the man hard. He moved away, and surrendered his ticket to the porter. I observed that the ticket was a whole one—and not the half of a return. This pointed to the fact that the stranger had come to Bellton to stay.

"Come on, Benny—what's the matter with you?" growled Tommy, tugging at my arm.

"All right," I said dreamily.

We passed on to the parcels office, and Montie took possession of his package. Then we emerged from the station into the quiet roadway.

"Benny, old boy, is there somethin' the matter?" asked Tregellis-West. "I saw you lookin' at that chap as if you knew him. He didn't happen to be an old enemy of yours, I suppose?"

Sir Montie, in spite of his languid ways, was wonderfully shrewd.

"No, Montie, not exactly an enemy," I replied slowly. "But I know him—I know him jolly well. He's proved himself to be a

splendid chap in many ways. But—but—" I paused.

"But what, you slowcoach?" asked Watson impatiently.

I lowered my voice when I spoke again.

"That chap," I said softly, "was Montague Todd!"

"I don't wish to be curious, Benny," drawled Sir Montie, "but may I inquire who Mr. Montague Todd is, when he's at home?"

I looked at my two chums steadily.

"He's a Special Agent," I replied deliberately—"a Special Agent of the Circle of Terror!"

CHAPTER II.

(Nipper continues.)

DR. HOGGER'S SCHOOL ARRIVES, AND WE LEARN ALL ABOUT THE "HONOURABLES" AND THE "COMMONERS"—AN ENCOUNTER WITH MR. WRAGG.

BOTH Tommy Watson and Sir Montie Tregollis-West stared at me in amazement.

"The—the Circle of Terror!" stuttered Tommy.

I nodded calmly.

"It's more than I can understand, but it's a fact," I replied. "Let's be going, my sons."

We walked through the village. Not so very long ago Nelson Lee and I had experienced a sharp tussle with our old enemies, the Circle of Terror. That affair had been in connection with Seasue Yakama, the Japanese boy in the Remove. Cecil De Valerie had been mixed up in the shady business, too.

Was it possible that the Circle was getting busy again—and in this quiet country district? Somehow, I couldn't quite believe it. But that man had been Montague Todd—I was willing to swear to that.

Once through the village Montie and Tommy turned upon me.

"Now, you ass," said Watson, "what the dickens do you mean?"

"Begad, tell us, you know," drawled Sir Montie.

"You chaps ain't like all the rest of the fellows—you know that I'm Nipper, and that 'Mr. Alvington' is my esteemed guv'nor, Nelson Lee," I said, in a low voice. "You also know that we've been up against the Circle of Terror for ages past. The guv'nor has had dozens of scraps with the Circle's Chief—Professor Cyrus Zingrave. Even before the Circle was formed we knew Zingrave—when he was the Chief of the League of the Green Triangle. Although Nelson Lee tried to nab the rotter again and again, he couldn't quite succeed. And now that we're down at St. Frank's we're out of the run of things a bit. Still, I must admit that we move with the times, looking at things all round."

"Of course, we know all that," said Tommy half impatiently. "You're a lucky beggar, you know—it must be ripping to be a detective's assistant. What I want to

know is, who was that chap at the station?"

"Well, I'll wager my last ha'penny that he was old Toddy."

"A member of the Circle?"

"Yes, I told you so—one of the Chief Agents, too."

"Dear boy, I don't pretend to be brainy, and I'm frightfully puzzled," remarked Sir Montie. "You say this Todd is a member of the Circle? And yet I distinctly heard you remark that he wasn't an enemy—that he'd proved himself to be a splendid chap. It don't fit, Benny. You'll make Tommy and I believe that we've been harbourin' an awful scoundrel—meanin' yourself. On your own showin', you hobnob with members of the Circle of Terror!"

I grinned.

"It does seem a bit queer, doesn't it?" I said softly. "The fact is, Montie, I saved Todd's life once—months ago. Later on he turned out to be a genuine friend, for he helped us out of more than one ugly hole. You see, although he's a Circle Agent, he's a decent chap at heart."

"But I don't see how he can be," said Watson, shaking his head.

"When he joined the Circle he was duped, into believing that it was something different," I explained patiently. "And when he found that it was a criminal society it was too late to draw back. He's either got to obey the Circle's commands, or die. Once a chap's in the society he can't get out—except by death. Todd played a double game, you understand."

"Wasn't that rather treacherous, old fellow?"

"No, Montie, it wasn't," I said firmly. "There can't be any treachery with a ruthless organisation like the Circle of Terror. Todd hated his work—and I suppose he hates it now. But the poor chap is in a cleft stick; he's got to do as he's ordered. When a chance comes to give a whack at the Circle, he takes it. And it's risky, too. If his chiefs could discover that he had given any game away, he'd be murdered in less than a day."

"My goodness!" murmured Tommy. "What a rotten position!"

"Look here, don't you breathe a word about this to the chaps," I said warningly.

"As soon as we get in I'll have a word with the guv'nor on the quiet. There's no telling what this may lead to, my bonnie boys!"

I should have been a bit startled if I could have glimpsed into the immediate future just then!

When we entered the Ancient House my chums went along to Study C. I turned my steps in the direction of the Housemaster's sanctum. "Mr. Alvington" was in his apartment, and he greeted me with a smile.

"I'm afraid you won't be able to stop more than a few minutes, Nipper," he said. "Mr. Stockdale, of the College House, is coming across to discuss some questions regarding examination papers with me. I am expecting him every minute."

"Well, I sha'n't be long, guv'nor," I said. "I've got a piece of amazing news. I'm serious, sir—that's not swank, you know."

"Well, out with it, young 'un—don't leave me on tenterhooks."

"Tommy and Montie and I were at the station half an hour ago," I exclaimed in a low voice. "A train came in from London while we were there—and Montague Todd stepped out of it!"

Nelson Lee eyed me fixedly.

"You are—sure?" he asked in an even voice.

"Positive, guv'nor."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Nelson Lee, rising to his feet and pacing up and down. "Montague Todd in Bellton! What does that portend, Nipper? Is it possible that the Circle of Terror is— But, really, I cannot quite credit your statement, my boy. It is always easy to mistake faces."

"He was in the full light of one of the lamps," I said. "He wasn't disguised, and his chivvy is kind of distinctive, guv'nor. I'm willing to swear that the man was old Toddy."

"Did he see you?"

"I suppose he spotted the three of us, but we were in the shadow, and I know he didn't recognise me," I replied. "I noticed, too, that he gave up a whole ticket—and not just a half."

"That was keen of you, Nipper," said the guv'nor approvingly. "It appears that Todd is to stay in Bellton for some little time—although it would be foolish to take that for granted."

"What shall we do, sir?"

"Do? My dear boy, we can't do anything—yet," replied Nelson Lee. "We must wait until something further crops up. Of course, you have said nothing about this incident?"

"Only to Tommy and Montie."

"Well, you had better be running along now, young 'un," said Nelson Lee. "Don't worry your head about Todd. There may be a very simple explanation of his presence in the village. Although he is a member of the Circle, he has a great deal of liberty, and it is quite possible that he has come to the district on his own private business. The world is quite small, you must remember."

And so we left it at that. The next morning, however, I found out that a gentleman named Mr. Lewis Seaton had taken rooms at the George Tavern, in the village. This was about the most select inn in Bellton. I didn't need telling that Mr. Seaton was merely another name for Todd. The fact that he had assumed a different name seemed rather significant to my mind.

That same morning, too, the staff and domestics of the River House School took possession of their new abode. The boys, who had been on a few days' holiday, arrived in groups by different trains.

It was a Tuesday, and therefore not a half-holiday. Only one or two St. Frank's fellows saw some of the invaders during the evening. And they reported, with some indignation, that the River House boys were as big as any fellow in the Remove.

We shouldn't have minded a mere kids' school opening close by; but for chaps of our

own age to start in opposition, so to speak, was a bit thick. I could easily see that there were some strenuous times ahead. Keen rivalry was sure to exist between the two schools.

Football was abandoned on the Wednesday half-holiday. Only a House match had been arranged, and this wasn't an important fixture. Nearly all the fellows were curious to encounter the "Hogs"—as the River House boys were already termed. It was a somewhat disparaging name, but permissible in the light of the fact that the headmaster's name was Hogge.

Handforth and Co. sallied out with the intention of meeting some of the rival juniors, and wiping them up—just to show them, as a start, that they didn't count. Personally, I didn't quite like this view, for the River House chaps had as much right in the district as ourselves.

Tregellis-West and Watson and I took a stroll to the village ourselves. And we met with almost immediate success. Near the bridge Tommy paused and gazed along the towing-path. Four boys were lounging along towards us. They weren't dressed in Etona, but their caps were bright red with a blue badge. We didn't need telling that they belonged to the "Select Academy for Young Gentlemen."

"Let's wait," I remarked. "Might as well have a look at 'em!"

"Any old thing, Benny boy."

We waited, and the four schoolboys approached. They were dressed "up to the knocker," as Tommy Watson put it. Ralph Leslie Fullwood, the dandy of the Ancient House, wasn't in it with these fellows.

Their fancy waistcoats were simply gorgeous, and their ties dreams in themselves. One in particular was more like a nightmare! Coloured socks simply glared at us, and the four pairs of trousers were creased to perfection.

"Begad! Let's be movin' along, dear boys," said Sir Montie in dismay. "I feel frightfully shabby—I do, really! An', although I regret to say it, Tommy, your condition is simply appallin'!"

Tommy Watson sniffed.

"I don't care!" he grunted. "A chap can't help having baggy trousers now and again, can he? I ain't a tailor's dummy, thank goodness!"

"That's one for me," sighed Tregellis-West. "I asked for it, an' so I mustn't grumble. But just look at these dudes! Ain't it shockin'?"

I was rather surprised, for I had expected the River House boys to be quiet fellows—and not at all "classy." But, without a doubt, the quartette now in view were the nuttiest of the nuts. In fact, they "outnutted" our own particular crowd in the Remove—Fullwood, Merrell and Co.

The very manner in which they looked at us seemed to be offensive. Their glances were supercilious, as though we were as dirt at their feet. Now it wasn't likely that we were going to stand that sort of thing.

"I daresay you'll know us next time," remarked Tommy Watson pointedly.

The quartette moved on without pausing.

"Beastly boundahs!" exclaimed one of the boys haughtily. "Did you hear that rottah's remark, Bertie?"

"Some of those low St. Frank's fellows, I suppose—what?" drawled Bertie.

Tommy Watson went red.

"Look here, Bertie, or whatever your beastly name is," he exclaimed, striding forward and gripping the elegant boy's shoulder. "Did you say that the St. Frank's fellows are low? I happen to belong to St. Frank's, and if you're on the look-out for trouble, I'm perfectly willing to supply unlimited amounts!"

"Hear, hear, Tommy boy," said Sir Montie languidly.

The River House boys regarded us with cold stares.

"I have no wish to be rude, but we don't want anything to do with you!" exclaimed the boy who had spoken first. "It's really boring to tell you this, but I suppose it's necessary. We may as well understand one another at once. We have no desire to mix with common boundahs!"

"Hold on, Tommy," I said, as Watson was about to push up his coat-sleeves. "Let's talk to these queer beings quietly. Do they happen to be princes, or dukes? I don't suppose so, or they wouldn't affect such airs."

"My name is the Hon. Aubrey de Vere Wellborne," exclaimed the boy sneeringly. "It happens that my friends bear the same title as myself. Being exclusive, we would prefer not to mix with mere commoners."

"You seem to fancy yourselves," I said. "It's rather lucky for you that you're at the River House, and not at St. Frank's. You'd have all that rot knocked out of you in less than a week at our school, my bucks!"

"It's a matter of no importance, of course," murmured Tregellis-West. "We are quite awed by your presence, O august ones. Such low fellows as ourselves can't expect to back in your smiles, begad!"

"What's a matter of no importance, Montie?" asked Watson.

"Nothin', dear boy. I was goin' to say somethin', you know, but changed my mind. It doesn't matter, Tommy. We're horrid boundahs—or perhaps I'd better say boundahs!"

"Look here, I'm not going to let these chaps go without punching their faces!" roared Tommy Watson warmly. "Honourables, are they? Titles don't count for anything at school. You're Sir Montgomery Tregellis-West, Baronet; but if I had a row with you I'd punch your nose like lightning. I ain't going to low-low to anybody!"

Sir Montie looked pained.

"I'm shocked at you, dear fellow," he said. "There was no need to give me away, begad! I don't want these princely persons to know that I'm a baronet. A baronet is no better than any other chap, is he?"

The Hon. Aubrey de Vere Wellborne changed his expression.

"A baronet—what?" he said with interest. "Bai Jove! We shouldn't mind knowin' you, old thing! Why not leave these othah fellows, an' come for a walk? I daresay we shall get on quite well togethah!"

Tregellis-West shook his head, looking shocked.

"Dear boy, I wouldn't dream of it!" he said humbly. "I wouldn't dream of forcin' my common presence upon you. An', while I'm speakin', it wouldn't be a bad idea to pass an opinion. An' I'm a frightfully str'ight chap when it comes to talkin', you know. I think you're about the most insufferable snob it has ever been my misfortune to meet. To be even more eloquent, I may add that you're shockin'ly ill-bred, an' benders of the most despicable type. I wouldn't acknowledge you as pals of mine if we were the only fellows left in the world. To be quite frank, your presence disgusts me—I feel a kind of nausea in breathin' the same atmosphere, begad!" he added, turning to Tommy and me. "Let's be goin', dear boys."

The quartette was completely taken aback. Sir Montie's words, quietly spoken, had possessed a sting which was absolutely biting.

"Bats!" shouted Watson. "I'm going to punch——"

"Don't, Tommy boy—don't!" pleaded Tregellis-West earnestly. "There's no need to soil your hands by touchin' such unutterable worms. I've said a lot more than I meant to, because I hate bein' rude. But, begad, what can a fellow do? Because I'm a baronet these humbugs want to be friendly! Pah! I'm frightfully disgusted!"

Tregellis-West walked away with gleaming eyes. He had been deadly serious, and I didn't think it necessary for Tommy or I to say anything more. Montie's words were far more effective than half a dozen black eyes. They had stung even the hides of these stuck-up prigs.

We walked along the towing path, and I saw, out of the corner of my eye, that the River House boys were talking excitedly together. Undoubtedly they were feeling sore after the lashing they had received.

"Bravo, Montie!" I chuckled. "I was going to say something of the sort myself, but I couldn't possibly have done so well as you. It was just lovely."

"Benny boy, I couldn't do anythin' else," said Tregellis-West quietly. "Snobs always make me feel hellin' inside. Begad! Here are some more of them comin'. Pray turn aside!"

Three boys in red caps were striding along the path towards us, having just come into view from behind a clump of willows. One of them waved his hand, and shouted out something, and the trio broke into a run.

"Hold on!" I said. "We can't go, Montie, after they've beckoned to us. Perhaps they aren't of the same calibre as those other awful specimens."

The trio bore down upon us, flushed and breathless. They weren't nearly so dandified, and one glance at their faces told me that they were fellows of a different type.

"I say, I've been looking for some of you chaps," said one of the boys briskly. "You're from St. Frank's, ain't you? I'm Brewster—Hal to my friends. These chumps here are Georgie Glynn and Dave Ascott. We'd like to be on good terms with you chaps."

"Nothing in the way that I can see," I said cheerfully.

"One moment, dear fellows—just one moment," said Tregellis-West gravely. "My name is Sir Lancelot Montgomery Tregellis-West—I'm a baronet!"

Hal Brewster stared.

"I don't care if you're a giddy duke!" he exclaimed with a sniff. "Does that mean to say that you don't want to know us? My goodness! We've got enough snobs in our school without——"

"You don't mind me bein' a baronet?" asked Montie anxiously.

"What the dickens does it matter, anyhow?" asked the other.

"Nothin', dear boy—nothin' at all!" exclaimed Tregellis-West, with a genial smile. "We've just met some horrid fellows who wanted to pal with me because I happened to be a 'sir.' It's simply shockin' to be run after because of that. You don't care? Good! Then we'll get on all right!"

"This chap ain't dotty, is he?" asked one of the other boys anxiously.

I grinned.

"One of the most sensible chaps you can meet," I replied. "He's sensitive, though. Being a noble baronet, he's afraid of chaps toadying to him. That sort of thing's rotten."

All three boys nodded in unison.

"No need to tell us that," said Brewster bitterly. "We get nothing else but snobbery at our place. There's a chap named Wellborne——"

"Yes, we met him," I said drily. "We met him and three other fellows of the same sort. Montie told them that they were insufferable snobs and ill-bred bounders. I don't think they liked it; but we can't always have what we like in this world."

"You told 'em that?" chuckled Brewster. "Good man! You see, our school's divided into two sections," he went on confidentially. "Wellborne leads one, and I lead the other. They're the 'Honourables' and we're the 'Commoners.' I invented that name, so that we could be distinguished. The Honourables are a set of smoking, gambling, measly worms—and we're not."

We shook hands all round.

"We shall get on all right," I said genially, introducing Tommy and myself. "But I can't quite get the hang of all this. You don't mean to say that a whole crowd of your fellows are entitled to prefix their names with 'Honourable'?"

Georgie Glynn chuckled. He was a short, stubby boy, with a smile which wouldn't come off. I couldn't help liking him immediately.

"Not all of 'em," he explained. "There are three chaps who can shove Honourable in front of their beastly names—the Hon. Aubrey de Vere Wellborne, the Hon. Bertram Carstairs, and the Hon. Cyril Coates. They're the leaders of the gang, and they all call themselves Honourables, so as to be distinguished as a class apart. They're more numerous than we are, you see, or we shouldn't stand it."

"Hard lines," I said. "You won't find many chaps of that sort at St. Frank's, although we've got five or six hundred fellows."

"Phew!" whistled Brewster. "Old Hogge's only got about eighty all told—fifty Honourables, and the rest Commoners. We ain't powerful enough to put a stop to the rot. Besides, old Wragg believes in it."

"An' who's old Wragg, dear fellow?" asked Montie politely.

"Wragg? Oh, one of our under-masters," said Brewster. "A mealy-mouthed, soapy bounder, who's always toadying Wellborne and his lot. He's down on us whenever he gets the chance."

We got on splendidly with Hal Brewster and Co. I was glad that all the River House boys weren't of the same type as the Honourables. Even as it was, I could see that there would be many a gory encounter between the St. Frank's chaps and those stuck-up prigs.

As luck would have it, we hadn't parted with our new friends for more than ten minutes before we encountered the ill-tempered Mr. Wragg. We had left Brewster and his chums on the best of terms, and continued our way along the towing-path towards St. Frank's.

And, turning past a clump of trees, we came within sight of two individuals. One was a boy of about fourteen, and the other a thin-faced, scraggy-looking man, with hatchet-like features. He was engaged in the pleasant occupation of cuffing the boy right and left.

"My hat! I wouldn't stand that!" declared Tommy Watson indignantly. "I'll bet a quid this is that old Wragg chap. It's a wonder the silly ass doesn't go for him!"

The pair were right on the path, and we halted as we came to them. I then saw that the boy was pale-faced and weakly-looking. He was timid and nervous.

"Understand me, Leighton, I will not put up with impertinence from you," the man was saying harshly.

"Please, sir, I didn't mean to be impertinent——"

"Silence!" snapped the man. "You answered me back—and I will not allow such treatment from any of my boys. You will go to the school at once and write out five hundred lines—'I must be respectful to my teachers.' Go, and bear in mind what I have told you."

"I—I promised to meet Smith in the village, sir," said the boy timidly. "May I go there first—— Oh!"

The master had slapped Leighton's face

with a smack which resounded loudly, and left a distinct mark upon the pale cheek.

"Don't dare to answer me, boy!" snapped the man angrily.

He gave Leighton a push, and the boy stumbled on an uneven patch of ground and fell. I helped him up, and turned a pair of blazing eyes upon the master.

"You're too handy with your fists, sir," I said angrily.

"How—how dare you?" roared the man. "I am Mr. Wragg!"

"I don't care if you're Mr. Paper!" I retorted hotly. "You ain't going to knock this poor kid about while I'm here!"

"You—you impertinent young jackanapes!" roared Mr. Wragg furiously.

He reached forward, and his hand whizzed through the air towards my face. I ducked my head, and Tommy Watson thoughtfully put his foot out at the same moment. It caught Mr. Wragg just behind the knee—only a slight tap. But a tap just in that place is extremely effective. Mr. Wragg crumpled up, and before he could recover his balance, he plunged face downwards into a nice little patch of soft mud. The sounds he made as he scrambled to his feet were extraordinary.

"You young blackguards!" he shrieked. "I will report this matter to your headmaster this very afternoon! I will have you punished——"

"You can report what you like!" I exclaimed warmly. "You were acting like a brute, and you've only got yourself to thank for falling over. If you hadn't tried to whack me it wouldn't have happened."

Mr. Wragg lost the last vestige of his temper, and charged at me full tilt. I was ready for him, and my fist met his chest squarely. His charge was brought to a sudden stop, and he staggered back. Apparently he liked that patch of mud, for he sat in it by way of a change. There was a sickly, squelching sound as he bumped down, and the expression upon his face was worth quids.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Begad! I believe he likes it!" said Sir Montie, carefully adjusting his pince-nez, and gazing down at the howling Mr. Wragg. "It was really your own fault, sir," he added. "Oh, good gracious!"

Mr. Wragg had suddenly commenced uttering a few expressions which I wouldn't dream of putting in this narrative. For a schoolmaster to use such language was disgraceful, and I went hot.

"You can send in your report, Mr. Wragg," I said grimly; "but if you do, you can't expect us to keep quiet about your own behaviour—we don't promise to, anyhow. You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

Mr. Wragg gasped, and suddenly realised his position. And, without a word, he turned on his heel and strode away.

Leighton had already vanished.

"Nice, bright specimen!" I exclaimed angrily. "He won't send in a report, my son. He forgot himself when he started

swearing—and he knows it now. I don't envy those River House chaps a bit."

But Sir Montie and Tommy and I knew that war was declared, from that minute, between the St. Frank's juniors and Mr. Wragg—not forgetting his precious Honourables.

Certain exciting events were to occur in the near future, however—events connected with the new school, but which involved great activity on the part of Nelson Lee and myself. It won't be possible for me to describe all of them personally, but I shall do my bit here and there.

CHAPTER III.

VISITORS AT ST. FRANK'S—THE CIRCLE'S DEMAND—NELSON LEE'S SOLEMN PROMISE.

NELSON LEE shook hands very warmly with Sir Rupert Manderley, Bart. The pair were in Lee's study in the Ancient House, and the evening light was filling the room with a soft glow.

"No, we won't have the electric lights just yet, Mr.—er—Alvington," said the baronet, as Nelson Lee's hand rested on the switch. "I wish to have a little serious chat with you, and we can talk in the twilight."

"Just as you like, Sir Rupert," said Nelson Lee smilingly.

Sir Rupert Manderley had arrived at St. Frank's only a short while before. He had come in a big car, accompanied by another gentleman. The latter was now being entertained by Dr. Stafford, the Headmaster.

"This is not merely a pleasure visit," the baronet exclaimed, as he dropped into a chair and accepted one of Nelson Lee's cigars. "We are quite private here, I suppose?"

"Quite."

"Then it is not necessary for me to call you Alvington?"

"Not at all necessary, Sir Rupert."

"That's just as well," said the baronet quietly. "The fact is, Lee, I am dementedly worried. I want you to help my friend, and I'm hanged if I see how you can do it. You're tied down here, aren't you?"

"Well to a certain extent, perhaps I am," smiled Nelson Lee. "But I am not a prisoner, Sir Rupert. My identity as 'Mr. Alvington' is now of long standing, and I am quite part of the school."

The visitor nodded. He was a member of the Governing Board of St. Frank's—one of the most important members. It was owing to his good offices that Nelson Lee had found sanctuary at the school. Sir Rupert and Dr. Stafford were the only men connected with St. Frank's who knew that this quiet schoolmaster was really Mr. Nelson Lee, the world-famous criminologist.

Lee had not seen the baronet for several months, and he could easily observe that there was something upon the other's mind.

"The fact of the matter is, I have brought a friend with me—Major-General Stanley Leighton, D.S.O.," said Sir Rupert slowly. "He is one of the best men in the world."

Lee, and I have been tempted to let him into this little secret concerning your presence at St. Frank's. I felt, however, that it would be a breach of confidence to do so without having consulted you beforehand. The poor fellow is in serious trouble—and you, I believe, are the only man who can help him."

"I gather that this trouble is of a nature not unconnected with detective work?" suggested Lee. "I can think of no other way in which I could help—"

"You are quite right, Lee," interposed the baronet. "To be perfectly frank, the general has received a scoundrelly communication from the Circle of Terror."

Nelson Lee looked across at the other sharply.

"From the Circle of Terror!" he repeated. "I am afraid you are going to put me under temptation in my way, Sir Rupert. I have had many tussles with the Circle, and am anxious to engage in another."

The detective could not help calling to mind Nipper's report to the effect that Montague Todd was in Bellton. There was a significance in the fact that was not to be overlooked.

"That's my difficulty," said Sir Rupert. "I was sure that you would be keen, my dear Lee. But ought I to worry you under the present circumstances? At least, you can give me your advice—and that, I am sure, will be valuable."

"Can you tell me the nature of this Circle communication?" asked Nelson Lee. "It is of the usual type, I presume—a demand for money?"

"No, and that's just the trouble," said the other. "Leighton is rich enough, and I don't suppose he would be so upset over a mere financial question. This is a matter of honour, however. But perhaps you had better see the general himself."

"I should prefer you to give me a brief outline beforehand."

"Very well. Leighton came here—to Bellton, I mean—for the main object of seeing his son Stanley. The boy is at Dr. Hodge's school—which, as you are probably aware, has recently been shifted from the outskirts of London to this village. The general wished to see him comfortably settled in his new quarters."

"I quite understand," nodded Lee.

"The boy would have been sent to St. Frank's if he had been strong enough," went on the baronet. "But he is nervous and weakly, and unfit for the rough life of a big public school. These, at least, are Leighton's views. Personally, I would rather send a boy of my own to St. Frank's—the life would do him good. But Leighton is nervous about his son, and considers that a private school is better. Well, as we were so near, I thought it a good opportunity to consult you, Lee. I shouldn't have come down at all, but for that circumstance. Leighton, of course, knows nothing but I do. I have merely told him that a friend of mine here could possibly give him excellent advice. I leave it to you

to decide whether he shall be admitted into our confidence."

Sir Rupert paused for a moment, and tossed some cigar ash into the fire.

"Now, regarding this demand from the Circle of Terror," he went on. "It is, actually, a curt order, instructing Leighton to be at a certain spot at a certain time—for the purpose of undertaking a special mission. There are no details given, but obviously this mission is necessarily of a criminal character."

"When does the time expire?"

"To-morrow evening."

"H'm! That is not very satisfactory," commented Nelson Lee. "We have not much time at our disposal. I presume that Leighton is uncertain as to how he should act?"

"Exactly. The poor fellow is worried out of his life," said the baronet. "He knows only too well that a dreadful penalty will be exacted if he refuses. The Circle of Terror has made its ruthless methods famous throughout the land. The general is a man of high honour, and he has a terrible fear that some criminal undertaking will be demanded of him. He means to ignore the demand, I believe, but is half afraid to do so. His position, indeed, is unenviable."

"I think, perhaps, it would be as well to have a chat with the general," Nelson Lee exclaimed, rising to his feet. "There can be no harm in his knowing my identity especially as the information will be given in strict confidence."

"I may bring him here, then?"

"Certainly."

Sir Rupert left the study at once, and Lee paced up and down with grim thoughtfulness. He again recalled the fact that Todd was in Bellton, and he made a pretty shrewd guess as to the reason for the Circle Agent's presence.

Sir Rupert returned with his companion within five minutes. Lee shook hands with a bluff, hearty soldier. The general was a man of between forty-five and fifty. He seemed to be careworn, and his features were haggard.

"I dare say you are rather puzzled, Leighton," said the baronet. "You must allow me to introduce you to Mr. Nelson Lee."

Major-General Leighton started.

"Mr. Nelson Lee!" he repeated quickly. "Good gracious! Can it be possible? I visited your rooms in Gray's Inn Road, Mr. Lee, and was informed that you were abroad."

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Sir Rupert will explain," he said quietly.

In a few brief sentences Manderley did so. The general listened with great interest, and he wrung the detective's hand a second time when he knew the truth.

"You may be sure that your secret will be safe with me, my dear sir," he said earnestly. "It was a splendid idea to come here—a magnificent way out of a seemingly insuperable difficulty. But you are compelled

to remain, surely? I am afraid that you cannot help me in my dire trouble."

"That remains to be seen, general," said Lee quietly. "I can at least offer you my advice. Without being vainglorious, I think I may claim to have a greater knowledge of the Circle of Terror and its ways than any other man—since I have done more to wreck the vile organisation than anybody living. The Circle has not done with me yet, I may add. I am anxious—eager—to test my wits against theirs once more. Sir Rupert has given me an outline of your trouble, and I can fully understand the difficult nature of your position. May I see this communication from the Circle?"

For reply the general passed over a sheet of superb vellum notepaper. Nelson Lee nodded slightly; the notepaper was familiar to him. Upon the top was the well-known sign of the purple circle—that dread emblem which stood for all that was ruthless and villainous.

The communication was neatly printed, and ran as follows:

"Headquarters,

"Wednesday, the Twelfth.

"Major-General Stanley Leighton, D.S.O.

"You are hereby instructed to meet my representative under the big clock at Liverpool Street Station at 5 p.m. precisely on Thursday, the twenty-first. I have given you eight days' clear notice, so that you may make your arrangements accordingly. You are required for the purpose of undertaking a special mission of a very delicate nature, and I will accept no refusal. It would be as well for you to appreciate this fact at once.

"In the event of your failing to keep the appointment, you will be punished in a manner which will make you regret your decision for life. You will be approached at Liverpool Street Station by my representative—who will reveal himself at a suitable opportunity.

"Again I advise you not to fail.

"THE HIGH-LORD OF THE CIRCLE
OF TERROR."

"H'm! There is nothing fresh in this," remarked Nelson Lee. "I have seen communications of this nature on many former occasions, general. I must admit, however that the demand itself is of an unusual type."

"I do not know what to do, Mr. Lee," said Leighton. "I am worried and troubled. I simply cannot keep this appointment—this dreadful society can only want me for the purpose of betraying some military secret. The very thought of that horrifies me, and I would rather die than disgrace the uniform I wear. And yet I am half afraid to refuse. Other men have refused the Circle's demands, and tragedy has befallen them. I would not mind so much if I felt convinced that this punishment would fall upon my own shoulders; but I have a ghastly feeling that somebody dear to me will suffer—my wife, my son! Oh, I sincerely trust that you will be able to advise me."

"I can do so at once," said Nelson Lee quietly.

"And what——"

"I suggest that you ignore this communication completely," said the detective. "On former occasions I have advised my clients to satisfy the Circle's demands. But this case is different."

Major-General Leighton sighed with relief.

"You have given me comfort already," he declared. "I shall certainly do exactly as you say, Mr. Lee. But what will follow—can you give me any inkling of that? No, of course, it is foolish of me to assume——"

"Not so foolish, perhaps," interjected Nelson Lee. "I have an idea as to how the Circle will act, general. To be truthful, I have already received an inkling in that direction. I believe that the High Lord will strike his blow through your son."

"My boy Stanley?" asked the general fearfully.

"Exactly."

"But—but——"

"I have reason to believe that the Circle's emissaries will make some attempt upon your son at River House School."

"Good gracious!" muttered the other. "I had feared it—I had dreaded something of the kind. Mr. Lee—Manderley—I must take Stanley away with me this very evening. He shall accompany me to London——"

Nelson Lee bent forward quickly.

"I urge you not to adopt that course," he said earnestly.

"You are not suggesting that I should leave him at the school?"

"I am."

"But, my dear sir, such a course would be madness itself," protested the general. "The lad would be left at the mercy of these devils."

"On the contrary, he would be at their mercy if you took him to London," declared Nelson Lee grimly. "No matter how you sought to protect him, the agents of the Circle would gain their end."

"But if he is left here, he will be without protection of any sort."

"Not at all. I urge you to do as I request," persisted Nelson Lee. "Otherwise I cannot be answerable for the consequences—I cannot undertake to move an inch in this case."

"And on the other hand?"

"You may leave your son here confidently, with an easy mind," said the schoolmaster-detective. "I will take full responsibility for the lad's safety. I assure you, general, there is only one sensible course for you to pursue."

Leighton looked from Nelson Lee to Sir Rupert undecidedly.

The latter nodded.

"You cannot do better than take Lee's advice, Leighton," he said. "I think you have enough faith in such a famous gentleman to entrust him with the care of your boy. I don't think Lee has ever failed in such a responsibility, and he is essaying a perilous task in offering this help."

The general nodded slowly.

"I should be a fool to ignore the counsel you have given me, Mr. Lee," he said, thrusting out his hand. "I will leave my son at school—I will leave him in your care. And I pray to Heaven that you will be able to protect him from these infernal brutes!"

Fifteen minutes later the visitors took their departure. And Nelson Lee, left alone, paced his study in the flickering firelight.

His eyes were gleaming with the fire of battle.

"Another tussle with my old enemy!" he told himself. "By James! I am eager for the fray!"

The great detective, far from being unsettled and troubled, simply revelled in the prospect which loomed before him.

CHAPTER IV.

(Told by Nipper.)

IN WHICH I GET BUSY, AND HAVE A VERY INTERESTING INTERVIEW WITH MR. MONTAGUE TODD.

OWEN MAJOR was grinning hugely. "My dear chaps, you ought to have seen 'em!" he chuckled. "You missed the finest treat of the term! Old Handy was ripping—he simply wiped up a couple of the cads!"

"I thought the rotters would get it in the neck before they were much older," I remarked, shaking my head. "They were simply asking for it, you know."

We had two or three visitors in Study C.

Tea was over, and Owen major and Canham and Farman had dropped in. They were relating, with huge gusto, the story of an encounter with the Hon. Aubrey de Vere Wellborne and his fellow-prigs.

"Handforth went out ready for business," remarked Canham. "He and Church and McClure were armed with pea-shooters and squirters filled with ink, and I don't know what the dickens else. There were several other chaps with 'em—and they came across those prize dummies in the High Street."

"We were looking on," said Owen major, taking up the tale. "It was simply glorious. Handy didn't do anything until the cads started sneering, and making remarks among themselves. Well, you know what Handy is—he doesn't wait to exchange compliments. He just weighed in like a whirlwind. One of the bounders had made a remark about Handforth's face."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Of course, he wouldn't stand that!" went on Owen major. "In less than a tick there was the finest scrap going on you could wish to see. We took a hand in it, you bet, and by the time the Hogs crawled away they were simply in tatters. Their glorious clothes—Hullo! Who's that?"

A tap had come at the door, and Tubbs, the pageboy, looked in.

"Please, Master Bennett's wanted," he said.

"Oh, is he?" I grunted, getting up. "Who by?"

"The 'Ousemaster, sir."

"Oh, all right," I said. "I wonder what Old Alvy's found out about me? Will it be lines or a brace of cuts? Wish me luck, you chaps."

I passed out of the study, and hurried along to Nelson Lee's apartment.

Of course I knew well enough that I wasn't in for any punishment, but I had to keep up appearances. Tommy and Montie were the only fellows who knew my real relations with "Mr. Alvington."

I found the guv'nor standing before his fire with an expression in his eyes which made my heart jump. It was just that same expression which I had seen, times without number, in our comfortable consulting-room at Gray's Inn Road. I needed no telling that Nelson Lee had been keenly aroused in some way or other.

"Anything doing, guv'nor?" I asked eagerly.

"Shut the door, Nipper."

"It is shut, sir."

"Very well; come over here and sit down," went on Lee evenly. "I'm going to talk to you—I have something to tell you. Further than that, there is immediate work for you to perform."

"Good egg!" I exclaimed heartily.

"Your eyes did not fail you, young 'un. The man you saw emerge from the train the other evening was, indeed, our excellent friend, Mr. Montague Todd. I cannot absolutely swear to that, but everything points in that direction. There is grim work at hand, Nipper."

"For us?"

"Yes, Nipper, for us," said the guv'nor. "Now listen!"

And in a quiet voice he told me of his interview with Sir Rupert Manderley and Major-General Leighton. I became excited as he proceeded, and ended up by telling Nelson Lee of my own encounter with the River House boy—and, incidentally, the discomfiture of Mr. Wragg.

"The general wasn't far wrong in describing his son as a nervous kid," I remarked. "He's a fearfully timid chap, guv'nor—timid and weakly. I suppose he's nearly as old as the average Remove chap here, but he hasn't got the spirit of a Second Form fag!"

"You must not blame the lad for that, Nipper. I don't think he is a coward—at least, we have no reason to suppose so," said Lee. "He is naturally timid, and will fall an easy victim to the Circle's machinations unless we put a timely spoke in their wheel of villainy. For without a doubt Todd is in Bellton for one purpose, my lad. Should the general fail to keep his appointment, the youngster will be taken away from the River House School. It is too obvious to call for any doubt."

"And where do I come in, guv'nor?"

"You tell me that Todd is staying at the George Tavern under the name of Lewis Seaton?" said Nelson Lee. "Well, Nipper,

I want you to interview Todd at once—this evening. He may be able to give you an inkling of the Circle's game. It would be foolish for us to ignore the fact that Todd may prove a valuable ally."

"But how can I see him, sir?" I asked. "I'm Bennett, of St. Frank's. It wouldn't be wise to let old Toddy into the know, would it—even though he is a friend?"

"It would not be necessary for you to inform Todd of the fact that you are a member of the St. Frank's Remove, Nipper," said Nelson Lee. "You must change your clothes, and get out of the school by the master's private door—you will meet nobody. Attired in ordinary tweed clothing, Todd will assume that you have come from London—or anywhere but the school. I leave the rest to you, young 'un."

"Right you are, guv'nor."

Half an hour later I emerged from the master's private door and slipped across the Triangle. I was attired—for the first time since I had come to St. Frank's—in a common or garden suit of tweeds, with an overcoat and a soft felt hat. This, of course, was really my usual dress. I looked years older, and if any of the Remove chaps had met me in the gloom, they wouldn't have known me.

I hadn't been able to tell Sir Montie and Tommy anything about it, but would do so later on. By the time I arrived at the George Tavern the evening was getting on, and practically all the little shops in the old High Street were closed. Of course, it wasn't late, but business people in Bellton were early birds—early to close their shops at night, and early to open them in the morning.

I was a little uncertain as to how I should introduce myself to Montague Todd. I didn't want to walk into the place and speak to the proprietor—for the light was bright in the bar, and he might recognise me—at all events, it wouldn't be a wise move on my part.

The difficulty solved itself, for as I peered into the hotel entrance, Todd himself emerged, smoking a cigar, and looking somewhat bored. Without hesitation I went up to him.

"Good evening, Mr. Lewis Seaton," I said cheerfully.

"Good evening," he responded, removing the cigar from his lips, and eyeing me curiously. "You have the advantage of me, lad. You seem to have my name quite pat, but I must confess that I am ignorant of yours."

"Mine doesn't matter so much," I replied. "You ought to recognise my beautiful voice, anyhow—the light isn't strong enough for you to spot the natural charms of my chirpy."

"What the deuce—"

"It's all right—I want a private word with you—Mr. Todd!"

I whispered his name, and he gave a distinct start.

"How did you know—?" My name is

Seaton!" he exclaimed. "I seem to know your voice somehow— Follow me to my room. We can't talk out here in this public porch."

My end was achieved, and we passed through the dimly-lighted entrance hall, and proceeded upstairs to a big sitting-room. Todd waited for me to enter, and then closed the door and locked it. A lamp was burning on the table, and I turned this up so that a warm, cheerful light was cast around.

"Well, Toddy, how are you?" I said, extending my hand.

He stared at me very hard.

"You're—you're Nipper!" he muttered amazedly.

"What a marvellous eye you've got!" I grinned. "Yes, Toddy old man, the one and only. We haven't seen one another for ages, have we?"

Montague Todd sat down abruptly.

"But—but you don't look the same," he exclaimed. "Your hair, Nipper—it's fair! I could have sworn you had dark hair—"

"My dear chap, just a little touch of disguise," I said. "Some patent stuff of the guv'nor's."

My hair was dyed, of course. It was really the only disguise I had adopted on coming to St. Frank's—except for my Eton rig-out. If I'd presented myself to Todd in my school clothing, he wouldn't have known me at all.

"I'm pleased to see you, Nipper," he said, shaking my hand warmly. "How did you know I was here? Where is your boss, Mr. Lee? I haven't seen or heard anything of you for months past. I thought you were both out of the country."

"Oh, we're still alive and kicking," I said. "The fact is, Toddy, I can't explain matters fully, although I know I could trust you. I've come down this evening to have a chat with you."

"What about?" asked Todd, who had recovered himself.

"That boy, Leighton," I said quietly.

"Well, I'm hanged! You seem to know all about it!"

"Not exactly all," I went on. "The guv'nor knows that the Circle is getting busy, and he's got an idea that designs are being made on General Leighton's son. I suppose you're in charge of the operations down here? If so, you might be able to give us a tip, Toddy—just a little hint."

The special agent of the Circle of Terror looked somewhat nervous.

"I'd risk a lot to help you, Nipper—to help Mr. Lee," he said. "You know that I loathe the Circle and all its infernal works. But I'm bound to the devils, and can't free myself. One other man tried to desert the Circle—he attempted to get out of England. He was found dead at the docks."

I nodded sympathetically.

"You're in a rotten position, Toddy, and I'm awfully sorry," I said. "Still, it won't do you any harm if you just give me a hint of the Circle's game. We're pals, ain't we? You're as much against the Circle as I am."

"As much?" said Todd bitterly. "You



A thin-faced, scraggy looking man was engaged in the pleasant occupation of cuffing the boy right and left.—(See page 7.)

don't know the Circle as I do, Nipper—otherwise your loathing would be fifty times as great. It is a gang of ruthless cut-throats, with a fiend for its chief. I wish to Heaven I was free of it all—and I'm only living for the day to come when the crash will arrive. I shall be safe—even if I am caught red-handed with the rest. Mr. Lee will see that I come to no harm."

"You can bet your boots on that," I said heartily, realising more than ever how sincere was Todd's hatred of his superiors. The man was true blue to the backbone—an ally within the enemy's camp, so to speak. Treachery from Todd was as unthinkable as villainy from Nelson Lee himself.

"You wish to know the Circle's plans, Nipper?" he said slowly, bending forward in his chair. "Honestly, I don't know much, but I'll tell you as much as possible. And I needn't warn you that the information must be kept to yourselves. If my chiefs find out that there has been a leakage, it might be fatal for me. But I will risk that, Nipper. I'd like to see this dirty plot of theirs smashed up."

I waited without comment.

"To tell you the truth, I am down here without any particular object," he continued. "Leighton is to be kidnapped but not by me. If the general keeps his appointment the boy won't be touched; but the chiefs are fairly convinced that General Leighton won't turn up. Prompt action will then be taken."

"How?" I asked. "Action by you?"

"I don't think so—although I might be compelled to do something," replied Todd. "I am merely here in case I am wanted; I came down in advance in order to get the lie of the land. In all probability I shall return to London to-morrow evening by the fast train. The thing comes off to-morrow—
if at all."

"Then who's going to do it?"

"I don't know."

"Don't you know anything at all?" I persisted.

The Circle's agent nodded slowly.

"Yes, I know something," he said. "Hang it all, Nipper, I'll tell you the lot," he added with a sudden pressure on my arm. "You saved my life once, didn't you? You saved it after I'd deliberately attempted to kill you. Good heavens! I shall never be able to do enough in return for that action on your part, lad!"

"Rats!" I said cheerfully. "You didn't try to kill me, Todd. You were ordered to, but couldn't bring yourself to do it. Blow that, though. Let's hear about this affair."

"Well, young Leighton is to be taken away if his father falls," whispered Todd. "He will be held a prisoner, and, meanwhile, the Circle will send another demand to the general—threatening that he will never see his son again unless he agrees to the Circle's terms. Leighton will certainly keep his appointment then, for he will be in a cleft stick."

"And what about this secret mission?"

"I don't know what it is, Nipper—I haven't the faintest idea."

"H'm! Do you know how the boy is to be got away from the River House School?"

"Yes," replied Todd, with a smile. "As a matter of fact, a very time-worn device is to be employed. It is absurdly ancient, but, because of its simplicity, it will probably succeed. At six o'clock to-morrow evening a big car will arrive at Dr. Hogge's school. It will contain one of my chiefs, and he will represent himself as General Leighton's secretary. He will carry two forged letters—one for Dr. Hogge, and the other for the boy."

"Supposed to be written by the general?"

"Of course. They will be masterpieces in their own way, and Dr. Hogge will certainly allow Leighton to go. The thing is rather cunning, Nipper. Hogge will have no cause for suspicion, and no reason for communicating with the boy's father. It might be a week before any alarm is raised, and, by that time, the prisoner will be hidden away."

"Supposing old Hogge won't let him go?"

"Well, in that case, I shall have to use other means," replied Todd quietly. "That's why I'm here, Nipper. But I don't think it will be necessary for me to act. I can't tell you where the boy will be taken to, because I don't know. I am only aware of one fact."

"And what's that?" I asked eagerly.

"Just this. Young Leighton is to be held secure in a home," whispered Todd. "It is a private establishment for the mentally deficient."

"A lunatic asylum?" I gasped.

"No, no! Of course not. I've heard of the place, Nipper, but only vaguely. It is quite a respectable establishment, situated amid pleasant surroundings. It is more like a sanatorium than anything else—for the patients there are quite harmless and inoffensive. Leighton is to be kept there until his father has served the Circle as it demands. The doctor who runs this home is a Circle chief himself—one of the High Lord's trusted advisors. The High Lord visits the home regularly every month, I believe."

"You believe?" I said tensely.

"Well, I know it to be a fact," exclaimed Todd. "But this information isn't of any use to you—I can't tell you where the home is. It might be in Scotland, or Wales, or it might be within twenty miles of us. There, Nipper, I've already said more than I should have done. I needn't urge you to be careful, need I?"

I rose to my feet.

"You won't come to any harm through anything the gov'nor or I do," I said, glancing at the clock. "By jingo, it's a quarter to eight! The train leaves for Bannington at ten to—the only connection with the London express."

"You'd better look sharp, then," exclaimed Todd briskly.

I hadn't told him I was going by train, but he naturally assumed this to be the case. Somehow, I felt it was rather mean to diddle

old Todd in that way—after he had given me such a lot of information. But it was wiser, on the whole, to leave Todd in ignorance of the fact that Nelson Lee and I were at St. Frank's. The news would only have worried him, anyhow. For he would have feared that his connection with us might become known to his superiors.

Two minutes later I left the hotel—but I didn't make for the station.

CHAPTER V.

(Nipper continues.)

IN WHICH, WITH INFINITE CUNNING, I INVITE STANLEY LEIGHTON TO TEA.

NELSON LEE regarded me steadily. "And you will undertake the mission, Nipper?" he asked, in an even voice. "If you have the slightest doubt—"

"I'm simply dying to do something, guv'nor," I broke in eagerly. "Of course, I'll undertake the mission—and bring it off successfully if I can. It was ripping of old Todd to tell me so much. He thinks I'm on my way to London now!" I added with a chuckle.

"All the better, young 'un—you acted wisely in giving Todd that impression," said the schoolmaster-detective. "Well, so far as I can see, we have discussed every point which needs attention. But there will be danger, Nipper."

"I like it, sir."

"There might be a host of perils."

"I thrive on 'em!"

"You might even fall into the Circle's hands."

"Then I shall have to fall out again, guv'nor," I said cheerfully. "But you're trying to test me now, ain't you? You're seeing if I'm nervy?—I know your old games, sir," I grinned. "Nothing would please me better than to give old Zingrave one in the eye!"

To tell the truth, I was a bit flattered. The guv'nor was going to trust me with a very special piece of work, and I resolved to see it through successfully. He and I had been talking for nearly an hour.

I had returned to St. Frank's, had changed into Eton's, and had gone to "Mr. Alvington's study. And here, having told Nelson Lee all that Todd had told me, we at once fell to making plans.

"I suppose I can tell Montie and Tommy, sir?" I asked rather anxiously.

"Do you think it's wise, Nipper?" said the guv'nor thoughtfully. "Oh, yes, I suppose you had better take them into your confidence. It would not be the thing to leave them in ignorance—and we know they can be trusted. I shall, of course, have another chat with you in the course of to-morrow."

I left the study a few minutes later, and hurried to the Remove passage. It was nearly supper time, and I entered Study C

feeling rather guilty. I hadn't seen my chums for over two hours.

They were both standing by the fireplace, jawing, when I entered. Tommy Watson bestowed a glare upon me which was an unmistakable hint that trouble was brewing. Sir Montie contented himself with a mild, reproachful expression, which was far more effective than Tommy's glare.

"Oh, so you've turned up at last!" exclaimed Watson deliberately.

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" I observed, closing the door. "Anything the matter, Tommy? Has somebody been ruffling you for the wrong way?"

"You—you—"

"Tommy boy, don't get wild," protested Sir Montie softly. "Let's ask Benny things quietly. The dear fellow will tell us all about it—although, begad, you're a bit of a bounder, Benny."

"Where've you been?" growled Watson.

"Out."

"You are! We knew that," roared Tommy. "What about your silly prep? I suppose you like getting into trouble with old Crowsfeet?"

"Mr. Crowell won't know anything about it," I said calmly. "It ain't necessary for me to prep. at all really—as you chaps know. If I liked, I could be in the Sixth, but I'd rather stay where I am."

"But what was the idea of runnin' away, old boy?"

"I didn't run away," I replied. "The fact is, there's something afoot," I went on in a low voice. "You remember what I said about that man in the village—the fellow I recognised as a Circle agent?"

"Yes. What about him?"

"The guv'nor has found out why he's here," I said. "There's a plot against that River House kid we saw this afternoon, Leighton. The Circle of Terror will probably try to kidnap him to-morrow evening."

"Great pip!" gasped Watson blankly.

"Really, Benny? Begad! It's rather startlin'," was Montie's comment.

"Well, it is a bit startling," I admitted. "The guv'nor has given me permission to tell you the whole yarn. So listen carefully."

Still speaking in a low voice, I told my two chums all about my interview with Todd, and the arrangement which the guv'nor and I had come to.

"But what are you going to do, exactly?" asked Tommy Watson.

"I'm going to be kidnapped," I said calmly.

"Begad!"

"Ki-ki-kidnaped?" gasped Tommy.

"Instead of Leighton," I explained. "It's quite simple."

"You—you fathead!" roared Tommy excitedly. "How the dickens can you be kid—" He pulled himself up, and lowered his voice to a hiss. "How can you be kidnapped, you thundering idiot?"

"By taking Leighton's place."

"Do you mean to say you're going to impersonate him?" asked Watson blankly.

"Not exactly that," I replied, with great patience. "Impersonation's a tricky business, my sons. But Leighton isn't known to the chaps at this home for dotty people, and I shall palm myself off as——"

"But what for, Benny boy?" inquired Sir Montie. "Be sporty, you know. Let's hear everythin'. I'm in a shockin' state of bewilderment, begad!"

I became serious.

"In a nutshell, this is the position," I said. "I shall take a pretty big risk in allowing myself to be collared in Leighton's place, but there's no telling what good may come of it. The guv'nor and I have jawed it over, and we can see lots of possibilities. I shall act the part of a timid, nervous kid, and pretend to be in a blue funk all the time. There's no fear of my being treated badly, for I shall simply be taken to this home and placed in the doctor's charge. But, once I'm there, I've got to use my own ingenuity to find out exactly where the place is situated. Then I've got to send the information to the guv'nor."

"How can you if you're a prisoner?" demanded Watson sarcastically.

"My dear chap, I shall have to think of a way," I replied. "Once that information is received by old Alvy, he'll act promptly. You see, we want to collar old Zingrave—if we can. It may not be possible, but it's a big gamble."

"Begad!" exclaimed Sir Montie. "Don't use that word, Benny. Gamblin' ain't proper. Say a sportin' chance. But I'm still in a frightful muddle. Supposin' you're spotted?"

"Then there'll be—trouble," I replied quietly.

"And what about us?" demanded Tommy Watson, with great indignation. "Where do we come in?"

"My dear old son, you don't come in at all."

"Ain't we going to do anything?"

"Well, you can help me to invite Leighton to tea to-morrow evening," I said thoughtfully.

Tommy Watson's only reply was a snort. Neither he nor Sir Montie liked the arrangement. They implored me to give it up; they assured me, in the most solemn voices, that horrible things would happen to me if I let myself be taken away by the Circle men. But I turned the deaf ear to these alternate entreaties and threats. Finally, my two chums worked themselves into a state of dismal resignation. They badly wanted to come with me—to take an active hand in the game—but they knew it wasn't possible.

Throughout the next day they were gloomy, but bucked up as soon as afternoon lessons were over. They would be able to help me to start with, at all events. And the first move in the game was to visit the River House School.

This, in itself, was a somewhat risky proceeding. We should be entering the enemy's camp—for the Honourables, at all events, would be hostile. And as they were in the majority at Dr. Hogge's Academy, the

chances were that we should have a lively time.

It was a calm, mild spring evening. The sun was setting in a clear sky, and there was every prospect of a fine night. There would be no moon, however—and that might be useful. I didn't want too much light.

As we entered the big gates of the River House School we saw that the place was very quiet; not a boy was to be seen. The playing-grounds and fields were all in the rear—quite decent ones, too.

"Come on," I said. "We shall have to knock."

We found the main door open, however. Marching into the hall, the first person we encountered was Mr. Wragg, the under-master. He looked at us sourly, and I guessed that he hadn't forgotten the incident of the day before.

"Well, what do you want here?" he demanded curtly.

"We wanted to see Leighton, sir," I replied. "We thought——"

Mr. Wragg pointed to the door.

"You may go," he snapped. "I shall not allow you to see Leighton. Be off with you! You have no right on these premises."

"Begad!" gasped Sir Montie. "But—but——"

"Leave this school at once!" said Mr. Wragg harshly.

"Look here, sir," I protested, "I don't see why——"

"You don't see! You don't see!" roared the under-master. "How dare you bandy words with me, boy? Go at once—at once!"

I was dismayed; but I didn't get into a temper. This attitude on Mr. Wragg's part had been unexpected, and I wasn't quite prepared for it. The success of the whole plan—the guv'nor's main plan, I mean—depended upon getting Stanley Leighton over to St. Frank's.

And here was Mr. Wragg ordering us off the premises before we had even seen the chap! I knew the position would only be worsened by "bandying" words with the ill-tempered rotter, and so I nodded.

"All right, sir," I said shortly. "We'll go."

I turned and went out. Sir Montie and Tommy followed me, but they were boiling with indignation—at least, Watson was. He exploded out on the drive.

"What's the idea of this, Bennett, you idiot?" he hissed. "We've got to take Leighton back with us, ain't we?"

"My dear chap, we couldn't argue with that awful bounder," I said. "We shall have to get round to the playing-grounds by the rear, and beckon to Leighton—— By jingo, look what's blown in!"

At that moment my gaze fell upon a slight, bent figure, which had just entered by the gates. The gentleman was somewhat aged, and he wore a rustling gown and a mortar-board. Without a doubt Dr. Molyneux Hogge, M.A., himself!

"Come on, my sons!" I murmured.

We raised our caps respectfully as we

halted before Dr. Hogge. "His name was a cruel insult, for one could not possibly imagine a more meek gentleman than the worthy doctor. He beamed at us through his spectacles.

"Ah! You are St. Francis College boys, I believe?" he said genially. "How are you, boys? I am delighted to see you here. We must be friends, eh?"

"I hope so, sir," I replied respectfully. "We wanted to see Leighton—we were going to ask him to tea at St. Frank's."

"Excellent—excellent!" beamed Dr. Hogge.

"But Mr. Wragg has ordered us off the premises, sir," complained Watson warmly. "He said that we had no right here—fairly gave us the order of the boot. We didn't cheek him, or anything!"

Just for a second a frown flitted across Dr. Hogge's genial old features.

"Ah, Mr. Wragg is inclined to be hasty," he said genially. "Have no fear, my dear boys. You have my permission to enter the school whenever you like. If you meet Mr. Wragg, tell him that I regard your presence in my establishment with approval and pleasure."

"Thank you, sir," I exclaimed gratefully. "Come on, my sons!"

We marched in again, as bold as brass. And we met Mr. Wragg at the far end of the hall. He was chatting in an oily, obsequious fashion with the Hon. Aubrey de Vere Wellborne and two or three more of the Honourable gang.

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed the Hon. Aubrey protestingly. "Just look at this, Mr. Wragg! Bai Jove, must we stand this, really? These awful boundahs—"

Mr. Wragg twisted round furiously.

"Didn't I tell you boys to go?" he thundered. "How dare you return—"

"We've just met Dr. Hogge, sir," I said sweetly. "He has given us permission to come whenever we like. Can you give us any idea where we can find Leighton? We're rather anxious to get back to St. Frank's in time for tea."

Mr. Wragg was speechless; he simply mouthed at us.

Smiling gently—but with a certain amount of triumph—we passed out by the big rear door, and found ourselves in the playing-grounds. Tommy had recovered his temper, and Sir Montie was quietly chuckling.

"Rippin', dear fellows!" he murmured. "The discomfiture of the disgustin' Wragg—what? He asked for it, you know—he did, really. Begad! There's our innocent prey over there."

We had sighted Stanley Leighton. He was walking from the direction of the brand-new gymnasium, and he nodded eagerly as he saw us.

"Oh, I'm awfully sorry!" he said half nervously, as he ran up.

"Sorry?" I remarked. "What for?"

"I didn't thank you for stopping Mr. Wragg's bullying," said Leighton. "I believe he delights to torment me—the wretch! Perhaps it's because I'm such a weak,

nervous boy," he added bitterly. "I can't help it—"

"That's all right," I interrupted, looking at him critically. "The fact is, old son, we want you to come up to St. Frank's to tea—in our own study, you know."

Leighton's eyes lit up.

"Do—do you really?" he asked eagerly.

"Begad, of course we do!" smiled Sir Montie. "Come along, dear fellow!"

"It's—it's awfully decent of you—"

"Rats!" I said cheerfully, taking his arm. "Let's be going."

And we went. The first part of our programme had been carried out successfully. Meanwhile, Nelson Lee had been making certain arrangements, and I didn't see any reason why the whole scheme shouldn't pan out victoriously all along the line. Barring accidents, it would do so.

But, then, accidents are always liable to happen, and the merest triviality was destined to alter the whole course of after-events.

CHAPTER VI.

THE ARRIVAL OF MR. GRANT—THE SUBSTITUTION —WATSON'S MISHAP.

SIX o'clock was just striking from the old village church when a big limousine glided through the old High Street of Bellton. It proceeded over the bridge, and pulled up before the drive of the River House School.

A gentleman descended, and had a few words with the chauffeur; then he pushed open the wrought-iron gate and walked briskly towards the headmaster's private door. He was tall and spruce, attired in a fur-lined coat and a soft hat.

A maidservant came to the door in answer to his summons, and ushered him into a small, but comfortable waiting-room. Three minutes later Dr. Hogge came bustling in, with the stranger's card in his hand, and a smile of welcome upon his genial old features.

"I am delighted to meet you, my dear sir," he exclaimed warmly. "Mr. Grant, I believe?"

"That is my name, Dr. Hogge," replied the stranger, taking the headmaster's hand. "As my card announces, I am General Leighton's private secretary, and I am here for the purpose of taking Stanley away with me—"

"Good gracious!" interjected Dr. Hogge, his smile vanishing. "Is anything the matter, my dear sir? Are you suggesting that you are to take Stanley away from my school—"

"Only for a few days, doctor," smiled Mr. Grant. "This letter will doubtless explain matters sufficiently."

Dr. Hogge took the letter, and adjusted his spectacles. By the time he had finished reading he was beaming again. General Leighton's handwriting was well known to him, and he had no reason to suspect that this communication was nothing more nor less than a clever forgery.

"Just a little vacation—eh?" he smiled. "Of course, you will be allowed to take the boy at once, Mr. Grant. I sincerely trust he will have a pleasant holiday with his uncle. Home from Mesopotamia, I understand? H'm! Most interesting—most interesting!"

Dr. Hogge refolded the letter and placed it in his pocket. He failed to observe the slight gleam of satisfaction which entered the other's eyes. The unsuspecting old schoolmaster had swallowed the bait beautifully.

"If you will wait just a few minutes, I will have Stanley brought to us," said Dr. Hogge, touching the bell-push. "Ah, Jane," he added, as a maidservant entered a moment later. "Will you please find Master Leighton, and bring him to me?"

The girl departed on her errand, but returned within five minutes with the information that "Master Leighton" had gone to St. Frank's with one or two junior schoolboys from the Ancient House.

"Dear me! How annoying!" exclaimed Dr. Hogge. "I seem to remember one or two St. Frank's boys questioning me with regard to Leighton, an hour or two ago. Perhaps you will care to wait until Stanley returns, my dear sir?"

Mr. Grant was looking annoyed, although he strove to conceal it.

"How long do you suppose the boy will be?" he asked.

"Really, I cannot possibly form an opinion, sir," replied the head. "He will certainly not be later than eight o'clock, for the gates are locked up at that time."

"Eight o'clock!" interjected Mr. Grant sharply. "My dear doctor, I can't possibly waste two hours of my time in that way."

"Then I will send for Leighton at once."

"I do not think that will be necessary," put in the other, as the obvious solution occurred to him. "It will only take me a few moments to run up to St. Frank's in my car—and I can fetch Stanley away direct. He will need no luggage, and may as well start from St. Frank's as from here."

"Ah, that is quite a good idea!" beamed Dr. Hogge.

After a few more words the pair shook hands, and Mr. Grant took his departure. There was nothing particularly brilliant in his suggestion to go to St. Frank's for Stanley Leighton. It was, indeed, the only sensible solution to the little problem—and Nelson Lee had fully relied upon this turn of events. He had laid all his plans accordingly.

The big limousine glided away from the River House School, and proceeded to St. Frank's. Its occupant was more than pleased with himself. There had been no hitch, and it was practically certain that there would be none now. Dr. Hogge had accepted him without question—and it was plainly obvious that there would be no difficulties at St. Frank's. Indeed, Mr. Grant assured himself that nothing could have been more suitable.

The motor-car drove straight into the Triangle at St. Frank's, and came to a halt just within the gates. It was nearly dark, and the great school was twinkling with

hundreds of lights. Warren, the porter, who was standing by, opened the door of the limousine with a flourish—with a keen eye to any possible tip.

Mr. Grant alighted, and earned Warren's lifelong respect by presenting him with half-a-crown immediately.

"You are the porter here, I presume?"

"Yessir," said Warren.

"I am looking for one of the River House boys," explained Mr. Grant. "He is in the Ancient House, I believe. Can you direct me—"

"Why, certainly, sir," said Warren humbly. "If you will just follow me, sir—Why, 'ere's Mr. Alvington, the 'Ousemaster, 'imself."

Nelson Lee had just emerged from the Ancient House, and as he set off towards the gymnasium Warren gave him a respectful hail. Lee at once altered his direction.

"I am Mr. Grant, and I have come to this school to fetch a boy named Leighton," explained the stranger. "Dr. Hogge has given me to understand that the lad is visiting some friends of his in the Ancient House."

"Quite so," said Nelson Lee gently, in his best schoolmaster manner. "I seem to remember having seen a River House boy with some members of the Remove. If you will accompany me to the waiting-room, my dear sir, I will fetch Leighton at once."

Mr. Grant's eyes gleamed in the gloom.

"There is really no necessity for me to bother you to such an extent," he exclaimed. "I will wait here, if you don't mind. I am rather in a hurry, and I shall take it as a great favour if you will lose no time in having the lad brought to me."

"Certainly—certainly!" said Lee briskly.

He bustled off, his gown rustling, and proceeded at once to the Remove passage. He tapped gently upon the door of Study C, and entered. The little apartment was occupied by three juniors only—Tregellis-West, Watson, and Nipper. Stanley Leighton was at this moment taking tea with Dr. Stafford himself—at Nelson Lee's express instructions.

"Now, Nipper, the time has arrived," said Nelson Lee softly.

"Is he here, guv'nor?" asked Nipper eagerly.

"Waiting, my boy."

Nipper gave his chums a quick look of satisfaction, and picked up a red cap with a blue badge—the unmistakable cap of a River House schoolboy. Nipper had been careful to see that Leighton left it behind before adjourning to the head's quarters.

"When will you be back, Benny?" asked Watson anxiously.

"Can't tell—haven't the faintest idea," said Nipper briskly. "Fare-thee-well, my sons. I shall turn up again, bright and kicking, before long."

"Begad, I don't like it—I don't, really!" murmured Sir Montie protestingly. "We ought to go with you, Benny boy—"

"Can't be did, old scout," put in Nipper. "So long!"

He left the study with Nelson Lee; but he

did not don the red cap until he had emerged into the gloomy Triangle. Other Remove fellows might have wondered, had he done so. Once out of the lobby, however, he placed the distinguishing cap upon his head, and changed his manner so completely that even Nelson Lee was slightly surprised.

Nipper seemed to become smaller; he walked differently; his expression was one of extreme timidity and meekness.

Mr Grant came up with a bustle.

"This is the boy?" he asked genially. "You don't know me, Stanley—oh?"

"No, sir," said Nipper nervously. "I—I don't think so, sir."

"This letter from your father will introduce me," said Mr. Grant. "I have already interviewed Dr. Hogge, and he has given me permission to take you away. If there is any little thing you need from your school, we will call there on our way down to the main road."

"Take—take me away, sir?" asked Nipper fearfully.

"Don't be frightened, lad," put in Nelson Lee kindly. "I am sure Mr. Grant is a very nice gentleman. Read the letter, Leighton. Your father may have something of importance to tell you."

While Nipper was nervously reading the letter by the light of one of the headlights of the motor-car, a brief but exciting argument was proceeding within the confines of Sturdy C. Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Tommy Watson were having high words.

"It's rotten, I tell you!" hissed Watson excitedly. "We're stuck in here, and we can't even see Benny go off! I ain't going to stand it, Montie."

"Dear fellow, don't be so ridiculous!"

"Who's ridiculous?" roared Watson.

"You are, Tommy, old boy! In fact, you're impulsive, begad!" said Sir Montie. "Shockin'ly impulsive! Do you want to spoil the whole game by buttin' in when you're not wanted? We'd better sit in here until Benny has gone—"

"We can get out of the window, I suppose?" said Tommy Watson warmly.

"Well, there is nothing to prevent us," admitted Tregellis-West. "I hadn't thought of the window, you know. It ain't a bad idea, Tommy—it ain't, really."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you all along, you ass!" growled Watson. "We'll nip out of the window, and cut across in the gloom to the gates, and see old Benny as he goes out. Might as well have a last look at his chivvy before he goes to his doom," he added optimistically.

Without more ado the pair raised the window sash—having switched off the electric light—and stepped quietly out into the Triangle. They ran softly across, and found themselves immediately behind the big limousine. Nelson Lee and Mr. Grant and Nipper were round the other side.

"Oh, I shall love to go home," Nipper was saying timidly. "Are we going straight away, sir?"

"Yes, unless you wish to call at your school for your overcoat or a clean collar," said Mr. Grant kindly. "It would only take us a few moments longer."

"Oh, we need not do that, sir," said Nipper. "Can't we start away at once?"

"Certainly, boy—certainly."

Tregellis-West and Watson, concealed behind the car, marvelled. They could scarcely believe that it was Nipper who was talking. His voice was nervous and almost characterless—a wonderful imitation of Leighton's own. Nipper, of course, wasn't attempting to impersonate the River House boy—except in the sense that he was representing himself to be Leighton. As Grant and the other Circle members were not acquainted with the boy, there was no reason why Nipper's trick should not be entirely successful. It would be somewhat rich for the Circle to hold Nipper whilst being under the impression that their prisoner was Stanley Leighton. It was time that Nelson Lee wanted—and this was a means of gaining it.

"Begad, doesn't he do it spiffin'ly?" murmured Sir Montie, with untold admiration in his voice.

"He's absolutely a wonder," breathed Tommy Watson.

"Haden't we better be movin', dear boy?" went on Montie. "The car will be startin' in a minute or two, and then we shall be exposed—like a couple of horrid cave-droppers, begad! Let's get to the gates!"

"Half a mo', Montie!" whispered Watson.

"There is no hurry."

"But there is, Tommy, old boy—"

"Shurrup, you ass!"

Tregellis-West obediently shut up, and heaved a little sigh. As he did so the door of the car banged, and Nelson Lee was heard saying good-bye.

"Look out!" whispered Sir Montie hurriedly.

Tommy realised that he ought to have taken his chum's advice at once. But there was still time to get out of the way without being seen. They had edged their way round to the rear of the limousine. Tommy had carelessly placed his left foot upon the metal-work of the luggage grid. And now he gave a little gasp. Pull as he would, he could not free his foot!

"Great pip!" he gasped. "My giddy foot's got jammed!"

"Tug, dear boy—tug!" breathed Sir Montie quickly. "The car will be startin'—"

Before Tregellis-West could finish, the car gave a little jerk forward. Sir Montie heard Nelson Lee walking briskly towards the Ancient House; the detective hadn't seen the two boys behind the car.

Tommy Watson was dragged forward as the car moved, and just for a second he thought that his foot had worked loose. But then he was wrenched forward, and instinctively he made a grab at the big mudguard of the rear wheel.

"Oh, corks!" he gasped despairingly.

"Tommy, boy—"

Tregellis-West paused, horrified. Tommy Watson, clinging helplessly to the car, was carried through the gateway and into the darkness beyond.

CHAPTER VII.

WATSON'S TERRIBLE PREDICAMENT—DISASTER—THE TUSSLE IN THE LANE.

MR. GRANT settled back amongst the luxurious cushions of the limousine, and glanced down with a quiet smile of satisfaction at his young companion. The trick had worked with eminent success, and all would now be smooth.

Nipper, for his part, was equally as satisfied in his own way. There was no light in the car—and nothing could have suited him better.

Neither of the car's occupants—or the chauffeur, for that matter—were aware of the fact that Tommy Watson was clinging desperately to the rear of the vehicle. His foot was still jammed, and, even if he had been able to free it, it would have been madness to drop off, for the car was travelling at a decent speed, and the roads were flinty.

Nipper confidently told himself that this adventure would pan out well. There was more than a chance that it would end in the complete defeat of Professor Zingrave and the Circle of Terror generally. As for any possible peril, Nipper was satisfied that he could take care of himself. If things went wrong—well, he would trust to his own ingenuity. After all, he would only be an inmate of a private home, and it would be fairly easy to break free from such a place.

Mr. Grant did not talk much, and Nipper wasn't sorry. He guessed that the man was one of the Circle's Chief Agents. There were many different grades of Agents in the Circle of Terror—ordinary Agents—this term applying to the rank and file of the organisation's members—Special Agents, such as Montague Todd; Chief Agents, and members of the High Lord's Council. The whole society was run upon strict business lines, as though it were a perfectly legitimate concern.

Nipper did not conceal from himself a feeling of intense personal satisfaction. He was flattered, in fact. Nelson Lee had set him upon this mission, quite content that the lad would quit himself well. Nipper was grimly determined to prove himself worthy of his master's trust. He did not know that a tiny, trivial incident was to wreck the whole plan!

Needless to say, it was Tommy Watson who was responsible—although the unfortunate lad could not justly be blamed. His mishap had been purely accidental, and, after all, had been caused by his over-zealous desire to witness the departure of his chum.

Watson was to be sympathised with. His position was perilous. He knew, well enough, that "old Alvy's" well-laid plans might all go wrong if he revealed his presence on the

car. With commendable pluck, therefore, he was endeavouring to free his foot with the intention of dropping off when the car ascended a hill—for then the speed would be greatly diminished.

This idea of Tommy's, however, was not possible of realisation. For, try as he would, he could not wrench his foot free. It had become jammed even more firmly by the motion of the car. Had the vehicle been still, he would have been able to perform the trick in a few seconds; but he was in a cramped, awkward position. It took nearly all his strength to cling on.

To release his grip would be absolutely fatal. For he would be flung backwards, and would be dragged along the road until he perished.

Bellton was left behind, and the car took the road to Caistowe. Nobody had seen Watson in the village, for the streets were dark and almost deserted.

"I can't stick it—I can't stick it," groaned Watson despairingly.

The pain in his foot and ankle was terrible. He could scarcely refrain from crying aloud with the sheer agony of it. Every jolt of the car made matters worse. And at last, after another futile attempt, the lad realised that his very life depended upon the stopping of the car. It had already mounted the hill out of Bellton, and was now booming away on the long downward stretch towards Caistowe. It was gathering speed, and the jolts were becoming more violent. Before long one of these jolts would inevitably wrench Watson's hands from their grasp. And then the lad shuddered as he thought of the possibilities.

"Help!" he shouted hoarsely. "Oh!" Help—help!"

He had been forced to it—forced against his will. Much as he wanted to keep silent, he knew that it would have been suicidal.

Watson listened anxiously, but no reply came to his appeal. He was nearly exhausted, and when he shouted again his voice was shrill with pain and alarm.

"Help!" he screamed. "Stop the car—help!"

And then he heard one of the windows go down with a clatter. Mr. Grant's head was thrust out, and Watson faintly heard him giving a sharp order to the chauffeur. The latter applied the brake so quickly that Tommy Watson was flung forward on to the mudguard. His foot twisted violently and came free. With a hoarse cry Watson collapsed upon the road.

The limousine pulled up ten yards further on, and both Mr. Grant and Nipper hurried out. Something dark was lying upon the road a little way back.

"Did—did we run over somebody, sir?" asked Nipper timidly.

"We couldn't have done—there was no jolt!" snapped the Circle man angrily.

They both hurried back, and Nipper caught his breath in slightly as he recognised Tommy Watson. He shrewdly guessed, in that

second, the true explanation of this unlooked-for event.

"Why, it's—it's—a boy!" he exclaimed, sustaining his part.

"I—I ain't hurt much, Bennett!" moaned Watson faintly. "My foot stuck in the grid and—and—"

Nipper set his teeth grimly as Watson's voice trailed away. The unfortunate Removite was in a half-fainting condition, and he didn't realise what he was saying. He was dazed, bewildered, and in great pain. The harm had been done, however.

Grant started and looked keenly at Nipper.

"What did he mean, Stanley?" he asked sharply. "Why did he call you Bennett?"

"I—I suppose he is muddled, sir," said Nipper.

"Muddled!" cut in Grant. "He heard your voice, and called you Bennett. Is there some trick here? Have you been playing a game upon me, you young rascal?"

"A—a game, sir," faltered Nipper, his brain working swiftly.

Grant swore.

"Tell me, boy," he exclaimed. "Where were you living when you were six years of age?"

Nipper affected a look of blank surprise.

"Why—in—in Bournemouth," he replied nervously.

"H'm! Where did your father meet with his accident?"

"Accident, sir?"

"Yes. Where was he, and what was the nature of the accident?"

Nipper took a deep breath.

"I—I don't remember, sir," he replied steadily.

Grant's eyes blazed. Nipper knew well enough that the man suspected treachery, and he had put these questions in the hope of trapping the supposed Leighton. By the look of things he had done so! Nipper had been well-primed for the part he was playing, but he knew nothing about an accident to General Leighton.

"You don't remember?" exclaimed Grant harshly. "You infernal young rascal! You are not Leighton at all—you are a boy named Bennett!"

Nipper was absolutely taken aback. Tommy Watson at that moment rose dazedly to his feet and stared at the pair in a bewildered fashion. He half realised that he was the cause of this altercation.

Grant turned upon him abruptly.

"Who is this boy?" he demanded. "Tell me his name?"

"Who—who is he?" muttered Watson, startled. "Why, Ben—I—I mean Leighton—Leighton, of the River House School—"

Grant twisted round and shouted to the driver. The man came round promptly.

"Help me to bundle these boys inside!" snarled Grant furiously. "There has been some faked work, and I mean to take the pair of them with me, in order to be on the safe side. In with them!"

Nipper clenched his fists. He realised in that second that the game was up. Owing

to Watson's accident it was impossible to continue the deception. And Nipper had no intention of knuckling under tamely.

"Buck up, Watson!" he roared. "Fight, man—fight!"

The next moment he charged full tilt at Grant. Tommy Watson, aroused by Nipper's shout, hit out valiantly at the chauffeur. A fierce tussle was soon in progress.

And at that moment two bicycles came into view on the brow of the hill, and charged down towards the struggling quartette.

CHAPTER VIII.

SIR MONTIE'S ALARM—NELSON LEE ACTS PROMPTLY—THE END OF THE EPISODE.

SIR MONTIE TREGELLIS-WEST stood rooted to the triangle for a few seconds after Tommy Watson had been carried out helplessly on the back of the big limousine. And then, with a gasping cry, the swell of the Ancient House dashed to the gates.

The red light of the car was already dwindling, and there was no sign of Tommy Watson.

"Good heavens!" muttered Sir Montie. "He'll—he'll be killed!"

One clear thought came to him, and he twisted round and ran into the Ancient House with every ounce of speed possible. Incidentally he nearly bowled over Handforth and McClure, who were on their way out.

"What the dickens——"

Sir Montie didn't pause a second. He left the two juniors staring after him in amazement, and pelted straight towards Nelson Lee's study. For the first time in his life Sir Montie burst into his housemaster's private sanctum without knocking. He found Nelson Lee and Dr. Stafford and Stanley Leighton within the room.

"Good gracious, Tregellis West!" exclaimed the head, rising to his feet. "What on earth——"

"Tommy's gone, sir!" gasped Sir Montie hoarsely. "He was carried away on the car, begad. I—I—— Oh, it's shockin'!"

Nelson Lee gripped the excited boy firmly. He had never really seen Tregellis West upset before, and he knew that something very unusual must have happened. In a few words Montie panted out the truth, and Lee's eyes gleamed grimly.

"This may mean the wrecking of all my plans!" he exclaimed. "I don't blame Watson—the lad didn't perform the act intentionally. But we must go at once—at once!"

"Go, sir?" repeated Sir Montie mildly.

"Go and get your own bicycle and mine out of the shed," ordered Nelson Lee crisply. "The car will only proceed slowly through the village, and if we start at once we shall probably overtake it within a mile or two. Poor Watson may meet with disaster in that unfortunate position."

Tregellis-West hurried away, and Nelson Lee turned quickly to the head.

"I think it highly probable that we shall find Watson somewhere down the road," he exclaimed. "He may have fallen when the occupants learned of his presence."

"I sincerely trust the boy will come to no harm!" said the head anxiously.

"I am afraid poor Watson will not escape scatheless," was Nelson Lee's grave reply. "As you know, Dr. Stafford, I am expecting Miss Eileen Dare at almost any moment. She has promised to take care of Stanley."

"Yes, yes. I am aware of that."

"Should Miss Dare come whilst I am away, please give the lad into her charge, and request her to make straight for London with all speed," said Lee. "It is most essential that Stanley should be got clear away at the earliest possible moment. You will go willingly, my boy?"

"Oh, yes, sir," said Leighton, in a bewildered manner.

Nelson Lee left without another word, and he found Sir Montie just ready. He had thought it wise that Miss Eileen Dare should waste no time at St. Frank's. The one-time girl-detective had responded to Nelson Lee's call without hesitation, and she had promised to convey Stanley Leighton to her place in London, where he would be well looked after by the girl and her aunt—far from the Circle's grasp.

Nelson Lee would have preferred to meet Eileen personally, but he knew very well that it would have been foolish to keep her hanging about with no real object. Dr. Stafford knew all the facts, and he was quite capable of explaining matters to Eileen when she arrived.

"Ready, sir," said Sir Montie breathlessly.

"Splendid, Montie. You have been very prompt."

The pair leapt upon their bicycles and pedalled away rapidly. Barely five minutes had elapsed since the departure of the limousine.

Montie was a splendid cyclist, but he found great difficulty in keeping pace with Nelson Lee. There was no sign of Tommy Watson. The village was quiet and deserted; and this would not have been the case had Watson dropped from the car in the vicinity. He had evidently been carried right through the village into the open country beyond.

Nelson Lee had made no attempt to follow the Circle's car hitherto, because he was sure that such a move would have been false. His efforts would have been detected, and the whole scheme wrong. Now, however, the matter was different—it was highly necessary to discover what had become of Watson.

At the cross roads near the end of the village Lee slowed down. He had had an idea that the car had proceeded to Bannington. But it would be far better to inquire. He did so of the village constable, who was standing outside the George Tavern inspecting the stars, and probably thinking of the cosy parlour of the inn near by.

"One moment, constable," called Lee, as he reduced his speed.

"Talkin' to me, sir?" inquired P.C. Sparrow, walking forward heavily.

"Yea. Did you see a car pass through here a few minutes ago?"

"Why, yes, sir."

"Which way did it go?"

"Straight through the village, sir," replied Sparrow brilliantly.

"Yes, yes, of course! Did it take the Bannington Road—"

"No, sir—the lane to Caistowe."

"That's all right—thanks," said Lee crisply.

He and Sir Montie continued their course, the detective realising the wisdom of making the inquiry.

Up the hill out of the village Sir Montie flagged somewhat. He rode splendidly, but could not quite manage to sweep up the hill as magnificently as Nelson Lee was doing.

At last the summit was reached, and then a long straight stretch was covered, Sir Montie endeavouring to catch up. By the time the corner was turned, and the neighbouring slope lay before Nelson Lee, Sir Montie was only a few yards in the rear.

Lee clenched his teeth firmly. Only a comparatively short distance away a motor-car was stationary in the centre of the road. Four figures were struggling fiercely in the near vicinity.

"By James!" muttered Nelson Lee tensely.

He knew that something had gone wrong, and he put on a spurt which carried him forward at terrific speed. Disaster, however, followed rapidly.

The figures ceased struggling, and Lee saw a bright spurt of fire. This was followed by a sharp report. At the very same moment the tyre of his front wheel went flat and the rim bumped unevenly upon the road.

At such a speed a flat tyre was simply useless. The wheel skidded alarmingly, and Nelson Lee, clever cyclist though he was, found it impossible to maintain his balance. The bullet had performed its work only too well.

Crash!

The detective went over heavily and fell clear of his machine. A startled yell sounded from behind, and there was a second crash, even louder than the first.

Sir Montie, unable to swerve aside in time, had blundered clean into Lee's fallen machine.

He went over like a ninepin, and, incidentally, he landed almost on top of Nelson Lee.

By astonishing luck they were unhurt except for grazes and bruises, and when they rose to their feet they were aware of a furious droning hum.

The limousine was speeding away into the darkness of the night.

Two figures came running up—breathless and well-nigh exhausted.

"Who is that?" came Nipper's voice.

"Well, young 'un, it appears that our plans have not gone at all smoothly," said

Nelson Lee, with perfect calmness. "Where is Watson?"

"I—I'm here, sir," exclaimed Tommy Watson fearfully. "Oh, it was all my fault, sir—"

"We won't discuss that at the moment, my boy," interjected Nelson Lee. "We must be thankful that we are all safe and sound—and that Leighton, too, is safe. The first episode in the game is over, and I think we may claim to have won."

Nipper stood there panting.

"I'm not so sure of that, guv'nor," he said. "If you'd only come a minute or two earlier we should have been able to collar those two rotters."

"Begad! We were comin' along at rippin' speed," exclaimed Sir Montie painfully. "Then something happened, you know. I don't know exactly what, but Mr. Alvin'ton and I were thrown over with a frightful smash—"

"Why, that chap, Grant, fired his revolver," panted Watson. "Did—did he hurt you, sir?"

"The bullet struck the front tyre of my machine," explained Nelson Lee. "I went over, of course, and Tregottis-West fouled the wreckage. It is most remarkable that we both escaped so lightly."

"Jolly lucky!" declared Nipper. "We were having a hot time, guv'nor. If you hadn't appeared just then those Circle chaps would have bundled us into the car, and then I don't know what would have become of us."

"But what happened, dear fellow?" inquired Montie.

"I'm blessed if I know myself, exactly," replied Nipper. "I suddenly heard a yell from Tommy and we were going along, and I could hardly believe my ears. Grant stopped the car, and then all the excitement began."

Tommy Watson gave a gulp.

"I couldn't hang on any longer, sir," he muttered. "Oh, I tried to—I didn't want to yell for help. But I was forced I should have been killed if I'd stuck on—"

"We need not discuss these matters just now," put in Nelson Lee. "The fact remains that our plans have miscarried. Well, we cannot help it, and we must make the best of the situation. Upon the whole, however, I think the matter has ended in our favour. We have won the first trick in the game."

As Nelson Lee had said, the first episode was over. And although complete success had not attended Nipper, it could not be denied that the Circle of Terror's scheme had been defeated. What was the next move to be? Both Nelson Lee and Nipper were aware of the Circle's ruthless methods, and they were convinced that there would be a very short respite.

These were exciting times at St. Frank's, but there were other excitements to follow before the case of Stanley Leighton was completely and finally settled.

THE END.

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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. They are arrested and sent to a camp at Oberhemmel. One of the guards illtreats Jack, and George goes to his rescue, knocking out a gaoler named Kutz. He and his brother are then put in separate cells. As George lies worn out on the hard floor, he suddenly hears a voice.

(Now read on.)

THE NEW GOVERNOR.

"**A**RE you awake, Englishman?" Looking in the direction from which the sound came, he saw a pair of glittering eyes peering at him through the grating, and the presence of the light was explained. A warder had opened the wicket, and was looking in.

George did not move.

The door was unbolted, opened.

A warder came in. He wore the ever-familiar uniform, the trousers of which were thrust into boots that almost reached the knee.

He carried his rifle in one hand, and a basin with some steaming broth in it in the other. It gave off a savoury odour.

"I saved it for you. Ach! You must want something after what you've gone through," said the man, in a gruff voice, but there was a kindly gleam in his eyes.

"I don't want it! Take it away!" said George sullenly.

The man set it down.

"I'll leave it," he said. "You'll swallow it all right. It's good. You've gone through enough. I tell you it did some of us good to see the way you and that little English boy stood up to the governor, and I wasn't sorry to see you gave it that fellow Kutz."

He glanced behind him to make sure that there was nobody listening.

"The new governor will take things in hand. His name is Von der Klutz. I've served under him before. He's just; but a hard man. He won't have any floggings. That's not his way. If a man does anything very wrong he'll shoot him! But——"

George gazed at the man in surprise.

"Why should you want to be friendly to me?" he asked.

The German grinned.

"Why?" said he. "I know you. I used to go to the football ground and watch the Rovers. I know what you and your brother, and the other English players who came over to train the team, did for the club. I like the football. So does Von der Klutz. Mind you speak out boldly and truthfully when you go before him. And eat the broth."

He swung to the door, whistling "Die Wacht am Rhein."

"Good-night!" he cried, and the door banged to, and the bolts shot home.

George went to the hard bench and sat down. He bent forward, his face buried in his hands, pressing his fingers against his forehead to try and still its throbbing.

An age seemed to have passed away since the morning dawned.

He was weary in body and mind. He felt faint and ill, for the first time in his life.

For a long while he sat, while the heavy tread of the warder echoed in the stone corridor.

Presently he felt calmer, and, rising, fetched the broth, and swallowed it, and ate the bread that stood on the wooden platter.

He felt warmer then, and donning his clothes, stretched himself out, and thought and thought, until at last his troubled spirit was lulled in a health restoring sleep.

• • • • •

When next George Gray awoke it was to find that day had come. All about the prison echoed the hum and bustle of the day.

He heard men coming and going, heard the bugles sound, and the tramp of many feet in the yard.

Food was brought him, unappetising food, and little of it. He ate it to live.

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

Then his cell door was opened, and he was told to stand outside.

All along the corridor he saw the prisoners standing outside their cells. Buckets of water, soap, and flannels were brought, and each man was set to clean his cell out.

Aching at every turn, for he was bruised all over, and marvelling that no bones had been broken in the rough usage he had received, and he could hardly bear the press of his clothing upon his back, George sullenly did his work.

The task completed, the prisoners were marched to the yard, and allowed to wash themselves at a pump there. And here he met his brother Jack again.

Jack was pale and looked ill. But when he saw George his face flamed, and his eyes brightened.

"George! George! How are you, old man?" he faltered.

"All right, Jack. But when I think of Kutz, and yesterday, there's murder in my heart."

"Stick it, boy!" said Wilson, and then they were ordered to be silent. Their unsatisfactory ablutions ended, the weary prisoners were again conducted to their cells, and it was not until nearing noon that George was fetched and marched under escort to see the new governor.

He entered the room in which the trial had been held. It was guarded by armed men as before, though there were fewer now.

Von der Klutz sat alone. He fixed his stern, unfeeling eyes on the prisoner, and demanded to know why he had been punished.

George, with trembling lips, told his story.

"They had no right to convict me, or to punish me," he said defiantly. "Even a German prison official has no justification for inflicting unnecessary torture on a prisoner. And I have to thank Kutz for being here——"

The governor ordered him to be silent, and thumped the official charge-book in front of him.

"I have studied the records. Violence on the part of prisoners will not be permitted."

"But violence on the part of the warders will be, of course," laughed George bitterly. "They might have killed me last night."

The governor raised his eyebrows.

"H'm!" said he. "What did they do to you, then?"

George told him how he had been kicked and thumped into unconsciousness. Von der Klutz listened with a grim smile on his lips.

"Ach! Is it so?" he cried. "Very well. In view of the fact I countermand the further punishment that would, in the natural sequence of events, have been inflicted on you to-day. But mind how you behave in future."

George breathed deeply.

"You are George Gray, the footballer, who was coach to the Berlin Rovers—isn't it so?" said the governor.

George nodded.

"H'm! I have watched you play. I do not believe you are the spy they say you are. If I thought so, I would have you shot. Mind how you behave yourself in future. I will not allow any prisoner to defy my guards. If you have any complaints, make them to me."

With a gesture he dismissed the case, and the guards, ordering George to turn about, were going to march him back to his cell when the governor cried:

"Many complaints have been laid before me by the British interned prisoners upon their being confined to the cells. I am going to alter all that. The prison is required as a barracks for our soldiers. You will all sleep to-morrow under the stars!" And he laughed loudly.

As George reached the door of his cell he turned to one of the men who escorted him.

"What did the governor mean by saying we should sleep beneath the stars?" he asked.

The man, a repulsive-looking Hun, grinned from ear to ear.

"They are wiring in a camp within view of the prison," he cried, "and to-morrow the whole lot of you will be shut in behind electrified barbed-wire, like a flock of sheep."

As the door banged to upon him George thought long upon what he'd heard. And he came to the conclusion that their lot would be decidedly easier, more bearable then.

"For after all," he muttered, "the weather is warm, and I shall be able to see and talk to Jack."

And he felt much better.

THE LAST DAY IN THE PRISON.

THE commandant had gone from the prison at Oberhemmel. The new governor, Von der Klutz, reigned in his stead.

And from the very moment of his coming the regime there was changed. In some respects the change acted for the better, in others for the worse. For instance, the prisoners were allowed longer time out of the cells, were permitted to mingle together on the parade ground or exercise yard under the eyes of an armed guard, and to talk to one another without being called to order every other moment by some autocratic brute of a Prussian.

On the other hand, the instructions for the cleaning out of cells, and the doing of menial work within the prison increased in severity, and, worst of all, the food showed a marked deterioration, both in quantity and quality. The bread was of the coarsest, the coffee of the weakest, the soup of the thinnest, and the gruel the most unappetising muck that ever irritated a Britisher's palate.

(Continued overleaf.)

Close watch was kept upon the warders or guards, so that the more humane among them, who had hitherto shown simple kindnesses to the interned prisoners, held aloof for fear of being punished.

Two days after the new governor's arrival, as the prisoners were exercising in the yard, and George Gray, much recovered, was walking up and down, his arm linked with his brother's, the news flashed from mouth to mouth that the morrow would be the last day they would spend within the frowning stone walls of the gaol of Oberhemmel.

"Von der Klutz is hot stuff, Jack," said George Gray. "He not only talks, but acts, and for my part I sha'n't be sorry to get out of this rat-infested hole."

"The governor intends it to become a barracks for troops, doesn't he, George?"

"Yes. That's his idea. And much may they enjoy it. For my part," and he raised his eyes to meet the blue canopy of heaven which hung above them cloudless and serene. "I shall be only too thankful to sleep out in the open as long as the fine weather lasts. It will remind us of that month's picnic we had up the Thames the year before the war. Do you remember, Jack?"

Did he remember? Why, the boy's face fairly beamed at the mere mention of that happy time. It had been a hot July, and he, his brother George, and four famous footballers, six of them in all, had hired a couple of randans, and had started up river, carrying with them such foodstuffs as they required, together with change of clothing and provision for sleeping in the open at night.

To Oxford and back they had rowed, and as the fine weather had held from first to last, it had been the most enjoyable holiday any of them had ever experienced. It had acquainted them with the joys as well as the discomforts and drawbacks of camping out. The two brothers remembered everything now.

Jack gazed wistfully up into the blue vault above.

"It's frightfully hot, George," he cried. "And it will be lovely sleeping out on the cool grass. I'm quite looking forward to it."

"Of course, there are bound to be huts and shelters and all that sort of thing," said George, as they paced slowly along the yard. "And we shall have a lot more freedom. No more cells, no more brutal warders, the guards will be obliged to keep their distance, I believe. We shall be more our own masters than we have been, and—there may come a chance of escape."

Jack's grip tightened on his brother's arm at the mere thought of it.

"Do you think so, George?"

"Why not? We shall be in the open. The barbed wire is bound to be strong, and the guards in force. Still, there may come a chance one day. Thank goodness we have lived long enough in this beastly country to have got a hang of the language. I don't intend to remain in the hands of the Huns longer than I can help, Jack. First chance we get, we'll make a bolt for it."

The younger brother's face flamed at the very thought. There were times when George's heart ached for his brother, for he was not blind to the fact that captivity was eating the heart out of the plucky lad.

He did not bear it with the same fortitude and resignation that some of the prisoners exhibited. His temperament was far more sensitive than theirs. Everything seemed to hurt him. He still suffered from the shock of that awful scene upon the flogging ground.

"If you go, you'll take me with you, won't you, George?" whispered Jack.

George set his right arm round his brother's shoulders.

"Nover doubt it, Jack," he cried. "I'd sooner die than leave you here. If ever we go, we'll go together. Not one without the other—unless it should be you."

"No. No. I'd never go without you, George."

George Gray's face softened. Poor Jack. Poor dear lad.

He hardly ever grumbled, never complained, but his heart was breaking for love of home and England.

They had reached the end of the parade ground, and had made an about turn, when they saw an armed guard swinging out of the prison.

The man Ablott, who was standing near, rang out an oath.

"Hallo, more trouble," he growled. "Curse the inhuman brutes."

Quickly the prisoners were formed up in squads, and brought to attention. Ringing commands echoed on the air. The armed soldiers surrounded the prisoners. At first some of them believed that they were all going to be executed without trial or warning. Some of the nervous ones began to tremble and to cry out.

Then the new governor and his staff swung out of the prison, and halted some paces distant from the position occupied by the assembled prisoners.

(To be continued.)

When you have read this week's number of the "Nelson Lee Library," hand it in at the nearest Post Office for a Soldier or Sailor; or send it to a pal. He will enjoy it as much as you.