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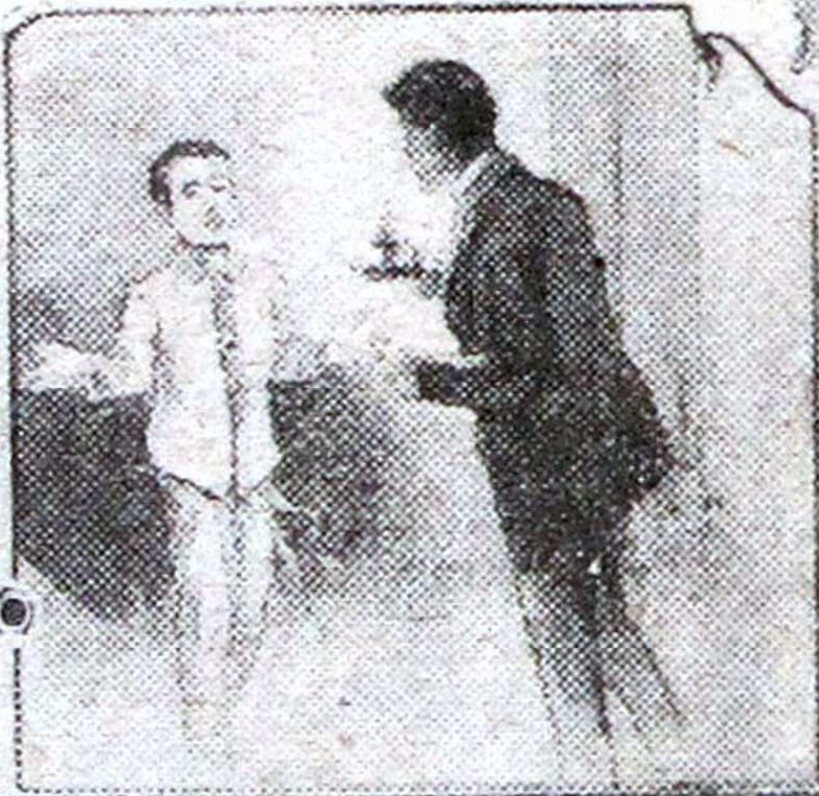
A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the BOYS OF ST. FRANK'S. By the Author of "The Remove on Strike," "Poor Old Handforth," "The Closing of the Net," etc.

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THE SERPENT'S REDEMPTION!

A Story of School Life and Detective Adventure at St. Frank's, introducing NELSON LEE and NIPPER and the Boys of St. Frank's.

By the Author of "The Remove or Strike," "Poor Old Handforth," "The Closing of the Net," etc.

(THE STORY RELATED THROUGHOUT BY NIPPER.)

CHAPTER I.

REGINALD PITT IS NOT PLEASED.

WALTER STARKE tossed his cigarette-end into the fire.

"I don't see why we shouldn't go, Kenny," he said, placing his feet comfortably upon the fender. "It looks like being jolly fine to-night, and the roads are in good condition for cycling."

Kenmore grunted.

"Don't forget what happened last time," he said. "We don't want another rotten affair of that kind, Starke."

"It wasn't Pitt's fault," said Starke. "He fell into the trap just the same as we did; but we shall take jolly good care to keep the thing quiet this time. I'm rather anxious to try my luck on that roulette-table."

For two Sixth-Formers—and prefects at that—to be smoking and conversing in this strain was rather astonishing. But Starke and Kenmore, of the Ancient House at St. Frank's, were a couple of "goccy" bounders—at least, that is what they termed themselves. In reality they were bullies and next-door to blackguards. Gambling and betting were their favourite pastimes.

At the present moment they were sitting in their study, in the Sixth-Form passage, having just finished tea. It was a Wednesday evening, and the weather was bright, although somewhat cold.

Within Starke's study, however, everything was cosy. It was a most luxurious apartment, both Starke and Kenmore believing in comfort—and having plenty of money with which to indulge their fancies.

"It's all very well," said Kenmore, "but I haven't much faith in Pitt. He's only a Remove kid, anyhow, and I expect he's exaggerated the thing. This swell roulette affair, as he calls it, is probably a dingy hole in the back room of a rotten slum house. Better give it up, Starke."

"Rot!" said the other prefect. "I'm curious, and I don't believe Pitt would have

the cheek to fake up a yarn of that sort. It's genuine enough, and I don't see why we shouldn't make some money; we're both flush just now. And heaps of money can be made at roulette."

"And heaps can be lost, too!" remarked Kenmore.

"Oh, you make me tired!" snapped Starke. "You're growling all the time. If you don't like to come with me, I'll go alone!"

Kenmore chuckled.

"Don't be an ass," he said. "If you're going, Starke, I'll go with you. But we shall have to arrange it with Pitt and we shall have to be careful, too. We don't want any more confounded japes!"

Kenmore spoke with feeling, and Starke agreed with him. On a previous occasion the two prefects had arranged to go to the gambling-house in Bannington with Reginald Pitt, of the Remove. But my chums and I had found out all about it, and had taught Starke and Kenmore a lesson. Apparently they had not profited by it. Because that outing had been ruined they were now anxious to arrange for another.

Pitt, of the Remove—known in the Ancient House as the Serpent—was, if anything, a greater rogue than either Starke or Kenmore, although he was several years younger. It was Pitt who had plotted against Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Edward Oswald Handforth. These unfortunate juniors had been expelled from the school; but their fate was not so serious as one would suppose.

For they were staying at the Mount, an old house within a mile of St. Frank's, the residence of Mr. Howard Ridgeway. This cheerful gentleman was a novelist, and a great friend of my governor's. Nelson Lee, the Housemaster of the Ancient House, was very busy just at present, and his attention was claimed by the very gambling-house which Starke and Kenmore had been referring to.

Nelson Lee meant to expose the men who were "running" the gambling-den a pair of rascals named Sales and Butler. There

were others in the gang, but Sales and Butler were the chief criminals. They were engaged in something far more nefarious than running a roulette-table; in short, they had been manufacturing a large number of worthless Treasury notes.

Pitt had frequented the Hermitage for weeks past—ever since he had come to St. Frank's, in fact. He had introduced Fullwood and Co. there, and had attempted to introduce Starke and Kenmore, too.

But Pitt, rascal though he was, knew nothing about the Treasury notes. Only a day or two previously he had inadvertently given Sales the information that Nelson Lee was interested in the criminal business.

Pitt had begun to suspect things on his own account, and he had visited the Hermitage in the early evening—enraging Sales considerably. Sales, in fact, had forbidden him to come to the place again for at least a month.

Meanwhile, Nelson Lee had been preparing a big coup. And then he had fallen a victim to the crooks, and now—on this very Wednesday evening—the guv'nor was held a prisoner in a small outbuilding at the Hermitage. Detective-Inspector Lennard and I had found him, but he had preferred to remain in captivity, so that his captors would imagine themselves safe. And Detective-Inspector Lennard was now preparing for a big raid, which was to come off on the Thursday night.

Pitt, of course, knew nothing about this, for it was being done secretly. Nelson Lee wanted the raid delayed until then because Sales and Butler were away at present, but would return on the morrow. The guv'nor's idea was to rope in the whole crowd at once.

So things were in a rather queer state. The only comfort was that they would be straightened out very shortly. Pitt would almost certainly be involved in the break-up of the gambling-house. Nelson Lee knew well enough that Tregellis-West and Handforth were innocent of the charges which had earned them expulsion. They were victims of Pitt's plotting, and the guv'nor would be in a position to prove this after he had made his coup. So the two juniors were quite content to wait until then.

Starke and Kenmore, arranging to visit the Hermitage, would have hesitated if they had known the actual truth. It was only by chance that they were thinking of going to-night. If they had delayed another twenty-four hours they would have been caught in the raid, and that would certainly have meant expulsion.

It was the prospect of winning money at the roulette-table which caused them to approach Reginald Pitt; for they foolishly believed that money was to be made out of roulette.

This, of course, was quite true—fortunes have been won at the "game." At the same time the proportion of fortunes lost at roulette is vastly greater. And Starke and Kenmore would almost certainly lose all their

available supplies of cash if they were mad enough to try their luck.

Starke got up from his chair and glanced at his watch.

"I'll go along and fetch Pitt now," he remarked. "We might as well arrange the thing in good time."

He left the study and walked along to the Remove passage. The noise which was proceeding from the various junior studies told of the fact that the Removites were taking tea—and this was never a quiet meal in junior quarters.

Starke opened the door of Study E and looked in. Pitt and Marriott were at tea, and they looked up at the prefect.

"Come in!" said Pitt hospitably. "You're welcome to what we've got left, Starke. There's only one sardine—"

"I want you, Pitt," said Starke, ignoring the generous invitation.

"Want me—what for?" asked the Serpent.

"Never mind what for—I want you in my study," said Starke. "You'd better come along with me now."

"Can't you wait until I've done?" asked Pitt. "I'll come along—"

"I don't want any cheek!" snapped Starke. "You'll come now!"

"Oh, all right!" said Pitt, who noticed that the prefect had winked at him. "I suppose you want me to do some fagging for you? You've got no right to—"

"If you can't be civil I'll give you a hundred lines to occupy your time!" said Starke harshly. "Follow me!"

They left the study, and went along to the Sixth-Form passage. When they were within Starke's study the prefect grinned.

"I spoke to you sharply on purpose," he exclaimed. "I don't want Marriott to guess things. It doesn't look well for a prefect to invite a junior into his study."

"Well, what's the trouble?" asked Pitt. "My cup of tea is getting cold, and I'm not particularly honoured by this attention, Starke. And it may interest you to know that Marriott is my study-mate, and I don't keep any secrets from him."

"Cheeky young bounder!" said Kenmore gruffly.

"Well, Marriott hasn't got to know anything about this business," said Starke. "You haven't got to tell him anything—understand?"

"Anything about what?" asked Pitt. Starke lowered his voice.

"Kenmore and I have decided to visit this gambling-house of yours," he explained. "We'll go along to-night—and we don't want the whole Remove to know about it either. So don't tell a soul—not even Marriott."

Pitt shrugged his shoulders.

"There is no need to tell anybody," he said. "We shan't go."

Starke and Kenmore stared.

"What do you mean, you young ass?" demanded Starke.

"It can't be done—that's what I mean," said Pitt. "I had a bust-up with the man

who runs it, and he's forbidden me to go. Sorry to disappoint you, Starke, but it's not my fault."

The prefect's eyes hardened.

"If you think I'm going to swallow that yarn you're mistaken," he said grimly. "You don't want to take us—that's the truth, isn't it? Well, you've got to do that I say!"

"I tell you it's impossible," retorted Pitt hotly. "If you want to go so badly, you'd better go by yourselves."

He turned towards the door, but Starke laid a firm hand on his shoulder and pulled him back.

"You know thundering well that we can't go alone," he snapped. "There's a password, isn't there? Besides, fresh visitors have to be introduced. I'm not going to stand any rot from you, Pitt."

The Serpent pulled himself away impatiently.

"You'll have to wait!" he declared. "It's no good growling at me, and it's no good blaming me, either——"

"Oh, let him go!" said Kenmore. "We're not keen on it, Starke, anyhow. Leave it for another time."

"If you think I'm going to be dictated to by an infernal junior, you're mistaken!" snarled Starke. "If you don't meet us after lights-out to-night, Pitt, I'll give you the hiding of your life! Understand? And I'll make your existence a misery for the next two or three weeks!"

"Nice kind of perfect, ain't you?" sneered Pitt.

Slap!

Starke brought his heavy fist round upon Pitt's face forcibly, and the junior staggered back. For all his coolness and insolence, Pitt was rather frightened by this bullying Sixth-Former. And he had sense enough to know, too, that Starke was in a position to carry out his threat.

"You rotter!" shouted Pitt passionately. "I'd take you like a shot if I could, but it can't be done, I tell you. You don't believe what I said, do you?"

"No!" said Starke bluntly.

"Well, it's true——"

"Even if it is true it doesn't make any difference," snapped Starke. "You can take us there and introduce us, I suppose? We shan't cry if you don't come in with us. We'll leave it at that—and be at the corner of the playing-fields at eleven o'clock sharp!"

Pitt rubbed his face tenderly.

"All right!" he growled. "I'll be there, but I don't promise to get you in. I'll do my best."

Pitt, in fact, was pretty certain that he would be refused admittance. And if Starke and Kenmore were treated in a similar fashion it wouldn't be his fault. They were rotters, but they couldn't blame him for the rebuff when it occurred. It would be better than refusing, and suffering from Starke's petty spite afterwards. Starke, being a prefect, could make the life of any junior a round of misery

"That's better!" exclaimed Starke. "I thought you'd drop that rot before you left this study, Pitt. At eleven o'clock sharp, remember. We'll be there—and don't tell anybody else."

"All right!" growled Pitt.

"And I'm sorry I bashed you just now," said Starke generously. "I didn't mean to hurt you, Pitt. But you made me so deucedly wild. Have one of these, and don't scowl so much!"

He offered Pitt his cigarette-case.

"Take two!" he invited.

"What's the matter with 'em?" asked Pitt.

"You cheeky young sweep!" growled Starke, noticing that Kenmore was grinning. "There's nothing the matter with 'em; they're the most expensive fags on the market."

"You asked me to take two," explained Pitt, taking them. "I thought perhaps you wanted to get rid of 'em. Thanks! I'll think of you when I'm smoking these."

And Pitt strolled out of the study. Starke and Kenmore looked at one another after he had gone.

"That kid's got a nerve on him!" said Starke. "Fancy having the cheek to ask if there's anything wrong with my fags!"

"Well, you ain't often so generous!" grinned Kenmore. "I say, it looks as though we shan't have much roulette to-night, old man. The chances are that we shan't get into the place!"

"Don't you believe it!" said Starke confidently.

Meanwhile, Pitt was rather doubtful. Starke's apology had mollified him a great deal, and he was cheerful when he returned to his own study. Marriott wanted to know what he had been away for.

"Oh, Starke and Kenmore are keen upon going to Bannington this evening," explained Pitt, calmly disregarding Starke's injunction. "They want to try their hand at roulette. Starke told me not to tell you—and I'm obeying him!"

Marriott grinned.

"Well, they're welcome to go," he said. "I went there once with you, Pitt, and I dropped thirty bob. It'll be quite entertaining if those lordly Sixth-Formers get it in the neck."

When the Remove went up to its dormitory Pitt was yawning expansively, and he dropped off to sleep at once. At all events, he appeared to do so, and none of the other fellows suspected that he was intent on breaking bounds. But Pitt was awake, and he remained awake until the school clock chimed a quarter to eleven.

Then he quietly got up, dressed, and stole out of the dormitory, carrying his boots in his hand. He donned them when he arrived in his own study, and made his exit by way of the window.

Eleven o'clock was just booming-out when he arrived at the corner of the Triangle by the playing-fields. Two dim forms came out of the shadows to meet him.

"Good for you, Pitt," said Starke. "By the way, I suppose you are Pitt? We're not going to be diddled again."

Starke took a close scrutiny, and was quite satisfied as to the identity of the junior. The trio then hauled their bicycles out—having placed them in readiness before going to bed—and mounted them.

They were soon spinning along in the direction of Bannington. The night was cold, but quite fine, although the sky was clouded. Once upon the Bannington Road they pedalled along in fine style, the wind at their backs.

"I hope we shall be able to get in," remarked Pitt. "We shall be masked, of course, and Sales mightn't notice me. I'm rather keen on risking a quid or two of my own."

"You know the password, I suppose?" asked Starke.

"Yes—I made sure of that last week," replied Pitt. "They're done on a system, you know, and I always take care to know the passwords well in advance. They generally have different words for different nights."

"A lot of rot, I call it," remarked Starke. "Sounds like an Anarchist society, or something of that sort. No need for all those precautions."

"Well, we couldn't get in without the password," said Pitt. "It's no good questioning Sales's methods. I dare say they're sound."

They cycled on, and arrived at the Hermitage. It was an old house, standing quite alone on the very outskirts of Bannington, and it was surrounded by tall trees. The three schoolboys pushed their bicycles in the gateway and went round to the side door, which was the entrance generally used by the habitués of the roulette-room.

"Leave your jiggers against the hedge there," murmured Pitt. "You'd better put your masks on now. And the password is 'Privateer.' Don't forget it when the door's opened."

They donned their masks, and then Pitt rapped upon the door in a curious manner. It was opened after a short delay—but not by Field, the usual doorkeeper.

"Privateer!" said all three at once.

"Come in, young gents," said the man. "It's you, Pitt, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Pitt, expecting to receive the order of the boot.

"I thought I knew your voice," went on the man. "You know your way inside, don't you?"

"Of course," said the Serpent, considerably surprised. "Where's Mr. Field, by the way?"

"Oh, he's inside to-night—Mr. Sales being away," replied the doorkeeper.

Pitt grinned beneath his mask, and Starke and Kenmore followed him along the passage. The news that Sales was away was decidedly interesting, for it had been Sales who had forbidden Pitt to enter the house.

"I thought you were lying this evening," muttered Starke.

"I wasn't!" retorted Pitt. "But Sales is away, and that makes all the difference. I didn't think we should get in so jolly easily."

"Doesn't look much of a place, anyhow," remarked Kenmore.

"Wait until you get inside," said Pitt calmly.

They passed through a doorway and emerged into a brilliantly illuminated passage. Passing between some heavy curtains, they entered the gambling-room. It was well patronised, and there was a "gay" feeling in the air which just suited the "dogs" of the Sixth.

They were vastly interested, and lost sight of Pitt almost at once. The Serpent had mingled with the crowd, and he was watching the play at the roulette-table when a firm hand was laid upon his shoulder.

"This way, Master Pitt," exclaimed a grim voice.

It belonged to Field, and Pitt looked round sharply. He wasn't surprised that he had been recognized in spite of his mask. After all, a mask is a very poor disguise—especially when one is known.

"What's the matter?" asked Pitt boldly.

"I'll explain outside!" said Field harshly.

Pitt knew better than to create a scene, and he accompanied the man down the passage and into the outer passage. The doorkeeper looked at them curiously.

"I forgot to give you orders not to admit this boy," said Field grimly. "Please understand, that he isn't to enter this house again."

"But look here!" protested Pitt indignantly. "I've introduced a couple of fellows——"

"I'm not going to argue with you, Pitt!" snapped Field. "You were expressly forbidden to come here again, and you have had the audacity to turn up within a couple of days. You'll get outside, and you'd better not show your face here again!"

"I don't see why I should be turned out!" shouted Pitt.

"Open that door!" commanded Field.

He took Pitt firmly by the collar, ran him along the passage, and literally hurled him outside. Pitt tripped over a stone and fell heavily. And the door slammed behind him. He had not only been turned out, but had been forcibly ejected.

The Serpent was simply boiling with fury. The indignity of the whole proceeding enraged him to such a pitch that he hated his former friends like poison. And he knew that he had no redress. To inform the police would merely involve himself, and it certainly wouldn't do Sales any harm, for that clever scoundrel had many safeguards. Moreover, it was almost certain that the police would not listen to a mere schoolboy; they would want more reliable information.

And Reginald Pitt took his bicycle and rode back to St. Frank's with feelings which were really too deep for words.

CHAPTER II.

SOME VALUABLE INFORMATION.

"T O-NIGHT, my son, is the night!"

I made that remark with much satisfaction in Study C. Tommy Watson looked up from his tea-cup and nodded.

"I wonder how things'll go?" he said thoughtfully. "I wish we were going to have a hand in the game, Nipper."

I grinned.

"Don't you make any mistake, my dear chap, we're going to have a hand in the game," I replied. "The raid is to take place at half-past eleven exactly. Mr. Lennard and I will start out quite early. I shall go over to the Mount to join him at about half-past seven."

"And what about me?" demanded Watson.

"You'll stay here."

"Oh, shall I?" said my chum warmly. "That's very likely, ain't it? If you think I'm going to be left out of the fun you're jolly well mistaken!"

"I shall join the inspector at the Mount," I repeated. "Then we're going to Bannington, and we shall release the guv'nor from that out-building. My dear chap, it wouldn't do for a crowd to go. Montie and old Handy will turn up later on—just to see the fun. My idea is for you to meet them at half-past ten. We can't be all together to begin with, but we can all join forces after the raid is over. Anyhow, I shall help to rescue the guv'nor."

"And why can't I go with you?" asked Watson warmly.

"I should like you to, but it can't be did."

"That's sheer rot—"

"Old Lennard's orders," I interrupted. "It's rotten, I'll admit, but the inspector is in charge of the case until the guv'nor's set free, and he positively says that it wouldn't do for a crowd of schoolboys to endanger the whole success of the raid. Hard lines on you, Tommy, but it can't be helped. Why, the inspector was half inclined to bar me at first, only I wouldn't be barred. Nelson Lee's my guv'nor, you see, and that makes a big difference."

"Well, I admit that," said Watson. "Still, I should like to go with you. What about Pitt?"

"I don't know anything about Pitt," I replied. "He'll get it in the neck to-morrow, I suppose, but this evening he doesn't interest me at all. And mind, not a word to the other chaps."

Tommy Watson nodded.

"I was just thinking that Pitt might be making arrangements to visit this rotten gambling-den," he remarked. "It would be pretty beastly for him if he was collared by the police—"

"That's his own look out," I interrupted grimly. "If a fellow's fool enough to frequent such a place, he deserves to come a cropper. I shouldn't go into hysterics if he got collared—it would serve him right. But

he's a St. Frank's chap, and we don't want the school to be brought into disrepute."

"What time shall I start?" asked Tommy.

"You'd better break bounds after lights out," I replied. "It won't matter tuppence if you're collared—Mr. Lee would make it all right. Arrive at the Hermitage at eleven o'clock. We'd better arrange a meeting place, so there won't be any confusion."

We fell to discussing the details and arranging how we should meet after Nelson Lee had been released. Watson knew that the police would not want to be bothered by a number of schoolboys, and he and Sir Montie and Handforth would have to steer clear of the actual operations.

And while we were going into these details we were quite unaware of the fact that somebody was listening just outside the window—the Remove studies being on the ground floor. That somebody was Reginald Pitt.

We had commenced tea rather late, and the blind was already drawn and the electric lights were going. Tommy had made the fire up as though we were in the midst of a cold spell, whereas the day had been rather mild. So it was only natural that the window should be open. We were not reminded of this fact, however, because the drawn blind concealed it from us. Besides, we didn't think for a moment that anybody would be listening outside.

Exactly why Pitt had come to the window was a mystery. In all probability he suspected that something unusual was happening. Nelson Lee's absence worried him, probably, and he knew that if anybody was in possession of any secrets it would be me.

At all events, whatever the reason, Pitt was spying at the window of Study C, and spying at a time when Tommy and I were discussing the most vital matters. It was a most unfortunate thing, but we didn't know it at the moment. We went on talking, unaware that all our words were being overheard.

Pitt remained until two or three juniors emerged from the Ancient House, and then he deemed it wise to stroll away. But he was in possession of the important fact that the Hermitage was to be thoroughly raided by a strong force of police that night at eleven-thirty.

"By gad!" muttered the Serpent, as he strolled across the Triangle, his hands deep in his pockets. "A raid! I wondered what was on, and now I know!"

His first impulse was to hurry to Bannington in order to give Sales and the others an urgent warning. But then he remembered how he had been treated on the previous occasion.

Sales had sent him off without listening to a word, and had forbidden him to come again. And last night, to crown all, he had been forcibly hurled off the premises. It was scarcely surprising that Pitt's feelings were very bitter at present, and that he did not feel any strong desire to help the men who had treated him so harshly. In fact, Pitt came to quite another decision.

"I'll let them rip!" he muttered savagely.

his eyes burning. "They've treated me absolutely dirtily, and I don't see why I should go out of my way to give them a warning. Hang them!"

If Pitt's own safety had been at stake, he would probably have hurried off without a moment's delay. But, raid or no raid, the event would make no difference to him. Sales and Co. would scarcely trouble to inform against a mere schoolboy, and Pitt did not fear anything from that quarter. And if his own visits to the Hermitage were already known, the raid would make no difference to him in any case.

The cunning Removeite was obsessed by quite another thought.

Why shouldn't he turn this information to account?

Sales and his confederates could rip—Pitt took almost an evil delight in thinking over the fate which would befall them. He found great pleasure in contemplating the disaster.

But why shouldn't he involve Watson and the Duke of Somerton in the general calamity? Why shouldn't he get his own back upon those two Removeites in a particularly neat manner?

If Watson and the duke were found within the gambling-house when the police raided the place, they would suffer the fate of the other frequenters, and they would certainly be expelled from St. Frank's without a hearing.

This is what Pitt supposed. He was rather desperate, having more than an inkling that his own days at St. Frank's were numbered. He had become reckless; he didn't care particularly what happened to him.

But he would willingly have given all the money he possessed to see Watson and Somerton share the downfall. For Pitt had a very bitter grudge against those two Removeites.

The Serpent did not forget things easily, and for a day or two he had nursed a fierce hatred against Watson and the duke. They had discovered him tormenting my little dog, Boz, and Pitt's punishment had been swift and drastic.

Tommy Watson and the duke, in short, had given him the thrashing of his life, and even now, as he paced about the darkened Triangle, he still felt sore from the effects of that hiding. That his thoughts should revert to that painful episode was not very surprising.

And here within his grasp was a glorious chance of getting even. But how could the trick be managed? The fate of Sales did not interest him at all; he only wanted to make sure that the two juniors should share it.

And he set his cunning wits to work, and evolved a scheme which seemed to provide no loophole for his enemies. He would have preferred me to be in the general bust-up, so to speak, but he knew that I should be away and the thing was impossible.

Pitt was a curious mixture. He was certainly not lacking in pluck, but his brain seemed to have a curious twist in it which prompted him to do all the evil he could. Treading the straight path, he would have

been a fellow to admire. But he had chosen the crooked path and was going the whole hog.

When he went into the Ancient House he was smiling cunningly. He knew exactly what he was about to do, and it only remained for him to carry his scheme into execution.

Exactly what came of it was somewhat surprising.

CHAPTER III.

FALLING INTO THE TRAP.

RALPH LESLIE FULLWOOD chuckled, and slapped his knee.

"I'm with you, Pitt!" he declared. "It'll be jolly fine if you can get Watson and Somerton sacked, they're a couple of rotters, and it would be a terrific success for us, too!"

"A raid!" exclaimed Gulliver. "My only hat! It's a jolly good thing it didn't happen when we were over there!"

"It didn't, so it's no good discussing the question," said Pitt. "But it's going to happen to-night, and it gives us a chance to strike a heavy blow. I've told you my plan, and there's no risk in it at all. If it falls through we sha'n't come to any harm, but I'm pretty certain that the cads will fall into the trap."

Pitt was discussing the subject in Study A, the abode of Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell, the Nuts of the Ancient House. Marriott was with them—Marriott being Pitt's study-mate. And they all agreed that the scheme was "jolly rich." The only one amongst them who thought that it was rather too thick was Gulliver. He wasn't quite such a cad as the others; but his voice carried no weight.

Pitt glanced at his watch.

"Time for us to get to work," he said crisply. "The first thing is to prepare the prison—we don't want any hitch. Got any candles?"

There were no candles in Study A, but Marriott offered to go and get some from the rear quarters. His search was successful, and he returned with three candles after a short absence.

Then the five rascally juniors left the Ancient House and made their way across the dark Triangle towards the old ruined monastery. They picked their way amongst the masses of stonework, and then descended into the dry old vaults below. Many stirring adventures had happened here during the great historic barring-out of the Remove.

"Ripping place," said Pitt approvingly, after they had lighted one of the candles. "He won't be able to get away from here, and no amount of yelling will bring him any help. Got those ropes?"

"Plenty of 'em," replied Fullwood.

"Good! We'll leave one of these candles burning," said Pitt. "We shall be down here again within ten minutes, I expect, and it'll be better to have a light going in readiness."

They ascended to the top again and stood in a little group against the old chestnut trees.

"This is where you do your bit, Marriott," said the Serpent. "Buck up!"

"Are you sure De Valerie went out?" asked Marriott.

"Of course I'm sure, and he's not coming back until nearly supper time, either," replied Pitt. "I always make sure of my facts before I get busy. If this trick fails to bring Somerton out, we must try another."

Marriott nodded, and walked briskly into the House. His part in the affair was not a very difficult one. He walked straight along the Remove passage to Study M, which was shared by the Duke of Somerton and De Valerie. The latter had gone over to the picture palace at Bannington with two or three other fellows, and wouldn't get back until after locking-up, having received passes for the occasion.

Marriott opened the door of Study M.

"You here, Somerton?" he asked.

The duke was within, sitting in front of a cosy fire, reading a story-book. He looked round inquiringly.

"Want me?" he asked.

"I don't want you," replied Marriott. "But De Valerie's in the Triangle, and he asked me to tell you that he wants you at once. Just pop out, will you?"

The duke laid his book aside.

"I thought he'd gone to Bannington," he remarked.

"Just got back," said Marriott glibly. "Had a bit of a smash, I believe. Anyhow, he's smothered in mud, and his bike is a bit of a wreck—his head's bandaged, too," added Marriott, drawing upon his imagination.

"By Jove! I hope the old chap isn't hurt!" exclaimed the duke anxiously.

He was tricked completely, and followed Marriott down the passage without a suspicion that he was walking into a trap.

Emerging into the Triangle from the illuminated passages, the big, open space seemed extremely black. Marriott led the way across towards the chestnuts, and the duke followed him.

"Isn't he in the bike shed?" he asked.

"No, you'll see him in a tick."

A few steps further, perhaps, and Somerton would have begun to suspect things. But he was not allowed that amount of time. Without the slightest warning several dim figures came out of the gloom and fell upon him. At the same moment Marriott placed his foot round the duke's ankle and forcibly tripped him. He went down with a crash.

"Don't let him yell!" exclaimed a tense voice.

"By Jove! You cads——"

The duke broke off as something thick was forced over his mouth. The next moment it was drawn tight and bound securely. Ropes were passed round his ankles, and other ropes secured his wrists. He didn't submit to this tamely, but fought with all his strength.

Considering that five juniors were against him, however, his struggles were of no avail. The odds were too great. Exhausted at last,

he was carried bodily across the Triangle and taken down into the old vault.

Pitt and his companions made no attempt to conceal their identity; they grinned triumphantly at the duke in the candle-light. The first part of the programme had been a complete success.

"Sorry to trouble you, Somerton," said Pitt calmly. "This is just a little jape of ours; you'll understand all about it later on. You may remember that you and Watson lammed into me with a stick the other day. I'm just having my own back for that little episode."

"Vindictive bounder!" thought the duke.

He was not in a position to make any verbal reply—even if he had wanted to. The muffer round his face was an effective gag. Although angered by this treatment, he did not show it.

"Yes," said the Serpent. "You'll be sorry you touched me——"

"Oh, don't go into that!" snapped Fullwood.

"Why not?" asked Pitt. "I want Somerton to know why he's being japed."

"He won't think it's a jape by the time we've done," put in Marriott. "Neither will Watson, by gad!"

Pitt chuckled.

"Perhaps not," he said. "Now, Marry, you and Bell have got to stay down here on guard. Don't let Somerton escape."

"What do you take us for?" growled Bell tartly.

Pitt didn't say any more. He and Fullwood and Gulliver made for the old stone staircase, and they ascended to the surface. They did not enter the Ancient House, but took up a position in the darkness and watched the lobby doorway.

"It's nearly half-past seven!" murmured Pitt. "We sha'n't have to wait long."

"By gad!" whispered Fullwood. "He's comin' now!"

The young rascals, as a matter of fact, were waiting for me to emerge. Pitt having listened at the window, knew that I had decided to start out for the Mount at about seven-thirty. And so the Serpent had made his plans accordingly. He was now awaiting until I was out of the way—which, in a certain sense, was rather a compliment.

I crossed the Triangle without a suspicion. My head was full up with thoughts of the coming coup, and I had no time to bother about Reginald Pitt. It would have been better, perhaps, if I had given him some little attention.

Pitt and his companions waited for five minutes after I had gone. There was still a light gleaming from the window of Study C, and Pitt nodded towards it and nudged Gulliver.

"Just go along and see if the coast is clear," he said softly.

Gulliver nodded and entered the Ancient House. He made his way to Study C and opened the door.

"Nipper here?" he asked briskly.

Watson, who was doing his prep., looked up rather grumpily.

"No, Nipper isn't!" he said shortly. "Buzz off!"

"All right, Snappy!" said Gulliver.

He withdrew his head and slammed the door. Two minutes later he rejoined his companions in the Triangle.

"All clear!" he murmured. "Watson's alone in the study, doing his prep. Better get the rest of it over while he's still alone."

Pitt nodded.

"That's what we're going to do, my son," he replied. "Come on, Fully."

They strolled across in the direction of the window of Study C, talking in low tones. They raised their voices slightly as they neared the window, and paused in their walk.

"Those chaps can't hear what we're sayin' here," remarked Fullwood. "I reckon you've done the trick nicely, Pitt. Somerton's been asking for trouble for days, an' he'll find plenty to-morrow—when it leaks out that he's been visitin' the gamblin'-house in Bannington!"

Tommy Watson, within the study, paused with his pen in his fingers. He had clearly overheard the words. This was not very surprising, considering that Fullwood and Pitt were deliberately talking out there so that Watson should hear.

Tommy was the last fellow in the world to indulge in eavesdropping, but this wasn't anything of the sort. The two juniors were talking just outside his window, and he couldn't help hearing what they said. And the reference to the gambling-house naturally gained all his attention.

"By George! Rather!" he heard the Serpent saying. "I've planned the thing thoroughly, and Somerton is nicely caught. He knows the password all right——"

"What is the password?" asked Fullwood.

"Express," replied Pitt. "The noble duke will get into this giddy gamblin'-den, and I hope he'll be sorry for himself—he ought to be. Anyhow, it'll probably mean the sack!"

"Probably!" echoed Fullwood, with a chuckle. "It's certain, my son. We've tricked Somerton into goin' to the gamblin'-house, an' we'll see that the fact comes out, too! He's as good as done for."

The voices trailed away, and Tommy Watson sat perfectly still, half-stunned by the alarming thoughts which crowded through his brain. He did not suspect for a second that the cads had been talking especially for his benefit.

"The rotters!" he gasped. "The—the awful rotters!"

From the few words which Pitt and Fullwood had uttered Watson knew that the Duke of Somerton had been tricked into going to the Hermitage, in Bannington. How the trick had been performed was a mystery—and it didn't matter, anyhow.

The very fact that the duke had gone was enough.

Watson rose to his feet, forgetting all about his prep., and walked about the study

anxiously. To tell the truth, he didn't know what to do. On any ordinary evening it would be serious enough to learn that a decent Removite—especially a chap like Somerton—had fallen a victim to Pitt's cunning; that he had been spoofed into paying a visit to such a place as the Hermitage.

But to-night was a special night!

The duke's presence at the Hermitage was alarming. He would be there when the police raid was made! And Watson knew well enough that if he was found frequenting the gambling-house he would be expelled practically without a hearing. No other result could be expected.

In fact, unless something was done—and something drastic—the duke would tumble into a truly frightful hole. It was too late to warn him now, since he had already started, and Watson had no one to confide in. Even Church and McClure, Handforth's special chums, knew nothing of the exact details of the raid.

Tommy Watson was thoroughly alarmed. His rage against Pitt and Fullwood was completely overwhelmed by his anxiety concerning the duke. The punishment of Fullwood and Co. could wait; but the rescuing of Somerton couldn't.

Unless he was warned very quickly he would certainly be caught in the trap. Watson would have been astonished had he known that he was, himself, being caught in a trap!

He surmised that Pitt had faked up some plausible story, and that the duke had believed it. Watson remembered how Sir Montie Tregellis-West had been duped by the Serpent a week or so before, when Montie had been expelled. Something of the same kind, no doubt, had happened now.

But, as I said, Tommy didn't bother his head about how it had been done. It was a time for action, and Watson was not accustomed to acting on his own initiative. He always looked to me to lead, and he was quite content to follow.

At present he couldn't appeal to me, because I wasn't there. And he believed that I should have started out from the Mount by that time. No, something had to be done, and Watson had to do it.

But what could be done?

There was only one thing. Watson knew that the password for the evening was "Express"—he had distinctly heard the word—and he was well acquainted with the procedure at the Hermitage.

He decided then and there to hurry to Bannington on his bicycle. He would enter the gambling-house, wearing a mask. It would be easy enough to get in, and he could spot the duke within a couple of minutes and then bundle him out.

That was the programme—quite a simple one, and it would be direct. By hurrying off to the Mount in the hope of finding me he would waste much time, and probably spoil everything. Looking at it all round, Watson concluded that the only course was to whizz off to Bannington.

In plain, unvarnished language, the innocent Tommy had fallen headlong into the trap which Pitt's cunning brain had devised. He fell into it thoroughly, and the result was to be startling.

Watson went out of Study C quickly, his face grim and determined. Out in the passage he met Owen major and Farman and Tom Burton. They all regarded him somewhat curiously.

"Say, you're sure looking rattled!" remarked Farman. "Anything wrong?"

"No, nothing much!" said Watson hurriedly. "I—I say, have you seen anything of Somerton?"

"I saw him about an hour ago," replied Owen major.

"I think he's gone out, messmate," said the Bo'sun.

"Gone out? Where to?"

"Bannington, I believe."

Watson hurried on, his suspicions confirmed. He didn't know that Marriott and Gulliver had carelessly made one or two remarks in the hearing of other fellows that Somerton had gone to Bannington. The Bo'sun had spoken in good faith, little realising that he was helping the plotters.

Tommy Watson made inquiries of other fellows, and from several quarters he learned that Somerton had gone to Bannington. Nobody had actually seen him start, but the general impression was that he had gone. And the very fact that the duke was nowhere to be found was convincing enough.

By the time Tommy Watson hurried to the bicycle shed twenty good minutes had been lost; but it had been highly necessary to make certain before taking such a drastic step.

He had cut out a rough mask from an old piece of cloth, and then set out on his mission. After all, he told himself, it wouldn't matter so much, and it would be ripping to diddle the rotters so neatly. And he and Somerton could remain in Bannington while they were there and see the raid. This would obviate the necessity of Watson getting up after lights out. There would be practically no risk, for he would get Somerton out at once.

There was just a possibility that he wouldn't be admitted, but Tommy didn't care to think that. But if he couldn't get in he would certainly tell Nelson Lee all about it, so that the duke wouldn't suffer.

And with the fixed determination to rescue Somerton from Pitt's machinations, Tommy Watson rode hard towards Bannington.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DUKE MEETS WITH BETTER LUCK.

"NUMBER one!" remarked Reginald Pitt pleasantly.

He and Fullwood and Gulliver were standing at the gates, watching the red rear light of Tommy Watson's bicycle twinkling away into the distance. It finally vanished round the bend.

"Number one!" repeated Pitt. "And now we'll go and see about number two, my sons. Watson's taken the bait, and it's pretty certain that Somerton will follow his example."

"Mustn't be in too much of a hurry," said Fullwood. "I thought you weren't goin' to bait Somerton until after supper?"

Pitt nodded.

"That's right," he agreed. "It's getting on for supper time now, and if we sent the duke off at once both he and Watson would be cleared out before the raid happened—and that wouldn't suit us."

"Don't you think Watson will clear out, anyhow?" asked Gulliver.

"It's not likely," replied Pitt. "He'll think that Somerton will turn up any minute, and he's bound to stay an hour, anyhow. By that time Somerton will get there, and they'll both be collared nicely."

Fullwood shook his head as they strolled away.

"There's a flaw in your plan," he said slowly.

"What is it?" asked Pitt.

"Well, I believe that even if Somerton can be tricked into going, both he and Watson will manage to get out before the raid takes place."

"It won't matter," said Pitt calmly.

"What do you mean, you ass?" demanded Gulliver. "What's the good of all this planning——"

"You seem to forget, my dear chaps, that the Hermitage will be watched by dozens of policemen and detectives for hours before the raid happens," replied the Serpent. "They won't be seen, of course, but they'll take note of everybody who enters, and it's a ten to one chance that they'll collar everybody who comes out. Even if they don't arrest them the police will recognise Watson and Somerton, and the report will reach the Head—and that's all we want."

"By gad! You're a cunnin' beast!" said Fullwood, with candid admiration. "I shouldn't have thought of that, you know."

"I don't suppose you would!" said Pitt drily. "When I do a thing, I do it thoroughly. There's no sense in leaving loopholes. It really doesn't matter a twopenny dash whether the cads are caught in the raid or not—the result will be the same. But I'll admit that it would be a bit better."

"If it doesn't matter, what's the idea of waiting till after supper?" asked Gulliver pointedly.

"Well, I don't know that it wouldn't be better to get the thing over at once," said the Serpent slowly. "We will! Let's go and work the trick on Somerton now. It'll come to the same thing."

"Good!" said Fullwood. "We'll get it done with."

The three young rascals hastened their steps, and quietly entered the monastery ruins and descended to the vault. As they entered they were chuckling and laughing with great delight.

"Done him!" exclaimed Fullwood, with huge satisfaction. "Done the boulder beautifully!"

"In fact I think we'll let Somerton go on the strength of it," remarked Pitt. "We've taught him a lesson, anyhow. I don't suppose he's enjoyed this imprisonment down here."

"What have you chaps been up to?" asked Bell curiously.

He knew exactly what they had been up to, of course, but it was part of the plan for him to pretend to be in ignorance. The duke lay helpless, fuming, and listening to what was being said.

"Oh, we've been working off a wheeze on Watson," said Pitt, with a laugh.

"Something rich, I'll bet," said Marriott.

"Rather! We've sent him off to that gambling-house at Bannington—that place known as the Hermitage, just on the outskirts of the town, down the lane," explained Pitt, with some detail. "Watson will get it in the neck properly, and it'll mean the sack to-morrow."

"My hat! How did you manage it?" asked Bell.

"That would be telling, wouldn't it?" grinned Pitt. "You see, there's going to be a police raid this evening, and Watson will be collared red-handed. He'll be lugged off to the police-station and put in the cells all night!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Nuts laughed uproariously.

"Or, even if the police don't do that, they'll take Watson's name," said Pitt. "That'll mean a shocking disgrace for St. Frank's, and Watson will be hoofed out, neck and crop. Oh, there's a nice time in store for him, I can tell you!"

"But how did you work the wheeze?" asked Marriott, as though Somerton didn't exist, and giving no intimation of the fact that he was asking these questions for the duke's benefit.

"We gave him the giddy password," replied Pitt. "You see, there's a roulette-room there, and they're jolly cautious. A fellow must know the password, and he's got to wear a mask. You can get in by the side door, round to the left of the house. And the password for to-night is 'Express.' We haven't forgotten anything, and Watson is bound to find his way in."

Bell shook his head.

"It won't work," he declared.

"Why won't it?"

"Because Watson will smell a rat. He won't go into that gambling-house for nothing—"

"Of course he won't," grinned Pitt. "He'll go in to rescue Somerton, who's glaring at us this minute."

"Somerton!" yelled Bell.

"Exactly!" chuckled Fullwood. "Oh, it's too funny for words! Watson believes that Somerton has gone to the gamblin'-house, an' he's rushed off to rescue him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You told him that Somerton had gone there?" yelled Marriott.

"Yes—an' he believed it!" roared Fullwood. "He's gone off to go the giddy rescuin' stunt like a good little boy. An' instead of rescuin' Somerton he'll get himself the sack!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Nuts did it very well, and Somerton, who had been listening to everything, had no cause to suspect that he, too, was falling into a trap. The one fact which angered him was that these cads had sent Watson off to Bannington by trickery, meaning to get him into grave trouble.

And the duke realised that it was up to him to go to Watson's rescue, since Watson believed that he, the duke, was in the gambling-house. It would only be playing the game to hurry off at once.

But he couldn't—he was helpless. And Somerton felt like bursting a thousand bonds just then. He struggled furiously, and only succeeded in hurting himself.

"All right, keep your hair on," said Pitt, crossing over to him. "We're going to let you go now—we've done all we want. And I shouldn't advise you to talk about this affair, either. It wouldn't be nice to have the school saying that Watson had been visiting a gambling-house, would it?"

Pitt jerked the muffler free, and the duke took a deep breath. He was about to burst out into a torrent of angry words, but he checked himself. What was the use? It would be a waste of breath to deliver any utterance to these frightful cads.

So he set his teeth and waited. His bonds were untied, Fullwood and Co. feeling safe in releasing their prisoner—since they were five to one. Somerton sprang to his feet when the last rope was cut, and his eyes were blazing.

"You plotting brutes!" he shouted briefly. Crash!

Before Pitt could dodge, Somerton's fist landed with terrific force upon his nose, and the Serpent went over with a thud, howling.

"You tricked Watson, but you're going to pay for it!" shouted the duke, his eyes blazing. "Come on—all of you. I'm ready!"

"Collar him!"

"Knock the cad down!"

Fullwood and Gulliver and Bell hurled themselves upon Somerton. Marriott wisely decided to help Pitt to his feet. The Serpent was not looking at all happy; a scowl marred his features, and blood was flowing freely from his injured nose. The punch had been a heavy one.

Thud! Thud!

The duke's fists worked like lightning. Fullwood staggered back, and Bell followed him. Gulliver was the only one who touched the duke at all, and even then it was only a weak body-blow. He gave a howl as Somerton's fist did its utmost to close up his left eye.

"You rotters!" panted the late prisoner. "This is only just a taster; you'll be punished properly later on!"

The Nuts made one more rush, but their victim looked so formidable that they paused in confusion. Fullwood and Co. were not fighting-men. They had never imagined that Somerton would dare to attack them single-handed. But he had done so, and, what was more, he seemed quite prepared to attack them again.

"Clear out, you beastly bounder!" exclaimed Fullwood harshly. "We'll pay you out for this later on——"

"When you can attack me in the dark, by surprise?" asked the duke sarcastically. "That's about the best you can do, you contemptible cads!"

And Somerton, greatly disgusted, turned on his heel and ascended to the Triangle. At all events, he had given the Nuts a taste of his fists, and they were not feeling quite so satisfied as they had done.

The incident was only trivial, however, for the main object had been achieved. Tommy Watson had been tricked into visiting Bannington, and the duke was now in the same boat. The situation, from one point of view, could only be regarded as humorous—at least, it would have been, had not the issues been so grave.

Watson had rushed off to rescue the duke, and now the duke was about to rush off to rescue Watson! It could not be denied that Reginald Pitt's scheme was extremely smart. The duke did not lose his head. He knew enough of the Nuts to suspect that they were merely "kidding" him; and the very first thing was to look carefully for Watson. It would be just as well to make sure.

Somerton hurried to Study C, and he found that apartment in darkness. The common-room was fairly crowded, but Watson was not there. He looked round anxiously, and then made inquiries. The juniors were quite indifferent as to what had happened to Watson; but Burton and Farman unknowingly helped the scheme once more.

"Souise me! Are you looking for Watson?" asked the Bo'sun.

"Yes."

"How long have you been back?"

"Back?" repeated the duke. "Back from where?"

"Bannington."

"I haven't been to Bannington."

"Waal, say, that's surely rich," grinned Farman. "I guess Watson has just toted off real slick on your track—leastways, he reckoned he was takin' that trail. Watson's gone to Bannington, duke——"

"Are you sure?" demanded Somerton.

"I guess I wouldn't swear to it, but——"

"Of course he's gone to Bannington," put in the Bo'sun. "Watson was asking for you, Somerton, and we thought you'd gone to Bannington. He started off about twenty minutes ago, and is nearly there by now, I suppose. Hard luck, shipmate."

"Thanks," said the duke shortly.

He left the common-room, looking very grim. Watson had certainly gone to Bannington, as Pitt had declared, and he had gone with the intention of looking for the

duke. This proved that Pitt had been telling the truth.

Somerton's rage was tremendous. By this time, possibly, Watson was already within the gambling-house, and there was only one thing to be done. Somerton would have to hurry off in order to warn the other junior.

It must be remembered that the duke knew little or nothing about the Hermitage, but Pitt and Co. had given him all the required information—not directly, but in the course of that conversation amongst themselves in the vault.

The duke knew that the gambling-house was called the Hermitage, that it was situated just down the lane to the left before Bannington was reached, that it was necessary to go to the side door, and that the password was "Express."

The mask was a simple matter. Somerton made himself one within two minutes, and then he started off on his bicycle. As Pitt had said, he couldn't very well talk about the affair amongst the other juniors. A large number of fellows would believe that Watson had been tricked, but a large number, also, would choose to think the worst. And talk of that kind wouldn't be nice.

For Watson's sake alone the duke was obliged to be silent. And it was up to him to hurry off to the rescue, since Watson had been so prompt to enter the gambling-house in search—as he thought—of the Duke. One good turn always deserves another.

But the Serpent's precious plan was destined to go wrong.

The Duke of Somerton, in fact, met with better luck. Just before reaching Bannington he was somewhat startled to see a dark form move out from against the hedge. This dark form, to be exact, belonged to me. I had seen the cyclist coming along, and hadn't thought anything until the last moment. But there was a flaw in the duke's bicycle lamp, and a tiny shaft of light fell upon his face occasionally, being thrown backwards. I thought I recognised him, and meant to make sure.

"Hallo! Who's that?" I asked softly.

"By Jove, is that you, Watson?"

"Well, I'm blessed!" I exclaimed, recognising his voice. "What are you doing here, Somerton?"

"Why, it's Nipper," ejaculated the duke, jumping from his machine. "I thought you were Watson for a minute. I suppose you haven't seen anything of him, old chap? I'm rather anxious——"

"Anxious?" I interrupted. "Why?"

The duke looked at me steadily. He wasn't aware of the fact that Nelson Lee was just behind the hedge, with Detective-Inspector Lennard, of Scotland Yard.

"Pitt's been up to some more of his beastly games, that's why I'm anxious," he replied quietly. "The cad made him believe that I had gone off to some gambling-house, and he's gone——"

"Watson's gone to the gambling-house?" I asked, startled.

"Yes, and there's going to be a raid——"

"Who told you that?" I demanded anxiously.

"Pitt and Fullwood and Co. were talking about it," replied the duke. "They have tricked Watson into going, so that he will be collared by the police. They wanted to trick me, too——"

"The awful rotter!" I muttered. "He seems to know everything! This raid has been kept secret, and I didn't think anybody knew. And do you really mean to say that Watson has been ass enough to go to the Hermitage?"

"I don't know about ass enough," objected Somerton. "It was jolly decent of him. He thought I was in trouble, and he meant to warn me."

I nodded grimly.

"So you're going along to warn him?" I said. "I can see the wheeze. Pitt wants to have the pair of you collared in the police raid. You won't go, Somerton. You'll stay here with us."

"And what about Watson?"

"He'll be all right," I replied. "You stay here with us——"

"'Us'! What do you mean?" demanded Somerton.

"I think I can explain," said Nelson Lee, stepping forward. "No, don't be startled, Somerton. I know all about this gambling-den, and I know all about the raid. You need not worry about Watson; he will come to no harm."

The duke was rather taken aback. But the matter was soon explained to him. It was necessary to take him into the secret now—and we should keep him with us, too, until the raid was over. Much as he was to be trusted, the gov'nor had no intention of letting him go back to St. Frank's.

He was told all the details. Only a short while before his arrival Nelson Lee had been released from the little shed at the bottom of the Hermitage garden, where he had been kept prisoner—willingly—for the past two or three days.

The gov'nor could have been released within an hour of his capture, if he had liked. But had he escaped then the crooks would have taken fright, and would probably have escaped. So Nelson Lee had preferred to remain where he was, deluding the criminals into believing that they were safe.

But now the time for action had come.

The two principal criminals, Sales and Butler, had been absent, but had returned this evening. The idea was to capture the whole bunch during this raid, and there was no reason why that object should not be achieved.

The Hermitage was not merely a gambling-den; Sales and Butler were the chief movers in the printing and issuing of a large number of forged Treasury notes which had recently been flooding the South of England. The time had now arrived when they would have to pay for their misdeeds.

Everything had been planned to the last detail. The neighbourhood of the Hermitage was swarming with police and detective-officers, although not one of them was to be

seen. Nelson Lee and Detective-Inspector Lennard had planned this raid between them, and it was certain that every care had been taken to maintain secrecy. Until the actual blow occurred not a word was to leak out.

And now we discovered that Pitt knew all about it!

Nelson Lee was rather concerned at first. If Pitt knew about it, it was quite on the cards that the criminals had been warned—or would be warned. For Pitt was known to be in close touch with Sales. The events of the evening, however, went to prove that Pitt had used his information in a different way.

Instead of warning the Hermitage men, he had plotted to get Watson and Somerton involved in the disaster. I remembered that the Serpent had a particular grudge against those two juniors, and he had evidently decided to get his own back upon them, rather than give warning of the raid.

"In any case, we can do nothing now," said Nelson Lee. "The house is surrounded, and Sales and Butler are certainly within it at present. I don't think they have the least suspicion, and, even if they have, they will not be able to get away now. We must carry our plan out exactly as arranged, Lennard."

"There's nothing else for it," agreed the inspector.

"But what about Watson, sir?" asked the duke anxiously.

Nelson Lee smiled.

"Watson will come to no harm, my boy," he replied. "Even if he is caught in the gambling-den with the other habitués he will not suffer. I think I know Watson well enough to be sure that he is quite innocent of any wrong-doing. His motive for entering the Hermitage—if, indeed, he has entered—was a noble one, for he went there thinking that you had been enticed into a trap."

"Thank goodness you didn't go, too," I remarked. "Tommy was a fathead, of course, but he'll be all right afterwards."

Nelson Lee and Detective-Inspector Lennard crept away shortly afterwards, and Somerton and I were left to ourselves. We waited, in fact, for the arrival of Sir Montie Tregellis-West, and Handforth. These two juniors, of course, had been staying at the Mount, as I have previously explained, and they had insisted upon being in the vicinity when the raid occurred.

And so the duke and I waited.

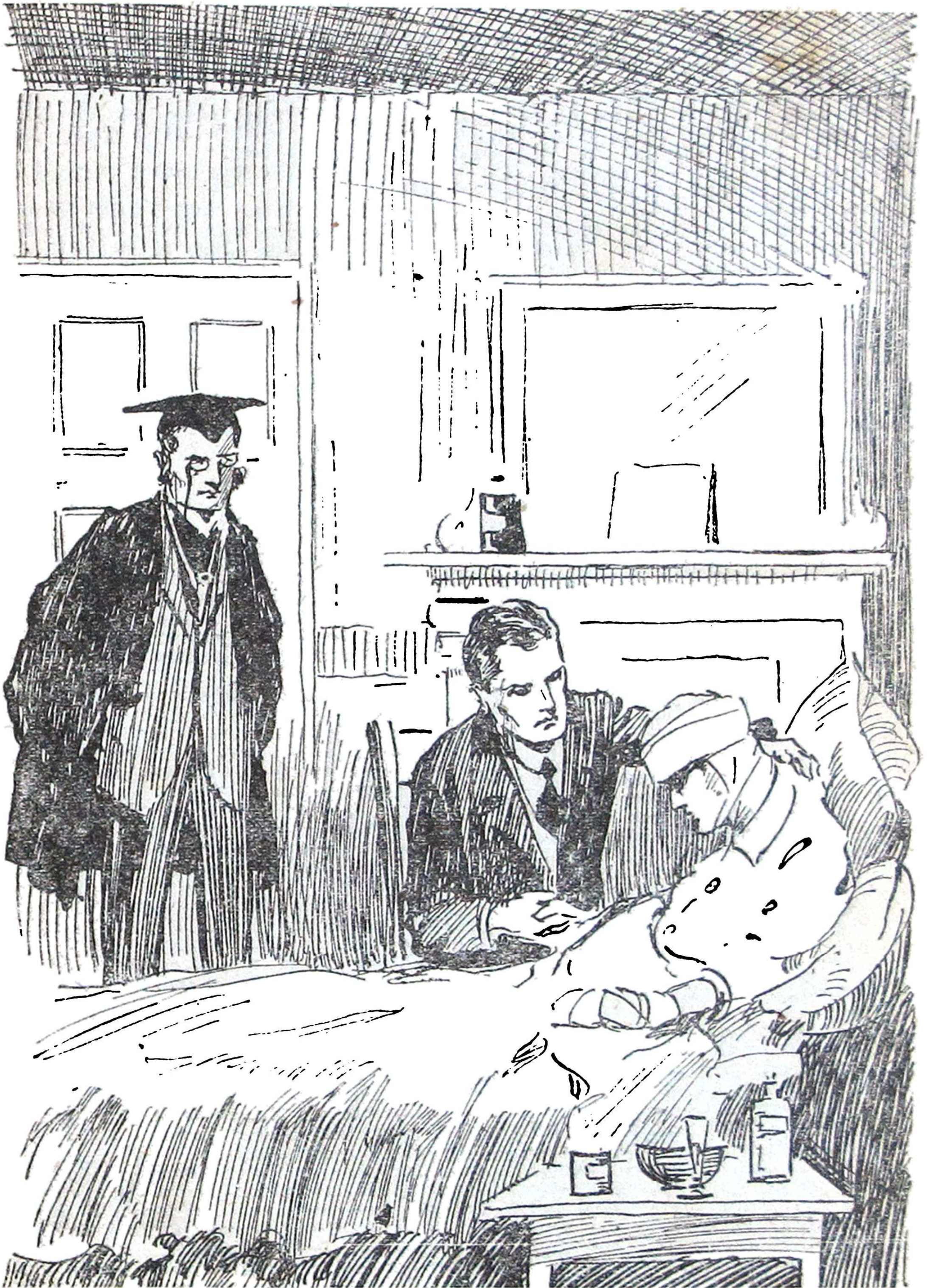
Events were moving, and the climax would soon be reached.

CHAPTER V.

THE FALLING OF THE CHOPPER.

TOMMY WATSON was having a rough time of it.

He managed to get into the Hermitage with practically no difficulty. Wearing his mask, he gave the password, and walked through into the roulette-room without being stopped or questioned. He was inwardly excited, but tried hard not to



Nelson Lee took his place by the bed in which Pitt sat, his hands and head swathed in bandages.—(See page 21.)

show it. He knew very well that something drastic would occur if he was exposed.

And so he pretended to be careless and indifferent, and strolled about as though he was in no hurry.

The roulette-room was somewhat crowded. Although early, quite a number of visitors were there, and the business of gambling was in full swing. Amongst the habitués there were several boys—all masked. Watson had to go to work carefully; he could not afford to make a mistake.

And he moved amongst the crowd, keeping his eyes open for the duke. Needless to say, he didn't find him, for Somerton hadn't started out from St. Frank's at that time. But even now Watson did not suspect that he had been duped. He thought that there perhaps was another apartment in this house where gambling went on, and he made one or two inquiries of other visitors.

He was satisfied at length that this room was the only one to be searched, and he became extremely anxious as the time went on. Perhaps he grew a little less cautious. At all events, Sales noticed the junior's uneasiness, and the man watched him.

He saw that Watson was doing no gambling, and after a while Sales became suspicious. Watson's efforts to find the duke were obvious—that is to say, Sales knew that the Removite was looking for somebody. He crossed over to him at last.

"Who are you looking for, boy?" he asked.

"Oh—oh, nothing," stammered Watson. "I—I was just looking round, you know. It's all right, thanks. You needn't worry about me!"

His nervousness was obvious, and Sales's suspicions grew.

"That won't do, youngster," he said. "Who are you, and where do you come from? Have you been here before?"

"No," replied Watson hesitatingly.

"How did you get in?"

"I—I gave the password," replied Tommy. "Look here, what are you questioning me for? I'm looking for somebody—"

"A moment ago you intimated that you were not looking for somebody," said Sales grimly. "You will come with me."

"I won't!" panted Watson, growing alarmed.

"If you do not come with me quietly, I shall take you by force," said Sales. "You have your choice, and it makes very little difference to me. I give you just ten seconds to choose!"

Watson looked round helplessly. He knew very well that no escape was possible, but his brain was rather muddled. Watson was not cut out for acting promptly when in a tight corner. He was a splendid fellow to follow anybody else's lead, and a staunch supporter. But he couldn't manage things on his own account. Besides, his failure to find the duke had upset him.

"I—I'll go!" he muttered.

Sales made no reply, but led the way across to a curtained recess, taking care to grip Watson's arm. They passed through a

secret doorway, and found themselves in a comfortable apartment.

"Now, boy, your name," demanded Sales.

"I don't see why I should tell you my name!" exclaimed Watson defiantly. "Go to the dickens! You ought to be in prison, running a beastly place like this!" he added incautiously. "You'll find yourself there before long, I'll bet!"

"You infernal young hound!" grated out Sales.

Watson had given himself away by that impulsive remark. Sales knew at once that he was an intruder—that he had not come here for the purpose of gambling. He was, in fact, out of sympathy with the whole affair—and the boy with those thoughts was not the kind of visitor Sales wanted.

"You're a spy!" he exclaimed furiously.

"Rot!" roared Watson. "Don't you call me a spy! I'm looking for some chap who was tricked into coming here, and I'm going to find him. If you don't let me go I'll yell the place down!"

"Yell away!" said Sales grimly. "Your voice will not be heard by a soul, except myself; you may as well know that before you commence."

The man was not only furious, but alarmed. If Watson was allowed to go free there was no telling what he would do. Somehow or other he had slipped past the guard, and he would not be allowed to slip out again.

Sales crossed the room and touched a bell-push. Within two minutes a second man entered.

"We've got to do something with this boy, Butler," exclaimed Sales harshly. "I believe he is a spy, but we can't bother with him now; he will have to be left until after everybody has gone. Do you know if the top room is clear?"

"Yes, I think so," replied Butler.

"Then get some ropes."

Watson listened with growing alarm.

"If you think I'm going to be kept here until after midnight, you're jolly well mistaken!" he exclaimed warmly. "I'm going now, and if you try to stop me you'll be sorry——"

Watson paused, a sudden thought striking him. There was to be a raid, of course! His best policy, he decided, would be to say as little as possible. Even if he was made a prisoner he would soon be released—and that was a great comfort. He closed his lips and said no more.

But he pretended to be very frightened—and he wasn't. Great alarm filled him, but it was not fright. Tommy Watson was plucky enough always.

The ropes were soon brought, and then he was effectively bound and a thick scarf was tied round his mouth. After that Sales and Butler carried him out of the inner apartment and up two flights of stairs. Arriving at the top of the house, they passed into a small attic. There was no window at all—only a skylight in the roof in the ceiling, and this was securely closed and out of reach. There was very little prospect of Watson getting away even if unbound—and

no prospect at all in his present predicament.

"We'll attend to you afterwards, when we have more time," said Sales angrily. "This is going to be a nuisance, Butler," he added, as he and his companion went out, locking the door. "I don't see how we're going to deal with this boy."

"We'll find a way later on," declared Butler. "We must get below now; it isn't wise to leave the roulette-room for long. We never know what might happen."

They certainly didn't know on this occasion. For something was shortly to happen which startled them more than they had ever been startled before. The blow fell just before eleven-thirty.

Tommy Watson, up in the attic, knew nothing about it at the beginning. Very sensibly, he had resigned himself to the situation. There was no sense in attempting to escape when he knew he couldn't escape. So he lay there waiting for the deliverance which he knew was coming.

Just at the time of the raid there were more visitors than ever in the gambling-room and everything was going full swing. Sales and Butler, in fact, were congratulating themselves that they were having a particularly profitable night. Larger sums than usual were being staked at the gaming-tables. This, in a way, helped the police considerably, for a hum of excitement was causing Sales and the others to relax their vigilance.

I, of course, didn't take any actual part in the affair, although I was watching. Sir Montie and I were crouching behind a hedge in the meadow adjoining the Hermitage garden—quite out of the way, but able to hear and see everything. Handforth and Somerton were just near us—and Handforth, as usual, was arguing.

"Can't you asses be quiet?" I whispered.

"It ain't me, old chap," said Somerton.

"I can't see why we shouldn't take part in this giddy raid!" declared Handforth firmly. "What's the good of us being stuck here, like so many dummies? I don't like being made into a dummy!"

"You always have been one, so what are you grumbling at?" I remarked. "Dry up, Handy, or we'll gag you!"

"You silly, ass!" snorted Handforth. "I don't see—"

"Shush!"

I had distinctly heard a rap upon the side door, and I knew that Nelson Lee had caused it. At that very same moment police and detective officers were standing ready to enter every lower window in the house. Other parties were crouching handy, forming a complete cordon round the house.

In order to be on the safe side, the police, under Nelson Lee's orders, had taken possession of the large secret workshop where the forged notes had been manufactured. The raid itself was for the purpose of capturing the whole gang red-handed.

The secret workshop was situated in the cellars, and was reached by a kind of tunnel,

which had originally been built in order to carry the waters of a brook beneath the road. Nelson Lee had discovered all about this some days before. And before the raid actually commenced Detective-inspector Lennard led a party of police down the tunnel and the workshop was seized. This tunnel also served as a secret exit in case of a raid.

It would not be very secret on this occasion. The occupants of the house, fleeing, would run right into the arms of the police. There was no possible escape for any one of them.

I was unaware of the fact at the time, but Reginald Pitt was crouching behind the hedge at no great distance from the spot where I stood. He had broken bounds in order to be in at the death, so to speak. He wanted to watch the proceedings from a safe distance—his chief object, in all probability, being connected with his trick upon Watson and Somerton.

With regard to Tommy, we were all rather anxious. He certainly hadn't left the building, although two of Lennard's men had reported that Watson entered two or three hours earlier—at least a boy had done so who could have been none other than Watson. What was he doing within the Hermitage so long?

I couldn't understand it, and didn't attempt to. The best thing was to wait until he could give a personal explanation.

And as I heard Nelson Lee knock upon the door I nudged Sir Montie.

"This is where the band starts playing!" I whispered tensely.

"Begad! Rather!"

We waited, listening. By parting the bushes we could faintly see the doorway on the other side of the garden. The door opened, and a murmur of voices came across to us. Nelson Lee, in fact, had given the password.

He was masked, and Field, the doorkeeper, suspected nothing. Exactly five seconds later Nelson Lee's hand was clapped over Field's mouth and half a dozen police officers appeared, apparently from nowhere. Field was not able to utter a sound, and he was taken quickly away.

Then, like clockwork, the actual raid commenced.

The gov'nor and Detective-inspector Lennard strode into the passage, followed by a dozen plain-clothes men. They walked straight through quietly, and burst into the roulette-room right in the midst of a particularly exciting period. For the first moment, indeed, nobody took any notice of them.

"Surrender—every man present!" rapped out Detective-inspector Lennard sharply. "I call upon you to surrender in the name of the law. There's no need for any fuss—Now, then, men! Look out!"

"Guard the doorways!" shouted Nelson Lee urgently.

There was reason for these brisk orders. A

time surrender was not Sales's idea, and after the first startling moment he appeared to regain his wits. The raid had been a complete surprise, otherwise the police could never have entered so freely, and they could not have penetrated into the roulette-room itself.

"Keep your heads—keep your heads!" shouted Sales. "We're all masked, and we shall all get away; but there must be no panic!"

While he was speaking all the lights in the place went out, and a sharp, metallic click sounded. Nelson Lee, who had been there before, knew well enough that the roulette-table was about to disappear into the floor, by a cunningly contrived apparatus. Lee's torch flashed out, and he dashed forward. He was carrying something which looked like a walking-stick, but which was really a bar of steel. Even as the table was descending he thrust this bar just behind one of the legs, crosswise to the corner.

The result was that the table descended to within six inches of the floor—the surface of the table, that is—and there it jammed hard upon the bar.

The utmost confusion reigned within the room. Two secret doorways, of which Lee knew nothing, had sprung open, and the frightened men were crowding through into safety as they fondly believed. The whole body of men, including Sales and the croupier, disappeared very quickly. Several of the masked visitors had been seized by the police, and these were held. But the others had got away. They would be trapped in other parts of the building and outside, for complete escape was impossible.

And before the police could get through the doorways they were closed automatically, being made of heavy steel. Two policemen were rather badly crushed by the closing doors, and they had to be carried away at once. But Nelson Lee and Lennard remained within the roulette-room. It was found that Butler was amongst those captured, but Sales and the croupier were not roped in until a little later on—and until Sales had performed an action which was to lead to dramatic consequences.

For, as Nelson Lee and Lennard were looking round, huge bursts of flame appeared from every side of the room. This development was so sudden that nobody was prepared for it. Panels had opened near the base of the walls, releasing scores of gallons of petrol.

But for Lee's coolness several people would have been burned to death. As it was, he roared out a warning at the very first second, and the police and their prisoners just managed to get into the passage in safety, although severely scorched. Within one minute the roulette-room was a blazing furnace.

"What's the meaning of this, Lee?" panted the inspector.

"It was a precaution, I expect," replied Lee. "In the event of a raid, Sales meant

to burn the place down—and so destroy all evidence. But he was too late, for we had already entered. The house is doomed, without a doubt."

"But I can't quite see——"

"The petrol was obviously contained within special tanks just behind the wall—within the wall, in fact," declared Nelson Lee. "One lever apparently discharged the whole supply of spirit, igniting it at the same time. If we had not made our entry, Lennard, every scrap of evidence would have been destroyed."

It was undoubtedly a cute dodge, but it had missed fire. The petrol hadn't, however! It was blazing with enormous fury, and the spirit poured out into the passage, driving the invaders out. As the gov'nor had said, the Hermitage was certainly doomed.

It was a dry old place of considerable size, and the woodwork was mostly rotten and as inflammable as tinder. And the roulette-room, being practically in the centre of the house, formed a furnace which rapidly spread in every direction. The heart of the building was on fire, and other rooms became involved with incredible speed.

Petrol is terrible stuff when it gets alight, and an enormous quantity like this had sealed the doom of the Hermitage from the very first second. Outside, we knew nothing of it until volumes of dense smoke began to roll out of the lower windows. After that there was so much excitement in other quarters that our attention was taken from the house.

Sales and the rest of his gang, numbering four, were all captured while trying to escape. Not a single man who had been within the building succeeded in eluding the police.

And by the time we looked back at the Hermitage we saw that lurid flames were bursting out from nearly every lower window. Only one side of the house was, so far, immune. And the excitement was tremendous. In the glare of the light we saw Pitt come running forward. He had forgotten to be cautious in the general uproar. And it was clear that he was alarmed.

And then we heard a hoarse cry. It came from Butler, who seemed to be dazed by the shock of capture.

The man was struggling with the two uniformed constables who held him. His struggles appeared to be pointless, for he was handcuffed, and there was no possibility of escape. And he was even then being led towards a motor-car which had swept up in readiness to convey him to the police-station, together with his confederates. Two large char-a-bancs were also there, for the accommodation of the frightened, dejected frequenters of the gambling-house, who would all have to appear before the magistrate, and who would probably be cautioned and bound over.

Butler was struggling fiercely.

"Now, now!" exclaimed one of the policemen. "It's no good going on in that way——"

"Is everybody out of the house?" shouted Butler hoarsely.

"Don't you worry! There's nobody there now——"

"What about the boy?"

"What boy?" asked Nelson Lee, striding forward.

"There's a boy at the top of the house—bound and helpless!" panted Butler wildly. "He can't escape, and the flames are spreading. Get him out of that furnace, for Heaven's sake! We're caught fair and square, but we're not murderers!"

Nelson Lee gave some swift, sharp orders, and then turned to Butler again.

"Who is this boy?" he asked.

"I don't know—except that he was a St. Frank's junior," huskily. "He was an intruder; he'd come to look for somebody. And Sales and I put him up in the attic out of harm's way. Be quick, for the love——"

"It's all right," interjected Lee. "They're getting him now."

Half a dozen policemen had been despatched on the rescue work, and I waited with extreme anxiety. Of course, the boy was Tommy Watson—he couldn't be anybody else. Pitt, who was standing near by, didn't say a word. His face was pale, and he looked different, somehow. He probably realised that he was the main cause of Watson's predicament.

There was really no need to worry. The police would soon fetch Watson down, and the Bannington Fire Brigade had already been warned, and would arrive upon the scene within ten minutes.

But it was quite obvious that the firemen would not be able to do much, for the house was burning like firewood, and the flames had already reached the first floor.

Butler and the other prisoners were taken off in the car. And then came the shock. We saw four or five policemen come staggering round the house. They were half-choked and badly scorched.

"It's no good, sir!" gasped one of them. "The stairs are blazing from top to bottom, and we can't reach the upper floors! The attics will be burnt to cinders within five minutes!"

"Good heavens!" muttered Nelson Lee.

He gazed up at the house, and I saw him catch his breath in sharply. Even now flames were bursting through the skylight which was situated at the top of the main staircase! The flames were roaring up the well as though it were a chimney—and Tommy Watson was at the top, cut off from all rescue!

"We must have ladders—ladders!" roared the gov'nor quickly.

"There isn't one here, or anywhere near!" shouted somebody. "The fire brigade will be along in ten minutes——"

"The boy will be dead by that time!" rapped out Nelson Lee.

Sir Montie and I stood silent. We were stunned by the shock of it all. Up till now we had almost taken a delight in the proceedings; but it seemed as though the raid

was to develop into a tragedy. And our own chum, Tommy Watson, was the victim!

Just then I heard a wild cry, and turned, gulping.

Reginald Pitt was ripping off his coat in one frantic movement, and before anybody could stop him he raced for the house at top speed!

CHAPTER VI.

REGINALD PITT THE HERO!

"STOP him!"

STOP him! That shout went up from dozens of throats. It was easy for the dullest to understand that Reginald Pitt intended making an attempt to get into the burning house. But although several police officers rushed after him, he was not captured.

Personally, I was staggered by this surprise.

Pitt! Pitt had gone to the rescue! He was about the last fellow in the whole Remove who would be expected to perform a brave act.

"Begad!" panted Sir Montie. "We're dreamin', Nipper—we are, really!"

"Oh, the idiot!" I gasped. "He'll kill himself!"

Indeed, if Pitt succeeded in getting into the house, it was almost certain that he would meet with disaster. For the smoke and fumes were driving out of every window and doorway, to say nothing of volumes of flame. Moreover, there was tremendous danger from falling debris. The fire was now roaring fiercely, and the sparks were flying in myriads.

But what could it mean? Had the Serpent suddenly taken leave of his senses? Knowing him for what he was, I was filled with blank amazement, and my terrible anxiety concerning poor old Tommy gave place to stupefaction at Pitt's action.

There could be only one explanation.

Pitt knew that he was responsible for Watson's presence in the burning house. Pitt had deliberately planned to get Watson there. He had seen Somerton, and knew that the Duke had not shared Tommy's fate.

And, by some kink in his character, he had been brought to realise the extent of his sin, and was now doing his best to make amends.

In spite of all my contempt and dislike for Pitt I couldn't help giving a roar of admiration—mingled, I believe, with a gasp of horror. For it seemed to me that Pitt had gone to his death.

That he should have gone at all was astounding enough. The thought struck me, although I regret to admit it, that Pitt was doing this for show—that he really had no intention of attempting a real rescue. It would be in keeping with his character if he just entered the smoke-choked hall, stayed there until a few moments had passed, and then staggered out, pretending to be overcome.

But the Serpent had no such theatrical intention. This was a real, genuine act of remorse. In this, a time of acute crisis, his better self came uppermost, and he revealed a new side of his character which took us all by surprise.

Pitt forgot everything—the danger to himself and all his former hatred of Watson. He was dashing to the rescue, and he didn't care a jot what dangers had to be faced.

Pitt had been ready enough to plot against Watson in order to get him expelled. But this was different. Through Pitt's action, Watson's life was in danger, and the scheming Removite revealed his true colours.

The Serpent did not make for the front door, but dashed to the side of the house where the fire had not yet obtained a hold. Thick masses of ivy grew on this wall, and Pitt started climbing like a monkey.

The police arrived just as he was out of reach, but the ivy was not of sufficient strength to bear their much greater weight.

"Come down, you young fool!" shouted one of the policemen.

But Pitt took no notice; he climbed steadily and quickly. And everybody watched with their hearts in their mouths, expecting to see Pitt come crashing down to the ground.

But desperation lent him strength and agility, and he climbed up and up. Near the roof the ivy was thinner, and afforded less grip. But a large gutter-pipe aided Pitt during those last few terrible feet. He grasped the gutter after what seemed an eternity, and hauled himself upon the gradually sloping roof. It was so shallow, in fact, that Pitt was able to walk up the old tiles.

In the very centre of the roof the staircase skylight had disappeared, and flames were spurting out twenty feet into the air. We could see Pitt's figure outlined against the lurid glare.

Right at his feet was the skylight of the small attic—quite near to the gutter, in fact, and, as yet, just beyond the zone of the flames.

After a grim struggle he succeeded in forcing up the skylight. He sent it back against the roof with a crash, and we could see a cloud of smoke rising from the aperture.

Pitt only paused for a moment. He bound his handkerchief round his mouth and nose, and then dropped into the attic.

"He's done for!" I muttered shakily. "He's gone to his death!"

We waited tensely. Nelson Lee and Leonard were not idle. Men had been sent searching for ladders, and others were anxiously watching the road to see if the fire brigade was in sight.

And it had been ascertained that there was no ladder to be found. Nelson Lee, in the hope that Pitt would succeed in getting out alive, took a number of men with him and fetched a heavy tarpaulin which had reposed in the shed at the bottom of the garden.

He and the police officers then stood at the

foot of the wall, stretching out the tarpaulin in readiness for Pitt to jump into.

But Pitt had not appeared. Everything had been done for his safety in the event of his getting out of the house alive. Without ladders no actual help could be given. And in a fire of this sort seconds were of value.

Pitt had dropped into the attic with only one thought in his mind. He had to rescue Watson—he had to rescue Watson! And he found poor old Tommy within five seconds, for Watson was just below the skylight.

Pitt tore the handkerchief from his mouth. The smoke was so thick that he could see nothing, although the lurid reflection of the flames made the attic like an inferno.

"Are you all right, Watson?" gasped Pitt hoarsely.

"Who's—who's that?" muttered a weak voice.

"Me—Pitt—"

"You awful cad!" panted Watson. "You got me into this fix—"

"It's all right!" said Pitt, with a hard laugh. "I'm getting you out of it now—and if I die I shall only get what I deserve."

Watson was nearly overcome with the smoke and fumes, but he had sufficient wits about him to be amazed by Pitt's words. The Serpent slashed through the ropes which bound his companion, and Watson got to his feet unsteadily.

"I'm done!" he muttered. "I can't see—I can't walk—I—I—"

And then he collapsed upon the floor. Pitt clenched his teeth and bent over the fallen junior. The heat was almost unbearable, and the roar of the flames just outside the door sounded ghastly. Even as Pitt stood there tongues of fire were licking under the doorway and the wood was splintering and cracking.

"Heaven help me!" muttered Pitt feverishly.

He lifted Watson up in a hopeless kind of way, knowing well enough that he would never be able to hoist the inert form up to the skylight. And then, in a flash, he thought of the strong ropes which had bound the unconscious Tommy.

Pitt worked like a madman. Keeping his eyes tightly closed, and with the handkerchief once more about his mouth and nose, he gathered all the rope together and made a noose round Watson's body under the arms.

Then he flung the loose end upwards on to the roof and leapt towards the skylight. Under normal conditions Pitt would never have been able to grasp the edge. But in this terrible moment he was given added strength, and his fingers just grasped the wooden edge. He hauled himself up—and we saw him.

A terrific cheer went up, but it faded away when it was seen that Pitt was alone. That cheer, however, spurred him on. It was probably the first time that Pitt had ever been cheered, and he liked it.

He hauled on the rope, setting his feet

against the skylight framework in order to grip firmly. And inch by inch he dragged Watson into the open air, tearing his hands seriously on the thin, strong rope. By a miracle it bore the strain, and at last Watson's head and shoulders appeared at the opening. Pitt grasped him under the arms, and with a last terrific effort pulled him clear on to the roof.

"Bravo!" I shouted wildly. "Good old Pitt!"

"Hurrah!"

The cheers that went up were heard all over Bannington, for hundreds of people were now collected round the burning building, and everybody shouted their hardest. It sounded strange in my own ears for me to be shouting "Good old Pitt!"

He staggered blindly just after Watson had been dragged into the open. And below, Nelson Lee was looking upwards anxiously.

"Drop him into this tarpaulin, Pitt!" shouted the gov'nor in a great voice. "Drop him, and then throw yourself down——"

"All right, sir!" came Pitt's shout, husky, but steady.

He dragged the unconscious Watson to the edge and then cast him over.

Plop!

Watson struck the tarpaulin squarely, bounced up, and then settled down again. The fall had scarcely hurt him at all, and he was pulled out uninjured. And then a great shout of horror went up from hundreds of throats.

Reginald Pitt, having performed his mission, was overcome by the terrible strain and the choking smoke. He staggered back, fell heavily, and hung half over the aperture of the skylight.

Probably he realised his danger and attempted to get up. The effort proved his undoing, for he fell back into the attic.

"Good heavens!" I panted. "Oh, poor chap!"

I felt sick and faint, and I could hear women screaming on every hand. Men were shouting—but what was the good?

Pitt had rescued Watson—at the expense of his own life!

But the night's excitement was not yet over. A volume of shouting came from the road, which increased to a terrific roar.

The fire escape was within sight!

It came tearing up, and another wave of hope went through the crowd. I had been condemning the Bannington Fire Brigade as a slow set of duffers. But the manner in which they swung the ladders into position was worthy of intense admiration. It was one of the smartest pieces of work I had ever seen. And although it seemed hours since the alarm had been given, barely twenty minutes had elapsed.

Firemen swarmed up the ladder with ropes and choppers. Two of them dropped into the attic, and the minutes seemed like weeks.

Smoke was now pouring out of the skylight in denser volumes than ever, and I gripped Sir Montie's arm feverishly as I saw

sparks shooting up, too! The attic was already alight, and Pitt and two firemen were within!

It seemed as though three lives were to be sacrificed. But then a helmeted head appeared, followed by another. In the great glare of the light we distinctly saw that the two brave men had got Pitt out. They carried him to the edge, where the ladder was resting. One of the men paused for a moment to beat his hand against Pitt's leg, near the boot, for his trousers were smouldering!

Somehow the crowd was subdued, and not a single cheer went up, only a tremendous gasp of relief sounded from all those throats.

Very tenderly Pitt was brought to the ground by other firemen who were waiting on the ladder. The two men who had gone into the attic were badly scorched, and upon reaching the ground were immediately placed upon the ambulance, which had come on the heels of the fire-escape.

Pitt was taken to a quiet spot, and Nelson Lee made a rapid examination. Then, somewhat to my surprise, one of the cars belonging to the police was commandeered, and Pitt was taken rapidly away—but not towards Bannington. The car drove in the direction of St. Frank's, and I recognised the driver as Dr. Brett, of Bellton. The doctor had appeared upon the scene, and had willingly consented to see Pitt to the school.

It was some little time before I was enabled to have a word with the gov'nor. And then I saw that his eyes were shining gladly and there was no trace of worry or anxiety in them.

"By James! Pitt acted wonderfully, Nipper!" he exclaimed. "It was astounding, bearing in mind the boy's character—simply astounding!"

"Will he die, sir?" asked Somerton huskily.

"Is he dead already?" put in Handforth, who was never satisfied.

"Dead!" echoed Nelson Lee, with a laugh. "Pitt will be walking about within a fortnight. I can assure you. Considering his terrible experience, he has escaped wonderfully. Just a few burns—serious ones, but not vital. They are mainly leg and arm burns; his face and body are untouched."

"Thank goodness!" I exclaimed fervently. "I thought the chap was a rotter, sir, and I can't believe that he performed such a plucky action. It doesn't seem——"

"You must not think of what it seems, Nipper—it is so!" interrupted the gov'nor gently. "Pitt, as we now discover, is not all bad. Every ounce of goodness within him revealed itself to-night."

"Will—will he be sacked, sir?" asked Handforth.

"That is a question which I cannot answer just at the moment," replied Nelson Lee. "It really depends upon Pitt's attitude when he has sufficiently recovered to speak. In any case, Handforth, you and Tregellis-West had better return to the Mount for to-night."

I had almost forgotten to say what had

become of Watson, and I daresay he'll be hugely indignant when he reads this. As a matter of fact he wasn't even burnt or scorched. The smoke had wellnigh choked him, but fresh air made a wonderful difference. Within ten minutes he was conscious again and was being attended to by one of the Bannington doctors who had arrived upon the scene.

He appeared after a while, looking shaky, but grinning pluckily.

"Talk about excitement!" he exclaimed. "I say, what did I look like when I was coming down into that tarpaulin?"

"It's a good thing you were unconscious, my son," I replied. "You were all legs and arms, and you would have had a rare fright——"

"Fright!" said Watson indignantly. "Look here——"

"Whoa! There she goes!" interrupted Handforth.

The roof had suddenly collapsed with a deafening crash, and the flames roared into the sky to a tremendous height. We were a safe distance away, and watched the immense conflagration somewhat awed. It was truly a terrible spectacle. The Hermitage was doomed, and when the fire finally died down nothing but the stark, blackened walls remained.

The raid had been a splendid success from start to finish, and I wasn't exactly sorry that Tommy Watson had been in danger. For it had provided an opportunity for Reginald Pitt to show what he was worth—when it came to a pinch!

The Serpent had shown us a new side of his character—he was a hero, and his incredibly brave action had certainly wiped out the past.

But what was to be the end of this stirring episode?

CHAPTER VII.

THE REWARD OF BRAVERY.

ST. FRANK'S buzzed with subdued excitement.

Morning had come, and the news was public property in both Houses at the old school. Tommy Watson didn't sleep in the dormitory; he had been provided with a special bedroom. For Tommy, after the excitement of the fire, was suffering from a reaction.

There was nothing much the matter with him; he only needed a good sleep to set him on his legs properly. And he wouldn't have obtained much sleep in the Remove dormitory!

The Ancient House was thunderstruck. A considerable number of fellows positively refused to believe that Pitt had performed any brave action at all. It was, as McClure remarked, altogether too tall to be credited.

But I had seen Pitt with my own eyes, and I knew. And there was much excitement, too, concerning the raid. That it had

been a complete success was regarded as a huge triumph by all the Ancient House fellows, since Nelson Lee was their Housemaster.

Sales, Butler and Co. were safely locked away, waiting their trial, and I knew that the gov'nor had obtained enough evidence to convict them five times over. His case had been a complete success.

Detective-Inspector Lennard would reap most of the reward, but Nelson Lee didn't mind that at all. Lennard was a good fellow, and the gov'nor was always ready to give him the benefit of his own labours—particularly in a police affair of this kind.

But the St. Frank's fellows sniffed when poor old Lennard was mentioned. They regarded him as a mere nobody. It was their Housemaster who had done the trick, and they wouldn't allow anybody to say a word to the contrary.

Fullwood and Co. were looking extremely sick, and they were very nervous, too. They were afraid that the truth would come out concerning their part in the trapping of Tommy Watson and the Duke of Somerton.

As for me, I was concerned about Sir Montie. He was to have come back, freed from all suspicion, after this raid. The same applied to Handforth. But they were both at the Mount still, and their presence so close to the school was unknown to all save Church and McClure and Watson and myself.

While the other fellows were all talking in groups I managed to slip away and went to the gov'nor's study. I found him there, looking spruce and tidy and eminently satisfied with himself.

His keen eyes were twinkling, and he nodded genially to me as I entered the study.

"Well, Nipper, how are you this morning?" he asked cheerily. "I'm afraid you didn't get much sleep last night——"

"Oh, bother sleep, gov'nor!" I interrupted. "What about Montie?"

"Well, what about him?"

"And what about Handforth?" I went on.

"I suppose you are asking me when those two ill-used juniors will return to their proper places in the Remove?" inquired Nelson Lee.

"You know I am, sir."

"Well, I think they will be back some time to-day."

"Has Pitt confessed, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"It really makes little difference whether Pitt confesses or not, young 'un," said Nelson Lee, his eyes gleaming somewhat. "I have plenty of evidence to prove that both Tregellis-West and Handforth are innocent."

"Then why aren't they back, sir?" I asked quickly.

"My dear boy, one thing at a time!" protested the gov'nor. "My hands have been full with this raid until half through the night, and it would hardly have been wise to bring back the two boys in the middle of the night. I have no doubt that both Montie and Handforth will turn up by dinner-time."

"And will they be vindicated, sir?"

"Publicly, replied the gov'nor. "Dr. Stafford intends to make a short speech to the whole school. Another reason why I am in no particular hurry is because I am anxious to have a little talk with Pitt."

"How is he this morning, sir?" I asked.

"Better. Dr. Brett tells me that the boy is fully conscious and almost his old self, except, of course, that he is a mass of bandages and is suffering from a slight physical breakdown as the result of his terrible experiences."

I grinned unfeelingly.

"And that's what Dr. Brett calls being his old self?" I inquired. "Pitt won't be about again for weeks, sir, I'll bet. But it's good to learn that he isn't badly crocked. I say, sir, don't you think it's rather astounding? I thought Pitt was a rotter to the core."

Nelson Lee looked thoughtful.

"There is good in the boy," he replied slowly. "Last night's adventure proves that, Nipper. I am inclined to believe that he has been greatly influenced by bad companions—as, for example, those scoundrels of the Hermitage."

"How did he get to know them, sir?"

"So far as I can gather, Butler was running a gambling-den of a somewhat similar nature to this one in the vicinity of Pitt's old school," replied Nelson Lee. "Pitt was led away by elder boys, and rapidly became utterly reckless and rascally in his conduct. He lost all sense of proportion, and seemed to imagine that telling the truth was namby-pamby. He was not expelled from that school, for his father took him away before such a disaster occurred. If he had been expelled, he would certainly not have been admitted to St. Frank's. He came here, Nipper, literally soaked in wickedness—schoolboy wickedness, that is. And he has made good use of his time."

"Bad use of it, I think!" I remarked grimly. "But I can forgive him everything for the way he rescued Tommy. He's plucky, gov'nor—there's no doubt about that. And perhaps the experience will do him good."

"I sincerely hope so, my boy," replied the gov'nor. "But I can't waste any further time. I am going along to the sanatorium now, with the Headmaster. I will let you know the result of my interview later on."

So, for the time being, I was dismissed, and went in to breakfast in an anxious frame of mind.

Meanwhile Nelson Lee had gone along to Dr. Stafford's study, where he found the Head waiting for him. The Head had been greatly startled over the exciting events, and hadn't quite got over it yet.

"I am glad you have come, Mr. Lee!" he exclaimed. "Pitt has sent a message, requesting that I should go to his bedside. A brave boy, Mr. Lee, and I find it hard to believe that your suspicions concerning his conduct are justified. His action in rescuing Watson is worthy of the highest praise."

"I am filled with keen delight that Pitt should have retrieved his character so

thoroughly," said Nelson Lee. "I am inclined to suggest that he should be given a free pardon, for he has certainly earned both praise and sympathy."

They went over to the sanatorium at once, and found Pitt sitting up in bed, his eyes shining with a determined light. At first glance he looked almost feverish, but the nurse assured the Head that Pitt was wonderfully strong. He was a wiry fellow, and was bearing his pain bravely. Bandages smothered his arms, but the fire, mercifully, had not touched his face.

"Oh, I'm all right, sir," replied the Serpent. "A few burns like this won't do me much harm—I'll expect they'll do me good, in fact. I've been in frightful pain during the night, but I daresay I deserve it."

He bent forward slightly.

"How's Watson, sir?" he added eagerly.

"You needn't trouble your head about Watson, Pitt," said Nelson Lee reassuringly. "Watson is sleeping peacefully at this moment, and there is really nothing whatever the matter with him. He will take his place in the Remove to-morrow or the day after. You succeeded in getting him out of the attic before the fire actually entered the apartment. You, yourself, suffered—"

"Don't talk about that, sir," interrupted Pitt. "If it comes to that, I deserved to suffer. In fact it's rather a pity I didn't fall into the flames altogether!"

"Upon my soul! I cannot have you talking like that!" exclaimed the Head severely. "What do you mean, Pitt? I cannot countenance such absurd statements. Your action was amazingly brave, and—"

Pitt laughed.

"That's just where you're mistaken, sir," he said, with all his old coolness. "That's just where you're off the track. It wasn't brave at all. I don't believe I knew what I was doing at the time—I just dashed forward in a kind of mad fit. If I'd remained cool I shouldn't have done it."

"It is generally found, Pitt, that all heroes perform their brave actions under stress of great excitement," put in Nelson Lee. "That does not make their action any the less praiseworthy. The courageous spirit was within you, and it came out at a moment of crisis. Dr. Stafford was quite right when he described your action as being wonderfully brave—"

"But it wasn't, sir," denied Pitt. "That's—that's what I want to tell you. Watson was at the Hermitage because I had tricked him into going. Oh, I hardly knew what I was doing when I discovered that the poor chap was in the attic. It was my fault, and it was up to me to get him out."

"That is one way of looking at it, certainly," agreed Nelson Lee. "I will not inquire what this trickery was, Pitt. You have confessed, and that is sufficient. I am very pleased to find that you have suddenly developed quite a different spirit. Almost since the first day of your arrival at St. Frank's you displayed an arrogance which

was most irritating to the other boys. Not only that, but you deliberately schemed——"

Pitt gave a little gulp, and lay back.

"I know, sir!" he said huskily. "I—I've been a rotter. I've been everything that's absolutely vile. What happened last night seems to have brought it all home to me, and I want to confess something. I want to tell you that I—I——"

He broke off, and his eyes filled with tears. In such a hard junior as Pitt this exhibition of emotion was certainly surprising. But his vitality was at a lower pitch than usual, and he seemed to be in a mood when he took an absolute pleasure in confessing his misdeeds. During the short interval since the previous night Reginald Pitt had changed in a manner which Nelson Lee would never have thought possible.

"There, there, my boy!" said the Head gently. "We had no intention of distressing you. Mr. Lee and I will go——"

"No, don't, sir!" exclaimed Pitt quickly. "I—I want to get it off my chest. I have been miserable all night, and I mean to make a clean breast of it. It's—the best way, sir."

"What have you tell us, Pitt?"

"Just this, sir," replied the Serpent, setting his teeth grimly. "Ever since I came to St. Frank's I've been playing a low-down game. When I was in the College House I played a rotten trick in connection with the junior boat-race. I can see that it was rotten now. I couldn't at the time. And I got pally with Full—with some of the other fellows," he added hastily. "They're rotters, and I was a fool to have anything to do with them. I tried to get all the fellows to turn against Nipper—and make him resign the captaincy. Then I plotted against Tregellis-West, and got him the sack."

The Head's expression hardened.

"Mr. Lee has constantly told me that Tregellis-West was innocent," he exclaimed. "Do you positively assure me, Pitt, that Tregellis-West did not visit the home of a low bookmaker in Bannington——"

"No, sir, he didn't; it was me all the time, and I did it on purpose to have him expelled," said Pitt brokenly. "It was just the same with Handforth, sir. Handforth didn't plan to set the gymnasium on fire—it was just another trick of mine. I—I hope they'll both be brought back, sir; they are as innocent as any other fellow in the school. I did it all. I've been an awful rotter."

The Head looked at Nelson Lee steadily, and Lee nodded.

"I am very glad, Pitt, that you have confessed your guilt," said Lee gently. "I may as well tell you that you have greatly improved your position by being thus open. I have been aware of the actual truth for some little time, and if you had maintained silence I should have exposed you. As it is, you have won approval from both the Headmaster and myself by admitting your faults."

Pitt looked miserable.

"I suppose I shall be kicked out when I get well, sir?" he asked, laying back on the pillow. "I can't expect anything else, can

I? I deserve the sack, and a dozen floggings as well. I—I'm awfully sorry, sir, and I hope you won't think too rottenly of me."

"On the contrary, Pitt, my opinion of you is very different now from what it was last night," said Nelson Lee. "You have certainly earned expulsion, but your bravery in rescuing Watson will doubtless influence Dr. Stafford in his final decision. You have already suffered a great deal, but, in my opinion, the most pleasing aspect of the case is that you have awakened to the full realisation of your disgraceful conduct. Had you persisted in your former attitude, Pitt, very little sympathy could have been extended to you."

"I—I don't expect any, sir," muttered Pitt. "I don't deserve any."

"Mr. Lee was not far wrong in what he said, my boy," exclaimed the Head, laying a hand upon Pitt's shoulder. "In reality, I ought to be very angry with you, but I'm not. You have acted in the most abominable fashion; you have given free play to a most vindictive spirit, and your conduct has been of the most contemptible nature. All that, however, has been completely wiped out. You have eradicated the stain by your noble action of last night. And your open confession at this moment finally decides me to be merciful."

Pitt sat up in bed with shining eyes.

"You—you mean——" he began, panting.

"I mean that you will be pardoned, Pitt," said the Head, gently. "I intend to give you another chance. You have had your lesson—a terribly bitter one—and I believe it has done you a world of good. When you are well enough you will return to the Remove and resume your place in its ranks."

"And—and I sha'n't be punished, sir?" asked Pitt huskily. "Oh, but I want to be—I deserve it! It isn't right that I should be allowed to go scot-free after all the beastly things I've done. And, besides, the fellows won't stick me any more. They'll hoot me out——"

"They will do nothing of the sort," interrupted Nelson Lee. "You have no idea, Pitt, of the feeling that is now running through the school. Far from being hooted, you will be cheered. And I sincerely hope that you will succeed in living up to the high standard which you set yourself during the fire last night. The past is forgiven—and will be forgotten. Tregellis-West and Handforth, I am positive, will be the first to extend their hands in friendship. Have no fear, Pitt. You will find St. Frank's a different place—a more cheerful world—if you, yourself, tread the right path."

Pitt's eyes were gleaming joyfully.

"I will, sir!" he vowed. "I'll—I'll make up for all my rotten behaviour. But I don't know how to thank you, sir," he added, turning to the Head. "I don't know what to say. I—I ain't worth bothering about, and yet you're going to pardon me. Oh, sir, that's made me realise more than anything what a cad I've been."

"There is just one other little matter,

Pitt," said Nelson Lee. "What were your relations with Sales and Butler?"

"They—they'd got me in their power, sir," muttered Pitt. "I've always been a rotter, I believe, and I got into trouble at my last school. But the chaps at the Hermitage knew that I was coming to St. Frank's, and they made me promise that I'd introduce fellows with money into the gambling-rooms, so that they'd be able to skin 'em."

"And did you know nothing about the forgery side of the question?"

Pitt's eyes widened.

"Forgery, sir?" he repeated. "I—I don't know what you mean."

Nelson Lee was satisfied. Pitt was not acting. He was not capable of acting at that moment. He had known nothing whatever of the true character of the Hermitage. He had believed the place to be a gambling-den, pure and simple. And both the Head and Lee felt convinced that Reginald Pitt had been led into most of his rascally actions by the influence of his undesirable companions.

Much as he had been to blame himself, he had been victimised by others—by men who had no scruples. And at last Pitt's eyes were opened, and he looked upon a new world already.

There were practically no lessons that morning.

I was the first to hear the result of the interview with Pitt, and I was extremely glad to find that the Serpent had confessed. My dislike for him vanished, and I felt that there was a great deal of good in the fellow. But I wondered how the school would take the news that he had been the cause of the expulsion of Tregellis-West and Handforth.

The Head made a speech in Big Hall, and every fellow at St. Frank's was present, except, of course, Pitt himself and Tregellis-West and Handforth. Tommy Watson had rebelled and had got up—somewhat shaky, but cheerful.

In simple language the Head explained that Pitt had confessed, and that the two expelled juniors would return at once. There was much joy in the ranks of the Remove, and the feeling against Pitt was revived.

But then Nelson Lee got on his hind legs, so to speak. In graphic sentences he described Pitt's splendid heroism of the night before, and he plainly told the fellows that Pitt had wiped out the past, and that it would be only fair to give him a chance. The boys, worked up to a fine pitch of enthusiasm, responded nobly. The cheers which were given for Reginald Pitt, the hero, reached the sanatorium, and the Serpent flushed with unaccustomed pleasure as he lay in bed. And

there was a considerable lump in his throat, too.

It was unanimously decided in the Remove that Pitt should be given a fair chance upon his return. The past would be forgiven, and he would be able to prove exactly what he was worth.

Meanwhile a great deal of further excitement was provided by the triumphant return of Sir Montie Tregellis-West and Edward Oswald Handforth. Considerable amazement was displayed when it became known that the two juniors had been at the Mount all the time, waiting for the moment when they could return.

They received a terrific welcome, and were carried round the Triangle on fellows' shoulders until they ached. Poor old Montie didn't like it at all, because it ruffled his elegant attire. But Handforth was in his element. He enjoyed himself tremendously—and let everybody see it, too.

After that he attempted to make it quite plain that he was the captain of the Remove. But in this he was sadly mistaken.

Now that all suspicion had been cleared away from myself, and Study C in general, it was universally agreed that I should resume my old position as Remove skipper. The only fellows who voted against it were Fullwood and Co., and they nearly got themselves ducked in the fountain for expressing such a view. Handforth was greatly indignant, but accepted the situation with his usual good-temper—after he had calmed down. As he darkly hinted, his chance would come again. He didn't know when—and nobody else knew—but Handforth seemed to think that it would come all right.

And thus the whole affair was settled. Nelson Lee's case had ended in triumph, and the great campaign of Fullwood and Co., executed by Reginald Pitt, collapsed ignominiously.

The rascals of the Remove had triumphed all along the line to begin with, but now, at a blow, everything was normal.

Pitt remained in the sanatorium, and he had many visitors daily. He was pleasantly surprised to find that all the decent fellows in the Remove were anxious to shake his hand and to extend their friendship.

The Serpent had redeemed his character, and he was to be given a fair chance. But, when he left the sanatorium, would he gradually fall back into his old ways, or would he benefit by the lesson?

It was a problem, and only time would show.

As events turned out, Reginald Pitt was very soon to be provided with an opportunity of proving his sincerity. For a new fellow was coming to St. Frank's—a boy who was something of a novelty in his way, and who was destined to meet with many trials and troubles in the ranks of the Remove.

THE END.

NEXT WEEK!—(See p. iv of cover.)

GRAND NEW SCHOOL SERIAL!**The Chums of Littleminster School.****A Magnificent Story of School Life and Adventure.****By ARTHUR S. HARDY.****The First Chapters.**

BASIL HOOD is a new boy at Littleminster School. On his arrival he makes a friend of

JOHN CHALLIS, a Senior in the Fifth Form.

MYERS and COGGIN are two bullies, who, with some others, try to make Challis join the "Clubs," an athletic society. He refuses, and they determine to send him to Coventry. He is persuaded later by Mr. Evans, a master, to join. Challis takes Hood fishing in a punt, which gets cast adrift. Later on Grainger, the Captain, sees Challis at the nets, and asks him to play for the next sixteen against the eleven. Meanwhile Basil suspects Myers of casting the punt adrift, since he found a coin belonging to him near the spot. Unsuspectingly he puts the coin in a drawer in his cubicle. It vanishes, and Basil suspects Myers. The next day the match between the eleven and the sixteen takes place. John Challis plays a fine innings. Ponsonby gets his forehead in the way of a hard drive of his, and is laid out. The other boys accuse Challis of wilfully hurting Ponsonby.

(Now read on.)

THE SUMMONS.

OF course the accident put an end to the trial match. There could be no thought of cricket while one of the players was hovering between life and death.

Silently the boys made their way back to their respective houses and gathered there to discuss the incident, whilst the players in the pavilion condemned Challis with hardly a dissentient voice.

Truly, John's enemies had the whip hand of him then.

So while the doctor remained in the room to which Ponsonby had been borne, grave of face and doubtful of the issue, the cause of the trouble sat silent and dazed in his room, still wearing his flannels, unable to think clearly or to decide upon any course of action.

So the afternoon passed away and evening came. The supper-bell rang, but he heeded it not. His absence from the dining hall was duly noted and commented upon. Most certainly it did not count in his favour.

Afterwards Mr. Evans went up to see him. On opening the study door he looked into a darkened room, which at first seemed empty.

"Are you there, Challis?" asked the master sternly.

"Yes," came from the recesses of the room.

Mr. Evans found the switch and turned the light on. He stared in surprise at the boy, who still wore his cricketing flannels.

"Why didn't you come down to the meal, Challis?" asked the master impatiently. "You make matters no better by skulking out of the way, you know."

Challis rose with a bitter laugh.

"I don't know what to do, sir," he replied. "I'm afraid I'm getting not to care what I do. Everything goes wrong with me. Did you hear the way they set on me? I haven't a friend in Littleminster. I wish I'd never come here. I hope I——"

Mr. Evans, who studied the boy's haggard face, with lines of suffering stamped deep upon it, softened. He interrupted swiftly:

"It all happened in the heat of the moment, Challis," said he. "But you are wrong when you say you have no friends. Did not Grainger stand by you?"

"Yes, out of pity, I suppose. But he's a white man."

"Don't take the thing so much to heart. It is a thousand pities the accident happened. But everyone will see that there are extenuating circumstances."

Challis uttered a bitter laugh, then said gravely:

"May I ask how Ponsonby is, sir?"

"The doctor is with him now. So far he has not rallied. One cannot say what will happen yet, but we must hope for the best."

Challis swung across the room and back again.

"That's just it," he stormed, resenting the decree of fate which seemed always to put him in the wrong. "Had anyone else driven that ball, the boy wouldn't have been hurt at all. With me he hovers between life and death. It isn't right, sir, it isn't right. I wouldn't have injured Ponsonby for the world. You must know that. If they had the slightest sense of justice among them they would know it too. Yet they howled me down, they struck at me, they reviled me as if I were a murderer. I can't stand it. It is too much. Too much!"

He flung himself into a chair, and, beating the table with his hands, stared vacantly at the wall.

"His nerves are all on edge," thought the master. "By George, who'd have thought it? Challis with nerves!"

(Continued on p. iii of cover.)

And so he went to the boy and dropped his hand on his shoulder and pressed it kindly.

"Of course I know you meant no harm," he said. "It wasn't fair of Ponsonby to take the risk he did. Had you been less eager you might have held your hand, of course; but I don't blame you."

Challis looked swiftly into the master's face.

"Bless you for those words, sir!" he faltered. "I tell you, if I could change places now with Ponsonby and face the risk he's running, I'd willingly do it."

At that the door opened and Grainger came in.

He stopped short on the threshold at sight of those two.

"Oh, Challis," he said, after a pause, "the Head has sent me over for you. I've been with him explaining how the accident happened. He wants to see you. He asked me to bring you back with me. But—I say, sir, he can't face the Doctor in those clothes."

Challis rose.

"Why not?" he cried unflinchingly. "It'll take me some minutes to get into my other things, and—does it matter?"

"It will be ill-advised," said Mr. Evans.

Challis, shrugging his shoulders, passed his hand across his head to smoothe his hair.

"I have been too worried, too upset to change," he said. "I'll take the risk. I'm ready to accompany you, Grainger."

"Then come along," said the school captain, giving John a searching glance. "And I should like you to accompany me, sir, if you would."

The master nodded, and followed them from the room.

"I think it will be better," said he.

THE DOCTOR RELENTS.

DR. MORTON was writing in his study as they entered, and for a brief moment or so continued his task.

Then, glancing up, he uttered a cry of amazement, while his eyebrows came together in a frown of deep anger.

"What is the meaning of this?" he cried sternly. "How dare you come to in those things, Challis, at such an hour, and after—after what has happened. I should have thought you'd have been ashamed, if you'd a spark of decent feeling left!"

Challis eyed the Head fearlessly, coldly.

"I wasn't aware of the time, sir, until Mr. Evans came to see me," he replied, his voice sounding far away. "I'd been sitting thinking, and hadn't changed. I didn't want to keep you waiting after Grainger came with your message."

The Head uttered an impatient cry, but a glance from Mr. Evans soothed him.

"Challis has taken things very much to heart, sir," said the master. "And I found him in a highly nervous and excited state."

The Head looked long and searchingly at John.

"You'd better sit down," said he; and

Challis dropped mechanically into the chair Grainger placed for him.

"Now tell me how the accident happened, Challis," the Head went on. "I should like to have your version from your own lips."

Challis at that told his story, as he had told it before to Mr. Evans.

With elbows on desk and fingers interlaced the Doctor listened.

"Now tell me," he said. "After Ponsonby howled the fatal ball," he said, "were you conscious of possible danger if you struck at it?"

"I'm hardly sure, sir. I saw the ball coming, and half saw Ponsonby dash past the opposite wicket and speed along the pitch. It flashed across my mind even as I drove the ball that he might be in the way and in danger. I ought to have held my hand, I suppose. But the score was critical, and I wanted to do the best for my side."

"H'm."

"You must remember, sir"—and Challis voice shook—"I did not ask to play in the game. Grainger selected me, and having laid myself open to severe adverse criticism over the previous house match, I determined to do my best. I had these clothes sent down purposely. Yet, eager though I was, I'd sooner have lost my right hand than have injured Ponsonby."

"H'm," said the Head. "Now, I have questioned Myers and some of the other boys, and they say there was bad blood between you and Ponsonby, Challis. Is that true?"

John's face flushed angrily.

"No, sir. He did not like me, I know, but I bore him no ill-will."

"He was always twitting you, I believe?"

"Not more than the others, sir. Much less than most. I could have liked Ponsonby."

The Doctor sat long, thinking hard. His fine face was troubled, his eyebrows puckered in a frown.

"It is most unfortunate—most unfortunate," he said at last. "Boys will be boys, of course, but it is a very bad thing for a school when this sort of ill-feeling exists. It is hard to eradicate. You know that Ponsonby's condition is very serious, of course, Challis?"

"I had hoped that it was not, sir," replied the boy, raising his head proudly. "But Mr. Evans told me a little while ago."

And the sensitive lips trembled as John saw the piercing eyes of the the Doctor searching him to the very soul.

The Head nodded, beckoned to Grainger and Mr. Evans, and stepped apart with them for a long minute they talked in whispers.

Then the Head turned to Challis.

"Go back to your room," he said. "I will make further inquiry into this matter when we have seen how things go with Ponsonby. Meanwhile, don't worry too deeply, my boy. I had believed when the affair was first reported to me that Ponsonby had been injured as a result of deliberate and spiteful play on your part. Since then I have had reason to alter my view. You need not attend school

(Continued overleaf.)

to-morrow. You will dine in the Hall with the other boys, of course."

Challis rose, and stood stock-still, staring vacantly at the Head.

Then to his surprise the Head's right hand closed upon his and gripped it firmly.

"You have had to face a terrible ordeal, my boy," he said; and his voice rang with a note of sympathy that startled John, "but I am glad to find that there was not, as I was first led to believe, any malice in what happened. Accidents will happen on the playing-fields. But I hope and pray, for your sake, my lad, that Ponsonby will soon recover."

Challis's face flamed, and his sensitive lips quivered. Harshness he was accustomed to, but kindness left him without defence.

He glanced at Mr. Evans and at Grainger. They, too, were nodding and smiling encouragingly.

Just then the door opened and the doctor entered. His step was quick, noiseless, his face grave.

His arched his eyebrows in surprise on finding Challis there.

"I should like a word with you, sir," he said hesitatingly.

"Oh, you may speak without fear. Is it about Ponsonby?"

"Yes."

"How does he fare, doctor?"

"But badly. The stupor continues. I see no signs of recovery yet. I am afraid, if there is no change by the morning, I must call in a specialist."

"Of course. Anything you think advisable," said the Head, his face setting anxiously.

Then, struck by Challis's dismay at the news, he went to the boy and dropped both hands upon his shoulders.

"My poor fellow," he said. "Be brave—be brave!"

And Challis, unable to endure more, bolted from the room.

A GHOSTLY VISITOR.

IF his interview with the Headmaster had no other effect, it tended to soothe John's quivering nerves and to show him that, in spite of his reputation for severity, Dr. Mason possessed a kindly heart.

After returning to his study, John laid himself down and tried to sleep. It was useless. Tossing from side to side, he could think of nothing else but the unfortunate accident on the cricket-field, saw Ponsonby go down once more from that terrific drive and lie of a heap on the green grass, whilst the terrified boys rose aghast.

Again he saw the masters bending over the fallen figure, and heard the execrations of the boys and the denunciation of his enemy Myers.

And the doctor still thought that the case was critical.

If Ponsonby died, what then? If Ponsonby died—

Challis could stand it no longer. With a hoarse cry he rose, and, slipping on his dressing-gown, crossed the room to the electric switch and turned the light on. Then, seating himself at his table, he took up his lessons and tried to find relief in study.

For a half an hour, an hour, perhaps, he persevered, but it was no good. The lines he was studying ran together. Whenever he took up his pen to write, he found himself using the wrong words and constructing sentences that set all laws of grammar at defiance. At last with a groan he put the pen down, and dropping his head upon his arms, tried to still his throbbing brain.

Gradually as he sat there he grew calmer and his eyelids drooped.

The sleep he had sought in vain crept upon him. He began to breathe easily, drowsily, and felt at peace with himself once more.

Suddenly he started back in his chair. The opening of the study door startled him.

(To be continued.)

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